



What Education as Inquiry Is and Isn't

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Education as Inquiry Is a Philosophical Stance

I recently came back from a meeting with a group of middle school teachers who were interested in implementing a multiple-ways-of-knowing, inquiry-based curriculum. There was a good deal of talk about what inquiry was and wasn't, how one should and shouldn't go about implementing it, and what was and wasn't possible. Participating in that conversation, and reflecting on it later, helped me clarify what "education as inquiry" means to me.

Education as inquiry provides an opportunity for learners to explore collaboratively topics of personal and social interest using the perspectives offered by others as well as by various knowledge domains (psychology, anthropology, economics, ecology, feminism) and various sign systems (art, music, mathematics, language) for purposes of producing a more equitable, a more just, a more thoughtful world. In this way, curriculum becomes a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be.

Since we don't have the answers to the problems future generations will face, I don't think we can afford to "train" children in the name of education. We need to give them tools with which they can outgrow us and yet help themselves. The problems we hand future generations—pollution, a depleted ozone layer, overpopulation, ethnocentrism, the haves of technologically rich countries versus the have-nots of economically developing countries—are not simple, nor will there be simple answers. It is going to

take a good deal of research and understanding to unpack the problems and lay bare the issues that lie at the heart of finding real solutions.

For me, education is inquiry and inquiry is education. It is what schools should be about from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon. *Education as inquiry is not a clever new way of integrating curriculum*. It is a reorientation; a new way of conceptualizing schooling.

As I see it, all we guarantee the students we teach is that they will face problems of some magnitude and that no single individual is going to be able to fix the problems. If the messes we hand future generations are to be resolved, I suggest that it will take a lot of good minds that know how to learn and how to collaborate.

Many teachers think of inquiry in terms of six- or nine-week units of study. I see it as an attitude. In Jennifer Story's sixth-grade classroom, she and her students have been conducting "Twenty-Four-Hour Inquiries" and "Three-Day Inquiries" (Stephens, personal communication, 1993). On these days, the exploration of a single topic is all that gets done—no switching from mathematics, to language arts, to social studies, to music, to yet some other content area. Once these strategies have been introduced in a classroom, I would like to see "Twenty-Four-Hour" and "Three-Day" inquiries offered as options for students to elect to do any time the class is doing something that is not of compelling personal interest. This means that school schedules need serious work and serious rethinking.

I don't want inquiry to be relegated to an afternoon time slot, to be reductively thought of as something equivalent to a unit of study, a theme, or an integrated way to handle social studies, science, or other content areas. While education as inquiry is all these things, it is also more than any of these things.

Education as inquiry is a reconceptualization, a new way of thinking that challenges all extant definitions. Education as inquiry means rethinking reading, rethinking writing, rethinking classroom management. Reading as inquiry, for example, is very different from reading as comprehension. While reading as inquiry still focuses on making and sharing meaning, it goes further. The meaning we make has to be used as a metaphor to deepen understanding and make sense of some other part of our

lives or world. This is “the inquiry,” the search for ever broader connections. Writing as inquiry means writing as a tool for thinking rather than as a skill to be mastered. Writing as inquiry means using writing to establish one’s voice, distance oneself from experience, observe the world more closely, share one’s thinking with others, strategically search for patterns that connect, present what one has learned and reflectively take new action. Discipline as inquiry means that rather than implement behavior management procedures that allow you, the teacher, to control the situation, problems of discipline are matters of discussion, with alternatives generated by the group and with the parties involved invited to find solutions that work.

Education as Inquiry Calls for Radical Change

In the past, reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies have run roughshod over the curriculum. Say “schooling” to most people and they think of groups of children getting on a yellow school bus to be hauled to classrooms to engage in reading, writing, mathematics, and other content areas. In the old days, the students would be sitting in rows and taking tests. Today, even in whole language classrooms the structure hasn’t changed much. Oh, they aren’t sitting in rows or taking tests—now they’re at tables, keeping portfolios—but they still have a writing time, a reading time, a math time, a theme time, and so on. Despite surface structural changes, the content areas are still the organizational device for curriculum.

