

Prepared to Take Responsibility: Practitioner Inquiry for Social Justice in a Professional Development School Partnership

Danielle Butville
General Wayne Elementary School

Sarah Hanrahan
Philadelphia Hebrew Public Charter School

Rachel Wolkenhauer
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: Extensive research has shown that teachers entering the workforce are not adequately prepared. Deep inequities related to racial discrimination and oppression in the United States demand action. This article reports on research into perceptions of preparedness from graduates of an inquiry-oriented school-university partnership. The study found that graduates of an inquiry-based professional development school enact an inquiry stance throughout their careers through practices of reflection, their use of inquiry as a teaching tool, and in their ability to take risks. Participants indicated feelings of overall preparedness when entering the field, and a perceived positive impact on their students was also reported. A contemporary vignette is shared in this article to illustrate the study's findings through the story of one graduate who used the inquiry stance developed in her preparation program to teach first and second grade students about social justice through racial identity and experience through inquiry.

KEYWORDS: inquiry stance; practitioner inquiry; professional development school; social justice; teacher preparation

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential One: A Comprehensive Mission. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential Two: Clinical Preparation. A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

Essential Three: Professional Learning and Leading. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Essential Four: Reflection and Innovation. A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Essential Five: Research and Results. A PDS is a community that engages in collaborative research and participates in the public sharing of results in a variety of outlets.

AUTHOR NOTE: Authors' names are listed alphabetically to demonstrate equally shared authorship. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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In 2020 a global pandemic devastated the world, as nearly two million people died from the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. In the United States the crisis also exacerbated pre-existing problems and unmasked deep inequities related to racial discrimination and oppression. As educators, we found ourselves grief-stricken by the national upheaval, and overwhelmed by our sense of responsibility for children, families, teachers, and schools. As we often do, we turned to one another - professional development school partners - for comfort, inspiration, and resolve. We wrote this article for the *School-University Partnerships* themed issue, "The Response and Responsibility of School-University Partnerships in a Time of Crisis," in part to act as critical friends, supporting and challenging one another through our shared practices of practitioner inquiry, to seek understanding and take responsibility in the recent spotlight on social injustice.

We are teaching and research partners who first met as colleagues in a professional development school (PDS) partnership where we served as a teacher educator, a mentor teacher, and a teacher candidate. Recognizing the extensive research showing that teachers entering the workforce are not adequately prepared (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Ducharme & Ducharme, 1999; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Labaree, 2004; Nahal, 2010), we are dedicated to rethinking the ways we prepare new teachers and have been professional learning partners for over five years. Our work together in the PDS has relied on practitioner inquiry in an effort to enculturate novice teachers in problematizing their practice as a mechanism for transforming those practices to meet their students' needs, and inform the field at large (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Donnell & Harper, 2005). Understanding that utilizing questioning and reflective practices to adapt and change, even early in the profession, can lead to teacher resilience (Botha & Rens, 2018) and increased teacher efficacy and confidence (Voet & De Wever, 2017; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2017), we have always hoped that incorporating practitioner inquiry would better prepare teacher candidates. We have a renewed sense of urgency to take actionable steps for better understanding these practices so that we are doing everything we can to prepare teachers for the responsibility of reimagining teaching and learning for equity.

Although implications for the promise of practitioner inquiry to support novice teachers are prevalent in the literature, the implications of embedding practitioner inquiry into the foundation of teacher preparation programs have not been sufficiently researched. There is not yet clear scholarship on the ways graduates of inquiry-based teacher preparation use inquiry in their careers, and even more specifically, how graduates might use inquiry for social justice. In response, this article reports on research into the perceptions of preparedness of graduates who completed yearlong internships as a part of their undergraduate teacher preparation programs in the elementary PDS where we met. The article concludes by discussing a vignette from a PDS graduate who is using inquiry as a mechanism for social justice in her classroom, particularly during this national time of crisis.

Literature Review

In this article, we argue for an inquiry-oriented model of teacher preparation within school-university partnership, and rely on literature related to practitioner inquiry and teacher preparation. The demanding field that novice teachers enter ardently expects them to continuously, responsively, and flexibly create, adapt, and foster inclusive, socially-just, and democratic classrooms and schools (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

For decades, teacher preparation programs have been under scrutiny because teachers so often enter the field unprepared. Research clearly indicates that novice teachers consistently struggle with classroom management, job dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout (Berry & Shields, 2017; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Nahal, 2010). Additionally, they have poor self-efficacy, low confidence (Bursal, 2012; Silm, et al., 2017; Truxaw, et al., 2011), and find it challenging to make meaningful connections between the theory they learned as teacher candidates and the practices of teaching in the reality of schools (Nahal, 2010; Rots, et al., 2012). As the pandemic heightens our awareness of racial discrimination and oppression in the United States (U. S.), it becomes even more urgent that teacher preparation programs take responsibility to respond to the need and reevaluate the ways we have traditionally brought up new generations of teachers.

