

System transformation for equity and quality: Purpose, passion and persistence

Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

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Introduction

The authors of this paper have been working with networks of educators to create system transformation in the province of British Columbia (BC), Canada, over the past two decades. For us, system transformation means moving from a sorting system where **some** learners thrive to a learning system where **every** learner crosses the stage with dignity, purpose and options' and where **all** learners leave our settings more curious than when they arrived.' We believe that innovation is built on a strong foundation of curiosity and floats on a sea of inquiry.

Through our work in developing school-to-school inquiry networks, focused on equity and quality, and from our experience in designing graduate leadership programs – with the expressed intention of developing leaders with clear moral purpose and strong inquiry mindsets – we have learned a great deal about what it takes to create and sustain change. Our participation in the OECD: CERI innovative learning environments research study, as well as

our experiences in supporting inquiry networks in British Columbia, England, the Yukon, New Zealand and Australia, are contributing to our growing understanding of the importance of shared frameworks and disciplined inquiry as foundations for meaningful innovation. We have learned that system change is not for the faint of heart. Significant change takes a real sense of purpose, unfaltering passion and absolute persistence.

In this paper we will outline how the inquiry networks in BC have evolved internally and spread beyond our province. We will highlight some of the key research that has influenced and shaped our thinking, and describe the frameworks that are bringing coherence to transformative efforts across inquiry networks – and across other systems. We will outline the ways in which approaches to leadership development are contributing to system change. We will close with some perspectives on the importance of passion and persistence in system change.

Inquiry Networks – evolution and spread

In 2000, with the support of a provincial grant, educators from thirty schools in British Columbia came together to explore using learning progressions in literacy, social responsibility and numeracy, to deepen learner agency. This developed into a province-wide network of schools that agreed to pay attention to four big ideas.

1. *Learner metacognition*

A key goal of deep learning work is for learners to be able to coach **themselves** for improvement.

2. *Nimble and responsive teaching*

As educators we need to use evidence of learning to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs – minute by minute and day after day.

3. *Inquiry mindedness as a way of life*

A necessity for learners, teachers and leaders is an inquiry mindset (Kaser and Halbert, 2009), involving the use of thoughtful strategies and then looking for evidence of deeper learning.

4. *Learning for all through networks*

To make the difference that is necessary for all learners, especially those who are vulnerable, the isolated efforts of individual educators, no matter how well intentioned, will not suffice. Teamwork is essential.

The original network has now evolved into a wider range of inquiry and innovation networks, all using a disciplined, evidence-informed approach to collaborative inquiry. While the approach is consistent, the focus of each of these networks varies. Some are intensely focused on improving the learning outcomes of Aboriginal young people.¹ Another network is intent on creating more positive health outcomes for learners of all ages,² and another

is focused on assisting educators in engaging young people in developing a sense of community and place, through involvement in filmmaking and digital forms of learning.³

Changing Results For Young Readers, a large provincial initiative, was focused on creating both competence and pleasure in early literacy from 2013–2015.⁴ As part of this work, primary educators from across the province were involved in using a disciplined inquiry approach to increase self-regulation, confidence, skill and joy in reading. In addition, a team of network educators is working with faculty at Vancouver Island University to support literacy in remote districts.

Initially the inquiry networks consisted almost entirely of school-based educators – teachers, principals and vice principals. Increasingly the work has shifted to focus on creating greater coherence across institutions, associations and regions of the province. This is leading to greater collaboration across roles and the inquiry networks now include support staff, cultural workers, teachers, formal leaders at the school and district level, university scholars, community members, leaders in arts organisations and Ministry staff. Many of the educators involved in inquiry learning networks are now in significant leadership roles – as principals, curriculum coordinators, district superintendents, senior Ministry officials, local union presidents and faculty members, in teacher preparation and graduate education programs.

International links and interest

Partly as a consequence of the involvement of BC network leaders in the OECD Innovative Learning Environments study and a growing awareness of the relatively strong results that BC learners display on international assessments,⁵ there is

To make the difference that is necessary for all learners, especially those who are vulnerable, the isolated efforts of individual educators, no matter how well intentioned, will not suffice. Teamwork is essential.

interest in the networked inquiry approach in BC. The following national and international links that are being formed are helping to strengthen the work in BC and are providing opportunities for global forms of networking.

