

ENHANCING TEACHING AS INQUIRY: USING A TEAM APPROACH

Principal's Sabbatical Report

David Brown

Westburn School

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Acknowledgements

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I acknowledge the Ministry of Education and N.Z.E.I, for making sabbatical leave available, as having the time to read, reflect and pursue an area of interest and importance, as well as having time to revitalise, have personal space, and look at ‘things’ away from the pressures and time constraints of a busy school, is invaluable, personally and professionally.

I would also like to formally acknowledge the principals, or in some cases their leadership teams of other schools, who offered me a significant amount of their time in a generous and open manner, taking the opportunity to share what their schools were doing with enthusiasm and pride.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical study was to investigate how team based teacher inquiry offers not only an alternative approach, but an effective option to the customary practice and expectations of existing teaching as inquiry practices. It was my intention to gain some idea how schools incorporated collaborative practice in their teaching as inquiry process, and how principals and school leaders viewed its impact on ‘student achievement’ and ‘school improvement’. I wanted to find out what it was that these schools did, and how they went about implementing collegial teacher inquiry practices that made a difference. I was also keen to see how the

process that we have been developing at Westburn School compared to those being used in schools of similar size.

Background

During discussions with colleagues in the past three years, one aspect of affirming that teachers meet the Registered Teacher Criteria that has raised questions and discussion has been how Dimension 12, *'Use critical inquiry and problem solving effectively in their professional practice'* is being consistently met and monitored. The understanding of what teaching as inquiry actually means, how teachers actually take part in the process and how it applies to classroom practice, would appear to vary from school to school. While the concept of teachers inquiring into their practice is not new and is generally understood, the expectations about how it happens in schools and how the process links to raising student achievement outcomes is more varied.

Various inquiry initiatives have existed for some time but in recent years, it has been recognized that the act of teachers inquiring into their professional practice has become a significant part of their day to day work. Indeed, the ability to critically examine, develop and research are considered to be integral parts of the teacher's praxis. Viviane Robinson, in her SET article (2003), *Teachers as researchers: A professional necessity?* states:

'Instead of thinking of practitioners and researchers as different categories of person, we should think about them as different roles. This allows us to see the overlap between the two roles, and the possibilities for their integration.' (p1)

Robinson goes on to suggest that research supports the idea that working collegially rather than individuality is one of the important factors that assists teachers to work as researchers. Effective professional learning and working in this way provides better opportunities to acquire inquiry skills needed for researching teaching practice.

This view leads me to suggest that successful teaching as inquiry has strong and viable links to teachers carrying out research through investigations, and doing so in teams or groups.

In 2012, the Education Review Office released the second of two reports entitled *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners*. The report detailed the findings from investigations into the systems and processes that had been established by schools to support inquiry practice and what that inquiry practice looked like in schools and classrooms. It described what elements were in place when teaching as inquiry was working well and how it impacted on outcomes for learners. It also detailed what essential components were missing from schools where teaching as inquiry was not as apparent or as successful.

The release of this report provided the impetus for the management team at Westburn School to consider how effectively teaching as inquiry was operating in our school, how effective the outcomes for teaching and learning were, and how well we were monitoring both the process and the outcomes. The consensus was that we needed to change what we were doing, that through a planned development process and by doing things differently, we could improve this aspect of teacher's professional practice. This in turn, would enhance outcomes for learners.

Nearly two years further on, this sabbatical has provided an opportunity to compare how we are utilising teaching as inquiry with what is taking place in other schools. It has also offered the prospect of discussing the topic with school leaders, as well as observing and sharing good practice.

I need to state from the outset that this report is not intended to question the validity or importance of individual teachers carrying out teaching as inquiry, nor has it been seen as an opportunity to champion one process or system over another. Having teachers who can use critical inquiry processes and problem solve effectively in their professional practice is the ultimate goal for all principals and their staffs. By highlighting the importance of collaboration as a key part of the inquiry process, and by drawing attention to the possibilities offered by a team approach to inquiry, I hope

to provide another avenue for addressing this important aspect of professional development and learning.

