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“Inquiry is Confidence”: How Practitioner Inquiry Can Support New Teachers


Rachel Wolkenhauer

The Pennsylvania State University, rxw40@psu.edu

Angela Hooser

hoosera@usf.edu

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the profile of “Hannah”, a first grade teacher, who was having a successful first year of teaching until February when her principal shifted gears. At this point administration expected, as Hannah quoted her principal, “to walk into your classroom, at any point of the day, and see you in front of the classroom and the kids sitting at desks answering bubble-in questions and not talking to each other.” Rather than being discouraged by this, Hannah turned to her knowledge of practitioner inquiry to systematically study and stand behind the professional decisions she knew she needed to make to provide her students with meaningful learning experiences. This paper used phenomenological interviewing to solicit the story of Hannah’s journey. Using Hannah’s own words crafted from transcribed interviews, this paper discusses the importance of incorporating practitioner inquiry in preservice teacher education programs for the purposes of developing an inquiry stance.

Hannah Jefferson had a successful first six months of teaching. She was hired to teach first grade, fresh out of her teacher preparation program, at a brand-new elementary school. By December, she was seeing academic improvement in her students, was looked up to by her teaching colleagues, and had impressed her principal. And then in February that all changed.

I thought it was going well. But the principal came in again around February and gave me the complete opposite [feedback after an] observation...She literally told me, ‘I feel bad for all of the students in your class because they have you as a teacher and they haven’t learned anything all year.’ I know that she is wrong. I know I’m a good teacher. If I was a different first-year teacher, there was no way I would continue teaching after that.

Hannah credits this perseverance and confidence to the inquiry stance she developed in her teacher preparation program.

In the book that first coined the term “inquiry stance,” *Inside Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* (1993), Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe inquiry stance as:

The position teachers and others who work together in inquiry communities take toward knowledge and its relationships to practice...Across the life span, an inquiry stance provides a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas. (pp. 288-289)

Many teacher preparation programs value the inquiry process for its potential to engage student teachers in active, practice-based problem solving. However, few programs recognize the importance of moving beyond engaging in the formal inquiry process as an assignment for the university to inquiry as a stance; a way of work and being as a teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 2009; Wolkenhauer, Boynton, & Dana, 2011).

It is known that engaging in practitioner inquiry as an intentional part of field experiences holds promise for developing teachers who are able to meet the learning needs of K-6 students (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Dawson, 2007; Donnell & Harper, 2005). However, there are few examples in the literature that describe the ways first year teachers engage in inquiry after developing inquiry stances in their preservice teacher education programs. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to provide an example of one such first-year teacher and the ways the development of an inquiry stance supported her professionally.

Relevant Research

Practitioner inquiry is a form of professional learning defined as the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 2009). Educators engage in systematic reflection and take action for change by asking questions or “wonderings,” gathering data to explore their wonderings, analyzing the data, making changes in practice based on knowledge constructed, and sharing learning with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Through this process, practitioners gain new understandings of their philosophies and actions, and are able to make more informed professional decisions that shape their own practice and that of other educators (Oberg, 1990). By connecting theory with practice, inquiry encourages changes in teaching while simultaneously raising the voices of teachers in the field (Meyers & Rust, 2003). For these reasons, practitioner inquiry has shown endurance as a tool to support the learning of preservice and inservice teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; 2009; Crocco, Bayard & Schwartz, 2003).

As colleges of education increasingly infuse clinical experiences across preservice teacher education programs, practitioner inquiry has the potential for developing teacher candidates as educators who critique and generate knowledge for student learning and professional growth. Barriers do exist, however, in creating and maintaining effective inquiry-based experiences across higher education coursework. Lack of resources, support, and understanding can deter practitioner inquiry from effectively developing in teacher preparation programs (Allen & Calhoun, 1998; Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman & Pine, 2009; Stuart

& Yarger-Kane, 2000; Tom, 1997). Despite these barriers, research indicates that when successfully integrated into teacher preparation, practitioner inquiry enables future teachers to take ownership of their professional learning in ways that help them transition from thinking like students to thinking like teachers (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Dawson, 2007; Donnell & Harper, 2005). The changes associated with this transition to ownership of professional growth can be linked to improvements in school cultures and the larger society. This is because practitioner inquiry positions teacher candidates as leaders, decision-makers, collaborators, and activists whose daily practice helps to reshape the teaching field itself (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Price & Valli, 2005).

