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Does Inquiry Make a Difference?
Examining Our Beliefs
About Curriculum
In our lives both inside and outside of schools, we are constantly reminded of the power of story (Rosen 1984). When we get together for professional or social reasons, we always tell stories about our recent experiences. In fact, we have reserved the first half hour of our meetings for “storying” before discussing business, and we often stop to tell stories during our conversations. We’ve found that if we don’t take time for stories, we have difficulty completing the tasks we have set for ourselves. Through these stories, we struggle to make sense of our lives as teachers and learners, the kinds of classroom learning environments we are creating, and our students’ lives as learners and thinkers.

The stories in this book center on our attempt to understand curriculum as inquiry (Harste 1992). They grew out of questions we were asking about children’s understandings and the kinds of learning environments that would support deep, complex learning. To examine our questions, we formed a teacher research group we thought would last for a year. Four years later, we are still meeting and talking. Our group consists of Kathleen Crawford, Margaret J. Ferguson, Gloria Kauffman, Julie Laird, and Jean Schroeder, who are all classroom teachers in elementary schools in Tucson, and Kathy Short, who teaches at the University of Arizona. While we have changed grade levels and schools and moved into and out of graduate coursework, we have continued to meet and think together about curriculum as inquiry.

In examining our initial questions about children’s understandings, we came to realize that we needed to make major changes in the kind of learning environments we were creating with the students in our classrooms. These changes involved our thinking about curriculum as inquiry and exploring curricular structures that support inquiry, such as broad concepts and the inquiry cycle (Short and Harste, with Burke 1996).

Exploring Our Tensions as Teachers and Learners

All of us had used writing workshops, literature circles, thematic units, and self-evaluation in our classrooms. We were considered innovative teachers who put time and thought into our teaching and were willing to constantly explore new ideas. We were kidwatchers (Y. Goodman 1978), observing and listening to the students in our classrooms. We made sure that our curricula were carefully developed from students’ needs and
interests, and we gave students many choices in their learning. They were actively involved in meaningful learning experiences and encouraged to reflect on those experiences through self-evaluation.

While we felt positive about many aspects of our teaching, as learners we paid attention to the tensions we felt in our curriculum and our interactions with children. One such tension was that we had two parallel curricular frameworks: the authoring cycle for reading and writing, and thematic units for content area learning. We were uncomfortable with this separation of content and process. We also began to worry that our thematic units remained teacher directed and that students often seemed simply to gather facts about topics rather than engage in thoughtful investigation of questions and issues. When we started hearing the term “inquiry” at professional conferences, we initially assumed that inquiry was a slightly different version of a thematic unit, but nothing substantially different. However, the tensions we were feeling led us to wonder whether inquiry might offer another approach to curriculum.

Through a summer course on integrating literature into inquiry, we became interested in children’s multicultural and historical understandings and came together as teacher researchers to explore children’s understandings in our own contexts. In order to study our questions, we realized that we had to create more powerful learning environments in our classrooms to support children as thinkers and learners. As we struggled to create these environments, we began to envision a different curriculum—one based in inquiry.

While many educators were talking about inquiry, we found little in the professional literature on actual classrooms grounded in inquiry. We had come to believe that inquiry offered a different perspective on curriculum, but most of the practical examples we found were updated versions of thematic units. We needed a way to connect our beliefs to practice.

We thought we understood inquiry at a theoretical level, but it wasn’t until we tried to live inquiry in our classrooms that we realized that this approach involved a major theoretical shift for us as teachers (Short and Burke 1996). It was difficult to make this shift, and readers of this book will find that our classrooms are in transition from thematic units to inquiry. Taking an inquiry perspective on curriculum was much more difficult than...
adding another activity or changing the format of our units. It meant a
different way of thinking about curriculum. We used many of the same
activities and materials as before, but our thinking about those activities
and materials had to shift. It was easy to slide back into our old ways of
operating in the classroom because this new way of thinking was hard. In
addition, when we first moved into this new way of teaching, we had not
explored all of the implications or fully experienced a classroom based in
inquiry. Sometimes our struggles were rewarded with major break-
throughs; other times we just had to keep believing that our struggles
would eventually get us some place.