Practitioner Inquiry in Teacher Preparation

When teachers study their own practices, they can better contribute to systemic educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Meyers & Rust, 2003; Newman & Mowbray, 2012; Price & Valli, 2005; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Doing so within community allows educators to support one another's work in challenging educational structures and policies, while also collaborating to reflect on and act for necessary educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Glickman et al., 2013; Hollins, 2011; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2021). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993; 1999) have long argued that practitioner inquiry—the systematic and intentional study by educators of their own classroom practices—demonstrates promise as a mechanism for helping novice teachers construct knowledge of practice as they interrogate their classrooms and schools as worthy of critique and consideration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). With roots in the work of John Dewey (1933; 1938), practitioner inquiry as a form of teacher learning has been a long-standing movement in teacher professional development settings, and for the renewal of teacher preparation programs (Burns et al., 2016; Cochran-Smith, 2015; Corey, 1954; Glickman et al., 2013; Nolan, 2016; Zeller-mayer & Tabak, 2006). Yet, despite urgent calls for research into the impact of practitioner inquiry communities embedded within teacher preparation programs, little research exists that examined the implications of teachers' participation in inquiry-based teacher preparation.

The term “practitioner inquiry” (also referred to as teacher inquiry, action research, and classroom research) is used purposefully in this article to indicate the process as a worthy endeavor across the career span of the teaching practitioner. In the PDS that is the context of this research, all partners, including teacher candidates, mentor teachers, university-based teacher educators, graduate students, school and college administrators, and K-12 students are invited to engage in inquiry. PDS partners typically follow a cyclical process of:

- Asking questions, or “wonderings,”
- Collecting data, including relevant literature, to gain insights into those wonderings,
- Analyzing that data,
- Taking action to make changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and
- Sharing findings with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020).

When inquiry is effectively embedded in teacher preparation programs, teacher candidates learn to take responsibility for their learning and develop knowledge-based habits to support student learning and their own professional growth (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Dawson & Dana, 2007; Donnell & Harper, 2005; Kim, 2018; Kinskey, 2018; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2017). Successful integration of inquiry, however, poses a variety of challenges. Most notably, a

lack of cohesion across coursework, in conjunction with limited resources, support, and understanding, can undermine the purposes of practitioner inquiry in teacher preparation programs (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2014).

The Development of Inquiry Stance in Teacher Preparation

It is common for inquiry to appear as a series of steps within a time- and-place-bound project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Nolan & Hoover, 2010; Wolkenhauer et al., 2011), where teacher candidates see practitioner inquiry as a graded course assignment, failing to see it as a “critical habit of mind that informs professional work in all its aspects” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). Rather than introducing inquiry to teacher candidates as a “project,” teacher candidates should learn to teach through an inquiry stance, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) define as:

A worldview and a habit of mind - a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one’s professional career and that links individuals to larger groups, and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. (p. vii)

A cyclical framework, like the one developed by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020), helps guide and focus practitioners toward evolving goals (Currin, 2019) and can exist as a practice related to inquiry stance, but simply going through the inquiry cycle does not equate to holding an inquiry stance. An inquiry stance exemplifies the complexities of teaching, through practical, authentic application, allowing the practitioner to reflectively look back on their practices and dispositions, while intentionally moving them forward in their careers (Currin, 2019). As such, inquiry demonstrates a positive impact on teachers’ self-efficacy (Bursal, 2012; Silm, et al., 2017), reflective practices (Nguyen, 2009), leadership (Wolkenhauer, et al., 2016), confidence (Truxaw, et al., 2011), and an overall professional stance that “encourages responsiveness to change, knowledge generation, and social action” (Donnell & Harper, 2005).

The Landscape of Inquiry-Oriented Teacher Preparation in PDS Contexts

Notably, the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010) highlighted effective preparation of teachers as a “clinically based approach” that gives:

aspiring teachers the opportunity to integrate theory with practice, to develop and test classroom management and pedagogical skills, to hone their use of evidence in making professional decisions about practice, and to understand and integrate the standards of their professional community. (p. 27)

While we see clear implications for both school-university partnerships and practitioner inquiry in that statement, in the ten years since the release of these reports, extant research continues to show teacher preparation programs are struggling to improve the quality of teaching and learning, with ongoing debates centered around program accountability in preparing teachers (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018; Kissau et al., 2019; Plecki et al., 2012). Additionally, inquiry-based teacher preparation programs that are designed to nurture inquiry stance are rarely cited in the literature, even though deemed a “key” in teacher education (NCATE, 2010).

