

# BEGINNING YOUR INQUIRY JOURNEY

We've all been there; that moment when someone asks you to do something you know is probably good for you, but you *just don't wanna!* Maybe it's an early morning run, a visit to the dentist, or having a difficult conversation. Perhaps it's this book. My colleague at Inquiry Partners, Maggie Chumbley, calls this the "groan zone." It's a bit like Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: that sweet spot of not too easy and not too hard. The groan zone is a nice stretch that yields results. This book will offer you an opportunity to regularly move into your groan zone. (See Figure 2.1 on the following page.)

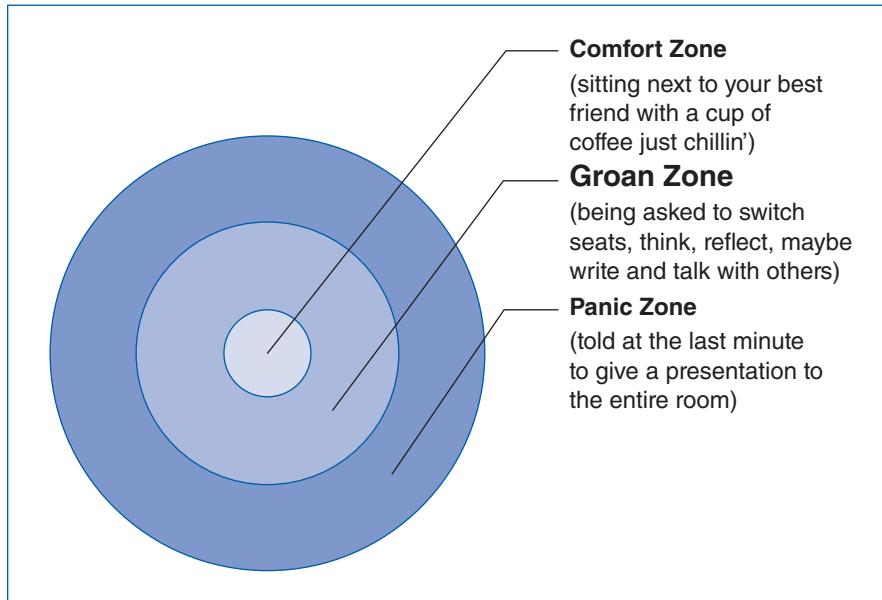
Notice that the groan zone stops before that space called the panic zone. The panic zone is where there is so much stress that learning becomes nearly impossible. When children arrive to school already in the panic zone, bringing them to the comfort zone should be our first priority.

Think for a minute: *How often do you require your students to get into the groan zone? When is the last time you were in the groan zone?*

## How to Use This Book

As you can see, there isn't a lot of reading to do in this book. There is a lot of *space for writing*, however. Inquiry classrooms are full of metaphorical blank spaces. Filling in the literal blanks in this book is a great way to ease into space-filling and to get conversations going with your colleagues and students.

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ The groan zone is where the most powerful learning happens.



This book is meant to be written and doodled in, drawn on, pulled apart, folded up, and spilled upon. Play with it. Flip through it. Start anywhere. Go in sequence or skip around. Try the exercises on your own, with your colleagues, and in your classroom with students. Let your hair down. Flip upside down and see things from a new perspective. Chances are, this book will become so beloved, because ultimately it's *your creation*.

Some of the experiences you will enjoy, and others may have you searching for excuses to hide in the bathroom or disinfect student desks. That's good. Pay close attention to those, especially. Oftentimes, the most challenging experiences are the ones that bring about the most growth and transformation.

I've structured these 50 experiences around five key strategies that will help you understand and implement inquiry in your own classroom. It's low on word count and high on thinking space.

*This book will ask something from you, too.*

Like in an inquiry classroom, space and power is shared within the pages of this book. The book is designed not to *tell* you what inquiry is, but to *invite* you to discover it for yourself.

You will be invited to think, ask questions, experiment, create, write, and share. You will need to periodically reach for a pen, move your body, make time for a conversation, ask for release time, visit classrooms, collect data, record yourself, and reflect. By nudging yourself into the groan zone and engaging in these 50 experiences, you will create a solid inquiry practice.

Even if you're still skeptical about inquiry (*especially* if you're skeptical about inquiry), working through these experiences will improve your relationships with students and colleagues, reduce your workload by placing more demand on students, and breathe new joy into your classroom. Your time will not be wasted if you approach it with an open mind and a willingness to learn.

## WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

I believe strongly in the power of teacher communities of practice. When teachers can work with and learn from one another, they are unstoppable. Most of these experiences are therefore designed for groups of teachers to use in a workshop setting, staff meetings, and/or in professional learning communities (PLCs). The exercises are designed knowing that this time together is precious, limited, and rarely catered (sadly).

## WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Many of the experiences within these pages are also perfect for developing stronger bonds between you and your students. Adapt some of the experiences for your content area, tinker with the developmental requirements, and see how your students approach them!

## ON YOUR OWN

Use these experiences as personal exploration. No one has to see what you write down. This is *your* workbook. Have at it without worry. Just remember that many of the experiences may require you to work with others, too. Sorry, no getting around this one. We are social animals. Finally, remember that it's the conversations that are sparked from these exercises, not necessarily the exercises themselves, that will create the magic.

## Tips for Success

While you are free to romp around these pages on your own, there are experiences that will require you to engage with others. For these, I suggest the following norms:

## BE OPEN.

Like heroes from mythology, your journey isn't really complete until you've reflected upon and shared it with others. You'll need to agree to dig into this book on your own *and* with others. Be open to learning something new and deepening your knowledge. In other words, approach this book the same way you'd expect your students to approach what you teach: with a curious mind.

## PLAY NICE.

Playing nice means different things to different people. At the very least, have a discussion about what "playing nice" means to you. Establish some ground rules, or norms. I know, norms can be annoying. We're adults and we should know by now how to work together, right? You may be the most well-oiled professional team on the planet, but you still need norms. Review the ones you've already established or create new ones and then guide a conversation about them. Review and post them. Refer back to them frequently. Seriously, you need norms.

## COME PREPARED.

When the book calls for group work, make sure your facilitator is not only capable and confident, but also prepared. Even the best activities will bomb with off-the-cuff planning and poor facilitation. Set aside the time needed to think through the possible reactions and outcomes of these experiences before they are enacted. I'm a fan of structured protocols or ways of facilitating group conversations. Check out *Liberating Structures* and the National Reform Faculty for a treasure trove of ideas.

"LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING ARE  
INDISPENSABLE TO EACH OTHER."

-JOHN F. KENNEDY, FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT

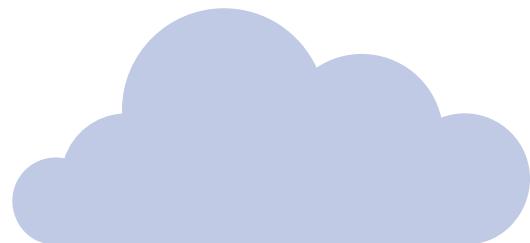


## What's the Role of Administration?

Even if your principal isn't wandering in and out of classrooms or high-fiving students during lunch, his or her vision reverberates in a thousand ways—down the hallways and into the classrooms.

There were two school leaders in my career who modeled inquiry leadership for me: Jackie Cochran and Tom Bailey. Jackie was my elementary school principal in Compton, California, in the early 1990s. Born and raised in Compton, Jackie knew her community inside and out. She embraced its changing demographics at that time, from an African-American suburb of Los Angeles to a Mexican-American one. Jackie learned to speak Spanish, and when she wanted her teachers to try something new, she'd try it first. Jackie was the only principal whom I actually observed *teaching*. Her courage and willingness to be vulnerable like this made a huge impact on me.