Methodology

The plan for my own inquiry progressed through the following stages:

1. Initially, spend time reading any research about teaching as inquiry that placed some emphasis on utilising a team or group approach.
2. Communicate with, either in person or by email, at least ten principals of medium to large sized schools to discuss a series of questions based upon Criteria 12 of the Registered Teacher Criteria and then to reflect upon their responses. I wanted to learn what aspects of a team approach to teaching as inquiry were present in school systems.
3. Consider that information in relation to the team inquiry process that we have developed at Westburn School then reflect on and compare the information.

Considering the literature and research:

What does the current literature have to say about the process of development, implementation and review of a team inquiry process?

The importance of and expectation that teachers will inquire into their teaching has been clearly signalled in the New Zealand curriculum (2007).

'Inquiry into the teaching–learning relationship can be visualised as a cyclical process that goes on moment by moment (as teaching takes place), day by day, and over the longer term.' (p.35)

While the topic 'teaching as inquiry' has been written about at length in recent years, there is considerably less in the way of writing or research about a team approach to inquiry in New Zealand schools, particularly at the primary level. While much of the literature acknowledges and promotes the importance of inquiry through collaboration, groupings for this procedure tend to be seen as a vehicle for discussion and reflection rather than as structures that help drive inquiries

themselves. Teaching as inquiry is more often viewed as a process that is based around outcomes for the individual practitioner.

The Education Review Office report '*Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners*' (2012) highlighted the following key components. These were considered to be critical for schools as a means of supporting successful teaching as inquiry practice:

- leaders working with teachers to build an understanding about teaching as inquiry
- having a performance management system in place that included a requirement for teachers to reflect on their professional practice
- encouraging the use of reflective writing in journals or portfolios that sat outside the performance management system
- programmes of professional learning that incorporated opportunities for an inquiry approach
- Research projects in self-selected areas that were carried out by individual teachers or groups of teachers

While all the elements mentioned above are critical for effective inquiry to occur, the fifth point includes an important idea regarding the viability of a team centred approach. A group of teachers working collaboratively provides a vehicle for ensuring systematic and continuous inquiry takes place and also offers a viable forum for co-operation and discussion. This final point is central to the success of the teaching as inquiry concept.

The short article published in the '*Capacity Building Series*' from the Ontario Department of Education entitled '*Collaborative Teacher Inquiry*' (2010) details a seven step model that gives an example of an operational framework to construct ideas and form practical thinking. The article highlights the importance of teaching as inquiry being a shared process.

'Collaboration provides perspective, diversity and space for teachers to consider questions about student learning that can provide new insight unavailable in inquiry processes that are done individually.' (P3)

In the article, the writers detail as the second of their seven characteristics of teacher inquiry, collaboration or a shared process. They suggest when educators work together, they are more likely to embrace the opportunity for gaining a deeper understanding into their student's learning rather than to merely simplify it. Collaboration leads to a level of robustness that strengthens the practice of inquiry.

The Hagley College Experience: Fowler (SET, 2012) described the importance of the critical role played by middle school leaders in successfully mentoring teachers with the teaching as inquiry process. He highlighted the importance of professional interactions and conversations as being a major determining factor in successful teacher inquiry. He also investigated the conditions that are necessary for school wide inquiry to thrive. While this paper relates to a process that is taking place in a secondary setting, the conditions described by the author are just as relevant for other educational levels.

Fowler noted that in the inquiry process that was developed, reciprocal sharing of inquiry projects amongst colleagues, risk taking, mentorship and strong participation by empowered senior leaders were essential elements of a successful programme.

As with other models involving inquiry by groups of teachers, Fowler emphasises the importance of meaningful professional conversations as part of successful inquiry.

'Disciplined dialogue is not based on hearsay, anecdote or rumour, but on real data relating to matters critical to understanding students and their learning.' (p.4)

Considering and comparing current practice:

What are the important understandings and perspectives that principals and teachers have when they consider teaching as inquiry and how does a team inquiry approach support professional learning and outcomes for learners?

I set out to gain some appreciation of how schools were employing any form of team or collaborative approach to teaching as inquiry.

When it came to selecting schools to contact for my inquiry, I was very conscious of how frequently principals and other school leaders are approached nowadays, to take part in data gathering exercises for sabbatical papers, doctoral dissertations and other research programmes. I wanted to ensure that the set of questions I proposed to ask were pertinent and limited to the issue I was investigating.