We believe that curriculum is determined through a collaborative
process in which both students and teachers have a voice (Dewey 1938).
We didn’t want to impose curriculum onto children, but we also didn’t
believe in silencing our voices through a laissez-faire approach. Curricu-
lum is most powerful when teachers, with their experiences, interests, and
knowledge (including state and district curriculum mandates), and stu-
dents, with their experiences, interests, and knowledge, come together.
Curriculum developed this way goes beyond what any one individual can
produce.

We knew that within this curriculum development process we, as
teachers, had the primary responsibility for creating productive learning
environments that could potentially raise issues and problems for our
specific students (Dewey 1938). We also knew that students needed to be
actively and reflectively involved in curriculum as collaborative decision
makers about the focus of class inquiries and the questions they wanted to
pursue in personal inquiries. The issue for us was finding a way to balance
teacher and student voices in this process. We constantly struggled with
defining our role as teachers and with finding ways to involve students
meaningfully in the process. Our questions and issues about the roles of
teachers and students and the mistakes we made are integrated through-
out our stories.

We felt the need for structures that would connect classroom inquiries
across the year. We became increasingly excited about the potential we
saw for broad, umbrella concepts, such as Change, Discovery, Harmony,
Bridges, and Sense of Place, to provide connections across different class

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and personal inquiries. Such concepts allow for examination of almost any topic or issue so there is no limit on what students can decide to pursue. We found that using the concept of Discovery in our classrooms supported our thinking and planning as teachers, gave us a place to start the school year with students, and became a point of connection that each class could weave through personal and group inquiries.

Our teacher research group was essential in helping us work through these many issues about curriculum, inquiry, and roles. We could bring our questions and feelings of discomfort and frustration to the group and know that others would listen and talk with us. We met biweekly in the spring and several times over the summer to make initial plans for the research and the curriculum. We then met biweekly throughout the school year to talk about curriculum and to compare notes on what was and was not working in our classrooms. The following summer and school year, we met once or twice a month to write histories of what occurred in each classroom and to analyze dialogue from the literature circles and interviews with children. We have continued to meet once a month for the last two years to pull together our experiences and write about them in ways that make sense to other educators. This book grew out of many drafts of chapters that we shared with each other to make sense of our experiences.

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the theoretical beliefs about inquiry that underlie the classroom stories we will tell in subsequent chapters. Our experiences in moving from textbook teaching to thematic units to inquiry involved a close examination of our beliefs about content areas and learning, and this, in turn, affected our actions in the classroom.

Examining Our Beliefs About Content Areas and Learning

When we were students, content area classes, such as social studies and science, focused on the memorization of specific facts and concepts. We listened to lectures, read textbooks, filled out worksheets, gave “right” answers in class discussions, and took tests about facts, dates, and events that we forgot as soon as the test was over. When we were asked to research a topic, we copied information on assigned topics from the
encyclopedia into a “nice” booklet that we handed in to the teacher. We spent a lot of time “covering” many topics and facts and ended up with only superficial knowledge about, or interest in, those topics. Once we were “done” with a topic, we bitterly complained if a teacher returned to it at another grade level.

Early in our teaching experiences, along with many other teachers, we moved from textbook-dominated approaches to thematic units. Instead of textbooks, our students read fiction and nonfiction and engaged in a wide range of activities related to those books and the science and social studies topics we were studying. Students were encouraged to share both what they knew on a particular topic and what they wanted to know. They were involved in problem-solving as they researched topics and prepared projects to share with classmates. In the thematic units, we moved from teaching facts to creating a wide range of activities related to a topic. Sometimes these activities were developed to teach particular facts or concepts, and sometimes they were just a way to have fun with the topic. Our students became more engaged as learners and enjoyed the active involvement. Both we and our students were having more fun.

But then, tensions began to arise. Our units were more exciting, but we realized we were still “covering” topics and supplying information, just as we had before; the only difference was that now we were doing it in more interesting ways. We felt as though we were in an endless cycle of creating activity after activity and that we often engaged in these activities at the expense of critical and in-depth thinking. Children continued to focus on facts; now they gathered facts instead of memorizing them. We were overrelying on books: students were still primarily reading about, not doing, science and social studies.

