

A Passion for Inquiry in an Era of 'Right Answers': Inquiring about Teachers Inquiring about Their Practice

By Beverly Falk

What drew me to teaching many years ago was the opportunity it provided to renurture myself as a learner. With children I "relearned" things I once had been taught but never quite fully understood. Surrounded by their wonder and uninhibited curiosity, questions awakened within me that I previously had been unaware I even had. With each pursuit, I learned a bit more about how to help others inquire about the world. Soon I was "hooked" on being a teacher. It opened up a world of learning for me more powerful than I had ever imagined. That is what motivates me now to teach teachers — to help others experience the passion of learning so that they can do the same for the children who have been entrusted to their care.

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Now I lead a program that teaches teachers in a public university. Most of the teacher learners work in struggling urban schools serving students from predominantly poor and minority backgrounds. The courses in my program share a common purpose: to develop understandings about the active nature of children's learning and to use these understandings to guide teaching. One of the major mechanisms for accomplishing this goal is to provide opportunities for candidates to inquire about and reflect on their practice. The culminating course of the program does

this with a project that requires participants to generate a question about some aspect of their own teaching or some issue that impacts their teaching lives, read and write about what others have to say about that question, and pursue an inquiry about it in their classrooms or schools. The experience offers them an opportunity to uncover, inquire about, and reflect on some thing that they genuinely care about. The aim is to help them apply the theories and skills they have learned in the program to their own contexts and experience the ups and downs of the learning process themselves so that they can have a better grasp of how to facilitate good learning experiences for their students. Through this project my hope is that they will learn not only how to work more effectively in their schools, but that they will come to envision new possibilities for themselves and the contexts in which they teach (Fried, 2001).

Since I created and began teaching this course several years ago, I have noticed a transformation in my students. Throughout the year they seem to become more excited about their own learning and their teaching and develop a more professional sense of themselves. New images of possibility for their work and their lives emerge. I wondered if it could be that the research class was having the effect I had hoped for. To find out if this was the case, I embarked on my own inquiry of my students doing inquiries. I wanted to probe deeply into what, if any, impact the experience was having on my students. I wanted to examine exactly what I was doing to support them. What follows is an account of what I have learned.

Conceptual Framework and Context for This Work

My approach to doing teacher research is guided by the belief that teachers do not have to be technicians, consumers, receivers, transmitters, and implementers of other people's knowledge, but instead, can be generators of knowledge and agents of change (Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1989; Erickson, 1986; Florio-Ruane & Walsh, 1980). I have read accounts of how teacher research can enhance practice and practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Grimmer, 1993) and can stimulate critiques of schooling that result in improvements to students' lives (Wells, 1994; Zeichner, 1994). I have been inspired by those who view teacher research as a vehicle for changing relations of power between schools and universities and for challenging the hegemony of the university as the sole generator of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Fine, 1992; McDonald, 1992). I am affirmed by current teacher education scholars who recommend that classroom and context based inquiry experiences related to teachers' questions and concerns be built into the ongoing work of teaching (Chandler-Olcott, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Rock & Levin, 2002).

My work with teacher research is conducted in the context of the unique and complex challenges posed by urban schooling. These challenges require urban teachers to possess not only the deep knowledge of content, skills, and how children learn that

all good teachers need to have, but also to understand how to apply these strategies to the diverse learners and ever-changing conditions that are the hallmark of urban life. Central to the preparation of urban teachers, then, is learning how to put theory into practice and how to problematize and problem-solve the sometimes overwhelming issues that are all too common in under-resourced, struggling communities.

Yet, the teachers who work in many urban communities are frequently ill-prepared to take on these challenges. Often the products of the same schools in which they teach, many of my students have never experienced schooling that supported them to be problem-solvers and critical thinkers. Like the children they serve, too many of them have been the recipients of the same kinds of skills-based, scripted, paced programs that increasingly are found in urban schools with high percentages of poor students. Programs like these justify the fact that they provide little opportunity for students to engage in interesting, complex, non-prescribed work by claiming students first need to master “basic” skills before going on to tackle higher order skills. The reality, however, is that basic skills are learned in the context of higher-order skills (Resnick, 1987) and that pursuing one without the other can leave both children and teachers not only lacking in the basics but unequipped as well with the skills they need to tackle the issues and problems they face as citizens and teachers in their communities and the world.

