

In the second school year of LIREC implementation, the project's internal evaluation conducted targeted data collection around teacher inquiry cycles. Inquiry Cycles emerged over the course of the project as a central mechanism for providing blended professional learning to LIRECs network of rural schools, and the cycles that were developed and tested in LIREC schools are an important legacy product of the project. However, because the strategy evolved substantially over the course of the project, as the implementation team learned about the most effective ways to build professional capacity in physically isolated schools, they were not well addressed in the design of the external evaluation.

What are Inquiry Cycles?

LIREC Inquiry Cycles provide 6-8 weeks of content and activities for a collaborative team of teachers learning about, implementing, and reflecting on a specific literacy strategy. They were designed to provide the kinds of experiences any learner (adult or child) needs to build new knowledge and transfer it into practice, as described in the gradual release framework already well known to many teachers as a model for designing student learning (Fisher & Frey, 2007). In this framework, learners have an opportunity to experience new practices through **modeling** (e.g. video, classroom observation, case, webinar) and **guided practice** (e.g. co-designing a lesson, coaching or supportive feedback on teaching; collaborative discussion) before **independent** expertise is expected. By allowing teachers to experience gradual release as a learner, LIREC Inquiry Cycles gave teachers not only an effective way to learn new strategies but a model for their own lesson design. Each session in a LIREC Inquiry Cycle provides three kinds of professional learning:

- (1) Seeing new/best practice modeled;
- (2) Engaging in facilitated discussions so individuals can make meaning;
- (3) Planning for application where teachers are held accountable to transferring the learning to their own practice and commit to *report back at the next meeting* on what was learned.

The application piece is what weaves the individual sessions into a cycle, ensuring that learning is transferred between sessions and that there is space for structured reflection at the beginning of the next session. In most cases teachers were asked to bring back a specific artifact from their classroom implementation, such as a student writing sample or an anchor chart co-constructed with students. These artifacts provided the raw material for reflection in the next session and were a key mechanism for the transfer of learning across classrooms, as teachers saw concrete examples of how their colleagues implemented the practices under study and how their students responded.

The remainder of this report is based on the responses of 152 teachers across 18 LIREC sites to a January 2016 online survey about the inquiry cycle they had just completed. Topics of the cycles were selected by participating teams from among LIREC offerings based on project-structured needs assessment. About half of the teams worked on interactive read-aloud, with smaller numbers working on collaborative writing, guided reading, and small group literacy activities. This report summarizes findings on the following questions:

- **What kinds of professional learning were embedded in the Inquiry Cycles and which did teachers find most valuable?**
- **How did Inquiry Cycle learning transfer into classrooms?**

Professional Learning and Classroom Impacts of LIREC Inquiry Cycles

Professional Learning in LIREC Inquiry Cycles

LIREC Inquiry Cycles incorporated 13 distinct forms of professional learning over the 6-8 week cycle. Individual teachers reported that they had engaged in **an average of 8 different forms of professional learning** at least once, more often multiple times. As shown in the following table, 8 of the 13 practices had at least 75% of teachers reporting participation. Among those whose Inquiry Cycle work did incorporate each of the forms of learning, between 45% and 73% rated that specific learning experience Effective or Extremely Effective (top 2 points on a 5-point scale) in supporting their classroom practice.

	% who participated in this kind of learning during Inquiry Cycle	Of those who participated, % rating as Effective + Extremely Effective
Workshop/presentation by someone from your school/district	88%	73%
Analyzing student work	85%	70%
Analyzing student learning data/assessments	80%	67%
Engaging in reflection on our professional learning around the focus practice	93%	63%
Collaboratively planning instruction using the focus practice	89%	62%
Workshop/presentation by someone from outside your school/district	69%	62%
Coach debrief/feedback from classroom observations of the focus practice	78%	60%
Peer debrief/feedback from classroom observations of the focus practice	66%	59%
Developing common assessments	60%	55%
Within or cross-grade development of learning goals related to focus practice	83%	55%
Discussing professional readings	82%	53%
Analyzing classroom videos	48%	53%
Viewing/discussing web seminars	53%	45%

