

## Making the turn: Fostering an inquiry stance in teacher education

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*ABSTRACT: In this article, the authors describe how an examination of teacher candidate inquiry projects led to an examination of their own experiences as teacher education practitioner-researchers and competing narratives about education research. They describe how in the process of doing research, they came to recognise how their experiences and methodological decisions impacted the process of their inquiry and the implications they could claim. Through a review of abstracts for inquiry projects created over the past ten years by interns in a professional development school English education program, they explore how the grand narrative of educational research may affect the meaning of inquiry and how this may have implications for teacher education. They argue for pragmatic approaches that foster an inquiry stance in teacher candidates as a way to position future educators as autonomous knowledge-makers who have a prominent role in education research.*

*KEYWORDS: Grand narrative, inquiry stance, methodology, narrative inquiry, pragmatism, professional development school, teacher education*

### MAKING THE TURN: FOSTERING AN INQUIRY STANCE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

In this article, we describe how, in an effort to analyse how teacher candidates in a school-university partnership engaged with the concept of “inquiry”, we inadvertently found ourselves engaged in research that contradicted our own stated stances as practitioners becoming researchers. This realisation stood out against a layered background of narratives – our own situation as graduate students exploring research methodologies, our experiences as secondary English Language Arts teachers and teacher educators, and as beginning researchers. Here we explore teacher candidates’ inquiry alongside an exploration of our own experiences amidst competing visions of educational research and the role of the practitioner in building knowledge.

As *practitioners*, we viewed educational research from a naturally developed pragmatic perspective. The value of research and the ideas and policies developed out of it were inherently judged by the outcomes in the lived lives of students and our fellow practitioners. This did not develop from a consciously chosen epistemological stance, but instead from the position of the practitioner in the educational system. As we transacted with the complex contexts of our classrooms and school environments, the concept that educational practices could be perfected became less tenable.

However, in becoming *researchers*, we felt the pull to conform to what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as “the grand narrative of social inquiry” (p. xxv) and which Lagemann (2000) traces back to Thorndike’s ideas of “a science of education”. The

grand narrative of education research stems from a foundational positivist methodology that leads to the privileging of experimental designs such as those seen in medical discourses (Slavin, 2002). It is the rhetoric that such designs are the primary and optimal vehicle for incremental progress and improvement to be achieved. However, as a consequence of its seeking reproducible and predictable results, it diminishes the role of practitioners to “technicians” rather than professionals, as it seeks to “teacher-proof” the profession with an emphasis on scientifically proven “best practices” purported to work in all contexts.

In the last decade, this grand narrative has become even more prominent. Teachers in many nations are facing tensions as a result of legislation such as NCLB (No Child Left Behind) in the United States and NAPLAN (National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy) in Australia. These policies represent a move towards standardisation and accountability and are indicative of the increasing influence the grand narrative of education research is having on the lived experiences of practitioners.

Our experiences as teachers did not match the claims of the grand narrative; and as doctoral students, we have each felt a disconnect between the ways that teaching and learning are discussed within the grand narrative and the ways they are discussed by practitioners. However, as we began our own research, we found that we inadvertently took on the grand narrative as opposed to acting out of our own.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that personal narrative is an effective way to counter the grand narrative and recognises that “*the person* in context is of prime interest” (p. 33). As such, we begin this article with our personal narratives and analyse some commonalities in our experiences. Then we describe how, as doctoral students and beginning researchers, we engaged in the process of a research project based on our shared experiences as students in a course on educational philosophy and as teacher educators in an English teacher certification Professional Development School (PDS) at our university. We describe our research process, our beginnings with questions about how interns in a PDS program take up inquiry and how our research took a turn. We came to realise that while our research questions stemmed from our experiences, our initial approach stemmed from the grand narrative and sought to answer these questions in a way that is not aligned with our views on the role of research in education.