Teacher preparation programs have typically been structured so that universities teach theory and skills to teacher candidates through coursework and methods classes, while school systems provide the platforms where teacher candidates apply that knowledge in practice (Perry

& Power, 2004). This often leads to a gap in novice teachers' abilities to transfer their knowledge from university coursework to practice in schools (Allsopp et al., 2006; Biggers & Forbes, 2012; Ramnarain & Hlatswayo, 2018; Samuel & Ogunkola, 2013; Spaulding & Wilson, 2002). Understanding that a teacher's perseverance in the field of education can be predicted by the model of teacher preparation program from which they graduated (Latham et al., 2015), professional development school models are reinterpreting these novice-expert conceptions and expecting teacher candidates to engage as inquiring professionals within communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; National Association of Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2017; 2021). In learning to become an inquiring professional, "beginning teachers need to have a command of critical ideas and skills, and equally important, the capacity to reflect on, evaluate, and learn from their teaching so that it continually improves" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 3). If inquiry is to be a stance throughout a teacher's professional life span, it needs to be an integral part of their professional development beginning intentionally with their preparation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Context

The elementary professional development school that is the context of this work is located within a longstanding partnership between a research intensive university in the rural Northeast and the eight elementary schools in the university's local school district. The PDS is characterized by a community of district and university educators:

mentor teachers who support and learn alongside teacher candidates in their classrooms; teacher candidates who commit to an intensive teacher preparation program and full year in the classroom; university faculty and graduate students who learn about, and contribute to, a wide range of knowledge and expertise in teacher education, inquiry, and content area teaching and learning; and administrators who offer support from both sides of the partnership. (Coon-Kitt et al., 2019, p. 1)

The partnership's mission to create and maintain a community of teacher candidates, inservice teachers, and teacher educators who strive to engage all partners, including K-12 students, in continuous learning, reflection, and innovation through respectful, collaborative inquiry reaches beyond the formal structures of the schools and university it directly serves, and strives to continue collaborations across partners' careers.

Important, especially for the context of this research, is that this PDS partnership immerses teacher candidates in a culture of inquiry from their first day in the program. The PDS's platform is centered around the fundamental belief that teaching is complex and requires ongoing questioning, data collection and problem-solving in order to understand students and learning. One goal of this specific PDS is to educate teacher candidates about an inquiry-oriented stance toward their practice, by involving all partners in investigating and examining problems through classroom-based research. Partners engage in inquiry through methods courses and graduate classes, undergraduate internship seminars, professional development workshops, and as a natural part of teaching practices in both school and university classrooms. Insights gained from annual inquiry work are shared at a teacher inquiry conference to celebrate findings and strengthen the community of reflective practitioners. This inquiry-oriented teacher preparation program normalizes practitioner inquiry within a community of practice in order to connect theories and practices that respond to the needs of adult learners, including teacher candidates, and elementary school students.

For the purposes of the study reported on in this article, graduates from this PDS's undergraduate teacher preparation program were asked to share their perceptions of preparation related to inquiry. Graduates with between one and "eleven or more" years of teaching experience were surveyed and interviewed alongside close analyses of relevant archival data from the PDS. In the next section, we further describe the methods used in this research.

Methods

This phenomenological study, reported in its entirety elsewhere (Butville, 2020), examined fifteen teachers' perceptions of preparedness in enacting inquiry as a result of participating in a professional development school teacher preparation program grounded in inquiry. Use of a social cognitive theoretical framework and thematic analysis revealed deeper understanding in the areas of practitioner inquiry in teacher preparation programs within school-university partnerships. Because phenomenological research employs tools from both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell, 2015), data collection included a survey (Appendix A), semi-structured in-depth interviews (Appendix B), document analyses, and member checking.

A phenomenological study was purposefully used to respond to a need for more research regarding inquiry-based preservice teacher preparation and possible lasting impacts on graduates of such programs. The research questions that served as a guide for the study included:

- Do graduates of an inquiry-based teacher preparation program believe they enact inquiry-based dispositions and practices learned from their program in their own classrooms?
- If they believe they enact inquiry-based dispositions and practices, how do graduates of an inquiry-based teacher preparation program enact these dispositions and practices in their own classrooms?

As teacher turnover rates rise, and as responsibilities for equitable teaching practices intensify, we must come to a better understanding of the ways teachers are initially prepared for the profession. In this study, it was imperative that teachers were provided a platform to voice the perceptions of their current practices and dispositions based upon their teacher preparation (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, phenomenology ensured researcher professional experiences with the phenomenon were acknowledged, but also bracketed from the findings. The methodology helped to gain the "universal essence" (Creswell, 2015, p. 76) of participants' perceptions of their dispositions and practices in response to the phenomena "inquiry-based teacher preparation." The study was designed to portray realistic perceptions of teachers' perceived impact of their specific PDS experience on their dispositions and practices. The study was not designed to gain generalizable findings.

