

## **Inquiry in Teacher Education: Competing Agendas**

**By Kelly Donnell & Kelly Harper<sup>1</sup>**

School-based practitioners and university-based teacher educators do not necessarily agree about what is important in pre-service teacher education. The perennial tensions between what prospective teachers learn in the academic environment and what they learn in field placements have been studied by Dewey (1904), Wehlage (1981) and Cannella and Reiff (1994). Controversies continue about the extent to which theories are useful in preparing students for the complexities of classroom life.

To address the lack of connection between theory and practice, a number of recent reforms in teacher education have included inquiry-based programs and/or new types of education courses (Darling-Hammond, 1994), which encourage student teachers to be reflective problem solvers and change agents. Additionally, student teachers have been encouraged to be critical consumers of professional research (Zumwalt, 1982) as well as generators of their own knowledge (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Pre-service teachers need to connect and expand their professional knowledge by examining their own understandings of teaching and learning (Olson, 2002). Wodlinger (1996) argues that these experiences increase teachers' sense of autonomy and control of educational priorities and

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enable teacher candidates to make a shift from thinking like students to thinking like teachers. An increasing number of teacher education programs have adopted some form of inquiry approach to learning from and about teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Teacher research is viewed as an exciting avenue to both knowledge creation and social change (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Fecho, 2000)

Based on a pilot course for student teachers, the researchers, also aspiring teacher educators, studied the process of implementing an inquiry approach toward teaching and learning to teach while simultaneously responding to the issues and needs of the student teachers. The researchers utilized the model of inquiry-as-stance developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) in which inquiry-as-stance is defined as a way of reflecting on and documenting the relationships among teacher learning, pupil learning, and professional practice across the professional lifespan. The process of inquiry was defined as “critical and transformative, a stance that is linked not only to high standards for the learning of all students but also to social change and social justice and to the individual and collective professional growth of teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p.38). Three questions were posed, as follows.

- (1) What happens when inquiry-as-stance is intended to anchor the learning of both beginning teacher educators and student teachers?
- (2) What themes and issues emerge among the student teachers and teacher educators as they attempt to make sense of the inquiry process and also meet the daily demands of classroom teaching?
- (3) What kinds of questions about inquiry-as-stance and teaching are raised by the student teachers and the teacher educators?

## **Method**

### **Context**

As the student teachers were required to reflect on their own practice to improve their teaching, the teacher educators also inquired into the process of introducing inquiry to understand the immediacy of the situation and to illuminate possible directions for prospective class meetings. A qualitative approach best fit the questions and the available data.

### **Participants**

The participants were 52 pre-service student teachers pursuing a Master’s degree in education and the course facilitators, fourteen doctoral level teacher educators and one professor. The doctoral level teacher educators were first through third year doctoral students, thirteen in Curriculum and Instruction, one in Educa-

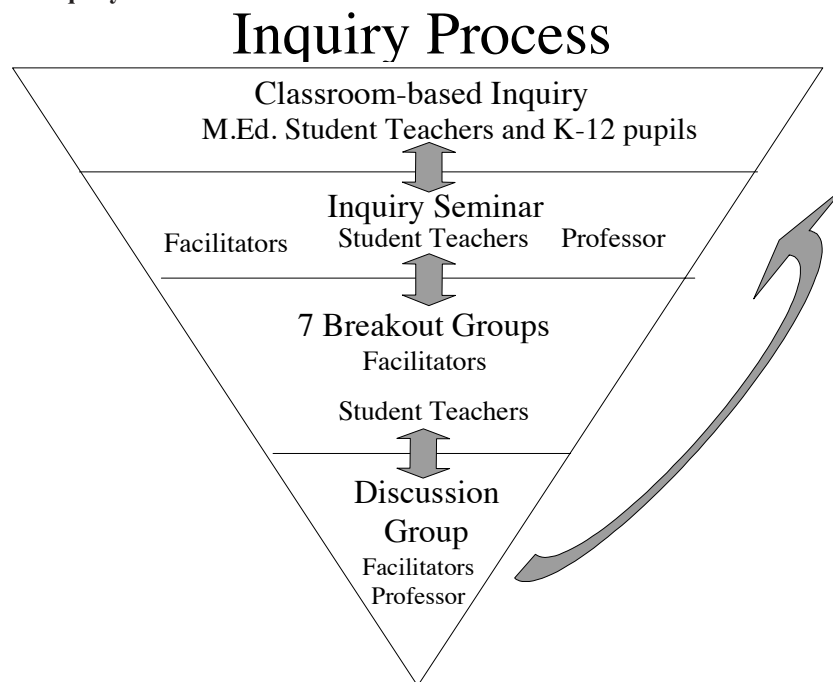
tional Administration. Every facilitator had classroom teaching experience ranging from three to twenty years, and several continued to teach full- or part-time in schools during their doctoral program. The group included three men and eleven women, ranging in age from 25 to over 45 years old. One was a person of color.

