Practitioner Research in a Changing Educator Preparation Landscape: Exploring Tensions and Reimagining Possibilities

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Abstract

In this opening article, Guest Editor Ellen Ballock highlights the purpose of this special themed issue of the Journal of Practitioner Research, introduces the six manuscripts selected for inclusion, and highlights how each piece contributes to building a culture of inquiry within educator preparation.

A decade has passed since Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) asserted that these are "trying times" for practitioner research. At the time, they argued that the rhetoric of accountability in public education—for example, the emphasis on "capital R" research-based best practices and the narrowing of educational outcomes to those testable on high-stakes tests—threatened key underpinnings of the practitioner research movement by de-emphasizing local context, local knowledge, and the role of teachers as knowledge producers. Yet Cochran-Smith and Lytle also asserted that practitioner research continued to flourish despite these obstacles. Furthermore, they encouraged readers to consider Maxine Green's words—"The freedom to imagine comes from encountering and resisting obstacles" (quoted in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 35)—and to explore how "trying times" might push the work of practitioner research forward towards new depth and possibility.

A decade has passed, but "trying times" for practitioner research persist and are perhaps felt even more keenly within teacher education programs due to recent changes in the educator preparation landscape in the United States. Examples of these changes include revised accreditation standards, new capstone performance assessments required for program completion and/or licensure, and increased accountability for P-12 students learning (CAEP, 2016; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016; SCALE, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Together, these changes place an increasing emphasis on "teacher education data collection, accountability, and evaluation" (Wiseman, 2012, p. 88), creating new tensions and obstacles for practitioner research. However, change also paves the way for new purposes and possibilities. For example, while new capstone performance assessments may coopt the time previously set aside for teacher candidates to complete capstone practitioner research projects, these same performance assessments provide new lenses through which teacher educators may engage in intentional inquiry to inform program improvement (e.g., Peck, Gallucci, & Sloan, 2010).

It is this push and pull between tensions and possibilities that served as the impetus for this special issue. The call for papers addressed this push and pull through two purpose statements: (1) to acknowledge and document the current complexities, tensions, obstacles, or constraints that challenge practitioner research within educator preparation, and (2) to imagine new ways forward by considering ways practitioner research is being positively reimagined, reshaped, or embedded in the work and culture of educator preparation programs. Potential authors were asked to consider the following questions when framing their work:

- What tensions, challenges, or obstacles currently threaten practitioner research within educator preparation programs?
- In what ways have educator preparation programs successfully reimagined practitioner research in response to tensions, challenges, or obstacles?
- What opportunities does the current educator preparation landscape provide for pushing practitioner research forward towards new depth and possibility?
- What role can practitioner research play in navigating changes in the educator preparation policy and practice?
- How do current educator preparation programs create a culture of inquiry or support the development of an inquiry stance?

The manuscripts selected for inclusion in this issue take a variety of approaches to addressing these central questions. First, authors chose different paper formats. Included in this issue are two conceptual pieces, two descriptions of promising practices, a practitioner research study, and a research study about practitioner research. Second, authors focus on different populations. Some focus primarily on teacher educator practice as a site for inquiry, while others highlight teacher candidates engaged in practitioner research. Finally, authors highlight a range of perspectives on the types of challenges or obstacles that may threaten practitioner research (e.g., the "Age of Accountability," distance supervision, new state assessments) or open up new opportunities for practitioner research within educator preparation programs (e.g., new continuous improvement processes, new models for clinical supervision).

Despite this divergence, a significant unifying theme runs through this issue. In the face of challenges, teacher educators and educator preparation programs are creating cultures of inquiry, modeling an inquiry stance towards practice, and fostering an inquiry stance in teacher candidates. While practitioner research may be conducted as a single time-bound project, a culture of inquiry promotes ongoing cycles of practitioner research, both formal and informal. A culture of inquiry exists within an organization or across organizations when taking an inquiry stance towards practice becomes a way of knowing and being

(Snow-Gerono, 2005), a central component of a collective professional vision (Ravitch, 2014), an ongoing practice of taking a research perspective on practice by "carefully observing, challenging underlying assumptions and beliefs, posing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and continuously reinventing practice to improve students' learning" (Cochran-Smith, 2002, p. 284).

In this issue, Elizabeth Currin elaborates on inquiry as stance in her piece entitled, "From Rigor to Vigor: The Past, Present, and Potential of Inquiry as Stance." She traces the historical roots of inquiry as stance, highlights three "battle lines" that represent areas of tension and challenge both historically and in the current "Age of Accountability," and advocates for teacher inquiry over transmission modes of professional learning.

Two pieces in this special issue feature promising practices and concrete tips for fostering a culture of inquiry amongst teacher educators. Sara Quay and Meghan Lockwood highlight the Data Wise Improvement Process as a promising practice that supports taking an inquiry stance towards practice in the context of the proliferation of state data now available and state expectations for more systematic data-driven continuous improvement. Similarly, Nicholas Husbye, Julie Rust, Christy Wessel Powell, Sarah Vander Zanden, and Beth Buchholz highlight the ways they have used digital tools to create and sustain a digital inquiry community to support collaborative practitioner research over time and across great distances. Significant in both of these pieces is the development of cultures of inquiry that expand beyond the boundaries of a single institution or location.

This issue also includes two pieces highlighting ways teacher educators might support teacher candidates in developing an inquiry stance during clinical experiences. Sherry Dismuke, Esther Enright, and Julianne Wenner both model an inquiry stance towards practice for their teacher candidates by engaging in a self-study of their feedback to teacher candidates following lesson observations and propose a new feedback model gradually shifts primary responsibility for inquiry into practice from teacher educator / mentor teacher to teacher candidate. Stephanie Schroeder and Elizabeth Currin propose a new model for distance supervision of clinical experiences that links practitioner research with instructional coaching supported by the development of an inquiry community amongst teacher candidates.

Finally, Margery Miller and Valerie Shinas model an inquiry stance towards practice by examining their institution's long-standing tradition of teacher inquiry as a capstone experience in light of a new state-mandated teacher

candidate assessment system. They conclude that integrating teacher inquiry into a clinically-based teacher preparation program does not take away from the development of state identified competencies, but actually promotes the development of these teaching competencies *and* serves as appropriate assessment evidence of teacher candidates' developing proficiency.

This special issue set out both to acknowledge current tensions or constraints challenging practitioner research within educator preparation and to imagine new ways forward by considering ways practitioner research is being positively reimagined, reshaped, or embedded in the work and culture of educator preparation programs. While each piece does situate itself within the challenges of the current landscape of educator preparation, what truly stands out across pieces is the ways the authors are thinking flexibly, embracing change, and imagining new ways forward. In this issue, we see teacher educators who are willing to re-examine "what we've always done" in light of current challenges and who are open to discovering shortcomings in their current practice. We see teacher educators using new data sources and collaborative processes to support each other in continuous improvement and professional growth to better support developing teachers. We see thoughtful and rigorous approaches to addressing problems of practice. We see that an inquiring stance and openness to change supports these teacher educators in navigating the push and pull of tension and possibility. For those readers feeling caught in places of tension, may reading this special issue capture your imagination and provide encouragement to push you forward towards new possibilities.

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