The topics of our units were frequently trite, with forced connections. At the end of a two-week unit on kites, for example, none of us wanted to hear about kites again. Doing math computations on kite shapes and spelling kite-related words didn’t seem especially meaningful. Even more troubling were student comments that indicated they considered themselves “done” with this topic; they had studied it, it was over. Dewey (1938) argues that what makes an experience educative, as
opposed to miseducative, is whether conditions are created for further
growth in either the same or new directions. Even though students were
having more fun in school, we wondered whether they were engaged in
experiences that were challenging them to continue learning and growing
over time. We were concerned whether students were operating within
their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978)—whether they
were being challenged to go beyond what they already could do indepen-
dently to what they could accomplish with some support from other
learners.

Gradually, we realized that our move to thematic units had not
involved a theoretical shift from the textbook model of curriculum. We,
as teachers, were still the ones in charge. We assumed that students would
discover what others already knew about a given topic and that we just
needed to set up activities so they could do so. Because we developed the
units, students were limited by our own knowledge of the topic; the class
stayed safely within what we already knew. Our units continued to be
based in a deficit model of learning, a focus on what children didn’t know.
We assumed they would go from being more confused to less confused
about the topic.

We spent many hours developing activities and gathering materials
for units. Because the creativity came from us, we were exhausted. Eventu-
ally we realized that all we had done was move from an isolated curricu-
ulum to a correlated curriculum, not to true integration. The activities
were correlated to each other because they related to the same topic, but
they weren’t integrated in powerful ways to support inquiry. Because
knowledge was still compartmentalized by activity and by subject area,
students still operated within the same limited understandings about con-
tent areas that had led us to move away from textbook approaches in the
first place (Altwerger and Flores 1994).

Inquiry as Problem-Posing and Problem-Solving Processes
These tensions led us to think more about curriculum as inquiry. We
realized that one of the problems with textbook approaches and our
thematic units was that they were models of how to teach content, not of
how people actually inquire about something they want to understand. We
needed to look at how learners actually pursue inquiry in their lives outside of school. Reading and writing instruction in schools changed dramatically when Ken Goodman (1967) looked at what readers actually do during the reading process and Donald Graves (1983) observed writers engaged in the process of writing. Instead of beginning with questions of how to teach reading and writing, they examined what readers and writers actually do and then thought about what this might mean for classrooms.

As we looked at young children, we were impressed with their lives as inquirers. They live in a constant state of curiosity and learning. For them, inquiry comes from exploring and being interested in the world. Through their active explorations of their world, tensions arise which lead them to ask questions about aspects of the world that puzzle them. They systematically investigate those questions, thereby creating new understandings and new questions and issues (Short and Burke 1991). As we thought about our own experiences, we realized that we spend at least as much of our time exploring broadly and trying to figure out our questions as we do actually researching those questions. Sometimes we couldn’t determine our question until we had done the research. Other times, we explored for long periods of time before we could put our feelings of tension into words so that we could focus on that question through further inquiry.

Paulo Freire (1985) argues that inquirers need to be problem-posers, not just problem-solvers. We saw that in our classrooms we were the problem-posers; our students were forced to become the problem-solvers, answering our questions. We realized that problem-solving and research are empty processes when the question is not one that really matters in the life of the inquirer. While there are many research strategies that support our lives as inquirers, focusing on learning those strategies is a waste of time if we don’t first take time to find a significant question. Even then, we may not find a specific question, but an interest, an issue, or a general wondering that we want to pursue further. As we work through inquiry, we do not usually end with one answer or even a set of answers. Inquiry does not narrow our perspective; it gives us more understandings, questions, and possibilities than when we started. Inquiry isn’t just asking and answering a
question. It involves searching for significant questions and figuring out how to explore those questions from many perspectives.

Progress in inquiry is finding new understandings and new questions. The term *understandings* highlights the temporal nature of what we learn, while the term *answers* signals that what we learn from one experience will never change. Carolyn Burke argues that understandings last only until learners have time to ask new questions or create more compelling theories. We don’t inquire to eliminate alternatives but to find more functional understandings—to create diversity, broaden our thinking, and ask more complex questions (Short and Burke 1991). We can end up *more* confused, not less confused, but our confusion reflects new questions that are more complex and based on deeper insights.

