

## Inquiry as stance – a professional learning strategy

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### Introduction

In this document we describe the line of thought behind the idea that ‘inquiry as a stance’ is a professional learning strategy for teachers and other educational professionals, which helps them to cope with issues they encounter in their educational practice.

### Educational practice requires continuous professional development

During the life span of a teacher’s career, many changes will occur. Due to developments in society, technology and environment, education is changing. The curriculum is changing, there is more emphasis on the need to learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and the contents of subjects are also different compared with 20 years ago. The population of pupils is changing, more immigrant children participate in education, children with special needs join general education, there is a strong wish to offer pupils more tailor-made education. Didactical approaches are changing, pupil-centred approaches are becoming more popular and subjects (mathematics, biology, history) are often taught in interdisciplinary projects. Teaching practice is changing, some schools work with teams of teachers that teach collaboratively and work closely together. All these changes are challenging for teachers. How can you adjust your way of doing to the new situation? The constant change requires a flexibility of teachers, to adjust to the new situation and to master the change rather than submerge in it.

### Preparing teachers for change

In our Teacher Education Institute, we want to prepare our student teachers for their future careers not only by equipping them with subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, but also by equipping them with an inquiry stance (Kools, van Schaik & Struik, 2019). Kelchtermans (2019) stresses the fact that the best way to prepare future teachers for the inevitable changes in their future teaching practice is to develop their ability for critical thinking and inquiry as stance. The critical analysis of their insecurity, uneasiness and practical discomfort offers powerful possibilities to develop their professionalism.

### Inquiry –as-stance

Nancy Fichtman-Dana (2015) argues that it is important that teachers see inquiry as a substantial part of their work. In her words: ‘teacher inquiry is a continual cycle that all educators spiral through throughout their professional lifetimes—a professional positioning or stance, owned by the teacher, where questioning, systematically studying, and subsequently improving one’s own practice becomes a necessary and natural part of a teacher’s work.’ (Fichtman-Dana, 2015, p 164). This process is also called inquiry-as-stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Another way to look at this process is to see it as a flowing river or a brook, which is a metaphor for inquiry-based activities. This process starts with a question or issue (for example: how can I actively involve my pupils in my

teaching?) and continues with a series of activities that each contribute to finding answers to this question. Possible activities could be: asking a colleagues how she deals with this, asking questions to pupils, reading literature on the topic, trying something experimental in class, reflect on this experiment, adjusting the experiment and try again, etcetera. During this process, the original question might change, due to renewed insights (not: how can I actively involve my pupils in my teaching, but: 'how can I make my pupils apply 'deep learning'?).

Distinctive for this approach is that the choice of activities is not defined beforehand, but advances step by step, based on insights that occur along the process, and on reflection on these insights. Building knowledge thus happens step by step, each step adding new insights to the previous step.

To make sure that this approach is not just 'trial and error', it is important that steps and insights are written down to be able to reflect on these and to be able to share them with others.

### The 'fit' of an inquiry stance in the work of teachers

In the daily practice of teaching there are a lot of opportunities to gather information on practice related questions (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). For example observations, analysis of student work, video-recordings of situations in class to observe teachers' or pupils' behaviour, analysis of assessments and exams, feedback of pupils. Next to this, information can be gathered 'on top of' the natural act of teaching. For example, an interview with a group of pupils after school about their learning, following an interview protocol developed beforehand (Fichtman-Dana, 2015). Reflecting on one's practice can be enriched by using the extra information that the teaching practice offers. Next to the information from one's classes and teaching situations, conversations with colleagues also offer new insights.

### Inquiry-as stance as professional development strategy

The idea of inquiry-as-stance and taking one step at a time to unravel a problem links up nicely with the way teachers develop professionally. In their model of interconnected growth, Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) describe teacher learning as a process of reflection and enactment through four domains (see figure 1). These domains are the external domain, the personal domain, the domain of practice and the domain of outcomes.

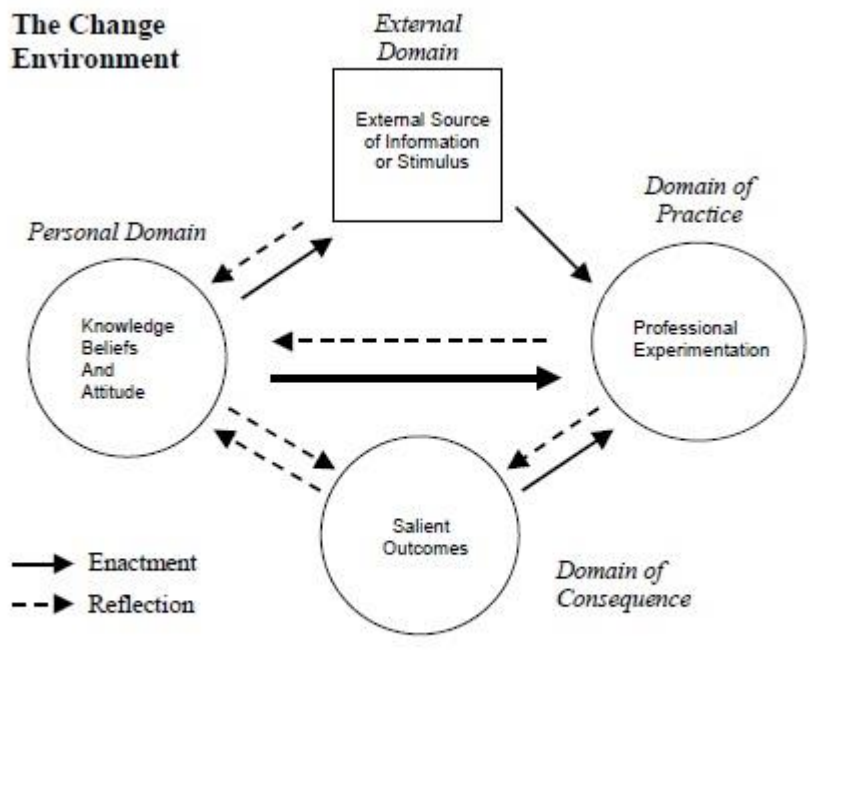


Figure 1: the interconnected model of professional growth by Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002)

The *external domain* represents all external sources of information, for example literature, a lecture, a conversation to an expert or a colleague, a visit to another teachers' practice. The *domain of practice* is the domain of experimentation, of trying out things in own teaching practice. The *personal domain* consist of total of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of the teacher, the professional identity. The *domain of consequence* is about things that can be noticed in pupils or in situations. Clarke en Hollingsworth argue that professional growth occurs when domains are interconnected and combined. For example, a teacher notices that the pupils in class are not motivated to work (domain of consequence). She goes to an expert meeting to learn more about this where she hears about the self-determination theory (external domain) and is inspired by that. She decides to experiment with this theory in her teaching practice (domain of practice). Her experiments lead to slightly improved motivation (domain of consequences). This strengthens her ideas about pupils' ownership (personal domain) and she continues this new practice.

The model of Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) which suggests teacher professional learning takes place through a consecutive process of reflection and enactment between external sources, practice, professional identity and outcomes, is in fact the representation of the inquiry stance that Fichtman-Dana is promoting. The interconnected model of professional growth underpins the importance of an inquiry stance for teachers. It also offers a framework to 'map' the inquiry stance and helps to envision the way this inquiry stance works as a process.



## References

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