

Abstract:

Leaders create the conditions which allow deeper learning to flourish. Inquiry approaches are considered part of a repertoire of deeper learning processes. Moving forward with inquiry learning in schools requires leaders to consider some of the important supports and dispositions they need to model in order to help staff gain confidence and motivation to reframe their instructional approaches to one where inquiry leads the way.

Supporting Teachers with Moving Forward with Inquiry

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A blog post I read recently suggested that three important words all leaders must be prepared to say to move learning forward are: “*I don’t know*” and to follow that with “*But let’s figure it out together*”. There were many moments in my leadership in a large public school district where I had to admit that I needed time to research and find answers to issues but I did learn through experience that the answer was often ‘in the room’ when staff had the chance to collaborate. Supporting teachers with moving inquiry learning forward is an example of a challenge that is best addressed by using a collaborative approach. **Leaders create the conditions which allow deeper learning to flourish.** This article seeks to highlight some of the important supports and dispositions that Principals, Vice Principals and Teacher Leaders will want to consider in helping their staff move forward with inquiry.

Calls for deeper learning abound in articles about meeting the goals of modern learning and in applying pedagogies that promote innovation, creativity and critical thinking. Deeper learning includes building knowledge, reflection and application of what is learned in different contexts. Inquiry processes are now clearly part of revised curricula such as Science and Technology and Ontario’s new Social Studies, History and Geography (SSHG) Curriculum. As one of the success criteria for indicator 4.32 in the School Effectiveness Framework 2013 promotes, literacy and numeracy instruction needs to move “towards inquiry-based, intellectually challenging instruction which is developmentally appropriate for all students” (p. 27).

Inquiry can be looked at from several vantage points including inquiry as a teaching strategy – infusing questions as a focal point of instruction, the ability to do inquiry as a process of learning and how professionals such as scientists, historians and geographers do their work (scientific inquiry, historical inquiry and geographical inquiry). Adding a layer of professional authenticity to curriculum design supports the introduction of disciplinary thinking in our new Social Studies, History and Geography Curriculum (2013). What is exciting about developing or enhancing an inquiry mindset as a way of instruction is that the integration of literacy and other subject expectations is quite natural. When big ideas or concepts are able to drive student interest, discussion and learning, I believe we need to open the door to having conversations about the compartmentalization of the day and to the fact that change can add value. Inquiry lends itself to interdisciplinary work and integrated learning. What has to catch up is how we plan for inquiry, organize timetables, structure the day and make room for collaborative learning designs.

Developing inquiry mindsets towards instruction also aligns with the development of collaborative inquiry as a form of adult professional learning. As administrators, it is very important to participate in the opportunities to learn more about constructivist approaches with students and staff. The “leader as a learner and ultimately a co-learner” sets a message and tone which is supportive of the refined teaching practice we are increasingly hoping to see in Ontario classrooms. Common to collaborative inquiry experiences for staff and inquiry-based approaches for students are the opportunities to integrate higher-order thinking challenges.

The following are some suggestions for moving schools toward a culture of inquiry:

(1) Seek clarity of terminology as a staff.

Take the time to discuss and clarify terminology and to build consensus on how terms will be used in your school setting or learning community. The Monographs on Collaborative Inquiry and Student Inquiry from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in Ontario are a great resource for starting conversations. There are many text and digital resources as well. Not doing so can add to the confusion that some staff feel but may not wish to express publicly. Take the time to discuss what is truly new and what is not but may have resurfaced with new focus.

The following are terms that administrators may wish to explore with their staff as a starting point. A word wall in the staff room can be built over time and revisited during discussions. Exemplars can be examined together. Inquiry processes can be moderated for deeper understanding. It is important to note that terms can be defined in a variety of ways and that our understanding of the terminology deepens over time and practise:

Inquiry
Inquiry stance
Inquiry mindset
Inquiry-based learning
Project-based learning
Problem-based learning
Design-based learning
Constructivism
Collaborative Inquiry

(2) Debunk emerging myths or misconceptions about inquiry learning by addressing them as a staff.

