

“Those Who Do Not Learn from History...”: Contemporary Implications from the History of Teacher Inquiry

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Abstract

Over the preceding century, interest in teacher inquiry has ebbed and flowed, yet the teacher inquiry movement presents consistent themes that remain relevant to contemporary teachers, teacher educators, and scholars. This historical overview of teacher inquiry surfaces implications for practitioners today. It is presented in three eras: the recognition of the teacher as inquirer in the 1930s–1950s, the implications of the Civil Rights movement and the quest for excellence in the 1960s–1980s, and the resurgence of teacher inquiry in the “messy” 1990s and 2000s. The very earliest era of teacher inquiry demonstrates the importance of teacher autonomy and administrative support. The second era points to the place of inquiry in promoting social equity and excellence in education. The final era foregrounds the nonlinear nature of the inquiry process and the importance of collaboration among teacher inquirers.

Keywords: teacher inquiry, history of teaching, teacher education, teacher autonomy, teacher collaboration

Introduction

Teacher inquiry has played a role in improving teachers’ practice for decades. Its conceptual roots go back to the work of John Dewey’s philosophy of reflective action and experience. Its first systematic variant was action research, coined in 1944 by Kurt Lewin. By the 1950s, Stephen Corey at Teachers College had helped bring action research into education. While the impact of teacher inquiry remained relatively small in the 1950s to 1970s, by the 1980s and 1990s, there was a surge in interest, perhaps best encapsulated by the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle. Today, teacher inquiry—an umbrella term used here to encapsulate action research, practitioner research, and other types of systematic inquiry undertaken by educational professionals—often serves as a capstone activity for preservice teachers and as a collaborative form of professional development, and its results are disseminated in journals and conferences across the world. It is a powerful technique which, in the words of Cochran-Smith and Lytle, helps teachers undertake “the joint construction of local knowledge, the questioning of common assumptions, and thoughtful critique of the usefulness of research generated by others both inside and outside contexts of practice” (2009, p. 2).

As historian Larry Cuban argues, historical awareness is a powerful tool for teachers. He writes: “Were teachers to be more informed about the history of classroom instruction perhaps they would voice their preferences based upon a firm knowledge of what can and cannot be done in classrooms as they are presently organized” (1984, p. 7). Not only can teachers’ inquiry work

benefit from the use of the historical record as inquiry data (e.g., Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 87), but the dissemination of teachers' inquiry contributes to the professional literature and serves as a historical record of the power of teachers systematically examining their own practice. We argue that Cuban's point can be appropriated by teacher inquirers. By looking at issues in the history of schooling in tandem with teacher inquiry, implications for the work of teacher inquirers can be elucidated. These implications can contribute to the propagation of teacher inquiry, for the inquiry work of teachers has a part in "shaping and making history by changing what is done" (Kemmis, 2010, p. 417).

This paper provides a set of implications for contemporary teacher inquirers drawn from the history of teaching, schooling, and teacher inquiry. It will present three distinct periods: (a) the pre- and early history of teacher inquiry, roughly the 1920s to the 1950s; (b) the intersection of inquiry with broader social issues in the 1960s to 1980s; and (c) the "messy" 1990s and early 2000s in which a surge in teacher inquiry intersected with a new awareness of the complicated nature of learning, teaching, and schooling. Because of the large span of time under consideration, we will highlight a few key historical trends, draw from the contemporaneous scholarly literature, and provide key implications for practitioners today. We hope this all-too-brief reflection on the history of teacher inquiry will serve to inform and inspire teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers. We believe this is an apt time to reflect on the history of teacher inquiry as the Florida Educational Research Association is bringing a renewed focus to the inquiry movement with the continued presence of the Inquiry Strand at the Annual Conferences and this inaugural Teacher Inquiry Section.

Recognizing the Teacher as Inquirer: Autonomy and Teacher-Directed Reform

The first period under consideration spans from the early decades of the twentieth century to the 1950s. Much of this era predated the formulation of action research, though as will be shown, there were extant examples of teachers inquiring, adjusting, and disseminating their research. This era saw the development of various philosophies of inquiry, particularly in the thinking of John Dewey, and the crossover of action research into education through the work of Stephen Corey of Teachers College (Currin, 2019). A key lesson from the early period of the teacher inquiry movement is the importance of institutional support for teachers as they inquire into their own practice. Two implications can be derived from this era. First, teacher inquiry cannot prosper without institutional support. Second, teacher inquiry can contribute to reforming teaching practice.