I chose ten 'local' schools, in other words, those within the Christchurch city boundaries. I visited eight of the ten schools in person and communicated electronically with the principals of the other two schools.

All the schools I used in the investigation were in the U4 to U6 range. My reasoning for this was to have examples, for comparative purposes, where there was likely to be a team or syndicate structure not unlike that of Westburn School.

I developed a set of questions closely related to the Registered Teacher Criteria, Section 12 which requires teachers to '*use critical inquiry and problem solving effectively in their professional practice*'. This obligation, along with three specific requirements relating to the use of professional reading, responding to feedback and reflecting on professional practice, provided a foundation for my inquiry.

I also approached colleagues working in schools in the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Education Authority in England with a view to comparing practices relating to team inquiry in another country. I learned that while some of the more progressive schools were engaged in aspects of teacher inquiry, others were not. There appeared to be no compulsion to do so: that is, there appears to be no formal link between teacher registration criteria and inquiry practices.

I spoke to one principal who confirmed that she promoted an inquiry approach to professional learning by encouraging collaborative discussion amongst teachers and that the investigating was based upon assessment information. Resulting professional learning for the staff was monitored and was linked to cultural contexts. Her biggest goal was to ensure that the professional learning not only improved outcomes for students but that changes to teacher learning were sustainable over time. The process was staff based rather than being individual. She was aware that

not all school's professional learning programmes followed an inquiry approach and felt that only more progressive schools in the borough did.

Given the fact that there was no compulsion to have an inquiry focus in all schools, I decided to concentrate my information gathering on the 'local' schools.

Registered Teacher Criteria 12 i: 'systematically and critically **engage with evidence and professional literature** to reflect on and refine practice'

Question: What strategies do you use to encourage teachers to engage in regular meaningful professional reading?

In all of the schools where I either interviewed or received feedback from the principal, there is an expectation that teachers will regularly engage in professional reading to inquire into or support their practice. Almost all schools use a process where there is direction from a level of leadership about what material will be read by teachers. In several cases, the principal was the instigator who informed teachers of what was to be read while in other schools, team or syndicate leaders had this responsibility. Teachers were also encouraged to source material for themselves. In two instances, principals reported that they encourage teachers to source and share pertinent material they locate with their colleagues. Professional reading appears to be related to inquiry at a number of levels: to support school wide professional development projects, to reinforce team or syndicate initiatives or to endorse inquiries that teachers may be working on individually.

The level of 'compulsion' for teachers to actively involve themselves in professional reading varies from school to school. In some cases, school leaders strongly encourage the practice while in others, there was a requirement linked to the appraisal and attestation process. Teacher's reading is often acknowledged in appraisal summaries.

While some principals and teachers develop processes unique to their school setting, upon which their professional development programme is based, others use

a range of models which include a reference to or requirement for professional reading eg: InterLEAD consultant's 'Appraisal Connector' or the Ariki Project.

Dialogue and discussion about professional reading is commonly encouraged by all principals. Most school leaders I spoke to continually look for innovative and creative ways of encouraging teachers to discuss the content of what they read. Scheduling time to share good reading is common as is the promotion of electronic forums. Some invite comment from those that are interested while in some schools, there is a level of compulsion to interact. At three schools, principals indicated that they actively encourage and support post graduate study. Professional reading and conversation are integral elements of such study.

While all principals agree that the ultimate goal is for teachers to seek out appropriate sources of professional reading to support their inquiry into their professional practice, several admitted that they found it useful to 'direct' teachers towards recommended readings. It was acknowledged that the intensive nature of the teacher's job means that many simply do not have the time to seek out suitable specialised reading material. Teachers appreciate being guided by leaders when it comes to selecting meaningful professional reading.

Teams or groups are often used as a vehicle for discussing and debating professional reading. Three principals indicated that discussion of professional literature was timetabled on a regular basis to ensure that it took place. Others indicated that it occurred when it was organised by group leaders or the members of the groups themselves.

