

# Teacher Inquiry Defined

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*Teaching involves a search for meaning in the world. Teaching is a life project, a calling, a vocation that is an organizing center of all other activities. Teaching is past and future as well as present, it is background as well as foreground, it is depth as well as surface. Teaching is pain and humor, joy and anger, dreariness and epiphany. Teaching is world building, it is architecture and design, it is purpose and moral enterprise. Teaching is a way of being in the world that breaks through the boundaries of the traditional job and in the process redefines all life and teaching itself.*

— William Ayers

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Whether you are a beginning teacher, veteran teacher, administrator, or teacher educator, when you think of teaching, learning to teach, and continuing one's growth as a teacher, you cannot help but be struck by the enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions that exist in the simple act of teaching itself, captured so eloquently in the quote from William Ayers. With all of these complexities, paradoxes, and tensions, a teacher's work shapes the daily life of his or her classroom. In addition to responding to the needs of the children within the classroom, a teacher is expected to implement the endless changes advocated by those outside the four walls of the classroom—administrators, politicians, and researchers. While teachers have gained insights into their educational practice from these three groups, the voices of teachers have typically been absent from the larger discussions about educational change and reform. Historically teachers have not had access to tools that could have brought their knowledge to the table and raised their voices to a high-enough level in these

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larger conversations. Teacher inquiry is a vehicle that can be used by teachers to untangle some of the complexity that occurs in the profession, raise teachers' voices in discussions of educational reform, and ultimately transform assumptions about the teaching profession itself. Transforming the profession is really the capstone to the teacher inquiry story. Let's begin our journey into the what, why, and how of teacher inquiry with an overview of the evolution of the teacher inquiry movement and a simple definition of this very complex, rewarding, transformative, provocative, and productive process.

### WHAT IS TEACHER INQUIRY?

Understanding the history of teacher inquiry can help you recognize how, as a current or future educator, you find yourself today investigating a new paradigm of learning that can lead to educational renewal and reform. This history lesson begins by looking closely at three educational research traditions: process-product research, qualitative or interpretive research, and teacher inquiry (see Table 1.1).

Two paradigms have dominated educational research on schooling, teaching, and learning over the past two decades. In the first paradigm, the underlying conception of "process-product research" (Shulman, 1986) portrays teaching as a primarily linear activity and depicts teachers as technicians. The teacher's role is to implement the research findings of "outside" experts, almost exclusively university researchers, who are considered alien to the everyday happenings in classrooms. In this transmissive mode teachers are not expected to be problem-posers or problem-solvers. Rather, teachers negotiate dilemmas framed by outside experts and are asked to implement with fidelity a curriculum designed by those outside of the classroom. Based on this paradigm, many teachers have learned that it is sometimes best not to problematize their lived classroom experiences or first-hand observations because to do so may mean an admittance of failure to implement curriculum as directed. In fact, the transmissive culture of many schools has demonstrated that teachers can suffer punitive repercussions from highlighting areas that teachers themselves identify as problematic. The consequences of pointing out problems have often resulted in traditional top-down "retraining" or remediation. In the transmissive view, our educational community does not encourage solution-seeking behavior on the part of classroom teachers.

In the second paradigm, educational research drawn from qualitative or interpretative studies, teaching is portrayed as a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity. In addition, this qualitative or interpretive

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**Table 1.1** Competing Paradigms: The Multiple Voices of Research

	<i>Research Paradigms</i>		
	<i>Process-Product</i>	<i>Qualitative or Interpretive</i>	<i>Teacher Inquiry</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	Teacher as technician	Teacher as story character	Teacher as story teller
<i>Researcher</i>	Outsider	Outsider	Insider
<i>Process</i>	Linear	Discursive	Cyclical
<i>Source of research question</i>	Researcher	Researcher	Teacher
<i>Type of research question</i>	Focused on control, prediction, or impact	Focused on explaining a process or phenomenon	Focused on providing insight into a teacher's classroom practice in an effort to make change
<i>Example of research question</i>	Which management strategy is most successful?	How do children experience bullying in the classroom?	How can I accommodate ESL students at the kindergarten writing table?

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paradigm captures differences across classrooms, schools, and communities that are critically important. Chris Clark (1995) identifies the complexity inherent in a teacher's job and the importance of understanding and acknowledging contextual differences as follows: "Description becomes prescription, often with less and less regard for the contextual matters that make the description meaningful in the first place" (p. 20).

Although qualitative or interpretive work attends to issues of context, most of these studies emerging from this research paradigm are conducted by university researchers and are intended for academic audiences. Such school-university research provides valuable insights into the connections between theory and practice but, like the process-product research, the qualitative or interpretive approach limits teachers' roles in the research process. In fact, the knowledge about teaching and learning generated through university study of theory and practice is still defined and generated by "outsiders" to the school and classroom. While both the

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process-product and qualitative research paradigms have generated valuable insights into the teaching and learning process, they have not included the voices of the people closest to the children—classroom teachers.