Widespread Limitations on Teacher Autonomy

The historical literature for this period shows that while isolated pockets of inquiry were occurring, a strong administrative power structure limited the autonomy of the teacher. As early as 1917, the Lincoln School at Teachers College served as an example of the power of teacher inquiry. The school's leaders charged its teachers with "producing research that would expand readers' thinking rather than encourage its wholesale imitation" (Perrillo, 2016, p. 91). Two of its teachers, Harold Rugg and Hughes Mearns, would help steer the very trajectory of their subject areas with innovative textbooks. Lincoln teachers wrote articles that were featured in preeminent journals, their books were published by established education publishers, and they hosted in-service and professional development courses for participants from across the United States. Historian Jonna Perrillo specifically argues that administrative support contributed to the success of teacher research at Lincoln.

Though Lincoln demonstrated the power of teacher inquiry, “much of the significance of the Lincoln School was in its exceptionality” (Perrillo, 2016, p. 96). In other words, despite widespread recognition, Lincoln’s example was not replicated in the early twentieth century. Across the nation, a powerful administrative hierarchy constrained teacher autonomy. Historian David Tyack (1974) has argued that administrative progressivism pressed powerful educational experts—newly professionalized administrators, superintendents, and policymakers—to wrest away local control of schooling as well as teacher independence. These administrative reformers were motivated by a utilitarian ethos that stressed “restructuring the governance and organization of schooling in order to make it run more efficiently, in line with business management practices” (Labaree, 2005, p. 281). In the early decades of the twentieth century, teachers—mostly female—were kept under the thumb of powerful—and mostly male—administrators, a situation that would continue for much of the century (Graves, 2009). For example, an oft-cited address at the 1904 National Educational Association convention depicts the teacher’s place in the school hierarchy. Superintendent Aaron Gove argued that administrators should be empowered autocrats who would rightly wield “despotic” powers. Gove was repulsed by the “dangerous usurpation by teachers” of administrator power (1904, p. 153). For Gove, teachers were to follow orders from those above them in the hierarchy. This sentiment appears widespread for, as Tyack notes, teachers “felt powerless to influence policies dictated by their superiors” (1974, p. 259).

The lesson here is that while teacher inquiry has the power to promote a “radical, but quiet, kind of school reform” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992a, p. 318), this power lies dormant when teachers are not given the autonomy, authority, and respect to take a stance of systematic reflection toward, and enact changes in, their own work. While the Lincoln School points to the power of teacher inquiry when teachers are given adequate support, the broader history of the early twentieth century is one of administrators crowding out much of the potential for teachers to take reform into their own hands. Perrillo’s research into the Lincoln School points to the power of teacher inquiry when it is supported by administrators.

Reforming Teachers’ Practice

Dismissive attitudes toward teacher autonomy were not the only headwinds teacher inquiry faced in this era. Teachers themselves often reinforced the methods with which they were taught. As educational historian Larry Cuban (1984) argues, consistent and unexamined teaching practices prevailed across decades. David Tyack memorably sums this up: “Although the rhetoric of different pedagogical reform movements ruffled the surface of the educational sea, a fathom deep, in the classroom little changed” (as cited in Fraser, 1989).

Lortie (2002) calls this tendency for teaching practice to remain stable across decades an “apprenticeship of observation” (p. 61). Echoing Cuban, Lortie asserts that teachers teach the way in which they were themselves taught, perpetuating the same tried methods, whether effective or not. Despite drastic changes in teacher education and the degree of centralization of school administration (Schneider, 2018), Lortie, Cuban, and Tyack each argue that this consistent teaching practice resisted reform. Stephen Corey, whose landmark book *Action Research to Improve Schools* (1953) would be widely cited in the teacher inquiry of this era, noted a large gap between research and practice. In other words, despite innovative research on pedagogical methods, teachers would often ignore research findings.

But this “apparent invulnerability of classrooms to change” (Cuban, 1984, p. 2) also summons a poignant benefit of teacher inquiry. The literature reminds us, after all, of the power of teacher inquiry to prompt reflection and revision of practice as well as the importance of disseminating teachers’ inquiry to inform others (e.g., Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr, & Zeichner, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992b, 2009). In the 1950s, Corey argued that teachers themselves were best positioned to make sense of their practice, and the insights from their inquiry projects were more

likely to be implemented. In our own era, Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) argue that broadcasting, discussing, and debating intentional, systematic thinking can exert a powerful influence on teachers, schools, and even districts.

