
TEACHERS AS INQUIRERS:

Strategies For Learning
With and About
Young Adolescents

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NATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

Table of Contents

Preface, 3

1. Inquiry As Opportunity, 5

Introduction

What Constitutes An Inquiry

Context Inquiry

Inquiries Beyond the Classroom

Forms of Inquiry

Relevance to Middle Grades Teachers and Students

Conclusion

2. Getting Started, 15

Introduction

Who Wants To Know?

Framing the Topic

Designing Questions

Sources of Information

Ensuring Anonymity

Planning Framework

Conclusion

3. Collecting and Assessing, 25

Introduction

1. Survey/Questionnaire

2. Interviews

3. Classification/Categorization

4. Documentation

Some Final Cautions

4. Learning from Inquiry, 38

Introduction

Uses of Inquiry

Improving Communication

Inquiry As Curriculum

Selected Examples of Inquiries

Some Final Words

Preface

The opening scene in Meredith Willson’s classic *The Music Man* depicts a group of traveling salesmen on a train rolling westward across Iowa and singing “Rock Island.” As they discuss and debate the keys to successful salesmanship, the central character—a beguiling Prof. Harold Hill—leads their chorus of the syncopated refrain, “Ya’ gotta know the territory...” Of course a worthwhile and needed product is essential. However, when you are in the business of selling things, understanding your constituency—its tastes and beliefs and lifestyle—is paramount.

I learned early in my teaching career that this principle applied no less importantly for me as a middle level teacher. I also had faith that my own personal interests were not so far removed from those of my young adolescent constituents that we would not be able to find ample common ground for building effective communication. While the consideration of teaching as “selling” might initially seem demeaning, I learned firsthand during my early teaching years that young adolescents quite thoughtfully and analytically size up the adults who have authority in their lives and that they share their perceptions with each other. Their characterization of any of us as a “good teacher” or “unfair” derives from their empirical experience as surely as adults critique the merits or deficiencies in people around them. It did not take more than a couple of years of struggle for me to acknowledge that if I expected to be a successful teacher, I needed to create honest ways to solicit my students’ portrayals of themselves—their curiosities, aspirations, concerns, likes, dislikes, and ideas about how to ensure that our time working together would be as productive and personally meaningful as possible.

The challenge to create some kind of systematic way to ensure candid communications with students stumped me for a while. Quite unexpectedly, however, an argument among several boys about a popular television show presented itself in a way that led to opinion polling among the other members of our team. That first crude inquiry is described more fully in this manuscript, but suffice it to say that this serendipitous occurrence set me in a direction that I followed for forty years of teaching young adolescents and university students. The bottom line is that it is simply human to appreciate being asked for one’s opinion.

Creating inquiries to ensure communication between teachers and students seems self-evidently worthwhile to me. Not only does it impact the ease of relationships, it influences both sides’ approach to learning.

Integrated curriculum is grounded in a blend of teachers' agendas and students' questions and ideas. "Integration" is often associated only with a combination of disciplines in a curriculum study, but the concept refers first to a combination of the priorities of the two parties involved. Inquiry, therefore, defines the character of student-teacher relationships and communication.

The creation of this monograph began somewhere near the middle of my sixteen-year stint of teaching fifth through eighth graders, and it accelerated as a result of working with middle level teachers in Vermont. This manuscript reports examples of those teachers' work, usually as part of a course or seminar they enrolled in and which I taught. Their insightful work as first time inquirers led me to incorporate the technique in my undergraduate teacher education courses at the University of Vermont. I appreciate the vision, energy, and insights of these people; and I like to think that using inquiry has become integral to their continuing professional work. The names of many teachers who contributed to this project are included in this volume, but to attempt to name all who embraced the technique would risk leaving people out, so I won't attempt that. This work with inquiry has continued throughout my teaching career, and additional strategies and findings can be found in Chapter 3 of my book, *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* (Longman, 2001). If we truly want to understand "our territory," we must be sure to ask, listen, and enjoy the understanding that builds trust and reciprocity with our students.

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1.

Inquiry As Opportunity

INTRODUCTION

This monograph has been prepared for the teacher who has little or no prior experience with conducting inquiries. Planning strategies and procedures described in the first three chapters have evolved from firsthand use by more than one hundred first time teacher-inquirers. The fourth chapter concludes the monograph with summary sketches of 25 of those inquiries conducted by middle grades teachers in Vermont between the spring of 1984 and the fall of 1985.

An overview of the inquiry process is presented in this initial chapter. First time inquirers are cautioned to remain mindful that inquiry involves a way of thinking and learning as a teacher-learner that grows with experience. Experience teaches best how to define topics more sharply and articulate questions more clearly. Strategies for collecting information become more imaginative and dependable as the inquirer grows in awareness of the possibilities. Ultimately results become more trustworthy and useful.

A Beginning

For the first several years that I taught middle graders I only occasionally participated in my students' out-of-class discussions about topics that interested them but held little interest for me. From time to time they would ask my opinion about a particular movie or rock musician or television program, but for the most part we seemed to acknowledge that there were some fundamental differences between their non-academic interests and mine. I was comfortable with the simplistic notion that propriety dictated differences between a teacher's interests or concerns and those of an early adolescent.

My first inquiry project happened almost by accident during the winter of 1972. My students were swapping points of view about several television programs. Initially I opted not to participate in an exchange that I regarded as trivial. As discussion evolved into heated argument, however, I intervened. This impassioned conflict of personal tastes that was being dominated by the youngsters who were loudest and most assertive was leading nowhere. The thought occurred to me that we might all benefit from exploring the television viewing tastes of our class members in a more systematic way. Lacking any clear idea of just how such an investigation could be carried out, I mulled over the idea of an inquiry for several days before proposing that we conduct an organized study of the television habits and preferences of our class members. I rationalized to myself that the work could be justified if I presented it as a social studies unit. The youngsters liked the idea and agreed to the proposal. I soon found myself involved in the first of what has turned out over the years to be a number of serious inquiries into the contexts of my students.

Our first step was to prepare a viewing log. Students recorded their family members' television habits for a seven-day period. The log was arranged so that a record of each family member's viewing times and program choices was maintained. We wanted to find out what younger children and parents watched as well as what our class members preferred. Using ditto stencils, we made enough copies so that each student could collect daily information for the week being examined. We also agreed that the logs would be anonymous; students felt that individuals would be more candid if their identities were protected. A lot of discussion about initial data occurred from the first day of the study. Results were being compared by pairs and small groups well before the week had ended. Abundant early predictions were made about which shows would be most watched. Even other classes began to discuss and write about television, and for several weeks viewing habits became a focus of interest throughout the school.

The process and the results taught us many provocative things about the place of television in our family lives. The unit raised individual and collective consciousness about the extent to which we were affected by the presence of television. For example, we learned that almost every family had at least two sets, one usually being located in the family room or living room, the other most frequently located in the parents' bedroom. That single finding provoked some fascinating reconsideration of implicit meanings for "family" and "living" as they pertained to the primary use of those parts of the household.

We also learned that parents only occasionally reported that they watched anything except the evening news unless they watched a show with their children. On the other hand, the kids were wary of that information; they suspected that parents didn't always report everything they watched on their bedroom sets because they didn't want their children to know what and how much they watched in late evenings after children's bedtimes. We also learned that the most popular shows watched together by children and parents were ones of the "Gunsmoke" and "Have Gun, Will Travel" genre.

Subsequent discussions about how those shows depicted men, women, and children provoked heated discussion about the stereotypes we were being fed by the television industry. This realization was particularly powerful as we assessed the presentation of masculinity. Heroic males were not family men—they were single, powerful characters often driven by a somewhat mysterious quest. This stereotype was particularly reinforced by "Bonanza," a depiction of a "family" of four such men, the father being a widower and the three sons taking turns from week to week flirting with the possibility of marriage and conventional family commitment. Just in the nick of time, however, the son on the brink of making such a change would be redirected by a "higher" calling. We acknowledged that none of us was personally acquainted with anyone remotely resembling the heroes of these shows.

We also learned that the most popular viewing with young children was the parade of cartoons offered on Saturday mornings. This was a particularly disturbing insight, for many of my students were themselves marginally addicted to cartoons. When we subsequently assessed those shows for their teaching and modeling merit, we were troubled by the high incidence of violence, anti-social actions, and general lack of substance. While personal testimony and defense of cartoons was rare, it seemed likely that each of my students underwent some serious self-appraisal.

This first somewhat awkwardly conducted inquiry born of impulse and instinct has led me to believe now that exploring my students' points of view on a variety of issues was possibly the most worthwhile, influential educational enterprise we undertook. As the inquiry unfolded, the character of conversations we shared changed in important qualitative ways. I recognized in many of them a seriousness not previously characteristic of their response to schooling in my class. Conversations that had earlier seemed mere exchanges of bias evolved into more open questioning, sharing of information, and speculation about what it all meant. Evidence of personal reflection was particularly exciting; my

students manifested an “ownership” of curriculum that transcended their previous customary responses to course content. We became partners in investigative processes directed at finding out about things that were mutually interesting and relevant in the real world we inhabited.

WHAT CONSTITUTES AN INQUIRY?

Teacher inquiry is an integral part of every lesson or unit taught. Each time we solicit student reactions to an idea, activity, or speculative question, we are inquiring—attempting to assess perceptions, understandings, and beliefs. Sensitive teachers know that no matter how teaching is carried out, learning is always idiosyncratic and personal. The processes of inquiry are simply processes of assessment, i.e., strategies designed for finding out what the state of affairs may be as our students or others perceive them.

We all carry around our own assumptions about the nature of schooling in general and our actions in particular. Our teaching behaviors are manifestations of those beliefs. What we believe “to be the case” dominates our perceptions. What we do in our classrooms reflects our assumptions and beliefs. Inquiry enables us to gather information that will help us better understand how our students perceive things, thereby exploring and closing the gap that inevitably exists between adults and children.

Failure to assess and understand our students’ perceptions is an occupational hazard. We tend to be preoccupied with teaching issues such as unit or lesson plans, textbooks or other instructional materials, and curriculum guides. Since this complex of expectations must always be juggled within fixed units of time, it is no wonder that our thoughts are dominated by concerns often removed from the agenda that exists in our students’ context. It is essential, therefore, to understand that inquiry is not an extra task or an add-on. It is an integral part of the teaching-learning-growing process; it generates information and dialogue that is laden with meaning for all participants. Teachers who engage in such inquiry model those same attitudes and intellectual processes we seek to inculcate in our students.

CONTEXT INQUIRY

Inquiry in schools is commonly associated with academic research. The traditional application of the concept of inquiry has focused upon research projects in which students draw primarily from published materials to create a reference paper on a pertinent curricular topic in

English or social studies classes. Science teachers also use inquiry as an instructional technique in laboratory settings.