My efforts to carry out inquiry research with practicing and prospective teacher educators have been aimed at addressing these dilemmas of urban education. I have used the research experience as a teaching tool in the hopes that it will instill in my students a feeling for what it means to be a questioner, a knower, and a doer. I have designed it to be a training ground for how to engage in problem-solving informed by evidence, how to put theory into practice, how to think critically and reflect on practice, how to take charge of their own learning and take action to make change. I envision teacher research as a catalyst for awakening and sustaining the passion for learning that is the foundation of good teaching. I teach research as an induction to membership in our professional community and as a way to help shape its direction.

Research Method

For three years I studied my teacher research class and its participants. The teacher candidates were from diverse countries or backgrounds, many the products of the city’s public school system, and virtually all were, or were soon to be, practicing teachers in that same system.

To conduct this study, I used qualitative modes of inquiry. Being the instructor of the course I was studying, I functioned as a participant observer. Data sources include observational notes of course activities, responses to reflection/response surveys given to all course participants over the three year period, audio-taped reflections of course participants, the completed studies of course participants, and a case study of two course participants that documents their activities in the years following their completion of the course.

Data analysis followed traditional methods of qualitative inquiry. Field notes, interview transcriptions and documents were read and reread for relevant themes. The method was both inductive and deductive. The themes that developed were interrogated for disconfirming evidence and were chosen because they were supported by ample, relevant data. My findings concern two major areas: the qualities of the course that support inquiry and growth; the impact of the inquiry experience on course participants.

Teaching Strategies That Support Inquiry And Growth

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves. —Rainer Marie Rilke

The teacher research course begins by eliciting the wonderings of course participants — their own questions, their burning issues. Often, teachers struggle with this part of the process the most. I think this may be because traditional schooling provides us with very few opportunities to formulate our own questions. Most of the time we spend in schools focuses on preparing us to answer other peoples' questions. Consequently, when we are asked to generate our own, we are at a loss as to what to do. So when the teacher candidates begin, their initial questions often lack substance or depth. Sometimes their questions are presented in a "fancy" or "academic" manner that is in keeping with images of what they think research should be but has little connection to what they really care about.

It takes my students at least a month of reading examples of teacher research and of journaling about possible questions (another new experience for them) to begin to understand what research about their own practice might be and to come up with a draft of their own question. Frequently they flounder and begin by posing a query that is either so vague or so global that it is virtually unresearchable. Or they frame their question as an hypothesis in the experimental model that must be proven right or wrong. After lots of discussions they eventually get the idea that the research we aim for in the class is about finding out about "how," "what," and "why." They begin to understand that the purpose of this work is for them to learn more about something they really care about. Then they start to generate questions that have real meaning and purpose for them: What kinds of teaching strategies can I use to help children get excited about learning? How can I create an environment that helps children in my classroom to respect and learn from each others' cultural and ethnic differences? What can I do to support literacy development for the students in my class who are not native English speakers? How do I engage my students as active partners and support what I know about how children learn in the midst of the testing pressures and curriculum mandates coming from my school and district?

To get to these questions takes lots of time and exposure to others' inquiries. The teacher learners need to feel safe and confident enough to value their own thoughts and experiences in order to uncover what they really care about and then

venture forth with their own questions. They also need to be assured that it doesn't matter if the questions they have chosen to pursue have been asked or pursued by someone else before. They need to be reminded that "Discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes" (Marcel Proust).

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with purpose.

—Zora Neale Hurston

To answer their newly-articulated questions, class participants learn that they need a systematic plan. So they learn how to formulate sub-questions related to their main question; how to craft a design for their search that includes multiple forms of data; how to collect and code different kinds of data; how to synthesize, critique, and evaluate evidence — from others' as well as their own research; how to articulate the big ideas and themes that emerge from their investigations.

