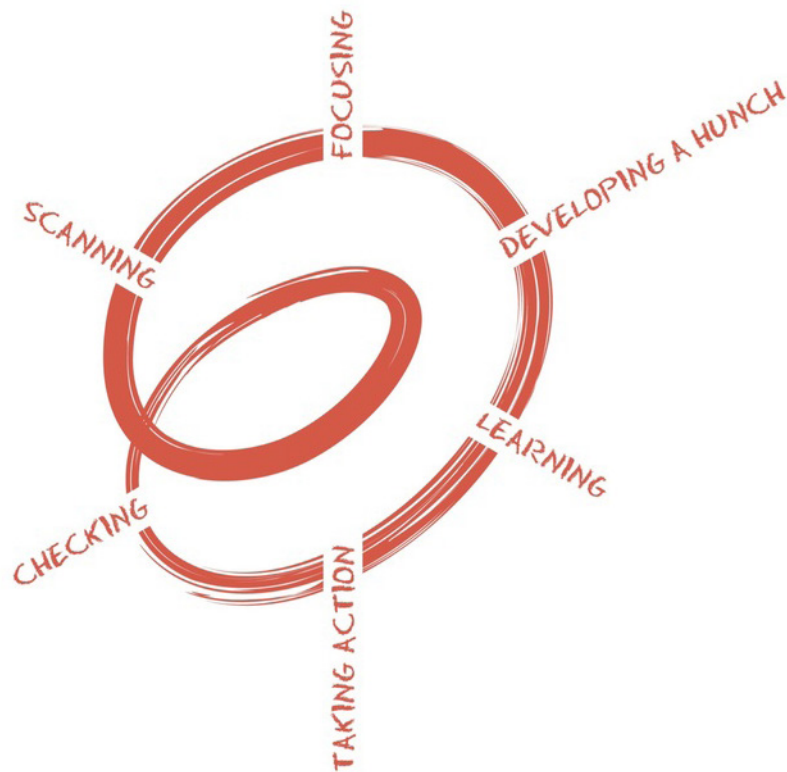


Whole  
Education

# Narrowing the Gap with Spirals of Enquiry

## Evaluation of Whole Education's Pilot

Louise Stoll and Julie Temperley





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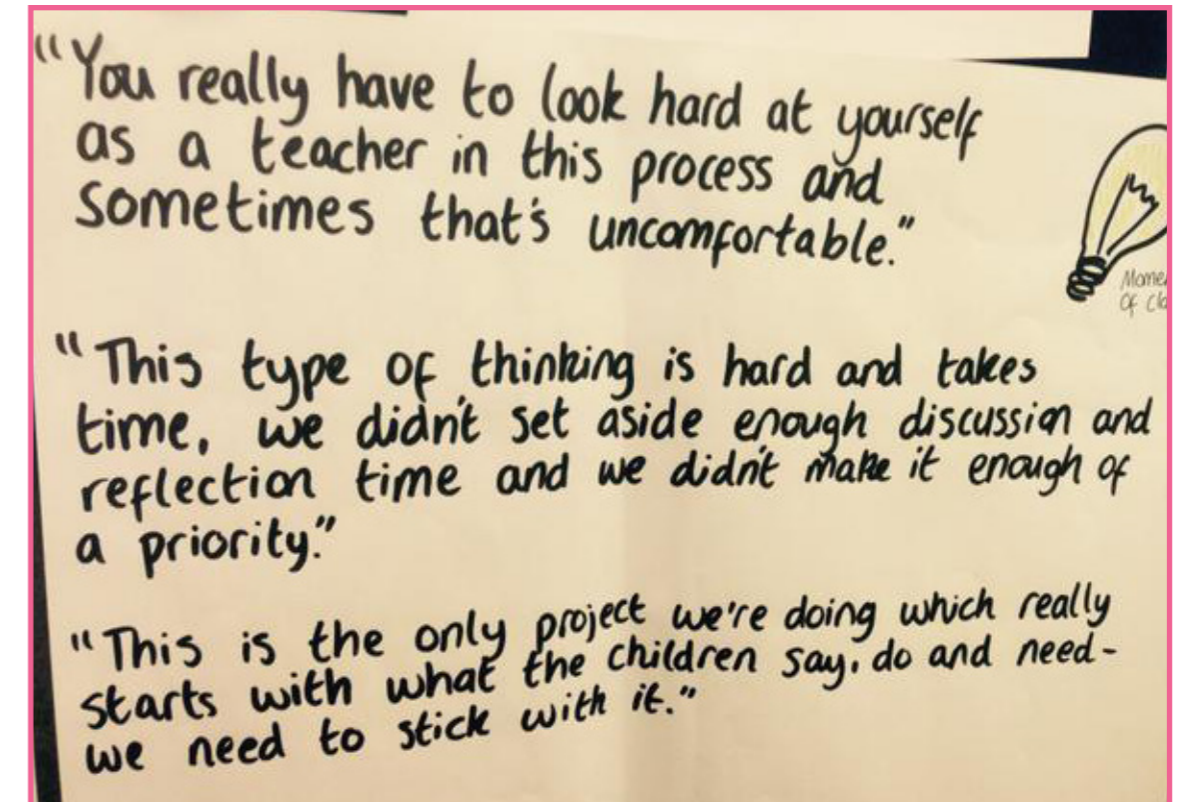
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## Summary

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- + Spirals of Enquiry is a different way of approaching enquiry which confronts, challenges, shifts paradigms and energises
- + Spirals has the potential to develop a deep professional learning culture, underpinned by research and enquiry, based on seriously understanding the pupil's experience in school
- + After a short, initial seven-month cycle, schools can demonstrate that vulnerable children are more engaged, that gaps are narrowing and parents feel more connected
- + Spirals isn't a quick fix approach – it takes time and you have to make time – but it leads to more profound change
- + Spirals requires intentional, committed leadership, dedicated support and teamwork
- + Networking with colleagues from other schools provides added value
- + External facilitation offers necessary critical friendship and helps maintain momentum
- + Spirals appears to be more challenging for secondary schools, whereas primary schools seem to find it easier to embrace the methodology
- + Further investigation is needed to understand context and phase differences, and sustainability