The focus of inquiry in this monograph is to understand other people's context: issues or circumstances that exist in their situations as they see them. Middle grades students perceive schooling differently from teachers and parents. Inquiry enables teachers to investigate topics of interest in order to understand them from students' points of view. Teachers and parents also differ in their perceptions of conditions and events at school and at home. Again, inquiry provides a way of gathering information that can improve understanding of differences in order to achieve better communication. Context inquiries also clarify the fabric of interwoven beliefs that inevitably exist within each of these groups.

INQUIRIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

While the overarching purpose is always to expand our understanding of our constituents, the process need not be limited to the classroom. The television inquiry described earlier is an example of a project carried out with students about one aspect of their lives outside of school. Inquiries about home-school issues such as homework policies, grouping practices, curricular rationales, behavioral expectations, dress codes, and social standards or activities can create urgently needed coherence and concurrence about the tasks of raising and educating youngsters.

The most useful inquiry to a particular school might be one that collects teachers' perceptions about their work, teachers' or parents' beliefs about the curriculum, the organizational framework of a single school, the merits of extracurricular and community-based activities. Demands for teachers' time and energies often limit opportunities for discourse about the larger issues of their profession. Inquiry can generate discussion about issues that are otherwise overlooked.

A major benefit of being a teacher is that we always have the opportunity to be creative and innovative in our work. This ongoing challenge is the essence of teaching as an art. As we design instructional plans we draw upon a variety of informational resources, and we conceptualize organizational plans that reflect our personal interpretations, i.e., our values. This is a creative enterprise, whether or not we perceive ourselves to be creative teachers. Each time we incorporate a novel idea or change a way of presenting lessons, we are making innovations in the way we teach. Our personal and professional lives are enriched when we exchange our perceptions and insights about

the things we do. Inquiry is simply one dimension of the creative nature of our work—one that enables us to learn from our students, colleagues, or parents just what meanings are inherent in their lives and in our acts of teaching. The most relevant, trustworthy information we can get is that which comes directly from our constituents, and the process of collecting is something we must do for ourselves. No amount of data based upon external studies will embody the same significance and meaning.

FORMS OF INQUIRY

Familiar forms of inquiry are the questions teachers sometimes ask students in class:

“What did you think about the game yesterday?”
“Where can I get the best pizza?”
“Which jeans are best?”

Such ordinary questions simply elicit youngsters’ beliefs. Questions such as these and ensuing responses that lead to discussion often serve as fillers near the end of class period or during homeroom or advisory period. When we ask these questions we demonstrate our interest in them as people, interest that goes beyond how well they perform in class. This monograph seeks to assist teachers who wish to transcend this level of interaction, to employ more systematic procedures for collecting, understanding, and using inquiry-derived information.

In simplest terms, then, an inquiry is a collection of the views of other people. When we inquire, we ask others to teach us, to help us close the gap between our understanding of a topic and theirs. The broad questions asked by inquiring people of those whose views they seek to understand, whether voiced in social settings or in a school-based inquiry, include

“What is their understanding?”
“What are their ideas?”
“What do they feel?”
“What do they believe? value?”
“What are their concerns? interests? questions?”
“What do they want to do that involves change?”
“Who or what influences them?”

To inquire about other people’s context, then, means simply to find out, not to judge. Although selected inquiry techniques may sometimes be appropriate for use in evaluation, inquiry seeks only to understand how others perceive their circumstances. Relating inquiry-based information to evaluation criteria becomes MISUSE of the information

unless an evaluative intent has been clearly stated from the outset. It is absolutely essential that those from whom inquiry information is being sought understand that they and their opinions are not being evaluated. Rather, the information is being solicited solely to increase and improve understanding. Once the inquiry has been completed and insights identified, it is necessary to share the results with those who provided the information. We must preserve the integrity of the process by sharing understandings and preserving the anonymity of individuals.

Inquiry—Not Traditional Educational Research

Teachers with whom I've worked have typically expressed interest in educational research, but just as frequently they have also been intimidated by the mystifying nature of its language, concepts, and presumed quest for "proof" that one treatment or arrangement is superior to another. They are curious to know the effects of their work, especially when the work is an original and, therefore, creative expression. In spite of this curiosity, however, teachers tend to be detached from the esoteric concerns of the traditional researcher: the theoretical framework of the research, the researcher's hypotheses, assumptions about the control of variables, emphasis upon objectivity, measurement that involves mathematical determinations of significance. One result of this separation between the work of teachers and that of professional researchers is the frequent report that teacher practices are rarely affected by research. Even in cases I have encountered where teachers and researchers have worked together, teachers report that their concerns and those of the researcher usually do not overlap. Hence, the teacher's curiosity and needs remain unresolved.

Numerous conversations and interviews with teachers about their perceptions of educational research suggest two major themes. First, teachers want to understand the effects of instruction and dynamics of their classrooms and schools MORE than anyone else; they sincerely seek insight. Second, they do not perceive that the world of educational research has very much applicability to their immediate concerns; their situations are typically perceived as being too far removed from the research setting. One productive path to resolution of this issue is for teachers to conduct their own investigations of pertinent questions. There are many valid reasons why this is a practical solution. Teachers do not have to meet the requirements of traditional educational researchers. Compatibility with particular theory is not essential. Comprehensive research design is not necessary. The inquiring teacher does not have to be concerned about the application of findings to any population beyond

his or her own classroom. In brief, the classroom teacher enjoys several advantages:

First, teachers are free to explore their own questions, assumptions, goals, even whims that suggest fruitful possibilities. We inquire to gain enlightenment for ourselves and for those with whom we work. While there are always underlying assumptions or belief structures when we decide to inquire, we do not have to defend them to others. For the sake of one's own clarity, however, it is important to think through the issues of personal interest and motivation involved in a particular inquiry. Inquiry-based insights gained over an extended period of time help us move closer to an accurate understanding of just what our students' perceptions are and how they value the schooling they are experiencing.

Second, subjectivity is an asset to the inquiring teacher. A teacher's anecdotal knowledge may be discounted by traditional researchers as merely one person's point of view. The processes of inquiry enable that teacher to explore the beliefs and assumptions that make up the "point of view" in question. Teachers who make subjective inquiries into the perceived circumstances of their classrooms are more likely to become objective in the processes of self-examination and change.

Third, we always have situation-specific understandings of the subtleties of our classrooms: the nuances of a particular group of students, their reactions to class determined by such things as the hour of the day, previous classes, time of year, upcoming events, and so on. For classroom teachers, these influences are often subjects for class discussion. We are concerned about the conditions in our classes, so we explore them in order to make adjustments and move on.

Fourth, inquiry findings are typically shared with those who provided the original information as part of the inquiry process. Inquiry data are, therefore, immediately confirmable; inquiring teachers give and receive immediate feedback. Since the teacher-inquirer is usually already close to those providing the data, validity and dependability are enhanced. Inquiry is unique in that it embodies this mechanism for self-correction.

Finally, inquiry enables a teacher to ferret out answers to questions and issues that are constantly changing. School life is dynamic, and the priorities of professional researchers and central office evaluators rarely shift to accommodate the contextual changes of a single school. As teachers we have the benefit of daily access and the potential for capitalizing upon our students' responses to "hot issues."

Critics of inquiry argue that outcomes and interpretations can easily be biased according to what the inquirer desires to show or “prove.” While that is a criticism we must take seriously, inquiry embodies a process that serves as a control for this liability. Results of inquiries are always shared with those who provided the original information. Those results are typically discussed at some length. Often the results provoke further inquiry or other curricular treatment. If the results appear to reflect the inquirer’s personal bias, the constituents will recognize it for what it is. Developing adolescents are especially sensitive to such manipulations, and they know that there is little justification for carrying out an inquiry that is designed to produce preconceived results.

In summary, the purposes of inquiry do not include the illusion of proof, comparing programs in order to make claims about superiority or inferiority. Just as there is no one way to educate, there is no single right or wrong way to inquire; there is instead a great diversity of questions to explore and strategies for exploring them. Teachers should not, therefore, be intimidated nor mystified by what are often very simple, imaginative ways of interacting with students, colleagues, or parents in order to better understand their contexts. Often we learn from the inquiry process itself as well as from the results. Inquiry is simply “finding out,” and teachers of young adolescents have particularly important reasons for understanding their constituents.

RELEVANCE TO MIDDLE GRADES TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Teacher inquiries provide valuable information for all teachers, but middle grades teachers especially benefit from them. Given that middle grades students are undergoing such profound changes, that our educational practices are imperfect for this age group, and that parents are frequently experiencing confusing and sometimes frustrating changes in their children, the place in schooling where we most need better understanding is in the middle grades.

Consider first our need to better understand the children we serve. We know in a general way that middle grades children undergo rapid, dramatic, and unpredictable changes; we know or suspect that their personal values do not rank schooling at the top of their priorities; we can be sure that they are fully engaged in the trying processes of forming personal identity. But typically our impressions are limited by the more or less detached observations teachers make. Inquiry enables us to go beyond superficial impressions. We can also examine the findings of outside researchers in the context of our specific classrooms and schools.

Developing adolescents are engaged in the monumental task of learning about themselves, their capabilities, their relationships to their peers, and the actualities of the adult world. It is through these interactions that they formulate beliefs that become the basis for their values and actions. When we solicit their views through inquiry, we feed their hunger to express themselves and to understand what their peers believe. The recognition that accompanies the experience of being asked for input verifies a youngster's sense of personal worth and importance, acknowledges one's credibility. Inquiry also provides constructive expression for the passion that so frequently accompanies an early adolescent's point of view. My students have over the years constantly expressed their appreciation for being asked, listened to, and responded to on matters that interested them and which we explored through inquiry.

Given developmental changes and a general lack of applied knowledge about how to best work with middle grades youngsters, inquiry offers a constructive response to our need to know our circumstances better. Inquiries conducted within the faculty also yield insights about how teachers perceive the viability of the school's operation. It is a truism that teachers support most fully those issues with which they agree. The prudent principal, committee chairperson, or other leader turns to inquiry to try to access his colleagues' personal beliefs and state of mind. My experience with inquiries carried out within faculties indicates that teachers rise to greater consciousness about the purposes and practices of their schools when they participate in defining their state of affairs.

CONCLUSION

Inquiry involves a way of thinking and functioning as a teacher-learner that grows and improves through experience. Taking the step to create an initial inquiry is the only hurdle. Second and third efforts will reflect advancement; topics will be more sharply defined; questions will be more clearly articulated; strategies for collecting information will be more imaginative and dependable; results will be more trustworthy and, therefore, useful. The following chapter provides guidance in getting started. Essential to getting any inquiry beyond idle speculation and conversation is clear conceptualization of "what it is that I want to know more about."