Registered Teacher Criteria 12 ii: **'respond professionally to feedback** from members of their learning community'

Question: What mechanisms do you employ to encourage teachers to seek and respond to feedback about their practice?

The principals I spoke to detailed a range of methods and systems they employ to allow teachers to obtain and discuss feedback about their practice.

Of the principals I spoke to, at least half employ the 'walk through' to observe classrooms in operation and to see teachers actively involved in the teaching process. They then follow that up by giving the teacher feedback about what they observed. 'Walk throughs' range in duration and are usually informal.

Conversations with students are an integral part of the process. The follow up discussions not only provide an opportunity for the observer to comment but give the teacher an chance to respond to, question and validate what is happening in the classroom.

The importance of professional conversations was emphasised by all principals, when discussing how they encourage teachers to seek and respond to feedback about their practice. Increased dialogue amongst teachers about classroom practice and the relationship to data about student learning has positive effects, according to principals. Planned conversations that follow 'walk throughs', in team, syndicate or staff meetings is rewarding. These discussions enable teachers to talk about their work in a focussed manner. Principals felt that even informal conversations tend to take on a sharper focus on topics relating to teaching and learning.

Three principals referred to the importance of preparation for the 'walk through' process. These are not necessarily restricted to principals but may involve other leaders and teachers. Teachers need to understand how the process will operate, why it is taking place and what the expectations are for those involved. The importance of developing a high trust model was mentioned often by principals who promote this practice in their schools. Teacher 'buy in' relies on open and honest reasons for having the process. By providing the appropriate coaching, the outcomes such as better and deeper forms of questioning, feeling comfortable with challenging conversations and long term changes to classroom practice are more likely to occur.

Peer coaching and mentoring are increasingly being used as a method of supporting and developing teacher practice. Just as teachers use model good practice in classrooms, principals recognise the importance of modelling activities such as challenging respectfully, active listening and giving / accepting constructive criticism

appropriately. One principal indicated that once these practices were operating effectively, teachers who participated appeared to work more collaboratively with their colleagues.

All of the principals that I spoke to have an expectation or requirement in their schools that teachers will use of some form of written record about their inquiries. Reflective logs, written journals, jotting notebooks and online blogs are just some of the methods by which ideas, thoughts and questions are recorded and shared. The use of electronic journals continues to expand. Principals and teachers are using a range of innovative methods to share ideas, carry out debates and post findings in real time. Many of these journals are linked to teacher's appraisal documents allowing them to be used as tangible evidence of professional learning programmes. Notes from 'walk throughs' and observations along with subsequent feedback and discussion are often recorded in these documents.

In one case, the principal described the process of carrying out three way observations, this, along with the associated professional learning and reading was linked to the inquiry. Syndicate meetings provided the vehicle for discussion about priority learners. Interestingly, teacher aides were included in the inquiry discussions. This not only allowed the teacher aides to share important information, but helped establish next steps in the inquiry process as well as for their own practice. We often forget that our school support network has valuable information to add in an investigation.

Registered Teacher Criteria 12 iii

'critically examine their own beliefs, including cultural beliefs, and how they impact on their professional practice and the achievement of akonga

Question: What methods or practices do you employ to encourage teachers to consider their teaching philosophy, practices and belief systems?

One principal summed up his response to this question with the following statement which in many ways, encapsulated what all the other principals I spoke to said: 'Bringing about attitudinal change through process, expectation and practice.'

All principals agreed that processes and strategies can be put in place to alter teacher's practice in the classroom. Outcomes for learners can often be quite outstanding. However, simply altering classroom practice, while being very important, is only part of the change they want to achieve. All principals seek to have those changes become entrenched, permanent fixtures of teaching practice. For this to occur, teachers need to embrace change at a philosophical point as well as at the practical level. At that point, change is most likely to be enduring.

Principals described several methods that they employ to encourage teachers to think about their teaching philosophy and beliefs. Firstly, they challenge their thinking in a range of ways by encouraging professional discussion and debate on a range of topics. At present, flexible learning and collaborative teaching practice are examples.

Several principals mentioned the need to modify traditional thinking. For example, developing a culture where classroom practice is regularly questioned, where debate is encouraged about the way teachers accept the notion 'constant change' in teaching practice and how effective teaching is underpinned by using assessment data to consider professional learning options.