## Why Spirals of Enquiry?

Narrowing the gap is one of the most pressing issues facing schools today. Despite considerable investment via the Pupil Premium and a ramping up of system incentives – chiefly in changes to Ofsted’s inspection framework – achievement gaps in many schools remain stubbornly wide. The Spirals of Enquiry model, designed by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser<sup>1</sup>, and originating out of British Columbia (BC) in Canada, was identified by Whole Education as having potential to address this seemingly intractable problem in Pathfinder schools because:

- + *it leads to sustained improvements* – in New Zealand and BC, there is strong evidence of sustained improvements in outcomes where an enquiry focus is supported and sustained over time<sup>2</sup>, and local evaluations in BC demonstrate gap-reducing impacts<sup>3</sup>. It’s also considered by international experts to have been influential in British Columbia’s continuing high performance in international assessments eg. PISA and PIRLS
- + *it is underpinned by high quality research* – Spirals is based on a research synthesis by a world-leading writer on professional learning which concludes that doing this kind of enquiry is the best way to improve teachers’ practice and pupil outcomes<sup>4</sup>. The spirals process also draws on research on the principles of successful learning<sup>5</sup>, assessment for learning<sup>6</sup>, and the social and emotional aspects of engaging learners<sup>7</sup>
- + *it supports system-wide culture change* – networks, regions and districts using it have developed a system-wide enquiry culture
- + *it is tried and tested* – 1650 schools in BC (70%) are engaged, many of them for more than a decade

Spirals of Enquiry requires participating teams to source and use evidence to help them develop teaching and whole school strategies, in this case for narrowing the gap. The ‘Spiral’ begins with four questions teachers ask their pupils about their learning. What the teachers hear then leads them into further questions about their own practice, driving a process of enquiry, professional learning, intervention, action learning and evaluation.

The four questions at the heart of the Spirals of Enquiry model ask individual pupils about their experience of and expectations for learning from their point of view.

### Four Spirals of Enquiry scanning questions

1. Can you name two people in this school/setting who believe you can be a success in life?
2. Where are you going with your learning?
3. How are you doing with your learning?
4. Where are you going next with your learning?

Halbert and Kaser (2013)

*“Hundreds of BC educators have told us that they have made transformative shifts in their learning and teaching repertoires after exploring the experiences of their learners through posing and then reflecting on the learners’ responses to these questions.”*

Halbert and Kaser (2013)



## Why Spirals of Enquiry?

### Understanding the Spirals of Enquiry

What’s going on for our learners?

How do we know?

Why does this matter?

Asking carefully crafted questions of learners that help us to understand their perspectives on how and what they are learning

Making sure we had the impact we expected. Have we made the difference we hoped for? If not, why not? What else do we need to do?

Applying new learning and practice with a clear sense of the impact we expect to have for learners as we do so

Exploring the issues raised by learners to identify priority areas for further enquiry

Exposing the beliefs and practices that have a bearing: what am I doing that’s contributing positively and negatively?

Seeking out fresh ideas and developing new practice by engaging with colleagues, other schools and with research evidence



The Spirals model has been adapted to large network settings in Australia, New Zealand and the Yukon Territories. Whole Education’s pilot is the first trial in England within a network setting. Contextualising the model for this pilot included considering what it would take to embed such a model within participating schools’ professional learning communities to ensure a sustainable process<sup>8</sup>.

Critically, it was also essential to think how best to support the enquiry process across a network of schools, given Whole Education’s remit and the potential amplifying effects of networks and partnerships for in-school activity<sup>9</sup>. So Whole Education’s aim is for schools to work both separately and together in this form of evidence-based professional learning.



## Why Spirals of Enquiry?

### Introducing Spirals to the Whole Education Network

Whole Education’s pilot supported small teams from schools to engage in collaborative enquiry, using the Spirals of Enquiry model to narrow achievement gaps for their pupils. The pilot involved teams from fifteen schools: five primary schools and ten secondary schools in an initial cycle running from November 2014 to June 2015.

A second cohort of nineteen schools, began a year-long cycle in June 2015, Cohort two comprises four primary school, two middle schools, eleven secondary schools, one all-through school and a consortium of pupil referral units. Two of these secondary schools are partnered through a multi-academy trust, and a secondary school and the two middle schools are also in a partnership.

In addition to great access to Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser, a team of three: a project manager from the Whole Education team, a coach experienced in support for teacher enquiry and an expert in teacher professional learning and school improvement supported the first cohort schools through:

- + *School team composition* – in their core team, secondary schools were encouraged to involve a senior leader, middle leader and a teacher, and primary schools to include a senior leader or a middle leader and teacher
- + *Two face-to-face day long events* – a launch for the first cohort in November 2014 and a sharing event in June 2015, both with Judy Halbert, Linda Kaser and members of the Whole Education team
- + *Ongoing support and challenge* – through termly two-school coaching calls focused on different phases of the spirals with circulated follow-up summaries, a mid-cycle webinar involving Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser, regular emails checking progress and challenges, recommendations of research-based resources in response to specific needs, a frequently asked questions google document
- + *Norms of telling the truth and what can they learn from each other* – constant focus on being honest about challenges as well as successes, critical friendship, and ensuring that the final sharing session would not be a ‘bring and brag’
- + *A simple case study framework* – for reporting and sharing with network colleagues throughout
- + *Tools to guide reflection* – on school and network baseline and end of cycle conditions, impact at different levels
- + *Evaluation* – eliciting feedback on the process and support at each stage, including data from coaching calls, tools, and telephone interviews

Of the original fifteen schools in the pilot nine stayed in the pilot until the end. Of these six completed a full ‘Spiral’ or cycle of the enquiry and the remaining three were well on their way and intended to complete.

