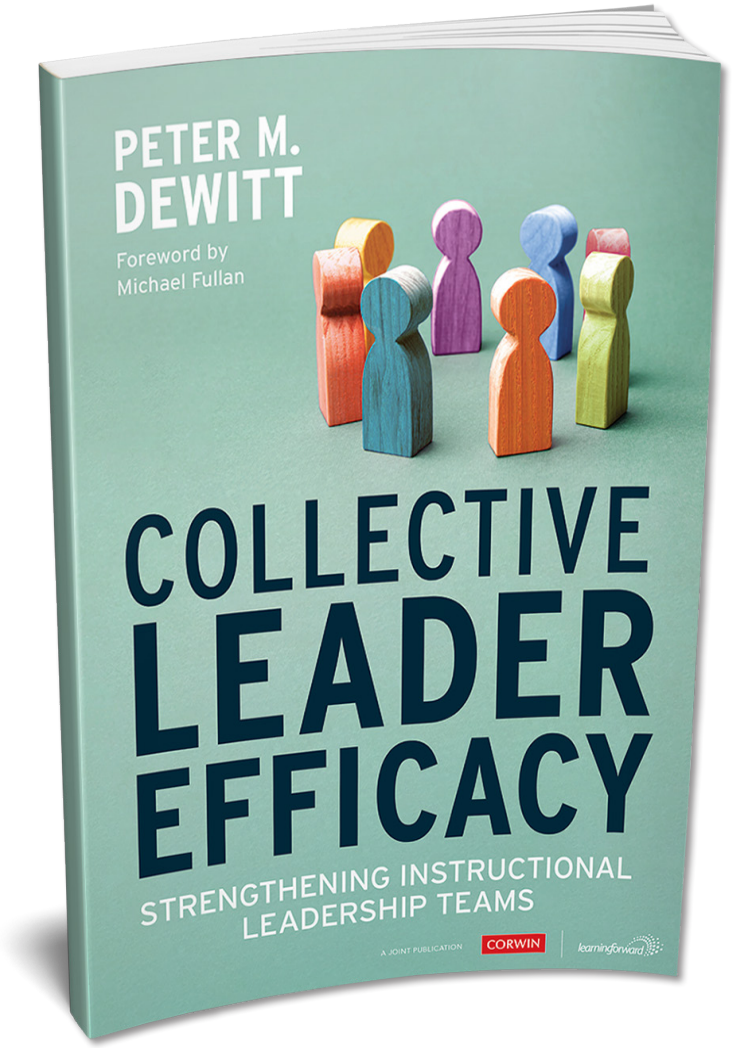

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CYCLE OF INQUIRY

How do teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principals, and school building leaders within your organization best learn? Over the course of this book, my hope is that your team has engaged in learning about collective leader efficacy and the various drivers but also about your specific focus on learning. What are the needs of your school community? What are you curious about concerning learning? I often worry that adults spend so much time going into their classrooms and schools to teach that they forget that they are also there to learn.

Not only has this book focused on how your leadership team functions and learns together, but it has also focused on the importance of student learning and the journey from surface learning to deep learning and transfer-level learning.

We have now gotten to the point where your team begins their specific focus on learning and puts theory into action. At its core, this book is about how your individual organization learns together, and the last two chapters of this book will take that learning and put it into action.

Organizational learning is important, and it's not merely a topic for researchers or school leadership classes. Organizational learning research is about how schools, with all of the adults and students within them, choose to learn. Robinson (2001, p. 58) found that "there are two distinct strands of research on organisational learning. The descriptive strand, with its roots in social and cognitive psychology, seeks to understand the processes by which organisations learn and adapt." We have spent a great deal of time concentrating on that aspect of organizational leadership because social and cognitive theory are at the heart of self-efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, collective leader efficacy, and Bandura's (1997) work on each of those.

Additional to the descriptive strand is the normative strand of organizational learning. Robinson (2001, p. 58) found that "the normative strand, which is sometimes referred to as research on the 'learning organization,' is concerned more with how organisations can direct their learning in ways that bring them closer to an ideal." And that research on the normative strand of organizational learning is what brings us to this chapter on a cycle of inquiry.

In order for your instructional leadership team (ILT) to bond closer together, have a positive impact on the learning that takes place in your school, and develop collective leader efficacy, they will need to enter into cycles of inquiry. Cycles of inquiry are meant to assist teams in directing the learning of individuals and teams within their organizations. Keep in mind, this whole book has centered around collaboration and the voices of everyone on the team, so do not be scared of the fact that I just used the word *directing* in that last sentence.

