

A Focus on Equity and Excellence in Networks of Inquiry
Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education, British Columbia (BC) and the Yukon Territory,
Canada
www.noii.ca

Diana Krall is a famous Canadian jazz singer whose mother was a teacher librarian in a BC public school. Fifteen years ago, her mother died and Diana wrote a song in tribute entitled Departure Bay that talks about knowing where you come from and knowing where you are going. About this time, we had been invited to host the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement in our home city of Vancouver, BC. We chose as our theme “New Departures for a Learning World of Equity and Quality.” The theme of this QASSP journal is very much in line with our focus on creating a stronger learning world for every young person through linked inquiry networks.

This work started in 2000 when we each received a small grant from the Ministry of Education in BC with the aim of helping to build learner agency through a focus on assessment for learning. We turned to each other at that meeting and one of us said, “I have an idea – what if we put our grants together and invited principals and teachers to work with us as part of a network.” From a nucleus of 34 schools, this network has since grown to include hundreds of schools and 100 volunteer leaders in the province and has expanded to focus on healthy schools, the environment and Indigenous education. Partner networks are now in place in the Yukon, England, Sweden, Barcelona, Canadian schools in China, New South Wales, New Zealand, Queensland and the Northern Territories. Emerging networks are taking hold in Manitoba and Germany.

The three goals for this network have emerged from the shared purpose of the educators involved. Reflecting a commitment to both equity and excellence, these goals are:

1. Every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.
2. Every learner leaving our settings more curious than when they arrive.
3. All learners gaining an understanding of and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing.

For us in Canada a focus on equity must directly address the racism of low expectations experienced by many Indigenous youth. We were challenged to build on our success in developing inquiry networks by inviting schools to focus their inquiries on changing the experiences of their Indigenous learners. In many cases, this started with ensuring that all learners understood the impact of colonization and our history of using residential schools to destroy identity, language and culture.

Quality – or excellence – means that young people are leaving school – crossing the metaphorical stage to adulthood – having a strong sense of identity and having been treated with dignity in school regardless of their backgrounds, gender, orientation or ethnicity. It also

means that they are leaving with a sense of purpose and aspiration for their future and that they have had the kinds of learning experiences that provides them with real options for their future rather than with a diploma that leads nowhere. Excellence also means that we are creating the conditions in our schools where learners of all ages – young children and experienced adults – are leaving our classrooms and our schools more curious and engaged as lifelong learners than when they arrived.

It is impossible for any one teacher or any one school to address these goals on their own. Meeting the needs of every learner and seriously tackling the challenge of creating equity and excellence requires adaptive expertise and purposeful collaboration amongst educators across classrooms, schools, states and increasingly countries. Bringing people together to discuss problems or to share strategies is not enough. A disciplined approach to collaborative inquiry is required to develop the kind of deep thinking and shared expertise needed to create lasting change. It is at this point that the spiral of inquiry joins the discussion.

For the first ten years of the network in BC we asked schools to enter into an annual cycle of inquiry based on shared teacher judgment of student performance and we were seeing strong evidence of improvement when schools stuck to a focus area for two years or more. When we discovered the work of Professor Helen Timperley and her findings on the role of professional inquiry in making a positive impact on literacy results in New Zealand, we knew we were on to something important.

In essence, Helen's research indicated that two years after a formal national literacy program ended, schools that both applied the strategies they learned during the intervention AND engaged in continuous iterative cycles of inquiry were making significant gains in reading and writing, especially for their most vulnerable learners. This led us to a collaboration with Helen that led to the conceptualization of the spiral of inquiry. We have written about the spiral of inquiry and encourage you to check out some of the references at the end of this article.

We occasionally ask ourselves why the spiral of inquiry and inquiry networks seem to be striking such a chord with policy makers, researchers and most importantly, with school-based educators in such a range of jurisdictions. The first reason is the evidence of impact. Based on international assessments, BC has one of the strongest systems for both equity and quality across all OECD countries. See for example <https://asiasociety.org/education/equity-and-quality-education> Recently the [Economist Magazine](#) named Canada and New Zealand amongst the five most forward facing countries for their educational policies. Researchers and informed visiting leaders see connections between the frequency of collaborative inquiry amongst adults and the critical thinking competencies demonstrated by student learners.

Second, the spiral of inquiry makes sense to educators. By asking teacher and principals to use some key questions to really understand what is going on for their learners before leaping to action, school teams can avoid the activity traps or simplistic solutions that are pervasive in too many schools. Concentrating on one – or at most two – focus areas means that teachers

actually have a chance to learn enough to make substantial changes. Engaging in serious consideration - and developing hunches - about what current practices might be leading to the current situation for the learners, is the point at which we take responsibility as a profession for areas over which we have control. By linking new professional learning to the focus area determined by the school team a culture of continuous learning – and curiosity – is built within and across schools. By checking to see if we are making enough of a difference and by sharing stories of the differences we are seeing, we are building confidence and integrity into the improvement processes. Using plain language helps make the work accessible across schools and cultures.

Third, slowing down to provide space for thinking and reflection can feel like a gift to educators/teachers who often feel compelled to rush – to cover curriculum, to get it all done, to tick off all the boxes. In BW we are fortunate to have a set of learning principles that reflect a consensus among First Peoples, Metis and Inuit groups about Indigenous ways of knowing. Amongst these principles is the acknowledgement that learning is holistic, reflective, experiential and relational. As educators engage in collaborative inquiry using the spiral of inquiry, they begin to experience what this principle means and the process starts to make more sense. A second extremely important principle is that learning takes patience and time. The spiral of inquiry is not a rushed process. In fact, it is designed to slow down thinking so that when action does take place it is informed and leads to significant change. Slowing down initially to speed up change over time may sound counter intuitive - but to teachers this makes sense.

Finally, educators - at least in British Columbia - are more motivated by a sense of community, invitation, support, recognition and shared purpose than they are by policy directives, mandates or guilt.

We acknowledge the efforts of QASSP and lead principals in Queensland to develop and support inquiry networks. This is work that will take you in new directions. As you create your own new departures and find your own songs to guide you, we hope that you will believe that good things can happen when as Margaret Wheatley says, two people get together and say “I have an idea, what if....”

References:

Halbert, J. & Kaser, L. (2013). *Spirals of Inquiry for Equity and Quality*. Vancouver, BC: BCPVPA Press.

Halbert, J. & Kaser, L. (2015). *Learning to Be: A Perspective from British Columbia, Canada*. *European Journal of Education*, 50 (2), 196-213.

Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2014) Creating and Sustaining Inquiry Spaces for Teacher Learning and Transformation. *European Journal of Education*, 49 (2), 206-21.

Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2009). *Leadership mindsets: Innovation and learning in the transformation of schools*. London: Routledge.

Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2017) *The Spiral Playbook*. C21 Canada. <http://c21canada.org/playbook/>

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2014). *A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry*. Center for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper No. 234 Melbourne, Australia.

For information on the First Peoples Principles' of Learning, please see <https://firstpeoplesprinciplesoflearning.wordpress.com/first-peoples-principles-of-learning/>