2

Getting Started

INTRODUCTION

“What did you have for breakfast this morning?”

“How much sleep did you get last night?”

“How much time did you spend on your homework?”

These questions are part of the daily parley between teachers and students. The critical juncture in the process of contemplating issues and questions exchanged with students is, of course, the movement from idle curiosity and momentary speculation to the systematic action of inquiry. There are many reasons why suppositions remain unexplored, however. Teachers are besieged with responsibilities: the unending tasks of planning and paper grading, student advising, parent conferencing, and much more. Such obligations mitigate against introducing additional tasks into the classroom; there are limits to time and energy.

If curiosity is to evolve into inquiry, it will happen because the teacher recognizes its potential value and wills it. One must incorporate the inquiry into available time, existing structures, and established responsibilities. An advisory group or homeroom may be the most appropriate setting to initiate an inquiry. Sometimes the topic fits the context of one particular discipline. On the other hand, most inquiries I have carried out or learned about from others have been done irrespective of a particular discipline. Inquiries are by their nature interdisciplinary.

WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

Inquiries almost always arise first from teachers' curiosity. Sometimes the interest is prompted by students' questions; sometimes it grows out of conversation in the faculty lounge. Inquisitiveness often results from something read in a professional journal or the daily newspaper. Questions that emerge in a parent conference may stimulate ideas. There are also examples of inquiries being conducted by administrators who need teachers' reactions to an innovation being considered. But regardless of who conceptualizes and initiates it, the project belongs to everyone. Even though the original questions may

have been personal to only one or two people, once the inquiry is underway, everyone involved feels a sense of ownership and is curious about what is being learned. Teacher-inquirers must be willing to share the project and acknowledge the interest of those from whom information is being sought. Failure to demonstrate this attitude will result in suspicion and unwanted alienation from both students and colleagues.

In schools where teachers are grouped according to Interdisciplinary Team Organization (ITO) there are particularly unique opportunities for inquiries. An integral part of the ITO process is the exchange of ideas and concerns among team members about the students they serve and the effectiveness of programs and activities being provided. ITO advocates insist upon a schedule that provides common planning time so teachers can exchange observations of students and program. These sessions inevitably include the sharing of questions and speculations—a certain indication that some level of inquiry is underway.

Students like to explore their own questions, too. Questions that hold mutual interest for students and adults may become a subject for collaboration. On several occasions I have helped my students look for and understand their classmates' views on issues as widely ranging as beliefs about the fairness of school rules to preferred brands of peanut butter.

In one presidential election year we conducted an extensive survey of eighth graders in schools from each of the fifty states in an attempt to predict the outcome. We asked which candidate they believed the people in their communities would support. Although our project was far from "scientific" in comparison to those reported in the media, we were astounded by the accuracy of predictions we were able to make based upon predictions collected just three weeks prior to the election. Another group of students acted upon their curiosity about the school's neighborhood by conducting an inquiry designed to identify origins of our neighborhood families, the parents' jobs, their hobbies, types and names of household pets, and so on. I have learned that the more frequently I conduct inquiries with my students, the more they in turn propose their own projects, ask for help in exploring the issues that are on their minds, and grow in their understanding of the inquiry process.

In general, students in the middle grades have not matured sufficiently to be able to conduct an inquiry without a good bit of adult assistance. Conceptualizing a project necessitates dimensions of formal thought that are generally beyond the developmental readiness of young adolescents. They also simply need more life experience. It is necessary, therefore, that we provide the organizing structure and guidance so that

they can pursue their interests and satisfy their questions. Youngsters who particularly enjoy participating in a teacher-led inquiry develop rapidly in their understanding, however.

FRAMING THE TOPIC

Next to committing required time and energy, the greatest single obstacle to launching an inquiry is the process of establishing parameters for a topic. There always risk in wanting to find out so much information that the original focus diffused. For example, I once wanted to understand what my students thought about the detention system in our school. I thought of our system as a direct presentation of the structures of governance in our adult society. Consequently, I solicited my students' thoughts about the rationale for rules, order, and consequences. What I got from them was a collection of superficial, chauvinistic views concerning the merits of our way of life. Their ideas about our specific detention system were lost in the shuffle. Reactions were detached from the specific issues I wished to examine. Follow-up discussion with them revealed the flaws in my own understanding. I learned that I needed to focus the inquiry more sharply upon a concrete issue: our detention system.

Another problem with focus emerged when a colleague wanted to collect student evaluations of some innovations she had made in her math program. What she really wished to understand better was the extent to which some games she had introduced were seen by students as helpful in learning computational operations. Her inquiry looked at the math course too broadly, however, with the result that she got very little specific insight into how students viewed the games.

Such broadly focused inquiries are not necessarily useless, for the results may raise new questions, possibilities, and ideas. The process can sometimes be as enlightening as the results. In these examples, however, the failure to focus precisely enough brought results that were fairly far removed from the original intent the inquiries. It is best to keep the inquiry centered upon the explicit topic of concern.

Once specific possibilities begin to be conceptualized, it is especially useful to discuss the ideas with fellow teachers. Solicit their reactions to your notions, ask specifically for judgments about the coherence in your explanation and questions. For example, are you really interested in students' perceptions of "sportsmanship" as a concept, or do you want to know what it means to them in gym class? Are you interested in their ideas about "success," or do you want know what they think a successful

student in your school does? As a rule of thumb, it is wise to focus upon explicit, real-life issues and concrete examples when inquiring with middle grades students. Otherwise their reactions may be widely ranging speculations that do not really shed light on your questions.

Another topic that has been explored by several groups of teachers in different schools has to do with finding out about the nature of their students' transition from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school. It is common for teachers to have impassioned assumptions about "what they do to the kids when they go up there" or "what they did not teach them down there." Typically teachers in all schools concerned lack accurate information about what the real issues are to those whose welfare is in question—the children who anticipate and live through the transition. By gathering reflective experience and impressions about the transition from those who are going to be making it as well as those who have already accomplished the change, teachers have been able to form valuable, pertinent insights. Subsequent program innovations based upon those learnings ease the transition for future generations.

DESIGNING QUESTIONS

Once the topic has been framed satisfactorily, the specific questions the inquirer wishes to address become more evident. Limitations usually help clarify the precise information the inquirer needs. Since teachers are more accustomed to asking questions designed to elicit known answers, articulation of questions that explore may initially seem difficult. It will be useful again to solicit colleagues' critique of sample questions. Unforeseen dimensions may emerge and enrich or further clarify your original ideas. What is the likelihood that the information the questions will provide meets your needs for the topic?

Although there are usually many factors that make it difficult to accomplish an effective collaboration, the axiom that "two heads are better than one" is especially applicable to designing questions. We sometimes gain insights about our own thoughts and concerns by hearing ourselves explain our ideas to someone else. Lots of discussion about the topic is encouraged, particularly when it results in concrete examples of specific questions deemed appropriate to ask. Once questions have been articulated, it is a good idea to try them out on a few selected people who are representative of the larger group targeted for the inquiry. This field testing provides feedback that enables the inquirer to make refinements or modifications to have the best possible chance of getting the desired information.

Consider this observation: a student body is made up of numerous smaller social groups. We hear them referred to as the “nerds,” or the “jocks,” or the “preppies,” and so on. If the topic of an inquiry is to learn about these groups in ways that go beyond stereotypes and labels, then the following questions would be appropriate:

“Why does one join a particular group?”

“Can anyone belong?”

“What do people in _____ group believe about themselves?
Others?”

“What are their beliefs about school? Work?”

“Do students regard teachers as members of adult groups?”

“How do students describe teachers’ groups?”

Given that concerns about group membership are particularly common in the middle grades, an inquiry designed to generate better understanding about the groups in one’s immediate environment is especially useful. While the published work of traditional professional researchers will often inform us about group psychology and adolescent behaviors in general, only a teacher-directed inquiry can enlighten us about the groups in the settings in which we live. Such topics have special appeal because they concern real people (ourselves and our students) in real situations (our classrooms and schools).

One of the developmental trademarks of the transition from childhood to early adolescence is the qualitative change in youngsters’ preferred styles of dress and grooming. During these years they become more conscious than previously about how they appear to others. For some developing adolescents the changes appear to be incidental, while for others they become an obsession. Regardless of the degree of impact, teachers can be certain that emerging adolescents have a new awareness about how they appear to others. A teacher-inquirer wishing to explore students’ perceptions about their styles of dress might ask,

“Why do kids plait the laces in their sneakers?”

“Which jeans do you prefer to wear? Why?”

“What kind of shirt would you NOT be caught dead in?”

If, on the other hand, the inquirer wished to explore relationships between fashion and membership in a group, the questions would be different:

“What do preppies wear? Never wear?”

“What does a dweeb wear to a New Wave dance?”

“Which groups of kids do not have pierced ears?”

Yet another tack on this topic is suggested by these questions:

“How much do clothes cost if you’re in _____ group?”

“How do you pay for clothing purchases?”

“What are your parents’ rules about clothes?”

Student interest in these questions is certain, because middle grades youngsters are particularly sensitive to peer values. Imagine how interested parents will also be in the results of such an inquiry. If the school employs a dress code, students may have a great deal to say about how they express themselves outside of fashion and grooming practices.

It is customary in the middle grades for teachers to test children’s knowledge of content at the end of an instructional unit. Such tests generally require specific answers to specific questions. Grades are assigned according to an established index or standard, and then everyone moves on to the next unit of study. Consider for a moment some questions we don’t often ask:

“What do you believe were the most important things you learned in this unit?”

“Why do you regard them as important?”

“What do you consider to be unimportant? Why?”

“What did you learn that you believe will stick with you for six months? A year? Forever? Why?”

“What does your teacher believe is most important? Why?”

“Which one of your school books is most valuable? Why?”

Although surveys and questionnaires are the most frequently used devices for asking questions, they are by no means the only ways for teacher-inquirers to access information. There are many, many ways to explore questions. Part of the challenge of inquiry is to create ways to effectively and efficiently explore the topic of interest so that the information being acquired is trustworthy and instructive. An assortment of strategies designed by inquiring teachers to collect the information they needed are described in the next chapter.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The knee-jerk reaction of educators to professional questions is usually “to look it up.” Our automatic turn to the library is understandable, for that is the action we have been taught and which we teach as knowledge consumers. Inquiry topics may also be explored in the question-formation stage by considering work that has been done by professional researchers and reported in the appropriate professional journals. *ERIC* is an excellent resource for identifying such related

work. But even if classroom teachers have ready access to professional libraries, the time necessary to conduct a literature search may not be so readily available.

While the professional literature is often helpful, it is not essential. Inquiry is above all a collection of information concerning a specific group of people in an immediate setting. One is not compelled to justify the project on the basis of its relationship to research and contribution to knowledge outside the immediate setting. In fact, the inquirer is free to go straight to the topic, zeroing in upon specific questions about the immediate classroom, school, or community.

