



## **Inquiry for appraisal or inquiry as stance?**

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For some years now I have taught a postgraduate research methods course entitled Practitioner Inquiry. My students are teachers of all descriptions. Some are preservice teachers completing field-based post graduate diplomas in teaching whilst also teaching (and using inquiry) part time in secondary schools. Others are early childhood educators, tertiary teachers, or primary and secondary teachers completing honours and masters degrees. Since the introduction of teaching as inquiry within the New Zealand Curriculum and, more recently, the implementation of government initiatives such as Investing in Success, Communities of Learning and the Teacher-led Innovation Fund, when I ask the school teachers among them what they know about inquiry, the answers almost invariably begin with the phrase, “for appraisal I have to...”. Initially this surprised me. As a teacher researcher myself, I think of practitioner inquiry as a chance for professional learning guided by problems of practice emerging from my professional work. I have not experienced a requirement to inquire but rather a passion or inner drive to investigate problems of practice which, through systematic inquiry, I strive to improve the educational chances of my students. To understand where my students were coming from I asked more questions: How did they decide what to inquire about? How did they envisage the inquiry process? How did they use their inquiry findings to satisfy their appraisal requirements? What happened to them in the appraisal process if their inquiry had – as often is the case – found nothing of particular value and needed to be rethought?

Teachers’ answers to these and other questions have revealed to me that unlike practitioner inquiry and collaborative inquiry communities I have experienced and read about in the literature, the approaches these teachers are engaging in are different. In the current context, these teachers are *required* to engage in inquiry, variously defined. These projects are largely carried out as specified by their school. Often they describe using assessment tests and standardised tasks as a measure of the success of small pedagogical interventions rather than seeing inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). When inquiry is a stance teachers continue to learn throughout their career by generating local knowledge through posing important questions, learning how to unpack deeply held assumptions, and finding new ways to work with colleagues to transform students’ learning opportunities and outcomes

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(Cochran-Smith, 2011). I am troubled that in many New Zealand schools inquiry is becoming a mandated activity within a performance frame – in short, small projects carried out to meet appraisal goals. Of course, I dearly hope I am wrong, that I have misinterpreted these conversations. But even if I have, they have fueled a fire in me to work harder to assist my postgraduate students to see the importance and value of inquiry in the service of their own professional learning; to help them to read widely about the various approaches and their purposes, and to become both ethical and systematic while at the same time acquiring an inquiry stance. By this I mean developing “a world view and a critical habit of mind about teaching – a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational settings and informs professional work at all levels” (Cochran-Smith, 2011, p. 22).

## REFERENCES

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