While the most common way to integrate inquiry into teacher preparation coursework is as an assignment or culminating project, some teacher education programs have found inquiry to be a useful tool for supervisors who teach about teaching while working with preservice teachers in the field. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2013) identified inquiry as a specific practice of supervision that integrates multiple supervision tasks, in that focusing on one area of improvement through inquiry influences learning in other areas. By using practitioner inquiry in this way, teacher educators can support preservice teachers' work within challenging educational structures and policies, while also teaching them to reflect on, and act for, necessary educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). As a part of supervision, inquiry holds potential for developing new teachers as reflective problem solvers able to approach their practice from an inquiry stance (Nolan & Hoover, 2010).

Methods

As supervisors in a teacher preparation program designed to integrate inquiry for the purposes on developing inquiry stance (Delane, Hooser, Richner, Wolkenhauer, Colvin, & Dana, 2017), we approached supervision by taking inquiry into account, making use of it, and ensuring our approach was congruent with the practices of having preservice teachers inquire. This inquiry approach to supervision used inquiry:

- as a pedagogical approach for connecting theory and practice.
- as an assessment of preservice teacher learning and professional growth,
- as a way to model the critical habit of mind and reflective worldview of a professional inquiry stance.

After implementing this approach for two years, we wondered about the impact on students' working lives as first-year teachers.

In order to select participants for the study, we used criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). To locate participants, we turned to the graduates from the teacher education program in which we worked and sought participants who had engaged in the inquiry process no less than four times. In addition to these careful sampling procedures, we took specific measures to identify participants who were amenable to sharing stories of their experiences through an initial email and phone conversation (Moustakas, 1994).

Once participants were selected, Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interviewing method was used to engage in data collection. This method combines the solicitation of life history experiences with the philosophy of phenomenology through engaging in focused in-depth interviewing. Modifying Seidman's recommended three-interview format, we conducted two 90-minute interviews - one at the end of participants' first semester and one at the end of their first year teaching - in order to address Seidman's process of gathering participants' histories, current experiences, and reflections on meaning. Each of the interviews was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The first interview asked for a focused life history in regard to the inquiry process and their understandings of being a teacher. We also explored the participants' current experiences using inquiry as first-year teachers. Prior to the second interview we transcribed the initial interviews in order to choose experiences and details from which to ask the participant to reflect on and make meaning of. In addition, participants shared new current experiences using inquiry in their first year as teachers during the second interview.

At the conclusion of data collection, the interviews were reduced inductively, through a three-step iterative process: 1) identification of meaning units and clusters 2) the creation of narrative profiles and themes, and 3) reflection on meaning. In order to generate meaningful clusters, units of meaning were initially identified and we drew from the phenomenological tradition by bracketing the data and identifying excerpts related to the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994). As we read and re-read the data, we combined similar meaning units, excerpts from the transcribed data, to form meaning clusters (Seidman, 2013; Weiss, 1994).

We winnowed and sorted the data by reading each meaning cluster as a whole and identifying excerpts that related to the ways each participant defined, used, and experienced inquiry as a first-year teacher (Seidman, 2013). As the

meaning clusters were formed and re-formed, we moved from meaning units to the construction of narrative profiles and themes.

The narrative profiles are a “vignette of a participant’s experience,” and have a beginning middle and end, as well as a sense of conflict and resolution (Seidman, 2013, p.122). The purpose is to immerse the reader into the experience, in this case, the experiences of first-year teachers and the ways they exemplify an inquiry stance.