Several teachers in one middle school were disturbed about the emphasis their administration was placing upon one particular set of descriptors of effective teaching. The descriptors were part of a theoretical model receiving a lot of attention in professional literature. The aspect of the model that concerned these teachers had to do with what they perceived as only peripheral attention to their personal high priorities of “affective” and “humanistic” attributes. Since the issue involved some previously latent ideological differences, strong feelings were at stake. Their decision to conduct an inquiry about students’ perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers and teaching became an earnest examination of the matter from the point of view of those most affected—the students.

The original descriptors that had aroused the inquiring teachers’ passions and curiosity were employed as a guide for designing the questions they wished to explore. What had previously been rejected as adversarial became an asset as they sought to formulate the questions. A series of conversations precipitated collaboration that reflected collective concerns and questions. Inquiry became a responsible professional reaction to an authentic issue, and the teachers who conducted the study looked upon the imposed model in more open, inquisitive ways.

Inquiry is foremost an investigation of issues in one’s immediate context, but many topics are also problematical issues in other schools. Ideas derived from conversations with colleagues in those settings may provoke thought about previously overlooked possibilities. For example, one project designed to explore students’ ideas and values regarding intramural and interscholastic athletics led the inquirers to gather ideas from teachers and coaches who worked in other middle grade schools in the immediate area. They sensed that the people they interviewed in at least one of the neighboring schools were considerably more competition-conscious than was true of their own school. This new consciousness of differences in school values caused them to reconsider

their approach to the inquiry. Eventually they proposed parallel inquiries in which the impressions of youngsters from both schools were collected, thus adding a previously unforeseen dimension to the project. Another parallel inquiry explored perceptions about grade reporting systems. The inquirers interviewed teachers and parents in other schools prior to investigating perceptions in their own school.

The source of information that is ultimately most valuable, however, is the people whose experience is being collected and examined. The inquirer decides which group or population is to serve as the information pool. If the topic concerns students' ideas and beliefs about the course being taught, then the inquiry will be limited to just those students who are in the class. On the other hand, if the topic is a school-wide issue such as school spirit, it makes sense to gather information from lots of different students from an array of grades and classes.

Precise sampling techniques are not necessary, yet common sense suggests that questions concerning school-wide issues should be addressed to students, teachers, or parents who typify the makeup of the school's population. One note of caution: keep the number of informers limited to what you believe will be a manageable number. If you inadvertently wind up with more information than you can manage, you've taken on an unnecessary burden. A related rule of thumb: be conservative in deciding how many people you will include in your information pool. If you later discover that the information you have collected is too sparse, you can always add people to your study.

ENSURING ANONYMITY

Trust is sometimes hard to come by in schools serving the middle grades. Therefore, most people providing personal views about school-related topics prefer to do so anonymously. There are some exceptions, of course. On quite a few occasions students have *wanted* their identities known by their classmates; the inquiry seemed to legitimize telling each other what they believed about an issue. In general, however, it is reasonable to expect that students and adults feel more willing to be candid if they can respond without having their identities known either to each other or the teacher-inquirer. Sometimes the strategies being used to collect information preclude such privacy. In such cases informers need to understand why anonymity isn't practical or possible. Then they can judge how intimate their responses should be. If the topic is sensitive, the inquirer should do everything possible to protect the informers' identities.

Assuring anonymity has its risks for the inquirer, too. Sometimes we have to confront “bad news.” Information received may include content that is personally critical. If one opts to solicit responses to programs or issues with which he or she has close personal association, there is always the possibility of getting information that is personally painful. In one school where there were apparent philosophical divisions, several teachers created an anonymous inquiry to explore some assumed differences. They hoped that by surfacing and clarifying disputed values they would better understand each other and could be led to work together more agreeably and comfortably. The hurt came when several of the teachers in one camp decided to sabotage the inquiry, taking advantage of their anonymity to communicate vitriolic remarks to the inquirers, who were deeply hurt. However, once the inquirers got past their initial upset and disillusionment over that unanticipated and unjustified abuse, they were able to recognize just how serious the faculty breach had become.

This project confirmed the actuality that faculty relations and morale were in grave jeopardy. The administration had certain evidence that the school was confronted with a personnel issue that begged for attention and resolution. Subsequently a mediator was brought in to help the faculty work through their differences, and results were encouraging. Had anonymity in the inquiry not been assured, divisive issues and feelings may have remained surreptitious until the split was beyond repair.

PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The following framework has been used many times to organize issues and stages of inquiry for teachers beginning to conceptualize a first inquiry. It is useful as a checklist for planning.

1. What is the topic that interests you?
2. What do you want to find out about it?
3. What are potential sources of information?
4. Who might provide you with assistance if needed?
5. What are some ways you might collect information?
6. What difficulties or problems do you expect to encounter?

Once these questions have been answered, the teacher-inquirer is ready to begin.

SUMMARY

Teachers are surrounded with clues about issues on the minds of students having to do with their personal-social contexts. Incidental conversations and interactions create impressions that lead to assumptions. Where students and teachers share interest in issues, opportunity for inquiry is especially golden. The essential first step leads to conceptualizing the parameters of the topic followed by articulating questions that effectively inquire. Next comes the challenge of creating ways to collect the information needed. Imaginative strategies developed and used by inquiring teachers are detailed in the next chapter.

3.

Collecting and Assessing

INTRODUCTION

Questions and collecting dance together. Sometimes the question “leads,” sometimes the collection strategy leads. Regardless of whether the movement of the inquiry is directed more by one, the other must always follow. This chapter describes various strategies for collecting information.

How the information will be collected influences which questions are appropriate to explore and vice versa. If, for example, the inquirer wants to know how students use their leisure time, it makes sense to have them maintain individual activity logs for a week or two. Actual use of time has then been documented. While the inquirer might initially think of using a questionnaire, the log constitutes a more dependable body of information. Although the log was created for a specific purpose, it may also yield other valuable information about hobbies, reading habits, television viewing habits, activities shared with parents, and so on. Such additional information may lead to other inquiries. Fitting the collection procedure to the kind of questions being explored is a very important part of the inquiry process. It is always a worthwhile challenge to create effective ways of continually learning more about the youngsters with whom we work.

Surveys or questionnaires are usually the easiest, most direct ways of collecting information. A well-conceived questionnaire can produce clear indications of what the respondents think. Although interviews sometimes consume too much time to be a practical device for the teacher, they are especially useful for getting comprehensive, clear, pertinent responses. There are, however, several different ways of conducting interviews the inquiring teacher should consider, and each is described in this chapter. A variety of additional techniques have been developed by innovative teachers. In addition to providing descriptions of survey and interview techniques, this chapter includes some of those innovative strategies: documentation of students’ ideas and teachers’ anecdotal observations; teacher-student letters; categorizing tasks using

pictures; card sorts; picture-reaction activities; role playing; anonymous note box. The first-time inquirer is encouraged to draw from these existing ways of gathering information and at the same time to imagine novel ways of exploring questions. A special benefit of conducting inquiries is the effect the process has on relationships between teachers and their students, colleagues, and parents. People generally enjoy telling others what they believe, and early adolescents are especially fond of telling teachers what they think. Students often come up with excellent ideas about what topics to explore, which questions work best, and how the information might be collected. As I became a more and more experienced inquirer, my instruction and evaluation practices changed. Students were quite responsive to that evolution. My advice is, be imaginative—and enjoy the experience!

1. SURVEY/QUESTIONNAIRE

For several reasons questionnaires offer an appealing way to collect information. They are easily reproduced by photocopying. Locating answer spaces on the sheet can allow for easy scoring. The inquirer who is concerned about uniformity is assured that every respondent is asked the same questions in the same manner. Questions are very easy to efficiently distribute and collect, thus accommodating the time pressures every teacher confronts. When a computer is available, questionnaire data can be put directly into a program that provides instant calculation of quantifiable information. The questionnaire in such a case should be constructed with computer scoring in mind.

A. Yes/No/Short Answer Items – When putting together a survey the most common tendency is to ask simple yes and no questions.

“Do you participate in sports?”

“Do your parents require you to do chores at home?”

Other direct, short-answer questions also solicit concise, often quantifiable responses.

“How long does it take you to travel to school?”

“How much allowance do you receive?”

“What pets do you have?”

Responses to questions such as these are easily tallied and expressed in terms of frequency with which they occur, average answers, and the percentage of responses to particular items. Such information helps us gain a better understanding of who supports and opposes an issue.

Furthermore, this kind of arithmetic-friendly information can be treated using tables and graphs. Polls reported in newspapers and magazines are often developed in this useful but limited manner. Use the direct questions that seek yes or no responses and short answers, but consider some additional ways of eliciting responses.

B. Open-ended Questions – We’ve all had the experience of trying to respond to a yes or no question with “Yes, but...” Open-ended questions invite the respondent to provide more detailed answers. Responses to open-ended questions tend to identify the respondent’s position on an issue while including elaboration that enriches the inquirer’s understanding. Such responses can still be tallied and treated in the same fashion as yes/no/short answer responses, but the additional commentary can provide a context that improves understanding.

“How could you improve the discipline system?”
“Describe a homework assignment that helps you.”

C. Statement Completions – These items require the respondent to complete a thought or make an association by completing a statement. Responses to these items are particularly useful because they combine the best features of short answer and open-ended questions. The inquirer gets answers that indicate personal beliefs in a form that is almost always succinct.

“I feel best about myself at school when I...”
“My hair is...” “Kids my age are usually...”

D. Agree/Disagree Items – It is often useful to know the extent to which respondents support and oppose issues in an inquiry, but two-dimensional (yes/no) responses don’t indicate how strong students’ views may be. Agree/Disagree items also provide for responses that indicate indecision or indifference. A five-point scale is most useful.

“I am a good friend because I am always loyal.”

Disagree					Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

“My teacher usually doesn’t listen to me.”

Disagree					Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

E. Rating Items – Reorganizing a list of items into an order that reflects personal priorities is another method of making value statements. Items ranked at or near the top and bottom are usually the most useful. An additional option the inquirer might use is to allow respondents to create their own higher or lower items if they feel particularly strong about adding them.

“List in order of most to least interesting to read:

Popular Science *Sports Illustrated* *Seventeen*
Time *Penny Power Newsweek* *Smithsonian*”

“List the following ‘places to go with a friend’ so that your first choice is on top, your second choice is next, and so on until the place you would least want to go is on the bottom. If there is a place you wish to add or leave out, please do so.”

movies my house bowling ball game friend’s house

F. Listing Questions – These items ask the individual to simply list as many responses as come to mind. With this kind of question the respondent may name a variety of ideas. A follow-up question might combine the listed items with a rating task by asking the person to then organize the answers according to priority.