The student teachers' placements included Kindergarten through grade 12 classrooms, urban and suburban settings, and both special needs and general education classrooms. Almost half of the student teacher group (24) were members of an urban teaching cohort. All of the participants attended the year-long inquiry seminar which met five times each semester. The activities consisted of a large group lecture followed by small group discussions facilitated by pairs of doctoral level teacher educators. After each session, the doctoral level teacher educators and the professor met to discuss the progress of the student teachers and future directions of the seminar.

#### Data Sources

Data sources included materials related to the understanding of the process of the seminar. These included course materials such as written notes, transcripts, and

**Figure 1**  
**The Inquiry Process**



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summaries of each seminar session, notes from discussions between the doctoral level teacher educators and the professor, student feedback on course evaluations; and responses from a survey distributed at the end of the course (see Appendix A). Data sources related to outcomes included student teachers' critical reflections, seminar facilitators' comments on student teacher journals and papers, written assessments of the students' progress in December and May, and student teachers' final papers.

#### **Data Analysis**

Analytic induction and continuous readings of the entire corpus of data (Erickson, 1986) were used in order to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the meaning of inquiry for participants in the seminar. Data were coded through several successive rounds of preliminary and continuing analysis, allowing the researchers to construct tentative explanations and themes and then revise them on the basis of continued readings of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Both researchers read the data individually and then met together to see if they agreed on the codes and themes that emerged. Analyses were revised and verified through triangulating multiple sources of data, attending to negative or discrepant case analysis as well as to confirming evidence, and member checking with the professor who taught the course.

#### **Results**

The researchers identified four major tensions related to the convergence and divergence of the multiple agendas that characterized and shaped the evolution of the inquiry process: (1) Understanding and misunderstanding inquiry as an aspect of learning to teach; (2) Theory versus practice; (3) Various meanings of and commitments to social justice; and (4) Multiple requirements from stakeholders with different priorities in one outcome. The researchers used the term *tension* to portray the conflicting and competing forces that emerged in each of the four areas. The differences in the agendas of various participants in the seminar contributed to the tensions. Each tension is elaborated and supported with representative evidence from the data sources.

##### ***Tension #1:***

##### ***Understanding and Misunderstanding Inquiry as an Approach to Learning to Teach***

Not all student teachers, or teacher educators for that matter, fully embraced or understood the concept of inquiry-as-stance. Rather, student teachers ranged along a continuum from outright rejection of inquiry to parroting the teacher educators' language without seeming to completely understand or accept the concepts to fully embracing inquiry. On the other hand, while some of the teacher educators challenged the inquiry process, most understood and accepted it.

