

# Digging **DEEPER**

A Teacher Inquirer's Field Guide

## *Into* Action Research

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Foreword by Marilyn Cochran-Smith



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# How to Use the Inquiry Books

This table summarizes the books I have authored or coauthored related to inquiry and describes their focus, differentiating the texts and delineating their use.

Book	Authors	Focus
<i>The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn through Practitioner Inquiry</i> (2009) (Facilitator's Guide Available)	Nancy Fichtman Dana, Diane Yendol-Hoppey	This book provides an in-depth introduction to teacher inquiry for both prospective and practicing teachers, taking the reader step by step through the process including developing a wondering, collaborating with others, collecting data, analyzing data, writing up one's work, assessing the quality of inquiry, and sharing one's work with others. A great first book on teacher inquiry.
<i>The Reflective Educator's Guide to Professional Development: Coaching Inquiry-Oriented Learning Communities</i> (2008)	Nancy Fichtman Dana, Diane Yendol-Hoppey	This book focuses on coaching the inquiry process within professional learning communities. In addition to tips on the establishment of healthy learning communities, it contains numerous coaching resources to take teachers through each stage of the inquiry process.
<i>Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher</i> (2009)	Nancy Fichtman Dana	This book takes administrators through the step-by-step process of inquiry, offering rich examples of principals engaged in each step of the process. This is a perfect resource for districts to provide powerful professional development for principals as well as

(Continued)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) write that

There are critical relationships between teacher learning and student learning. When teachers learn differently, students learn differently; when teachers at all levels or experience are encouraged to ask questions, their students are more likely to find themselves in classrooms where their own questions, not rote answers, signal active and consequential engagement with ideas. In our troubled democracy, there is no more significant outcome for educational institutions, and we cannot afford to cultivate an image of teachers and teaching that promises less. (p. 85)

As an inquirer, then, you have the power to push back against a test-driven only view of teaching and learning, and *engage* every student you teach.

The second *E* word found in figure 1.2 is “Enable.” A wonderful benefit of inquiry is that through your work as an inquirer and the sharing of that work with others, you *enable* others to learn from you! As a teacher, you have already touched the lives of countless children who have occupied the four walls of your classrooms and your schools. Through engagement in inquiry, you make a difference in the lives of many more children you will never teach and never even meet—the children of other practitioners who benefit from inquiring beside you, hearing you discuss the learning that has taken place through the process of inquiry, and the subsequent improvements they make based on what they’ve learned from you. As an inquirer, you *enable* powerful learning not only for the children *you* teach, but also for your adult colleagues as well!

The third *E* word found in Figure 1.2 is “Expand.” Through inquiry, you *expand* the knowledge base for teaching and learning. When we turn back the pages on the history of educational research, for many years, research on teaching and learning in education was conducted by what was referred to as “outside experts,” mostly university researchers who were removed from the daily life of classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). While valuable knowledge was produced during these years, it has become evident that when research on teaching and learning in education is produced only by those outside the classroom, a gaping hole in knowledge about teaching exists, for those who are closest to children, practitioners, are uniquely positioned to study teaching and generate critical knowledge from within the four walls of their classrooms and schools. Through your work as an inquirer, you make immense contributions

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## Developing and Fine-Tuning Your Research Plan

*Developing a plan for your inquiry requires careful thought about the ways you will collect data. I've learned that data are everywhere in my classroom. All creating an inquiry plan means for me is charting a course for how to capture it all. I particularly find student work and student interviews powerful data collection tools to help me not only gain insights into whatever my wondering is for a particular inquiry but to get to know my students in ways I never did before I inquired. There's not doubt that becoming an inquirer has made me a better teacher and has allowed me to better understand and reach each individual student in my classroom.*

—Stephanie Whitaker, Teacher Inquirer,  
Dunedin Elementary School

### The Research Plan Defined

A research plan is defined as an organizational structure for the ways the inquiry will be carried out. As a natural outgrowth of the research wondering that has been articulated and refined, the core feature of the

capturing the natural actions that occur in the busy, real world of the classroom. In addition, by and large, a single teacher's classroom usually is not a ripe place to design an experimental study since the sample size used in the study generally would not be adequate to indicate any statistical differences, and any one treatment variable would almost be impossible to isolate from intervening variables. Finally, one would need to question the ethics of providing a potentially beneficial "treatment" to some children within a classroom but not to all.