Casey (2014) writes, "Questions are the root of inquiry; they initiate, sustain and invigorate each aspect of the process. Questions direct investigation, drive creativity, stimulate discussion, and are the bedrock of reflection" (p. 510). Casey goes on to write, "When we describe learning in terms of inquiry, we are clearly affirming that learning and questioning processes are somehow intertwined" (p. 510). The reality is that individuals on the team are inquisitive, or at least, they felt inquisitive at one time in their lives. Our ILTs need to find a place that brings that curiosity to the table and gain an understanding of what is working and what is not within their building.

Cycles of inquiry are inspired from the work of Dewey (1956), who purported that there are four primary interests of a learner (both child and adult). Those four interests are inquiry, communication, construction, and expression. Inquiry is inspired by questions we want to ask. Communication is a person's need to engage in social relationships, which we explored earlier with self-efficacy and its place in social cognitive theory. Construction is a person or team's need to build something, and reflection is understanding the meaning behind the experience they have had.

Casey and Bruce (2011, pp. 78–79) write, "We need to interpret the cycle as suggestive, neither the sole, nor the complete, characterisation of inquiry-based learning. Inquiry rarely proceeds in a simple, linear fashion." Additionally, I think it's important to mention here that this doesn't have to be a stiff process. We hear terms such as *inquiry* or *linear process* and our minds go to a place where everyone is serious and chooses their words carefully.

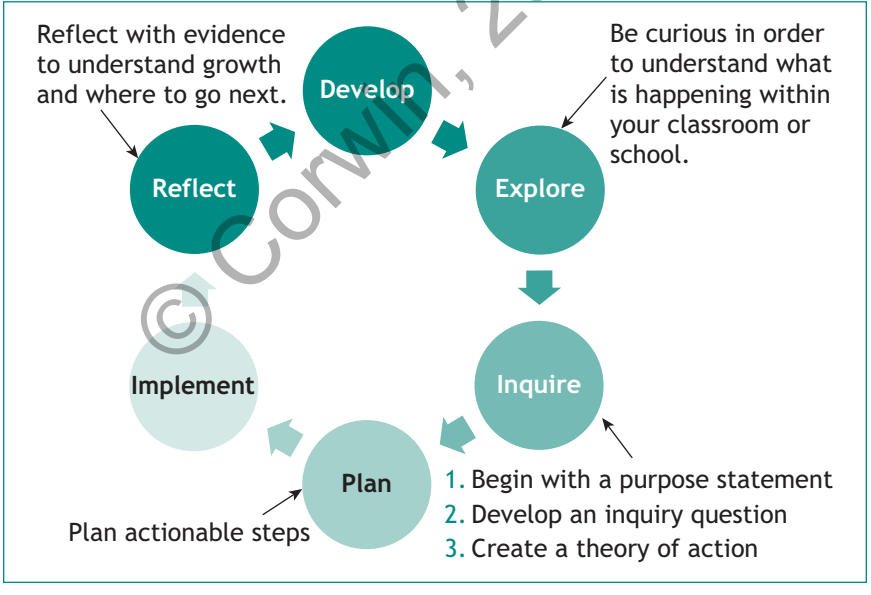
This process should be engaging, somewhat fun, and even messy at times. I think we can still have fun while we are engaging in deep learning about the instructional core of our school. As Donohoo (2013, p. 23) says, "Inquiry should be viewed primarily as a professional learning strategy as opposed to a research design."

When it comes to the inquiry process, Casey and Bruce (2011) go on to write,

> Each step can be embedded in any of the others, and so on. In fact, the very nature of inquiry is that these steps are mutually reinforcing and interrelated. Together, they comprise a cycle that can be used to inform and guide educational experiences for learners. (p. 79)

Given all of the research on the profound impact that a cycle of inquiry can have on individuals and groups, I have created a cycle of inquiry for your team. This cycle of inquiry has been used by instructional coaches and leadership coaches in my on-demand courses, and it has been used with groups at workshops that I coach. As you will see in Figure 11.1, the cycle of inquiry has six elements to it. Take some time with your team to look at the image. I will explain each aspect of the cycle of inquiry below.

Figure 11.1 Cycle of Inquiry Model



Source: DeWitt, 2021.

There are six steps in the cycle of inquiry:

Develop. It's important that your ILT develops an understanding of how the team will work together when it comes to a focus on learning. Pay close attention to a couple of these questions because you will see them again.

- How do we develop a shared understanding of student engagement?
- How do we develop a shared understanding of how students and teachers are engaged in authentic learning experiences?
- How do we develop an understanding of how the ILT supports students and teachers in that pursuit?

Explore. ILTs need to understand how they are presently doing the work that they referred to in the development stage. It's important that ILTs do not reinvent the wheel, especially if they are already engaged in actions that are impactful. Keep the following questions in mind:

- How do we support students and teachers in their pursuit of authentic learning experiences?
- How do we provide equitable resources to our students and teachers so they can engage in authentic learning experiences?
- How can we improve in the way we engage our students and teachers?