Teachers do not know exactly what children will learn when they begin a focused study in the classroom because the questions are not framed ahead by teachers and experts. Children have to participate in creating the questions. John Dewey (1938) states that teachers have a responsibility to establish classroom learning environments and select experiences that have the most *potential* for raising anomalies and questions for a specific group of students. They cannot, however, determine exactly what those anomalies will be for students; if they do, they become the problem-posers.

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**Figure 1.1**

*Reflection Log (Amber, Age 11)*

We have independence here. We get to figure out what we know, what we want to. We are trusted to learn, to talk, and to share. We are expected to ask more questions and find out more.
Curriculum as Inquiry

Three sources of knowledge are essential to inquirers in their search for significant questions and their investigation of those questions (Harste 1992): personal and social knowing, which is acquired through our life experiences; knowledge systems, which provide structures for organizing knowledge and offer alternative perspectives on our world (e.g., history, biology, psychology); and sign systems, which provide alternative ways of making and creating meaning about the world (art, music, movement, language, and mathematics). Knowledge systems and sign systems are not reduced to subject areas and the mastery of specific facts, procedures, and skills. They are seen as perspectives, ways of thinking, and stances one can take in the world (Short and Harste, with Burke 1996).

The concept of knowledge systems does not involve dividing knowledge into separate areas and learning facts for each of these areas. Rather, knowledge systems offer alternative perspectives on the same topic and diverse strategies and tools for researching that topic. Instead of focusing on how to “cover” the content of subject areas, the emphasis is on pursuing significant questions through using questions and ways of researching from a range of knowledge systems. A conversation with Joan Irwin, a historian from Winnipeg, helped us understand how history could be seen as a knowledge system rather than a collection of facts about events and people. She pointed out that she approaches any situation with the question “How can I use the past to understand the present and to change the future?” She also noted that historians have particular processes and tools for research. These include conducting interviews, taking notes, examining primary sources, and constructing time lines. When children read only textbooks or historical fiction when studying history, they encounter the work of someone else who has engaged in historical research, but are not learning how to engage in that process themselves.

By bringing multiple knowledge systems to a topic, students are able to ask different questions about that topic from the perspectives that each system offers and can choose from a wide range of research processes and tools. For example, when an inquiry group in Jean’s classroom became interested in bugs, they first took a historical perspective as they asked, “Who was the first person to discover bugs? What is the history of bugs?” They then moved into a paleontology perspective, where they explored
“fly bones,” and from there went to a scientific perspective, where they learned that flies have no bones. Finally, they moved to an agriculturalist perspective and asked, “Why do we have bugs? What are they useful for?” Each shift involved new questions, research processes, and tools.

Outside of school, learners do not use only reading and writing to create and share meaning. They have multiple sign systems available, including music, art, mathematics, movement, and drama as well as language (Eisner 1994). Any of these sign systems can be vehicles for learning and thinking about a particular inquiry or for sharing that inquiry. Sign systems allow learners to explore and create new ideas and to share what they are learning as they examine a topic through their own personal experiences and different knowledge systems.

Learners will not pursue the questions that really matter in their lives unless they are in an environment where their ideas and lives are valued (Edelsky 1994). The learning environments that are most supportive for inquiry are those that move beyond hierarchy toward a democracy where all are equally valued. Pat Shannon (1993) defines a democracy as a system in which people participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives. It involves participation and negotiation among equals. Participants are not just given a choice among options determined by others behind the scenes; they are part of the thinking behind the scenes.

As Figure 1.2 illustrates, the smallest unit of curriculum is therefore inquiry itself, not a fact or an activity. Inquiry is a whole process that cuts across and integrates personal and social knowing, knowledge systems, and sign systems within an environment based on education for democracy.

Instructionally, curriculum as inquiry means that instead of using the theme as an excuse to teach science, social studies, mathematics, reading, and writing, these knowledge systems and sign systems become tools for inquiry—for exploring, finding, and researching students’ own questions. Curriculum does not focus on activities and books, but on inquiry. Literature comes into this process as it supports inquiry, not as the focal point.

