

Learning to teach, learning to inquire: A 3-year study of teacher candidates' experiences

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Abstract

In this study, the authors report on their research into the inquiry component of a newly conceptualized pre-service teacher education program. In a series of focus group discussions conducted over a 3-year period, 17 teacher candidates talked about their understanding of, and their experiences with inquiry. They were able to identify benefits such as inquiry's potential to improve classroom practice, support teacher development, and contribute to the learning of the larger educational community. They also identified several challenges of engaging in inquiry, such as the changing nature of the teacher's role, the open-ended nature of the process, and the way in which a commitment to inquiry can disrupt the status quo in schools. The authors conclude with some recommendations and questions that teacher educators need to consider if they expect their teacher candidates to adopt an inquiry stance towards their teaching. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

An emphasis on inquiry and reflection is becoming more and more evident when schools of education re-view and re-think their teacher education programs. As teacher educators, we are committed to preparing teachers who recognize the complexity of teaching, are thoughtful about their teaching practices, question their own

assumptions and consider multiple perspectives in order to make informed decisions about the learning needs of their students. As we relinquish traditional notions of the teacher as “technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementer of other people's knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16) and shift to an expanded conception of the teacher as knower, thinker, leader and change agent, our teacher preparation programs must also shift and change.

In this article, we describe the change process undertaken in our Faculty of Education when inquiry and reflection became one of the guiding

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principles of a newly conceptualized program. We report on our 3-year research study into inquiry as it is being practiced in our program. During the first 2 years of this study we sought faculty members' definitions of inquiry and examined teacher candidates' conceptualizations, interpretations, and experiences with inquiry. In the third year of the study, we interviewed the participants after they had completed their first year of teaching. Drawing primarily on data from these interviews, we examine the positive effects as well as the tensions and challenges our teacher candidates encountered, we explore a number of questions and issues that were raised for us, and discuss the insights we have developed as a result of our inquiry into inquiry.

The research literature in teacher education confirms that teacher candidates and collaborating teachers consistently single out the practical element of the student teaching experience as the most valuable aspect of a teacher education program (Segall, 2002). Others have, however, pointed to the limitations of a primary focus on the practical aspects of teachers' work. While teacher candidates might be most interested in opportunities to improve their practical craft skills, the attainment of these skills, while necessary, is not sufficient preparation for the professional role of teaching. As Dewey (1904/1965) cautioned, "unless a teacher is...a student [of education] he may continue to improve in the mechanics of school management, but he cannot grow as a teacher..." (p. 151). Beginning teachers need to know many things beyond the craft skills of teaching. They need to know about themselves as learners, about students and how they learn, and about the context in which they are teaching. They need to know their subject matter and how to teach subject matter. They must understand the moral component of teaching, the implications of the formal curriculum, the process of community building and the politics of school governance. The list could go on. While knowledge in each of these domains is important for teaching success, the critical issue for teachers is how they learn to think about the source and role of that knowledge for their own classroom practice; how they blend theory and practice to further their

knowing and understanding of learning, teaching and schooling.

The recent literature on teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Goodlad, 1990; Labaree, 2003; Loughran & Russell, 1997; Norlander-Case, Raegan, & Case, 1999; Rodgers, 2002; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1991; Zeichner, 1993, 1996) points us to inquiry-based approaches to teacher education as a way of preparing teachers who think systematically about their own practices, seek the advice of others, draw on research to deepen their knowledge, and then adapt their teaching in ways that most effectively support student learning. The recent literature on teacher education suggests that inquiry-based approaches to teacher education encourage resistance to thoughtless implementation of teaching practices, support dispositions of critical thoughtfulness about teaching, and nurture the ongoing learning, professional growth and intellectual development of teacher candidates.

2. The study

The teacher preparation program at the University of Manitoba is a 2-year after-degree program that consists of an integrated sequence of course work, and field experiences that constitute 24 weeks of the total 2-year program. Students entering the program choose one of three streams for their focus of study: Early Years (Kindergarten–Grade 4), Middle Years (Grades 5–8), and Senior Years (Grades 9–12). Teacher candidates are placed in schools in cohort groups and are supported in each practicum experience by collaborating teachers and faculty advisors. In each stream, the focus of the school experience is extended beyond the classroom to encompass an exploration of the school as a community as well as a study of the broader community. To guide the experiences and the learning of teacher candidates in all three streams, we have designed a curriculum for the practicum around the following five inter-related principles (Thiessen, 1998): inquiry and critical reflection, collaboration, integration, diversity of experiences,

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