“List some things we’ve studied that you don’t understand.”

“Name some places you like to go with your family.”

As a follow-up,

“List them according to where you go most or least often.”

G. Situation Resolution – Early adolescents are beginning to think in much more hypothetical and theoretical ways than they have been able to function in their earlier years. This developmental change is especially evident as youngsters explore various dimensions of social conflict and interpersonal dilemmas. They are increasingly able to put themselves into another person’s place. Situation resolution items can enlighten the inquirer not only about students’ social values but also about the development of formal thought in individual students. Hypothetical situations can be presented on a written survey, or they can be used for role playing activities in the classroom or advisory. Either way they require the student to identify with another person. For example,

Sam and Ben have been best friends since fifth grade.

They like the same sports, and they now share a

newspaper route that originally belonged only to Sam. Paul recently moved into the house next door to Sam, and they have quickly become good friends. After doing a lot of things together without including Ben for a couple of weeks, Sam called Ben to ask if he'd give up his share of the paper route to Paul. Paul needed the job as a source of spending money.

This situation offers opportunity for students to react from as many as four points-of-view: Sam's, Ben's, Paul's, and the view of an outsider. The inquirer may wish to ask students to respond solely as if they were in the position of each of the three characters or solely as an outsider.

H. Reflection Questions —These queries invite one to look back upon experience, to reflect upon past events in a manner that produces a judgment or opinion. Middle grades youngsters are beginning to think seriously in such reflective ways, and they respond to the opportunity to express the wisdom of their experience. Reflective questions produce not only better understanding of what students think about a topic but often provide excellent suggestions for improving school practices. Such items solicit opinions that are couched in one's present beliefs.

“What advice do you have for an incoming sixth grader?”

“What was the hardest thing to learn last year?”

“When did school work best for you?”

These are not the only types of items that can be used in constructing a questionnaire, but they are ones that provide access to information that can usually be managed and interpreted effectively. The inquirer who decides to use this method for collection should experiment by creating trial or tentative items. The best way to learn how to construct effective questionnaires is to create them and apply them, expecting to learn by trial and error.

2. INTERVIEWS

Ordinarily, the most efficient way to determine someone's view about an issue is to ask directly, face to face. The nature of the institutional relationship between students and teachers sometimes works against such direct questions, however. We must not forget that teachers have greater authority and power than students have. Students may be inclined to tell adults what they believe adults want to hear whether or not it is truly what is believed. The inquirer has to make a judgment about the degree of candor that exists in student-to-teacher communications. The

direct teacher-student interview does, after all, eliminate anonymity. If it appears that students feel comfortable and free to respond to teachers' questions without apprehension, then the direct interview is a feasible way to collect information.

In order to increase the probability of getting responses that are relevant to the inquiry topic, interview questions should be thoughtfully planned. It is a good idea to develop some tentative questions to try out on colleagues or students who will tell you just how clear the questions sound to them. By sticking to well-developed questions, the interview is less likely to evolve into a conversation that deflects the purpose of the interview. Some simple, basic guidelines for interviews worth observing are presented below.

A. Guidelines

First, the questions should be few in number and carefully worded so that they articulate precisely what the inquirer seeks to learn.

Second, once the interview has begun, the format and questions should not change. When questions are spontaneously paraphrased, their meaning is often altered. Stick to your plan.

Third, the interviewer should not reflect or comment about the interviewee's responses. It is inappropriate for the interviewer to offer a personal opinion about either the question or the response.

Fourth, if the interviewee opts to move the discussion in a direction that is tangential to the question, the interviewer should attempt to gently move the focus back to the original question unless it is apparent that the interviewee doesn't want to discuss the topic further or has nothing left to add. Of course, if the interviewee doesn't wish to respond to a question at all, the interviewer should move promptly to the next question.

B. Interview Structure

Since it is the interviewer who initiates and controls the interview, the degree of structure constitutes an important consideration. A highly structured interview is controlled by the questioner who asks direct questions designed to elicit discrete responses. Once a question has been satisfied, the process moves to the next question and so on. This is an efficient arrangement for gathering information in a face-to-face encounter.

When more reflective responses about a topic are sought, a semi-structured format is appropriate. The interviewee describes in greater

detail his reactions to the questions being voiced. Questions are open-ended, and the interviewer may add spontaneous questions or request elaboration. Connections with points already made may also be sought. A more reflective process can be encouraged by asking for concrete examples of general statements made by the respondent.

The most unstructured arrangement is an oral history format. In this case the interviewer asks broad questions that encourage the respondent to discuss at length if he chooses. This format is the least useful one for teacher inquiries because it requires the investment of so much time.

C. Interview Formats

Interviews are generally thought of as discourses between two people, one of whom asks while the other answers. While this may be the most ideal arrangement from the standpoint of clarity and coherence of information collected, the inquiring teacher can select from several interview arrangements:

1. **One-to-one** – The teacher interviews as many students as practical, one at a time. It is wise to limit the interview to as few questions as possible on a single topic. Obvious time constraints often make this format the least feasible.

2. **Small group** – A group interview involving no more than five students may be an effective way to collect information representative of a larger group. I have opted to use this arrangement when I needed information that reflected student interactions around a particular question. In a small group where each person has ample opportunity to participate, students will express and exchange views with minimal interviewer intervention. Sometimes they will reach consensus; sometimes they will take sex-role related positions; other times there may be widely disparate opinions. The key ingredient in this setting is that each person responds but doesn't bear the burden of being the only respondent. Recommended group size is from three to five students.

3. **Large group** – An effective large group interview is difficult to achieve simply because time and the ratio of students to interviewer limit the number of people who can respond. Too often the most outspoken people dominate the discourse, whether or not their views coincide with those of quieter colleagues or classmates. Experienced teachers recognize this syndrome operating in class discussions of any kind. It is almost inevitable that group dynamics will influence the responses or non-responses of students who would have more to offer in a smaller group setting. Successful large group interviews are possible, however, when

the questions are clearly articulated, and the interviewer makes certain that every student who wishes to respond may do so.

4. **Student-student** – Middle grades students can be especially effective when interviewing each other. I have found that after giving the whole group an introduction to the inquiry topic, several students who interact well with their classmates can do a better job than I can of collecting their classmates' reactions to the topic. This format also has the advantage of providing anonymity insofar as the teacher is concerned since it is not necessary for the interviewers to reveal the names of respondents. In the example of the television inquiry described in the first chapter, most of the interviews were conducted by students. When using student interviewers, it is paramount that they understand the importance of collecting precisely what others believe; the tendency to interject one's own opinion is strong. Practice interviews critiqued by classmates and the teacher raise everyone's consciousness about this tendency, and lots of practice leads to expert interviewers.

Summary – When interviews are highly structured it is not necessary to use a tape recorder as long as the interviewer is noting the responses. In general, tape recording is a good idea for semi-structured settings, and it is a necessity in unstructured oral history discourse. I have used tape recorders most successfully in helping students learn to be more effective when interviewing others. When students listen to themselves conducting an interview, they become particularly conscious of their own tendencies to paraphrase, to give inappropriate feedback, to interpret, and so on. The tape recorder can be a helpful reminder that it is the interviewee whose views are being sought.

3. CLASSIFICATION/CATEGORIZATION

The human ability to think categorically, to compare and contrast, to place events into sequential order appears to develop markedly during early adolescence. In my experience students enjoy such intellectual activity, especially when the topics being sorted or classified relate to their interests or issues in their lives. Consequently, information-gathering techniques that invite youngsters to function in these intellectual terms are well received. A few examples of some imaginative ways to elicit students' beliefs are provided.

A. Card Sorts – Topics are listed on 3 x 5 index cards; students are asked to arrange them so that they fall into categories such as “most important to least important.”

For example, distribute five cards to a student, each card labeled with one of the following:

telephone refrigerator bicycle encyclopedia television

Then ask the student to arrange the cards in order of which one is most important for him or her to have at home, next most important, and so on to the least important item. Then ask the student to explain the basis for his or her ideas about the ordering. The point is not that one order is more or less appropriate than another. The key is to understand the basis of decision making for one's order.

Students may also be asked to generate their own responses on cards and then arrange them according to predetermined criteria. For example, give the following directions step by step, allowing students time to carry out each task.

1. List the names of five of your favorite television personalities, putting one name on each card.
2. Now arrange them in order of whom you would most want to meet for lunch at the restaurant of your choice.
3. Identify the person you placed first and explain your choice; then do the same for your second choice, and so on.

B. Picture Arrangement – Pictures taken from magazines can be mounted on cards or sheets of paper and distributed in packets of five or so. Students are again asked to rank them in order of importance, or courage, or intelligence, or some other relevant trait.

Comic strips can be used for a similar activity. They should be cut into separate frames and mounted on separate cards. Students should then be directed to arrange them so that they tell a story. If the balloons above the characters' heads are also removed, students can add dialogue to tell a story about a particular issue.

The key to this kind of activity is learning the explanations that underlie students' classifications. When students are freed from apprehension about rightness or wrongness they are more imaginative and innovative in their responses to tasks such as these. Teachers are then better able to understand how personalities and issues are perceived. An additional dimension of picture arrangement activities involves asking students to write down one or two words that describe the individual depicted. These descriptors can then be sorted according to categories that will emerge on their own.

C. Product Evaluation/Comparison – Students are establishing preferences with regard to the many commercial products they use such as: sodas, clothing, pizza, magazines, cosmetics, sneakers, and so on. Often their biases are based upon assumptions about attributes that can be tested and compared in the classroom. For example, sodas can be submitted to a blind taste test. First, the inquirer collects information from students about such things as the frequency they drink sodas, their choice brands and flavors, and reasons why they prefer particular ones. Based upon this information, taste tests of unlabeled samples of the most frequently chosen ones can be made. Results should establish the extent to which students can identify them. Further questions can be asked to establish the definitive attributes of a frequently identified brand: distinctive flavor, sweetness, carbonation, texture, advertising, or other criteria. These procedures will also produce information that can be used for the calculation and graphing techniques that are usually part of the middle grades mathematics curriculum. For the inquirer who is particularly interested in evaluating or comparing products, *Penny Power* is an excellent resource. The bimonthly magazine published by the Consumers' Union is oriented toward product assessment by middle grades youngsters.

4. DOCUMENTATION

A good documentation system is an asset to teachers in the middle grades for a host of reasons. Several specific documentation techniques can be employed to collect information relevant to inquiries. The teacher-inquirer who wishes to involve students in collecting and sharing information over an extended time should consider the following documentation strategies.