Most of the principals I spoke to emphasised the importance of creating and maintaining a professionally secure environment where teachers felt 'safe'. Teachers need to know it is acceptable to question, be questioned, to take risks and to share ideas.

Question: *How are your teams / syndicates involved in teacher inquiry?*

This question was pivotal to my study. Having based the focus of our teaching as inquiry process closely to a team concept, I was interested to find out if other schools had moved in a similar direction and if so, how they had utilised the groupings to help implement such programmes.

It was gratifying to note that this was one area where principals and their management teams were becoming quite innovative. While the use of syndicates and teams was still prominent and according to the school leaders, effective with the right type of support and structures in place, other combinations or groupings were also being utilised for the purpose of inquiry. Principals had instigated inquiry processes using a group as big as the whole staff, right down to pairs of teachers as well as all manner of combinations in between. While some groups contained teachers from the same teaching level, vertical groups and collections of teachers generated by profiling had also been utilised. A number of principals I spoke to emphasised three key points about what constitutes a successful group. Firstly it must be 'fit for purpose'. There is no point in constructing a group if there isn't a clear reason for doing so. Secondly, the composition of the group is critical. 'Engineering' the configuration of a group is often necessary to achieve the right outcome. Thirdly, having the right leader is critical. The leader will not necessarily be a member of the school management team, but the person who understands the goals, has an interest in the focus and can get people working collaboratively.

Principals had utilised best practice and reliable information from a number of sources including the Education Review Office's best practice indicators, BES and the Teachers' Council Professional Learning Hub's professional learning and development projects.

Question: *How are your team / syndicate leaders involved in promoting teacher inquiry?*

In all cases, the principals I communicated with acknowledged the importance of the middle managers they work with and the essential roles they play in promoting and supporting teaching as inquiry. These people work under a range of titles: deputy principals, associate principals, curriculum managers and directors, lead teachers, team and syndicate leaders. I have referred to them collectively in this section as middle managers. Several principals indicated that a common set of understandings and adherence to a plan were important aspects for their management team when it comes to working with teachers in the inquiry process.

Along with the principal, the middle managers are often responsible for promoting professional reading. They also, wherever appropriate, act in the capacity of mentors to teachers, using their experience and knowledge to guide and assist teachers through the inquiry process. Principals would often use them to demonstrate aspects of classroom practice or model inquiry processes.

Principals acknowledged that middle managers are indispensable when it comes to ensuring that the various functional aspects of teaching as inquiry are being carried out effectively by teachers. They released teachers to observe practice and to organise and lead forums for discussion.

Two principals preferred to see their middle managers as mentors when they were working with teachers on inquiry related tasks. They felt that this role differed from their usual leadership role in that they acted as guides as opposed to leaders. Several principals expanded on this idea by suggesting that they, along with middle managers had an obligation to act as role models for teachers. For this reason, understanding teaching as inquiry and how it works is critical if they are to be taken seriously, and inquiry is to be acknowledged.

Many of the principals I spoke to agreed that you need the right person to carry out these roles. Some felt their middle managers were better placed than they were to fill the lead role. Several also acknowledged that the right person is not necessarily always someone from the leadership team and that in some cases, teachers have the skills and attributes required to take on the mentorship / leading / enabling role.

Question: *How do you appraise / attest teacher's capability / accomplishment in the inquiry process?*

Clearly, for principals and other school leaders involved in a teacher appraisal process, being able to confidently verify to what extent teachers have met the registered teacher criteria as part of the annual appraisal programme, is of high importance. Criteria 12 i to iii which requires teachers to '*use critical inquiry and problem solving effectively in their professional practice*', compels principals to attest to teachers confidently and competently engaging with professional literature to

reflect on and refine practice, respond to feedback and critically examine their own beliefs.

The principals I spoke to outlined how the appraisal programmes worked in their schools. While there are a range of similarities in school management systems, each school has developed an appraisal system which makes it uniquely theirs. They operate in different ways, use a variety of timelines, are managed in distinctive processes and have a variety of expectations and requirements. Reputable standardised models such as the Ariki model and the Teachers Council template have been adopted by a number of schools. Principals I conversed with believed that models such as these offered robust, reliable practices that not only provided the evidence they required to ensure that appraisal was completed successfully, but presented a means of developing meaningful inquiry by teachers.