The shift from textbooks to thematic units involved a major change in how our classrooms looked. Many more materials and lots of teacher time were needed to gather books and plan activities. Instead of students sitting quietly at desks, they moved around the room, engaged in a wide range of activities.
The shift from thematic units to curriculum as inquiry is a much more subtle shift because the classroom does not look different on the surface—the same materials and activities are often there. But many of these materials are now gathered by the entire classroom community, not just the teacher; and students set up and create their own sites for exploration instead of only engaging in our preplanned activities. The major difference, however, is in the beliefs underlying those materials and activities and the functions they serve (Short and Burke 1996). This has been a much more difficult change for us as teachers to make. It is easier to change the look of our classrooms than to change how we think about curriculum. We found it especially difficult to move away from the subject areas as the center of the curriculum because schools are organized around this assumption. We often found ourselves still using these areas to organize the curriculum instead of using them as tools to support inquiry.

Figure 1.2
Curriculum as Inquiry (Short 1993)
An example of this change in thinking is the difference between Kathy’s experiences in Indiana teaching a first-grade thematic unit on the ocean and Kathleen’s experiences in Tucson with first and second graders exploring the ocean. Kathy chose the ocean because it was a high-interest topic for first graders and she had many appropriate books and materials to use as resources. At the beginning of the year, she made a list of the units to be studied that year and decided when they would be taught. The ocean was slated for January because she thought it might enliven the Indiana winter. In teaching this unit, she read picture books to the students, pulled together thematic sets of books for browsing in the classroom, and engaged students in activities, such as science experiments with salt water and art activities with watercolor washes and a large mural of sea creatures. She arranged to show movies on the ocean, brought in her own collection of seashells and specimens, and planned learning centers where students categorized seashells and wrote in fish-shaped books. To conclude the unit, Kathy asked students each to choose one sea creature for research and then to write a short informational book with many pictures. At the end of the unit, Kathy gathered up and returned the library books and boxed up her materials until the next January.

In contrast, Kathleen’s class inquiry, or focus, on the ocean began when several children went to San Diego over spring break and returned to the classroom with stories about a huge body of water and sea animals that seemed improbable to children who had spent their lives in the desert. The children’s questions and interest led to a class decision to study the ocean. Kathleen gathered fiction, nonfiction, and poetry on the ocean from the library as well as a collection of seashells, photographs, art prints, and music. Children who had been to the ocean added their own seashell collections, pictures, and books. Over the course of a week, children had time to tell their stories, browse the materials, and gather each day to share their observations and questions, which were listed on a large sheet of paper. The class then used this list to create a web of questions that were most significant to them. The web became a sign-up sheet for research groups on why oceans have waves, the differences between mollusks and jellyfish, the teeth and jaw structures of sharks, and how to keep ocean water clean. Kathleen and the students pulled together resource sets for each group, and students met in their groups to pursue their...
research. As they worked, they realized that they needed tools for keeping track of what they were finding, so each group developed some kind of chart, web, graph, or diagram to record their data. Students shared their research through presentations that ranged from murals to written books to dramas. After the class focus ended, many of the books remained in a corner of the classroom, and some children continued their explorations of the ocean throughout the rest of the school year. As they explored the ocean, many students became interested in environmental issues, so the class decided that this topic would be their next class focus.

Many of the same materials, activities, and books were part of both Kathleen’s and Kathy’s studies of the ocean, but they were used in very different ways. In the thematic unit, Kathy determined the sequence of activities and took the class through the books and activities together as a class. She determined the topics for the research; students were only given the choice of which sea creature to focus on. In Kathleen’s classroom, the books and activities supported students as they broadly explored the ocean and found their own connections and questions. Many of the engagements that Kathy used for whole-class activities Kathleen used as exploration centers that children browsed as they wished or used as part of their research group. Kathleen did not assume that all children needed to have the same experiences. Because she gave her students time to explore and to develop their own questions, their research groups reflected a much wider range of topics, which children explored at both factual and conceptual levels. Kathy’s students contented themselves with gathering a few facts on their animals to put into their books.

Kathy planned her unit by listing subject areas and then developing activities for each one. She carefully selected activities that drew from science, social studies, mathematics, art, reading, writing, and music. Some were selected because she felt the children would enjoy the activity, while other activities were selected to teach skills from these subject areas. Kathleen also gathered many resources, books, and artifacts. She thought about possible engagements that would allow children to first connect to their own experiences and then explore the ocean from many different perspectives in order to find questions they wanted to pursue through inquiry. She was aware of the importance of different perspectives and so
made sure that the resources she brought into the classroom reflected a range of perspectives on the ocean, such as environmentalist, scientific, social, recreational, and literary. These knowledge system perspectives were also highlighted during class discussions. Photographs, paintings, and music about the ocean were part of the resources that children used to learn. They were encouraged to sketch as well as take notes as they read and observed. When they presented their research, they constructed their understandings in the sign systems that best communicated what they had learned. Knowledge systems and sign systems were tools Kathleen’s students used to learn about the ocean.