The Core of an Inquiry Curriculum Is Personal and Social Knowing

Education as inquiry, while respecting the disciplines and what it is we think we know, is fundamentally about changing the way we think about instruction. Significantly, education as inquiry suggests that the personal and collective questions of learners ought to be the heart of curriculum. Rather than framing curriculum in terms of the content areas, learners’ inquiry questions become the organizational device for curriculum. Integration

occurs in the head of the learner, rather than in the daily schedule of the teacher.

Recently I ran into a middle school student wearing a T-shirt with the logo, “Been There . . . Done That,” repeated on both the front and back. It struck me that metaphorically, at least, this is how we treat the subject matter areas in school. Rather than have students say, “Been there . . . Done that” (“I took ecology . . . I’m done with that”), I want them to see the content areas as available perspectives they might take during their inquiries. No matter what their question, at some point I would like them to look at the issues their inquiry raises in terms of science: What would an ecologist have to say about this problem, as well as this solution? The same is true for history: What would a historian want us to learn about this topic? What would an anthropologist want us to understand? an economist? a psychologist? and so forth.

Content Areas Reviewed

Each discipline or content area has a particular perspective—a focusing question, if you will. These ways of looking, often systematized and involving the use of certain types of research tools, have proved valuable. That is why they are still around. Rather than dead truths—something you learn and hopefully recall when *Jeopardy* comes on television—disciplines are tools for systematically exploring the modern world. We don’t want kids to say they studied feminism and now they are done with it. Equity is an understanding we want them to keep foremost no matter what issue they are exploring.

More and more we have come to realize that everything is connected to everything else. Helping learners see the disciplines as devices they might use to unpack the complexity of issues surrounding the topics they study supports them both in thinking more deeply as well as in understanding the community and the connectedness of knowing.

Legitimizing Multiple Ways of Knowing

Sign systems represent ways humans have devised to make meaning: language, art, music, drama, movement, mathematics, etc.

Each of the sign systems is used by each of the knowledge domains as a tool and toy for inquiry. This is why much of mathematics is structured on language and why mathematicians use charts and graphs to convey their meaning. Music is very mathematical, a fact you can discover for yourself if you lay out the underlying patterns of your favorite song with a set of unit blocks. This is not to suggest that music, art, and language are the same. They aren't. Each captures dimensions of knowing that are unique. Meaning in language unfolds synchronically as words are temporally produced. Meaning in art unfolds as a whole; the juxtaposition of line, shape, form, and color holistically "means" simultaneously.

Currently, schools tend to value language and mathematics as ways of knowing. Art, music, movement, drama, and the like are relegated to the fringes, evidenced by the fact that whenever students in Australia, England, Canada, New Zealand, or the United States don't score well on a national or international examination, the typical response is to raise language and mathematics requirements for graduation. A multiple-ways-of-knowing, inquiry-based model of education is designed to change all that. It assumes that art, music, mathematics, drama, and other sign systems play a role similar to that played by language in learning. By denying access to these sign systems, we silence some students' ways of knowing. We don't do ourselves much good either. By making art, music, drama, and movement second-class citizens in curriculum, we limit our ways of knowing, too. Whole dimensions of what it means to know are silenced.

I assume different cultural groups have different ways of making meaning. Although we have learned to *accept* children in terms of their home literacies, we have yet to *respect* children and the home literacies they bring to school. If we truly respected our students' home literacies, we would routinely invite ourselves and the other students in our classrooms to inquire into these ways of knowing and try them on for size. At present we seem to accept multiple literacies but are determined to move them on toward school literacy.