Written journals are now common place and have often evolved from hand written journals to effective online logs, blogs and forums.

Principals also indicated that there was a growing insistence on inquiry that included components involving presentation, regular discussion and 'next step' learning.

They had the expectation that professional conversations would form an essential part of the inquiry process. While most schools I visited tend to use the groups of teachers that exist as part of the school structure (syndicates or teams), some had formed groups specifically 'assembled' for the purpose of professional discussion and investigation.

Teaching as Inquiry: Taking a team approach

Team based teacher inquiry offers some alternative strategies for utilizing and developing the inquiry process:

Working as part of a team or syndicate is nothing new for teachers. Planning, evaluating, assessing and reflecting on student learning are all part of the teacher's everyday work. Teacher's work collaboratively by nature.

The Registered Teacher Criteria describe the measures for quality teaching that are to be met by all fully registered teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Teacher Council recognises that teaching is a highly complex activity, drawing on repertoires of knowledge, practices, professional attributes and values to facilitate academic, social and cultural learning in diverse education settings. The criteria and indicators are viewed as interdependent and overlapping. Registered Teacher Criteria No.12 states: *Use critical inquiry and problem-solving effectively in professional practice.*

Until two years ago, teacher inquiry had been reliant upon individual teacher investigations which differed in process quite markedly. Addressing Criteria 12, the management group in the school was finding that attesting to teacher's ability to inquire into their practice difficult. It was timely to review current practice by considering if our process was:

- robust and successful
- relevant to and engaging for our students
- consistent with our teaching and learning pedagogy
- complemented our School Based Curriculum

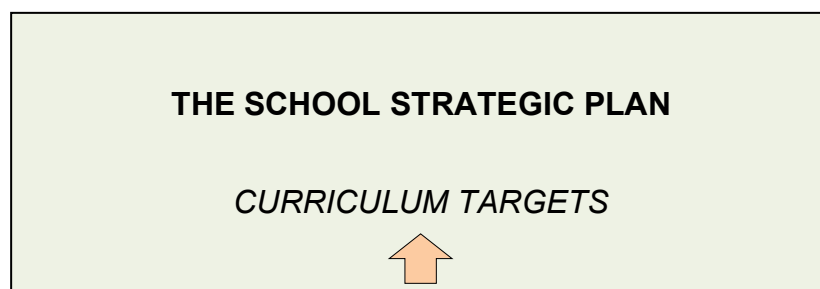
The review of teaching as inquiry involved all teachers and leaders in the school. This approach was adopted following a review of the teacher appraisal process, the outcomes of which suggested that individual teacher inquiry varied in approach and success across the school. The principal and management team felt that a different approach based upon collegiality, utilizing teacher strengths and focusing on student needs at specific levels of the school, would provide better outcomes.

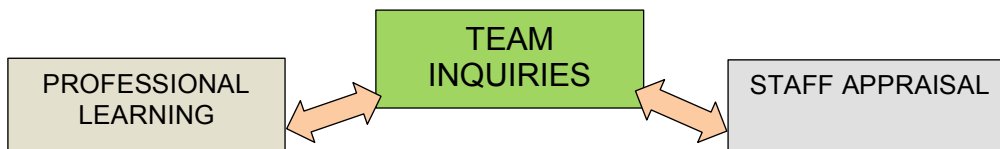
To provide some starting points for the process we had decided to embark upon, the management team utilised two sources of academic writing to provide theoretical rigour to the development. Firstly, the paper written by Mike Fowler '*Leading inquiry at a Teacher Level: It's all about Mentorship*' (2012) provided a local example of developing and sustaining a team focus on the inquiry process. It offered practical examples and evidence upon which to develop teacher's interest. Helen Timperley's book '*Realizing the power of Professional Learning*' (2011) suggested a fresh

approach for understanding and using teacher inquiry. It also detailed a knowledge building process focussed based on a cyclic model. Timperley's contention that 'fundamental shifts in thinking about professional learning' encourage us to consider the ways we inquired into our professional practice prompted us to question the way we thought about inquiry as a vehicle for change. We agreed that if teacher inquiry was going to be used effectively and consistently, a team based approach probably offered a more reliable means of attaining the efficacy we sought. Teams of teachers offered a range of ideas, years of experience and teaching backgrounds. Properly managed, all team members would not only be expected to contribute to a certain level, but were likely to benefit to a particular level as well.