Yukon

Early in the development of the BC network, a few key educators from the Yukon became actively involved. These educators slowly and steadily built commitment to the key ideas and, by 2016, Yukon educators were presenting their inquiry work to an international audience. The Yukon Department of Education made a significant contribution to the grass roots work of these lead educators, by supporting professional learning in the areas of formative assessment and inquiry. There is a growing momentum in the Yukon as department staff, teachers, cultural workers, principals and superintendents work together to deepen their understanding of inquiry as a driver for change.

C21 Canada⁶

This relatively new national organisation of school superintendents and partner groups focused on 21st Century learning. One of the objectives of this group is to create greater coherence across Canada, through publications aimed at system leaders. *The Spiral Playbook: Leading with an Inquiring Mindset in School Systems and Schools*, released in late 2016, was designed as a tool for district leaders interested in using deeper forms of inquiry as a tool for system change.

Whole Education Network (WEN)⁷

Whole Education, in England, is about dynamic partnerships of schools and organisations, committed to redefining educational offerings designed to make learning more relevant and engaging – with learners taking ownership of their

own learning. Since 2013, WEN schools have been provided with the opportunity to engage in networked inquiry, using the Spirals of Inquiry (Halbert and Kaser, 2013) approach. Dozens of schools to date have taken up this offer, and the research study conducted by Louise Stoll and Julie Temperley,⁸ at the conclusion of the first year of the pilot, has helped inform both the work in England and the work elsewhere.

Australia

The variety of applications of the spiral of inquiry framework, in a number of Australian jurisdictions, is impressive. These system applications include

- a group of schools in the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, applying the inquiry approach to a STEM initiative, with strong research branch support;
- the involvement of a substantial number of educators exploring inquiry through their involvement with LEAP⁹ (Leading Educators Across the Planet);
- the interest of head teachers in Melbourne through the CIRCLE initiative;
- the rapid growth of a network of Sydney based leaders and their teams in an Australian Network of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII), with their first symposium slated for July 2017;
- the formation of an inquiry-based network of primary schools in Queensland, with the formal start up set for September 2017; and
- emerging interest in the ideas and concepts in Western Australia.

Study tours of individuals and groups from Australia are regularly visiting network schools and districts in BC, and the professional linkages between Australian and BC educators are becoming stronger.

New Zealand

The work of educators and researchers in New Zealand schools and universities has been foundational in the development of the spiral of inquiry – both conceptually and in practice. Professor Helen Timperley’s research on teacher professional learning and the impact of focused inquiry has had a significant influence on network thinking and action. The Ministry of Education in New Zealand is currently creating an on-line site to support the spiral of inquiry with case studies that will provide images of what the framework looks like in practice. This site will be useful to educators across the globe.

Coursera

In 2013, we were asked to develop a MOOC (massive online open course) that incorporated key ideas from the BC networks into a foundational course on planning for teaching and learning.¹⁰ To date there have been over 10,000 participants in this course from a wide range of countries. It has been fascinating to see how ideas developed in British Columbia are being applied in rural parts of India, urban centres in Brazil, university courses in Korea and schools across the USA.

Teacher Education in Daabaab, Kenya

Another global setting using the spiral of inquiry is located in the largest refugee camp in the world. There are 40 elementary schools in this camp and trained teachers have been hard to find. Through an innovative partnership¹¹ between the faculties of education at the University of British Columbia and Moi University, Kenya, young people living in the camp are being trained as teachers. The spiral of inquiry framework is used in this program to support teacher candidates in their learning.

Teacher Education in British Columbia

More than half of the teacher preparation programs in BC are using the spiral of inquiry in school-based programs, to develop adaptive expertise in teacher candidates right from the start. New teachers are participating in an early career mentoring program as a collaborative inquiry initiative of the BC Teachers Federation (BCTF), the provincial superintendents’ association (BCSSA) and the faculty of education at UBC. This professional partnership has grown out of a long-term BCTF professional learning initiative involving teams of inquiring educators.

The links being created across associations, institutions, districts and now systems are contributing to a greater sense of coherence in widely differing contexts. One key to this growing coherence is a set of foundational ideas that have informed the work in BC are now influencing the learning designs across global networks.