In essence, our initial approach mirrored the “strong push” in the United States and elsewhere to define high-quality and effective teaching so as to “[yoke] all professional development to prescribed content and pre-existing outcomes and standards” and be able to hold individual teachers “directly accountable for any investment (input) made by a school or government in his/her professional learning” (Parr, 2007, p. 27). Parr suggests that teachers who take an inquiry stance must work against a policy environment that has developed from the grand narrative. This environment may include projects that resemble those of a practitioner inquiry that “emphasises the situated and provisional nature of teacher knowledge” (Parr, 2007, p. 28); however, these projects may instead be managerially used to measure teachers’ performance leading to formulaic products. Our initial approach to this study was similarly on its way to evaluating the products of the interns’ inquiries in order to identify benchmarks of a “successful” inquiry and therefore would likely have led to

parallel results of managerial ends. We questioned the work we were doing because it was counter to what we wanted for our interns and counter to our own narratives.

## NARRATIVES

Personal narratives, which look at a particular context to understand those individuals in a specific time and space, are one way to challenge the grand narrative. The researcher's positionality is significant in inquiry. Practitioners are often positioned as "in the trenches" rather than "in the ivory tower" or "inside the academy." Polkinghorne (1988) writes that "practitioners, perhaps, are better commonsense epistemologists than academics...practitioners work with narrative knowledge" (p. X). As such, we offer our personal narratives here as a way to situate ourselves and to offer counter-narratives to the grand narrative. Our research is, in many ways, "insider research" (Tuhivai-Smith, 1999, p. 139) because of our experiences. These personal narratives illustrate our experiences as practitioners and shed light on how those experiences influence our work as scholars and as teacher-educators.

### Michelle's narrative

I was a secondary English Language Arts teacher for fifteen years (from 1995 – 2010). For the first half of my career, I enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and a felt generally respected as a professional, as an intellectual, and as a practitioner who had a voice in education reform. During the last half of my career, I felt increasingly marginalised and stifled. I realise now that this was in large part due to the result of new discourses about education reform and education research – and how that rhetoric positioned teachers in both of these. I also realise that these new discourses, which marked a movement away from negotiation and possibility towards initiatives, mandates and "what works", were in large part due to NCLB legislation and the publication of the National Research Council's 2002 report, *Scientific Research in Education*. In light of this historical background, I now better understand why the last few years of my career were plagued by a long list of acronyms, new hires (including a Director of Research and Assessment), fads, and anything else that could be attributed to "scientifically valid research". Rigour and relevance, benchmarks, best practices, scientifically-driven...these were the catchphrases that marked my final years in the secondary classroom.

While I would not have called myself a *researcher* at any point in my fifteen year career as a practitioner, I realise that I was constantly engaged in inquiry processes, testing and revising to find what worked for my students in my classroom. This inquiry stance was evident in my daily work and more prominent in several critical incidents throughout my career. One critical incident relates to my efforts to reform the daily viewing of Channel One News, a commercialised news broadcast which school administrators made mandatory. In collaboration with a group of colleagues who also refused to accept "mandatory" as the only option, we engaged in a process to establish alternative choices. We developed supplemental lesson plans related to media literacy and provided these, along with readings and discussion prompts related to the issues raised in the program, to teachers. Some used them, and we asked those who used them to compile anecdotes and examples of their experiences. We would have never called this information data, but it was, and we used it to establish our

argument and to contribute to a culture of teacher voice and choice rather than blind acceptance of mandates at our site.

During the last few years of my career, I went to numerous conferences with building and district administrators and school board members; these were conferences that all claimed to provide scientifically based ideas for “what works”. I found myself leaving these conferences quite sceptical; I kept thinking, “yes, but...”. I realise now that I was thinking, “yes, but...context matters and more importantly, practitioners matter.”

And, neither of those was clearly evident in the “treatments” proposed. After one conference, I was given a CD of “gold standard lessons” and directed to ensure that all of the English teachers used at least three of those lessons per year. This command stemmed from the belief that somehow these lessons were a cure-all, and that test scores would certainly rise if these “gold standard lessons” were implemented in all classes. I grew increasingly frustrated by so-called experts and administrators – who were no more expert than most teachers but who exerted more power – making decisions that directly impacted teachers without significant teacher input. So, I left a profession I loved. In some respects, I left to regain my own voice, or at least to reinforce it. More importantly, I left seeking an opportunity to foster voice in a future generation of teachers. I realise now that one way to foster this voice is through the development of an inquiry stance in pre-service teachers and practitioners.