Hence, a third research tradition emerges highlighting the role classroom teachers play as knowledge-generators. This tradition is often referred to as “teacher research,” “teacher inquiry,” or “action research.” In general, the teacher inquiry movement focuses on the concerns of teachers (not outside researchers) and engages teachers in the design, data collection, and interpretation of data around their question. Termed “action research” by Carr and Kemmis (1986), this approach to educational research has many benefits: (1) theories and knowledge are generated from research grounded in the realities of educational practice; (2) teachers become collaborators in educational research by investigating their own problems; and (3) teachers play a part in the research process, which makes them more likely to facilitate change based on the knowledge they create.

Elliot (1988) describes action research as a continual set of spirals consisting of reflection and action. Each spiral involves (1) clarifying and diagnosing a practical situation that needs to be improved or a practical problem that needs to be resolved; (2) formulating action strategies to improve the situation or resolve the problem; (3) implementing the action strategies and evaluating their effectiveness; and (4) clarifying the situation, resulting in new definitions of problems or areas for improvement, and so on, to the next spiral of reflection and action.

Now that we have explored three educational research traditions, acknowledged the limitations of the first two traditions, and introduced teacher inquiry, our brief history lesson might suggest that teacher inquiry is just another educational fad. However, although the terms *teacher research*, *action research*, and *teacher inquiry* are comparatively new, the underlying conceptions of teaching as inquiry and the role of teachers as inquirers are not. Early in the 20th century, John Dewey (1933) called for teachers to engage in “reflective action” that would transition them into inquiry-oriented classroom practitioners. Similarly, noted teacher educator Ken Zeichner (1996) traces and summarizes more than 30 years of research, calling for cultivating an informed practice as illustrated in such descriptors as “teachers as action researchers,” “teacher scholars,” “teacher innovators,” and “teachers as participant observers” (p. 3). Similarly, distinguished scholar Donald Schon (1983, 1987) also depicts teacher professional practice as a cognitive process of posing and exploring problems or dilemmas identified by the teachers themselves. In doing so, teachers ask questions that other researchers may not

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perceive or deem relevant. In addition, teachers often discern patterns that “outsiders” may not be able to see.

Given today’s political context, where much of the decision making and discussion regarding teachers occur outside the walls of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1994), the time seems ripe to create a movement where teachers are armed with the tools of inquiry and committed to educational change. If that is our goal, we now need to understand how teacher inquiry can serve as a tool for professional growth and educational reform. We believe that the simplest and most eloquently stated definitions of teacher research come from the work of two teacher-inquirers we have collaborated with; here are excerpts from their own journals:

Teacher research enables me to investigate one of my wonderings in a deliberate fashion. I used the tools of a researcher to investigate my own environment. Teacher research provides the impetus for teachers to find various solutions to their own questions. By definition then, it is relevant inquiry. (Borst, 1999)

Teacher research is a method of gaining insight from hindsight. It is a way of formalizing the questioning and reflecting we, as teachers, engage in every day in an attempt to improve student learning. (Brown, 1999)

### **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER INQUIRY AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL GROWTH?**

Simply stated, teacher inquiry is defined as systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice (see, e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana, Gimbert, & Silva, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 1993). Inquiring professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice. They do this by posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others. Hence, whether you are a prospective teacher at the dawn of your teaching career or a veteran teacher with years of experience facing new educational challenges every day, teacher inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and reform.

As a teacher-inquirer in charge of your own learning, you become a part of a larger struggle in education—the struggle to better understand, inform, shape, reshape, and reform standard school practice (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Teacher inquiry differs from traditional professional

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development for teachers, which has typically focused on the knowledge of an outside “expert” being shared with a group of teachers. This traditional model of professional growth, usually delivered as a part of traditional staff development, may appear an efficient method of disseminating information but often does not result in real and meaningful change in the classroom.

Those dissatisfied with the traditional model of professional development suggest a need for new approaches that enhance professional growth and lead to real change. For example, over 25 years ago, Goldhammer (1969) emphasized the need for supervision to become an opportunity to help teachers understand what they are doing, and why, by changing schools from places where teachers just act out “age-old rituals” to places where teachers participate fully in the process of supervision and their own professional growth. More recently, Nolan and Huber (1989) described teacher reflection, a key component of inquiry, as the “driving force” behind successful professional development programs. Nolan and Huber describe successful professional development programs as “making a difference in the lives and instruction of teachers who participate in them, as well as the lives of the students they teach” (p. 143).

