

# Leading inquiry at a teacher level

## *It's all about mentorship*

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Middle-level leaders in schools have a critical role in mentoring teachers as they work with the teaching-as-inquiry process. One-to-one interactions and professional conversations with each teacher largely determine the quality of inquiry, both for an individual teacher and on a school-wide basis. In this article, an experienced senior secondary school leader explores the conditions necessary for school-wide inquiry to flourish, and explains why mentorship needs to be valued and to operate at a range of levels within the school if effective inquiry is to be initiated and sustained.

### The importance of inquiry

Teaching as inquiry is at the centre of *The New Zealand Curriculum's* section on effective pedagogies (Ministry of Education, 2007). MacBeath and Dempster (2009) argue that teachers are not simply delivering a curriculum: they need to build their professional knowledge by inquiring into their curriculum area and into the art and science of teaching. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2009) argue that sustained improvement in teaching depends on teachers developing their own inquiry skills. They can then collect relevant evidence and use this to inquire into the effectiveness of their teaching and its impact on students, and respond by making ongoing adjustments to their practice.

Teaching as inquiry is at the centre of strong school self-review practice. A recent Education Review Office (ERO) report recommended that all schools make “teaching as inquiry a useful and integral part of everyday teaching practice” (ERO, 2011) and that school leaders help teachers improve their knowledge of the inquiry process. Elmore in Pont, Nusche and Hopkins (2008) argues that a necessary condition for school leaders' success in the future will be their capacity to improve the quality of instructional practice,

a position that places inquiry into the impact of teaching on learning at the centre of their professional development. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2010) also call for school leaders to be actively involved as leading learners. They argue that the more leadership is focused on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater its impact. They also tentatively suggest that sustainability of changed practice may be dependent on whether teachers learn to inquire into the impact of their teaching on students.

### Aspiring to strong inquiry practice

Inquiry needs to have the status it deserves within a self-reviewing school. Aspirational characteristics of strong practice include:

- teachers undertaking meaningful inquiry projects into the impact of their teaching on their students
- viewing inquiry as central to teachers' professional learning
- reciprocal sharing of inquiries with other teachers, both within and across curriculum areas
- strong participation from senior leadership
- meta-analyses that provide an opportunity to examine trends and set directions for school-wide professional learning.

To what extent does this description reflect reality? It appears that the embedded school-wide inquiry scenario described above is little more than fiction in many secondary schools. In their 2010 study of 67 primary and 42 secondary schools, ERO (2011) found that only 26 percent of schools had highly supportive processes in place for promoting inquiry. Also bear in mind that this is an aggregated percentage covering both primary and secondary schools. Given that school-wide professional learning initiatives are harder to establish in secondary settings, and that there are the additional challenges of working across more complex department-based school structures, it could be expected that the this figure would be lower than 26 percent in secondary schools. However, ERO [2012] found that only 3 percent of secondary schools had highly supportive processes in place to support inquiry

What, then, is required to make the aspirational actual, to make teaching as inquiry an established, valued and widespread practice across staff in a secondary school? What is required in order to achieve sustainability, for teachers to adopt what ERO (2011) describes as an “inquiry disposition”, whereby teachers habitually view teaching and learning through an inquiry lens? Inquiry-based practice is simply not going to happen on its own.

## Introducing inquiry: empowering middle leaders

How is inquiry made to function in schools, at both a strategic and an operational level? Mentorship of those facilitating the inquiry process seems to be the oil for the wheels of change. This section explains how to get started, and the following section provides more detail about mentorship at the middle-leader level. The principles described are those that were used to introduce inquiry across a large secondary teaching staff of approximately 80 teachers (the author’s school).

We found that it is much easier to facilitate the inquiry process at a teacher level, with inquiry initiated and introduced gradually by senior leaders in collaboration with heads of curriculum areas. It was vital that middle leaders who had not previously implemented inquiry practices were established as professional leaders of inquiry using a distributed leadership model. In two instances, where heads of curriculum areas already had established inquiry practices, their work provided valuable local examples of what inquiry already looked like within the school.

Another key early step was setting up opportunities for middle leaders to explore and understand inquiry in cross-curricular workshops. A high level of resourcing supported this process, including guidelines for middle

leaders to introduce inquiry to their teachers, teacher toolkits, and key readings. The development of a set of descriptors as a reference point for leaders and teachers is guiding the inquiry process and is also gaining status as a code of practice (see Box 1).