### **Kevin’s narrative**

My first teaching position, in 2004, was in a diverse suburban community. I sought resources, primarily in the form of experienced teachers, to help me respond to the differences I was seeing in classroom dynamics and needs that stemmed from this diversity. I felt able to admit I was inexperienced in this area, and I was fortunate to have colleagues that were open with sharing the stories of their experiences so that I could learn from them.

I was also encouraged to be innovative and try out new strategies. For example, when preparing to teach Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, I felt supported by my administration and teacher colleagues when I experimented with having my students learn and perform the final scene of the play in order to create engagement by inviting them to question what could lead to such an intense and violent ending. I felt clear in my reasoning for trying it – as a pre-reading strategy for a challenging text – and knew that I had the support of my professional community.

Looking back now, I wonder how I would have seen these situations if my experiences took place in a time more dominated by the grand narrative. My lack of effective strategies for responding to the cultural needs of my class could have been categorised as a deficiency in my expertise and I might have sought to hide my questions about my practice for fear of being seen as unqualified. Also, my pedagogical choices in how to introduce *Hamlet* may have been questioned on the academic standards that they directly addressed or I, myself, may have seen my ideas as too far from the norm and sought more traditional (and safe) teaching methods. My understanding of what being a teacher meant, however, included that teachers are continuously in a process of identifying and responding to dilemmas that arise. I saw teachers as being “always in the making” (Dewey 1928, as cited in Shannon, 1989, p.

76) and this allowed me to openly ask for more experienced teachers' guidance without a sense that this would endanger my reputation.

My first year was not, however, free from negative experiences with standardised testing and the grand narrative. For example, a representative of the county school district was sent to share with us the results of the previous year's grade-level test. The scores were broken down by the standards being assessed and we were told that the results of as few as two assessment items within a given standard were sufficient to make claims about our success – or failure – at teaching that standard. While none of us, likely including the county representative, had extensive training in statistical analysis, this call for an immediate rewriting of our curriculum seemed unwarranted and, while I was interested in discussing how we teach the concepts covered by the standard, the greater part of my reaction was defensive.

The next year, I changed schools and took a position at the school that partners with the PDS where I now continue to teach full-time. The adjustment to teaching in this community was easier given what I had learned; however, I was still continuously surrounded by important questions of practice and again I found that I depended a great deal on my colleagues for their advice and experience.

I also have noticed that the pressures of standardised testing are not, as yet, as strong as I had felt in my last school. I attended, and still attend, "professional development" sessions that focus on how we can improve our state test scores; however, the framing of these discussions is often to reflect upon what we currently do to teach towards the standards with an understanding that teaching strategies are always in motion and can only improve when reflected upon. This framing allows our department to have more open discussions about what we do and what we are considering trying next. I am uncertain of all the factors that contribute to limiting the pressures of the grand narrative in this school; however, I suspect the factors include that members of the school leadership directly work to create a "contested space" that resists and limits the impacts of the grand narrative (Serriere, Kawai & Mitra, 2012).

After teaching in this district for three years, I rejoined the PDS as a mentor teacher. Working alongside interns, I have sought to foster an inquiry stance, in them as well as myself, as a philosophical approach to defining what being a teacher means. There are moments when this approach seems clear and I feel as though I am nurturing the sense of being in a community of inquiry that has supported me in my own teaching practice. However, there are also moments when the appealing concept of "teachers as technicians" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 3), with clear right and wrong teaching strategies, overcomes me and/or the interns with which I work. At these latter moments, we fall into the trap of seeking easy answers to complex and contextual questions, rather than remembering that "scientific results furnish a rule for the conduct of *observations and inquiries*, not a rule for overt action" (Dewey, 1929, p. 15). It is a continual challenge made more difficult by a climate of standardisation that has developed out of the grand narrative and this drove me to pursue my Ph.D. in order to bring intentionality to this inquiry.