Along the way, it is not uncommon for people to get frustrated or confused. Sometimes their questions evolve and change. Sometimes they realize that the data they are collecting are not providing evidence that will answer their questions. Sometimes their emerging ideas and understandings are difficult for them to express in written form. Setbacks happen. Changes are made. It is all part of the messy process of learning in uncharted terrain. Genevieve, one of the teacher learners in one class, described the process this way:

It took some time to come up with the research question. We had to wrestle within ourselves to come up with something. It took me a LOOONG time. It was sooo hard. Eventually we all DID come up with something finally. I think that the quality of what is a real question was learned. But it was a challenge! We kept on changing and revising and changing until it came.

At times, for some, the process seems overwhelming. For many, this is the first original work they have ever done in school. And, unlike students in other colleges, many, many of my students struggle to accomplish this task in the midst of busy lives as teachers, parents, grandparents, heads of households, or caretakers of ailing relatives. Many are the first in their families to attend university. Some have to juggle school with second jobs. Some face an additional challenge of navigating school in a language that is not native to them. Many also struggle to overcome perceptions of themselves as unsuccessful learners.

I remind them that these feelings, these problems, these challenges are not unlike those of their own students. What is important is to remember that anything is possible, if we stay focused and take it one step at a time. I tell them of a story that author Anne Lamott recounts in her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994). She recalls a scene from her childhood, one late Sunday night when her brother sat at the kitchen table with books spread out, holding his head in his hands, overwhelmed by the task of completing a report on birds that was due the very next day. Although it had been assigned many weeks before, he had

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procrastinated and was paralyzed by the enormity of what he had to do. Their father came into the room, put his arm around the child's shoulders, and said in a calm steady voice, "Take it bird by bird, my son. It is the only way to get through."

I try to help my students take it "bird by bird." I do this by the way I structure the assignments and assessments, by the role I assume as instructor, and by the learning experiences I create for the class. Below I explain a bit about each one of these elements of my teaching.

Assignments and Assessments as a Guide to Learning

I take nothing for granted about what students know. I articulate the purposes for doing everything. Everything gets explained from the ground up. Each element of each assignment and each skill that needs mastering is presented and gone over in detail until everyone understands. Standards for performance are defined publicly and in advance. Criteria for how to meet the standards are delineated. The learning process is paced to respond to students' developing skills and understandings. One critical aspect of how this is done is to structure assignments so that each builds a piece of the course's final project. Rather than using assignments as end-points, as is the case in traditional grading, each assignment is considered a draft on which I give feedback and is then returned to the students so they can make revisions before they hand it all in for a final evaluation.

Assessment rubrics are attached to each assignment. These are designed as guides for the projects. Exemplars of past students' accomplished work are made available to bring meaning to the rubrics' descriptions. The final product is evaluated only after it has been worked on extensively. In these ways, assessment is used in an ongoing way to support students' learning.

Learning alongside of Students

There is no "right" answer in research. There is no "right" question. Only each learner knows what is right for him/her. There is no "right" analysis either. As long as research methods are valid, data can be interpreted in a variety of ways. What makes it all work is if the design is coherent, if the findings are supported by evidence, and if the analysis of the findings makes sense. Understanding this can be liberating. Each one of us can become an authority when we construct our own knowledge about our own questions.

To help students redirect their quest from what others might see as the "right" question/answer to a search for what is "right" for them, I often tell my own story of professional growth and share my own dilemmas about the research in which I am engaged. I want my students to see that people in positions of authority are not untouched by insecurities, doubts, or struggles about learning; that even people with a lot of accomplishments started out not too different from themselves and are just a little further along down the path than they are. I do this to consciously dispel any illusions that people in positions of authority are the only ones who can

determine what is “right.” Most importantly, however, I want my students to see that their own ideas matter and can make a difference.

Creating a Community of Learners

To take the risks necessary for real learning to occur, students need to feel safe and supported. They need to feel that the work they are doing is their own work; that they have someone who can serve as their guide; and that they have colleagues to whom they can turn for support.

In my class I try to provide for these needs by creating a sense of community. I do this by offering lots of opportunities for social interaction and collaboration. I divide class participants into groups based on the common themes of their questions. Regularly these groups meet to update each other on the progress of their research, to share resources, to give feedback to each other, and to probe each other’s thinking. Usually I give the groups focusing questions that can be used to guide their discussions. These are first modeled with one or two students in front of the entire class.