Initially, inquiry was challenged or misidentified as classic scientific research by some student teachers. On the other hand, some student teachers seemed to take the process of questioning and problematizing one's practice for granted. They gave the impression that they believed a course in inquiry was superfluous. When asked whether they believed their thinking about what it means to teach had changed as a result of the inquiry process, one student noted, *"I hope that I was already engaging in the process of inquiry before taking this course. I didn't need to take this course to do this"* (Student teacher survey response, May 2001). Another commented, *"Questioning and reevaluating my technique is something I do naturally"* (Student teacher survey response, May 2001). Others felt that the process had been rushed or that the researchers had put the cart before the horse: *"We are being asked to change the way we think and teach before knowing how to think and teach"* (Student teacher survey response, May 2001).

Other student teachers seemed to grow and gain new insights into how they looked at their practice. They became more comfortable not having all the answers and began to see how inquiry-as-stance could help them address the myriad ever-changing problems presented in their classrooms. This change in thinking is exemplified in the following student teacher's comment: *"I have increased awareness; the most important thing I learned is that there are things I don't know - I came into class just trying to get certified, but I leave as an inquirer and an advocate"* (Student teacher survey response, May 2001).

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) affirm that "daily reflections in practica logbooks provide opportunities for narrative inquiry where isolated details begin to form threads from which implicit narrative themes can emerge" (as cited in Olson, 2000, p. 115). The aspiring teacher educators in this study also struggled to understand and effectively teach inquiry-as-stance. They continually discussed the issue of student teachers who did not see the value of inquiry and how they should respond to this. One doctoral level teacher educator reflected:

Each session students have seemed to welcome sharing their experiences and soliciting advice from peers. They are wonderful at helping each other look closely and/or in a different way. I am puzzled as to how difficult it seems for many to connect the value of inquiry to practice. I see it as a piece of the process and yet I have been unsuccessful at helping students see it as anything more than an add-on. I'm beginning to wonder how much of this is "developmental." When [the professor] first questioned whether, if people act a certain way long enough, they become it," I laughed. She gave the example, if someone is not kind but acts it, do they eventually become kind? As scary as the idea of acting the role "even when you don't understand" is to me, I am slowly coming to see that it may be a way in for many people. (Doctoral level teacher educator's summary, March 2001)

Because the seminar met over the course of the entire year, sessions occurred several weeks apart. The professor and doctoral level teacher educators debated whether to introduce new ideas or devote additional time to revisiting the inquiry concepts

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with which the student teachers seemed to have a tentative grasp. Early in the year, one facilitator commented,

We found ourselves struggling to balance being welcome and open to everyone's ideas (providing a safe environment) and addressing various assumptions/judgments. (How much can we push and question in this setting?) Part of these difficulties is a result of the fact that we only met 3 times so far and we only have 2 more meetings this semester. We feel that the students have come far in terms of reflecting on practice and inquiring into what they are seeing and doing; yet they are still very new at this and developing skills. While we want to encourage and push them, we don't want to squelch what is still developing. (Doctoral level teacher educator's reflection, October 2000)

#### **Tension #2:**

##### ***Theory versus Practice***

A second tension that emerged for both students and teacher educators was the division between practical and theoretical concerns. Some students' need for, and teacher educators' desire to offer, practical and immediate solutions to day-to-day problems in the classroom superceded the need for understanding and implementing the theoretical basis of inquiry and how it could be used in learning to teach. Many students remained caught in a dilemma articulated by Olson (2000):

If student teachers are unable to connect new and/or expanded professional knowledge of teaching with their own unexamined narrative knowledge. . . , professional knowledge presented in courses remains decontextualized theory, their narrative knowledge of teaching remains implicit and unexamined and they teach as they believe they were taught. (p. 110)

Encouraging the student teachers to continually critique and analyze their own narrative knowledge was a priority for the beginning teacher educators but not necessarily for the beginning teachers. For many student teachers, the priority was debriefing but not necessarily examining their daily practice. For example, one beginning teacher noted, "*This second semester was much more helpful when [the teacher educators] let us talk and we did not stress about the agenda that they were given*" (Student teacher survey response, May, 2001). Many students were unable to recognize how the inquiry process would help them address their practical concerns. A survey response from one of the student teachers is typical of this perspective:

I did not benefit from the readings. I benefited more from talking with people and hearing other people's experiences. I think finding a job is a good discussion for the group, classroom management issues (because we don't take a class on that) and writing tests. Although these topics are not related to the inquiry seminar, they would be helpful to amateur teachers and truly prepare us for the teaching world. (Student teacher survey response, May 2001).