We believed that by placing the inquiry teams and their work at the centre of process, it not only elevated the importance of the idea, but ensured that it had links to many of the key practices and functions in the school. The following key elements were established:

- Team inquiries were linked to the curriculum targets from the strategic plan. This meant that current and reliable data was being used to underpin investigations.
- The teams would be comprised of teachers working at the same level in the school. This ensured that the inquiry focus not only had relevance for the teacher, but related directly to the learning outcomes for the students they worked with.
- Team inquiries were closely linked to professional learning programmes. Professional learning becomes more relevant by being aligned to teacher development needs and the curriculum targets
- Team inquiries were linked to Criteria 12 of the Registered Teacher Criteria. This provided a means of engaging a demonstrable line of accountability

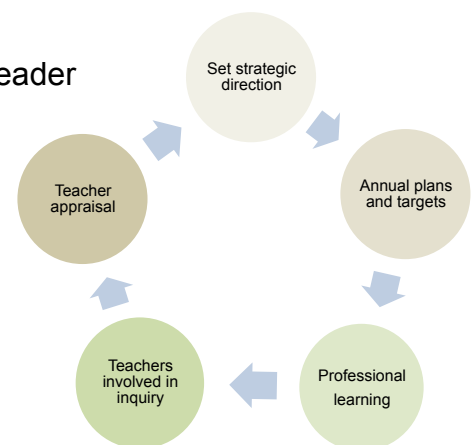




To ensure that a high level of consistency was maintained and that inquiry teams had a robust procedure to follow, the action research model was used as a basis for investigations. This continuous process provides a link between knowledge building and data gathering and combines them with an action phase. Used efficiently, it empowers teachers and allows the school to sustain change by providing information not only of how to make the variations required, but also on the change process itself. Teachers are involved in the collaborative process of creating and implementing the planned alterations.



At the outset, we utilised Timperley’s models of teacher and leader inquiry cycles. These expand on the action research model and provided germane support and advice. Her expansion of and explanations for the knowledge building cycle provided clear pathways for our team based inquiries.



Links to the school’s strategic or annual plan

Team inquiry has been given a high profile in the current school strategic plan. A key focus for 2013 and 2014 have been:

‘Improving learning outcomes for students by developing and enhancing teacher inquiry.’

Following the analysis of student achievement data, each of the four teams developed a target relating to their level of the school. In 2014 there were three literacy related targets and one mathematics target. Using the action research model described previously, plans were developed which included professional learning and teaching programmes. Emphasis was placed on the accurate use of pre inquiry achievement data and comparative post inquiry information. Information and evidence has been gathered throughout the process over both years of its use. The

management team have regularly reviewed the several aspects of the process. Teachers have assisted by offering their views and reflections which has helped us to alter aspects of the programme, for example, shifting due dates for tasks so that they don't coincide with other demands and scheduling inquiry conversations and updates at all team meetings.

Members of the management team and teachers have all remarked that the greater focus on inquiry, by making it central to the team operations has had several beneficial outcomes:

- Team meetings are more focussed on analysing student achievement and the outcomes for learning
- Professional learning is more focussed on what is needed to achieve inquiry / target outcomes
- Focussed learning conversations happen more frequently and tend to be concentrated on the team's target and matters related to it
- Debate is healthier, sometimes more difficult but happens in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect
- Teachers believe they get a greater level of satisfaction from the team effort rather than working alone. Team members 'keep each other honest' with regard to task completion and meeting deadlines.

Findings

This sabbatical provided an opportunity for me as the principal and for the school to delve deeply into the key factors that promote success in the team inquiry approach. The opportunity to investigate and learn from the success of other school leaders where a focused team inquiry approach is making a difference has been valuable.

