The spiral of inquiry: An introduction to checking

ECE resources

This phase involves checking the effectiveness of the changes made and the new approaches trialled in the taking action phase by assessing their impact on children and their learning. It is essential to collect and evaluate information on the impact of new strategies and practices on children's learning and outcomes to inform the future direction of the inquiry. Change does not always equal improvement or transformation, and there may be instances where teachers change what they are doing only to find that not much has changed for the children, so it is important to ask whether enough of a difference has been made and to seek corroborating evidence.

During the scanning and focusing phases, teachers make decisions about the methods and evidence needed to check the impact of their inquiry. The checking phase is crucial because it involves collecting this evidence and analysing it in order to determine what comes next. It is important to note that this is not the last phase of inquiry but rather a bridge between the first cycle of inquiry and what comes next in the learning and improvement journey.

A guide to the checking phase

Start by clarifying **what counts as success** by checking back to the intentions for improvement identified earlier in the spiral and using this as a key success criterion. **Maintain high expectations** that your inquiry-led actions will make a significant difference for all children and **revisit your goal(s)** from the taking action phase. Have the outcomes you had envisioned for the children at the forefront of your mind when checking to see if your actions have been effective.

Next, revisit and review the data collected and the collection methods you used in the scanning and focusing phases and **collect a new, separate data set to assess impact.** Replicate the data collected in the scanning and focusing phases by using the same tools, and **consider if you need to supplement data to assess impact**. Do you have enough evidence to know if you are making a difference? How much difference will be enough? Consider a range of evidence to **find out about children's learning and experiences**, such as the impact on engagement, motivation, enjoyment or their perception of themselves as learners.

As well as searching for evidence that proves your actions have been effective, also **search for evidence that suggests the approach might not be working** (for example, for particular groups of children or specific curriculum areas), and **consider different levels of impact** – the impact on groups and individual children as well as particular gender or cultural groupings. **Ask critical questions:** don't use checking to justify your actions but be open to what the evidence says about the effects on children's learning. **Remember to check regularly and give your innovation and change time to have an impact**, but don't leave it too long in case the strategies you are exploring are ineffective.

Be prepared to **adjust your practice** as you proceed with the checking phase. Return to your plans from the taking action phase, reflect on the actual outcomes for children and set a new goal. What different approaches could you try? What can you adapt, refine or revise in your understanding of children's learning? **Make adjustments immediately,** and maintain an inquiry mindset. If you do not get the results you hoped for initially, remember there is always something to learn. Deepen your processes of

observation, listening, and critical thought. Be patient, and be willing to risk being wrong and to learn from failure. Try again.

Questions for checking1

Use these questions during the checking phase to help you evaluate and measure the impact of your inquiry:

- What happened as a result of the new teaching strategies/approaches you have trialled?

- How effective has what you learned and put into action been in promoting children's learning and wellbeing?

- How have your changes been positive for children?

- Have your changes/actions had a negative impact on children?

- What learning happened for the children?

- What did you learn about the children?

- Did the changes made achieve the intended outcomes? If not, why not? If so, how will you sustain the effective practices and what are your next steps?

- Did the change impact all children? In what ways? Or why not?

- Why is it that your teaching was less successful for this group of learners compared to another?

- Who did the changes work for? Under what circumstances?

- Why is it that your teaching was successful in one aspect, but not in another?

- Did the changes have any unintended (positive or negative) outcomes?

- Is this the most efficient way to use limited resources?

- What different approaches could you try? Should you ask the children?

- What are the implications for future teaching?

- What can you adapt, refine or revise in your understanding of children's learning?

- What will you do next to ensure that the children continue to achieve?

- What new goals do you want to set? (Return to Scanning)

Tools for checking

The following tools may be useful during the checking phase. You might also like to revisit and reuse some of the tools from previous phases to compare children's learning and measure progress.

Evidence collation template: Use this table to collate and compare the data from the beginning of the inquiry in the scanning and focusing phases and in the checking phase.

Critical checks template: Use this table to collate and critically interrogate your evidence for this inquiry. This tool includes some critical questions to help you evaluate the impact your actions has had on your teaching practice and children's learning.

Scanning phase data collection tools: Use the same data collection methods as you did in the scanning phase in order to measure the effectiveness of your actions.

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Detailed action plan tool: Revisit your Detailed Action Plan from the taking action phase to examine your findings, reflect, and set a new SMART goal for the next cycle of your inquiry.

References and further reading

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Endnotes

1 Questions adapted from:

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