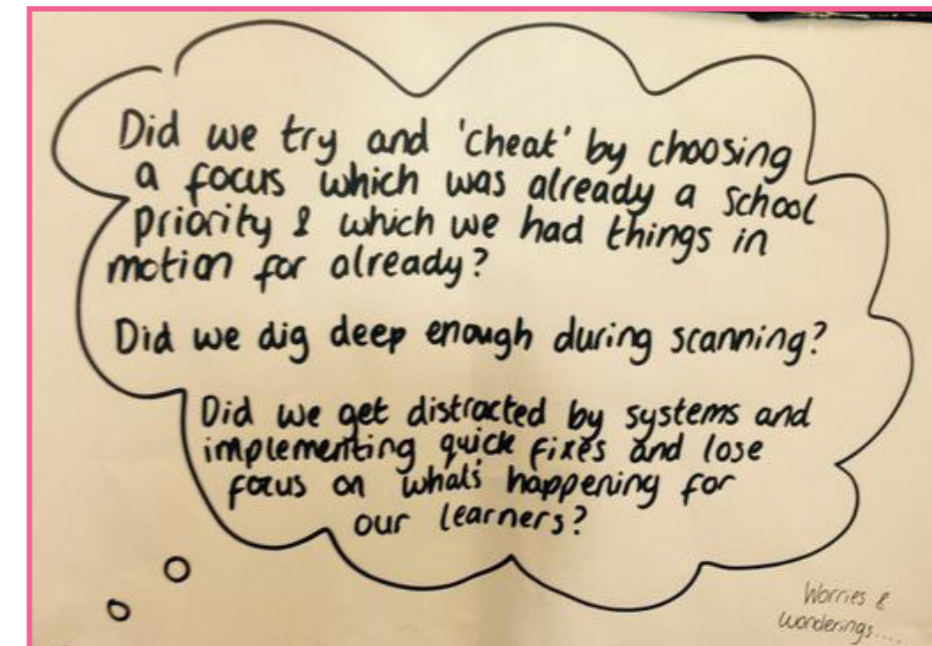


## Why Spirals of Enquiry?

There were various reasons for schools stepping back and it happened at different points in the process.

- + One secondary school team was clearly struggling with school challenges at the launch event and discontinued during the scanning phase
- + Four secondary schools remained involved until Ofsted inspection results led to a significant refocusing of their entire school agenda
- + One secondary school dropped out during the scanning phase after only one coaching call

This report focuses on the design, impact and learning from the first cohort of fifteen schools, including some but not all of those who dropped out. Key design changes for the second cohort, based on the first cohort school’s journeys are also included<sup>10</sup>.





## What has the impact been so far?

Spirals led schools to take action around stimulating a love of reading, increasing relevance and enjoyment of writing, developing growth mindsets, promoting pupils' active engagement in their own learning through target setting, data use and understanding about quality work, cultivating deeper pupil-teacher relationships to enhance self-concept, and revising options choice processes.

School teams provided evidence for eight forms of impact in their schools, which they attributed to their participation in Spirals of Enquiry. It is important to remember that for most of the schools, the enquiry cycle took place over seven months.

Of course, most important, everyone wanted to make a difference for their pupils, but they also looked at intermediate outcomes such as impact on parents, participating staff, other staff and leaders and their leadership, and impact on professional learning and enquiry processes, school culture, and the school's orientation to the Whole Education Network.

### Impact for pupils

School teams noticed considerable impact for pupils, with examples of:

- + better progress in reading and an increase in the 'love of reading'
- + more pupils feeling their teachers believe in them
- + increased engagement
- + greater awareness of how and why they learn
- + better self-assessment
- + more accommodation of challenge

Two schools, one primary and one secondary had videoed children to enable them to get their voice across and demonstrate the changes. All school had aspirations and plans for increasing impact in the second year and beyond.

*"The kids feel a lot of time has been invested in them from the enquiry. They are happy with their options . . . they feel a lot more empowered."*

Senior leader, secondary school

*"Particularly for vulnerable children the reflections in journals have improved hugely over the last few months, and the way they talk about their learning and their aspirations for themselves is so different. There's been clear evidence that what is happening is clearly working."*

Teacher, primary school

### Impact for parents

Five schools who had involved parents highlighted parents':

- + increased awareness of their children's learning challenges
- + active engagement
- + improved communication and
- + positive feedback



## What has the impact been so far?

### Impact for participating staff

Significant benefits for those involved included:

- + enthusiasm
- + passion
- + collaboration and
- + having a shared focus

Being more proactive or feeling braver were two schools' outcomes.

Through this learning opportunity, participants increased understanding as they were challenged in their thinking and had to question themselves and their practice. One teacher described the effects of asking the four questions like this:

*"You kind of assume you know what the kids are going to say and then you are a bit upset almost if they don't give you the answer that you were expecting. So it took a bit of practice I think to get over what I call the ego trip, listen to what they were saying and trying to use that information rather than trying to guess what they were meaning. . . Just going through that process, I am far more open minded about talking to people about their learning and getting to a point about why they're not making progress, rather than just trying to second guess."*

Primary middle leader

### Impact for other staff

Colleagues in half of the schools have shown active interest in getting involved, especially after seeing the impact. Often this is because their beliefs have been challenged by pupils' responses to the four questions.

*"The good thing is that although it started with a group of PP children, this is something that now all class teachers are taking on board, and all around the school we see teachers with assessment papers out and children checking the kind of errors they made and areas for improvement."*

Primary leader

*"In general the staff seem to have taken on board the findings of my research and many have commented on its perceived impact."*

Secondary teacher

### Impact for leadership

Significant changes of beliefs and practice occurred in some schools, with increased engagement, understanding, focus on new thinking and collaborative enquiry. Engagement of headteachers and SLTs varied, though, even where the project has been included in school plans.

*"Leaders have changed their practice, involving students more."*

Secondary senior leader



## What has the impact been so far?

### Impact for professional learning and enquiry processes

Some schools have seen an increase in reading and use of research, engagement in professional learning, and how spirals offered a structured approach to enquiry. Two schools hadn't yet taken up the opportunity for influencing professional learning beyond participating staff.

*"Professional learning has been at the heart of the Spiral process. The Spirals process has informed beliefs to make a shift in our thinking and learning."*

Primary senior leader

*"It's increased staff research."*

Secondary team

### Impact for school culture/enquiry mindset

The impact on culture was significant for some schools and for their pupils, with greater questioning and interviewing ability, ownership of professional development and people increasingly coming on board. For schools where few people had actively been exposed to spirals, no culture change was noted, although one is already very research and enquiry-engaged.