Key ideas and research foundations

Network theory and practice

From the inception of the BC inquiry networks, two major influences on the designs were the ground-breaking views of sociologist and network analyst, Manuel Castells, and the practical and forward-looking use of networks in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative. From studying the concepts of Manuel Castells, especially *The Information Age: Economy Society and Culture*, Volume 1 *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000), we learned about the power of networks as social movements to create change – change in a new world of communication that

he described as a ‘space of flows’. We have seen these ideas play out across inquiry networks, as educators are directly influenced by practices in remote parts of our province, as well as practices in schools in the Yukon, urban and rural parts of Australia, communities across New Zealand and challenging urban contexts in England.

The research on the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, conducted by Stanford scholars Milbrey W McLaughlin and Joan E Talbert (2002), helped us to understand more clearly the challenges to making inquiry-mindedness a system-wide way of life. During the first five years of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (1995–2001) there was an overall investment of \$112 million. Eighty-seven schools serving vulnerable learners were identified as lead schools, with another 140 participating schools. The goal was to use a cycle of inquiry and collective work to stimulate gains in equity. The appraisal by the researchers at the end of five years of focused effort concluded that the challenges (the ‘tensions and headaches’) involved in navigating through either constraining or enabling districts, or of being marginalised by state policy shifts and high stakes accountability measures, made the desired outcomes very difficult to achieve.

For our work this account of a well-structured, thoroughly researched equity initiative was strangely encouraging. We knew we would never have the level of financial support experienced in the Bay Area and we knew that policy stability was unlikely. We were confident, however, that we could use the concepts about networks from Castells, and the insights from the BASRC research, to shape our efforts in sustainable ways.

Assessment for learning

From the outset, one of the key goals across the networks has been the development of learner metacognition and agency. A deep understanding of both the intent and the strategies of assessment for learning provide the bridge from teacher-directed learning to student agency. The work of assessment researchers and practitioners such as Dylan Wiliam and Siobhan Leahy (eg, 2015), Lorna Earl (eg, 2013) and Ron Berger (eg Berger et al, 2014), has been particularly helpful in providing educators with specific evidence-informed strategies and tools to make the shifts required. As educators in the inquiry networks gained confidence in making changes to their assessment practices, they have developed resources, conducted workshops, done side-by-side coaching to assist colleagues in shifting their practices, and used social media to communicate emerging understandings.¹²

Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck (2006)’s original research on the importance of mindset in learning, and the many subsequent studies examining the impact of a growth mindset on learner outcomes, has had a significant influence on network thinking. Enacting the research evidence about the kinds of changes that are possible when learners have access to new strategies and appropriate support – and put forth more effort – has become an essential part of the network approach.

Teacher professional learning

Another foundational idea for the inquiry networks involved ensuring that designs for teacher professional learning are always based on current research and practice evidence. Helen Timperley’s research (2007, 2012, 2013 and Timperley

Understanding that teacher professional learning should be based on the identified learning needs of students seems straightforward and yet this does not reflect the reality of many professional development programs – especially those packaged programs promising dramatic improvements.

et al 2014) into the aspects of teacher professional learning that have the strongest impact on student outcomes, has had a significant influence on our thinking and practices. Understanding that teacher professional learning should be based on the identified learning needs of students seems straightforward and yet this does not reflect the reality of many professional development programs – especially those packaged programs promising dramatic improvements.

A recent report, *Beyond Professional Development: Teacher Professional Learning in High Performing Systems* (2016) by Ben Jensen and the Learning First research group, examined teacher professional learning in four high-performing systems: Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong and British Columbia. Although the context of BC is quite different from the other jurisdictions, the themes that were identified across systems have validated and reinforced the approach of the inquiry learning networks.

Jensen and his colleagues note that teacher professional learning in these high performing systems is

- inquiry-based;
- collaborative;
- linked and coherent;
- professionally led; and
- undertaken over time

Challenging racism

More recently, challenging systemic racism and overcoming the bigotry of low expectations are becoming central issues of concern for network schools. To inform and stretch our thinking we are indebted to a number of indigenous scholars for their work and for their generosity in supporting the efforts of networked schools. Jo-ann Archibald's book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit* (2006) and Thomas King's Massey Lectures

and book: *The Truth about Stories – A Native Narrative* (2003) are deepening the thinking of many BC and Yukon educators. We look forward to a new publication edited by Jo-ann Archibald and Jan Hare (2017), entitled *Learning, Knowing, Sharing; Celebrating Successes in K–12 Education in BC* will further extend and deepen change efforts.