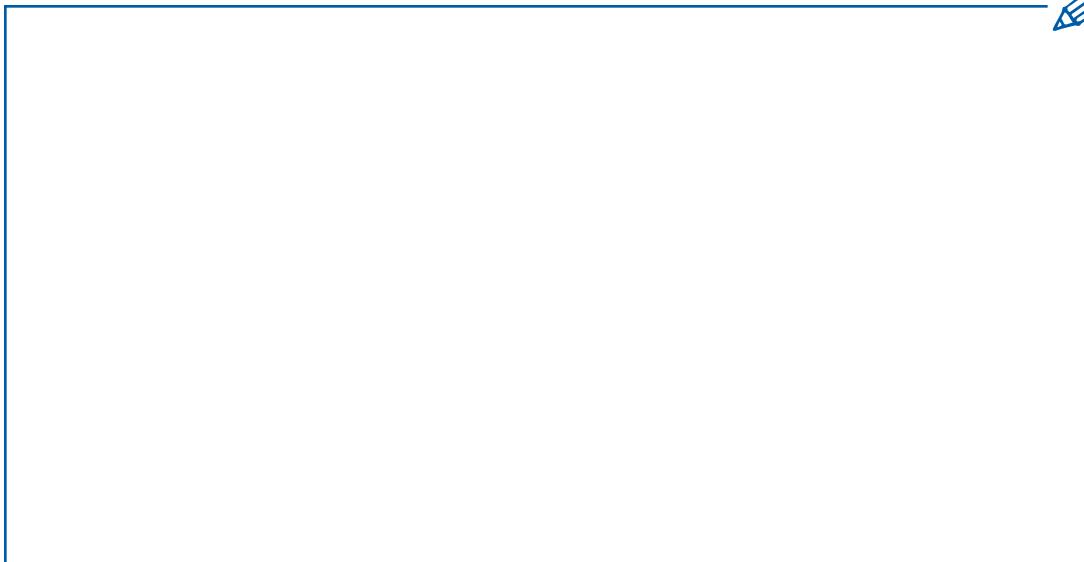
Tom Bailey was my high school principal in Seattle, Washington. Tom believed strongly in establishing personal relationships with his students, teachers, and staff. These relationships, he insisted, made it possible for him to make tough calls. Students loved seeing him in the hallways every day because his goal was to know each one of our 1,300 by name. If he couldn't remember someone's name, he paid them a dollar. Tom couldn't afford *not* to know his students by name! Every Friday, when teachers and staff met for drinks after school, Tom would tell me, a young Assistant Principal at the time, "You need to show up. Have one drink, so they think you're human. Then, say goodbye before they *know* you're human."



Who are the administrators you look up to as a teacher? What is it about their leadership that inspires you? Jot down some anecdotes below and share with others.



**Optional Experience:** Chances are your leadership team is actively involved in supporting inquiry schoolwide (especially if they invested in this book). However, just in case there is reluctance, brainstorm ideas on how you and your colleagues might encourage your leadership team to use the Self-Reflection Tool and administer the Staff Reflection Survey.



Hello, school leader! Your role in successful inquiry implementation is absolutely key. These exercises and strategies apply to you, too. Take a look at the questions below and reflect. Where are you right now in supporting inquiry to flourish schoolwide?



## THE INQUIRY LEADER SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

### INQUIRY STRATEGIES

### QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

Get personal.

How well do you know your staff?

How well does your staff know you?

What are the rituals in place to strengthen staff relationships?

My Reflections:

Stay curious.

How do you model the practices you hope to see in classrooms?

How often do you get into classrooms to guest or co-teach?

How comfortable are you not knowing the answer to something?

My Reflections:

*(Continued)*

(Continued)



**INQUIRY STRATEGIES**

**QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON**

Ask more, talk less.

How much do you talk (vs. your staff) during meetings?

How do your meetings with staff encourage question asking?

My Reflections:

Encourage evidence.

How often do you back up your claims?

How often does your staff back up their claims?

How often do you as a staff rigorously analyze the validity of information or data that comes to you?

My Reflections:

Extend thinking time.

How do you seek and vigorously protect time for your teachers to work together?

How often do you release teachers to observe other classrooms?

My Reflections:

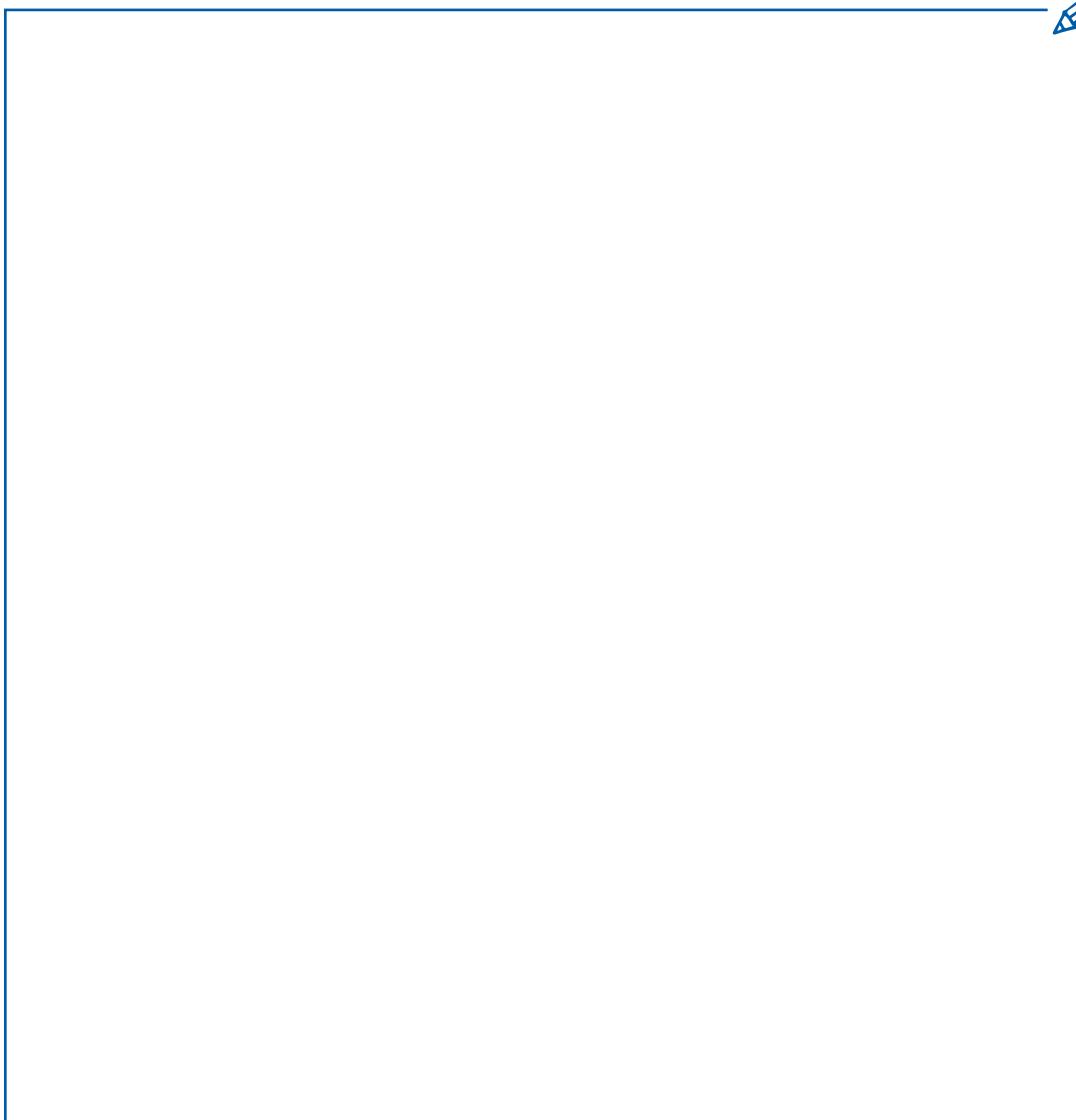
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How well do your perceptions square with reality? Offer this survey to your teaching staff (feel free to edit the statements). Ask them to reflect periodically on your leadership as they deepen their inquiry practice.

Once you receive them back, take some time to analyze the results (make sure you are in the right frame of mind to do so first). What seems to be going well and what needs more attention? Refer to the Self-Reflection Tool questions to help you create an action plan.



# Staff Reflection Survey

Read through the statements below and mark an “X” depending upon your level of agreement: 0 = absolutely not true (yet) to 10 = unequivocally true.

- .....
- 1** I have a strong, positive relationship with my principal.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 2** Our school has meaningful rituals that build community among teachers.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 3** I’m motivated to do my best work at this school.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 4** My principal provides opportunities for us to observe each other teaching.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 5** My principal models inquiry practice in meetings and workshops.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 6** My principal prioritizes and protects teacher collaboration time.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10
  - 7** Teachers are equally listened to.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

**8** Our principal backs up his or her claims with evidence.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

**9** Teachers have lots of opportunities to give input and make choices.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

**10** Our principal offers regular opportunities for teachers to think and reflect.  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

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**I wish my principal knew:**

A large, empty rectangular box with a blue border, intended for writing. A small pencil icon is positioned in the top right corner of the box.

## The Importance of Balance and Harmony

One of my favorite snacks is “Chicago Mix” popcorn. This delicious and slightly addicting concoction is simply cheddar cheese and caramel-covered popcorn all mixed together. It achieves that perfect sweet and yet salty “umami” taste. But there is a trick to eating it. If you grab a handful of just cheese or a handful of just caramel, it doesn’t achieve the balance that makes it so great. There’s a perfect ratio for every Chicago Mix eater. For me, it’s three cheese to every one caramel. That’s my harmonious balance.

It’s the same with inquiry. You need a mix of activities to achieve balance and harmony in the classroom. Too much lecturing is boring. Too many questions without answers is confusing. Too much freedom in the classroom is chaotic. And too many projects without real content and skill-building is frustrating.

Remember that becoming an inquiry-based teacher doesn’t mean you swing the pendulum wildly to one side or another without warning. It’s not an “all or nothing.” It means you are willing to *mix up your strategies* and achieve balance and harmony with your activities and approaches.

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