The smallest unit of curriculum in an inquiry model of education is a focused study (see Figure 1.1), which entails a question of personal and social interest, at least one perspective, and

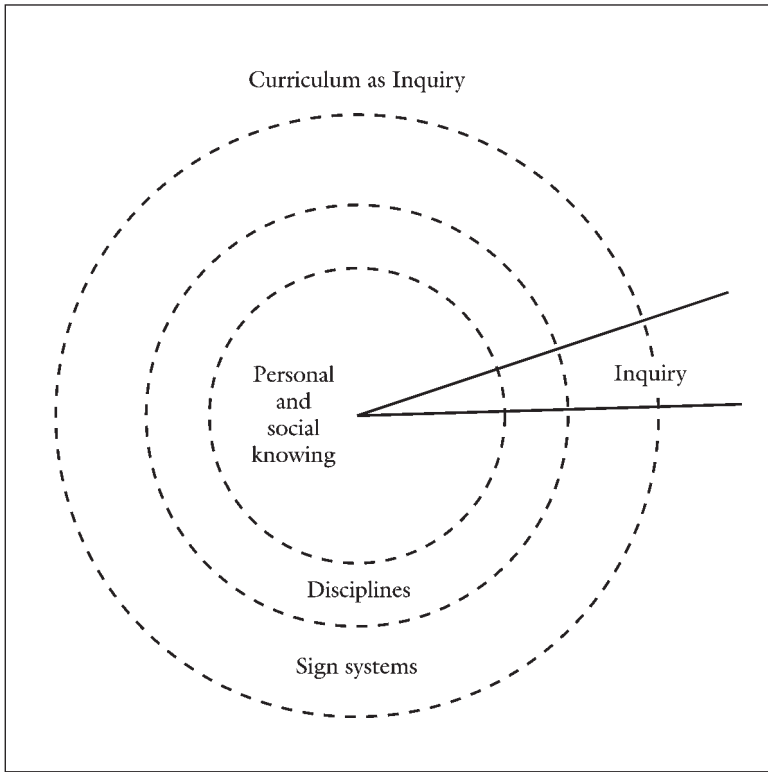


FIGURE 1.1. *Curriculum as inquiry* (Short & Harste, 1996).

total access to the various sign systems through which the topic might be explored. Marjorie Siegel says we should think of education as inquiry as a model which “invites learners to see themselves as knowledge makers who find and frame problems worth pursuing, negotiate interpretations, forge new connections, and represent meaning in new ways” (1995, 3).

Focus of an Inquiry-Based Curriculum

Figure 1.2 is a working model of the processes underlying an inquiry-based curriculum based on what we know about the role that language and other sign systems play in learning. Art, music, mathematics, drama, movement, and language each play a