International associations

From the inception of the networks in 2000, the scholars connected with the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement have provided intellectual companionship and critical friendship for BC network leaders. Hosting the 2009 Congress: *New Departures for a Learning World of Equity and Quality*, in Vancouver, allowed BC educators to hear first-hand from Viviane Robinson, Ken Leithwood and Alma Harris on leadership, from David Istance and Valerie Hannon on educational innovation, Kieran Egan on imagination, Deborah Butler on self-regulation and Lorna Williams on indigenous understandings.

As Canadians, for many years we have also had the chance to learn alongside Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves. Their work on moral purpose, coherence and sustainability have been especially significant in our context.

Annual celebrations/symposia

Providing an annual provincial forum¹³ for network schools to meet, learn together and share their findings has been important for several years in accelerating the pace of learning, and in building a sense of teamwork. In addition to the provincial gathering, regional celebrations of learning are designed so that all participating schools can tell their stories of change and impact. From the ideas and research that have informed – and continue to inform – the inquiry networks, we are finding

that shared frameworks are essential in building educator confidence and system coherence.

Frameworks for coherence

Educators across the world are bombarded with seemingly incompatible ideas about system direction and desirable models of reform. The call for disruptive innovation of education systems where schools, as we have known them, cease to exist, has a certain appeal for those frustrated with the seemingly snail's pace of system change. Some change experts urge systems to focus intensely and consistently on improving the quality of teaching and learning, with a few strong and carefully constructed goals. From this perspective, a focus on transformation and innovation can be just one more system distraction. A third approach, usually advocated by politicians, is to make systems more accountable for learner performance, guided by a belief that somehow someone will work out how to do this.

Although reformers may like to argue the relative merits of improvement, innovation and accountability, these distinctions are not particularly helpful for practitioners struggling to make learning more engaging and relevant in this moment in their particular context. We have seen, often to our dismay, the tendency for well-intentioned educators and policy makers to make things overly complicated and, in the ensuing complication, sometimes lose the focus on what they are trying to accomplish.

We have come to believe that a sense of common purpose expressed in plain language goals and a few powerful frameworks can guide our thinking, inform our goals, direct our actions and build system coherence. Drawing on current

research about learning and change, and organising those ideas in ways that educators can explore, apply and reflect upon, has been an important part of our work.

Purpose

In *Coherence* (2016) Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn suggest that coherence consists of the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of work. They claim that coherence is not about alignment, it is not about structure, and it is not about strategy. The first driver of their coherence framework is that it needs to be purpose-driven. Initially in BC, the network focus was on learner agency and engagement through actualising assessment for learning strategies. Over time this focus evolved into three goals that are now reflected in many district and provincial policy statements.

Goal 1 – Every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options

This means that collectively we have agreed to strive for equity and quality through achieving a 100 per cent secondary school completion rate. Each learner will experience acceptance and respect for her/his personal identity. Each one will have a sense of direction and purpose – and will have genuine options for future learning, regardless of the path s/he chooses.

Goal 2 – Every learner leaving our settings more curious than when s/he arrived

Educators we work with have observed that learner curiosity often diminishes over time in school; and, they agree, this is counter to what we hope to achieve through our educational programs. A key goal of system reform is to design learning environments that promote deeper forms of engagement, more opportunities to pursue important questions in depth and a genuine love of learning.

We have come to believe that a sense of common purpose expressed in plain language goals and a few powerful frameworks can guide our thinking, inform our goals, direct our actions and build system coherence.

Goal 3 – Every learner developing an understanding of, and respect for, indigenous ways of knowing

Developing the capacity for expanded worldviews is important for all citizens in complex and globally connected societies. Within the context of British Columbia, there is a moral imperative for learners of all ages to develop a greater understanding of the perspectives and contributions of indigenous people. The legacy of colonisation, and of residential schools, has contributed to inequitable challenges for Aboriginal learners. Efforts to reduce racism and improve outcomes are encouraging¹⁴ – and there is still much to be done. The recent changes to the BC curriculum¹⁵ have been welcomed by inquiry-minded teachers across the province, as there is now increasing space for educators to go in much greater depth in areas that really matter to learners.