Finally, as recommended by Seidman (2013), while we used the exact words of the participants to construct the narrative, we used notations to let the reader know when we inserted or deleted language. First, we used brackets to denote words that we inserted for clarity or for transitional purposes. Second, we used ellipses in order to denote deleted material from a sentence or paragraph, or when we spliced similar ideas into one sentence. Finally, we deleted repetitions in language and idiosyncrasies of verbal speech such as, “you know,” “uhm,” and “like” (Seidman, 2013, p.124). In the final step of the analysis, we reflected on the process we had engaged in thus far as a whole, and looked across the participants’ experiences to consider the meaning they brought to their work as first-year teachers.

This paper shares the experience one these first year teachers, Hannah Jefferson, who you met at the beginning of this article. Next, we share her story, in her own words, crafted from transcribed interviews.

Hannah’s Story

I don’t think of myself as a great teacher who doesn’t need to change. As a first year teacher almost nothing goes as planned. It’s helpful to be able to analyze what I’m doing - to know that if something doesn’t work, I can figure out ways to fix it. I know that there are always questions and always lots of answers to try, and then lots more questions...and the process keeps going. The most important thing about teacher inquiry is confidence. I have the tools to collect data and do research in my own classroom and figure out what I can do differently; it’s confidence in knowing that what I am doing is data-driven and research-based. Teachers have to be flexible in asking questions about their practice because every group of kids is different. We need to be able to change our teaching according to [the] students we have and what is working, or not working, from year to year.

[For example,] I have seven first graders that are really struggling. When I got them they were scoring 52% on a [reading] level A. To pass kindergarten, the goal is a level C. My mindset is not that they are not doing well, but what can I do differently so that they pass? I did an inquiry in college on a reading intervention program that really helped my students so I started doing that for 45 minutes every day. Originally, in college, I just knew the steps [to the intervention] and I knew to follow them. I didn't have many teacher skills, so I wasn't really seeing the impact on children or understanding that every piece is important. But now, I've been doing this for about three weeks and my students are all on level D or E. They are now on a first grade reading level.

[As another example], in my school we are using the same reading curriculum that I used in my internship when I did an inquiry on how to improve student engagement. It is awesome that I did that inquiry because now I use what I have found every single day. I know how to use my teacher voice and my students know that 100% of the time they will all share. [At the beginning of the year] my principal came in and did an informal observation and it happened to be [a reading] lesson and I thought, "Yes! I did a whole inquiry on how to do this right. I know how to do this." My principal said how impressed she was that all my students were discussing [reading] with each other. I loved my job and my kids were making great progress. I was seeing detailed data that some of my first grade students who had come in not knowing any letters or sounds were now reading at a beginning first grade level.

I thought it was going well. But the principal came in again around February and gave me the complete opposite [feedback after an] observation.

I was very upset but I'm a first year teacher, I figured I have things to learn and she is a principal. She started observing me three times a week. One time during reading, I had a small group at my table and we were doing phonics. The other groups were doing independent reading with their accountability journal. This is where they retell the books they are reading with three details, and then report out to their accountability partners. There were three students that I wasn't confident could read and write about a story and stay engaged the whole time [so they] were doing computer comprehension activities. When [my principal] walked in I thought, "Yes! I am finally doing everything I can possibly be doing to differentiate for all these kids." But I was told that they should not be doing independent reading because they don't know how to read. I was told there was no accountability. But she didn't ask the students what the goal was for the day or even look at their journals! She just said, "Some students are not getting any instruction." I thought, "This is good teaching! I know it is good teaching

because I know it is researched-based. And I know that my kids have made improvements.”

I went up to her after I got that particular observation back. I said, “I’m happy to take any corrections but I want you to know, according to what I’ve learned so far, I’m doing the best instruction that I can and I have the data to back that up.” I’m quoting my principal here because this was the straw that broke my back. She literally told me, “I feel bad for all of the students in your class because they have you as a teacher and they haven’t learned anything all year.” I know that she is wrong. I know I’m a good teacher. If I was a different first year teacher, there was no way I would continue teaching after that. But, I kept a smile on my face; I was as professional as I could possibly be and I said, “I’m so sorry you feel that way but I completely disagree. We obviously have different teaching styles, so tell me what you need me to do and I will try to do it.” My principal said, “When I walk into your classroom, at any point of the day, I expect you to be in front of the classroom and the kids sitting at desks answering bubble-in questions and not talking to each other.” If she had told me that at the interview, I wouldn’t have taken this job.

I started job hunting for next year because there was no way I could stay at this school any longer. The only reason I stayed this long was my kids.

I heard about a job and applied. I told them in the interview, “If you walk into my classroom you will not see me standing at the front of the room pointing at a whiteboard. You will see kids all over the place. You will see them on the floor working, you will see them alone working, you will see them working with me.”

The principal asked me, “How are you able to stand up for what you know is right and do something about what is happening at your current school?” I showed him my data notebook and he said, “How did you get to doing this?” And I explained about inquiry and about how if something isn’t working I keep trying things until something is working. Then he asked me, “How are you going to convince all my other teachers to do that?” They were so impressed they hired me to teach first grade the next day.

[At my new school,] the teachers are all very curious [about the way I teach], I share stories about [what I’ve learned by studying my] students. For example, one little girl knocked something off another teacher’s bulletin board and every day I asked her, “have you figured out that problem yet?” One day she came in with signs and she asked, “Can I hang these up so people stop touching

the bulletin boards? And then I'm going to go ask if I can help redo the strings I knocked off. I need to ask how long they need to be." Now that student is a problem solver. It's not my problem to solve.

None of the teachers are actually trying [inquiry] yet, but they're thinking about it. They know it's working, they see it. I'm just very open about what I'm doing.

I think the most important thing for me now, after everything, is being a learner and learning with my children. It is not just how to teach them the best that I can so that they learn the most. And not just so I can fix what I did wrong. Instead, I think of myself as a learner and teach my students that we can actually learn things together. We can do research together, and that's way more powerful than just me teaching them something. I've noticed with my new class that I've been seeing a lot more inquiry through my students. Like right now, I want to teach my kids poetry and I don't know what is the best way to teach poetry. I told them, "That's my [inquiry] question." [So] we are collaborating. My kids and I are learning what poetry is together.

At my new school the principal has said that I'm really innovative. They see I'm trying new things and I'm not afraid to go out there. Next year they want me to be a leader in a blended learning environment. They want me and one other teacher to pilot a 1:1 iPad classroom in fifth grade. Right now I am looking into how to [use] iPads for math and science. I'm researching different ideas that other teachers have had, and I scheduled to go in and observe other 5th grade teachers to get a feel for the curriculum. I'm just researching and seeing what they're doing.

At my first school, they were breaking me. After everything that I have gone through, I think now, more than ever, it's so important to share what you're doing and what you're finding. Just to know that other teachers are doing inquiry too, and are finding things out and having success from it. That you are not alone.

Discussion: Inquiry is Hannah's Way of Work

As we listened to Hannah's story unfold during her first-year teaching, we learned a great deal about her understanding of inquiry and how it supported her as a new teacher. Hannah understands inquiry as a way of teaching, knowing, and being as an educator (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Inquiry as a Tool for Flexibly Customizing Teaching

Hannah understands inquiry as a tool for flexibly customizing her teaching practices for her students' learning needs:

Teachers have to be flexible in asking questions about their practice...we need to be able to change our teaching according to [the] students we have and what is working, or not working, from year to year.

Inquiry provides Hannah with a structure for questioning and analyzing her teaching practices. It is the mechanism that allows her to systematically study her own practice so that she can be certain that the changes she is making in her teaching are what her students need. It allows her to focus on what she can do in her own classroom for her specific group of students. With an inquiry stance to teaching, Hannah is able to continuously ask important questions that lead to data collection and analysis, ensuring she is not simply enacting what she *thinks* will be effective teaching, but is instead acting on data-driven decisions based on what she knows she and her students need.

Inquiry as a Tool for Advocacy

Hannah understands inquiry as a mechanism for standing behind her professional decisions and advocating for what she believes is best for students:

I told them in the interview, 'If you walk into my classroom you will not see me standing at the front of the room pointing at a whiteboard. You will see kids all over the place. You will see them on the floor working, you will see them alone working, you will see them working with me.'

