

# Liberating Inquiry: Exploring Systemic Barriers and Institutional Support for Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) in Elementary Education

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## Theoretical Framework

This research examines how institutional systems enable or constrain IBL in elementary schools.

**IBL:** a student-centred approach building critical thinking, engagement, and transferable skills



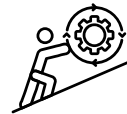
### Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978)

- Learning as a social process.
- Emphasizes collaboration and interaction to construct knowledge.



### Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970)

- Education as a practice of freedom.
- Encourages critical thinking and empowerment to challenge societal inequalities.



### Dewey's Progressive Philosophy (1938)

- Learning through experience and reflection.
- Focuses on active, student-centered learning.



### Battiste's Decolonizing Framework (2013)

- Holistic and relational approaches to knowledge.
- Emphasizes respect for diverse perspectives and cultural contexts.

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## Research Topic

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- Investigating how systemic structures in British Columbia and globally impact teachers' ability to implement IBL.
- Examining the role of professional development, collaboration, policy, resources, and school culture in enabling or constraining IBL practices.

### Research Question

- How are elementary school teachers supported or constrained by institutional systems to implement IBL in their classrooms?

### Thesis

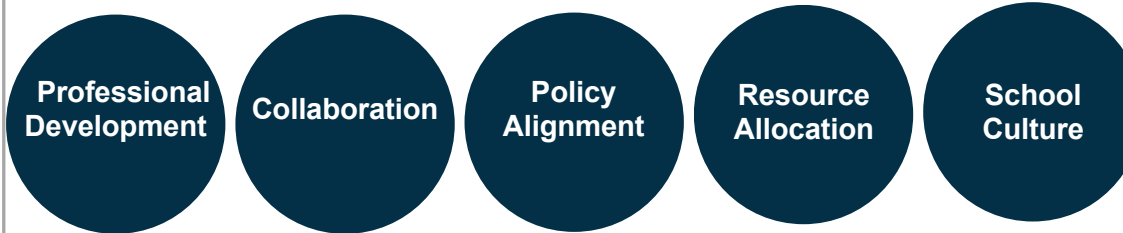
- Elementary teachers' ability to implement IBL in their classrooms is significantly shaped by institutional systems that either enable or constrain both their pedagogical practice and students' ways of knowing.

### Personal Connection:

- As an IB educator, this research is important to me because it empowers teachers and students, promotes 21st-century skills, decolonizes education, addresses systemic barriers, and contributes to educational reform.

## Literature Review

The literature review identifies five critical institutional conditions that significantly shape elementary teachers' ability to implement inquiry-based learning (IBL).



### 1. Professional Development and Teacher Training

- Lack of pedagogical knowledge and confidence remains a significant barrier
- "Sustained, multi-session, single-focus training aligned with school priorities can transform teaching practices and student learning" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 15)
- Teachers need "ongoing, sustained support in order to transform their practice" (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 545)

### 2. Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

- Effective only when a culture of trust is established, providing educators opportunities to take risks, reflect critically, and overcome dilemmas (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)
- "An ongoing collaborative culture facilitated the implementation of inquiry approaches, supporting teachers to cater for the diverse needs of learners" (Fry et al., 2025, p. 866)

### 3. Institutional and Policy Alignment

- Policy support empowers teachers to use IBL
- BC's curriculum focuses on big ideas and core competencies, making it more conducive to IBL (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2023)
- Aligning policy to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing is critical for decolonizing education (Battiste, 2013)

### 4. Allocation of Relevant Materials and Technology

- "Technology is a strategic component in creating collaborative, connected, and contextual learning experiences" (Seprie et al., 2025, p. 13)
- Limited resources negatively affect IBL implementation (Nirwan et al., 2024)
- Limited technology reflects "the digital infrastructure gap between schools, especially in under-resourced or remote areas" (Seprie et al., 2025, p. 8)

### 5. School Culture

- Shapes whether teachers feel empowered to facilitate inquiry and students feel safe to engage
- Leaders must be "mindful of, and deliberate in seeking to enhance, the school climate and culture" to promote positive classroom change (McChesney & Cross, 2023, p. 798)
- Cultivating a culture that supports IBL positively impacts classroom implementation (Yada et al., 2025)

### Gaps in the Literature:

Identified gaps include small sample sizes, limited research on non-STEM disciplines, long-term impacts, and diverse student populations.

## Recommendations and Barriers

### Recommendations

#### Sustained Professional Development:

Sustained PD is necessary to build the skills and confidence needed to implement inquiry-based learning and to foster a community of inquirers within the classroom and school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

#### Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):

Developing a collaborative environment through inquiry-oriented PLCs can be effective for teachers' individual and group learning by engaging in reflection-on-practice (Hudson, 2024).

#### Policy Alignment:

Align educational systems to enable Indigenous ways of knowing with IBL through dialogue, respect, collaboration, and the development of trans-systemic methods that honour both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Battiste, 2013).

### Barriers

#### Time and Financial Constraints:

Time and financial constraints are persistent systemic barriers to IBL implementation

#### Cultural Resistance:

For IBL to be supported by institutional systems, it requires a collectively shared vision among educators, leaders, and communities that its implementation is valuable

#### Teacher Identity:

The shift in pedagogy poses a threat to a teacher's professional identity by challenging their expression of who they believe themselves to be, how they understand their role, and what learning looks like to them (Voet & De Wever, 2016; Harmon et al., 2025).

## Conclusion

### Key Findings:

- Barriers reflect systemic failure, not individual failure
- Five conditions enable IBL: professional development, collaboration, policy alignment, resources, and school culture
- Change happens when institutions intentionally build conditions for inquiry, including diverse epistemologies. Transformation requires sustained PD, collaborative culture, and policies that centre Indigenous ways of knowing in a BC context.



References



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