Learning Principles

The OECD publication, *The Nature of Learning* (Dumont et al, 2010) contains a summary of findings from a number of international researchers about what makes a difference to student learning. The seven transversal principles identified in this book have become fundamental to the inquiry work in BC. They provide a lens for understanding the learning experiences of our young people, and they help identify areas that need to be strengthened. With enthusiasm for innovation and a desire for system reform, it is easy for policy makers to get distracted by promises of quick fixes. The conclusion by the research team – that a learning environment cannot be considered innovative unless all seven of the following principles are evident in the experiences of all learners – is helping to inform innovation efforts and to sustain momentum.

1. The learning environment recognises the learners as its core participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners.
2. The learning environment is founded on the social nature of learning and actively encourages well-organised cooperative learning.
3. The learning professionals within the learning environment are highly attuned to the learners' motivations and the key role of emotions in achievement.
4. The learning environment is acutely sensitive to the individual differences among the learners within it, including their prior knowledge.
5. In the learning environment programs are devised that demand hard work and challenge from all, without excessive overload.
6. The learning environment operates with clarity of expectations and deploys assessment strategies consistent with these expectations; there is strong emphasis on formative feedback to support learning.
7. The learning environment strongly promotes 'horizontal connectedness', across areas of knowledge and subjects, as well as to the community and the wider world. Horizontal connectedness is promoted across learning activities and subjects, both in and out of school in the broader communities.

In addition to drawing on the OECD learning principles, networked inquiry communities in British Columbia are actively applying a set of holistic indigenous learning principles,¹⁶ developed in collaboration with the First Nations' Education Steering Committee.

From a First Peoples' perspective, learning needs to be focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships and a sense of place. An indigenous worldview acknowledges that learning involves recognising the consequences of one's actions; values the role of patience and the need for time; and requires exploration and development of one's personal identity. The practical implications for teachers incorporating the First Peoples' Principles of Learning into their repertoire include creating greater connections to the broader community and the wisdom of Elders. It also includes the need for educators to make explicit what is being learned, in terms of how it influences the self, the family, the community and the land.¹⁷

Both these sets of principles are serving to inform system reform in British Columbia and are helping to provide the kind of coherence that is essential for sustained transformation efforts.

Disciplined inquiry

Right from the outset with the inquiry networks, BC schools agreed to engage in an annual cycle of inquiry, focused on changing student outcomes. Building on insights from the BC case studies and from the research in New Zealand on teacher professional learning, network leaders collaborated with Helen Timperley to design a new approach to professional inquiry, which we described as a spiral of inquiry.

There are several features that distinguish the spiral of inquiry from other action research approaches. The process always starts with a deep understanding of learning and the experiences of learners. It requires a collaborative approach by teams of educators. It builds in the findings from research on social-emotional learning. It is specifically designed to change outcomes for learners. The terminology used respects teacher judgement, their lived experiences and their language. It draws on the emerging understandings

Figure 1. Spiral of inquiry

What's going on for our learners?
How do we know?
Why does this matter?



If learners cannot say in their own words what they are learning and why it is important, it is fair to say that intellectual engagement is minimal.

about frameworks for innovation and also honours the findings from the school effectiveness and improvement literature. The approach is built on the best of what we currently know about professional learning. It insists on incorporating indigenous learning perspectives. It is evidence-informed at every stage, through an emphasis on ongoing checking about student agency, sense of belonging, self-regulation and metacognition.

The spiral of inquiry involves six key stages, which are to

1. scan;
2. focus;
3. develop a hunch;
4. engage in new professional learning;
5. take new professional action;
6. check that a big enough difference has been made; and then
7. scan what's happening and re-engage to consider what is next.

Although the stages in the spiral overlap, paying attention to each aspect is critical in achieving the greatest benefit for all learners. At every stage, inquiry teams ask themselves: 'What's going on for our learners?' 'How do we know?' and 'Why does this matter?'

The first two questions prompt educators to check constantly that learners are at the heart of what they do, and that all decisions are based on thoughtful evidence from direct observations and interviews, in addition to more formal data sources. The third question helps to ground teams in the importance of the direction they are pursuing.

Four key questions

An additional framework, which helps create coherence and focus educator attention on key areas of social emotional

learning and metacognition, consists of the following four questions for learners.

1. Can you name two people in this learning environment who believe that you will be a success in life? How do they let you know?
2. What are you learning and why is it important?
3. How are you doing with your learning?
4. What are the next steps in your learning?

These questions sound deceptively simple. When used regularly, however, educators have observed that what they hear from their learners prompts them to shift practices substantially, to increase learner sense of belonging and agency.