Some students viewed the course as preparation for a research paper rather than

for teaching. One student wrote, “*The class didn’t teach me how to teach, it taught me how to write a research paper. It is a bit dishonest to classify this as a teaching class*” (Student teacher survey response, May 2001). Perhaps the use of the term *teacher research* interchangeably with *inquiry* was misleading or confusing. Some students had difficulty shifting from the notions of research as objective, quasi-scientific studies to which they had become accustomed in other courses. Perhaps some student teachers were so immersed in the academic expectation of writing and reading research papers that they had difficulty seeing inquiry-as-stance as a different approach.

Similar to results reported by Lucas (1998), the beginning teachers in this study had difficulty recognizing the relationship of the theories as well as the improvements to their practice that they were producing from the study of their own classrooms to the inquiry process. As exemplified in the following survey response, many students improved their practice as a result of the inquiry process, yet did not see the relationship between being a researcher and becoming a better teacher.

I think this class had more to do with helping me as a researcher, as opposed to preparing me to be a teacher. *The seminar helped me learn how to do research in the classroom in order to determine my students’ needs and helped me change my practice to address those needs.* The break-out sessions helped when I had a problem and other students and teacher educators provided suggestions and strategies. (Student teacher survey response, May 2001, emphasis added)

Criticisms of the course seemed paradoxical in that the very things they wanted were the things that inquiry could support them to address.

### **Tension #3:**

#### **Various Meanings of and Commitments to Social Justice**

Learning to teach for social justice was an important and explicit theme in the inquiry course as well as in the School of Education (SOE) in general. The SOE mission statement refers to teaching as a political activity and all educators must work toward challenging social inequities and working with others for social justice. Students were required to read, discuss, and write about the relationship of social justice to their teaching practice throughout the course. They were encouraged to engage in inquiry as a means of critiquing the status quo and challenge the inequities they saw in their schools and their own practice (Cochran-Smith, 2001b). It was not surprising, therefore, that both student teachers and teacher educators often had different interpretations of both the meaning and the importance of teaching for social justice in their own practice. For example, many students identified overt social injustices such as racism and sexism. However, social justice issues embedded in the epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings of their own practice escaped their notice. Some beginning teachers, for example, remained committed to tracking practices or insensitive parent communication policies and

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were unable or unwilling to further examine the social justice issues inherent in these practices. Yet for others, looking at teaching through this lens was a new experience that prompted new actions, as this reflection indicates:

When I decided to go back to school to become a teacher, I had not thought about the role I would have as an activist for social justice. I had not considered the political aspect of teaching. I now see that I have a responsibility as an educator to teach, not just so that my students will know how to read, write, and compute, but also so that my students will recognize social injustice in the world and feel empowered to change it. I need to teach them by example how to meet the challenges of injustice in society and work to change it, starting in the classroom. Realizing how to do that will be, in my opinion, an ongoing process throughout my career. (Student teacher journal entry, January 2001)

However, some student teachers missed the implications of how their perceptions of students related to social justice issues in the classroom. While they could identify overt or glaring instances of racism, prejudice, or inequitable practices, they had difficulty taking responsibility for teaching all children. One teacher seemed unaware of her reliance on a deficit model view of her students, as reflected in this journal entry:

Some days I go home from student teaching with a defeated feeling due to the students' apathy and attitude. I feel as though I am not reaching them, as though I am not teaching them anything. But I do not feel completely responsible because there is only so much one person can do for a class of twenty-five children who are equally unimpressed by education and the pursuit thereof. (Student teacher reflection, January, 2001)