*"Everything's changed!"*

Primary team

### Impact on orientation to Whole Education network

Schools had benefitted from and appreciated the collaboration and support, with some increased interest in and greater commitment to Whole Education. But one wanted more face to face involvement and another is no longer a member of the network, although the participating teacher is committed to continuing to use and extend the Spirals of Enquiry process within his sphere of influence.

*"The Whole Education network was instrumental in 'opening up' the school to new professional learning."*

Primary teacher

*"Staff are asking about it."*

Secondary team



## What have we learnt?

Spirals of Enquiry has provided rich learning for schools curious to try out the process and those interested in supporting it to develop a culture of professional learning across a network, underpinned by research and enquiry. There are eight key learnings:

### Summary

1. Spirals of Enquiry is very different
2. Scanning can be powerful and is challenging
3. Spirals has the potential to change 'the way we do things around here'
4. Take and make time – it's not a quick fix
5. Spirals needs committed leadership and support in school
6. Networking enhances the process
7. External support helps keep Spirals on track
8. School context and stage of development affect involvement

### 1. Spirals of Enquiry is very different

Schools have found that Spirals of Enquiry is quite different from other forms of enquiry, data use and professional learning they've encountered. We think there are several interlinked reasons.

i. Starting with pupils' experience of learning is a paradigm shift for many people – School leaders and many teachers may frequently pore over quantitative data (eg examinations, tests and surveys) but are less likely to really talk to pupils about their learning. The scanning conversation with pupils – the four questions – focuses on what is known about successful learning and links to the social and emotional aspects of learning. Teachers are held back from making decisions about interventions until they are really clear about what pupils are telling them and why. This conversation at the beginning of the Spiral is critical to the success of the process overall. As Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser warn: *"If you don't get that part, you don't get anything."* Spirals isn't top-down; it's bottom up and interventions are then fitted to the children and their learning needs, rather than the other way around.

*"Usually we use the research lesson study model, so it's like the teachers deciding what area they want to focus on and then pairing up with another teacher. So it's almost the opposite really of what we've been doing this time."*

Primary leader

*"At the very beginning we tried to adapt it [the process] and come up with our own questions based on the focus that we thought we were going to take and then that didn't work - obviously because we weren't following the process. So we started again with the four key questions and we followed it step by step since then."*

Primary leader

A further paradigm shift for some was realising that this offered a different and powerful way to lead people to opportunities for new professional learning.

ii. Confronting perceptions through forming a hunch – some people highlighted this as the specific moment that is different from most enquiry approaches in pushing them to confront their own practice and take responsibility for a situation.



## What have we learnt?

*By not taking time to speak to quieter pupils and not asking them challenging pupils about their ambitions/aspirations I am giving them the impression that I do not believe in them.*

Secondary school hunchiii. It's an open process – while there's a structure to keep people on track, it's tailored to what conversations with pupils elicit rather than trying to fit their answers into existing plans. For some people, this can feel rather 'loose', but coaching calls suggest that it's a more thorough process than many other schools have used. However, it may not sit comfortably with a pre-existing, more mechanistic, efficiency school improvement agenda and approach.

*I like the open questions and producing responses I don't think we would have found otherwise, or wouldn't have uncovered.*

Secondary senior leader

*... you can change focus and keep scanning, and change the focus as you're going to meet the needs of your own school, so it's different in that sense. But then you have the structure of the different phases so that helps you to keep on track as well. The structure of whole process is... definitely a benefit. It most definitely is a worthwhile process – I favour this one over any other thing we've done in school.*

Primary teacher

iv. Spirals energises those who engage seriously, stay with it and 'trust' the process – it's a tool for professionalising teachers and leaders who are curious. As people understand the value of starting with pupils' learning experiences and the profound insights it gives them, they find it freeing and, often, exhilarating. It motivates them to want to find out more about how to deal with the issues they have uncovered.

*"You've got to feel passionate about it and believe in it and be prepared to fail at little bit and then go back and get it right. Initially we asked questions that weren't quite the spirals questions and then we had to go back again, and then we could really understand why it was important to ask them as they are. So I think just being totally behind it and giving it a go so that you see the value of it first hand and then being able to share that more widely. I think that now that we've trialled it, we can talk about it passionately and I think that's what you need to really get it going."*

Primary senior leader

*"When you strip it back and say, 'go and ask the kids what they think about a particular question, and then that's going to feed into your next action point', that's quite empowering, whereas I think maybe when you say action research, especially for a teacher who's busy and got a 20 hour timetable, it feels like this massive thing that is going to be all-encompassing."*

Secondary senior leader

## 2. Scanning can be powerful and is challenging

Scanning provoked deep insights for those who interviewed pupils.

*"For us, one of the most valuable parts of the scanning process was discovering that most of our children could not tell us what quality work looks like. Most children told us that quality work was 'neat' and it was sad to hear such responses. Not one child said quality work is 'when you've tried your best', or when you're really proud of your achievements, or when you've worked hard to edit and improve until it's the best it can be etc. This was really valuable information."*

Primary case study



## What have we learnt?

Unquestionably, scanning interrupted people's assumptions<sup>11</sup> about the pupils and what helps their learning:

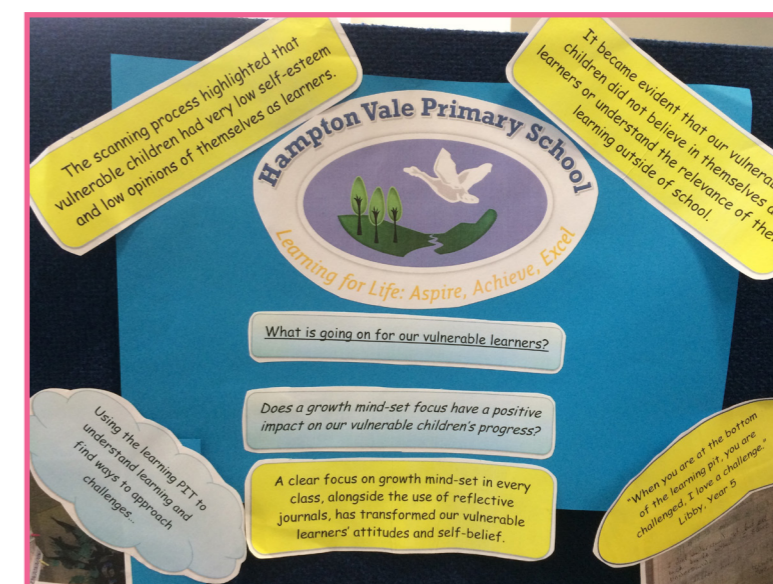
*"I found it very difficult at the start, because as a professional you jump to a whole lot of initial conclusions. I found the scanning was the hardest bit. You have to keep going back and keep going back and questioning to really get your focus. And a few times I thought I had my focus because I was just jumping in because I wanted to fix it, but actually just taking that step back was really useful because actually I would have just gone on with a different project if I'd just gone with what I first thought was the issue."*

