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## Chapter 1

# Foundations for Inquiry: Reviewing the Research

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to present research supporting the centrality of inquiry to effective teaching and student learning, as well as to organizational learning; and to discuss the values and culture of schools in which collaborative and sustained teacher inquiry is a habit. Connecting each of the six major sections is the idea that collaborative inquiry is central to how all people learn—how children and adults learn, how teachers learn through professional development, and how organizations, including schools, learn.

### INTRODUCTION

Collaborative, sustained inquiry into teaching and learning is the exception rather than the rule in most U.S. schools. Its absence (beyond the review of test data) is striking, particularly when compared with several European countries as well as Japan, where it is routinely practiced and integrated into the school day. Even before the pressures of the current accountability policy, few schools or districts created time during the day or devoted resources to making teacher inquiry a reality.

### Barriers to Inquiry

The absence of time within the school day is often cited as the major barrier to regular collaborative teacher inquiry. An alternative explanation is that time is not set aside for inquiry because inquiry has not been valued as a means to improve schools or teaching. The current policy context is averse to inquiry in many ways. High-stakes testing has narrowed curriculum and instruction to focus on test preparation, and the demands of the external accountability system have focused teacher inquiry, to the extent it is practiced, on analyzing test data so that teachers can better prepare students for the tests.

While the narrowing of the curriculum to address current accountability policies is a relatively recent aspect of the education policy landscape, our school systems' focus on bureaucratic control and accountability has a long history, leaving the most important aspect of school—the quality of teaching—largely to the discretion of individual teachers.

In contrast to schools in which teachers view themselves as solo performers, schools that develop an “inquiry stance,” a term coined by researchers Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1999), create constructive opportunities for teachers to question their practices in the light of external research, the unique needs of their student body, and the history and context of their school and its surrounding community.

### **Lack of Research on Inquiry**

Because collaborative, sustained inquiry over time is atypical in our schools, there is not yet a body of research that can provide adequate evidence for the effectiveness of all the approaches to inquiry on student learning and teacher development. However, recent research on professional development that includes ongoing inquiry into practice—for example, through such professional networks as the National Writing Project and “critical friends groups”—demonstrates that teachers' development is profoundly and positively affected by their participation in inquiry. Their professional competence and confidence are reflected in the quality of their instructional practices and in the quality of student work from their classrooms (Academy for Educational Development [AED], 2002a; Clark, 2001; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Richardson, 2003).

In their review of quasi-experimental studies of teachers reviewing student work, Judith Warren Little and her colleagues (2003) found a positive impact of this type of inquiry on student academic outcomes and on observed and self-reported teacher practice and knowledge. However, they also point out that the “black box” of teacher inquiry into student work and instruction has not yet been sufficiently explored. Researchers have limited knowledge about what happens in the various kinds of inquiry groups or how particular practices relate to student outcomes and teacher development. The cases in Chapters 3 through 6 in this book provide concrete images of what such practice looks like in real schools and how it is related to improvements in instruction and student outcomes.

This chapter contains six sections:

Learning and Inquiry discusses the scientific research substantiating the importance of inquiry approaches for students and adults to learn concepts rather than facts.

- Teacher Professional Development and Collaborative Inquiry discusses recent research on professional development, which, like research on how people learn, demonstrates that effective learning for teachers must include inquiry into their own classrooms.
- Reflection and Inquiry discusses the importance of reflection in inquiry and why it is essential for effective inquiry work among teachers.
- The Emotional Dimension of Inquiry discusses research that demonstrates that, because learning requires the recognition and understanding of preconceptions and sometimes substantial rethinking of previously held ideas, it has a strong affective dimension.
- Organizational Learning and Inquiry summarizes research on how organizations, as opposed to individuals, learn, and the role of inquiry in organizational learning.
- The Culture and Values of Inquiring Schools summarizes the lessons from a 5-year study of a California elementary school as well as research on “trusting relationships” in schools, to describe the conditions that make teacher inquiry possible and effective.