A. Journals – Students may be asked to keep a specific journal that they are willing to share with the inquirer about the topic of inquiry. For example, if the topic being explored has to do with “frustration in the seventh grade,” students might be asked to spend the last few minutes of a class or the school day reflecting and then writing in their inquiry journals about any frustration experienced that day. The entry could be about a personal experience or about frustration observed in other people (teachers included!). The inquirer should establish a framework for the entries: who was involved? what caused frustration? what has occurred to resolve the frustration? At a designated time two or three weeks later, the journals constitute the documentary information. The inquirer has

several choices about how to process this information. Journals could simply be turned in to the inquirer for study and analysis. The guiding framework could be used as a pattern for summing up observations by the journal-keepers. Class discussions could be designed to draw upon the journal entries. Regardless of how the inquirer decides to process the collected information, journals provide rich data pertinent to the topic of “frustration in the seventh grade.”

B. Logs – In their simplest form logs are merely tally sheets designed for recording brief bits of information such as time, names, activities, and number of occurrences. For the television inquiry described at the beginning of this monograph, I created a viewing log for each student to use to record information at home. The log was simply a collection of ditto sheets on which data about the television viewing practices for each member of the family was kept for a seven-day period. At the end of that week the sheets were brought to class, and the process of compiling and analyzing them began. There is no single way to design a log; design is a consequence of function. If students are recording the amount of time they spend talking with their parents, the log needs to provide spaces for those entries on a day-by-day basis. If the inquiry concerns how much time different family members spend talking on the telephone, the log needs to provide spaces for different family members, the time the call is taken, the time the call ends. The best advice I can offer is to first create a log you think will serve your needs, then test it on your own or with a small group of collaborators to establish how well it works.

C. Anecdotal Records – For years I kept anecdotal records on students without realizing that it would be extremely useful if I kept an anecdotal record on ME i.e., a record of my observations, thoughts, ideas, insights, questions. Once I began to keep such a record (a three-ring binder referred to by my students as “the good book,” I began to make more systematic observations of my students. One year I met weekly with a group of other teachers to share concrete incidents of youngsters thinking their way to solutions of problems. These were primarily academic quandaries, and if I did not write them down in anecdotal form shortly after they occurred, I usually lost them. This anecdotal process made it possible for me to pursue my interest in learning more about how the 11- to 14-year-olds in my multiage class tackled intellectual dilemmas. Once again, there is no single way to keep such records. While I was comfortable with the “good book,” colleagues

used such other techniques as 3 x 5 index cards stuck in a pocket, a tape recorder, and a journal such as the one described in the preceding section.

D. Suggestion Box – One of the very best devices I have ever used for getting candid, anonymous information from middle grades students has been the suggestion box. I first used this device to solicit questions and concerns from students in a class about adolescent sexuality. At the end of each period each student was required to place a folded note in the suggestion box. Written on the note could be a serious question or concern, or it could simply be a blank piece of paper. The point of this arrangement was to offer maximum opportunity for students to identify their concerns without risk of being known to their classmates. On rare occasions students abused this provision, but that was a small price for the wealth of candid, authentic information the others requested or shared. I am convinced that when students are certain of their teacher's earnest interest in them, they will use this device fully to report their views about a variety of issues or topics.

E. Letters – Some teachers with whom I have worked have used the format of a friendly letter to collect information from and about their students. The inquirer establishes a schedule for the letters to be written so that the task can be handled comfortably. Specific topics may be assigned for the students to write about in their letters. These letters do not pass through the U.S. Postal Service; they are simply handed to the teacher according to the prearranged schedule. In every case with which I am acquainted, the teacher has written short responses to the students and returned those with the original letter.

SOME FINAL CAUTIONS

There are several noteworthy cautions that apply equally to the first-time and the experienced inquirer.

First, everyone does not agree about the propriety of conducting inquiries. Many parents believe that schools exist strictly for the dissemination of established knowledge, not the creation of understandings about ourselves and each other. While my students have almost always been enthusiastic about participating in them, I always carefully explain that anyone who prefers not to participate has every right not to participate. If the mode of collecting is a survey, I suggest that anyone who doesn't want to participate simply turn in a blank form when everyone else turns in theirs. Likewise, if there are questions

anyone chooses not to answer, they should simply be left blank. Questionnaires are usually anonymous except for categories such as sex or age or grade, so privacy can be assured. If the inquirer suspects that students might be uncomfortable about having their identities known in a particular inquiry, the questionnaire is seen as a safe way of providing candid information. In our enthusiasm for inquiries, we must not overlook students' rights to the privacy of their thoughts.

Second, once information has been compiled and given a first tentative interpretation, the inquirer should share the results with the constituents. If information has been collected from a large number of students, this initial sharing can be carried out with a smaller group such as a class or one's advisory. Often this sharing generates discussion that gives further information about the responses and the method used to collect the information. More than once students have responded to my inquiries with, "Oh, I thought what you wanted was..." and "I thought you meant..." This kind of discussion provides the self-correcting advantage of inquiry over traditional educational research methods discussed in the previous chapter.

Third, final results must always be shared with those who provided the information. Although an inquiry may be carried out over several weeks, results should also be shared as quickly as possible. The greater the time lapse, the less seriously the results will be taken by others. The inquirer should always assume high interest among those who provide the information whether or not they request the results. Students in the middle grades are especially interested in how their peers respond to the questions they've answered.

Fourth, be conservative in forming judgments about the efficacy of your results. In inquiries as in traditional educational research, there are many factors that influence the moment(s) of data gathering, and we are never fully cognizant of all of them. While we should pursue inquiries with positive enthusiasm and curiosity, we must also remain modest in forming assumptions about what the data enables us to conclude. Notions of "proof" that lurk in the background must always be tempered by acknowledgment of the limitations of our procedures and the transient nature of opinion, especially among developing adolescents.

4.

Learning From Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Finally—results are in hand!

Learning from one’s own inquiry is a unique professional experience. In the variety of roles and functions that teachers fulfill, only inquiry involves the creation of knowledge. This final chapter points out some of the ways insights can be used and applied. Brief summaries of projects carried out by middle grades educators are included to illustrate topics of interest, questions asked, ways in which information was collected, and how the new insights were incorporated in classroom or school procedures.

USES OF INQUIRY

While we may have become accustomed to the assumption that inquiry and research teach only when the final results have been analyzed and conclusions have been drawn, teacher inquiries teach us as we go. Our relationships with our constituents change when we ask them to tell us about their perceptions. Those from whom we solicit share dimensions of themselves that are different from the ones we are accustomed to seeing in our more familiar roles. Several complementary uses of inquiry are noteworthy.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Teachers are like anyone else in that they conduct their work based upon assumptions about what other people believe. While having preconceptions is natural, conjectures are also sources of misunderstanding. No one likes to be told what he or she thinks. Teachers frequently voice assumptions about “what kids think” and “what parents want.” Such ideas are not malicious, but opinions based upon unexplored

speculations are often invalid and unfair. When personal conjecture constitutes the sole frame of reference for interpreting the actions and beliefs of others, we confuse ourselves and others about the true nature of the issues in question.

When others perceive us as presumptive about their beliefs, they understandably reject our suppositions. Communication quickly breaks down. On the other hand, when we are open-minded and inquisitive to the point that we explore their perceptions, we construct a basis for good communication. This principle is particularly applicable to our work with young adolescents who want so much to be understood and respected by adults who are significant to them. Our actions as inquirers also model a skill we implore our students to perfect—listening. Unless they listen carefully to the lessons we present, they are likely to misunderstand; unless we listen carefully to the lessons they offer us, we too will misunderstand.

Clear communication within a school community is rare. Inquiry offers interesting options to achieve needed enlightenment about the expectations, concerns, and values that exist among children and adults. Parents are often the most perplexed people involved with young adolescent youngsters. There is perhaps no greater area of misunderstanding, doubt, and suspicion than unclear or incomplete communication of priorities between home and school. Philosophical and practical differences can be better negotiated when issues are understood on the basis of information purposefully collected by inquiring teachers. The beliefs and priorities of those around us are there for the taking. When inquiries address the issues openly and new understandings are shared candidly, everyone benefits.

INQUIRY AS CURRICULUM

The information explosion of our time necessitates that students learn how to find out whatever they need to know. One approach to finding out is to inquire in the fashion described in the preceding chapters. The television inquiry reported in the first chapter began simply as an inquiry to address students' conflicting values. It produced initial information that led to further study of the issue beyond anything anyone had originally imagined. Once the popular shows were identified, they were analyzed to determine the basis of appeal and the story formula. We assessed the "get-something-for-nothing" genre and came to fuller consciousness about the "hooks" used to get us to watch them. We examined commercials to identify and clarify the angles being used as "lures."

What began as a single, brief inquiry evolved into curriculum that was responsive to students' interests and engaged them in exercising their intellects. The inquiry required use of basic skills: reading, writing, categorizing, classifying, problem solving, interpreting, and analyzing. Much of the study required application of mathematics previously studied largely as abstractions. The television inquiry evolved into an interdisciplinary curriculum unit that was both intellectually and academically appropriate.

Young adolescents have an enormous curiosity about what and how their peers think about the "new issues" of their time of life: the opposite sex, what is "in" and "out" according to local mores, the social order in the immediate context, dating and parties, and clarification about peer expectations to name a few. Although students often have burning curiosity, a suitable context for voicing their questions is more difficult to find. Since early adolescents are already aware that there is much they do not know, they constitute a perfect group for studying the topic.

The teacher designing such a unit of curriculum is wise to include an inquiry component. Armed with information gathered firsthand, the teacher can then create balance between what students want to know and what the teacher believes they also need. Social studies, science, and language arts units can be better designed when inquiry is employed as an instructional strategy.

Inquiry As Problem Solving

Teachers in the middle grades are especially aware of the health risks to students in contemporary society. Many socially conscious agencies join efforts to educate children about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Our students' nutritional practices are a less publicized but similarly serious threat to health.

While published materials provide needed content to pass on to students, those materials were designed for a broader population. A well-crafted inquiry produces information that raises consciousness about the extent to which these risks are an active part of their lives. An eighth-grade teacher carried out a pre-assessment of his students' knowledge about drugs prior to designing a unit on drug use. He unexpectedly discovered that aside from his students' knowledge base, they revealed suspicions that the information they received from adults and published literature was not truthful. They appeared to believe that such information was simply a scare tactic. The unit he subsequently designed required students to conduct their own inquiries to generate information

they could trust. The unit went so well that copies of conclusions were distributed throughout the school.

Many teachers and administrators have used inquiry to explore problem areas in their schools. Some projects have investigated students' perceptions of the system by which discipline is carried out. Others have sought student reactions to homework policies, dress code, intramurals, interscholastic sports, and so on. Selected studies from ones done by middle grades teachers and principals in Vermont between the spring of 1984 and the fall of 1985 are briefly summarized on the following pages.