Data were collected by emailing surveys to graduates who had been placed in the PDS for the final year, and culminating clinical field experience, of their teacher preparation program. Surveys were sent in three bands related to teaching experience: one to five years, six to ten years, and eleven or more years. Fifteen participants responded to the survey. Based on convenience sampling related to the teachers' availability, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with two teachers in each band of experience, totaling six in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2015; Dukes, 1984). Archival data, consisting of syllabi, PDS program descriptions, program planning calendars, conceptual frameworks, and student resources were included in the analysis. Specifically, archival data was used to help add description to the experiences the participants expressed in their interviews. In order to member-check, participants were emailed transcripts from their interviews to confirm their viewpoints and perceptions were accurately captured, with the opportunity to revise or clarify any statements. In addition to confirming

accuracy of perceptions, member checking allowed for additional questions or expansion of answers. The use of semi-structured interviews, in addition to surveys and member checking, allowed for triangulation and a narrowed “focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ between individuals or settings” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88).

Findings

Findings indicated that graduates of this inquiry-based PDS enacted an inquiry stance throughout their careers through practices of reflection, utilization of inquiry as a teaching tool, and in their ability to take risks. Participants expressed feelings of overall preparedness when entering the field, and a perceived positive impact on their students was reported as a result of participating in the inquiry-based PDS teacher preparation program. This study found that graduates not only enacted an inquiry stance in their teaching, they were able to discuss and define it, and could describe it being used in practice, something missing from the present body of literature on inquiry in preservice teacher preparation. The majority of participants believed they were “as prepared as possible” when entering the field, and as a result they enacted an inquiry stance towards teaching, which in turn, led to enacting specific practices (e.g., reflecting, teaching through inquiry, taking risks) that have a perceived impact on their students.

While preparedness of participants to enter the field does not directly respond to either research question in this study, the collective voice of participants revealed their feelings of preparedness when entering the teaching field, countering research analyzing the poor preparation most teachers receive (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Green et al.; 2018; McConney et al., 2012). As a result of this preparedness, utilizing inquiry as stance was the second finding emerging from the participants’ perspectives. Participants clearly articulated how they transferred their definitions of inquiry stance as teacher candidates into their practices as inservice teachers. Seeing teaching through this lens allowed participants to overcome barriers and enact certain practices in their teaching, specifically (a) reflection, (b) inquiry as a pedagogical approach, and (c) a willingness to take risks. In order to highlight these findings, in this article we share the contemporary experience of one such graduate from this PDS, who we call “Amber.” The vignette is of particular relevance during this national time of crisis.

Vignette: Amber’s Story

The following vignette is offered in Amber’s own words, transcribed from an interview and edited by Amber through member-checking. The vignette shares the story of how Amber’s inquiry stance supported her resolve to advocate for the needs of the Black and Brown students in her first grade classroom during a time of heightened awareness about racism and racial oppression. The vignette demonstrates the ways she used inquiry to take responsibility for social justice.

Background: My PDS Teacher Preparation Experience

As a preservice teacher in the PDS, I was introduced to inquiry as a tool for professional growth. As part of our yearlong clinical field experience, teacher candidates engaged in practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 1999). We analyzed trends in our classrooms in order to generate wonderings. To gain insight into our wonderings, we collected and analyzed data from various sources (e.g., field notes, reflective journals, student work, faculty meeting notes, literature). Based on this data, we took action to respond to our wonderings. Finally, we shared our findings in a district and college inquiry conference. During my year in PDS, my

mentor teacher, my professor, and I also worked to adapt practitioner inquiry for the children we taught. We engaged in an, “inquiry into inquiry,” where we inquired into working with students to develop their own inquiries. We guided them through the process as we were going through the process as teachers. Students generated and researched their own wonderings around topics they were passionate about. Wonderings included, “How can I make my own spy gear?” and “How can I make students who are new to our school, and don’t speak English, feel welcomed?” After collecting and analyzing data, students took action to create change. For example, students created their own spy gear using physics, and translated welcome letters for new classmates with the help of university linguistics students.

Through our inquiry into student inquiry during my preparation as a teacher, I learned the power of inviting students to express their own identities through their curiosities. I learned the power of partnering with children in this process, in saying, “I am a learner and you are a learner as well.” Inquiry took away the power structure and let me be a little more transparent about the fact that none of us *really* knows that much until we search to find the answers together; the fact that we need to learn together. I graduated in 2016. I learned that year that inquiry could be a tool for student voice, as well as my own developing teacher voice.