We could see the theoretical and practical differences between thematic units and inquiry when we looked back on our experiences. However, it was not as easy to make these distinctions when we were in the middle of struggling with curriculum in our classrooms. Negotiating a class focus and then finding time to explore that focus and find questions for inquiry was a much more complicated process than we had ever imagined.

Pursuing Individual Inquiries

Most of the classroom examples we share in this book are based on children’s inquiries within a class focus. We believe in having a class focus because of the depth of inquiry that is possible when students think together within rich supportive contexts. Within this class focus, students pursue individual and small-group inquiries with support from whole-class experiences and from other learners in the classroom.

However, we also know that students have personal agendas and inquiries that they need to pursue. We worried about how to find a place in our crowded classroom schedules for both a class focus and personal inquiries. Writing work time and wide independent reading were two parts of the school day not directly tied to the class focus. Students could choose to bring that focus into these times, but they did not have to do so. While the literature circles usually related to the class focus, independent reading remained a time when students had a broad choice of reading materials. Occasionally, writing time involved the class focus, but most of the time students chose their own topics and uses of writing.
Initially we saw independent reading and writing work time as the times of the day when students could focus on language itself by engaging in the process and using those engagements to learn about language and how it functions. When we looked closely at what students were reading and writing, however, we realized that they were pursuing their own personal questions through what they chose to read and write. Some were working through family or peer issues, while others were pursuing information on favorite artists, snakes, or dinosaurs. By maintaining the open-ended nature of work time, we could support children’s explorations of their own “kid” topics. A whole-class study on each of these topics is not possible, but children still need the opportunity to pursue personal interests in the classroom. As teachers, we see our role as both supporting and pushing children as learners. Reading and writing work time support children’s interests, while the class focus challenges them to consider new perspectives.

Another structure that can support children’s explorations of individual topics is expert projects where students investigate any topic of personal interest. In this case, there is no class focus. We used to believe that teachers should schedule expert projects once or twice a year so that students would be able to pursue diverse topics. The problem was that these expert projects often seemed too much like our old units—students chose a topic and collected facts and information without any real sense of broader issues or questions to drive their inquiry. Now, instead of assuming that expert projects have to be scheduled at a particular time, we listen to our students. Sometimes, as they share and present their inquiries, it becomes obvious that their new questions are extremely diverse, and it is important for children to pursue individual questions. At that point, we encourage them to move into small-group and individual inquiries, rather than moving into a new class focus.

In this book, we focus on children’s inquiries within a class focus because that’s where we began our work with inquiry and have the most experience. For those who want to explore classroom structures where children engage in individual or small-group projects that are not tied to a class focus, we suggest reading about the Explorers’ Club (Copenhaver 1992) and expert projects (Copeland 1994).
The Inquiry Cycle as a Curricular Frame

As we explored how to move from our beliefs about inquiry into an inquiry-based curriculum, we found ourselves increasingly turning to the authoring cycle (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988) as a curricular framework. We had all worked with the cycle in thinking about reading and writing in our classrooms and found that it supported our decision-making about curriculum. The cycle served as a bridge that connected our beliefs to specific classroom activities by providing an organizational framework within which we could select engagements and make decisions with our students. Our old frameworks had been sequential scope-and-sequence charts that were based on behaviorist, hierarchical models of learning. Carolyn Burke helped us see that the authoring cycle was not just about reading and writing, but about learning itself. Through this cycle, we came to see authoring as a metaphor for learning and inquiry.

Figure 1.3 presents the authoring cycle as a curricular framework for inquiry (Short and Harste, with Burke 1996). (We will return to this cycle in greater depth in Chapter 8.) The arrows in the cycle go both ways, indicating that there is continual movement back and forth between the different aspects of the inquiry process, rather than a specific sequence or hierarchical order.