### LEARNING AND INQUIRY

Based on research in many domains of science about brain functioning and how children learn in various settings, a recent National Research Council (NRC) study, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (2000) highlights three key activities that must occur to ensure a deep understanding of subject matter. These activities include identifying preconceptions, relating new factual information to a conceptual framework(s), and monitoring and assessing learning.

#### Identifying or “Surfacing” Preconceptions

To learn effectively and help others learn, we must identify our preconceptions about the world and human relations. These preconceptions help us make “order out of the chaos” of the ideas, impressions, information, and sensations that we receive every moment of the day. A Harvard–Smithsonian study (Shapiro, 1987) in which high school students and graduate students from Harvard were asked the reasons for the change in seasons revealed that virtually all of them assumed that the seasons are caused by the earth’s distance from the sun rather than by the tilt of the earth in relation to the sun. Graduate students offered responses no different from that of ninth graders in public schools. Even when students had been taught the correct reasons for the changing seasons, their preconceptions were what

# Critical Considerations for Starting Inquiry

What is the purpose of homework, or recess—or school itself, for that matter? Ask five teachers and you're likely to get (at least!) five different answers. While we might all agree that having a clearly defined purpose for engaging in something as important as collaborative inquiry is essential, we're also bound to admit that we often undertake significant endeavors before we have absolute clarity of purpose.

In the case of collaborative inquiry, this lack of a clear and commonly held purpose is usually not attributable to resistance on the part of the teachers participating or lack of vision on the part of principals. Instead, it signals a quality of inquiry that is at once fascinating and frustrating. In collaborative inquiry, unlike more traditional forms of staff development such as workshops or courses, purposes are not fixed, but dynamic.

This dynamic quality suggests that, whatever the group's stated purpose—for example, assessing a particular instructional strategy or understanding and addressing issues of equity within the school—the purpose will respond to and be reshaped by the group's ongoing experiences with inquiry and the deepening understandings that emerge from that inquiry. At times, the purpose may even be reshaped in response to a group's frustration that a focus question or approach to collecting data seems to be leading to a dead end.

This chapter begins with a discussion of how purposes for inquiry are defined in different ways in different school settings. It goes on to consider some of the key decisions principals and those involved in the inquiry—either in supporting it or directly taking part in it—must make in getting inquiry going and sustaining it. We treat purposes and decisions together because they continually affect one another: The purposes you start out with, however broad, affect the decisions you make; and the decisions you make affect your evolving definition of purpose.

## PURPOSES

In inquiry groups, purposes find their truest expression in the question or questions the group members choose to explore. So, for example, a group or teacher asking, “How can I assess my students’ work in a way that will help motivate them rather than just serving as reward or punishment?” is purposefully engaging in a reexamination of assessment practice, one that may contribute to new assessment strategies that will help motivate students to perform at higher levels. A group asking, “Why are African American and Latino students in the school disproportionately represented among those reading below grade level?” is, similarly purposefully, “auditing” the distribution of resources and opportunities within the school in order to create more equitable conditions for all students.

### Defining and Refining Purpose

The process by which groups develop, test, and revise questions represents a continual “repurposing” by which they become clearer and clearer about why they are engaging in inquiry. This process takes time—often several months of meetings, and sometimes even a year of work together. This is not to say that all, or even most, inquiry groups start out with a blank slate when it comes to purpose. In many situations, administrators frame a purpose for the inquiry before groups are formed and inquiry begins. Some examples of purposes include improving instruction, assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum or an instructional practice, and investigating issues of equity.

This initial, and often broad, framing of purpose can be seen as an opening of the “space” in which inquiry can take place and an invitation to teachers, and others, to take part—to come to the table. The process may begin with the principal and other administrators taking stock of current school goals and practices and identifying areas for improvement or investigation—as described in Chapter 6—in which the principal encourages an inquiry group to investigate a mandated literacy curriculum. In many cases the administration involves the faculty in the framing process—for example, by forming a planning team, as described in Chapter 3, or getting input from teachers (and others) at key points in the evolution of inquiry, as described in Chapter 5. Sometimes the initiative may come from the district level, as described in Chapter 4.

