Engaging in the use of Spirals of Inquiry involves educators exploring and reflecting on their own practice to make decisions about ways to transform practice to benefit all learners. In my role as an education consultant working with networks of schools and early childhood services, I often promote and facilitate the use of Spirals to support the development of collaborative practice – both at network level and with teaching teams. Much of the research into effective collaboration emphasizes the need to get beyond sharing practices to use evidence for change, improvement, and transformation in networks and schools (Sweeney, 2011). The “inquiry and knowledge-building cycle” (Timperley et al., 2007) is a framework that will move a network beyond sharing.

Positive change is more likely through the use of Spirals, which can enable teachers and learners to determine what they need to learn and do to promote learning.

This article outlines some of the practical ways in which leaders can provide support for teachers to engage deeply in each phase of the Spirals so that the process is seen as a relevant and necessary part of learning and teaching.

Scanning
Teachers who are able to transform their professional practice and processes scan for a wider range of evidence before developing solutions to improve outcomes for learners. As a team, teachers can explore the reasons why some students are not reaching desired outcomes and from this a range of evidence-based questions emerge. Some teams need to spend a significant amount of time Scanning, and then reflecting on their practice in the Developing Hunches phase. They can then focus their inquiry into questions about their practices as a team, using the information from Scanning and Developing Hunches. For example, one teaching team formed the following questions after exploring what was going on for their learners and their own practices:

- How can we help students become self-regulated in order to help them “think about their thinking” to help with their learning?
- How can we develop an understanding of student agency so we can foster this within our students?
- How can we support students to seek and receive quality feedback and feedforward?
- How can we effectively use digital technologies to support students and encourage self-belief to improve knowledge acquisition?
That team of teachers worked with their learners to support them to create images/maps about their learning in writing, asking them what or who had an impact on their learning in writing.

*The maps gave insight into personal interests and therefore the students were given more time to engage with their personal interests (e.g. filming, listening to music, sports)*

Team leader comment

**Liz Stevenson** explains that mapping activities are collective, and they help us reveal previously hidden data. Such a process is useful for ongoing Scanning, and when clusters need to rethink their common needs, vision, and goals. It can help learners and adults to create space so that good ideas can emerge to inform transformational change. People can process images thousands of times faster than we can process words – allowing that space in our brains for innovation, ideas and inventions to emerge. **Patti Dobrowolski** provides a piece of the puzzle here as to why this visioning/imaging process works so well. **Dan Roam’s site** also provides a good explanation of this process.

### Focussing

Commonality in teacher practice and learning needs will emerge from a collaborative approach to teaching as inquiry. Many teachers don’t trust that this will occur until they recognize that learner needs and strengths can be heavily influenced by teacher practices – both positive and negative. When teachers see common themes emerging from Scanning data, they begin to realize the impact of their combined practices on learner outcomes.

The process of exploration encourages teachers to examine and change their practice in a more disciplined way to support improved learner agency and outcomes. The inquiry questions that they develop may not be perfect and there may be too many, so teachers often need to prioritize and further develop the focus of their initial inquiry. This reflects the messy process of *Spirals*. Kaser and Halbert recommend that we consider questions connected to the “seven learning principles from the conclusion to *The Nature of Learning*” from the Center for Educational Research and Innovation: OECD.” In considering these, educators can ask key questions that matter during the Scanning and Focussing phases.

#### Developing a hunch

Kaser and Halbert (2014) state that Developing a Hunch is “about getting deeply held beliefs and assumptions out on the table; about our own practices; considering practices...”

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### 11 exploratory actions...

3. [https://twitter.com/PDobrowolski](https://twitter.com/PDobrowolski)
4. [youtu.be/zESeeaFDVSw](http://youtu.be/zESeeaFDVSw)
10. [notosh.com/](http://notosh.com/)
that we can do something about and checking our assumptions for accuracy before moving ahead”.

Leaders can support a team to build a collaborative inquiry by guiding and mentoring teachers in how they reflect on their own practices that may be contributing to the situations emerging from the Scanning phase.

Timperley and Earl (2012) discuss Situation Analysis which is a process that encourages inquiry into practices to fully understand a student achievement challenge. They acknowledge that it is difficult to identify what practices are leading to achievement challenges, and propose that Situation Analysis involving the perspectives of family, Whānau, and community can help:

A situation analysis (J. Annan, 2005; B. Annan, Wootton, & Timperley, unpublished) is a facilitated process to help those wanting to improve outcomes for students to identify how they might need to change their thinking and actions to achieve ongoing improvement. It is most helpful when networks have experienced initial improvement in student learner outcomes, but then experience a plateau.

One place to fit it in the network cycle of inquiry, learning and action is when developing a hunch about what is leading to what. Another time might be after checking if enough of a difference has been made to outcomes for learners, particularly if the impact is less than hoped for. At this point, the situation analysis can be used to identify the focus of the next cycle of inquiry … It frequently means identifying what is not happening e.g. an absence of collegial critique. This process can take up to two days.