The cycle begins with building from students’ own life experiences so that they can draw perspectives and connections from those experiences to inform their inquiry. From these personal connections, students move into broad explorations of the topic or focus. These explorations give them time for observations and conversations as they “wander and wonder” through exploration centers and browse a wide range of materials and objects. Through these explorations, they build new understandings about the topic and gradually search out the questions that they want to pursue through further inquiry. Once students have selected a question to pursue in greater depth, they examine that question through different perspectives by thinking collaboratively with other learners, investigating their question through multiple knowledge systems, and using a wide range of sign systems to construct meanings.

Through their research, they encounter many new ideas that create confusions and contradictions. They need time to attend to those
differences and to reflect on what those ideas mean to them. At some point, they pull together their investigations to share informally or to present formally to other learners. These presentations give learners an opportunity to determine what it is they know and where they still have questions. After presenting their ideas to others, students need time to plan new inquiries by reflecting on what they have learned and their...
process of learning, and thinking about the actions they now want to take as learners. These actions include thinking about where they want to move next as inquirers and how they will use what they have learned from this inquiry to change how they think and act in their world. Because the cycle is recursive, students do not move step by step through the cycle, but continually move back and forth depending on their needs as learners.

While this cycle provided a framework that enabled us to think about organizational structures to support students within a particular class focus or individual inquiry, we still had many questions about connecting the different inquiries over time. Each focused study seemed to be a separate entity and, while the inquiry within a particular focused study was powerful, students did not necessarily make connections across the different studies, nor did the studies flow into one another. We wanted to establish an environment where students expected connection, but without forcing or restricting those connections, so we began to explore broad concepts as a curricular structure.

Connecting Curriculum Through a Broad Concept

We wanted to move into an inquiry approach where students pursued topics and questions of significance to them and where one inquiry flowed into the next in an endless cycle or spiral of learning. However, we didn’t want to ask students to list what they wanted to study without a supportive context in which they were encouraged also to consider new potentials. In addition, we knew that we needed to think about possibilities for the coming school year without predetermining the curriculum. The more we worked with a broad concept, the more we came to believe that it offered a structure that supported, not restricted, an inquiry-based curriculum.

For us, a broad concept serves as an umbrella that students and teachers can use to encompass a wide range of topics, themes, and ideas. It does not limit the possibilities for class and student inquiries, but provides a point of connection. When we used topics such as community helpers or the Civil War to integrate the curriculum, the connections between subject areas often seemed trite or forced. In contrast, broad concepts, such as Cycles, Change, Systems, Sense of Place, Interdependence, and Discovery, provide many possible points of connection that naturally
weave across the day and year and do not limit the topics and questions that students can pursue.

Using the Broad Concept to Support Our Planning to Plan

One of the first ways we found the broad concept useful was in our own planning as teachers before the school year began. Dorothy Watson (Watson, Burke, and Harste 1989) makes the point that as teachers we engage in “planning to plan,” but the actual plan is what we create with children. Our question was how to engage in planning to plan in a way that would not predetermine the topics and themes for the school year, but would still give us a framework within which we could think about possibilities and consider topics and resources. The broad concept provided us with a focus around which we could brainstorm a web of possible areas of study. We knew the actual plan would be created with the children, but working with the broad concept gave us a way to think about the curriculum and the classroom learning environment for the coming school year.

Beginning the School Year Through the Broad Concept

The broad concept was a useful place to start the school year. We did not want to ask students during the first week of school to list what they wanted to study. We knew from past experience that this kind of brainstorming leads to lists of general interests and school topics, rather than meaningful issues and questions that have the potential to push students’ understandings. Students need time to become a community (Peterson 1992) and to establish a supportive context within which they can consider possible topics and areas of study. By starting the year with the broad concept, we were not determining the topics of study, but we did provide a focus from which the class could begin exploring together. It also gave us time to observe and listen to students so that the curriculum could build from their interests and experiences.

Weaving the Broad Concept Across the Year

While we expected the broad concept to support our planning to plan and initial class experiences, we did not expect the broad concept to play an important role in providing curricular and conceptual connections
across the school year for both us and our students. As previously mentioned, we had found our earlier thematic units unrelated to each other, our attempts at connection too often forced. It felt as if we would conclude one unit by neatly closing it up in a box and placing it into storage and then getting down a new box and opening it for the next unit. Each unit was separate from the next; students did not realize they could connect understandings from different topics of study.

