

## Teacher Inquiry: What's Old Is New Again!

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At the outset, we wish to argue that *teacher inquiry* is as old as teaching itself. Indeed, the future of the teaching profession relies on the curiosity that teachers bring to their daily practice. However, for too long (and especially in recent times) *teacher inquiry* has been dismissed and diminished for a variety of reasons. For example, some conceptualizations of teaching, sometimes held by people who have been regarded as authorities in education, have not recognized, valued, or appreciated the central role that *teacher inquiry* plays within the profession. These authorities have either unwittingly or deliberately discouraged such inquiry. Even today, efforts to control classroom practices and to have teachers conform to a set of prescribed behaviours ignores the importance of the unique contexts that define and shape their work as educators. However, attempts to ignore *teacher inquiry* in favour of alternative practices that seek to understand teaching and learning have, by and large, contributed very little to the educative agenda (despite the enormous resources and energies expended in these endeavours). In recent years, there has been a dawning realization in the academy (and less so in other institutions with responsibilities in education) that *teacher inquiry* is central to understanding what actually goes on in classrooms. This 'new' insight is no surprise to the teachers in schools throughout North America and elsewhere. A brief history of educational inquiry and the politics at play with respect to the generation of knowledge within teaching illustrates this point.

### *Teaching Inquiry: The Politics of Knowledge*

There are at least four distinct trends in the knowledge generation for teaching and learning in classrooms since the 1950's: research on pupils, research on teachers, research with teachers, and research by teachers (see Fig. 1).

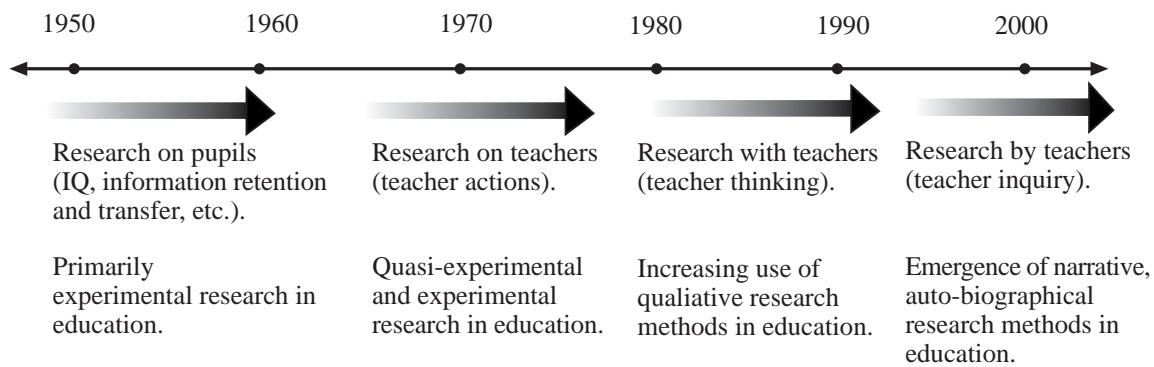


Figure 1. Trends in inquiry approaches that have influenced what ‘counts’ as knowledge in teaching.

Each trend had a distinct impact on the ways in which inquiry has been conceptualized and enacted within education. The first trend is associated with a behaviorist research on pupils or on more specifically on student learning (e.g., a focus on I.Q. tests, knowledge retention, knowledge transfer, etc.). Educational inquiry at this point was characterized by attempts to isolate elements of student learning into discrete units for intensive study. Although these studies purportedly contributed to our knowledge of teaching, for the most part their impact on teaching, and to our understanding of the daily practice of teachers and their work with pupils, was not enduring. The second trend coincides with a dramatic shift in interest in teaching and learning: research on teachers. Events such as Sputnik in 1957 focused widespread political and public attention on education. For the first time in North America there was a nation-wide effort to conduct research into student learning in terms of teacher actions (Erickson, 1986). These efforts were based upon linear causal models that implied that professional practice could be regarded as the field of theoretical application (Connelly and Clandinin, 1986) and, further, that the knowledge, skills, and competencies required by teachers could be specified in advance (Zeichner, 1987). Within this trend, researchers assumed that the phenomena they explored were natural and therefore stable, and that under intensive analysis and experimentation these phenomena would yield "scientific generalizations" (Gage, 1980, p. 14). Thus, experimental and quasi-experimental studies dominated educational inquiry during this period. Unfortunately much of the inquiry failed to fulfill the promise that its adherents advocated. Indeed, the long-term contribution to teaching and learning, like

that of its predecessor in the 1950s, was limited. In both the first and second trends, the academy along with other institutions responsible for education did not recognize *teacher inquiry* or teacher knowledge as being very important, and, as such, this attitude constrained efforts to recognize and validate the inquiries that teachers were engaged in as they worked in the immediacy of the action setting (Schön, 1987).