Context

Today I teach in a charter school founded in August 2019. Our school is, in part, a response to what we believe to be education segregation in our large, urban school district and city. As part of our model, we invite a certain number of students to attend from each neighborhood in our city. Our school is centrally located so that we are accessible to all neighborhoods within the city. I started teaching first grade in 2019-2020, and looped with my students so that I now teach second grade to the same group of students, although as we write this article, we are meeting remotely and synchronously due to COVID-19. The community that we so carefully cultivated in person carried over for their second grade year. The relationships we originally built together in the classroom continue to grow in our virtual format.

My Inquiry Response to Racial Discrimination and Oppression

By November 2019, our school, which was *built* on the foundation of equity, was beginning to see large numbers of referrals, particularly for our Black boys. This finding was, of course, quite troubling since we know the unjust impact of punitive discipline on communities of color and on communities with many people living below the poverty line (Schiff, 2013). Naturally, I leaned on my inquiry background and began to generate a wondering. After many iterations, I asked, “How can I make school a safe place for my Black male students?” I was eager to think through the ways I could research this question. Initially, I planned to dig into school data and any available literature I could find regarding referrals, social emotional learning, and Children of Color. However, as I began to search for the research, something continued to nag at me – my plan was entirely devoid of student voice. I realized there was no point in me doing this research alone; my students needed to tell me what school needs to look like for them. So, I brought that question to my first graders. I simply asked, “What do you need in our classroom to feel that you are seen and supported?” Students wrote and drew their responses. Initially, they shared things like, “for my teacher to be happy,” and, “lots of books.” This was telling information, and an important place to start, but I felt that we needed to dig deeper together.

Around this same time, we began a narrative writing unit during Writer's Workshop. I noticed that overwhelmingly students were illustrating themselves as White, despite the fact that the majority of my class identified as Black. That same week, two students had also had a debate about whether or not I am White (I am). When I asked what made them think I was Black, one student simply replied, "You're like us." It was apparent that my students were developing their understanding of race, particularly what it means when we say we are "White" or "Black." I realized then, that in order to name what we needed from a classroom, we first needed to be able to name who we are. Without understanding our own identities, we aren't able to advocate for the things we need. So, we jumped into the work of identifying our race. We asked our families how we identify by asking "Who are we?". That led us to a broader conversation that we really needed to have to gain insight into our inquiry. We needed to talk about who we are as human beings before we could understand what we needed to feel safe and supported in school.

As we continued sharing and celebrating our racial identities, one seven year-old asked a painful question that made sense in our context: "As a Black boy, will I be shot by police?". This question broadened our focus. Students were building an understanding of their identity within the larger context of their community and current events. We added to our inquiry question: "What is the Black Lives Matter movement?", "What is Black joy?", and "How do these concepts relate to students being seen and safe in school?".

In order to begin collecting and analyzing data, we looked at the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s to better understand protests and acts of resistance. Our understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement began with our understanding of bus boycotts and sit-ins, familiarizing us with the complex history that has led to this moment in time. We utilized resources from the Black Lives Matter at Schools website (Black Lives Matter at School, n.d.a.) to watch videos detailing the movement's mission and ultimately create our own "Black Children Matter" posters. Additionally, we did a few close readings of the poem "Hey Black Child" (Perkins, 1974), which became a powerful anthem for our class. In fact, months later when we were on Zoom, in the middle of seeing our city in protests after George Floyd's murder by police, students' first question was if we could read that poem again. It became a source of comfort. Through collecting and analyzing these resources, identity work became woven into my classroom in the ways I had hoped with my original question about making school a place that is safe for all of my students. Students led the way and I followed eagerly.

After our year of energizing, painful work, we had our summer apart. When we came back together in the fall of 2020, I returned to our inquiry by asking them, "What is your identity? How will you see your identity in your classroom? How will you know your teacher sees your identity? What do you want our virtual classroom to be like so that you feel seen and safe?". Students first named aesthetics. One student shared that he enjoys caring for things and requested a classroom plant. Another shared that she wanted more books about hair, like the ones we'd read the year before. One student said, "even in a virtual classroom I need to still see that Black lives matter." Together, we created a Bitmoji classroom with these things on display – the plants, the books, and a Black Lives Matter poster. Students created a list of books we'd read last year with characters they felt they could relate to. Those became many of our guiding texts for Reader's Workshop.

