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Global Education Experts Set to Challenge School Mindsets and Practice

Schools - now more than ever - must engage with their students and give them opportunities to contribute to their own learning, school and communities in meaningful ways, according to internationally renowned academics leading a master class for independent school educators today.

Supporting schools to ask the right questions that will concentrate their energies on improvements that will have the greatest impact on student outcomes has occupied the professional lives of Canadian academics and authors Dr Judy Halbert and Dr Linda Kaser for 20 years.

The Co-leaders of the Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education in Canada will share their extensive research and hands-on experience working with schools around the world with more than 100 Queensland independent school leaders and teachers during an online master class.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) Executive Director David Robertson said Dr Halbert and Dr Kaser were globally recognised leaders in evidence-based school transformation.

“This masterclass is well timed to harness the ideas, enhanced school-family partnerships and momentum for change in education created by the COVID-19 pandemic,” Mr Robertson said.

Dr Halbert and Dr Kaser said schools had traditionally served to sort students by their future destinations of university, training or work.

“In our complex, uncertain, interconnected and volatile world, we need much more from our schools. We want schools to be centres of learning – for everyone involved,” they said.

Parents and carers also “need to see and feel the enthusiasm of their children when they are deeply engaged in meaningful learning”, according to Dr Halbert and Dr Kaser.

“We need to engage parents in meaningful discussions about what success in life really means and to move beyond narrow definitions of success as measured by status or grades.”

At the core of the Spiral of Inquiry framework for school transformation – which Dr Halbert and Dr Kaser authored with Professor Helen Timperley - is “getting a clear understanding of what is going on for our learners before leaping to action”. *See case study examples below.*

Teams of Queensland independent school principals, leaders and teachers have been undertaking research into teaching and learning using the Spiral of Inquiry framework as part of ISQ's Research in Schools program. Dr Kaser and Dr Halbert have been working closely with these schools since 2019.

"We want to know that every learner has at least two adults in the school who believe in their potential for success and we want to know that every learner understands what they are learning, why it is important and what their next steps are to improve," they said.

"The only way we can know this is by asking the learners themselves. When we go to a doctor, we expect them to take the time to listen to our concerns, to do further investigation if necessary and then to develop a treatment plan accordingly. Listening to our learners gives us critically important information that will help us make better decisions."

"We have to avoid the tendency to say that when things aren't improving quickly enough that it is the fault of the particular program. Schools are prone to fall into activity traps that can lead to frustration and cynicism."

The academics hope the masterclass will encourage and motivate independent schools to take student learning to a new level.

"We hope they will be curious about what is going on for their learners and open to listening carefully to what their learners have to say. We would like schools to see the impact that their joint work is having on their learners and that this will encourage them to continue and to go more deeply."

SPIRAL OF INQUIRY CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1

A suburban secondary school in a relatively affluent community started their inquiry by asking Year 9 and 10 students about their experiences as learners. A solid majority were getting the marks they needed to succeed academically but many reported feeling anxious, depressed and intellectually disengaged. Many of the students seemed genuinely interested in social justice and global issues including food security. They wanted to be connected to real world situations where their learning had consequences beyond a grade or a mark. This started the staff on a journey that led to the creating of a farm on fallow land that has become a learning hub for students to engage in hands-on learning. This program was identified by the Spencer Foundation in 2018 as a model of innovation in secondary schools in Canada.

Making school inquiries transparent and visible to parents is key to building support and understanding – and then for seeking ways to engage direct parent support. For instance, in this case study, one of the parents had a connection with the local college and now students can achieve dual credit for both high school and college level courses through their work on the farm.

CASE STUDY 2

An elementary school was concerned about the growing levels of anxiety amongst their learners particularly when they moved from primary to intermediate (Year 3 to Year 4). They had decided to launch a program of mindfulness training to help reduce anxiety and stress. Then they recalled through their work with the Spiral of Inquiry, that they needed to check out their assumptions with their learners. What they learned was that yes, the students were indeed more anxious in Year 4 but what was critically important that they discovered, was that this was in large part due to the change in assessment practices particularly in Mathematics. Mindfulness was not going to address the concerns about Mathematics. Instead, the staff focused on strengthening their formative assessment practices in Mathematics with very positive results.

CASE STUDY 3

A secondary school had been working with the Spiral of Inquiry for a few years and had been doing a good job of improving outcomes in their areas of focus. The students were aware of the language and the concepts of the Spiral. A group of Year 11 students approached the Vice Principal to say that they had noticed an increase in the misuse of social media amongst the incoming Year 8 students with some quite negative consequences. They got her support to launch their own inquiry. They interviewed the younger students, developed a survey and came up with a plan – and they were clear that they were in a better position to tackle the use and misuse of social media than were their teachers or parents. They developed a program, worked tirelessly within their school and as the year went on the reports of misuse of social media went down to zero. This group of students have since been invited to work with other schools in their district. Seeing what this group of students had accomplished, a second group of students also approached the Vice Principal with the desire to use the Spiral of Inquiry to help address the issues of racism within the school.

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