The broad concept provided a much more natural connection across different class topics and individual student inquiries throughout the school year. This type of broad connection across experiences seemed to us to reflect the complexities of the world but still provide a focus for students and curriculum. In our daily lives outside of school, everything isn’t organized around a topic like “Japan” or “bears,” but we do continuously make broad connections between experiences to understand them.

The broad concept created a touchstone for curriculum so that students could make connections across their different questions and interests. As Margaret’s students explored their family histories, biome studies, life cycle studies of plants and insects, and historical changes in a community, they continuously returned to how each of these reflected the broad concept of Change over Time and so were able to connect history, science, and their own personal lives.

The broad concept also became a way to bring in mandated curriculum topics and still have those topics connect to other areas of study and inquiry. Kathleen was able to connect the mandated fourth-grade study of state history to students’ interests in culture and ethnicity. At the beginning of the year, she did not know exactly when the state study would occur, but she knew that she needed to connect it into students’ inquiries at some point. As students finished a set of inquiries on culture and ethnicity, she introduced the state study by bringing in resources related to the many different ethnic groups who live in the state of Arizona.

We found that the broad-concept framework supported students as they thought through and used the facts they were gathering as part of their inquiries. Instead of just collecting isolated facts, they used these facts to examine other conceptual issues. For example, in previous thematic units on space, our students had gathered facts on the sizes of and distances between planets. When Jean’s students decided to explore space,
they were interested in broader issues of how discoveries are made in
space and what would happen if we ever discovered another planet with
living beings. Students did gather facts, but they did so because they
needed them to think about broader issues.

While thematic units purportedly cut across content areas, the divi-
sion of the curriculum into separate subject areas is still central to the
curriculum. An “integrated” unit is based on the idea that the subject
areas are at the center of the curriculum, but they just need to be inte-
grated more. The thematic unit is used as a vehicle to cover the tradi-
tional subject areas and to engage children in reading and writing.
Through the broad concept, we were able to move to a primary focus on
inquiry, where students used knowledge systems and sign systems as tools
to pursue their inquiries.

While we all started out at the same point in our classrooms by
exploring Discovery as a broad concept and we shared some ideas about
inquiry as an approach to curriculum, the actual inquiries that took place
in each of our classrooms were quite divergent. These differences indi-
cated to us that the structures and frameworks we were creating in our
classrooms supported negotiation with our students and weren’t simply
another way to impose our agenda onto them. Inquiry was not a new set
of procedures or lesson plans that we could pass on to each other, but a
way of thinking about curriculum with our students in a way that enabled
them to find and examine questions significant in their lives.

**Conclusion**

In the rest of this book, we tell stories of what occurred in our classrooms
and in our work with each other as we tried to put our beliefs about
inquiry into action. As is always the case, there were gaps between what
we believed and what we could put into action in our classrooms. In
Chapter 2, we describe the history of our teacher research group and how
we decided on the notion of Discovery as a broad concept for inquiry.

Chapters 3 through 7 tell the stories of particular classrooms. Each
chapter begins with a description of how the broad concept of Discovery
was established at the beginning of the year and a brief history of how the
year unfolded in terms of the different focus studies that children pur-
sued. Each chapter also includes a description of one or two focus studies
to give readers a more in-depth look at the ways in which teachers and students worked at inquiry in that classroom. This structure across the chapters demonstrates how we each began at a common point, but then moved in different directions. Our struggles with the roles of teachers and students within a collaborative curriculum are evident throughout these chapters.

As we worked at inquiry in our classroom settings, the inquiry cycle (Short and Harste, with Burke 1996) became an increasingly important organizational framework for how we thought about and planned curriculum. Chapter 8 focuses on the different components of the inquiry cycle through a brief conceptual discussion of each part of the cycle, supported by many examples of engagements and strategies from our classrooms.

The book ends with our reflections on what we have learned from these experiences and the ways in which we have continued to explore inquiry in our classrooms. We think differently now about our classrooms and how to plan curriculum with our students. We continue to work at what it means to have an inquiry-based classroom, and in the final chapter we describe some of our current efforts as well as our lingering questions.