Around this time, we received sad news that deepened our work. One of our class heroes, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, passed away. We loved learning about RBG. *I Dissent* (Levy, 2016) was a classroom favorite read aloud. Students admired how she fought for women's rights. To process this news, we discussed legacies and how we carry on the legacies of our heroes. Her words,

“fight for the things you care about,” had long been a classroom motto of ours. And so, I asked students, “How will you carry on RBG’s legacy? What do you care about that you will fight for?”. We wove the work that we’d already done into these questions. Due to our previous data collection, we now knew what activism and identity work looked like. Students wrote about people experiencing homelessness, poverty, women’s rights, and the Black Lives Matter movement. We then had a class vote and overwhelmingly students named Black Lives Matter as the cause that they wanted to learn more about, given all that we’d already learned about the movement. Currently, we’re learning about the Black Lives Matter movement’s thirteen guiding principles, digging into one at a time (Black Lives Matter at School, n.d.b.).

While this work continues, we also continue the important work of defining our identities. Each day we ground ourselves before read-alouds by reviewing identity maps we each created. We know that texts can be windows and mirrors. When a text is a mirror, we see key aspects of our identities reflected back to us. When a text is a window, we learn something new about another culture or identity (Bishop, 1990). Each day, after our read-aloud, students complete a poll asking whether the text was a window or mirror. When the vote is unanimously “a mirror,” we discuss common experiences and interests. When the vote is unanimously “a window,” we generate questions that we have about the experience and seek to learn more. When the vote is split, we practice expressing curiosity about one another’s experiences through thoughtful questions.

Student Inquiry for Social Justice

We know that too often classroom engagement is confused with compliance. My preparation in inquiry, however, has helped me see that inquiry can lead students to engage with learning by interacting with the world around them. Inquiry has become so ingrained in my classroom that my students see things they are curious or passionate about in the world, and they tell me, “This is what we’d like to learn about next.” I use my teacher toolbox to make it happen because it is one way I can ensure my students feel seen and safe in our classroom. It is powerful to ask students to choose topics and to trust their decisions. Because students choose topics that matter to them (e.g. Black Lives Matter, women’s rights, homelessness), they are able to be engaged in more just ways because they are helping me challenge how learning looks in everyday classrooms by opening new pathways for understanding (Ahmed, 2018). Students can engage deeply with - and beyond - the curriculum when they interact authentically with learning. We use inquiry in my classroom to honor every member of our learning community’s knowledge in purposeful ways.

Originally, I believed that our single inquiry into a safe and supportive classroom would fix our single issue and that we would move on, but the kids had another idea. By giving students time, space, and the inquiry structure to explore personally meaningful topics, they realized the importance of their voices. As a result of their inquiries, students became real-life activists about their passions so that inquiry turned into platforms and calls to action. When I look at my kids and who they will become, I know that this is work they will continue to take on. In the future, you are going to see 30 individual inquiry cycles breaking down barriers and responding to social justice issues.

Right now, this work appears authentically in many ways in our classroom. Students speak up when they notice there aren’t enough “mirror” books in the classroom library (Bishop, 1990) and ask for specific additions based on careful research. During morning meetings, as we continue discussions around our larger community, students ask how they can take action to

support people experiencing homelessness – and then make concrete plans for how to do so in an ongoing “Wish List for Our City”. They carry this work with them when they leave our classroom space. In opening questions about identity and schooling experiences to the class, I sent the message to students that through engaged learning they are activists capable of advocating for themselves and others. I hope that because they are so young, this advocacy is being ingrained in them now. They will continue this work in part because it has been accessible to them in ways that reimagine schools as socially just places where all people are free to learn about things that are personally relevant and meaningful to them and their communities. My students have now seen that when there is a problem, the inquiry cycle can guide them towards advocacy and change.

Discussion

Amber’s vignette illustrates the findings of the full research study (Butville, 2020) shared in this article, and highlights the importance of such findings in light of the deep inequities related to racial discrimination and oppression heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amber articulated an inquiry stance developed in the PDS and defined her stance as a tool for professional reflection, pedagogy, and risk-taking.

As we saw reflected by a majority of participants in the full study, Amber learned to be a teacher through inquiry. In her vignette, she states:

I learned the power of inviting students to express their own identities through their curiosities. I learned the power of partnering with children in this process, in saying, “I am a learner and you are a learner as well.” Inquiry took away the power structure and let me be a little more transparent about the fact that none of us *really* knows that much until we search to find the answers together; the fact that we need to learn together.

The PDS offered Amber two vital experiences with inquiry during her teacher preparation program. First, she was first explicitly taught the cycle of wondering development, data collection and analysis, and sharing (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020) and then was expected to make inquiry a part of her teaching practice for a full year. Secondly, inquiry was modeled for her as a natural and normal part of teaching by her mentor teacher, university-based teacher educator, who Amber refers to as “my professor”, and other PDS partners, including the children in her classroom. Mentorship around this specific practice, within the community, allowed Amber to engage with inquiry in more meaningful ways at the very beginning of her career than she would have been able to do if inquiry had simply been assigned as a project in the final semester of her senior year.