### BOX 1. DESCRIPTORS OF GOOD PRACTICE IN REGARD TO INQUIRY

1. The inquiry is based on a group of students taught by you in the current year. This group might be selected students in one class, a whole single class, or a number of students within more than one class.
2. You look for quality evidence about what is happening to these students in their classroom. That could include framing questions like these about problems or issues about learning:
  - Why are students in my class struggling with...? What are the challenges they are facing in this part of my course...?
  - How confident are my students about this part of the course? How do they rate their understanding about what they are learning?
3. You identify an aspect where you can act as an effective agent to help students improve.
4. You take actions and apply teaching interventions aimed at creating improvements for students.
5. There is evidence of quality thinking about the value and effectiveness of the actions and interventions, as well as next steps. There is learning from your inquiry that has relevance and benefit for your teaching beyond the scope of your project.
6. The inquiry is not based on a single short event (e.g., “I noticed this in one period and changed it in the next”) but over an extended period.
7. You meet regularly with your curriculum leader during the year to talk about your inquiry.
8. You document your inquiry in a short written report, which you also share with other teachers in your curriculum area.
9. Your inquiry works within a suitable timeframe negotiated between you and your curriculum leader.
10. Your project is an important professional window on your practice and is included as part of your appraisal.
11. At a school-wide level, meta-analyses of the inquiry work of all teachers provide an opportunity to examine trends and set directions for school-wide professional learning.
12. Inquiry is a school-wide process that continues each year.

Middle leaders needed guidance to start the inquiry process with their teams, particularly when this was new for both them and the teachers. The process in our school started with teachers reflecting on their programmes with a particular class or classes and considering what learning issues were emerging. In some instances, common areas for shared inquiry emerged. Next, individual meetings were scheduled between each teacher and their curriculum leader. Discussions were personalised to each teacher’s situation in order to frame an area for inquiry. Teachers were often encouraged to consider ‘soft’ data in the form of students’ reactions and responses to their learning. Aitken (2007) suggests this might involve teachers asking their students about how confident they feel about a particular part of their course, how they rate their understanding of what they are learning, or which strategies being used by the teacher are helping them learn.

Teachers have become increasingly aware that the method and timing of data gathering significantly affect the type of information that is gathered. More immediate methods of soft data collection provide a richer information source for classroom-focused inquiry projects. If feedback is sought on an aspect of pedagogy the teacher is using in class at the time (i.e., close to the point of learning), students' impressions are fresh and specific. "Explain back to me; tell me what you understand about this" can yield useful details that place the teacher in an informed position to decide on appropriate interventions. Broader, evaluative questions are generally more cognitively demanding and can be more challenging for students to answer. As a result, they may be less useful for inquiry feedback purposes. An end-of-topic or semester survey, when students are distanced from their learning experiences, also yields comments that are more generalised and broad. Students tend to make overall impressionistic comments, lacking specific examples.

## Beginning and sustaining professional conversations about inquiry

Critical friendship, or mentorship, helps build knowledge *about* inquiry. Leadership that leads to successful inquiry at the teacher level is all about capacity building. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008) note that senior leaders can have a strong influence on working conditions and a moderate influence on fostering motivation and commitment, but they have a comparatively weak influence on building staff capacity. For this reason, mentorship of middle leaders must be aimed at supporting them to build their teachers' capacities. Middle leaders have the greatest potential to develop the capacity of teachers in their curriculum areas because they are interacting with them on a daily basis. Clearly, the nature of those interactions requires scrutiny.

Mentorship in inquiry means starting and continuing a professional conversation with each teacher. In simple terms, middle leaders are fostering the ability to try something out. However, what may seem to be a simple process is often a challenging professional task. Curriculum leaders are endeavouring to develop a connection to each teacher on a learning issue the teacher can address. Over time, their aim is to secure a commitment from that teacher to make a genuine effort to do something about that issue.

The goal for these ongoing professional conversations is to develop "disciplined dialogue" (Swaffield & Dempster, 2009). This is a useful notion because it includes several of the characteristics of the conversations

that middle leaders need to have with their teachers. Disciplined dialogue is not based on hearsay, anecdote or rumour, but on real data relating to matters critical to understanding students and their learning, as follows.

- The focus of the conversations develops according to the *stage of the inquiry process*. At an early stage this might involve conversations about the focus or scope of the project. Later it may mean helping teachers to 'dig into the details', or guiding them about where to look for data, then asking questions about their thinking on the effectiveness of the interventions they are applying.
- Questions about what and how teachers learn are not static. In our school, middle leaders have remodelled discussions in the light of *context-specific conditions*.
- *Teachers are on a continuum* with regard to their own expertise in inquiry. One middle leader found that she needed to address diverse needs. At one end of the continuum a teacher asked, "Could you send me my inquiry question again?" Other teachers with high levels of self-efficacy, and who were immersed in their projects, asked the middle leader to evaluate which next steps made the most sense.
- Consideration needs to be given to the *types of questions* a leader asks. Reflective questions that clarify, and questions that explore the reasons and intended outcomes for a particular practice, are effective mentoring or coaching strategies (Robertson, 2008). The middle leader above also found that asking additional questions that were intended to reveal creativity and open up possibilities yielded the most in-depth answers.
- Mentoring teachers to keep their inquiries *appropriately framed* is also very challenging. *Retaining a sense of agency* is vital for both the curriculum leader and the teacher. The problem of practice that frames the inquiry must be one for which the teacher can act as an effective agent to help students improve.
- The middle leader must also be able to *reciprocate* in their mentorship role. The example in Box 2 illustrates these challenges.