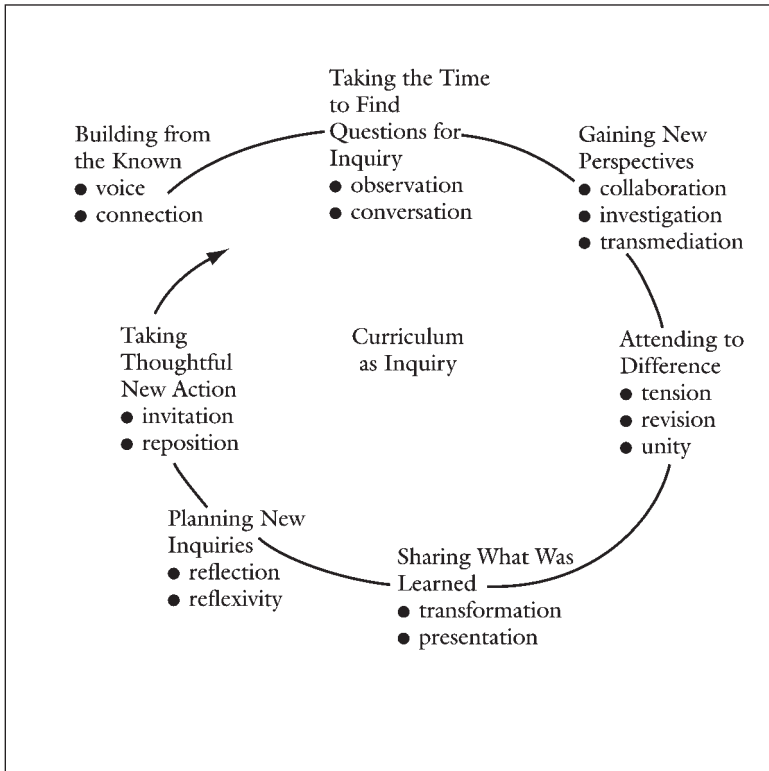


FIGURE 1.2. *The underlying processes of inquiry.*

role in the curricular development of voice, the making of connections, the more careful observation of our world, and so forth. A good inquiry-based curriculum focuses on learning how to learn. What students learn about learning today they apply tomorrow in the pursuit of a new inquiry. Part of this is metacognitive, knowing how to debug what went wrong as well as knowing how to position themselves with sign systems, disciplines, and other learners to capitalize on the learning potentials available in any situation. Mistakes are not problems, but the fodder for new inquiries.

Education as inquiry has some things in common with multiple intelligences, yet it is significantly more. Howard Gardner (1993) has proposed a theory of multiple intelligence in which he identifies seven major intelligences—spatial (which includes art),

musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical mathematical, linguistic, and bodily kinesthetic. At one level, his argument is much the same as mine. By limiting the kinds of intelligences we value, we do a disservice to what we and our society might become. I particularly like his conception of intrapersonal intelligence, which he defines as the ability to monitor one's own emotional needs. Gardner blames much of the emotional instability of our society on our lack of understanding of this intelligence. He sees teenage suicide, emotional outbreaks in which co-workers kill each other, and the like as evidence of our failure to help children develop this intelligence. He would like to see schools help students learn to monitor their internal emotional states and know how to make necessary adjustments for their mental well-being. Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to interact and communicate with others. Gardner sees it as an intelligence characteristic of persons in public office. In its most highly developed form, for example, we have a guru who can marshal others to work together for the good of the whole.

Although Gardner does not advocate using these intelligences as selection devices, many schools incorporating Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence have viewed their role as identifying students' strengths and nurturing these strengths. The result is an elitist approach to education. Kamehameha Schools in Hawaii, for example, use intelligence in one or more of Gardner's areas as the basis for admission. The Key School in Indianapolis not only identifies students by type of intelligence but also tracks them according to intellectual strengths.

In contrast to a theory of multiple intelligences, sign systems are democratic. Each of the sign systems is available to all of us. They represent the ways in which humans have learned to make and share meaning. While students may develop strengths in one particular sign system, the goal of the school is not to polish or hone this strength so much as to make sure that each student has ample opportunity to explore various ways of making and sharing meaning. *The goal of the language arts program becomes one of expanding communication potential rather than systematically closing it down through the overemphasis of one sign system at the expense of others, or through the denial of access*

because some sign systems are thought to be more important than others.

On one level, an inquiry-based curriculum is problem centered. Yet I want to be careful in saying this. Students need time to find, as well as frame, their own inquiry questions. Outcomes aren't known as they are in discovery learning, but are instead open-ended, with students free to go off in directions and reach conclusions that were not anticipated. This does not mean that teachers do not need to plan. Rather, it means they need to engage in "planning to plan" (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989) by rotating themes through disciplines and sign systems for purposes of exploring the possibilities and potentials for learning. Inquiry is not so much a curriculum of objectives as a curriculum of possibilities.

The focus of an inquiry curriculum should be on how to be a good inquirer. Experiencing inquiry is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Students need to be able to gain new perspectives, articulate what inquiries do to sensitize them to issues, and reflexively interrogate their own and their society's values.