Inquire. Later in this chapter, we will break this down even more, but *inquire* means that we engage in three specific actions:

- Develop a purpose statement that is inspired by a problem within the classroom or school.
- Take the purpose statement and create an inquiry question.
- Take the purpose statement and inquiry question and develop a theory of action.

Plan. In Chapter 12, we will focus on this aspect of the cycle of inquiry. Planning involves using a program logic model from which the ILT will take their theory of action and start to gain an understanding of what resources they will need, develop some impactful activities that will help them achieve their goal, create a timetable to hold themselves accountable, and gather evidence to understand the impact.

Implement. This aspect is when members of the ILT take those activities discussed in the program logic model, look at the timetable that they agreed upon, and begin taking actionable steps by putting those activities into action.

Reflect. The ILT needs to take time to reflect on their actions, gather evidence, and understand their impact.

As you can see, the first step in the inquiry process is to develop an understanding by asking questions, and as with all inquiry models, students must be at the center of the discussion. As I asked earlier, wouldn't it be impactful to have a student council engage in a cycle of inquiry? I will highlight what that might look like in some examples below. Investigate, create, discuss, and reflect will be explained further in Chapter 12.

It's important to note that there are many inquiry models, and some are referred to as *spirals of inquiry.* The bottom line at the heart of any inquiry is how a team focuses on student learning and involves students in the process. A cycle of inquiry is not merely how adults come together and talk about how students should learn.

Therefore, I have developed four guiding questions that need to be a part of the inquiry process, and if your team feels comfortable with them, they could be used in the development stage of the inquiry cycle. I highly suggest starting with the first three questions and using the fourth question for the reflecting stage of the cycle of inquiry.

These questions will help ILTs investigate what is happening in their schools and help to create hands-on learning experiences that foster the growth of students, teachers, and leaders. These questions should inspire deep discussion, which is why we focused on the drivers to developing your team in Section II—so you feel comfortable challenging each other's thinking. Finally, this process will inspire the ILT to reflect on what worked, what did not work, and where to go next when it comes to student learning.

FOUR QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE CYCLE OF INQUIRY

To develop the cycle of inquiry in which teams learn through a process, it is important that they engage in discussions around learning. Those discussions require questions in order to develop an understanding of the focus of the work, and that is where we are now. Through my work with leadership teams and facilitating workshops as well as doing research, I have developed four guiding questions to help lead your ILT. These four questions intersect with Elmore's (2009) three

components to the instructional core, but they also intersect with research about deep learning and social-emotional learning as well.

Throughout the book, we have explored ways that student councils can be included in the discussion on student learning. The reality is that progressive schools can include their student council in this process, and the four guiding questions can be as easily answered by those students as they can be by adults. If a student council approach is not possible, then perhaps two students can be a part of the ILT discussion, which was a suggestion made when we discussed roles on a team.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE CYCLE OF INQUIRY

1. How are students and teachers working together to create authentic learning experiences?
2. How are we supporting students and teachers in that process?
3. How do we engage families in the process?
4. What unbiased evidence do we collect to understand our impact?

Let's take a moment to explore each one of the guiding questions. Please keep in mind that the short descriptions below are from my perspective, so feel free to expand on these descriptions by adding your own specific contextual perspective.

1. How are students and teachers working together to create authentic learning experiences?

There has been plenty of focus on student engagement and student learning throughout this book. Now it is up to your team, with the help of student input (through student council or student members on the ILT), to develop a common language and a common understanding about what you believe *authentic learning* means. I believe it means we want to engage in experiences with students that will encourage them to think for themselves. This, of course, intersects

with Elmore's research about students engaging in their own learning but additionally takes into account a teacher's knowledge and skill. After all, teachers need the knowledge and skill to be able to do this work. However, not only do teachers need to understand how this is done—school building leaders do as well.

As your team engages in learning walks, this question is one that should be used to maintain your focus as you walk from one class to the next. It means taking into account student voice, surface- to deep-level learning, deficit thinking, the knowledge dimensions that have been explored in this book, and discussions about equity and anti-racism. This is an important time to help create those authentic experiences with students.

2. How are we supporting students and teachers in that process?

Throughout the book, we have focused on ways to elevate the voices of students and teachers, and we covered professional learning and development as a necessary driver to building collective leader efficacy among the ILT. You were even provided with activities that you can use with your ILT or with teachers in faculty meetings. Additionally, we included Robinson's work on promoting and participating in teacher learning and development.