### BOX 2. PRESERVING TEACHER AGENCY

A physical education head of department (HOD) found mentorship of an inquiry into the lack of progression in senior courses to be a challenging exercise. There was a complicated set of underpinning factors, many of which were beyond the teacher's control. Data gathered via focus groups and surveys revealed that a range of personal factors, such as body image and self-perception, influenced student choice. The HOD found it challenging supporting the teacher in an inquiry that in many respects revealed issues that extended beyond the scope of teacher agency and influence. The HOD responded, in part, by broadening the conversation to include other teachers, thereby promoting valuable discussion about how the department as a whole could address the issue of building students' capacities and confidence. Reflecting on her mentorship for future inquiry, the HOD intends to consider how teacher agency can be preserved, whether by framing or by containing their projects.

## Mentorship as a social process

This mentored approach to teacher learning is in essence a social process, sustained by what Rob Gilbert refers to as “relational trust” (Gilbert, 2011). This takes time to establish when a middle leader is new or when such relationships may not have previously existed. Relational trust can be made even more difficult when the middle leader does not share a subject specialism with the teacher they are mentoring, particularly when the interventions move beyond broader aspects of pedagogy to being situated in a specific subject context.

Our leadership model frames leadership as an activity, not a position (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009). A significant aspect of fostering relational trust derives from the stance that middle leaders take in their approach to their own inquiries. Modelling learning, where the HOD uses their own inquiry as an example and invites her or his colleagues to critique and comment, is one way middle leaders ‘lead by doing’. Within their departments, middle leaders at our school have found that they have built social capital and taken their teachers with them if the message they give is that their own inquiries have significant value within their work. Leading by doing, or the HOD working alongside the teachers completing their own inquiry, is one manifestation of this approach in action. It has helped broaden respect as well as engendering a positive sense of being involved in the inquiry process together.

A heightened awareness is developing that teachers take their lead from the leader’s attitudes. Reciprocity is vital. Middle leaders must place as much energy and commitment into their mentorship roles aimed at developing their teachers’ capacities as inquirers as they expect teachers to put into their own inquiries. Or, as Elmore (2008) puts it, “for every unit of performance I require of you, I owe you a unit of capacity to produce that result.”

These steps, among others, position the middle leader as a teaching leader, not as a manager or administrator. Robinson (2009) suggests that leaders who are perceived as sources of instructional advice and expertise gain greater respect from their staff and hence have greater influence over how they teach. While these are early days, in that many heads of curriculum areas in our school are new to leading inquiry, it is evident from discussions in middle leader mentorship groups that they perceive themselves to be gaining status as instructional leaders.

## Taking risks and challenging expectations

There is no value in a teacher finding out what they already know, which one middle leader described as a “lip service

inquiry”. An effective inquiry is one where a teacher takes the view that they can see and assess a problem, then try some strategies, with the expectation that a possible outcome is that some will work and others may not. If teachers see their curriculum leader questioning whether their own teaching is successful or effective, it helps create a teacher mindset of ‘I can see that happening to you, I feel comfortable, I can do that as well’.

Sometimes, deeper learning can result more from failures than from successes. Middle leaders have a role in reassuring their teachers that valuable learning is to be gained from inquiries where the interventions are not effective. For example, the head of technology reinforced the value of learning gained from a literacy-based inquiry project that had not been initially successful by encouraging the teacher to revisit how she could use simpler scaffolded activities aimed at building familiarity with technology terms in order improve success when students undertake an assessment activity.

As mentioned above, teachers are at various points on a continuum in terms of inquiry, and this guides the setting of expectations for inquiry in subsequent years. Teachers in their first year of inquiry are in a period of training in the process, and middle leaders should have an expectation of building on that in the future. Where teachers have engaged in the inquiry process over several years, there is an expectation that they will go beyond the comfortable to challenge their own thinking. Expectations also apply to teachers’ views of students. Disciplined dialogue based on information about non-achieving students can become a tool to break down deficit stereotyping, characterised as ‘My students can’t do this or that’, as if their lack of achievement were some sort of immovable position. The inquiry focus must be on under-achieving students—those who are not learning what teachers had assumed they had taught them—and on the interventions needed to move them on. The students who are resistant or not achieving are the ones on whom the teacher should focus.

