

Teacher Inquiry

Teacher inquiry is a vital component to improving the practices of educators in their individual classrooms. There is debate about the usefulness of teacher inquiry and how findings can be generalized to classrooms all over the country. However, there is little debate as to how effective it can be to improve specific teacher practices within their own classrooms. Vivian Paley focused a lot of her time and effort on improving her teaching, as well as her relationships with students, through conducting ongoing teacher inquiry. Although Paley seemed to incorporate a variety of different inquiry techniques, the most beneficial feature was her practice of audio-recording interactions with students and following through with daily critical analysis of the data.

Individuals removed from classrooms often do inquiry and research into schools and teaching. As Karen Gallas states, "Teachers and researchers live in separate but parallel universes." Those who want to teach must first attend school to learn and perfect their craft before they enter into a classroom of their own. A lot of what is learned during those years comes from educational researchers and not actual teachers. A beneficial step in the process of becoming a teacher is the internship year, because this is when aspiring teachers learn directly from experienced educators. These mentor teachers are there to guide self-reflection and offer constructive criticism to the inexperienced teachers. However, once these new teachers have classrooms and students of their own, they are left to reflect on their practice primarily without the guidance of others. This is where teacher inquiry comes into play. As Kathleen Kesson put it, "conducting research gives teachers enhanced responsibility, autonomy, and control over their labor." Since having another individual in the classroom to critique and offer advice would be a difficult task to accomplish, having a way to audio-record what goes on is the best way to increase the chances of the teacher being able to hear everything and learn from everyday experiences.

Paley discussed how she started using a tape recorder to better analyze the flow of classroom discussions, but soon realized that she could catch elements of the discussion that she missed when it was happening live (Appendix). She mentioned in her article, "Must Teachers Also Be Writers," that she picked up on "anxious comments plus the fact that [she] intended to ignore them" by listening back to what she had recorded that day in class. This shows how she was able to use the tape recorder to her advantage to learn what feelings were present in her students during specific moments. Since she purposefully used only one tape to record rather than multiple ones, she forced herself to revisit her data the same night so that the tape would be ready to use the next day. This allowed her to be able to think about situations and then go back the next day and address any concerns with the students before it would be too late to discuss them effectively. While she was revisiting the tapes, she would not only transcribe the conversations, but she would write down persisting questions she had, thoughts she wanted to address the next day, and feelings she wanted to delve deeper into. Writing notes in a journal throughout the day is also a very useful inquiry method, but finding time during the day to do this, while being expected to teach, can be a challenging task. Having the tape recorder allows a teacher to relive moments from the day when they have time to sit and write notes about it.

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley recounts an inner dialogue that she had regarding a student named Walter. After reading *Pezzettino*, she realized that it must have been her that was making Walter feel inadequate (Paley, 1997). She wondered about how often she had praised his squares or made sure that he felt appreciated (Paley, 1997). With all of her transcriptions of daily events that she would have gotten from her tape recorder, it seems natural to wonder if she should have gone back through and analyzed her encounters with Walter to make sense of what kind of relationship she had formed with him. This is the kind of action that could be taken when a tape recorder is used to inquire about teaching effectiveness or teacher-student relationships.

Overall, while many arguments can be made about the benefit of collaborating with others as a method of teacher inquiry, it is difficult to successfully collaborate if one does not have their own thoughts in order. Therefore, self-reflection through the use of an audio recorder seems to be the method of inquiry that allows for the maximum amount of critical analysis with regards to individual classrooms.