Primary teacher

Some teams started with a small group of pupil premium children or children in one year group but became so fascinated by the process and depth of intelligence it was offering about their children that they expanded it to whole classes, year groups or different year groups. Asking questions of both pupil premium and 'non pupil premium' pupils in one school threw up no difference in responses to three questions, but a dramatic difference in the 'where are you going with your learning?' (purpose) question.

Interviewing children wasn't easy. Many cohort one schools found asking the four questions difficult either practically or emotionally, or both. They found them awkward and felt awkward asking them, and so they sometimes went to considerable lengths to change them. They couldn't find suitable spaces in school to engage pupils in the conversations. Asking them in class resulted in literal responses from learners who interpret the enquiry as relating to the subject or even that lesson. Taking learners out of class could cause anxiety for the learner who thought she'd/he'd done something wrong. And informal settings just didn't seem to be sufficiently commonplace to make it feel like an ok conversation to have.

A few opted to survey children. One primary team spoke to some children and surveyed others. The results were 'extremely interesting'. Writing responses enabled children to answer questions more honestly, whereas those who answered the questions orally seemed to find the task much harder. This led the team to think more about improving children's speaking skills and their confidence to express feelings effectively.





## What have we learnt?

Schools drew on a range of people to interview children. In addition to, or instead of, themselves, some brought in other teachers, pastoral staff and older pupils. Several noted that it was important to give some guidance to others in how to ask the questions and handle emotionally difficult answers. Most were ultimately satisfied with their chosen method, or were intending to adapt it in the future based on the strategy of another school on the coaching call. In the sharing event, colleagues concluded that there was no one best way to scan, but it was important to try a range. But there was pretty widespread agreement that talking to the children and seriously listening to their answers, was absolutely essential.

*“You can’t do it without talking and really listening.”*

Primary teacher

*“It has very much taught me to always keep an open mind and the value of questioning children is just unbelievable.”*

Primary teacher

*“What it has done for us is give us a bit of a focus on digging down and unpicking for each individual child and looking at what those barriers really are.”*

Secondary senior leader

*“Don’t assume you know the answers. If you’ve got something you need to work on, don’t assume you know – ask the kids!”*

Primary middle leader

### Scanning suggestions from cohort one school teams

- + Don’t scan to confirm what you think you already know
- + Leave at the door what you think you will hear
- + Be authentic - listen and listen
- + Embrace the openness
- + Don’t rush
- + With older children, try video-taping
- + Keep scanning - go back to go deeper

### 3. Spirals has the potential to change ‘the way we do things around here’

Experience thus far, confirmed by evidence from the BC experience, suggests that once Spirals of Enquiry is embedded across a significant number of staff there is a tipping point at which it can profoundly change a school’s culture. Participating teams spoke of the value of:

- + a core group of staff ‘spreading the word’
- + leaders sharing the process and impact regularly with all staff
- + fitting it in with other initiatives and the school’s development plan
- + finding ways to engage and involve colleagues

Examples were cited of other staff in schools being ‘pulled in’ whether by being asked to help interview pupils, or working alongside a team member in their year group or department.



## What have we learnt?

Once teams had moved into the professional learning and taking action stages, colleagues also often found themselves involved in wider staff activity, whether this was related to interventions around reading, quality work, pupils’ course options, Ron Berger’s<sup>12</sup> ‘I can . . .’ learning and character targets, Carol Dweck’s<sup>13</sup> growth mindsets, or other interventions.

Strategies to extend and embed Spirals included a primary school that sent a new team to join the second cohort with different staff members to grow the project. In this second year the whole school will use the approach with ‘active pupil/family engagement’, and all staff will be using the four questions regularly to determine what they need to know about to develop their focus area.

In another primary school the four Spirals questions are being woven into pre-existing learning conversations. As a middle leader explained:

*“This is something that certainly [senior leader] and I found to be really valuable and that’s worthwhile spreading across the school and I think it will be far more successful when everybody is using it. . . . At the moment we have what we call learning conversations once or twice a year where teachers meet on a one-to-one with children in their class, and we felt that these questions would actually be far more guiding and valuable than the questions we currently ask so it’s something we think class teachers can adapt to an approach that they are already currently using, but asking far more valuable questions.”*

Middle leader primary

Meanwhile, one secondary school, having interviewed all year 9 pupils last year was planning to interview them again in year 10 and in year 11 to develop evidence of and insights into their pupils’ progress over time.

And in another secondary school CPD for the entire academic year is being reconfigured to accommodate Spirals. The senior leader for CPD highly prizes the discipline and focus of Spirals:

*“I think people will be much more focused on it, and it’s giving them that structure isn’t it? When you strip it back and say, ‘go and ask the kids what they think about a particular question, and then that’s going to feed into your next action point’, that’s quite empowering. Whereas I think maybe when you say action research, especially for a teacher who’s busy and got a 20-hour timetable, it feels like this massive thing that is going to be all-encompassing. Whereas when you say ‘let’s talk to the children and act upon that’, it’s much more manageable.”*

Secondary CPD coordinator

### 4. Take and make time – it’s not a quick fix

Getting time and timing right is fundamental to sustainable success with Spirals. Three points are particularly relevant

- i. Spirals requires a considerable investment of time in the first stages, particularly scanning. Often in education, we jump to conclusions and rush to action in what Steven Katz and colleagues call activity traps ; well-intentioned interventions which turn out to be a waste of time. Colleagues found that Spirals requires them to go deeper into problems and their reasons, before coming up with the most appropriate ways of addressing these. For the pilot schools, drilling down on hunches meant making sure they really knew why the focus they chose was the right one.