The first question quickly helps educators identify learners who do not feel connected to adults within the school – and propels them to immediate action. We were impressed with the courage of the large English secondary school that posed this question to all of its learners and found a huge discrepancy in the responses, between their more vulnerable learners and those who were experiencing traditional academic success. The realisation that few of the struggling learners were able to name a single teacher who believed they could be successful led to much soul searching – and then to informed action.

The three cognitive questions help move educator thinking from a preoccupation with content coverage to a focus on what learners actually experience. Student responses provide timely evidence about the extent to which young people are developing greater agency as learners. If learners cannot say in their own words what they are learning and why it is important, it is fair to say that intellectual engagement is minimal.

Leadership development

In the forthcoming *Innovative Learning Environment Handbook* (2017), David Istance argues that learning leadership is critical for reform and innovation. He further argues that the impetus for innovation comes neither exclusively from top-down mandates nor from bottom-up pressure. Rather, he suggests that innovation often occurs through rich connections in the meso (between) level.

[Learning leadership] is exercised through strong visions and corresponding strategies intensely focused on learning. It calls for shared, collaborative activity, not relying only on the principal, in which learners themselves are privileged players. Such leadership may well extend beyond the school in contemporary learning environments embedded in a rich web of networks and partnerships.

(Draft, March 2016, p 29)

British Columbia is, by most measures, a high-performing system. Yet, significant inequities do exist and the political educational context can be challenging. It is partly for these reasons we have sought to establish ‘third spaces’ outside the confines of individual districts or associations, where educators can engage in inquiry, experience new learning and try out new practices that will benefit their learners. The networks connecting schools across BC and the Yukon form one of these ‘spaces.’ Leadership programs for formal and informal school and district leaders are another.

For the past ten years we have worked directly with 500 graduate students in Masters level programs.¹⁸ These programs are designed to immerse participants first in the research knowledge about learning

and leadership, through an intensive face-to-face summer institute, and then to have them take informed action during the school year. Working with the spiral of inquiry, each participant identifies a key challenge for learners in her/his setting and designs new approaches during the school year. In addition, participants are asked to explore the case studies from the Innovative Learning Environment project, identify two international cases that are of particular interest – either because of similarities or contrasts to their own setting. They do additional research on the cases, and then demonstrate how they will apply ideas from the cases to their own context.

The BC leadership programs have been informed by international research on school leadership development, in particular the work of Stefan Huber and Viviane Robinson. Huber’s (2010) research on effective school leadership development programs indicated the following number of characteristics.

- Leadership programs need a clear and explicitly stated set of aims, using the core moral purpose of school as a focus.
- The development of the program must be based on a values and educational beliefs paradigm.
- Development must be viewed as a continuous process.
- There is a need for a shift away from fixed bodies of knowledge towards the development of conditional and procedural knowledge, conceptual literacy and knowledge management.
- There needs to be an intelligent balance between theory and practice.
- The program must have a strong orientation to the individual and actual needs of the participants.

- Inspiring collegial learning and intensive collaboration are key elements.
- Problem-based learning and learning opportunities at the workplace are central.
- Dual focus on the personal and professional development needs of the participants is required, as well as a focus on transforming their schools.

Robinson's (2011) key findings on the leadership behaviours that are directly connected to improved student outcomes underscore the importance of promoting, supporting and participating in professional learning. A key aspect of the BC leadership programs is that graduates have the opportunity to continue to extend their learning and deepen their connections upon completion of the program through ongoing involvement in the networks of inquiry and innovation. This layering of networked learning opportunities helps to sustain and extend their leadership influence.

The success of the Masters' level programs and the demand for additional system-focused learning opportunities led to the introduction of the Transformational Educational Leadership Program (telp.educ.ubc.ca) at the University of British Columbia in Autumn 2015. This post-graduate certificate program is adding another component to overall leadership development in BC. It provides an intensive experience for system leaders, by

- challenging the status quo, through intense and informed collaborative professional action; and
- creating high-quality and high-equity learning systems, through innovation, inquiry, networks and action, from local and global perspectives.

Changing systems: Purpose, passion and persistence

Changing an educational system from a focus on sorting to a focus on learning requires a strong sense of purpose, a deep passion for quality and equity – and a great deal of persistence. As we reflect on our experience with inquiry and innovation networks over the past two decades, the following four factors have emerged, which are contributing to system change.