Amber’s inquiry stance demanded that she contemporarily reflected on her practice, illustrating another common thread found amongst graduates of this inquiry-based program. In her vignette, Amber used reflective practices, grounded in inquiry to continuously, responsively, and flexibly create, adapt, and foster an inclusive, socially just, and democratic classroom (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). At the beginning of her story, Amber is bothered by rising referral rates of Black and Brown boys in her new school. Rather than complain about or ignore what she noticed, she took an inquiry approach and reflected on the ways she could act by asking questions related to her own practice that she understood could influence her colleagues and students. As her story continued, Amber adjusted her inquiry several times in order to reflectively act on what her students, and the world around them, demanded. Reflection in action is a foundation to the inquiry stance Amber described.

Perhaps most clearly connected to the overall research findings is Amber’s use of inquiry as pedagogy. Linked directly to her PDS experiences with inquiry, and the work she did with her mentor teacher and university-based teacher educator, we see Amber engaging her young students in inquiries of their own. While she engaged her students in the inquiry cycle by asking questions such as “Who are we?”, “What do you care about that you will fight for?”, and “How will you know your teacher sees your identity?” and considering multiple data sources (e.g. interviews with families, drawings from the narrative writing unit, conversations in the classroom, news and current events in the community, history, poems, websites, children’s literature) to gain insight into pressing issues of learning, she helped guide and focus her seven, eight, and nine year-old students toward their own evolving goals (Currin, 2019). Amber used inquiry as a teaching tool. She states:

I use my teacher toolbox to make it happen because it is one way I can ensure my students feel seen and safe in our classroom. It is powerful to ask students to choose topics and to trust their decisions. Because students choose topics that matter to them (e.g. Black Lives Matter, women’s rights, homelessness), they are able to be engaged in more just ways because they are helping me challenge how learning looks in everyday classrooms by opening new pathways for understanding (Ahmed, 2018). Students can engage deeply with - and beyond - the curriculum when they interact authentically with learning. We use inquiry in my classroom to honor every member of our learning community’s knowledge in purposeful ways.

In fact, she believes that her first/second graders exemplify inquiry stance:

By giving students time, space, and the inquiry structure to explore personally meaningful topics, they realized the importance of their voices. As a result of their inquiries, students became real-life activists about their passions so that inquiry turned into platforms and calls to action. When I look at my kids and who they will become, I know that this is work they will continue to take on. In the future, you are going to see 30 individual inquiry cycles breaking down barriers and responding to social justice issues.

Finally, Amber took on difficult conversations with bold confidence. She seemed unafraid to take risks when they were needed for her students’ well-being, a common thread amongst participants in the study. For instance, as a new teacher in a new school, she took on their unjust referral policy – *with* her first grade students – by inquiring into the ways they could make their school safer for Children of Color. When a seven year-old Black boy asked her, in front of his peers, if he might one day be shot by police, she did not shy away. Rather, she suggested a direction for inquiry. In a note to one of the authors she relayed this inquiry stance:

My classroom had a foundation of Black Joy, so when it came time to discuss Black trauma, it wasn't just me, a white woman, scaring kids about a reality that does not belong to me and sending a message that oppressed groups will exclusively experience oppression... We never want to tell students a single story about anything, but especially not about themselves. (Personal Communication, 2/4/21)

Likewise, when a global pandemic threatened the socially just community she had so carefully cultivated in her in-person classroom, she did not panic. She asked students via Zoom what they could do to keep learning critically together, and then she continued to have those hard conversations knowing full-well that parents and guardians were listening in on their virtual lessons. Amber is brave, and Amber credits her inquiry stance for this ability to take risk with, “Naturally, I leaned on my inquiry background.”

Amber's vignette illustrates the findings of this research in light of the most recent national injustice crises. Her story illustrates the ways teachers in the study perceived their inquiry-oriented teacher preparation in the PDS readying them for the teaching profession. Specifically, in Amber's case, she felt prepared to respond and take responsibility during this extreme time of crisis.

Conclusion

Teacher education programs are in the spotlight as colleges of education consider the ways we must prepare the next generation of teachers to take responsibility for advocating for socially just teaching; making schools places where all children see themselves as free, worthy, and valued learners. In this article, we explore the impact of one promising model for teacher preparation: an inquiry-oriented school-university partnership.