*“Normally you’d look at an issue and say, ‘it’s because of this’, so it’s great to have time to delve in.”*

Secondary middle leader





## What have we learnt?

At the start, despite warnings to the contrary, some schools thought that everything should be happening faster, and a few quickly selected their focus areas. Most, though, found that time spent up front was well invested:

*A few times I thought I had my focus because I was just jumping in because I wanted to fix it, but actually just taking that step back was really useful because actually I would have just gone on with a different project if I'd just gone with what I first thought was the issue.*

Primary teacher

Spirals also pays significant attention to new learning teachers need to engage in once they have identified hunches and confirmed the focus, in order to prepare themselves for action and learning how to do things differently. In a few cases the professional learning stage was less evident than in others, with a move directly to action.

ii. Making time is essential - This was a particular issue for some schools and team members. Several schools already had structures in place, such as professional learning community time or learning conversations that year group leaders were already having where the four questions could just be 'built in'.

For others, team members couldn't use the school's CPD time "because there were so many other things to introduce". And even where the initiative, and a wider commitment to Whole Education, were part of a school development plan or included within the CPD allowance, some teams didn't meet up regularly and teachers did most or all of the activity in their own time.

In two schools, Spirals essentially rested entirely on one teacher's shoulders, which also meant that the extent of sharing across the school in an ongoing way was limited.

*"... the end of the year in the INSET I will be telling the teachers the findings and the impact but there's just been no time to do that throughout the year other than in informal discussions. . . It's just me in my own time. That's something I would say definitely to ensure you have time and someone to talk through it with very regularly."*

Primary teacher

iii. The first cycle is usually a trial run - The BC experience suggests that people need to go through a whole cycle and have the opportunity to understand what other schools have done before the penny drops and they really understand the model and how it works. This was the experience of most cohort 1 schools too:

*"I think it's one of these things that you really have to trial it out for yourselves to really underpin each stage. And I think we're now ready to do it really properly."*

Primary teacher



## What have we learnt?

### 5. Spirals needs committed leadership and support in school

*What does it take to lead Spirals successfully?* The pilot has offered a number of insights.

i. Getting the right team - The make-up of the team and the way individuals operated as a team were both important. Getting a balance of senior leaders and middle leaders and/or teachers on the team meant that if classroom practice needed to change there was backing from people whose current experience includes teaching. And these team members were important in bringing examples to staff meetings, enabling colleagues to see the process and its outcome from other members of staff, not just from the SLT, 'making it a sharing thing'.

If the team was 'leadership heavy' there was the possibility that it could be hard to get others involved later, as well as senior leaders sometimes were too busy to commit regular time to Spirals. From their experience of 'leading' Spirals in their schools, colleagues from the first cohort also suggested that it might be helpful to have team members from different key stages and a mix of more established and newer staff. They viewed it as an opportunity to develop new leaders, with the suggestion that it might be included in appraisals.

ii. Capacity of the key person - Whoever was the 'real' driver of Spirals in the school - and sometimes this was a teacher - they needed the time to get properly involved. One school paid a small allowance, and suggestions were made by first cohort participants that an advertisement might be helpful to attract those potentially interested in leading the initiative.

iii. Involvement and influence of the senior leader team member(s) - It was clear that having a senior leader (in some cohort 1 schools this included primary headteachers/heads of school) on the team was a great asset when this person was actively involved and influential with other senior staff especially, the headteacher/executive headteacher. Having an influential senior leader involved meant that others were more likely to receive time to carry out Spirals, and had someone they could bounce ideas off or go to with problems, which kept them more motivated and helped maintain momentum. It also was more likely that other members of the SLT would understand the rationale behind Spirals and how it fit with other school priorities, with greater opportunity for it to be introduced more widely throughout the school.

iv. Senior leadership sponsorship - While commitment of the senior leader team member was important, and their access to the headteacher/executive headteacher also vital, equally significant was the headteacher's orientation to Spirals. Over the course of the first cycle, it was clear that some heads maintained more of a connection than others. Unquestionably, they were often waiting to see what impact there was before engaging more fully or committing the school to extend Spirals and, certainly for a few schools, seeing the impact convinced their headteachers to spread it more widely in the future.

*"It's only in the last month or so we've seen such an impact and it's been clear that it's working. Last week I presented it . . . and it was 'wow, what we've done is brilliant and it is actually working'. . . [The headteacher] was there, and it was the first time she saw it as a whole because I had some videos of children talking about how they've improved over the year and how what we were doing has helped them and it was the really key vulnerable children. That just made it very evident to her, so it was helpful."*

Teacher, June 2015



## What have we learnt?

*“It was fairly recently that we shared our findings at SLT and was able to share how valuable the questions were and the feedback we were given, and it was from then on that we decided to really spread this out across the school from September.”*

Middle leader, June 2015

As with other enquiry-based R&D projects<sup>15</sup>, a lack of clear leadership interest in Spirals demotivated or challenged a few school teams who would have welcomed further connections with other school priorities.

### 6. Networking enhances the process

Learning from and with other schools was an important feature of Spirals. The face-to-face events and coaching calls were designed to stimulate sharing of strategies, challenging issues and their resolution, and to encourage critical friendship. Summaries of partially completed case studies prior to the April coaching call also enabled teams to see what colleagues were up to. And teachers began to share the follow up reading they were doing as part of their professional learning:

*“I’ve found this really useful actually, just hearing what other people are doing, and what they’ve found. Some of the things we haven’t looked in detail, and what people have been reading, I’ve written down a few things. Documents [research] don’t always get read, but those notes [offered by a teacher in a different school] would be a lot easier. Talking and seeing people and having the conversations I find really good. You think, ‘ooh I hadn’t thought of that.’”*

Secondary senior leader

*“It’s been really helpful useful sharing our practice with other schools and listening to how they’re getting on and seeing which schools have had similar responses to us and the way other schools have led the process.”*

Primary teacher

After coaching calls, some schools also connected with others about particular interventions which had been discussed. Networking was especially appreciated where teachers were largely working alone on Spirals in their school.

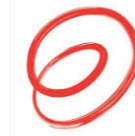
*“I heard others talking about similar feelings and emotions throughout the project. It was nice to know I wasn’t the only one who struggled with the openness.”*

Primary teacher

Technology issues sometimes inhibited full participation, with colleagues in one school expressing a preference for face-to-face meetings, and interest was expressed in coordinating meetings with schools where the team had ‘like interests’.