In sum, an analysis of the early twentieth century shows that even before Steven Corey brought action research to educators, a philosophy of inquiry had been theorized and even implemented in isolated pockets like the Lincoln School. The most pressing implications to be drawn from this era are related to teacher autonomy and the need for teacher-led reform. The action research movement of the 1940s and 1950s was short-lived, at least in part, because teachers were not trusted to reform their own work. The hierarchical structure of schooling, as well as the power disparity between a mostly female teaching force and male administrators, impeded the beginnings of a widespread movement aligned with the transformative practice seen at Lincoln. As Jurgen Herbst (1989) argues, administrators and educational researchers were treated as professionals, but teachers did not gain an area of practice that was exclusively theirs. This impacted the perceptions of policymakers and administrators who did not trust teachers with their own profession. Today, a more collaborative environment where teachers and administrators work to reform their schools will require greater power sharing as well as greater respect for teachers' autonomy. This administrative support was central to the success of Lincoln. Above all, if powerful reform of teachers' practice is desired, administrative support for teacher inquiry is imperative. As Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) remind us, whatever our position in the school, we must be committed to "simultaneous renewal and reform of the teaching profession" (p. 27). Teacher inquiry is one potent way of enacting these reforms.

Focusing on the Big Picture: Equity and Excellence

The second historical period under consideration (1960–1989) shows that teacher inquiry provides teachers a tool to address social concerns and political mandates in an ever-changing society. This tumultuous era included America's burgeoning Cold War with the Soviet Union, a resurgent Civil Rights movement and demands for equity in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, as well as widespread concerns about America's competitiveness in the global marketplace, exemplified by the pivotal federal report, *A Nation At Risk* (1983). Teacher inquiry provided an avenue for teachers to refine their practice within the dual goals of helping a more diverse student population excel as well as addressing political demands for excellence and accountability.

The Quest for Equitable Schools

Following the *Brown vs. Board of Education Act*, Civil Rights leaders were concerned with newly enacted integration policies. For example, Martin Luther King addressed the need for "programs, directions, and plans for carrying out the full realization of freedom for all people" (1966, p. 46). He challenged researchers to move beyond the "laboratory" of the ivory tower and enact studies to improve the lives of marginalized peoples. King specifically addressed the responsibility of teachers in establishing a quality integrated education: "Educators must once again use their training and skills to reshape unhealthy attitudes." Further, "meaningful programs that will benefit both the advantaged and disadvantaged must be established by skilled educators" (King, 1966, p. 53). King's call acknowledged the limitations of relying only on large-scale social and political events, such as the *Brown vs. Board* decision. He rallied educators to take responsibility in the quality and accessibility of a democratic education available to all children at the most personal of levels. King's call to both researchers and teachers is concordant with the scale of teacher inquiry. Classroom by classroom, and school by school, motivated educators could research and improve their practice, contributing to a more equitable society.

The scholarly literature reveals examples of teachers and district leaders engaging in action research aligning with King's call to address injustice on a local level. One example, published in 1968, was written by a district official grappling with the question of how to provide a more equitable education to students in inner city schools. The study suggests that schools engage in teacher inquiry to evaluate the effectiveness of their teacher training programs (Foster, 1968). Another example, from 1971, outlines how a teacher inquired into her practice as she taught students to become democratic citizens through instructional practice (Webb, 1971).

Much attention has been placed on the inequities in education since *Brown vs. Board*, yet there is still much to be done. Teacher inquiry can be a key way for teachers to investigate social inequity in individual classrooms and make a dent in inequitable practices. Villegas and Lucas (2001) remind teachers of this work:

We are not so unrealistic as to believe that our schools can single-handedly change the inequities that are embedded throughout society far beyond the school house door. However, there is much that we can and must do, and the time to start is now. (p. 201)

It is worthwhile for practitioners to keep in mind the larger mission of ever-greater equity in America's schools. Along with systematically evaluating the effectiveness of teaching for all students, teachers can examine their own positionality and ask questions about what works in the classroom and for whom.

The Push for Excellent Schools

Following the release of *A Nation At Risk* (NAR), the broader public and the federal government become increasingly concerned with the quality of America's schools. The report infamously proclaimed the perceived failure of American schools. It argued that had "an unfriendly foreign power . . . attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (1983, p. 5). Its writers concluded that public schools were failing to prepare students to compete internationally in the areas of "commerce, industry, science and technological innovations" (1983, p. 5). In some ways NAR positioned itself as a response to the quest for equity, arguing that educational quality was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (1983, p. 5).