## COMMONALITIES IN OUR EXPERIENCES

### Experiences with the Grand Narrative

Both of us were teaching as the current era of standardisation and accountability began to alter the way teaching and learning were discussed in schools. While at the beginning of our teaching careers we felt empowered and encouraged to be innovative and experimental in our teaching strategies, we later felt stifled by the grand narrative rhetoric suggesting there are simple and effective “best practices” that we should be employing. Our experiences did not match the claims of this rhetoric; we instead found that what seemed to work in one class at one time would fail in a different class or on a different day. MacDonald and Shirley (2009) coined the term “alienated teaching” to describe “instructional processes in which teachers neglect teaching practices that they believe are best suited for their pupils and instead comply with externally imposed mandates out of a sense of deference to authority” (p. 15). While neither of us would describe ourselves as having succumbed to the pressures of these imposed mandates, working against them did lead us to struggles with the kinds of low morale and divestment from teaching that others suggest are connected to such compliance (Bailey, 2000; Craig, 2006; Hargreaves, 2002, 2003, as cited in MacDonald & Shirley, 2009, p. 15).

### Experience with research

Burton and Bartlett claim Hannan’s (2000) findings that teachers frequently don’t read research may stem from “its traditional lack of importance for career advancement” (2005, p. 54). Unlike this conclusion, for us, it was about the lack of relevancy. Our experiences with research were primarily with positivistic studies that sought to generalise and speak in context-free terms. Our experiences led us to see context as critically important and this research therefore did not greatly influence our practice. In effect, we did not have transformative experiences after reading research and therefore did not prioritise it.

Research only became valuable where we found something that appeared useful to *try* in the classroom (and *try* here is important, because the question of whether it works or not would then be tested in the classroom) or where we were provoked to reconsider an element of our practice. Our experiences working with published theories and ideas about practice frequently led to innovations and reflections but also frequently led to lessons from failure as we tried new ideas that did not lead to the intended results. We also both experienced a movement from research being offered in a way where we could test it to research being imposed as policy and mandates. “Gold Standard lessons” were not offered along the lines of practitioner inquiry but were now being “unproblematically avowed...and typically delivered as a remedy for deficiencies or gaps in teachers’ existing practices” (Parr, 2007, p. 31). We witnessed how this movement in how research was portrayed led to practitioners feeling disenfranchised and judged on the basis of fideious implementation of strategies.

In truth, the grand narrative’s privileging of positivistic research, and the managerial ends to which we saw it frequently used, led us both to a defensive position where anyone holding the title of researcher was suspect. However, our experiences in our doctoral studies have led us to reflect on how research can potentially offer a valuable

collaboration in teacher inquiry. We have come to identify this as a pragmatic approach to educational research which rejects a view that research can “[provide] educational practice with recipes so that educational practice can be perfected” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 111) and instead judge the value of research by how the reading of it leads to “any portions of ascertained knowledge [entering] into the heart, head and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before” (Dewey, 1929, p. 39).

### **Experiences with practitioner inquiry**

For Dewey, what distinguishes inquiry from the trial and error that human beings are continually engaged in as they transact with their environment is that inquiry is “*controlled or directed* by means of reflection or thinking” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 58). While neither of us would have identified our early processes in the classroom, such as Michelle’s Channel 1 example and Kevin’s *Hamlet* dilemma, as being inquiry at the time, we would now recognise them as such, given the level of intentionality and reflection we brought to them. A critical component to both of these inquiries was the sense of autonomy we experienced. We felt the license to consider possible lines of action, experiment, and reflect on the outcomes with an understanding that this is what *teaching* means. Our inquiries were context-specific; we were not seeking a solution for all schools for all times and we felt there was a shared understanding of this with teachers, administrators and other members of our collaborations.

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009) state simply that teacher inquiry is a “systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice” and emphasise the word “intentional” in that teachers “take charge of [their] own learning” by bringing intentionality to their reflective practices and to how they share their reflections and assertions with others (p. 5, summarizing Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana, Gimbert, & Silva, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 1993). Our experiences led us to similarly stress the value of intentionality in that we felt the most ownership of our teaching practices when we had the time to engage deliberately in their development and had time to reflect on their outcomes. We saw Dewey’s claims that we are always involved in processes of trial and error lived out in our experiences with students and found that an ownership of our profession meant an ownership of these processes through being more mindfully present (intentional) with the elements involved in them.

Our experiences also align with Dana and Yendol-Hoppey’s inclusion of collaboration and making inquiry public. We both have relied heavily upon collaborations with colleagues in both formal and informal settings in order to develop possible courses of action and to share with others the ideas and experiences we have had. When dilemmas have arisen in our teaching practice, a frequent occurrence, we have sought out both formal and informal networks of support for ideas and feedback. We have also had valuable experiences sharing and learning from the actions our colleagues have found successful, as these have provoked inquiries into our own practices. We may, however, part slightly from Dana and Yendol-Hoppey in how we see this element of inquiry, in that we would include systematic and intentional processes as being inquiry even if they do not include formal sharings of the process or results. While we would agree that sharing through presentation and

article-writing helps to “[garner] a new respect for the complexity teaching entails”, indeed we view such efforts as critical to creating narratives separate from the grand narrative, we also believe that the “purposeful educative [conversations]” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 7) fostered by inquiry occur most frequently at local and less formal levels. Viewing the profession through a lens of inquiry at this level validates this process as being part of what a practitioner *is* and may support the taking of an inquiry stance with local dilemmas as well as with larger, more systemic problems explored through more formal inquiry.

Finally, we both took on positions of preparing future practitioners and worked with interns in the PDS, and our experiences matched the research findings that inquiry can enhance the quality of teacher preparation programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Silva, 2001; Wilson et al., 2001, as cited in Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 9). The PDS developed out of efforts to create a collaborative partnership with a local high school and considers inquiry to be the centre of teacher (and in fact all) learning. As a year-long program, the PDS seeks to immerse interns into the lived experiences of that community with a focus not on transmitting “a set of predefined attributes and knowledges that can be transmitted and reproduced to achieve an end-product state” (Secondary English Professional Development School, 2010) of a fully formed teacher, but rather to include interns in a continual process of co-inquiry with all members. The program holds that such co-inquiry, which is frequently “messy, born out of ambiguity, uncomfortable experiences, ‘critical incidents’, and differences about definitions” (Secondary English Professional Development School, 2010), parallels with and prepares interns for the realities of the profession. We believe instruction in the process of inquiry helps bring intentionality to their thinking about their experiences and offers a way to understand the profession differently than may be portrayed by the grand narrative.

In the current era of increased standardisation and accountability, we experienced the erosion of our professionalism and autonomy described by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009), and we are actively seeking ways to help prepare future educators to view themselves, not as in the process of becoming efficient workman with “control of the technique of class instruction and management” (Dewey, 1904, p. 1), but rather as practitioner inquirers working in a field that is “more like walking through a swamp, testing the ground with each step, than it is like driving on a superhighway or even like building one” (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002, p. 23). We want to prepare them for the realities of the tensions and limitations that they may experience as a result of the grand narrative and help these teachers to meet the needs of their individual students by understanding that they will at times need to take a stance against the stream of this distinctly dominant discourse. We refer to this as an inquiry stance.

## **INQUIRYING INTO INTERNS’ INQUIRY**

As second-year doctoral students, we were enrolled in a course designed to introduce the underlying epistemological and ontological beliefs that inform different methodologies of educational research and to challenge us to consider our own positions in becoming educational researchers. We began the course by reading Lagemann’s *An elusive science: The troubling history of education research* (2000), which framed the history of research as a competing set of narratives. The rest of the



course then sought to build an understanding of the different methodologies that developed out of and in response to these narratives. Our experiences as teachers resonated with these new understandings of methodologies and gave us language to articulate the tensions and struggles we encountered in the process of moving from teacher to researcher. Prior to this course, we both had a working understanding of the typology of research methods; however, this course brought to light the philosophical paradigms within which these methods are rooted. When, towards the end of the course, we were given a call for papers on the topic of *Research methodologies as framing the study of English/literacy teaching and learning* for this journal, we were excited to explore a research project relevant to our new understandings of methodologies and our shared experiences working with a English certification Professional Development School (PDS) at our university.

### **Our misguided beginnings**

We came to this research with two proposed research questions: 1) How do pre-service teachers of English come to understand the value of their own experiences in inquiry? 2) To what extent do English education interns in a PDS program take on an inquiry stance? Our research proposed a textual analysis of the abstracts written by PDS interns to describe their inquiry presentations given at the end of each year. We began by looking at 130 abstracts that covered an eight-year period from 2002 to 2010. We believed that these documents, publicly available on the program website, would shed light on our research questions, particularly if we looked at the types of methods and methodologies that were evident in the abstracts.

