

# The spiral of inquiry: An introduction to focusing



ECE resources

Focusing is about establishing the priority for improvement. In this phase teachers use the information about children's strengths and needs gathered during scanning to determine where to concentrate their energies to change children's experiences and outcomes. The broad scan will reveal many new perspectives on children's experiences. The focusing phase narrows and hones the area of investigation, breaking down larger issues into something more workable. An outcome of the focusing phase might be a working map of the elements that comprise the area that needs attention, or the identification of pathways toward potential approaches to trial. Focusing should allow teachers to develop a good idea of where to focus the ongoing inquiry and what it might involve.

## A guide to the focusing phase

Start by **interrogating your evidence**. Review your findings, asking 'how do I know?' and 'why does this matter?' Then **create a succinct and well-organised summary** of relevant evidence from several sources, in order to provoke thinking and discussion. **Share your evidence with a critical friend or your team**, encouraging them to ask questions, challenge your assumptions, and check your preconceptions and blind spots.

Next you need to **select an area of focus**. Focus on areas of children's learning that are most important and which you have the **greatest ability to influence**. Be careful not to choose according to your own interests. Ensure that your area of inquiry is **practice-focused**. Focus on what your scan shows is happening, and don't introduce completely new areas unrelated to the scanning process. Select key observations and **generate inferences and potential explanations and conclusions** for those observations. Avoid jumping to conclusions, but speculate what might be the reasons for the patterns that you identify.

It is important to ensure that the selected focus is **manageable**: select no more than one or two small and specific areas, and make your inquiry **deep and focused** but not overly constrained. Sometimes areas are related or reinforce one another, so they can be tackled at the same time. Think about how to **build on strengths** and positives as well as **gain clarity on challenges**. Consider whether there are common areas that you might **collaborate** on with other teachers.

Once you have narrowed your area of focus, you need to **define the problem or area for improvement**. Continue to **collect evidence** to clarify what is happening, and avoid jumping to solutions: make sure you understand the issues fully. Ensure your analysis is thoughtful and based on multiple, rich sources of information.

## Questions for focusing

The following questions may help to guide the focusing stage<sup>1</sup>:

- What popped out at you during the scanning process?
- What are the strengths that your children show? How might you build on these strengths?
- Are there aspects of your practice you can strengthen or do more of?

- What's not working well?
- Are some issues recurring, year after year, or across different groups of children?
- Which issues consume the highest levels of energy, time and resources?
- Which learning outcomes have children had the least opportunity to work on or develop?
- What really matters most for children and families, and what will make the biggest difference to their learning?
- What would be manageable for you and/or your team?

## Tools for focusing

The following tools may be useful during the focusing phase, although it is not essential to use these or any other formal tools.

**Overview template:** This tool has been designed to help teachers list things that emerged during the scanning phase, to evaluate what's working well and what's not, and to consider the amount and quality of evidence collected prior to selecting an area of focus. It is useful for helping to narrow your focus and identify any areas where you might need to collect a bit more evidence.

**Selecting a focus tool:** Use this tool to help you to select an area to focus on. It will help you rate potential areas to address against the level of need, your capacity to make changes, your strengths, challenges, your interest in it, potential to collaborate and ease of assessing progress and change. It's a very quick tool to use to help you keep moving through the inquiry process.

**Narrowing the focus tool:** If you have a general area in need of improvement, use this tool to narrow your focus by identifying the who, what, how and why of your key observations, and what the learning should look like. You can also use it to speculate possible causes of the problem or challenges. A narrow focus will enable you to conduct a tighter, deeper and more effective inquiry.

**The 5 Whys analysis tool:** The [5 Whys analysis](#) method is useful for identifying and defining the problem. It can be very difficult to clearly identify the root problem or issue, and this tool helps you to get past symptoms or factors that may affect a child's behaviour and motivation (such as tiredness) but are not the true cause of the problem.

## Next steps

Before rushing to set a goal and create an action plan you need to work through the next phase in the inquiry spiral - the '[developing a hunch](#)' phase. It is important you work through this phase to identify the impact of your teaching practice on the area of focus.

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## References and further reading

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## Endnotes

1 Questions adapted from:

Centre for Education, Statistics and Evaluation (2016). Setting the scope of an evaluation. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/professional-learning/pl-resources/evaluation-resource-hub/evaluation-design-and-planning/setting-the-scope-of-an-evaluation> Setting the scope of an evaluation (nsw.gov.au)

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