How long can students sustain inquiry? Forever, I would say. But we kill it by expecting reports, something to grade, and concrete products. Just as there are no prerequisites to inquiry except curiosity, so there are no specific terminal points other than more curiosity and the freedom to move in new directions if one so desires.

Often, inquiry begins not so much with a question as with an itch. Something doesn't feel right, but knowing what question to ask comes much later. For a change of pace, allow students to frame their inquiry questions through pictures rather than words. This invitation can give teachers as well as the students a new perspective on inquiry, as well as an intuitive feel for the complexity and possibility of the issues that need to be addressed.

I see it as dangerous to reduce an inquiry-based curriculum to either questions or problem solving. As Suzanne Langer (1980) has pointed out, by the time we have a question we also have a solution. Embedded in every question is an implicit, if not explicit, answer to the problem. Problem solving bothers me, too. Like questioning, problem solving implies a one-to-one corre-

spondence: Here is my problem; here is my answer. Here is the students' inquiry question; here is their answer. Inquiry isn't the product of curriculum so much as an invitation to live a new curriculum. It is easy to reduce inquiry to fact finding. To do so, however, is to simplify a complex process. And as Carolyn Burke (cited in Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) reminds us, while we can simplify a complex process, to do so does not change the underlying complexity of the process.

Inquiry is more about unpacking the complexity of issues than it is about coming up with simple solutions to complex problems. This does not mean that we cannot provide a supportive structure for our students as they learn about what inquiry is and isn't. I have developed inquiry journals that invite students to engage in observation, conversation, collaboration, reflection, and other key processes underlying inquiry (see Figure 1.2). As my understanding of the inquiry process grows, my questions and instructions change: Why is this topic important to you? What three questions do you have? For each question, you need to make an observation, read a book, conduct an interview, etc. Joby Copenhaver and Rise Paynter provided each of the students in their classroom with *A Wonderful Questions Booklet* (Copenhaver, 1991). Kathy Short and Gloria Kauffman hold a "Studio Time" each Friday during which students can use the various sign systems to conduct in-depth explorations of their inquiry questions (Kauffman, 1996). If an ample supply of computers and cameras is available, it is easy to envision a "Tool Time" during which students could be invited to explore the topics of their inquiries using these tools. In my experience, it is best to explore tools and sign systems as a functional part of inquiry rather than in isolation. The trick is to be clear about what processes you believe are an essential part of inquiry and then to create curricular engagements and structures that support these processes. If these structures do not work, revision—what I prefer to call "curriculum redevelopment"—is needed.

Inquiry is not about what kind of presentation students are going to make at the end of the inquiry. Often students will want to know this, and instead of inquiring, they begin planning their presentation. Fortunately, the process often takes care of itself, since in trying to present, students often end up having to in-

quire. Our options are either not to let students know what is coming up next or to trust the process. I have found that students find their way into inquiry through questions, exploration, presentation, conversation, and demonstration—that is, being around others who are similarly engaged. Over time, I have learned to trust both students and the learning process. I did not, however, manage this insight easily; neither will you.

Think about education as inquiry, and problem solving as the difference between philosophy and technique. In the old days of problem solving, we taught inquiry as something one did sometimes in mathematics or in science. It was a skill that once mastered could be applied whenever the need arose. I don't want inquiry treated this way. I want *everything* to be seen as inquiry, from the complexities of teaching to the complexities of learning and evaluation.

Evaluation Is Synonymous with Teaching

Education as inquiry calls for a total readjustment in our thinking about evaluation. In the past, evaluation has been anchored on outside criteria set by others; teachers and students either met expectations or they didn't. The view of evaluation was that of an outsider looking in. From an education as inquiry perspective, however, the view is different:

From an education as inquiry perspective on education, the only thing evaluation can do is help a learner or a community of learners interrogate their values. Over the years, teachers and pupils have been held more and more accountable while administrators, school board members, and other stakeholders have become less accountable. Under this outsider view of evaluation, the only persons truly vulnerable are teachers and learners. The evaluator and the standards, if not above reproach, are certainly not the focal point of evaluation.