Our research provides insight into the ways inquiry-oriented school-university partnerships can act as catalysts for change when integrated in teacher preparation. Especially when set as a professional expectation during preparatory years, practitioner inquiry can serve as a tool for teachers to have the confidence and resolve needed to change and adapt practices throughout their careers, in order to more equitably educate every child. Further research is needed into the impact an explicit connection between inquiry and social justice in teacher preparation might have in helping us prepare teachers to take responsibility for social justice work in classrooms and school.

Again, as the COVID-19 pandemic heightens our awareness of racial discrimination and oppression in the U.S., it is urgent that teacher preparation programs take responsibility in responding to the need and reevaluating the ways we traditionally bring up new generations of teachers. This research indicates that when prepared with an inquiry stance, teachers are better equipped to utilize praxis, inquiry pedagogies, and risk-taking to adapt their professional practice, so that alongside children we might reimagine the world by responding to injustice and taking responsibility for equity.

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Author Information

Dr. Danielle Butville (dbutville@gcsd.org) is a fourth-grade teacher at General Wayne Elementary School in Malvern, Pennsylvania.

Sarah Hanrahan (shanrahan@philadelphiahebrewpublic.org) is a second-grade teacher and team leader at Philadelphia Hebrew Public Charter School.

Dr. Rachel Wolkenhauer (rxw40@psu.edu) is an assistant professor of education at the Pennsylvania State University where she researches and teaches practitioner inquiry as a form of professional learning in school-university partnerships. Rachel Wolkenhauer: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4713-9723> Correspondence for this article can be addressed to 178 Chambers, University Park, PA 16802.

Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. How many years ago did you participate in the PDS program?
 - 0 – 5 years
 - 6 – 10 years
 - 11 – 15 years
 - 16 or more years

2. How many years have you been actively teaching in a public school?
 - 0 – 5 years
 - 6 – 10 years
 - 11 – 15 years
 - 16 or more years

3. Based on a Likert scale with options of: Not at all prepared, Slightly Prepared, Somewhat Prepared, Very Prepared, or Extremely Prepared, when you first started teaching, how prepared did you feel you were in:
 - Content knowledge
 - Classroom management
 - Communicating with families
 - Collaborating with school and district staff
 - Building relationships with students
 - Using data to inform your teaching
 - Asking questions about your teaching and pursuing answers

4. The teacher preparation program you participated in states their mission is: "to create and maintain a community of pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators who strive to engage all partners, including K-4 students, in continuous learning, reflection, and innovation through respectful, collaborative inquiry." During your internship year, how did you experience inquiry?
5. During my internship year, I utilized inquiry in my dispositions and practices, with a Likert-scale with the options of: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.
6. Based on a Likert scale with options of: Not at all prepared, Slightly Prepared, Somewhat Prepared, Very Prepared, or Extremely Prepared, currently how prepared do you feel to teach, in regards to:
 - Content knowledge
 - Classroom management
 - Communicating with families
 - Collaborating with school and district staff
 - Building relationships with students
 - Using data to inform your teaching
 - Asking questions about your teaching and pursuing answers
7. Currently, I utilize inquiry in my dispositions and practices, with a Likert-scale with the options of: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree.

8. If participants responded to Question 7 with “neutral”, “agree”, or “strongly agree,” they will be directed to the next prompt: Please provide examples of how you utilize inquiry in your own classroom, with as much description as possible.

9. The researcher would like to interview teachers to gain more insight into their beliefs about their current practices and dispositions, based upon their participation in an inquiry-based teacher preparation program. Interviews would consist of approximately 6 questions, with the interviewer taking notes and an audio recording of the interview, for approximately 30 minutes. If you consent to participating in an interview, please type your name and email below.

Appendix B

Potential Follow-up Interview Questions

- Was inquiry utilized during your internship year?
 - If yes, how? Specifically, in your mentor's classroom? In your methods classes?
- Do you recall any specific presentations, activities, readings, etc. that stood out to you?
- Recalling your first-year teaching, what about your teacher preparation program was beneficial in preparing you for your first year(s) as a teacher?
- Were there areas in which you felt especially well-prepared? If so, please explain.
- Were there any areas you did not feel adequately prepared? If so, please explain.
- Do you currently utilize inquiry in your teaching?
 - If yes, please describe ways you use inquiry and when it is used. If no, why not?
- Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) define practitioner inquiry as the "systematic, intentional study of one's own professional practice." Do you utilize inquiry as a stance in your teaching?
 - If yes, how? If no, why not?
- Do you utilize inquiry as a teaching tool with your students? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- How do you believe seeing your teaching through an inquiry lens impacts you as a teacher? How do you believe it impacts your students?
- Reflecting back on your preparedness to enter the teaching field, is there anything you would change about your preparation program? Please explain.