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# Inquiry, Discovery, and the Complexities of Teaching: Learning from the Research of Practitioners

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## **Inquiry, Discovery and the Complexities of Teaching: Learning from the Research of Practitioners**

In 2017, during the inaugural year of the *Journal of Practitioner Research*, Nancy Fichtman Dana and Elizabeth Currin brought together a collection of research from a single inquiry context, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School, to capture and highlight practitioner research in a special edition. The research focused on aspects of equity within that context, including inquiry that examined the inequity of academic tracking practices, the exploration of a music teacher's role in supporting equity, and a quest to teach self-regulation in an early learning environment.

Similarly, this special edition of the Journal attempts to examine inquiry from a commonality, but instead of contextual connections, this research was gathered at a single presentation location, the *5th Annual USF Practitioner Research Conference* held in April 2017 at the University of South Florida (USF). The Conference allows pre-service teachers (PSTs), in-service teachers, partners from surrounding school districts, and teacher educators to showcase (present, discuss, share) current practitioner research. Educators presented their research through poster sessions or roundtable sessions to share discoveries. Conference participants were subsequently invited to share their inquiry journey through the *Journal of Practitioner Research*, and several accepted the invitation.

To ground this special edition in a common lexicon, practitioner research, often referred to as action research, classroom research, practitioner inquiry, and teacher inquiry, is defined as a form of professional learning that encompasses the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 2009). These educators engage in systematic reflection by asking questions, gathering data to explore their questions, analyzing the data, making changes in practice based on their data analysis, and sharing learning with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Through this process, practitioners gain new understandings of their personal practices, and are able to make informed professional decisions that shape their own practice and that of other educators (Oberg, 1990). This type of research encourages changes in personal teaching practice while simultaneously raising the voices of teachers in the field (Meyers & Rust, 2003). For these reasons, we are honored and humbled

by the opportunity to learn from and with the preservice and veteran educators that have made themselves vulnerable by sharing the questions they have as they engaged in the inquiry process.

### **Introduction of the Practitioner Articles**

The articles within this edition include research presented by practitioners at various stages of teacher development and in various contexts. The practitioners range from pre-service teachers in both elementary and secondary contexts, to former teachers now engaged in teacher education and supervision. As such, the focus of each inquiry, the nature and scope of wonderings, and the knowledge gathered by participants is unique and in some ways, disparate. However, at the nexus of each project is a profound sense of discovery that enabled each practitioner to advance learning about their own individual practice and to examine implications for moving their practice as educators in new directions. Of the seven articles in this special edition, five were written by undergraduate students at the conclusion of their senior year at USF. In each of those five, the undergraduate students, now recent graduates, are noted as the first author and were supported by a second author.

The second authors in this special edition serve in a role that is inherently different from a second author of a traditional research article. The second authors in this edition were mentors and coaches as the practitioners, the first authors, engaged in the inquiry process and the sharing of their research. In addition, the second authors supported the practitioners as writers by (1) further developing the story and the analysis, and (2) editing for clarity and coherence while honoring the voice of the practitioner.

The remaining two articles were written by educators who work in higher education supporting the learning of teachers, both preservice and veteran, within school contexts. As scholars of education, these practitioners continue to engage in the study of their own practice both as a mechanism of continuous improvement and as a way to model the continuous learning process in which educators engage throughout their careers.

### **Practitioner Research in the Elementary Program**

An integral component of the elementary program at USF is an engagement in inquiry to develop students as reflective practitioners able to meet the needs of diverse learners. Thus, students in the elementary cohort program engage in multiple cycles of practitioner inquiry. These inquiry cycles begin in their junior year with a common exploration of a chosen individual learner, expands from self to consider the ways their instruction impacts student learning, and finally students engage in independent research, with a chosen wondering or question, during their final semester as students. This full time internship is integrated with a writing intensive course with a combined focus to prepare students to engage in teacher research as an intentional part of their teaching practice, write up their research and share their learning with other educators.

Three students in the elementary program chose to pursue publication in this venue after completing their final semester. The first practitioner researcher, Bailey Brown, engaged in inquiry in her fifth grade classroom to explore how various instructional strategies impacted student engagement. The second author, Steve Haberlin, supported her research by serving as her field supervisor and critical friend. The second story comes from practitioner Lauren Clark as she explores the tensions she feels related to learning how to effectively teach, and create meaning of social studies for her first grade students. The second author, Angela Hooser, supported Ms. Clark as her field supervisor for two years and instructor in her capstone writing course. The third story is told by Autumn Handin, and also centers around social studies as she explored ways to maximize instructional time while simultaneously increasing engagement, interest, and achievement for her fifth grade students. The second author, Jessica Leeman, was the instructor that sparked Ms. Handin's passion for social studies and was a natural choice as mentor for this article.

### **Practitioner Research in the Secondary Program**

Students in teacher preparation programs in Florida are required by the state to analyze their impact on student learning. In secondary programs at the University of South Florida, this analysis occurs throughout their programs through various teaching and reflective processes. Pre-service teachers complete a capstone experience during their last semester of their programs which consists of a final internship of semester-long teaching in the classroom of a mentor teacher.