#### ***Tension #4:***

##### ***Multiple Requirements from Stakeholders with Different Priorities***

The pressures of fulfilling multiple requirements in one final product for the course also highlighted the many and often competing agendas. The final project included requirements for the National Council for Accrediting Teacher Education, the university comprehensive exams, the field placement office, and the inquiry course itself. While many of the aims of the requirements from these different constituencies overlapped, the student teachers felt pulled in many different directions to fulfill the demands of each:

This class is my Master's comprehensive [exam] and I do not feel that my inquiry project is comprehensive. It was an important project, but it does not span everything I've learned or not learned. It would be extremely helpful if our facilitators [of the inquiry course] were also our supervisors [of the practicum]. My facilitators and supervisors were great but a little communication between the practicum office and inquiry course is necessary. (Student teacher survey response, 2000)

The multiple requirements and pressures of student teaching seemed to influence some student teachers to feel that they didn't have adequate time to engage in inquiry. One beginning teacher educator reflected after a class session,



We briefly discussed some of the issues faced by the students as they engaged in their inquiry project. Several students expressed that time was problematic. They feel that the observation lessons they must complete for their supervisor and the daily teaching responsibilities they are being given by their cooperating teachers make it difficult to collect the necessary data for their project. (Doctoral level teacher educator's summary, March 2000)

Combining many purposes into one course and one final assignment placed immense pressure on the professor and contributed to stress and confusion for the student teachers. Increased communication between the professor of the course and the practicum office became an important activity once the tension of multiple requirements was identified.

## **Discussion**

The analysis reveals some of the complexities that emerged when student teachers learned to use inquiry in their practice and teacher educators learned to teach the inquiry process. Several tensions were identified from the way the agendas of the various participants interacted and often competed with one another. The best way to understand the introduction of inquiry as a way of learning to teach in this setting was to respond to these tensions and to consider how they might inform the practice of teaching the seminar.

Each group of participants maintained identifiable goals that were at times in concert but often in conflict. These tensions prompted the professor and doctoral level teacher educators to question the success of the inquiry process and continually rework the seminar. The tensions also prompted the student teachers to take more risks in abandoning preconceived notions of one-size-fits-all teaching methods with their own pupils. The analysis does not suggest the process always went smoothly for either group. At times, the teacher educators and student teachers themselves expressed frustration with the lack of receptivity toward and understanding of a critical inquiry stance. Despite these tensions, over time, the students' written work in combination with the responses to a final survey indicated that many students not only understood inquiry, they used inquiry to promote their own and their pupils' learning.

The daily realities of teaching also presented obstacles and disincentives to inquiry. Many student teachers wanted definitive, a-contextual solutions and were initially resistant to the cognitive engagement required for inquiry. This study suggests that both prospective teachers and teacher educators were navigating a complex environment characterized in part by competing agendas exerting constant pressure on the participants as they learned to teach. Both cohorts experienced similar although contextually different problems in using inquiry-as-stance. The learning experiences of both groups were confounded by different priorities of the various constituents. Making sense of these tensions became an important influence on the way that the teacher educators constructed their own teaching practice.

***Implications for Teacher Educators***

In response to the changing pressures of educational reform, teacher educators may benefit from broadening their understanding of how course evaluation and assessment is understood and utilized. The assessment of this innovative inquiry practice was formative in the sense that the participants were continuously involved in developing and refining the purposes and outcomes of their work. In utilizing an inquiry stance for both teacher educators and student teachers, this assessment was also reflexive in that the questions posed about the seminar informed practice, which in turn led to new questions. More broadly, the inquiry process helps to reinvent the concept of how teacher educators and others view assessment by valuing and utilizing local knowledge rather than relying exclusively on external standards of what counts as knowledge. As indicated by this study, internal assessment can become part of the culture of teaching and teacher education when it is an ongoing process used by those inside the situation as opposed to something that is simply imposed on teacher education from the outside.

