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Inquiry for Equity: Exploring the Impact of Practitioner Research

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While the *Journal of Practitioner Research* is a new outlet for the publication of practitioners' systematic and intentional study of their own practice, the process is, according to McFarland and Stansell (1993), as old as Aristotle. Nourished by John Dewey's belief that teachers can be "consumers and producers of knowledge about teaching" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 9), practitioner research has evolved through the years, "shaped and reshaped in relationship to the era within which it has existed" (Dana, 2016, p. 1).

As a construct evolves and shape-shifts both *through* time and *in response to* the times, those who engage in the process can easily lose sight of *why*. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009), distinguished scholars of the practitioner research movement, maintain that the ultimate goal of practitioner research "always and in every context" is to enhance "students' learning and life chances for participation in and contribution to a diverse and democratic society" (p. 146). Practitioners engage in inquiry for equity to increase the learning and life chances of every student with whom they work, regardless of factors (such as race, socio-economic status, gender, and ability) that often inhibit students in an educational system that was not designed to meet their needs. In fact, in a recent study chronicling the impact of engagement in practitioner research, "practitioner research was at its most powerful when it served [teachers'] ethical commitments to struggling students" (Nichols & Cormack, 2017, p. 20), reinforcing the importance of inquiry undertaken for more equitable learning and schooling experiences for all. Hence, the purpose of this themed issue of *Journal of Practitioner Research* is to renew the field's commitment to the ultimate goal of inquiry for equity. In this opening article, we introduce five pieces of research that encapsulate this theme, looking across this collective body of work to note the important insights featured in this issue.

Introducing the Inquiry for Equity Selections in this Issue

Ten years ago, Cathy Caro-Bruce, Ryan Flessner, Mary Klehr, and Ken Zeichner (2007) edited a collection of research from teachers and administrators in the Madison Metropolitan School District, all focused on "achieving greater equity in educational outcomes for all students" (p. x). Their text, *Creating More Equitable Classrooms through Action Research*, while one of several anthologies of teacher research, offered a unique contribution not only in its focus on inquiry for equity, but also in the fact that all contributions came from one school district. This distinct focus enabled readers to see the power practitioner researchers within a single context have "to make a difference in the lives of students" as they endeavor "to understand equity in thoughtful ways" (p. 8). Honoring the ten-year anniversary of this book and acknowledging the ongoing need for practitioners to study how to create more equitable schooling experiences for children,

we offer five contemporary examples of inquiry for equity from a single context: P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School.

P.K. Yonge is one of four K-12 developmental research schools in the State of Florida, each affiliated with a university. Also known as lab schools, the four research schools in the state were established to disseminate innovations in education by serving diverse student communities. By state statute, students are randomly selected through a lottery so each school's population reflects state demographics both ethnically and socioeconomically. Having a representative population ensures the transferability of practices developed and studied in these contexts. In addition, each developmental research school is considered its own district, and as such, is responsible for all reporting and accountability measures (including student achievement testing) required by the state.

As a developmental research school, P.K. Yonge is a frequent site of large-scale research studies conducted by faculty at its affiliate, the University of Florida. Teachers at P.K. Yonge are also encouraged to engage in practitioner research, the mechanism through which professional learning and school-wide innovation take place. Each school year, teachers can study their own practice with the support of their colleagues. Four faculty meetings dispersed throughout the year focus respectively on kicking off the inquiry process, developing a research question, developing a research plan, and analyzing data. An extended faculty gathering is also held for teachers to share the results of their research with one another.

Serving approximately 1150 students, P.K. Yonge's student population is 49% White, 22% African American, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 7% multi-racial, and <1% Asian. Additionally, 26% of the total student population is economically disadvantaged, and 17% of the student population has disabilities. Given the diversity reflected in the school's demographics, equitable school practices are of critical concern. P.K. Yonge teacher researchers strive to name and mitigate or eliminate inequitable practices that exist across the United States as well as within their own school, such as academic tracking in the secondary division (Grades 6-12) and external special services (i.e., special education, gifted education, Title I) in the elementary division (Grades K-5).