### **Example: A Fourth-Grade Teacher Recasts Her Initial Experimental Research Design**

The original conceptualization of a study as experimental is exemplified by Debbi, a fourth-grade teacher I coached in the inquiry process. Debbi was passionate about reading and, in particular, fluency. Debbi's school had been 1 of 13 schools to pilot a statewide program called the Florida Reading Initiative. In addition, her school had set a goal as part of their annual school improvement planning process to raise the fluency levels of their lowest achieving students to increase their performance on the reading portion of their state's standardized test—FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test). Finally, Debbi was a voracious reader and had been studying the literature on reading fluency. She knew the research indicated that there is a correlation between fluency and comprehension.

With the knowledge that research indicated repeated readings improve fluency, Debbi began the design of her inquiry seeking to find if there would be a difference in fluency gains between using a commercial reading program her district had purchased called Great Leaps and repeated readings of plays with her students. In particular, Debbi owned a book of "fractured fairy tale plays," humorous takes on traditional fairy tales, that Debbi believed would be very motivational for fourth-grade learners, and more likely than the commercial reading program to elicit a joy of reading in her struggling readers. Debbi proceeded to conceptualize an inquiry that entailed dividing her lowest performing students into two different reading groups—using the Great Leaps Program with one group and the fractured fairy tales with the other group. She indicated in her inquiry brief that she planned to compare both groups' scores using a progress monitoring tool designed to measure reading fluency to see which group had higher gains.

A. Learning Statement 1

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B. Learning Statement 2

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C. Learning Statement 3

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V. Concluding Thoughts

- A. General reflection on the specific inquiry completed (i.e., what you learned because of engaging in this work about yourself, your teaching, your subject matter, your students, schools and schooling, policy, etc.)

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## On Your Way: Teacher Research as a Way of Being in the World

*Inquiry has become my way of work. As a fulltime practitioner inquirer, I find my role as teacher is constantly stretching. I use inquiry to support, push, and question my work. Inquiry is how I collaborate with my colleagues; it's the language I use to introduce new teachers into the profession; it is how I teach my students. Inquiry has undoubtedly transformed teaching and learning for me.*

—Rachel Wolkenhauer, Teacher  
Inquirer and Teacher Educator,  
University of Florida

### **Inquiry Stance Defined**

This book began by making the case for the importance of teachers inquiring into their practice using the mnemonic 5 Es device to help

inquiry is *self-directed* as teachers take initiative and responsibility for the design and implementation of the inquiry cycle—selecting a question that is relevant and meaningful to explore, managing data collection to gain insights into the question, and assessing their learning through data analysis. Fifth, inquiry is *collaborative*. Teachers discuss and critically reflect on practice together through meaningful and structured dialogue, collectively constructing knowledge about practice. Finally, the process of inquiry is *active and engaging*. Rather than passively participating in a “sit and get” workshop, inquiry “turns traditional professional development on its head” (Check, 1997, p. 6), as teachers learn from their own investigations.

In sum, inquiry enables teachers to *own* their learning. In addition, inquiry makes that learning immediate, relevant, differentiated, self-directed, collaborative, active, and engaging. Because the construction of knowledge through the process of inquiry is so powerful, it makes sense to share the gift of inquiry with the students we teach (Dana et al., 2011).

By teaching our students through inquiry, we empower them to ask, not just answer, questions and to pose, not just solve, problems. This, in turn, helps us cultivate in our students the critical-thinking skills necessary to find success in the 21st century and to participate fully in our democracy. A number of wonderful resources exist to support teachers as they introduce inquiry into the classroom. Chapters 5 and 6 of *Inquiry: A Districtwide Approach to Staff and Student Learning* (Dana et al., 2011) titled *Introducing Inquiry into the Classroom* and *Student Inquiry in Practice: The Stories of Elementary, Middle, and High School Teachers*, respectively, can get you started in the process of introducing inquiry into your pedagogical practice as well as explicating the relationship between teacher inquiry and student inquiry.

## Living the Life of an Inquirer

As you finish this book and a cycle of inquiry, you are well on your way to living the life of an inquirer. An important component of living this life is not just *doing* inquiry, but carefully and critically reflecting on the process and digging deeper into both teaching and inquiry each time you do it. Helping teachers dig deeper into teaching and inquiring into teaching is why this book was written in the first place.

To continue the practice of digging deeper, pause now to complete the following four open-ended statements and repeat this same exercise each time you approach the end of one spiral through the cycle of inquiry: