

Educational Experiences

Educational inquiry serves to examine questions of education, and the various forms of educational inquiry have specific methods, purposes, and meanings. Of the many meaningful forms of inquiry studied in ED 800, I believe that educational inquiry reflecting teacher experience is a fruitful approach to studying education, as it focuses on and promotes the asking of questions related to teaching and learning. Teacher inquiry is suitable for the study of educational issues relating to aspects of the classroom, including how teachers and students learn. Inquiry findings can be assessable and useful for teachers, scholars, administrators, and other educational interest groups.

Teacher inquiry is a distinctive approach to educational inquiry as it serves to foster our continual learning and enables us to think critically of our teaching beliefs and practices. It is through teacher inquiry that beliefs can change, knowledge can grow, and practices can be strengthened as we are active and reflective members of the learning community. Teachers are able to take on the role of a learner, seeking to understand ourselves, the classroom, and its students. Vivian Paley serves as a model for this, as she focused her questions and curiosities of the classroom into her own inquiries. In doing so, her role as a teacher became that of a learner as well, questioning educational conventions and seeking answers within her classroom. Paley says, "Questions such as theses can fuel a teacher's curiosity and personal research, for the answers are printed nowhere. They can be found only in the individual classroom..." As teachers search for answers to their questions about education, they move forward in their field, educating themselves and sharing experiences that can support others. Through reflection and documentation, teachers who engage in inquiry based on their experiences have the ability to make connections and gain understandings of components within their classroom communities. In the article, *Teachers' Knowledge and Children's Lives: Loose Change in the Battle for Educational Currency*, Karen Gallas discusses the importance of reflecting and writing. She states, "The truth is, if you're a teacher and you don't write, when you stop teaching, you leave no physical traces behind that can be incorporated into the body of knowledge about teaching and learning." Teachers who participate in inquiry in their classrooms seem to value their role as lifelong learners, dedicated to not only the development and refinement of their practices, but also to the broader field of education. Inquiry through teacher experience entail active participation and requires teachers to take ownership of their work by continually asking questions and searching for meaning in their direct experiences. Vivian Paley said, "Teachers frequently establish 'proof' of the effectiveness of their methods, not in order to write a dissertation or a book, nor even necessarily to convince others, but simply because once they discover certain truths, they can no longer teach in another way." Continual discovery and reflection in the classroom creates a community of learners, a place where questioning is valued and the pursuit of knowledge is seen as a continual process.

Teacher inquiry fosters the creation of meaningful connections with our students, thus contributing to their learning and development. Teachers are actively learning from their students and are continually searching for ways to promote their students'

development. When teachers focus on and value the experiences occurring in the classroom, learning and achievement seem to be seen as a continual and meaningful process rather than outcomes or products of individual lessons or set standards. As teachers participate in classroom inquiry, observing students and reflecting on classroom experiences, they are fostering an environment focused on what is best for their students. Based on experiences in the classroom, Paley asked questions about how her students were making sense of their world, and focused much of her classroom inquiries on play and storytelling, thus enabling her to create an environment that fostered their development. Knowing and acknowledging that every child in our classroom is continually developing, it becomes clear our classroom as a whole is constantly changing, presenting us with seemingly endless opportunities to understand our students and offer them the opportunities and learning experiences they need. As the children in our classrooms develop, so must our own practices and methods, and I believe that teacher inquiry enables us to reach this goal.

The findings of inquiry through teacher experiences can be accessible and useful for others when teachers document and share their inquiry processes and findings with others. While the teachers and students directly involved with this form of inquiry experience its valuable purposes and results within their own classroom, I believe that communicating these experiences with others, such as teachers, parents, or administration, allows for a learning community to thrive outside of individual classrooms. Writing is thus an important aspect of this type of inquiry, not only for the teacher, but so that others may use these inquiries as resources or as potential catalysts for their own inquiries. The accessibility of such findings seems to be dependent upon if, and how, teachers make them available. I believe that teachers must be a part of a community that supports and values the role others play in their gaining of new knowledge. Vivian Paley and her work showcase the influence teacher inquiry can have within and outside of the classroom. Her writings and lectures continue to teach and inspire others within the field. Her work, and the inquiries of other teachers, helps to lessen the separation between academic researchers and teacher researchers. According to Karen Gallas, in *Teachers' Knowledge and Children's Lives: Loose Change in the Battle for Educational Currency*, this separation is a problem. She believes that academic research is privileged as the source of knowledge in which vital educational decisions are made, and she states, "Further, decisions are being made without reference to the kinds of knowledge that teachers, through the agency of teacher researchers, can offer about the realities of classroom life and the lives of children and about the efficacy of the theories, models, and methodologies that teachers are directed to implement in their classrooms." Ideally teacher experiences should be useful, but they are not often the defining factor for how and what should be taught in the classroom. It is my hope that as more teachers learn about and use inquiry in their own classrooms, the knowledge that is gained and shared will begin to obtain the recognition it deserves.

As a teacher in a first grade classroom, I am learning how to take the opportunity when presented to step back and learn from my students. Listening into their conversations and observing how they work and learn is a tool I have been using to strengthen my teaching and help guide planning. Teacher inquiry impacts me as a teacher, and also benefits my students. A specific student of mine is currently struggling

to learn the basic skills need to enhance his reading and I have been observing and reflecting on what is, and what is not, working specifically for him in the classroom. By writing down and looking further into experiences that were both successful and not, I am learning how to foster an environment that better serves his individual needs. I feel fortunate to work with a supportive network of teachers who seek to continually learn and to have an administration that fosters this. Through grade level meetings and informal conversations, we are constantly exchanging ideas with one another and sharing the personal experiences that occur within our individual classrooms daily.

Inquiry through teacher experience is a powerful approach to studying education. This form of inquiry allows teachers and others within the field to ask questions of and examine their beliefs, practices, and development, both inside and outside the classroom. I believe that as teachers we are lifelong learners, and this form of inquiry allows us to pursue our curiosities and passions as they arise. As teachers, there is a seemingly endless amount of knowledge we can gain from one another, and I believe that teacher inquiry enables us to grow within our profession, allows us to foster the learning of our students, and serves to generate useful insight for others within the boarder field of education.