1. Find the 'outlier' practices.
2. Link the key influencers.
3. Infuse intelligence and develop new source of energy.
4. Persist and stay curious.

Find the 'outliers' and make their practices visible

As educators interested in system change we looked globally for examples of large-scale change in the social sectors. We found an impressive example in Vietnam. Using a 'find the positive deviance' model, chronic malnutrition of children was significantly reduced through a village-by-village peer network strategy. The evolution of this approach is described in *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (2010) by Pascale, Sternin and Sternin.

Positive deviants in this Vietnam case were those families who were somehow managing to raise healthier children than their neighbours. Their positive health outcomes were a result of small differences in what they fed their children – shrimp, crab and sweet potatoes from the rice paddies. Once this practice was identified and understood, it spread quickly, through a grassroots process.

layering of networked learning opportunities helps to sustain and extend their leadership influence.

We applied this model to learning practices in the inquiry networks in BC. We searched for and found small yet highly significant ‘outlier’ practices, where sharing of learning power between teachers and students was a matter of course. As just one example, a rural primary teacher developed a powerful cross-age coaching strategy to build reading comprehension, which has garnered considerable attention.¹⁹

Once other educators could see what the shift looked like, from a focus on the transmission of content towards much stronger learning-oriented partnerships in learning and teaching, elementary practices shifted quite rapidly in many parts of the province. Ongoing searches for innovative practices and online publications of video and print case studies²⁰ of inquiry/innovation keep adding to the repertoire of promising practices.

Link the influencers

In peer-to-peer learning networks, the most powerful influencers tend to be those who, regardless of their role, have a strong repertoire of changed practice, combined with a mindset of deep curiosity. These educators also have a spirit of generosity, as well as a drive to influence learning practices more broadly than just in their own settings.

The network brings together educators of all levels and then puts them all on the same level, making us teaching and learning resources for each other. We are all learners; we are all drivers of change; we are all important in the system.

(Network educator, 2016)

Providing regular formal and informal ways of linking the influencers has been key to creating and sustaining momentum

for system change. Linking involves the use of social media, participating in discussions at the annual symposium, widespread use of video, focused social events, engaging in research studies, participation in graduate programs and face-to-face meetings for network leaders.

Infuse intelligence and develop fresh energy

Teachers are incredibly busy people who often do not have the time to seek out evidence from the most current research and practice, about what will make a difference to their learners. When they have a chance to learn from the innovative practices of their colleagues – and when they work within the discipline of the spiral of inquiry, where new learning is an expected and essential part of the process – informed new practices spread quickly.

As network leaders, we endeavour to curate and disseminate research evidence in a way that is readily accessible. Building on a strong foundation of formative assessment and emphasising the importance of the learning principles from the OECD and BC First Peoples has helped to keep an informed and intelligent focus across schools.

We also look for international researchers who can stimulate and challenge thinking in person, through the annual symposium. Seeking both strong internal practices and powerful international research evidence has helped keep professional learning central to the work of the inquiry networks.

The network provides me with new ideas, skills and tools, but more than that, it provides me with a learning community that allows me to make real changes in my classroom.

(Network educator, 2016)

In peer-to-peer learning networks, the most powerful influencers tend to be those who, regardless of their role, have a strong repertoire of changed practice, combined with a mindset of deep curiosity.

Persistence matters. It matters in the building of networks and it matters in addressing difficult equity goals.

We are grateful for the ongoing support of international colleagues Lorna Earl, Valerie Hannon, Andy Hargreaves, Alma Harris, David Istance, Ben Jensen, Anthony MacKay, Amelia Peterson, Louise Stoll and Helen Timperley – all of whom have helped infuse intelligence into the network through their research – and for their participation in network learning events.

Some inquiry groups operate in cultures where support – whether from the formal district leadership team or the local associations and communities – may be inconsistent. It is understandable that even the most determined of educators can become discouraged under such circumstances. In these cultures we have found that infusing fresh leadership energy at a variety of levels helps to build and sustain momentum.

Persist

Observing the challenges of system change in BC and in other jurisdictions has led us to a deeper understanding of the necessity for persistence. There are few, if any, quick fixes. To create learning systems with high-quality, high-equity and deep forms of intellectual engagement requires a willingness to persevere over time. As Steven Johnson points out in *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2011)

The snap judgments of intuition – as powerful as they can be – are rarities in the history of world-changing ideas. Most hunches that turn into important innovations unfold over much longer time frames. They start with a vague, hard-to-describe sense that there’s an interesting solution to a problem that hasn’t yet been proposed, and they linger in the shadows of the mind, sometimes for decades, assembling new connections and gaining strength. And then one day they are transformed into something more substantial.