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF INQUIRIES

The following studies were carried out by first-time inquirers in a variety of Vermont schools that serve middle grades students: elementary schools, middle schools, junior highs, and junior-senior high schools. The topics were matters of interest not previously explored in any systematic way.

Transition From one School to Another

Judy Steffens and Bob McCann, fifth grade teachers at the Founders School in Essex, wanted to know what it was like for their students when they moved on to the community's 6-8 middle school. They wanted to find out how successfully their students made the transition, how they felt about the move, and whether they felt adequately prepared. They also wanted to determine whether or not there were steps that could be taken to facilitate any troubled aspects of this passage.

Using open-ended questionnaires, they collected information from students and teachers in the fifth and sixth grades. The inquiry generated a great deal of useful information about youngsters' expectations and the extent to which fifth grade apprehensions were borne out by experience. The most frequently offered advice from sixth graders to their younger counterparts was, "be prepared, follow the rules, and keep your mouth shut." Everyone surveyed agreed about the need for an orientation program that provided close personal attention.

Employing the information they collected, Judy and Bob developed several proposals for strengthening the school's effort including: the creation of a "moving up day" when fifth graders could spend the day with a sixth grader to experience firsthand the routines of the middle school; a buddy system for incoming sixth graders; an inservice for fifth

and sixth grade teachers to discuss common concerns; a parent workshop to identify practical strategies for helping their children.

Lori DeRosa was similarly interested in understanding how sixth graders managed the transition from their small 1-6 elementary school in Bristol to the much larger junior-senior high school. She also used questionnaires to solicit information from sixth graders anticipating the change and seventh graders who had moved on several months earlier. Both groups were surveyed in the spring.

She learned that there was a great deal of apprehension among the sixth graders, especially in regard to getting lost in the much larger high school. They were also worried about drugs, having enough time to get from class to class, and how older students and new teachers would treat them. One-third of the seventh graders continued to feel that they were inadequately informed about the high school even though they were nearing the end of their first year there.

Students had a number of suggestions for the transition: tours of the building for both sixth and seventh graders; an opportunity for sixth graders to go to classes one day with a friend in the seventh grade; having students, teachers, and counselors from the junior-senior high school visit the sixth grade to talk about the transition. Lori became much more enlightened about how these students perceived this important change, and she resolved to be much more accessible to them during their seventh grade year.

Doug Churchill and Roy Cichoski, teachers at Camel's Hump Middle School in Richmond, wanted to know about the experience of 21 students who had just entered their school as a result of their families' having recently moved into the community. Their survey invited students to comment about comparisons between their old school and the new one, what the first day was like, and friends left behind and new ones made.

Results indicated that these youngsters felt a good bit of anxiety and confusion associated with the change. The inquirers concluded that there was a definite need for a plan that would provide each new student with an experienced classmate as a partner during the first few days. They recommended to their colleagues and the administration the creation of a student handbook to communicate procedures and expectations to all students but especially to new ones. Further recommendations included tours of the building with returning students rather than teachers and a meeting between teachers and the new student and parents.

Sharing Personal Information

Carol Ayer and Stan Flink of the Spaulding Graded School in Barre suspected that their students would like to know more about the personal backgrounds of their teachers. They created an inquiry designed to establish the willingness of teachers to share personal information as well as the importance students placed upon having such information.

First they surveyed colleagues to identify the types of personal information they were comfortable sharing. Based upon information derived from these teachers' questionnaires, a student questionnaire was administered. Both groups overwhelmingly approved the proposed sharing.

Interestingly, however, several teachers who believed they shared a good bit of personal information were identified by students as "unwilling to share." Students were particularly interested in knowing teachers' leisure activities, personal life experiences (especially childhood), lifestyle, and educational background. They indicated that they felt more comfortable with teachers who shared willingly. Based upon these insights the faculty undertook consideration of an advisory program as a context that would facilitate the human interchanges students indicated that they valued.

Values Held By Middle Grades Students

Barb Smigiel, a science teacher at Essex Middle School, created a three-stage study of her students' valuing processes as reflected in decisions they made. She included the inquiry as part of a health unit on drugs.

To initiate the inquiry she employed some published values clarification activities to raise students' consciousness about the valuing criteria they already followed. She then presented her own questionnaire to probe students' thoughts about ways in which their school helped them with valuing, decision making, and ethical standards.

Based upon insights gleaned from the survey, she created two "situation resolution" activities. These role-playing activities explored students' reactions to adolescent alcohol addiction from the points of view of a friend and of a parent. An enormous amount of information was collected from the three activities, and Barb observed that her students demonstrated heightened awareness about the interplay of differing values among teachers, parents, and students. Enhanced communication and more thoughtful decision making also characterized her students as a consequence of the activities introduced by inquiry.

Robert Owen of Barre's Spaulding Graded School created an inquiry to explore his seventh graders' values in regard to friendship, amusements, and personal ethical standards. He wanted to collect this information in order to be able to compare it to the conceptions of his fellow teachers.

A questionnaire based upon a published design was adapted for use in the project. It was comprised of "forced choice" items, some of which he and his students had written. All seventh grade students and teachers completed questionnaires. Analyzed data were subsequently confirmed by selected follow-up interviews. Robert concluded that the inquiry was one of the most important activities he had conducted because it enlightened him as to how his students and his colleagues felt about a variety of issues.

Stress in Students' Lives

Six South Burlington Middle School teachers collaborated in an elaborate investigation of sources of stress in their students' lives. They prepared themselves by reviewing current professional literature about causes of stress during adolescence. Based upon ideas gained from those readings and their experience with students, they created an inventory of sources of stress and a list of ways students handle stress.

All sixth, seventh, and eighth graders completed an anonymous checklist, and the voluminous results were tabulated according to age and sex. Small group and individual interviews validated checklist results. From this inquiry it was evident that stress derived from two general sources: school and home. School-related stress was associated with what students felt to be overemphasis upon grades, exaggerated amounts of homework (especially in math), "picky rules," and overly judgmental peers. Sources of stress at home related primarily to what the inquirers judged as typical differences of opinion with parents.

The inquirers were unanimous in the belief that they needed to do more to help their students to recognize, understand, and deal constructively with stress. Homework policies, school rules, and additional strategies for helping students cope were identified as agenda topics for faculty meetings during subsequent inservice sessions.

Teasing in Adolescent Relationships

Teasing often clouds the climate of a school, and Gene Szatkowski of the Lawton Intermediate School in Essex Junction explored its effects within

his classes of sixth and eighth grade students. A survey combining rating scale items and open-ended questions was created to collect student ideas and experience. Gene administered it to small groups of his students.

Only 5% regarded teasing as harmless, and sixth graders saw teasing as “cruel” twice as often as did eighth graders. While older students were somewhat forgiving of teachers who tease students, the sixth graders were very protective of each other. Gene concluded from his fascinating data that teasing was not seen by students as friendly, joking banter; rather, it had overwhelming negative connotations. An enormous amount of evidence confirmed that students were sensitive about teasing, interested in it, and concerned that teachers understand their feelings.

The Meanings of “Success”

Verna Johnston, Barbara Velasquez, and Dave Bean, math teachers at Essex Middle School, wanted to know how their students perceived “success” in general in their school lives and, more specifically, what it meant in their math classes. They created a survey of three dozen items and gave it to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders during math classes.

While students generally reported that they experienced some degree of success at school, it was after school and during evening hours that they most often felt successful. Results also indicated that there was a significant decline from sixth to eighth grade in expressions of satisfaction with grades and achieving goals. With regard to mathematics, boys reported much more frequently than girls that they experienced success.

These results provided abundant material for ongoing study of the math program. While no conspicuous flaws in the curriculum were identified, there was ample evidence for teachers concerned about students’ feelings to study the issue further.

Development of Student Responsibility

During the year that she was a university graduate assistant working in an alternative program, Amy Demarest chose to conduct an inquiry into how adolescents learn responsibility. The seventh and eighth graders she studied were students in the Paradise Project at Edmunds Middle School in Burlington.

Amy’s initial mode of inquiry was systematic observation of interactions between students and teachers as they negotiated expectations and responsibilities. Based upon those observations, she

created and distributed questionnaires to all eighth graders and their parents.

Both groups indicated that the clarity of teachers' statements of expectations was the single most important ingredient in students acting responsibly. When teachers' language was clear and firm in a context where trust and acceptance of students was demonstrated—students were responsible. Both groups also confirmed that the classroom climate was essential to children's assuming responsibility. Students needed to feel safe and accepted by their teachers even when they failed.

Dean Witham also explored responsibility among fifth graders at the Founders School in Essex where the ICMM (I Can Manage Myself) system was used. He wanted to know how well students who had earned the ICMM cards understood what the cards meant, how they earned them, and what benefits they provided. He also wanted to understand the perceptions of students who had not earned a card.

A questionnaire and small group interviews provided the information he sought. Dean learned from his inquiry that students who had held ICMM cards for the longest time understood the system best; students who had never held a card were most uncertain about what it meant and how one could be gotten. He concluded that the system needed increased visibility and that students who had not held a card needed more direct assistance in earning one. All students expressed interest in having a card; those he described as "hard core offenders" seemed to be least aware of what changes they needed to make in order to earn a card. Based upon insights gained from his inquiry data, Dean gave more attention to children who needed his help to earn cards.

After School Activities

The after school activities of students at Spaulding Graded School in Barre interested Judy Schlegel and Gary Baack. The inquiry was precipitated by their noticing numbers of students hanging around classrooms after the school day ended. Suspecting that some of them were "latchkey" cases who wanted a social context in the afternoons, Judy and Gary surveyed all eighth-grade students, parents, and teachers to learn if after-school activities differed according to whether the student lived with one parent or two.

Results showed that students living with one single parent spent more time socializing with friends and watching television after school. Students living with both parents participated more frequently in organized activities (sports, music lessons, etc.). Students, parents, and

teachers agreed about the need for organized after-school activities. All adults further agreed that community resources and personnel other than teachers should be used.

Jim Wilhite was similarly concerned about the after-school activities of latchkey students at South Burlington Middle School. Sixty seventh graders were surveyed during their social studies classes using a 25-item instrument Jim designed.

He learned that his students who were at home alone after school spent an average of two hours watching television. Several students looked forward to having a few hours at home alone while others dreaded it. Based upon his results Jim made several recommendations for the consideration of his fellow teachers and the administration: an inquiry should be conducted at the beginning of fall term to identify children whose parents were both working; the school should offer additional activities for latchkey children; school counselors and officers of the PTO should work together to educate teachers and parents about the need for programs for these children.

School Climate

In a school-wide survey of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders at Spaulding Graded School in Barre, Maggie Eaton first asked students to list things they would not change if the school underwent a major transformation. Next she solicited their suggestions for improvements. She was curious to learn what students believed were the most important elements in maintaining a desirable school climate.