During these stressful times, we know that well-being is important, so social-emotional support is important, too. Given all that we have concentrated on, what is your ILT doing to support teachers from an academic and social-emotional standpoint? Perhaps this is where your ILT begins to focus on de-implementation rather than implementation.

What we know is that from an academic standpoint, we can always go deeper when it comes to student learning. De-implementation can allow the ILT to work with teachers in the school on high-impact teaching strategies that will encourage and foster deeper learning. What this means, and the reason why I mention de-implementation is that ILT's can engage in dialogue and professional learning and development that will allow teachers to suspend the use of strategies that are just not that engaging.

Lastly, de-implementation will help the social-emotional issues teachers and students face because it fosters a "less is more" philosophy which could alleviate the stress everyone feels.

3. How do we engage families in the process?

School communication usually comes in three different forms. Those forms are informational, dialogical, and learning (DeWitt, 2019b). Informational communication includes the use of newsletters or posts on social media to provide important dates and times. Open house at the beginning of the year, when teachers meet parents for the first time, tends to be informational as opposed to dialogical.

Dialogical communication is when teachers and parents have time to talk with one another, such as during parent–teacher conferences, when the student's report card is the center of attention. As a school principal, I began sending report cards home a week ahead of time so parents had time to look at them instead of receiving them at the meeting (when they wouldn't have time to prepare any questions). At first, some teachers worried that parents wouldn't come to their designated time if they already had received the report card, but holding a report card hostage in order to coerce parents to come in is not the way to build a relationship. We even provided parents with sample questions they could ask their child's teacher.

Learning typically encompasses special events such as math nights, science fairs, chorus and band concerts, art exhibitions, or maker space nights. Too often, communication to families is overloaded with one-sided informational messages and does not come in forms that encourage dialogue and learning.

4. What unbiased evidence do we collect to understand our impact?

What evidence does your ILT collect that would offer an unbiased opinion of the impact your team is having on the school community? Confirmation bias happens when we look for evidence that will directly support our opinions. It is natural for all of us to specifically look for evidence that will support our opinions.

For example, I engage in a lot of learning walks with school leaders and we are constantly at risk of having a learning walk bias. What does this look like? As a former first-grade teacher, I walk into first-grade classrooms expecting to see a classroom set up similar to how mine was when I was a teacher. It does not mean I believe I was the greatest teacher in the world, but I spent so many years in the role that it is very difficult for me to let go of the image I have in my head of a

first-grade classroom. I have had to learn to suspend my bias when I walk into classrooms to make sure I am getting a fresh perspective and not merely looking for issues that will confirm my bias.

Triangulating data is the best way to move forward. Anderson et al. (1991, p. 53) write that triangulation brings together several sources of information. Heal and Forbes (2013) write,

> Triangulation in research is the use of more than one approach to researching a question. The objective is to increase confidence in the findings through the confirmation of a proposition using two or more independent measures. The combination of findings from two or more rigorous approaches provides a more comprehensive picture of the results than either approach could do alone. (p. 98)

For our purposes, triangulation will allow your ILT to understand impact. The ILT can look at the evidence collected from learning walks and formative assessment data collected from teachers and student data such as surveys, exit tickets, authentic assessments, student voice groups, and portfolios. In Appendix 4, your team will find a sample of a learning walk document.

WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE?

Taking our cue from the guiding questions I developed, let's connect that concept with the next step in this inquiry process. We will ultimately use all four questions in the inquiry process but it's the first three specifically that you will see in the section below as we develop purpose statements.

Donohoo (2013, p. 22) says, "Outlining a clear and compelling purpose for the collaborative effort will further inspire and motivate the team." It is important to choose wisely when it comes to the purpose statement because Donohoo writes that because it "sets the direction for data collection and reporting, it is important to use language that is exploratory in nature" (p. 23). That discussion around data is where the fourth question in the list of guiding questions enters into the process.

It's always good to have some practice before we enter into the deeper work. Your team needs time to wrap their heads around the process, especially if they are new to it. The following is an activity to help get your team started in the inquiry process. It begins with developing a purpose statement, and in the examples below, I will offer one suggestion for each of the guided questions introduced above and then provide you with the opportunity to create one as a team.

In the appendices of the book, your team will find templates you can use to engage in this process as you will actually use it in your school. This practice section is just that—it is practice. However, when you actually begin to develop purpose statements, questions, and theories of actions, you will need to set aside several of your ILT meetings in order to do that.

When it comes to creating purpose statements, Donohoo (2013, p. 24) suggests a kind of a formula for writing a purpose statement: You should ask whether the purpose is for participants to explore, discover, describe, or understand a specific issue. The examples provided below can also be used by your student council if you choose to bring them into the process.

After you work through each practice activity (Activity 11.1–11.3), please keep in mind the specific needs of your school.