NAR provided a new set of benchmarks, defining excellence for students, schools, and society. For an individual learner, excellence is "performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace"; an excellent school or college is one "that sets high expectations and goals for all learners"; and an excellent society is one that is able to "respond to challenges of a rapidly changing world" (1983, p. 12). Reverberating to our own time, NAR contributed to a shift from local control to state and federal oversight, a greater emphasis on standardization, the promotion of school choice, and a concern with teacher quality and accountability.

In the same year, Stenhouse introduced the concept of teacher as researcher. In contrast with the overly quantitative measures of excellence used in NAR, Stenhouse proposed a more local, context-specific method of measuring teacher quality. His model submitted "teaching to the principles of critique because it provides criteria by which teachers can criticize their performance in specific forms of teaching on specific occasions, in contrast to the hazards of evaluating themselves professionally across the board" (Stenhouse, 1983, p. 4). In other words, quality teaching was not only to be measured quantifiably by examining student test scores but rather improved through the close examination of one's own practice. The budding concept of the teacher as researcher helped teachers better conceptualize themselves as professionals. It also provided an alternative route toward ensuring and demonstrating student achievement.

Redefining the art of teaching itself would be one way to achieve excellence, test personal limitations, set high expectations for students, and produce citizens capable of adapting to a changing world.

An implication in this era of increasing accountability is that teacher inquiry provides an avenue for teachers to improve their practice as well as to enable them to have a say in how excellence is defined. Most teachers will not have a seat at the table in designing and codifying accountability policies, but teacher inquiry projects are localized spaces for reconsidering what teachers teach and why. Thus, at the school level, teachers can use the results of their inquiry to demonstrate to school leadership their effectiveness as well as advocate for reform. After all, teacher inquiry allows teachers to investigate what equity and excellence mean in their specific context. This era reminds the teacher inquirer to reflect upon the larger picture and consider how their inquiry and practice align with social, political, and ethical calls for both equity and excellence.

Inquiry as Stance: ‘Messiness’ and Collaboration

The 1990s saw the cessation of the Cold War, a further opening of the global market, and a resurgence in interest in school funding (Ladd, Chalk, & Hansen, 1999). The Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1994, providing renewed federal funds to help low-income students, and included reforms for Title I. This era also witnessed increased funding for bilingual and immigrant education and provisions for public charter schools, drop-out prevention, and educational technology (Pauling, Blakely, & Stallworth, 2010). The national government’s increased involvement in education foregrounds the role education plays in American society and also points to the increasing complexities of the classroom.

While schooling has always been complicated, a notable trend in the 1990s was the theorizing, interest, and spread of teacher inquiry as a method to bring insight into the complicated work of teaching (Lagemann, 2000). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992b) argued in their pivotal book *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* that research in education had been dominated by two strains. The first, called process-product, assumed “teaching was a linear activity” and emphasized “the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments” (p. 6). This style of research, as they point out, aligned well with the philosophical assumptions underlying NAR and the budding standardized testing movement. They contrasted this with a brand of qualitative and interpretive studies which presume that “teaching is a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity in which difference across classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important” (p. 6). This latter style of research points the way toward the “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 7) that Cochran-Smith and Lytle would theorize. In short, there was a recognition that teaching was highly idiosyncratic and that the teachers—individually and collectively—were best positioned to investigate their own work and practices.

Embracing the ‘Messiness’

In the 1990s, theorizing about teacher inquiry recognized that learning is messy. Just as students gain insight from reflecting upon complex experiences in complicated contexts, teachers can benefit from a non-linear inquiry process in making sense of a “messy” classroom. Here, “messy” defines an entity that is not clear cut, and often feels like it is out of an individual’s control (Dana, 2009, p. 108). But, despite the word’s negative connotation, it is through the “messiness of the process that a teacher researcher’s mindset is cultivated” (Mitton-Kukner, 2015, p. 261). The nonlinear nature of the inquiry process mimicked the messiness of the classroom. Educators recognized that students did not always learn best with traditional methods, such as rote memorization, and used inquiry as a process to address these concerns (Richardson, 1994). Concurrently, while teachers reconsidered their practice through the non-linear path of inquiry,

published literature began to formalize the process of practitioner research, making it more accessible to educators. Seeing inquiry not as a product but as an orientation to every aspect of teaching was—and continues to be—an important outcome of the movement (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Grimmer & Mackinnon, 1992; Richardson, 1996).