As a tool for advocacy, inquiry provides Hannah with tangible data to share with others, allowing her to stand behind her professional decisions in ways that are increasingly important in an age of intense accountability. With an inquiry stance, Hannah can advocate for what she believes is best for her students because she knows to question and challenge the status quo, and because she can clearly articulate and demonstrate, for herself and others, what she believes and who she intends to be as a teacher.

Inquiry as a Tool for Leadership

Hannah understands inquiry as an opportunity to be a teacher leader:

I explained about inquiry and about how if something isn't working I keep trying things until something is working. Then he asked me, 'How are you going to convince all my other teachers to do that?'... None of the teachers are actually trying [inquiry] yet, but they know it's working, they see it. I'm just very open about what I'm doing.

With an emphasis on sharing one's practice, inquiry traditionally works to break down barriers of isolation for teachers. As a tool for leadership, then, inquiry is a way of working as a teacher that exists in collaboration with others. Inquiry provides Hannah with a language and a practice that she can readily share. And since her inquiry work is grounded in the work of her school, she is able to be a role model in the very context of her colleagues' work.

Inquiry as Professional Identity

Hannah understands inquiry as a confident, learner-centered professional identity:

The most important thing about teacher inquiry is confidence. I have the tools to collect data and do research in my own classroom and figure out what I can do differently; it's confidence in knowing that what I am doing is data driven and research based...It is not just so I can fix what I did wrong. Instead, I think of myself as a learner and teach my students that we can actually learn things together.

You may recall from the beginning of this paper that Hannah attributes her confidence in her first-year teaching to her inquiry stance. Hannah is a confident teacher, advocate and leader because inquiry is an integral part of what it means to her to be a teacher. In thinking of herself in this way, Hannah is able to depend on the inquiry process to guide the professional decisions she makes because inquiry opens up possibilities for learning to be a better teacher in every moment she spends in her classroom. Inquiry helps Hannah acknowledge, for herself, that what she is doing is impacting her practice for her students so that she can share those practices confidently with others.

Implications: Supporting First Year Teacher Inquiry Stance

Hannah's story provides us with an illustration of a first-year teacher with an inquiry stance. This has important implications for teacher preparation programs working to build the kinds of systemic supports that will help to raise the overall readiness and effectiveness of our beginning teachers.

By engaging in an approach to supervision that intentionally takes inquiry into account, teacher educators have the opportunity to support preservice teachers' abilities to develop an inquiry stance for the first year of teaching by:

- modeling inquiry-oriented teaching and assessment approaches for *preservice teachers* so as *first year teachers* they can access the tools they need to teach flexibly customized lessons to their students, no matter who those students are,
- challenging *preservice teachers* to ask questions about their practices and the status quo of educational settings so that as *first year teachers* they know how to be critical consumers of pedagogy, curriculum, and system expectations,
- expecting *preservice teachers* to gain insight into their questions by collecting and analyzing data that will provide evidence to back up their claims so that as *first year teachers* they have supported practice in confidently and justly standing behind their professional decisions,
- supporting reflection and collaboration practices that require *preservice teachers* to understand, articulate, and enact their teaching beliefs so that as *first year teachers* they have stronger senses of their professional identities,
- and modeling and engaging with *preservice teachers* in life-long learning practices so that as *first year teachers* they can take a learner-orientation into their classrooms and schools.

As teacher education programs continue to work toward improving systemic supports in order to develop the best teachers we can for our nation's children, we must take into account the sustainability and long-term effects of such efforts. Practitioner inquiry, when used as part of teacher preparation for the purposes of developing inquiry stance, has the potential to improve schools by raising a confident generation of new teachers who have the expectation that teacher professionalism is, in and of itself, a form of school reform. Through practitioner inquiry new teachers are positioned to positively impact student learning, their own professional growth, and the professional learning of the educators around them in influentially sustainable and progressive ways.

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