From an education as inquiry perspective on evaluation, there can be no observers, only participants, in the evaluation process. Remember, the whole of education is inquiry. School

board members need to ask themselves what they are doing to support the professional development of teachers and if this is the best use of the district's money. Teachers need to ask themselves if they are doing everything possible to provide instruction that is theoretically sound and based on what we know. Pupils need to ask themselves if what they are doing currently is the best they could do and perhaps, on the basis of this information, take thoughtful new action.

From an education as inquiry perspective, evaluation needs to track the changing inquiry questions of learners. Experience, rather than age or developmental stage, determines learning. The information provided by standardized tests is useless to teachers in planning instruction largely because it provides information relative to the test designer's inquiry question rather than the inquiry questions of the learners. By tracking the inquiry questions of learners, information about the functions that language and other sign systems do and do not serve can be gathered. Only on the basis of this information can teachers plan meaningful instruction.

What is an inquiry-oriented educator to do in the name of evaluation? The answer, I believe, is one part "kid watching" (Goodman, 1978) and one part "invitation" (Short & Harste, 1996), by which I mean inviting students to track their own inquiry questions. Developing kid-watching skills is not easy. Recently I have been working with Diane Stephens on a kid-watching approach she calls Hypothesis-Test (Stephens, 1990). Teachers keep a four-column kid-watching journal. The first column is used to record observations, the second column to record various interpretations of each observation, the third column to record hypotheses generated from reading across interpretations, and the fourth column to record curricular decisions and future inquiries. Just mastering the difference between observation and interpretation is not easy. Reading through the list of interpretations that have been generated for each observation (Diane recommends five interpretations for each observation), complex patterns of interaction can be noted. For example, in one instance

I noted that when students asked their own inquiry questions during literature discussion, everyone seemed more engaged. Further observations of literature discussion groups could either lend credence to or fail to support this hypothesis. If my hypothesis were supported by future observations—which in this case it was—a curricular change in how I conduct literature discussion groups would be called for. In another instance, I noted that with the increased use of reflective drama as a technique in writing, more dialogue appeared in students' stories. Given this pattern, a whole new set of inquiries arose, from new things to read to new curricular directions to try. The focus is not so much on teaching as it is on learning. Curriculum is built from and with the students rather than something that is done to students.

Many teachers think of checklists as the way to evaluate an inquiry curriculum. The problem this poses is that it assumes we already know what to look for. For both students and teachers, curriculum then becomes a matter of running the hurdles rather than an ongoing process of inquiry grounded in research.

Students, parents, and other stakeholders need to be invited into the evaluation process. The intent is to inquire, not to turn evaluation into a horse race whereby teachers, students, and sometimes entire countries are pitted against each other in adversarial roles. Evaluation needs to put at risk what it is each of us thinks we know. Positions—not people—are put at risk. No person or position is privileged. It is by making all positions within the educational community vulnerable that we grow.

How do I get the kids I work with to the point of wanting to investigate? I'm convinced nothing teaches like demonstration. By being inquirers ourselves, we provide students with the best invitation to inquiry I can think of. And we need to be upfront with students about what we are doing. They need to understand the inquiry questions we have about them as learners, as well as how we plan to investigate our questions. Instead of talking behind our students' backs with a colleague, saying that we are concerned about Jordan, a first grader who is not demonstrating any knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence in his writing, we need to say, "Jordan, I'm concerned. I'm wondering what I can do to support you to write like the other kids in the

room. See, they write so that I can read their writing. What can I do to help you learn to write this way? I know next year's teacher is going to be expecting you to be writing like them."

Statements like this may seem brash, if not wrongheaded, but curiosity, not correctness, starts the inquiry cycle for teachers as well as students. Embedded in statements of this sort are your beliefs about how schooling operates, what constitutes growth and development in writing, as well as what you see as your role in the big picture of things. While there may be several things wrong with the position you hold, by first clarifying and then interrogating your stand, you, like your students, grow.