Before we began a systematic analysis, we met to preview the data and to discuss tentative expectations and ideas we had related to the project. We worked independently to establish relevant themes from the totality of the data. Each researcher used open coding techniques to interpret the data and to identify themes and sub-themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We then met to share our themes and insights. At this stage, we also agreed to limit the data by eliminating abstracts that we agreed did not contain enough information – in particular those that only asked questions and those that did not mention implications. While these may have been evident in the interns' presentations, they were not evident in the abstracts we discarded.

We independently identified themes related to how the interns approached the end-of-year presentations, how they valued their own experience and whether they were approaching their presentations as a sharing of inquiries into their own practices or as a conclusive statement of what good teaching is and best practices are. Then, we compared how we coded the data with the intention of validating the themes we saw and intended to quantify the presence of these themes to construct an argument for their objective presence.

It was, perhaps, this move towards a claim of objective truth that marked the turning point of our work and our realisation that this method did not align with the inquiry stance we were attempting to support. In fact, we had unknowingly put on the white coat and taken up the grand narrative that inquiry stands against. Where inquiry recognises context, we were setting out to make claims about interns spanning multiple classrooms and multiple years. Where inquiry not only accepts but is based

upon the subjective experience of the inquirer, our methods of validation were an attempt to extricate ourselves from the research.

### **Making the turn: Learning from experience**

At that point we decided to embrace uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity; we stopped trying to define the themes as representative of the interns and started to realise that they were actually representative of the provocations we experienced. While we confirmed that the themes we identified independently were largely shared, we realized that this was as much a result of our shared experiences as practitioners and our individual work with interns as it was a matter of the themes being present in the abstracts themselves. We were simultaneously engaged in the research process and inseparably involved in what we were studying, what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as being “in the parade” (p. 81) to “experience an experience” (p. 50).

This led us to reconsider the entire endeavour, and we turned to Dewey’s criteria of continuity for experience to ensure that our current research project was better aligned with our past experiences and an imagined future that realises the significance of fostering an inquiry stance in pre-service teachers. “Dewey held that one criterion of experience is continuity, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences and experiences lead to further experiences...each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). We came to realise that the choices we were making were aligned with the past developments of the grand narrative instead of our own and were leading to the imagined future of the grand narrative instead of the future we envision.

With this realisation, the unit of analysis shifted from interns’ thinking to the space between these abstracts and ourselves as emerging teacher educators. Initially it was our intent to consider the interns, focusing on their epistemological positionings and their understandings of what research is or can be. Additionally, we began with a belief that our research would have implications for English programs, particularly for PDS programs. However, we came to realise that these misrepresented our efforts. We realised that we are not interested in making generalisations about these interns (and certainly not about all interns for all time). We also came to realise we were directing our work towards English education programs and shifted to recognise the significance of our research for our own work. That is, the objective of our research is to understand ourselves as “teacher education practitioner-researchers” (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman, & Pine, 2009, p. 3) and to position ourselves as participants in a collaborative community of other teacher educators interested in the same end, not to prescribe conclusions for programs and others in the community.

### **ANALYSIS IN A NEW FRAME**

Our research questions shifted from questions about interns and programs to questions about our work as teacher educators; we wondered what we could learn from these abstracts that may assist us in fostering a critical inquiry stance in our students. We collaboratively identified the themes described in the analysis below based both upon their frequent occurrence in the abstracts and upon what the analysis of these abstracts provoked in and between us as teacher educator practitioner inquirers. Through this

analysis, we saw signs of the grand narrative in interns' abstracts, signs of interns potentially taking on an inquiry stance, and potential conflicts between the two that parallel our own.

## **SIGNS OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE**

Overall, we felt that most of the abstracts frame their presentation in the language of inquiry. Interns frequently cite an incident that provoked their thinking, describe the ways that they are gathering data to intentionally investigate their question and then introduce their findings. However, we also saw potential signs that interns are privileging the grand narrative at the expense of their own. Specifically, we saw language related to 1) attempts to create experimental designs 2) seeking best practices 3) generalising the outcomes.