Consonant with the movement to change traditional professional development practices is the teacher inquiry movement. This movement toward a new model of professional growth based on inquiry into one's own practice can be powerfully developed, by school districts and building administrators, as a form of professional development. By participating in teacher inquiry, the teacher develops a sense of ownership in the knowledge constructed, and this sense of ownership heavily contributes to the possibilities for real change to take place in the classroom.

The ultimate goal is to create an inquiry stance toward teaching. This stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one's own practice becomes part of the teacher's work and eventually a part of the teaching culture. By cultivating this inquiry stance toward teaching, teachers play a critical role in enhancing their own professional growth and ultimately the experience of schooling for children. Thus, an inquiry stance is synonymous with professional growth and provides a nontraditional approach to staff development that can lead to meaningful change for children.

### **HOW IS TEACHER INQUIRY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT I ALREADY DO AS A REFLECTIVE TEACHER?**

All teachers reflect. They reflect on what happened during previously taught lessons as they plan lessons for the future. They reflect on their

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students' performance as they assess their work. They reflect on the content and the best pedagogy available to teach that content to their learners. They reflect about interactions they observed students having, as well as their own interactions with students and the ways these interactions contribute to learning. Teachers reflect all day, every day, while *in* the act of teaching and long after the school day is over *on* the act of teaching.

Reflection is important and critical to good teaching (Schon, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In addition, reflection is a key component of teacher inquiry. Yet teacher inquiry is different from daily reflection in and on practice in two important ways. First, teacher inquiry is less happenstance. The very definition of teacher inquiry includes the word *intentional*. We do not mean to suggest that reflection is never intentional, but in the busy, complex life of teaching, reflection is something that occurs most often in an unplanned way, for example, on the way to the teacher's room for lunch, during a chat with a colleague during a special, when the students are engaged in an independent activity, on the drive home, in the shower, or during dinner—wherever and whenever a moment arises. Unfortunately, few teachers have a planned “reflection” time. Teacher inquiry invites intentional, planned reflection, heightening your focus on problem posing. Second, teacher inquiry is more visible. The daily reflection teachers engage in is not observable by others unless it is given some form (perhaps through talk or journaling). As teachers engage in the process of inquiry, their thinking and reflection are made public for discussion, sharing, debate, and purposeful educative conversation. As inquiry raises the visibility of teachers' thinking, the profession garners a new respect for the complexity teaching entails.

### WHAT ARE SOME CONTEXTS THAT ARE RIPE FOR TEACHER INQUIRY?

With an understanding of what teacher inquiry is, how it contributes to professional growth, and how it differs from natural, daily reflection, let us consider the kinds of contexts that support teacher inquiry. As previously discussed, teaching is full of enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions, and hence, teaching itself invites inquiry. However, even as inquiry beckons each and every teacher, becoming a “lone inquirer” is difficult! For this reason, we explore three particularly ripe contexts for facilitating the development of an inquiry stance in practicing and prospective teachers—collegial study groups, student teaching and/or other clinical experiences, and professional development schools. You may currently be a part

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of one of these three contexts or you may wish to seek these contexts out as you begin and continue your teaching career.

### **Collegial Study Groups**

Collegial study groups serve to connect and network groups of professionals together to do just what their name suggests—*study* practice. By their own nature, then, collegial study groups enhance the possibilities for conducting an inquiry and cultivating a community of inquirers. Critical Friends' Groups (CFGs) are one example of collegial study groups. The CFGs emerged out of the National School Reform Faculty's (NSRF) work, a professional development initiative that focuses on developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in restructuring schools. The CFGs provide deliberate time and structures dedicated to promoting adult professional growth that is directly linked to student learning. In addition to the CFGs advocated by the NSRF, the Southern Maine Partnership also provides protocols and frameworks for not only developing inquiry skills but also nurturing the development of professional learning communities. More information regarding the creation of critical friends groups and professional learning communities can be found on the following Web sites: <http://www.harmonyschool.org/nsrf/default.html> and <http://www.usm.maine.edu/smp/about/index.html>. Creating collegial study groups facilitates the development of a professional learning community within your school. When you join a collegial study group or community of inquirers, your collaborative investigation into shared goals begins and your odds of achieving those goals become greatly enhanced.

### **Student Teaching and/or Other Clinical Experiences**

If you are a veteran teacher, you likely reminisce about your own student teaching experience as an important feature of your preservice education. Similarly, if you are a prospective teacher, you have likely looked forward to your field experience and student teaching with great anticipation. According to a research report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office for Educational Research Improvement,

Learning to teach typically involves spending considerable time in schools participating in field experiences of varying lengths, the staples of teacher preparation programs. Study after study shows that experienced and newly certified teachers alike see clinical experiences (including student teaching) as a powerful—sometimes the single most powerful—component of teacher preparation.