Networking with other schools has particular significance for individual teachers trying to use Spirals without senior support. Two forms of Spirals could be seen. One was a school-wide approach, even when introduced by a small cross-role team, with added benefit of critical friendship from other schools. The other was essentially individual engaging in collaborative enquiry supported by peers in different schools.

Potentially both forms could coexist within the Whole Education network, as they do in BC. This is important for teachers who feel professionally lonely or isolated in their school and are looking for a community of ‘like minds’.



## What have we learnt?

*“If I’d had a buddy to kind of be there and bounce off during that scanning phase, it would have been easier.”*

Primary teacher

In BC the network has provided space for people to find community, and year after year the same people stay engaged as well as new people coming on board. Over the longer term, as teachers become more confident and can articulate the impact more clearly, even individuals are having more influence because they pull in more people from their own schools.

### 7. External support helps keep Spirals on track

Most schools engaged with the Spirals of Enquiry process pretty quickly, even if they struggled with part of it.

They were passionate about making a difference for all of their pupils and often came to Spirals having often tried many other interventions to support vulnerable children and young people with mixed success.

However, seriously engaging with Spirals of Enquiry is difficult work, at least initially, because it is a new way of doing things. It requires organising, good questioning skills, a willingness to seriously listen and have your thinking challenged. And sometimes the scanning response elicits painful responses from children and young people which are hard to hear.

Some team members found questioning difficult, some didn’t know what to do with the pupils’ -responses. Sometimes, one team member’s attention was diverted with other priorities leaving their colleague to handle the whole initiative. And, with all of the other demands on teachers and leaders, maintaining momentum was a challenge for most of the first cohort.

Having access to the Canadian originators was an incredible bonus for Whole Education and greatly appreciated by the schools. Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser were in touch with the Whole Education team throughout, providing an invaluable sounding board as well as offering ideas and resources to schools.

Having a coach and regular coaching calls also helped with the issues faced as Spirals progressed. Coaching calls were linked to particular stages of the Spiral and school teams were open to challenge, and keen to hear feedback from the Whole Education team, as well as from other schools.

For many, coaching calls provided deadlines as well as further guidance from facilitators and colleagues on what to expect.

*“The coaching calls have really helped because they’ve just kept us focused. When we first set out we did it a little bit wrong so it was the coaching call that got us on track.”*

Primary teacher

*“With the emails and conference calls you’re constantly having to think about it. You know what it’s like in schools and everyday life. You’re constantly side-tracked. So with all of the deadlines and things you have to do, it keeps the momentum going and the process going.”*

Primary teacher



## What have we learnt?

### 8. School context and stage of development affect involvement

Narrowing gaps for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils is a particular priority for any school with a diverse population. A tension arose for a few participants around whether this approach is the right one to raise results in national assessments. For the primary school that identified literacy issues and then specifically focused their Spirals interventions on these, impact results confirm that this approach can be tailored successfully to addressing such stubborn challenges. In this school, home reading has increased significantly, as have pupils' enthusiasm for reading and their progress in assessments.

However, the lengthier qualitative investigative nature of Spirals conflicts with the pressure schools are under to ensure rapid improvement in results. Over the period of the project, four secondary schools stopped participation in the pilot after an Ofsted inspection. All had previously engaged actively in the launch and the January coaching call or February webinar. Given the speed of the inspectors' return visits and expectations around improvement in results over a short period of time, the slower – albeit potentially more sustainable and powerful – process did not fit with their change timetable. As one secondary senior leader explained:

*“We felt that even though there were lots of good aspects to the spirals process, we needed something that was a bit quicker for want of a better term – quicker in terms of bringing about the results we need.”*

Research evidence identifies this kind of enquiry – starting with the pupils' needs as a baseline for professional development and intervention – as having a positive impact on pupil outcomes and teachers' practice<sup>16</sup> but our evidence suggests that at least some Ofsted inspectors do not believe this process will help schools get good grades quickly.



## Moving forward

All of the nine schools completing the pilot were planning to continue the spirals process in one way or another, and two (1 primary and 1 secondary) also sent new teams to join cohort two. A primary teacher in one school, who had been strongly affected by the process and its impact on her pupils, was moving schools. She was fully intending to continue the process as well as using her new school middle leadership role to introduce it to colleagues.

As stories of impact began to emerge from the first cohort of schools, other schools in the network have shown interest in starting the journey, some of whom had held back from participating first time around.

Whole Education was also approached specifically by a few schools/teams because they had heard about Spirals of Enquiry and wanted to experience it for themselves. Eventually, 19 teams joined the second cohort's launch at the end of June 2015 with Judy Halbert, Linda Kaser and the Whole Education team. In working with this second cohort, more importance was placed on ensuring that team members have time to engage seriously, sufficient influence among senior colleagues at school, and understand the different way of working which underpins the spirals model.

Participants returned to their schools excited by the idea of truly putting learners at the centre of their learning, listening to what they really have to say, then addressing barriers and supporting individual pupils in their learning to deepen engagement and enhance achievement. They also enthusiastically greeted the opportunity to create a culture of enquiry where staff share ideas and developments, and were curious to work through the spirals cycle to see its effects, while being mindful of the need to create time, and bring colleagues along on the 'journey', helping them develop ownership.

It was encouraging that members of the first cohort thought that most of the support package should remain as it had been for them. They were clear Whole Education should keep Spirals of Enquiry, its Canadian originators, their resource book and the important scanning questions. And they appreciated the whole team's "genuine interest and understanding for each school's needs, your brilliant lust to learn from us as professionals", and being challenged in coaching calls.

*“The morning conference calls helped us make changes. They made me think about things in a different way. I've been doing this [enquiry] for 15 years.”*

Senior leader secondary school

Requests were made to enhance opportunities for sharing with other schools – “it's good for morale” and suggestions were offered around social media, blogs, resources and guidance, visits to other participating schools, and another face-to-face event midway through the process.