Depending on the school context, culture, and leadership, some groups might start with a more open-ended sense of purpose, trusting that, over time, it will become more defined. One way that schools have begun to consider purposes for inquiry is to bring to the surface some of the ques-



# An Inquiry Casebook

The following four chapters describe collaborative inquiry projects at four different schools over the course of 3 to 4 years. The chief authors of these chapters served as either outside facilitators or in-school support providers for the individual inquiry cases discussed. These particular cases have been chosen because they represent significant variability in the ways in which inquiry was first introduced at a school as a central form of professional development. Focusing on this variety of entry points provides a wide range of experiences from which to draw for those who wish to launch collaborative inquiry work in their own schools. Along with the variety of entry points, each of these cases depicts important milestones in the development of collaborative inquiry, milestones that may help us more deeply understand both how to design collaborative inquiry and how to recognize its effectiveness.

Chapter 3 describes the recently founded ASCEND, a kindergarten through eighth-grade school in Oakland, California, where the principal believes that inquiry is central to the work of teaching, and where the faculty considered the idea of engaging in formal inquiry from the earliest days of the school's existence. The demands of getting the school off the ground, however, forced inquiry to a back burner for the faculty as a whole until the informal inquiry of an individual teacher and the results she saw with students rekindled the entire staff's desire to get involved.

Chapter 4 draws on the experiences of teachers in Maxson Middle School in Plainfield, New Jersey, where the school district and an outside support provider took the initiative to launch a program of collaborative inquiry, *Reviewing Student Work*, at the school. The work took root most effectively in one small "school of choice" within the larger school.

At the Harbor School in Boston, Massachusetts, serving grades six through eight, which is described in Chapter 5, the founding principal brought collaborative inquiry to the school from its inception and encouraged the practice to continue as the school's faculty grew from 8 to 34 over 4 years.

At Melrose Elementary in Oakland, California, described in Chapter 6, collaborative inquiry had been established across the whole school for

8 years by the time we pick up the story to trace how one inquiry group applied their considerable inquiry experience to new district mandates and to addressing the needs of particular student groups within the school.

As you'll see, these are not "textbook" cases. They are messy. Teachers latch onto a set of questions with enthusiasm, only to find a few months later that something more important has arisen. Facilitators and group members arrive at decisions about group configurations and the scheduling of meetings and later find that personnel or schedules have shifted. Data collected doesn't always respond to the questions being asked. And stated purposes for engaging in inquiry do not always match with the actual outcomes of the process.

Some of this "two steps forward, one step back" movement is part of the inherent, necessary unpredictability of inquiry. A method of learning that depends on discovery, inquiry inevitably presents curves in the road. These curves, however, are an essential, and often positive, part of the process, and they can lead to deeper discoveries, new ideas, and more learning.

These cases, however, also reveal other, less productive kinds of obstacles. Time for group meetings is usurped. Collaborative inquiry is given second place to a new district initiative. Staff are moved without consideration of their roles in a collaborative team. Such obstacles grow out of the fragility of the conviction—especially among higher-level policy-makers—that collaborative teacher inquiry is an essential ingredient of creating a powerful learning community for students. For policymakers and school people who do believe in collaborative inquiry, the practice is hard to maintain in the face of all of the other urgencies in the lives of schools, students, and individual teachers. In the current policy environment, which does not typically provide designated time for teacher inquiry, supporting this practice on the school level over the long term requires a constant balancing act, as other needs compete for attention.

And yet we would argue that even now—or especially now—it is a balance worth seeking. Aside from the complications evident throughout the following chapters, there is something that makes the schools described in these cases different from schools where collaborative teacher inquiry has not yet been tried. Part of it is a function of collaboration itself. The teachers in these schools are talking about their teaching with each other. They've broken the silence, opened the closed doors. These schools, in which adults have built powerful professional relationships, feel warmer, more open, more cohesive. And it goes a step beyond collaboration. These teachers are not only collaborating,