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Whether that power enhances the quality of teacher preparation, however, may depend on the specific characteristics of the field experience. (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001, p. 17)

Mounting evidence suggests that field experiences that include engagement in teacher inquiry enhance the quality of teacher preparation (see, e.g., Dana & Silva, 2001; Wilson et al., 2001). The reason for this is quite logical. Given that the act of teaching is an enormously complex endeavor, “learning to teach” in any simple, step-by-step, short period of time is impossible. As a preservice teacher, you are immersed in the complexities of teaching for the first time in clinical experiences. Immersion in this complexity naturally encourages engagement in inquiry, as questions about teaching, schools, and schooling abound. As you student teach, inquiry can help you learn to identify the complexities and problems inherent in teaching and tease these complexities apart to gain insights into your work with children. Given the comprehensive nature of teaching, identifying complexities and striving to understand them is a process that lasts an entire career. Engagement in teacher inquiry as an integral component of field preparation enhances the power of the field experiences. As you simultaneously learn to teach and to inquire into teaching, these two processes become intricately intertwined. When teaching and inquiry become synonymous, you have cultivated an inquiry stance toward teaching that will serve you, your students, and the field of education well for the duration of your career!

### Professional Development Schools

Since the late 1980s, a specialized setting for student teaching and other field experiences has emerged—professional development schools (PDSs). According to Darling-Hammond (1994), professional development schools

aim to provide new models of teacher education and development by serving as exemplars of practice, builders of knowledge, and vehicles for communicating professional understanding among teacher educators, novices, and veteran teachers. They support the learning of prospective and beginning teachers by creating settings in which novices enter professional practice by working with expert practitioners, enabling veteran teachers to renew their own professional development and assume new roles as mentors, university adjuncts, and teacher leaders. They allow school and university educators to engage jointly in research and rethinking of practice, thus creating an opportunity for the

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profession to expand its knowledge base by putting research into practice—and practice into research. (p. 1)

Professional development schools grew out of Goodlad's *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools* (1990) and *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (Holmes Group, 1986). *Tomorrow's Teachers* was written by the Holmes Group, "a consortium of education deans and chief academic officers from the major research universities in each of the fifty states" (p. 3). Their primary purpose was to come together as a group to improve the quality of their teacher education programs. Although The Holmes Group (1986) has evolved significantly since the mid-1980s, one of the original goals of the group is still strong:

If university faculties are to become more expert educators of teachers, they must make better use of expert teachers in the education of other teachers and in research on teaching. In addition, schools must become places where both teachers and university faculty can systematically inquire into practice and improve it. (p. 4)

This goal from the original Holmes Group publication clearly notes the importance of systematic inquiry in the PDS. The Holmes Group has evolved to become The Holmes Partnership, where public schools and universities apply for a joint membership in the organization. If you are a practicing or prospective teacher in a PDS, your school and university may be a member of this growing organization that promotes teacher inquiry.

In an inquiry-oriented professional development school, teacher inquiry is a central part of the professional practice of all members of the PDS—practicing teachers, prospective teachers, administrators, and university teacher educators. This transition to inquiry is the mechanism for reinventing schools as "learning" organizations. Hence, a PDS culture supports and celebrates the engagement of teachers and other PDS professionals in constructing knowledge through intentional, systematic inquiry and using that knowledge to continually reform, refine, and change the practice of teaching.

### **HOW DOES MY ENGAGING IN TEACHER INQUIRY HELP SHAPE THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING?**

Regardless of your method of inquiry, the subject of your inquiry, or the context of your inquiry, what is most important is that you *do* inquire!

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According to numerous leading scholars on teaching and teacher education, such as Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), Greene (1986), and Zeichner (1986), “teachers are decision makers and collaborators who must reclaim their roles in the shaping of practice by taking a stand as both educators and activists” (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 280). Inquiry is a core tool teachers evoke when making informed and systematic decisions. Through the inquiry process, teachers can support with evidence the decisions they make as educators and, subsequently, advocate for particular children changes in curriculum and/or changes in pedagogy. Inquiry ultimately emerges as action and results in change.

As a prospective teacher, practicing teacher, or mentor-teacher interested in problematizing your professional practice, you have committed to simultaneous renewal and reform of the teaching profession and teacher education! Teacher inquiry is the ticket to enact this reform! Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) claim that in any classroom where teacher inquiry is occurring, “there is a radical, but quiet kind of educational reform in process” (p. 101). Your individual engagement in teacher inquiry is a contribution to larger educational reform, a transformation of the teaching profession . . . so let us begin the journey!