A fundamental goal of mentorship is the growth of teachers’ self-efficacy in their work with inquiry. We have yet to determine the extent to which middle leaders have been able to build each teacher’s ability to take individual responsibility, with a growing sense of confidence that they can and will independently carry through their inquiry. There are encouraging signs, though. In Social Sciences, three teachers who volunteered to update the department about their inquiries created a flow-on to a further group of teachers, who volunteered to share their progress at the next departmental meeting. The initiative has come more from teachers as the year has moved on, whereas in Term One the inquiry process was strongly middle leader-initiated.

## Senior leaders' roles

Leadership for professional development involves a strong organisational component as well as the ability to make things happen (Timperley, 2009). Senior leaders exert a strong influence over priorities within a school's professional learning programme. Continued forward momentum must be monitored at an organisational level and adjustments made as required.

Providing the optimal conditions means that time is created for mentorship to occur. It is easy to give conflicting messages that inquiry is valuable while consigning it to be dealt with as another 'thing to do' in departmental meeting time at the end of a draining teaching day, or as an add-on to an existing professional development programme. In many respects inquiry needs to become *the* professional learning programme, the lens through which learning issues are tackled. Creating space in a crowded school programme is a challenge that must be overcome. Some suggestions are to:

- minimise competing initiatives (Timperley, 2007)
- dedicate high-value staff development time (such as meeting time that might have otherwise been designated for full staff meetings on other topics) to middle leaders to use at their discretion for individual or faculty conversations about inquiry
- allocate the precious commodity of non-timetabled time to supporting inquiry—in our school, seven heads of major curriculum areas have 4 hours of non-teaching allocation per week, targeted towards fostering inquiry.

Senior leaders also have a role in 'mentoring the mentors'. The principle of reciprocity espoused by Elmore (2008) applies to the relationship between senior and middle leaders as well as to middle leaders working with their teachers. Senior leaders must place, and be seen to place, as much commitment into their roles as they expect from their middle leaders. They cannot simply set strategic goals, pass over the implementation to their staff, then return at a later point to measure progress. Senior leaders must lead by doing, which includes completing their own inquiries.

Bendikson, Robinson and Hattie (2012) observe that little is known about the extent to which senior leaders inquire into what their middle leaders know about the impact of teaching on their students, a key aspect of the inquiry process. Senior leaders can facilitate meetings where small groups of HODs share and learn from each others' mentorship experiences. In these meetings, HODs describe their own inquiries and outline their teachers' inquiry projects. They also share the approaches they have used within their curriculum areas to mentor staff and build an inquiry focus. At our school, with the permission of those involved, these meetings are recorded and

discussion summaries and conclusions drawn by senior leaders are shared among all those involved. While this is time consuming, it has proved valuable to be able to share middle leaders' insights into mentorship, and to suggest next steps as well as document the process. Several examples have been retrieved from these summaries in developing this article.

Senior leaders also have a role in reinforcing the idea that inquiry matters on a whole-school basis. In addition to a gradual and well-resourced introduction to the inquiry process, jointly led by senior and middle leadership, other signals that inquiry matters might include building in formalised opportunities for teachers to present their inquiries to their colleagues. Individual teachers' inquiry projects can also become a key part of the school appraisal process. This conveys an expectation of universal teacher engagement. Each teacher's inquiry is a key item in the appraisal process because it offers a window into the quality of their professional practice and therefore holds high professional status.

Once inquiry is embedded, senior leaders can carry out and publish a meta-analysis of inquiry across the school. This provides an opportunity to examine trends and set directions for school-wide professional learning. In one sense, this is applying one of Elmore's (2008) core principles of leadership for improvement by taking knowledge out of private classroom domains and making it public.

## Conclusion

Mentoring inquiry in our school is very much a work in progress. Although inquiry processes have operated as formalised professional learning in some curriculum areas for several years, inquiry as a required and documented component of each teacher's work is in its first full year. It will be interesting to observe patterns over the next few years, and there is a commitment to continue to monitor the inquiry process, particularly in relation to the dispositions that need to be further developed in senior and middle leaders in order to foster inquiry.

The experience so far indicates that middle leaders' one-to-one interactions and professional conversations with each teacher largely determine the quality of inquiry, both for an individual teacher and school-wide. It is essential to place significant value on mentorship development. It is through strengthening middle leaders' professional impact on the teachers they work closely with on a daily basis that schools may be able to move to a best practice inquiry model, spanning the different curriculum areas. Mentorship does more than oil the wheels for effective inquiry roll-out: it is at the centre of a distributed instructional leadership model.

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