The next distinct trend gained momentum just prior to and during the early 1990s. As dissatisfaction with a ‘technical rational’ approach to teacher education became more widespread there was a move to explore teacher thinking (Houston, Haberman, & Sikula, 1990). For the first time the academy and others were engaged in research with teachers, acknowledging teachers as more than just research subjects. Further, this inquiry into teacher thinking required the academy to adopt new relationships and methods of inquiry with teachers. One outcome was that qualitative research methods, such as case study research, became increasingly popular and recognized as legitimate and acceptable forms of inquiry in education. This shift coincided with changing conceptions of learning that encompassed more complex socio-cultural models of classroom practice. The mid-1990s saw a further evolution to include research by teachers. Evidence of this movement can be found in special theme issues on teacher inquiry in main-stream publications, for example Teacher Education Quarterly (Volume 22, number 3), and public forums with a focus on teacher inquiry, for example, the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (SSTEP) group at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the International Conference on Teacher Research (ICTR), and the annual Investigating Our Practices (IOP) conference held at the University of British Columbia. As with the research with teachers movement, the research by teachers movement saw an introduction of inquiry methods that were ignored or virtually unknown in educational research 15 years earlier (e.g., action research, autobiography, and arts-based research). Perhaps an eclectic approach to understanding teaching and learning incorporating contributions from multiple inquiry modes—not dissimilar to that proposed by Soltis (1984)—is likely to promote rich discussion and vigorous debate essential to informed critique and further development of teaching inquiry as a mature field of study in its own right.

*Teacher Inquiry: The Fifth Commonplace*

The recent ascent of teacher inquiry as a legitimate form of research is not due solely to its sudden recognition by the academy and others. *Teacher inquiry* has always been an essential element of professional practice! The early works of Dewey (1916) around the concept of 'deliberation' and more recently Schon's (1983) notion of 'reflective practice' represent attempts to explain how it is that professionals engage in, improve, and theorize about their practice. Others who have provided similar explanations include: Clandinin's (1986) work on Personal Practical Knowledge, Grimmett and MacKinnon's (1992) explication of Craft Knowledge, and Fenstermacher and Richardson's (1993) articulation of Practical Arguments. Each of these approaches recognize that problematizing and acting upon curiosities, challenges, and surprises that arise in daily classroom practice constitute the hallmark of professional practice. Further, Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) emphasize that it is both the conscious and unconscious elements of professional practice that must be subject to such examination, and that *teacher inquiry* is essential for the emergence of these sorts of understandings. As such, *teacher inquiry* is not a new phenomenon to the world of teaching and teacher education. Indeed, Schwab (1978) was only partly correct when he characterized teaching as having four commonplaces: for teaching to occur, someone (a teacher) must be teaching someone (a student) about something (a curriculum) at some place and some time (a milieu). There is, and always has been, a fifth commonplace. For teaching to occur, there must be a some how, a way for teachers to know, recognize, explore, and act upon their practice. For us that some how is *teacher inquiry*. This fifth common place is a cornerstone to professional practice; it is the essence of the teaching and learning dynamic and the subsequent knowledge generated and used by teachers in classroom settings.

*Teacher Inquiry: A Defining Feature of Professional Practice*

As Lewison (2003) notes, *teacher inquiry* involves:

. . . a generally agreed upon set of insider research practices that promote teachers taking a close, critical look at their teaching and the academic and social development of their students. . . . Although known by many names—teacher research, action research, practitioner research, insider research—teacher inquiry involves classroom teachers in a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. In this cycle, teachers question common practice, approach problems from new perspectives, consider research and evidence to propose new solutions, implement these solutions, and evaluate the results, starting the cycle anew. (p. 100)

Furthermore, it is important to note that *teaching inquiry*, as articulated above, is research. We emphasize the word ‘research’ to deliberately signal that *teacher inquiry* is a systematic and rigorous process for teachers to explore what they do and how they do it, and to share those inquiries with their colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993). The word ‘research’ here is consistent with the type of activities that Hargreaves (2000) uses to delineate between the pre-professional and professional phases in the history of teaching. In the professional phases—characterized by a recognition of complexity and uncertainty—Hargreaves argues that, now more than ever, it is imperative for teachers to engage in systematic and sustained inquiry that "lifts teachers out of the pre-professional prejudice that only practice make perfect" (p. 167). Failure to do this, Hargreaves cautions, will result in deprofessionalization forces wresting control of curricula and pedagogical practices from teachers—witness recent calls for centralized curricula, system-wide testing regimes, the standards movement, etc. (Hargreaves 2000).

In short, inquiry is a defining feature of professional practice. We argue that without inquiry, one's teaching practice becomes perfunctory or routinized, duplicative or imitative. When teachers cease to be inquisitive about their practice or the circumstances in which they work prevent such inquiries then their practice ceases to be professional.

This is an important distinction for us as inquiry is perhaps the single most important aspect of professional practice that distinguishes it from labour or technical work.

### *Conclusion*

*Teacher inquiry* takes on many forms and includes practitioners at all levels of the educational enterprise. Underlying all forms are the attendant challenges and celebrations associated with such scrutiny. These inquiries represent active engagement with outcomes represented as *teacher knowing* (implying that learning that is in a state of evolution) rather than *teacher knowledge* (implying that learning that is fixed and constant). The teaching profession is indebted to those who recognize this difference and the importance of *teacher inquiry* in this endeavour. In particular, we believe that Schwab's writings on 'The Practical' left an indelible mark on the profession. His contribution can be found in the works by Clandinin, Connelly, Elbaz, Eisner, Fenstermacher, and Shulman, to name a few, all of whom advocate and write about the importance of the 'some how' in teaching. Each and everyday, teachers themselves examine and generate new knowledge about the diverse classroom settings in which they find themselves and about the variety of children whom they work. It is critical that we acknowledge the significance of *teacher inquiry* and support processes that allow for knowledge generation within classrooms, and for that knowledge to move from the private to the public domain of the wider educational community.

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