Sustaining the slow hunch is less a matter of perspiration than of cultivation. You give the hunch enough nourishment to keep it growing, and plant it in fertile soil, where its roots can make new connections. And then you give it time to bloom.

(2011, p 77–78)

Developing more innovative learning environments requires active cultivation. Every gardener knows that persistence in developing the soil is required for successful cultivation. Lateral peer-to-peer networks that tackle hard goals **must** be prepared to persist over time and within shifting policy and political environments. We have been at this work in BC for several decades – and there is still much work to do.

Persistence matters. It matters in the building of networks and it matters in addressing difficult equity goals. We believe that innovative learning environments will flourish as we persist in using common frameworks, and as we persist with focusing our energies, diversifying our connections and always staying curious.

The network as a learning community and support system creates the conditions for educators to make real and lasting changes in practice. As a teacher, the network gave me the support I needed to make changes within my classroom and with my colleagues. As an administrator, the network gives me a vehicle to connect with my staff and school to help influence change on a larger scale. With the network, I can work alongside teachers in a way that is non-threatening and non-hierarchical. It is not top down or inauthentic. There is rigor and accountability but it is built on true collaboration with a genuine purpose.

(Network educator, 2016)

One of the most important goals of the networked learning communities is to cultivate an ongoing and lifelong disposition towards curiosity. Susan Engel, the author of *The Hungry Mind* (2015) concludes her book by pointing out that

Einstein was only partly right when he said, 'Curiosity is a delicate little plant which, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom.' It turns out that like many delicate plants, in order to flourish, curiosity needs to be cultivated.

(p 193)

Inquiry networks help create and cultivate spaces for professional curiosity. As educators gain in confidence through disciplined, collaborative inquiry, they become the leaders in creating quality and equity for all learners. This is the heart of system transformation that matters. Persistence, curiosity, passion and shared purpose can lead to big changes for every learner.

Endnotes

All the following endnote URLs were accessible at time of publication.

1. noii.ca/aesn/
2. dashbc.ca/what-we-do/programs-initiatives/healthy-schools-network/
3. www.ruralteachers.com
4. cr4yr.com
5. www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/details/education.aspx
6. c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Spiral-Playbook.pdf
7. www.wholeeducation.org
8. www.wholeeducation.org/pages/overview/peoples_stories/764,0/narrowing_the_gap_through_collaborative_enquiry.html
9. www.aLeap4principals.com.au
10. www.coursera.org/learn/teaching-plan
11. dadaab.educ.ubc.ca
12. See, for example, Brooke Moore's wiki ownlearning.wikispaces.com, and Jacob Martens' blog renomyclass.com/author/renomyclass/
13. noii.ca/resources/noii-symposium/
14. www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/performance.htm
15. curriculum.gov.bc.ca
16. www.fnesc.ca/resources/publications/
17. For background information and suggestions on how to incorporate First Peoples Principles of Learning into all learning settings please see this blog, created by JoAnne Chrona: firstpeoplesprinciplesoflearning.wordpress.com
18. calendar.viu.ca/education/master-education-educational-leadership
19. See Chapter 5 A Cross Grade Learner Conversation in Earl, L and Timperley, H S (2008) (Eds) *Professional Learning Conversations: Challenges in Using Evidence for Improvement*, Springer, Dordrecht, p 534–68
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L-R: Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

About the Authors

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In addition to working with leadership groups in BC and the Yukon, they collaborate with educators in Wales, Australia, New Zealand and England. They are deeply committed to achieving equity and quality for all learners – and to networking for innovation and improvement, both in Canada and abroad. To that end, they served as Canadian representatives to the OECD international research program on Innovative Learning Environments.

Linda and Judy have served as principals, district leaders, and policy advisors with British Columbia's Ministry of Education, in the areas of innovative leadership, district change, rural education, literacy and Indigenous education.

They are the co-authors of *Spirals of Inquiry* (2013), *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and Learning in the Transformation of Schools* (2009) and, with Helen Timperley, *A Framework for Transforming Learning in Schools: Innovation and the Spiral of Inquiry* (2014).

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