### **Attempts to create experimental designs**

*The data I present will include a video comparison, and a student written comparison of a simple read-aloud of The Diary of Anne Frank, where little advance preparation was made, and a more carefully planned class performance of Twelve Angry Men. The inquiry will measure the effectiveness of the interventions taken with the second play in comparison of the first.*

When describing the inquiry process, some interns used language that we attribute to a medical model of education research and the push for more experimental research in education (Riehl, 2006). Slavin (2002), an advocate for increased use of experimental methods in education writes, "differences seen in outcomes are due to treatments, not to extraneous factors" (p. 16). In fostering an inquiry stance, we want interns to reflect and look beyond the treatment, "the intervention", to consider other factors. We wonder if interns who put on the white lab coat and view inquiry as an experimental design may limit their views of other nuanced, complex factors that impact any inquiry.

Another example illustrates a second concern with this approach to inquiry: In an inquiry about the effects of allowing students to physically move around the classroom, an intern writes, "I will focus on three scenarios: students are forced to move, prevented from moving, and given the choice to move." While we cannot know how this experiment was conducted in the classroom, we wondered if the intern was creating a control group of students who were treated differently than their classmates. This raises concern for us related to the ethics of conducting experiments with human participants. There is a history of such ethical concerns in experimental designs and, as a result, research that uses such methods has developed standards and evaluative bodies, such as institutional review boards, to carefully control for potential abuse.

It is important to note that we did see examples of interns' use of the word "experiment" that did not raise some of the concerns addressed above. In these instances, we understood experimenting to be more closely aligned to personal narratives and to the inquiry process. For example, an intern writes, "Throughout the year, I have *experimented* with a variety of small group and full class discussion

activities. In my presentation, I will describe these activities and share my students' reflections..." (emphasis added). In this instance we see the intern's engagement in a process of intentionality and reflection. She is experimenting in a trial and error process rather than implementing an experimental design.

### Seeking best practices

*Do our students need to be activated? Utilizing an "Active Reading" strategy in the classroom teachers will improve the engagement of students in participation with text. This innovative strategy approaches reading through a three-step process that guides students in their appreciation, comprehension, and interest of reading.*

In some abstracts, we find examples of interns who seek solutions from outside, and we wonder to what extent they may be privileging best practices over their own experience. We wonder if interns who seek "gold standard" lessons and purport to find "what works" diminish their role as "knowledge workers" (Reihl, 2006, p. 24). In the example above, the intern asks a complex question presumably provoked by her experiences, and yet she answers that question with a single answer, a "best practice".

Additionally, we have reservations about claims that one "best practice" can meet the needs of all students for all time. Several interns presented a best practice as if it was applicable to any context in any time. Another intern writes, "Using the Vygotskian construct of the Zone of Proximal Development as a framework, *teachers can establish instructional and evaluative procedures that help students...*" (emphasis added). We do not dispute the usefulness of this approach. However, we wonder if the language used here may indicate a belief that one practice can be used for all teachers, for all students, for all time.

Similar to the concerns raised above, we see evidence in interns' language that may indicate that teaching is about implementing the best practice with fidelity, not responding to the conditions of the dynamic classroom. Writing about the implementation of the "Socratic Method of questioning", an intern writes, "Many teachers believe they are conducting this type of discussion, but in fact they are still maintaining some level of control. In my paper, I will outline some strategies for employing the Socratic Method as successfully as possible, I will describe how some teachers have done so, and I will detail my experience with the Socratic Method in my own classroom." While the intern does acknowledge contexts, other classrooms and her own, the intern's language may imply that a single, systematic method can and should be applied to both of these contexts – perhaps any context. Flexibility and allowances for context does not mean that an instructional method is being used incorrectly.

### Generalising the outcomes

*Many teachers ask their students to journal, defending it as a way to delve into valuable thoughts students are shy to offer in class or as a way to help students reflect back on their readings and writings. If journals are such a useful tool for documenting thoughts of importance or to assist in deeper reflection (than can be offered by discussion), why are we limiting the use of this tool to our students only? Why aren't teachers sharing in this method of documentation and reflection? The purpose of my inquiry project is to*

*examine the use/value of daily journaling from a (student) teacher perspective and to propose why it should be an activity that all teachers engage in to foster reflection on their classroom practice.*

While reflective practices such as journaling can be signs of the intentionality we see as critical to inquiry, the product of a journal, or an inquiry project for that matter, can also be incorporated into the managerial and accountability objectives of the grand narrative. While the above inquiry arises out of critical incidents from the intern's own experience working with students, the movement to a conclusion that "all teachers [should] engage" in journaling supports the grand narrative's objective of defining and enforcing best practices. Unlike the category above, however, here interns are seeking to be the creator of the enforced practice.