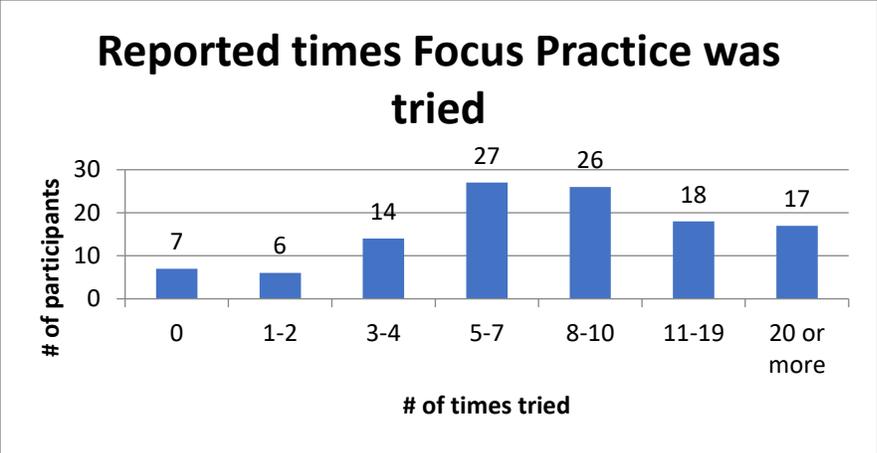
Responses to the open-ended question *“Please briefly describe the kind of learning that was most helpful to you in beginning to actually use the focus practice in your classroom and why/how it was helpful to you”* tell a somewhat different story. Of the 96 teachers who responded, 35 mentioned team collaboration and planning as the learning that most helped them make change in the classroom (this often included looking at data and/or student work which were highly rated forms of learning). This was followed by 25 teachers who mentioned modeling (including videos) and 14 who mentioned peer observation. Workshop or presentation-style PD was mentioned by only 8, although some of the highly valued modeling may have happened during those times. Below are the top 3 themes and representative quotes:

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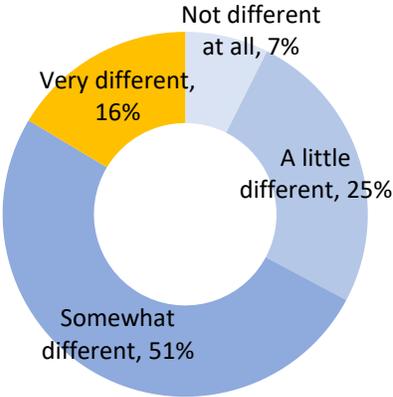
Most helpful learning	Mentioned by	Examples
Collaborative planning and analysis of student work	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I talk with other teachers about my practice, I learn. When I can reflect on my own teaching and observe others, I learn. Talking about assessments is also helpful. • I loved having the time to sit down and build read-aloud questions together. We were able to analyze books, and ask deep, thought-provoking questions that we designed together. We were also able to talk about focus questions to ask the children to listen for as we read. I thought this was a very valuable and sustainable exercise as we made a google doc that can continue to be added to. • It was most helpful to come up with a focus question and then to be able to score them as a collaborative group. I would like to be able to score more together and have the opportunity to talk to others re: kids work. • Collaboratively planning instruction really helped me use the focus practice in my classroom during the read aloud time. Just having different views about presenting ideas and ways to dig deeper in the read made us all aware of various strategies to use in our classrooms. • Collaborating with other teachers to score writing pieces. Time to plan instruction for students. Setting student goals with team members based on observations and student data.
Modeling and/or videos	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling by other teachers was the most effective because it didn't seem as over whelming as it did when reading about it. • I found the videos of effective instruction to be particularly useful as well as the reflection that followed. • I have found that when I see someone else doing the activities in practice, I can then teach it to them. I feel more comfortable once I have seen someone else implement it.
Peer observation	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing other classes within my school to see what the expectation was. • It was very helpful to have other teachers watch me teach and give feedback. • I watched someone else and asked them why they did what they did. We discussed what was good and what worked. They then watched me after I changed my classroom focus and told me what worked. • Peer observations and feedback was very effective. The information allowed someone else to give me a snapshot of strengths and weaknesses I have from a different viewpoint.

Classroom Impacts of LIREC Inquiry Cycles

The average participant reported **trying their school's focus practice 9.3 times** during the 6-8 week inquiry cycle, which is a high transfer rate for professional development. The chart below shows the number of teachers who reported trying the practice the given number of times.