From my discussions and questioning of colleagues, it is clear that a collegial approach to inquiry is evident in most schools. Teaching as inquiry is embedded in school cultures. Principals encourage and expect teachers to share the results of their inquiries, to work collaboratively, especially through learning conversations and to read widely for personal professional gain.

Principals are encouraging teachers to work collaboratively in a range of groupings. These are often established configurations such as syndicates or teams, but equally, can be groups assembled especially to focus on a particular inquiry aspect. At Westburn, we have attempted to link several aspects of teaching and learning together in a somewhat more formalised manner. The curriculum targets in the strategic plan are the focus of team inquiries, and the professional learning that occurs is being generated by the team focus. The appraisal system, linked to the registered teacher criteria, provides the mechanism for assurance.

Implications for other readers

Ideas to consider when contemplating the use of 'Inquiry' Teams:

- Expectations in performance management (appraisal) systems provide an appropriate means of gauging effectiveness inquiries and their outcomes
- Reflective logs / journals / blogs provide effective and efficient channels for sharing ideas, knowledge and outcomes
- Providing appropriate professional learning support is essential
- Establishing team research projects incorporating goal setting, data analysis, new teaching and review processes takes time and forethought
- To increase collective critical reflective thinking amongst teachers projects need to be: planned, collaborative, reflective, motivational, Focussed on positive change and focussed on important teaching and learning

Other key points:

The importance in the inquiry process, of learning conversations, cannot be overstated. This is where the idea of team inquiry really comes to the fore. Well conducted team inquiries build in regular discussion components. Over the past two years the Westburn staff has spent considerable time thinking and talking about professional conversations. Routman in *Teacher Talk* (2002) talks about conversation and research to sustain change.

'One of the most powerful approaches to developing this kind of confidence is ongoing professional conversation among colleagues, built into the school's professional development expectations for staff.' (p.32)

Indeed, understanding that learning conversations take many and varied forms, and that teachers not only need to recognise these forms, but need to differentiate so that they utilise the most appropriate form of discussion to suit an occasion, is of key importance. Annan, Lai and Robinson discuss their model of learning talk in their 2003 SET article, '*Teacher talk to improve teaching practices*'. They suggest that teachers need to learn when to use 'analytical talk', critical talk' and 'challenging talk'. Once teachers are clear about the differences and how to utilize them, discussions linked to teacher inquiry become much more focused and meaningful.

First and foremost the principal needs to be one of the driving forces behind the initiative. While we as the educational leaders of our schools, don't need to understand every technical aspect of a process, we do need to know enough about it to be able to make informed decisions, to direct, motivate and develop the leaders who will carry the inquiry model forward. Weighing up the ongoing cost (including the professional learning required) and the how the educational outcomes of the school 'fit' with the strategic direction are all considerations principals need to ponder.

As educators, we can often be guilty of getting caught up in the 'wave' of the next 'big idea' without asking the key question: Why should we do it? We asked this very question before we began using the team inquiry concept. We found many compelling reasons why we should take a team approach.

My suggestions to colleagues are:

- Examine and consider the staff 'culture' that exists in your school. A team inquiry approach relies heavily on a high degree of professional trust
- Take time to develop effective processes that ensure that teaching as inquiry becomes an integral routine of teaching practice
- Talk to other school leaders and discuss what works well and what poses challenges
- Take some time to consider and discuss with staff the various options available for promoting teaching as inquiry
- Have plans in place for when key staff leave the school so that the process continues

Conclusion

It is valid to accept that teachers acting individually can use the inquiry process successfully to investigate aspects of their professional practice with the eventual aim of improving outcomes for learners. Indeed, the manner in which the Registered Teacher Criteria are framed advocates this. However, I would contend that there are some attractive advantages in considering a team based programme that cannot only deliver consistent levels of inquiry, but enhance both the professional learning for teachers and ensure enhanced learning outcomes for students.

While schools have varied, well developed inquiry processes which teachers utilise to carry out successful investigations, a key objective for school management teams is to ensure that the method of inquiry that is being used is not only reliable, but that it is bringing about progressive and enduring change to classroom practice. The concept of a team approach to inquiry offers another way of doing this. In an environment where working collaboratively is being heavily promoted, this idea might well be worth consideration.

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