Most curricula are built from memory: This is what proficient reading looks like . . . This must be the way we get there. This is what being a mathematician means . . . Logically this is how someone must get there. In lieu of these adult-logical views of curriculum and curriculum development, think of evaluation as an opportunity for you, your students, and the wider educational community to build a new curriculum for our society through research.

Focusing on evaluation may, however, be an error. At this historical moment, there are so few instances of true inquiry-based education that to talk at length about evaluation seems premature. After all, it is hard to evaluate a dream if you have never first given yourself permission to have one.

Inquiry Curriculum Musts

I liken curriculum to drama. Because I see curriculum as a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be, I envision curriculum as an attempt to "dramatize" a new way of being in the world. This is why curriculum is more about sociology than psychology, more about research than memory, more about experiences than exercises. The lived-through experience curriculum offers and the new interaction patterns it fosters make all the difference. How you teach and what you teach are both important. In fact, how you teach often determines what gets taught. *Issues of equity and justice need to be embedded in the presuppositions one makes about curriculum, frontloaded in cur-*

riculum as class topics and themes, as well as experienced and interrogated as part of the inquiry cycle.

Too often, even in whole language classrooms, we schedule one engagement after another. Rarely do we take the necessary time to reflect on what we have learned from these engagements or what our participation in these engagements means for how we will operate in the world anew. Even less often are learners asked to interrogate new understandings in terms of who benefits and who doesn't. *Learning does not end with presentation but rather with reflection, reflexivity, and action.* As a function of learning, learners need to position themselves differently in the world: business ought not to go on as usual.

An inquiry curriculum is not neutral. It begins with voice, inviting all learners to name their world. It ends in reflexivity and action, inviting all learners to interrogate the very constructs they are using to make sense of their world. Naming one's world is not a neutral process. Because we are born into a world that is already named, it behooves learners to examine critically the meanings they make, the systems of meaning in society that support those readings, as well as the available alternatives. Phrased differently, learners must take responsibility for ideas as well as for the personal and social actions that result from ideas. I'm not for a minute suggesting that learners can both name and interrogate their naming simultaneously. I am suggesting that the very process of inquiry allows us to distance ourselves from experience and to look at it critically. Just as surely as inquiry must begin in naming and framing, it must end in interrogation and action.

How you view inquiry makes a difference. *As I see it, an inquiry-based curriculum allows us to use what we have learned about creating holistic and supportive environments for learners and to build from this base.* At the same time, an inquiry curriculum raises the stakes, forcing us to address issues of critical literacy as they relate to democracy and schooling. Some see inquiry as a new paradigm in competition with whole language; I see it as an extension of the whole language model. The potential for critical theory and inquiry has always been there. It has simply taken us this long to begin to explore its potential.

In her keynote address at the 1995 National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Carole Edelsky identified vari-

ous ways that issues of equity and justice could be addressed in curriculum without violating what we know about the role that language plays in the learning process. In addition to a unit on “bears,” she suggested we can and must study topics of greater social significance. Without question, curriculum as inquiry mandates that we position ourselves as advocates for the disenfranchised.

Whole language is about hearing new voices, starting new conversations, and putting in place structures whereby those conversations can continue. I want learners to understand inquiry-based instruction philosophically as a diversity model of education. *In lieu of the conformity and consensus model that now operates, diversity and difference should be seen as an educational asset, one that puts an edge on learning.* Although there is no singular outcome—no one vision of democracy toward which we must all work—curriculum as inquiry is only democratic to the extent that it supports thoughtful new personal and social action by today’s learners and tomorrow’s citizens.

Just as whole language benefited from the involvement of many teachers in the movement, exploring its potential as well as expanding how it might be done, so curriculum as inquiry will benefit from your inquiring voices. Education as inquiry will be what we curricularly and collaboratively make of it.

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