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Citation Details

Yeigh, Maika J.. (2017). Inquiry at the Heart of Teacher Preparation. i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 9.

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Inquiry at the Heart of Teacher Preparation

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When everything goes right, you know it. The air is electric, and people smile and connect. Classroom-based action research can be messy. There is constant doubt about whether you are on the right track, or collected the right data, or even asked the right question. Did you spend a year working on the wrong project? In the end, will you learn something worth knowing? Classroom research is challenging, but for the novice researcher, the process is even muddier.

Action Research with Teacher Candidates

New teachers—especially teacher candidates—ask a lot of questions. Some of the recent questions my candidates have asked include: Why does my third period class turn in work at a lower rate than my first period class? How can I make homework assignments more engaging, and will that increase the amount of homework completed? Why does the behavior in my classes deteriorate after 40 minutes? These three sample questions are important to investigate both for improved instructional practice and also for increased student learning. New teachers have a multitude of considerations as they acclimate to the profession, their schools, and the students in their classrooms; finding time to systematically study problems of practice is both challenging and critically important (Abrams, Strom, Dacey, Abi-Hanna, & Dauplaise, 2014; Stylianides & Stylianides, 2013).

The Graduate Teacher Education Program (GTEP) described in this essay is the largest in Mountain State (pseudonym), graduating approximately 90 teacher candidates at the secondary level each year. Most candidates complete the MEd and licensure requirements to be content-area teachers as part of an intensive program that runs June-to-June and includes a one-year field-based teaching practicum in a middle or high school classroom. As part of the MEd requirement, secondary-level teacher candidates design and implement an action research project during the one-year practicum experience. For many of candidates, this is their first experience to engage in research that directly informs their practice. The main goal of the project is not to be published. Instead, the goal is for teacher candidates to identify a problem of practice, study it, and learn something to take forward into their teaching (Dweck, 2014; Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Most importantly, the research project should support the development of an inquiry stance: for teacher candidates to build the habit to identify and study problems of practice for the benefit of teaching and student learning right from their very first days in the classroom.

Starting the Research: Intrigue

Our teacher candidates begin with observations in the placement classroom where they will spend the school year. As they get situated and learn more about their school, cooperating teacher, and their students, teacher candidates find themselves intrigued—sometimes with classroom structures, sometimes with interactions involving students, and sometimes with tensions in the curriculum. This intrigue is the birth of their research project. As stated previously, teacher candidates have an abundance of questions. Faculty guide candidates through a narrowing process to hone in on a research question that meets the criteria of being both professionally important and within the locus of the candidate’s control during their field-based practicum. To better inform their research, teacher candidates read about the topic and pose questions to guide their thinking. Faculty work with candidates to connect their questions directly to problems of practice at their practicum site.

Within a few months, teacher candidates are ready to design a project that will inform the questions and build on what they read and have learned so far. Candidates create a plan for project implementation and design three data collection instruments to inform their research question. An example of the process can be illustrated in the research of Scott (pseudonym), the candidate who asked why the behavior in his classes deteriorated after 40 minutes. This issue was professionally important to Scott; during instruction, student attention waned halfway through the 84-minute class period, contributing to a variety of classroom management issues. In addition, the collaborating teacher was amenable to Scott adjusting established classroom routines and experimenting with new approaches. To guide his thinking, Scott studied research about attention span and student engagement. He then designed instructional lessons that included engagement strategies. In order to formally study his work, Scott designed an observation tool, a student-interview protocol, and an assignment tracking sheet to collect data about the instructional changes and the effect they had on classroom behavior and work turn-in.

Seven months after beginning work in their placement classrooms, our teacher candidates are swimming in data. Many have interviews to transcribe, surveys to analyze, and observations to code. They sort and code and analyze, looking for trends and patterns that will inform their teaching practice. Scott had many findings related to improved behavior and increased attention, as would be expected. However, his students also reported enjoying the class more and feeling more connected to the content, other students, and Scott himself—all unanticipated findings.

Putting It All Together

For most programs of study, there is a culminating event—a graduation celebration, a hooding ceremony. In GTEP, we have both of those events. However, to situate teacher-as-researcher at the heart of our program and to celebrate our students’ acquisition of an inquiry stance, we have a culmination event where teacher candidates present their research. The event is designed as a conference, with a program that includes every project. Each conference room, classroom, and open space is utilized for presentations, with 11 to 14 teacher candidates presenting at each of the seven sessions. Guests attend the event as well: Incoming students, current students in our two-year program, additional program faculty, and friends and family members attend in the audience.

Teacher candidates put together a presentation that begins with the nexus of their research to let the audience know why the topic was personally interesting and relevant to their teaching practice. Then they explain how the research is situated in their teaching context and their research question(s). Candidates share the literature related to their topic before an explanation of the way they studied the question(s).

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The findings are the most important aspect of the work, and it is the sharing of those findings and what they mean for the presenter's future practice that creates the excitement. Why did the third period class turn in work at a lower rate than first period? The candidate determined that it was mainly due to student hunger prior to lunch, and therefore instituted a snack break. Attention and on-task work increased, which also improved work turn-in rates. How can homework assignments be more engaging, and will that increase the amount of homework completed? The candidate built in options that allowed students to use multimedia to show their learning on homework assignments; homework completion increased. Why did student behavior deteriorate after 40 minutes? In an 84-minute block, student attention waned after 40 minutes. Scott changed instructional focus and mode of delivery after the first half of the period, which improved student attention and engagement.

Suggestions for Other Teacher Preparation Programs

Collegiality around the sharing of research findings brings the projects full-circle. In the construction of the conference, I keep in mind a few key points. First, I make sure teacher candidates have the opportunity to watch other candidates' presentations in which they are interested. I spread out the content areas as much as possible so there is one mathematics, music, social studies, English/language arts, science, art, health/PE, and world language presentation at each session. I send out the program to candidates in advance in a draft format so they can inform me about whether their presentation is in conflict with another presentation they want to attend. In addition, candidates verify that the space in which they are assigned is conducive to their project. In our building, we have a variety of space available—small conference spaces, large classroom spaces, open spaces, casual spaces—and candidates can request which type of space works best for the presentation of their work. Technology is also provided; the goal is for everyone to share their work in the format that suits their professional needs.

One of the key elements for a successful project and celebration is turning ownership over to the teacher candidates. The project has to come from identified needs and interests of the participant in order for the findings to be meaningful. The contextual significance of the experience is at the heart of developing a stance of inquiry and reflective practice that can sustain a teacher through a career (Snow, Flynn, Whisenand, & Mohr, 2016). Our goal in GTEP is to support sustained inquiry in ways that contribute to a long and thoughtful teaching career.

Maika J. Yeigh is an assistant professor at Portland State University, where she works with preservice teacher candidates. Her research interests include the career cycle of teacher development as well as building partnerships between K-12 schools and teacher preparation programs.

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