Fullan (2000, 1993) suggested that educational change occurs only when teachers re-invent practice through personal development and participation in communities where continuous learning is a fundamental part of the new professionalism. Goodlad (1990) noted that almost no teacher education programs include preparing teachers for change as part of their purpose.

Change is the one thing we can be sure of as educators; it is inevitable that teachers will confront and have to deal with change. Increasingly teacher education programs are trying to prepare teachers with strategies for effectively responding to change, strategies which will help them implement responses to new circumstances and problems. Inquiry offers teachers multiple opportunities to reflect upon, learn about, and adjust their understandings of teaching (Olson, 2000) and to make meaningful intellectual contributions to the professional knowledge base (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990). Focusing on the inquiry process illuminated assumptions about teaching and learning while opening new avenues to the education of both beginning teachers and teacher educators. Teacher educators cannot be expected to teach students everything they need to know during their teacher preparation program. Nor can doctoral programs teach prospective teacher educators everything they need to know. The education of teachers and of teacher educators must equip individuals with the critical decision-making skills that will enable them to develop strategies to promote positive change and with the development of life-long commitments and attitudes toward generating knowledge about their own practice. Despite the difficulties inherent in the competing agendas, inquiry was a powerful process of knowledge generation and for some, perhaps, an opening for lifelong learning and questioning. As the facilitators of the course, the researchers' own practice as beginning teacher educators was significantly and positively impacted by engaging in inquiry along with the student teachers.

In what ways might teacher educators incorporate inquiry-as-stance into their

programs? First, the cultures of universities play an important role in how pedagogical and curricular decisions are implemented. Faculties can work toward incorporating inquiry as part of the university culture, weaving inquiry as stance into all coursework and practice rather than being viewed as an add-on. Second, acknowledging and addressing students' practical concerns throughout their teacher education program can facilitate the use of inquiry as a problem solving approach. Finally, the complex accountability contexts of today's teacher education programs in which outcomes have become central in policy debates (Cochran-Smith, 2001c) warrant extensive discussion and research. In the case of this study, the use of a capstone or culminating project in the inquiry course requires further consideration in light of the pressures to fulfill multiple and competing requirements from the state, NCATE, and various programs within the university.

Inquiry-as-stance for both beginning teachers and teacher educators provides a more ecological approach to teacher education (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). It recognizes, utilizes, and integrates the interrelated components of schools and schooling and of research, reflection, and practice (Fecho, 2000). The inquiry process provided the teacher educators in this seminar continuous and multiple opportunities in a learning community to challenge our own views of teaching, learning, and social justice in response to the needs and agendas of the student teachers. In an era that is wrestling with the appropriate outcomes of teacher education and public schooling, inquiry can provide opportunities to develop a life-long approach to learning and teaching that encourages responsiveness to change, knowledge generation, and social action.

## Note

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## **Appendix A**

### ***Inquiry Seminar Survey***

As your facilitators, we are very interested in your thoughts about the Inquiry Seminar. Just as you have been reflecting on and documenting your classroom experiences and professional growth, we are doing the same with regard to our roles in the seminars. As such, please refer only to the seminar experience, not the entire Teacher Education program. Please give this survey the same attention you hoped your students gave to the surveys or questionnaires you may have given. We appreciate your honest, direct and thoughtful responses.

How do you understand the purpose of the inquiry seminar?

What kinds of discussions/activities in seminar were most meaningful in your preparation as a beginning teacher? What topics, issues, or concerns do you wish had been addressed? Why?

Do you believe that your thinking about what it means to teach has changed this year? How so? What aspects of this course do you feel have led to your current understanding?

Do you foresee yourself continuing to integrate inquiry into your practice in the future? Why or why not?

Thank you for filling out this survey.