The change agenda is identified through leaders completing complementary problem-practice and capability templates in relation to their priority student learning problem. The problem-practice template identifies what needs to change and new actions to change it. The capability template helps leaders work out which new actions they can take on their own, and which will require new professional learning. (Timperley and Earl, 2012, pp. 40-41)

This can be a complex process to learn if you are not accustomed to critiquing your own practice. The benefits of practitioners engaging with professional readings include a deepening of their understanding about their own practice and increased opportunities to reflect on their own practice. Read-

With support, teachers and students learn to ask themselves what is leading to the situation and how they are contributing to this. As this occurs, further common themes emerge across teaching and learner practices and a set of focused inquiry questions emerge for the team to work on together.

These types of open conversations don’t occur automatically. Support teaching teams to use the language of inquiry and ask questions of the data, of learners and of each other.

Learning

Some teachers love reading research articles and relating these to their own practice. Others struggle to make time for professional reading. Leaders can foster engagement with research and professional reading by facilitating teams to read articles together. Readings can be broken up into parts for pairs to read and share back with the wider group and leaders can model conversation about what this means for practice by identifying possibilities.

The benefits of practitioners engaging with professional readings include a deepening of their understanding about their own practice and increased opportunities to reflect on their own practice. Read-
ing and researching widely during the Learning phase helps to build adaptive expertise. As this adaptive expertise grows, educators can more quickly identify and locate the most appropriate strategies and resources for the focused inquiry at hand. This Toolkit relating to the seven principles of learning from the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI-OECD) is evidence of what practitioners with adaptive expertise can create and share.

Seeing is believing. Teachers often need to see what theory and research looks like in practice. This involves story telling and accessing online stories, videos and blogs about collaborative teaching as inquiry.

**Taking action**

The leader’s role in transformation of teacher practice is to engage in regular conversations with the teachers to explore their thinking and practice and to encourage an inquiry mindset using the language of inquiry. The leader can also challenge teachers to think differently about the way they include learners and families in the inquiry process - ensuring their involvement in the inquiry process so that they can identify their roles in making changes.

Le Fevre (Timperley and Parr, 2010) explains that leaders need to ensure “inclusive and ongoing talk about expected changes” as a systematic part of professional learning. She points out that “it is helpful to have clear and explicit expectations that leaders and teachers can and will change their teaching practices” (p. 78).

Leaders can support teachers as they engage in Spirals by ensuring that they have set up systems and processes that enable time for teachers to develop their capability. This support through structures is referred to as “Organisational Capability” by Timperley, McNaughton, Lai, Hōhepa, Parr and Dingle (Timperley and Parr, 2010). They explain that effective schools are “those that balance the routine with the innovative so that they avoid the problem of stagnation or being overwhelmed by change” (p. 30).

The Taking Action phase is where Design Thinking frameworks and tools can prove useful. Teachers may engage in prototyping, experiencing mistakes and success. They may share their ideas and experiences for improvement and they will seek feedback on their practice from colleagues and learners. They might design small projects to further improve their practice, working with their learners and families to explore, synthesise, ideate and prototype. These Design Thinking processes may sit alongside small spirals with exploration aligning to Scanning and ideation aligning to Learning. The NoTosh resources are excellent for this type of exploration in schools to enable transformation or innovation.

**Checking**

Teaching teams can use narrative inquiry approaches to explore the current reality for learners. While learner maps can be useful to gather information during the scanning phase in order to uncover hidden information, teachers and leaders can use Story Hui to uncover hidden information at the evaluative Checking points of an inquiry. Story Hui is an evaluative mapping tool that encourages the use of visual data and group thinking to create a deeper understanding of what has happened during the phases of the Spirals. This process often uncovers previously unidentified information about what worked and what didn’t during the Spirals process. It places the needs of the learner first and is a socially designed process that starts with the learner’s point of view.

Kaser & Halbert (2009, pp. 64-75) explain that inquiry-minded leaders apply four types of inquiry in their roles (Narrative, Appreciative, Problem-based and Reflective). The use of Story Hui can be aligned to Narrative Inquiry where leaders can “create hypotheses about the culture and begin to see patterns that help them to understand the current view of ‘reality’. They also begin to shape the culture of the school by thinking about what stories they will tell.” (p. 65). Checking is about “beginning to set the stage for what comes next” (Kaser and Halbert, 2014) and Story Hui supports this purpose.

The range of tools and resources that leaders and teachers can access to engage in Spirals can feel endless and overwhelming. The process of inquiry is as old as time, but sometimes people forget the importance of spending the time to ask the questions before jumping to solutions. Effective, deep engagement in Spirals will mean choosing the tools that complement the process and that best suit your context. Trying things to see what works best and why is the way that we make progress.

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References and further reading are available online at [http://bit.ly/1Vp7gzp](http://bit.ly/1Vp7gzp)