Educational researchers Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) urged teachers to develop an “inquiry as stance” in the 2000s, which meant to center the core of their practice around the notion of systematic inquiry. From within this stance, teachers question fundamental aspects of their practice, profession, and purpose—questions that harken back to concerns with autonomy, equity and excellence. They write:

What purposes—besides academic achievement as indicated by test scores—are important to schools? What about teaching toward the democratic ideal, deliberation, and debate, and challenging inequities? [Teacher inquirers] also raise questions about power and authority: Who makes decisions about purposes and consequences? How do school structures, assessment regimes, and classroom practices challenge or sustain the status quo? (p. 9)

In other words, teaching, learning, and schooling are messy. By enacting an inquiry stance, the teacher takes steps toward better understanding and acting within this complexity. But the teacher does not have to accomplish this alone.

The Benefits of Collaboration

Cochran-Smith and Lytle argued that teaching has importance for the largest of social contexts and that the work of teachers can have impacts far beyond the walls of the classroom. They advocated for an inquiry stance across the profession as a way for teachers—individually and collectively—to understand and act upon this aspect of their work. More practically, educators were encouraged to “stand on the shoulders of giants” (Huberman, 1996) and learn from others’ inquiry. As Hubbard & Power (1999) pointed out, seasoned teacher researchers depend upon collaboration to sustain their work.

One example of this is the intersection of inquiry as stance with professional learning communities (PLC), a movement that began in the early 1990s. PLCs provide space for professionals to collaborate on a regular basis and engage in structured and deliberate dialogue focused around student learning (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). While many PLCs exist within top-down structures, driven by standardized data, some PLCs have been used by teacher inquirers to engage in collaborative inquiry. In these spaces, educators have “established mutual goals, set forth work to be accomplished, [and] collected data on the implementation of the work and reported back to the PLC” (Carpenter, 2017). Four characteristics of PLCs intersect with teacher inquiry and can promote positive change in teaching practices: collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning. Most importantly, in authentic PLCs, teachers are given autonomy regarding their own learning. This self-governance was noted as one of the characteristics undergirding a successful learning community (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

In sum, teacher inquiry came into its own in the 1990s through renewed theorizing, a greater appreciation of the messiness of the classroom, and the awareness of the importance of collaboration. Key lessons from this era are that teaching is a messy endeavor, and the process teachers use to make sense of their practice is often a nonlinear one. In addition, it is important to promote collaboration among teacher inquirers. After all, collaboration brings teacher inquirers together, it motivates them through inevitable struggles, and it fosters a greater sense of professionalization. It is fitting to end our historical overview with this last point as we believe that the Annual Teacher Inquiry Strand at the Florida Educational Research Association can serve

as a venue for greater collaboration among teacher inquirers and serve as a platform for the important work of teachers in the state.

Conclusion

This brief excursion through the history of teacher inquiry argues that, early in the century, teacher autonomy was often limited by a powerful administrative structure and unexamined teacher practices. Next came a renewed focus on the larger picture—equity and excellence. And finally, closer to our own era, teacher inquirers embraced an inquiry stance and collaboration. Each era brought forth implications for teacher inquirers that resonate today. It is worthwhile to repeat these implications. Across its history and today, teacher inquiry:

1. Requires that teachers possess some degree of autonomy.
2. Can be a powerful tool for reforming teachers' practice.
3. Aids in the goal of more equitable classrooms and schools.
4. Contributes to the excellent instruction demanded by political leaders and the public.
5. Provides a robust process for teachers to better understand their work.
6. Works best when teacher inquirers collaborate.

While there are enormous pressures on schools today, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers have the potential to improve schools through teacher inquiry. For teachers, examples of powerful practices and models of inquiry can be found both in the historical literature as well as in this very journal. As argued in numerous practical guides to teacher inquiry, collaboration with other teachers is highly valuable. We argue that for teachers who have some authority within their learning communities or disciplinary groups, inquiry is a valuable practice worthy of consideration. For teacher educators, inquiry can be easily connected with the reflective, methodological, and professional standards teachers are to be taught in their preservice and on-going professional development. For researchers, teacher inquiry provides an ideal site to better understand the experiences of teachers and provide a broader perspective on the impact of practices. We hope that this historical overview and its implications can serve as guideposts for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers as they work toward their own “radical, but quiet, kind of school reform” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992a, p. 318).

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