Based on the first cohort's experience and feedback, the Whole Education team has made several revisions to support for cohort 2, notably:

- + Coaching calls will be phase specific
- + More opportunities for networking are on offer. Regional face to face events are planned in a participating schools and coaching calls emphasise school-school sharing
- + Informal contact is being encouraged with the Whole Education Team between 'set piece' support events.

It is early days, but already this second run of Spirals feels more organised and animated, almost certainly as a result of the increased confidence of the support team, gained through the experience of completing the pilot.





## Discussion and conclusion

Early results of the Spirals pilot are encouraging. Some profound shifts have been experienced in the way participating schools think about narrowing gaps for vulnerable and other learners and how they approach professional learning. Asking pupils about their learning and the social and emotional issues which get in the way, really listening to what they have to say, and being willing to take

responsibility for the issues raised, has reoriented teachers' practice and several schools' culture. This is already leading to some positive results for pupils and their parents.

Issues have also been raised.

Differences between primary and secondary schools - The Spirals process seems to be more 'straightforward' in primary schools, and there have been a significant number of secondary school non-completers. Even taking the Ofsted factor into account (a loss of four otherwise-engaged secondary schools), secondary schools appear to find Spirals more challenging and 'counter culture' than primaries. In a high accountability climate, they seem more focused on doing whatever it takes to get quick improvements in grades, rather than invest effort in the medium term.

While there are examples of success in secondary schools, the most powerful impacts thus far have been reported in primary schools. Primary practitioners' continued enthusiasm and commitment is being rewarded and it will be interesting to follow their schools' progress over time as they engage in further cycles.

So what about secondary schools? Generally, fewer teachers have been involved so far, and adolescents' parents are harder to reach, with consequences for understanding their children's needs, as this secondary senior leader explained:

*"With primary because there's so much more exposure with parents, it's much easier to pick up those barriers quickly. We only really get to meet our parents when there's a parents evening or when there's an issue and we invite them in. My wife works in reception in primary and she sees most of her parents most days. So she can very, very quickly paint a picture for each of the children she has and what their barriers might be. We don't have that luxury unfortunately so I think it takes longer to actually unpick each child and find out what the issues are."*

Adolescents may also be less comfortable opening up to adults than younger children, and teachers may find it more difficult to ask adolescents the Spirals questions.

We clearly need better understanding of these differences – in particular, what it will take to ensure sustainability across secondary schools. Members of the second cohort are already experiencing revised support based on the pilot's findings, but continuing to learn from them as well as the first cohort's second cycle will be important.

Ensuring sustainability - Shifts in culture in some schools suggest that Spirals can be sustainable – a deep process, with wide involvement which lasts over time. But schools get involved in many interesting and potentially valuable initiatives which come to an end. And because this is a slower process, it is potentially easier to get disheartened or to lose momentum, especially if there is limited or change in leadership and support is not forthcoming.

As we learnt, the first spiral is essentially a trial run – teachers and leaders need to remain focused and use what they have learnt first time around to refine the process to make it more powerful and apply it to other problems identified by their pupils.



## Discussion and conclusion

They also need support and challenge from their peers. The BC network brings together newcomers with 'old hands' who have been through the cycle many times but stay connected in order to learn more with and from each other. They also continue to develop collective responsibility towards improving the outcomes and narrowing the gap for all of the network's children. Whole Education can facilitate these connections, involving some cohort one leaders as facilitators. It will also be valuable to connect in to the BC network.

To conclude, Whole Education's Spirals has made a promising start, with some early impact, plenty of valuable learning, and issues to address. We look forward to seeing how Spirals develops over time and leave the last word to participants from three first cohort schools.

*"I've loved doing the process and just the fact that you are making the kids the centre of it has been the absolute key to figuring out what we should do next. We've already started thinking about how we might adapt it and change it, so we will definitely be using this again."*

Primary middle leader

*"Through our involvement with Whole Education and Spirals of Enquiry we feel that our Year 9 pupils are best placed for success in their studies."*

Secondary senior leaders

[What was the impact on teachers and leaders using Spirals?]

*"Enthusiasm, passion, value, braver!"*





## Questions to stimulate learning conversations

Here are some questions to help various groupings think through the implications for them.

### Leaders of schools and groups of schools

- + What would be the benefits and challenges of trying out Spirals in your school/across your schools? How would alleviate the challenges?
- + How amenable is your school culture to change which challenges current practice?

### Teachers

- + How might Spirals help you improve learning for your pupils and advance your practice?
- + Are there other teachers in your school that you could work with on Spirals? How would you get others on board?

### Policy makers

- + What are the benefits and drawbacks of taking a longer term view on deep practice change?
- + What potential might there be for local adaptation of national policy and guidance to meet the specific needs of learners?

### Funders

- + The differential effects of phase and context on take up and impact of Spirals are apparent but need further investigation. What kinds of research might illuminate this issue further?
- + What would it take in the English context to have a sustainable Spirals networks equivalent to the Spirals network in British Columbia?

### Researchers

- + In what ways does Spirals increase teachers' and school leaders' appetite for evidence-informed practice?
- + What are the implications for how researchers present their research findings so that they can be useful in a process like Spirals?

### Whole Education

- + What different kinds of support might secondary and primary schools require to be successful when using Spirals?
- + Are there adaptations that could be made to the model that would make it more amenable to secondary school environments without losing its powerful integrity?



## Feedback and final reflections

### Would you recommend Spirals of Enquiry to other schools?

*"It gives an opportunity to speak to pupils and find out what their barriers are but provides a framework for doing so."*

Secondary teacher

*"Most definitely. Get involved if you really want to understand about what's going on."*

Primary teacher

*"I've been teaching for seven years. The whole Whole Education thing has been a huge shift for me."*

Primary teacher

*"If you ever lose the sense that every kid matters you have lost the game. We're linking in people who have the mindsets."*

Linda Kaser

*"If it wasn't for the network, people wouldn't be doing what they do now. It's changing outcome for kids but also changing the system to change outcomes for kids."*

Judy Halbert





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# Whole Education

CAN Mezzanine  
49-51 East Road  
London  
N1 6AH

[rosie@wholeeducation.org](mailto:rosie@wholeeducation.org)  
020 7250 8423

[www.wholeeducation.org](http://www.wholeeducation.org)  
[@wholeeducation](https://www.instagram.com/wholeeducation)

©First published November 2015