Keeping the same teachers and remaining in their 100-year-old school building headed the list of things that students believed should not be changed. A major theme for improvement had to do with increasing opportunities for them to spend more time together. Subsequently Maggie formed a School Spirit Club. Students who chose to participate interviewed parents and teachers during Open House Night. She videotaped subsequent discussions held for students to share what they had learned from their interviews.

As students began to see themselves as change agents, their ideas about change expanded. Maggie learned that they had sound, practical ideas about their schooling. She subsequently defined "school climate" as "the soul of the school."

Best and Worst Teacher Behaviors

Karen Grady and Verna Thomas of Camel's Hump Middle School in Richmond decided to inquire about the characteristics students and adults used to describe the all-time best and worst teachers they had ever had. Interviews were used first to create a list of descriptors. A brief questionnaire was then constructed and administered to students in fifth through eighth grades.

The youngest respondents, fifth graders, used specific incidents to convey their values rather than abstracting specific attributes or techniques of teaching. Personality, sense of humor, and the quality of interpersonal relationships were characteristics most often reported by sixth and seventh graders. Only the eighth graders identified specific teaching techniques as indicators of good or poor teaching.

A second written survey was employed to ask students to rate the order of importance they assigned to the leading descriptors identified earlier. This particularly comprehensive inquiry demonstrated widespread agreement about preference for teachers who were "nice, fun, funny, happy, understanding, fair, and friendly." Several seventh and most eighth graders rated "appearance, intelligence, and teaching ability" high in their priorities.

Terri Livak of Brown's River Middle School in Jericho also wanted to learn what her students perceived as good and bad teaching styles and actions. She created a card sort activity to initiate the project. Based upon the information gained she constructed a list of 18 items reflective of a good teacher.

Students were asked to rank items in order of importance. A final step was collecting the single most important piece of advice her students would give to a new teacher. Summary of the collected information about good teachers indicated the following priority order: sense of humor; fairness; strictness (but not too strict); explains carefully and patiently; remains calm and relaxed; allows discussions, teamwork, projects; friendly. Descriptions of bad teaching emphasized opposites of the positive attributes.

Additional information was enlightening about how students perceived homework and testing practices. Terri was pleased with the seriousness of her students in the inquiry, and she reported that it was particularly useful in helping her understand how students perceived her actions and how her actions affected their school lives.

Favorite and Least Favorite Places at School

John McGuire, a sixth grade teacher at the Wheeler School in Burlington, was concerned about the run-down appearance of his school building. He hoped that an inquiry would produce evidence to support his contention that money for rugs, painting, renovation, and additional equipment was needed to create an environment that students would like and which would not be a hindrance to good education.

To collect the information he wanted, John created a questionnaire that asked students to describe favorite places in the school according to location, color, floor, size, capacity of people, noise level, and smell. He then asked questions about the amount of free movement students had in their chosen place, what they did there, and whether they could talk.

To his surprise, more children chose the classroom than any other spot. Their preferred places were multicolored, uncarpeted, large (30+ people), and so on. Three points of greatest agreement had to do with freedom of movement, the presence of classmates, and freedom to talk (96% agreement on all three). John realized that the cosmetic conditions of spaces were considerably less significant to his students than the freedoms they enjoyed there. He concluded that “it is what we do with whom that makes a favorite place at school—not what it looks like.”

Ability Grouping

The practice of grouping students according to achievement test performance and grades has been an issue of concern to many teachers who are concerned about the effects grouping has on how students see themselves. Cathy Neale and Carol Livingstone decided to inquire into the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers at Camel’s Hump Middle School about that practice in their school.

Teachers and parents who attended an open house were given a written survey, and students were interviewed in small groups. Inasmuch as their inquiry revealed, students appeared to accept ability grouping without much question. They reported feeling academic pressures that led to a preference for being in classes where they believed they could succeed. They also reported that the particular group they were in did not affect their self-esteem. Parents were very supportive of ability grouping.

These inquirers concluded that how students were grouped was not nearly as important to them as the classroom atmosphere and how they were treated. Student interviews indicated unanimous value for teachers who were pleasant, caring, respectful, and who enjoyed their company

and valued their accomplishments. It was important for teachers to recognize and accept students' abilities and inadequacies equally.

Katie Kelley and Carole Slayton of Essex Middle School also explored students' perceptions about ability grouping in their school. They first examined student records in an attempt to establish the extent to which students' group membership was reflected in grades and test scores; they were unable to find clear-cut effects.

A survey was constructed to collect student reactions. The major theme that emerged concerned youngsters' preferences that they spend more time each day with the same classmates. They also preferred a grouping arrangement by which students would be grouped with their friends. All students believed that they learned best when they were progressing at the same rate as their classmates. The inquirers concluded that there was room for both homogenous and heterogeneous grouping in the middle grades at their school.

Students' Perceptions of Detention Systems

Sharon Baack initially explored the concept of "fairness" as it was perceived by students who were periodically removed from her class as a consequence of inappropriate behavior. She subsequently expanded the inquiry to explore students' experiences and perceptions about a variety of behavioral interventions (detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension) at the Spaulding Graded School in Barre. Sharon began by using interviews and a survey with students and teachers. Since interviews were consuming so much of her time, she formed a Student Research Team and had members conduct interviews with their classmates. Colleagues responded to the questions using written surveys.

The results provided some important insights, namely that there were great discrepancies in the perceptions of the three groups about what constituted specific offenses and why particular consequences were assigned. Better than four out of five students reported inequities in suspension practices. One conclusion was that an urgent need existed for clearer definition and outline of procedures. The student handbook was seen as seriously inadequate. Creation of a peer review team to assist in disciplinary issues was also suggested.

Philip Soltau, principal of the Williamstown Junior-Senior High School, also inquired into student perceptions of the detention system in his school. He reported that seventh and eighth graders undertook the project seriously and were very interested in the results he later shared

with them. Three out of four students had received at least one detention, so they were generally familiar with the system.

The majority indicated that they did not think the system deterred anyone from doing what he or she wanted to do. Only half of the students thought the system was fair. The major outcome of the inquiry included Phil's realization that he and the professional staff needed to reexamine their expectations, the effectiveness of their provisions for communicating expectations, and their conceptualization of how they might best deal with students' misbehavior.

Co-Curricular Activities

Mark Kennedy, principal of South Burlington Middle School, needed information from students, parents, and teachers in order to make informed decisions about the future of co-curricular programs. He created an inquiry that was distributed to all three groups, color coded for each group and students' grade level. Half of the items were five-degree agree-disagree; half were open-ended questions.

Among the implications drawn from Mark's project was the need to extend the number and variety of co-curricular activities; the majority of existing ones were sports oriented. Students and teachers were unclear about the purposes and commitments entailed in activities. Parents were particularly supportive of the idea of getting people from the community (other than teachers who were perceived as already heavily committed) to help staff additional activities.

Impact of Computers

Judy Carr and Lynn Currier were teachers at Essex Middle School where many of their students' parents are employed by the computer industry. They were curious to know the extent to which Essex families owned computers, the extent to which their students learned about them at home, and the extent to which students learned about and used computers at school. One hundred of their sixth, seventh and eighth graders were surveyed. Students from homes which had not yet acquired a computer were asked speculative questions regarding family plans to acquire and use a computer.

Judy and Lynn were amazed to find that more than half of their students already had computers at home, and many homes included peripherals and programs which comprised complete systems. If non-owner students' predictions were accurate, 83% of their students would

have home systems in the near future. One third of the teachers had home computers, and 11% of them had classroom computers.

Judy and Lynn concluded that “a quiet revolution was taking place” in Essex classrooms. Student sophistication with new technology was growing rapidly as a consequence of factors outside the school, and implications for teaching and curricular modifications were bountiful. Their results provided the school with certain evidence that teacher preparation for helping students use this new tool was urgently needed.

Camel’s Hump Middle School’s relatively new computer laboratory was being heavily used by sixth, seventh, and eighth graders who had completed an orientation course. Marianne Worden, Jim Leach, and Steve Koenemann were particularly concerned about sex equity in computer room usage; they sensed that girls were deferring to boys.

Information was collected from three sources: sign-in slips collected by lab supervisors, a written survey, and group interviews. The inquirers were surprised to learn that girls in each grade were slightly more frequent users than boys. Sixth graders of both sexes were the heaviest users. One significant byproduct of the inquiry was the indication from almost all students that they would like to have access to the computers before and after school hours.

Persistence in Band Participation

Charlotte Ellenwood, band teacher at South Burlington Middle School, had been concerned for several years that students who were active in band during the middle grades did not continue the activity in high school. She suspected that other responsibilities and opportunities affected the persistence of band students.

Charlotte’s inquiry explored the issue with high school students who were former band members. Items on her questionnaire asked respondents to answer with weighted responses: a highly important factor was scaled at 5 and a minimally important factor was 1. Outcomes clearly answered her questions about the decline of participation. A required music education course in ninth grade, an increased need for study time and sports, and diminished interest were the most frequently cited detractions. Charlotte realized that the middle school band program was as far as many students wanted to go. She was able to accept the actuality that her program was not necessarily a feeder for the high school band, and she refocused her efforts to make the middle school band program as personalized and satisfying to students as possible.

SOME FINAL WORDS

Inquiry is simply a way of satisfying teachers', parents' and students' curiosity about each other. When and where an inquiring attitude is valued, inquiry provides a way to fulfill the need to know. What we learn helps us understand others and how they view the contexts we share. How we do that learning is by listening—an indication of our respect and trust. An unanticipated consequence is that sometimes we also learn more about ourselves.

First-time inquirers should begin on a modest scale, expecting to learn as much from the process itself as from the information collected. With increased experience, inquiries become more focused. Colleagues can be very helpful as a sounding board for questions and procedures being considered. If there is concern that students may not be serious in their responses, they should be warmed up to the task. If practical, they can be involved in developing questions and collecting information.

Above all, the first-time inquirer should keep in mind that youngsters like to tell adults what they think, what they believe about controversial issues, and how they feel about others. The critical young adolescent years are a perfect time to encourage students to express themselves and to learn from each other in a safe, trustworthy setting. The depth and diversity of the youngsters' concerns about themselves and the often more adult-like than childlike issues they confront constitute the primary agenda in their lives. Teachers who harvest this rich resource lead children toward self-knowledge, the ultimate goal of any true educational system.

Teachers and parents hold strong personal views about the early adolescent years. Since they have all been through that time of life, often in ways that have left them with profound beliefs, they constitute a rich source of information. While we inevitably function on the basis of many assumptions about what others believe, the middle grades provide the ideal opportunity to explore our most critical assumptions about "how things are." Exactitude doesn't apply very well to early adolescence. Understandings are needed that clarify our immediate circumstances. Inquiry helps us do that.