I also try to provide regular opportunities for reflection on how the course is going, usually in written form or in verbal “go-rounds.” At the end of the course, students orally and visually make presentations to each other and, sometimes, to others beyond the class.

Reflecting on Learning:

“From This Course I Take Away . . .”

At the end of the course I ask participants to fill out a response form that completes the sentence above. The responses guide my planning for future classes and provide insight to the impact of the experience. Repeatedly class participants report that learning how to do research helps them to become better learners. Students also credit the research process with helping them to become better observers of children and more knowledgeable about the children in their care. Genoveba, one course participant, expressed it this way:

From the beginning I began to focus my thoughts on the kids in my class, particularly how I and they function in the room. I have been thinking about how to bolster their efforts, strengthen their weaknesses and bring fun into learning.

Others note that doing research makes them focus more keenly on their teaching, become more open to critical self-examination and more eager to inquire about their practice. For example, Caroline said:

This course has propelled me to look at myself as a teacher. I am learning how to investigate an issue in my class that is really affecting me. I look at my own teaching and realize there is room for improvement.

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Course participants call attention to the fact that being allowed to explore their own interests offers them a powerful motivation to learn and makes teachers more sensitive to how to be responsive to the interests and needs of the children they teach. Hilda explained:

This is a model to us for how to teach children. This course gave us the opportunity to choose the topic that we felt passionate about and that really made a difference. We all were really involved in it because it was something we cared about. So this has been a good example to us as teachers — how whatever we teach has to be connected to children's interests, not merely imposed on them. And then there will be a lot of learning.

The new insights gained from their research helps them feel empowered about learning. Ana said:

I learned that if you have a question or a problem in your classroom there is always a way to resolve it and you can find it through research. I never thought it would be possible for me to create my research. But I did!

This shift in teachers' attitude about themselves and their own learning is often accompanied by a changed attitude toward their work. Patricia's study on parent involvement transformed her attitude toward children and their families. Before she began it, she was frustrated with the lack of involvement of the parents in her class. Being a working single mom who managed to be involved in her children's education, she couldn't understand why others did not do the same. After interviewing her students' parents for her study, she developed a better understanding of their life circumstances that made school participation difficult. She stopped blaming the parents for not caring and began asking them for suggestions about how they might be involved. As a result, many parents gave Patricia ideas for how home/school connections could be strengthened. She tried them and was thrilled when many more parents began participating.

A door has opened up. It's like planting a seed and its starting to blossom. I'm seeing the fruits. My attitudes have changed. Relationships are changing around me. I'm listening really. My study is ending but my work is just beginning.

What we call the beginning is often the end. To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we must start from. —T.S. Eliot

Patricia is not the only participant in the research class who changed her attitudes and launched new beginnings. Neurys, a Spanish-speaking dual language teacher, for example, since completing the research experience, has continued to pursue other inquiries about her practice as an ongoing part of her professional life. She has joined a teacher research group in her district, continues to write, and has presented at conferences.

Other graduates of the research course have engaged in professional collabo-

rations, research about their practice, and change initiatives in their schools. Mercedes, an immigrant from Mexico, and Betty, a native of Harlem where they both teach, are graduates of different years of the research class. Although they had taught in the same pre-K program and school for several years, they only began to collaborate when they found out they were both veterans of the research experience. Since this discovery they have teamed up to co-teach and work together on transforming their classrooms into communities of inquiry. They have reached out to utilize the resources of their community, to connect to the families of the children in their classes, and to lead change initiatives with their colleagues in their school and district. In addition, they have sought National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification and have presented at national conferences. Mercedes credits the research experience as the inspiration for these changes:

We gained confidence to do this as a result of our research class. From it we learned how to choose what we wanted to study and how to think and produce. We learned that research is a never-ending endeavor; that we have to continually reflect on our practices and constantly rethink the understandings of our discipline. Our research experience did not end in the class. It continues in our work today.

Being an Inquirer in an Era of 'Right Answers'

Some might ask how useful it is to prepare teachers with a passion for inquiry when there are so many constraints that they face from district and state curriculum mandates and high-stakes tests. My response to this question has two parts: one part concerns values and the other good teaching.