“Inquiry is about doing projects.” “We have no time to do inquiry.” “Students can’t develop good questions.” “We can’t assess inquiry like we do other types of work.” These are just four examples of misconceptions that I have experienced and there are many more. What these

represent are perceived barriers for teachers and it is important to put them on the table and discuss them as they surface. The underlying issue is that many teachers will be concerned about how they manage expectations of curriculum coverage in a more experiential approach to learning. An inquiry experience involves developing a focussed question which is aligned with big ideas in the curriculum and where learning expectations are integrated into planning processes.

In reality, any traditional lesson can be enhanced by the teacher's ability to insert thought-provoking questions into the delivery process and to welcome student questions and interests into learning experiences.

Through an inquiry process, students ask questions, organize and analyse information and critically evaluate their findings (p. 23, Ontario SSHG Curriculum, 2013). Sharing their conclusions and/or final products with an audience or in a public way adds considerable motivation.

(3) Expect that teachers will begin their journey into inquiry learning at different entry points.

Inquiry approaches can be but are not necessarily linear. There are many entry points possible. Beginning with a more teacher guided inquiry cycle is going to be a more comfortable starting point for some teachers. Inquiry can run the gamut of guided, modelled, shared and independent forms of work. Student prior knowledge and readiness will impact the degree of teacher direction needed.

On staff, administrators will recognize those teachers who are life-long learners ready for new learning, those who like to break barriers and try innovative approaches, those who are just building the foundation of their professional repertoire and those who are more reluctant to change practice. Support needs to be differentiated and strategically teaming collaborative inquiry opportunities is a part of that differentiation. Demystify the exploration into inquiry approaches by having staff share learning on a regular basis or on-going basis. Cultivate and risk-taking culture and avoid the language of comparison or judgement.

In a Guided Inquiry process, the teacher is a part of the process, observing, asking questions, clarifying, adding information, giving feedback and encouragement. Being involved helps the teacher plan for additional supports and future instruction. It is certainly a myth that unguided inquiry is usually productive – in fact, it is usually not. Teachers and teaching are central to inquiry but their role does become more facilitative and assessment is an ongoing process for planning and evaluation of student learning. Principals or Vice principals who occasionally offer to take a group for a guided conversation will quickly see how this kind of teaching needs an understanding of facilitation skills.

(4) Foster a collaborative inquiry approach to professional learning about inquiry and be a co-learner.

Co-planning big ideas and impactful questions to spark or begin an inquiry can develop important shared understandings about how questions are the underpinning of an inquiry mindset. *Co-planning* can also include establishing norms for engagement, what criteria we should lead students to consider as we develop success criteria, and how an anchor chart can facilitate student understandings of expectations. *Co-teaching* parts of the inquiry process will help to unpack what prior knowledge students have or need to develop. *Co-debriefing* a co-teaching experience will help teachers determine important feedback for students and next steps for teaching. Mini-lessons represent “just in time teaching” for “just in time learning” in an inquiry process and determining the outline of mini-lessons collaboratively will deepen knowledge building efforts. *Co-reflecting* on an inquiry and moderating student work together provides the fuel to create effective rubrics and exemplars for future inquiries.

(5) Share your learning as a group with other staff or colleagues.

It is the fortunate staff member who is invited to be a part of a professional learning community or a learning network across schools. There are, however, many staff members in schools, who due to the restraints of release funds and the availability of occasional teachers are not able to participate. The leader’s task is to find ways to engage all teachers on staff in meaningful learning by creating opportunities for professional dialogue and sharing. Using a purposeful inquiry cycle as the process to engage adult learners is a great way to make the school a community of learners. We can expect that some participants of these discussions will not have much to contribute until they begin practising new learning designs. However, they will listen and be influenced by the enthusiasm that leaders express as learners. Inquiry cycles require facilitation, active listening, encouragement and great respect for different learning speeds.

Risk-taking grows in a culture where learning is valued and public judgement is not experienced. Thoughtful, respectful observations and questions about student learning move our thinking forward and invite engagement. Tangible support like time to collaborate is always going to be first and foremost on the wish list of staff but modelling an inquiry mindset and a learning lens as a leader offers a valuable intangible support – *“I value questions and continuous learning and I value learning collaboratively with you.”*

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