Concurrent with internship, PSTs take a Senior Seminar course to explore clinical aspects of internship and fieldwork, collaborate with colleagues about the complexities of teaching in their content areas, and conduct a research project, the Impact on Student Learning Analysis. Each PST conducts this detailed practitioner inquiry to engage in the complete teaching cycle from planning for a specific population, through instruction, assessment, and toward data analysis. Each also examines a particular aspect of their instruction, a self-determined problem of practice, and their ability to impact student learning.

Two studies were conducted by PSTs in secondary settings (grades 6-12) in content-area mainstreamed classrooms during final internships as a requirement of their content-specific certification; Deanna Vaccaro worked in a high school English language arts classroom, while Andre Vaquero worked in a high school math class. The article by Deanna Vaccaro illustrates how she acted on feedback from her collaborating teacher to successfully implement progress monitoring during a unit on writing personal reflective essays. Andre Vaquero explored scaffolded instruction during an Algebra unit that both satisfied his wonderings but also opened new lines of inquiry for him, which he is currently exploring in graduate work. Dr. Laura Sabella, second author on both studies, is the Coordinator for Secondary Clinical Experiences and the instructor for the Senior Seminar course in which their projects took place.

### **Practitioner Research as Teacher Educators**

Doctoral students in the College of Education are expected to engage in inquiry as part of their program requirements and throughout their coursework. Most programs of study also connect doctoral students at some point in their programs with field-based work, usually as supervisors and/or instructors for field courses. This field work provides rich context for inquiry. For Andrea Scalzo Willson, it was the nexus of her appointment as a university supervisor in the elementary cohort program and her own pursuit of inquiry in her coursework that led to her examination of her practice as a supervisor. Darlene DeMarie, heading toward candidacy, conducted her inquiry as a mechanism for self-reflection on her time as a Fulbright Scholar and the professional development she conducted at a child development center in South Africa.

### Conclusions: Looking Across the Articles

As a reminder, the purpose of this special issue of JPR is to bring together the research work of practitioners from across multiple USF programs to celebrate the learning possible as educators engage in the research process and share that learning with others. In this way engagement in practitioner research holds promise for educators to learn from practice and to add to the knowledge base for teaching. For practitioner researchers adding to the knowledge base of teaching does not mean that generalizable claims are formed, but instead, engagement in this unique genre of research sheds light on the complexities of teaching and the ways practitioner researchers make sense of these complexities. In this spirit of learning and growth, as we worked as editors and mentors of these practitioner research articles we considered:

- What did these practitioner researchers *learn* about their teaching and their students?
- How might programs, schools, districts and policies *support* their continued growth?

By engaging in this critical thinking process, we noticed trends that showcase divergence, as well as congruence in the dilemmas noted, problems addressed, and the meaning-making journey of these educators. These trends provide the opportunity for reflection on teacher education programs.

Divergence was showcased in obvious ways that reflected the context of the authors' learning (elementary, secondary, teacher educator). For example in the elementary articles, and in the article written by Andrea Scalzo Willson, an elementary supervisor, the term *wondering* is used to denote the research question, while *problem of practice* is utilized in secondary, and Darlene DeMarie, the current faculty member showcased, uses the term *research question*. While it is obvious that the terms chosen are reflective of these practitioners affiliated programs, it raised questions for us as educators. In what ways do the kinds of language used to frame research, including a way of identifying what is to be researched, shape teachers' learning? What do the choice of terms ( such as *problem of practice*, *wondering*) indicate are important foci of practitioner research? To what extent do our choices in framing practitioner research lead to a sense of reflection and discovery and/or present the expectation to identify a definitive solution? Does one allow for more introspection and even, *change*?

While there are only seven articles presented in this special edition, some general dilemmas of practice are articulated across this work. One obvious area of congruence was the importance educators place on student engagement in the learning they plan and implement. This was present in elementary articles by Clark and Hooser, Brown and Haberlin, and Handin and Leeman; the secondary article by Vaccaro and Sabella; as well as the article written by teacher educator, Darlene DeMarie. Additionally, the importance of time in negotiating curricular decisions was pivotal in the elementary article by Handin and Leeman, the secondary article written by Vaquero and Sabella, as well as the article written by supervisor and doctoral student Andrea Scalzo Willson. While the understanding of student engagement and time management concepts can be considered developmental, as educators we found these foci presented an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of teaching, as the practitioner researchers in this special edition are all at pivotal points in their development as educators (undergraduate students about to enter the teaching profession, a doctoral student entering the teacher education profession, or a faculty member transitioning to a tenured professor). We wondered to what extent these ideas (student engagement and time management) develop over time? In what ways are these (and other foci) dependent upon the context of the researcher and the position in an educator's career? What implications does this have for the ways teachers can be supported across their professional lifespan? And finally, if we see these educators as "outsiders" to a new profession, in what ways do their perspectives speak to the need to questions assumptions we may hold about the ways learning experiences are structured?

This special edition provides a compelling glimpse into the minds of practitioners as they make sense of their work educating others, and it highlights not just the complexity of *teaching* but the complexities of *learning to teach* that persist across a practitioner's career. As educators we recognized in these researchers a need to grow and change organically in ways that are tightly connected to their students, their teaching context, and their own learning. We see the importance in allowing educators to "wonder," stumble upon, and uncover truth for themselves, as they strive to learn and grow. We are honored as editors, mentors, and teacher educators to play a part in raising the voices of these practitioners as we learn from their journey into the messiness of discovery within the chaos of teaching.

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