Although there are tremendous pressures in schools right now to conform to teaching prescriptions and to turn teaching into test prep, the knowledge base about how children learn has never been clearer that individual development varies and good teaching must be differentiated to accommodate those differences. Teacher educators cannot let current policies obliterate these critical understandings. We have a responsibility to stay true to what works best for students, to instill "habits of mind" in our teacher learners so that they continually question and examine what is effective, and to help them have confidence to stay true to their convictions, even if they have to "go against the grain." Inquiry experiences in teacher education programs have the potential to nurture these dispositions. Some of the inquiries that my students have conducted — on how mandated/scripted programs, early academics in early childhood programs, and skills-dominated early literacy instruction have affected their students' learning — have given them evidence they subsequently used to speak out against the adverse effects of these practices. Their new-found knowledge gave them power. Betty explained:

Although I work in a school for young children, I did not think it was an appropriate setting for early learning, especially in literacy. Before I came to the research class I already knew in my heart that this was the case, but the class gave

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me an opportunity and the support to pursue it. After my research I realized that I had been on the right track for how to implement literacy in my classroom. I became empowered to act on my new understandings.

The other reason to keep inquiry alive in teacher education is that the skills of research are the very same skills that are a part of good teaching. Although the focus of inquiry may be different when adults are examining their teaching contexts, the inquiry skills they use are exactly the same as those needed for examining learning: observing, recording, reflecting, analyzing, and applying the understandings to practice. Teachers who know how to do this well are effective at helping children. Their problem-solving orientation prepares them to foster authentic learning, no matter the context in which they teach. It also prepares them to help children navigate the world of tests.

If you can walk, you can dance. If you can talk, you can sing!
—Unknown

My students continually reaffirm for me that anything is possible. It is inspiring to watch so many of them conquer their challenges, awaken and pursue their own questions, develop a new sense of themselves as able thinkers, and take action on behalf of their beliefs. It is thrilling to witness them “make audible their silenced voices,” “make visible their invisible faces,” and “look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 1997, p. 27, 33). My students are blurring the boundaries between teachers and researchers, knowers and doers, experts and novices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Vinz, 1996; Wells, 1994). They are becoming agents for change. I am humbled by what they know and do.

My inquiry about inquiry research has clarified for me what aspects of teaching support transformative learning. My students have told me that it helps them when they are allowed to pursue questions that have purpose and personal meaning and when they are listened to and responded to instead of having curriculum imposed on them in a standardized way. They say that they learn best in interdisciplinary, real-life situations; that they are helped when the criteria and expectations for their work are presented to them clearly, publicly, and in advance; that continual, instructive feedback on their work serves as a guide for their learning. My students say that it helps them when someone observes, documents, and reflects on their learning. They are also helped by being given opportunities to share with each other and help each other with their work. They are bolstered by working in community. They are motivated when they feel ownership of their learning.

This research about teachers doing research has affirmed for me that learning how to inquire and do research helps teachers not only develop skills and pedagogical understandings, but is also instrumental in helping them to connect theory to practice, pose and solve problems that have not heretofore been addressed, and to stay true to what works best for students. It is exactly this kind of expertise and professionalism that research on teaching has revealed to be the most critical quality of effective

teachers (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; The Holmes Group, 1986; Joyce, 1990; Lieberman, 1986; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; 1997). It is exactly this quality that needs to be developed further to prepare urban teachers to successfully tackle the challenges posed by the diverse and pressing needs of students who attend struggling urban schools.

Like Patricia, my study is completed but my inquiry is just beginning. Teacher research is still relatively new and holds many possibilities yet to be realized. The inquiries of teachers and other practice-based educators promise new understandings about schools and schooling. Their "vantage point, situatedness, materiality" (Greene, 1997, p. 34) should enlarge our perspectives, ignite our imaginations, and challenge our conceptions of the world as it is. Welcoming teachers to the world of research should help us to keep inquiry alive and to stay passionate in our profession. They will help us feel, as Pilar said at the end of last year's class,

It's like a party. It keeps getting better and better. You just don't want it to end.

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