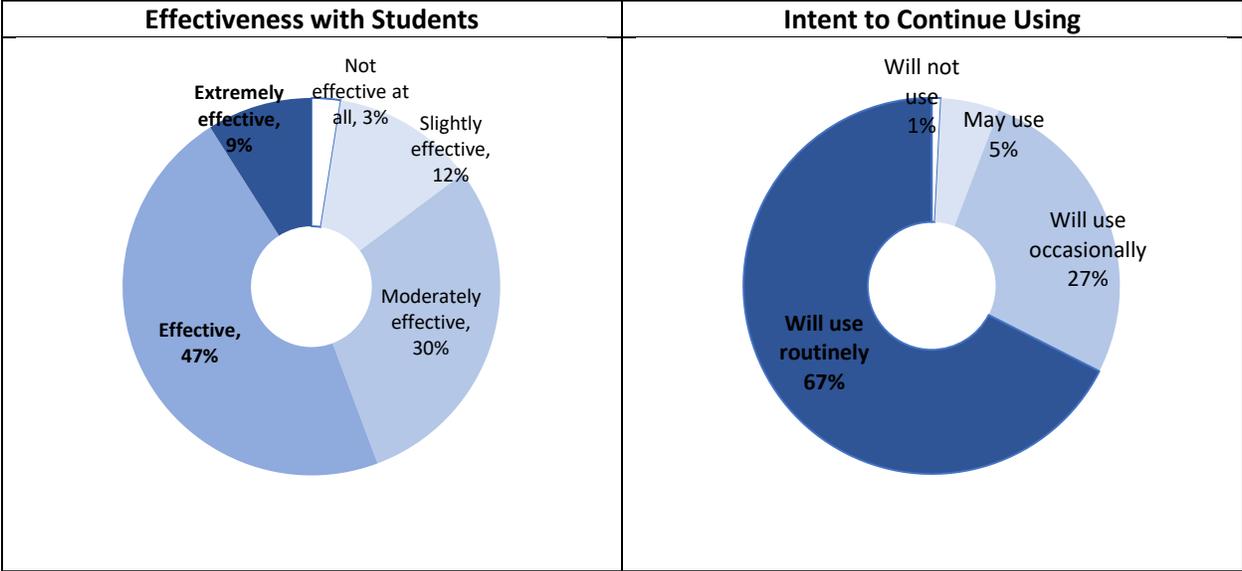
The number of repetitions is encouraging in terms of teacher learning and sustainability, especially because for 2/3 of participants the focus practice they tried was **substantially different from their previous approach**.



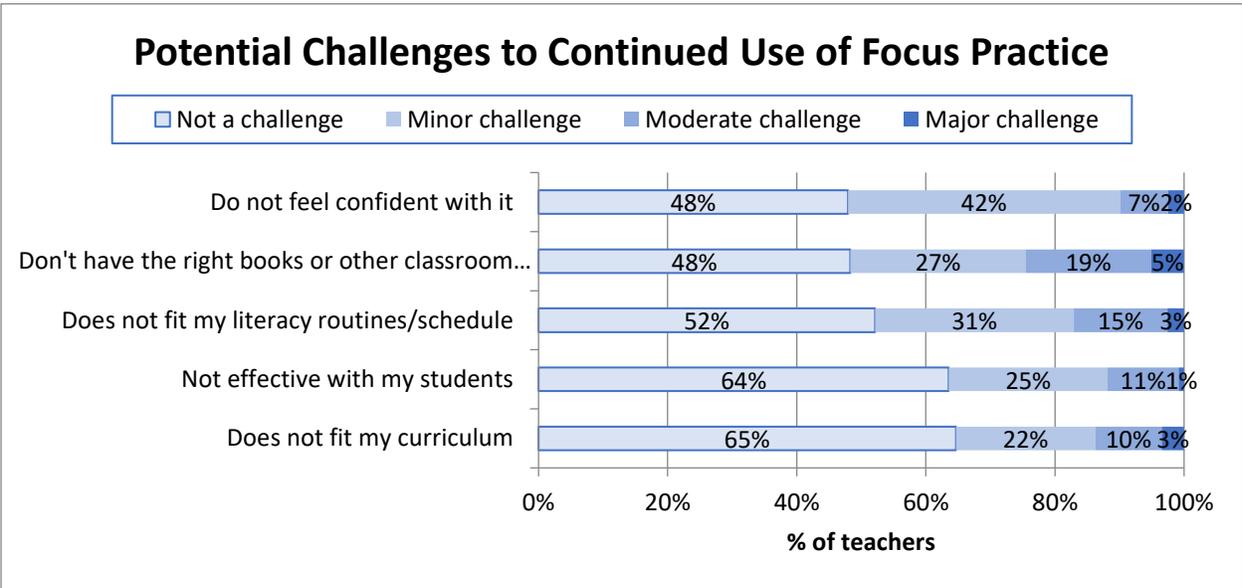
Because the practices were a stretch for many participants, the gradual release design of the Inquiry Cycles, providing an opportunity to engage in a cycle of supported practice, reflection, and revision was extremely important. One teacher reported that what enabled her to make the transfer was *“Multiple examples shown and support to the classroom teacher through modeling prior to expected participation.”*

Professional Learning and Classroom Impacts of LIREC Inquiry Cycles

At the end of the Inquiry Cycle, **over half of participants reported that the practice they tried was Effective or Extremely Effective with their students**, and an additional 30% said it was Moderately Effective. Most importantly, **68% of teachers report that they plan to continue using the practice routinely**.



Digging deeper into the issue of sustainability, teachers were asked to rate the extent of possible challenges to continuing use of the focus practice. Only a small minority of teachers anticipated any of the following factors being a Major or even Moderate challenge to continued use of the focus practice.



With about half or more of teachers considering each of these common hindrances “Not a Challenge” at all, the Inquiry Cycles appear to have left teachers with the confidence, resources, and professional support they need to continue implementation.