The five practitioner research studies in this special issue include three related works by academic teachers in the secondary division (Grades 6-12) at P.K. Yonge that challenge the use of tracking in English Language Arts, Biology, and Geometry. Tracking refers to the grouping of students into different levels of the same course (e.g., "honors math," "regular math," and "remedial math") based on some combination of the following: IQ scores, standardized test scores, teacher recommendation, prior classroom achievement, perceived ability and/or student motivation (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; NASSP, 2006; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2013). Scholars have documented how students

living in poverty and/or students of color dominate remedial classes, which are frequently skill-driven and lack academic rigor, while more rigorous, advanced classes are dominated by middle-to-upper class white students (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Tyson, 2013). Numerous cycles of practitioner research by P.K. Yonge secondary teachers prompted them to question the inequity inherent in academic tracking and ultimately “detrack” their course offerings. Continued cycles of practitioner research reported in this special issue by Kate Colantonio-Yurko, Cody Miller, Jenn Cheveallier, Mickey MacDonald, and Kristin Weller provide insights into the difference detracking can make in the lives and school experiences of students, as well as articulating the pedagogical implications of detracking.

Complementing the pieces focused on detracking, Melanie Mills Harris explores the role a music teacher can play in supporting academic teachers’ quest for equity. Harris describes how she collaborated with biology teacher Mickey MacDonald and geometry teacher Kristin Weller to support their teaching efforts, with a particular focus on gender inequities that have historically existed in math and science.

The final study in this issue, by Ashley Pennypacker Hill, introduces the reader to the elementary division at P.K. Yonge (Grades K-5), and the unique, newly constructed space for the school’s youngest learners. Hill’s study reveals how architectural and pedagogical innovation can unintentionally create inequitable learning outcomes for students receiving intensive instructional supports. Hill takes the reader through her quest to teach self-regulation, a necessary strategy if the new learning environment was to function well for all students, including those receiving special education services.

Looking Across the Pieces: The Power of Collaboration and Culture

Spanning multiple grade levels and disciplines, these studies demonstrate the broadly applicable power of practitioner research. Moreover, affirmed by the distinct institutional culture at P.K. Yonge, the teacher researchers featured here benefitted from critical collaboration that is a hallmark of high-quality practitioner research. Ideally, collaboration occurs within communities of practice that “regard educational problems and issues not solely as individual matters but also as social, cultural, and political concerns that may require collective action” (Lytle, 1996, p. 93). However, lone teacher researchers can nevertheless “engage others: students, parents, outside observers, in a dialogue about research in progress” (Schaenen, Kohnen, Flinn, Saul, & Zeni, 2012, p. 80). The variety of the pieces in this issue attests to the many possibilities available to teacher researchers.

The article by Kate Colantonio-Yurko, Cody Miller, and Jenn Cheveallier illustrates how collaboration among the English Language Arts teachers led to more

rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction, supported by their knowledge of and respect for each other, their institution, and the diverse students they teach. As an eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade teacher, each of them brought an important lens to bear upon their collective work. Similarly, Mickey MacDonald, Kristin Weller, and Melanie Mills Harris harnessed their collegiality to support one another across their seemingly disparate content areas: biology, geometry, and music. Practitioner research studies sometimes “focus on the same topic but explore different questions and wonderings about that topic. When this happens, inquiries potentially intersect and collaboration can occur at the juncture of that intersection” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 82). Collectively concerned about the success of all students, MacDonald, Weller, and Mills Harris found the “sweet spot” at the nexus of their wonderings, enabling them to sustain and encourage each other’s inquiries. Finally, Ashley Pennypacker Hill details how her study led to the formation of an inquiry-oriented professional learning community, focused on exploring the integration of technology into instruction at P.K. Yonge.

The pronounced culture of inquiry at P.K. Yonge both fostered and was fed by these five studies. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) explain how vital teacher research communities can be:

Not only does their work add to the knowledge base on teaching, but their collective power as knowledge-generating communities also influences broader school policies regarding curriculum, assessment, school organization, and home-school linkages. Through teacher-research communities, teachers’ voices play a more prominent part in the dialogue of school reform. (p. 103)

Each of the pieces in this issue demonstrates how teacher researchers can be change agents well beyond the walls of their individual classrooms. The actively maintained culture of inquiry at P.K. Yonge provides a foundation for systematic and intentional study of educational inequities in search of solutions, and the supportive administration stays open to necessary policy evolution as recommended by practitioner researchers. Further, each article shares broader implications for teachers in other contexts that may or may not bear resemblance to P.K. Yonge.

Conclusion

This themed issue celebrates the role inquiry can play in creating more equitable learning experiences for all by highlighting the work of teacher researchers who have done just that, “illustrat[ing] the kinds of changes teachers can make in their own thinking and pedagogy on behalf of their students” (Caro-Bruce & Klehr, 2007, p. 3). Honoring the long-standing tradition of practitioners’ systematic and intentional study of their own practice, while keenly attuned to today’s educational injustices, the teacher

researchers featured here offer authentic stories from their own classrooms. It is our hope that their powerful voices inspire other schools and districts to create and/or renew a culture of inquiry.

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