The presence of this tendency in the abstracts highlighted for us the importance of the methodology that underpins the activity of inquiry. Surrounded by the dominant discourse of the grand narrative, we worry it may be easy for interns to unknowingly fall into generalising the outcomes of their inquiries into best practice for teacher development (as above) or into best practices for teaching students. For example, one intern investigated methods of getting students to enjoy reading and frames the results of this investigation as offering "possible solutions for getting all students to read". In this case, she has picked up the language of the best-practices-seeking solutions instead of strategies.

## **SIGNS OF AN INQUIRY STANCE**

While the above examples lead us to believe that interns are at times viewing the practice of inquiry from the lens of the grand narrative that surrounds them, we also saw signs that interns may understand the practice of inquiry as a way of better understanding their own practices in order to "transform actions into *intelligent* action" (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 38), or action based upon thoughtful deliberation. We can't make a definitive claim that these signs indicate that the interns will take an inquiry stance towards their future practices as teachers. However, these signs suggest that interns may see beyond the creation and completions of an inquiry project as they move towards a view of inquiry as an essential and continual process (Cochran-Smith et al. 2009). Specifically we see signs of this movement when interns 1) refer to their lived experiences as inspiration for their inquiry projects and 2) when they see themselves as collaborative participants in a community of inquiry.

### **Inquiry within the continuity of experience**

*I began this year relying on my own past experiences to define parental support, and within two weeks my conceptions were turned upside down. I will focus on initial thoughts, how a year-long study and reflection led to a new definition, and how this will help teachers in their own classrooms.*

In the example above we see evidence of how some interns draw from their past experiences to understand their current ones. Inquiries that make connections between the past and the present, between themselves as students and their current students: "In my own educational career and in the attitudes of my students..." Another intern writes about an inquiry into student engagement, and tells of the inquiry "originating

from a personal struggle to gain agency over my own learning.” In these examples, interns realise the value of their own narratives, particularly their past experiences as students. The current inquiries are inspired by what is happening in the classroom and by their past. They are inquiring about their present time and space, looking backwards and saying, “I wish...”, and potentially looking forward to say, “I hope...” This language about the realisation of how the past impacts their present and imagined future is indicative of interns’ valuing of personal narratives over the grand narrative.

Through Analysis of Experiences No two teachers are alike. Despite years of similar training and schooling, each of us has carved out a unique personality and standards within teaching. What influences and shapes how we negotiate our niche in the role of teacher? If we could more completely analyse why we act the way we act in stressful, joyful or trying moments, perhaps we can feel more confident and assured in our teaching personalities. This inquiry explores my personal path to figuring out why I teach how I teach.

As a year-long certification program that can take place as either the last year of interns’ undergraduate studies or as part of graduate level studies, the PDS includes interns of all ages who are in the process of becoming teachers. We see evidence in many of the abstracts to suggest that interns take up narrative inquiry, using an intentional and systematic approach to examine what it means to “be a teacher”. In the example above, the intern’s inquiry focuses on “why [she acts] the way [she acts] in stressful, joyful, or trying moments” in order to “feel more confident and assured in [her] teaching [personality]”. Here, she is exploring her personal narrative in order to better understand “why [she teaches] how [she teaches].”

In discussing this process, undergraduates use language related to how they are negotiating tensions between how they see their professional selves and their private selves. One intern asks, “Who am I as a teacher? What parts of my personality and myself do I want to share with my students?” She continues, “These questions are ones that I face every day in my classroom experiences as I try to find the balance between my public and private selves. This inquiry presentation will detail my professional journey during my first year of teaching.” In these examples, undergraduates ask questions about their experiences in moving from student to teacher. In the narrative inquiries of graduate students, we see a greater emphasis on their transition from one career to another. Rather than building a professional identity, they are *rebuilding* a professional identity.

How did we kill the curiosity to learn? A sea of jaded faces urged me to use experiential and theatrical pedagogy to develop my own creativity-based learning community by implementing three types of activities: communal/dramatic, relevant/interpersonal, and aesthetic/intrapersonal...

While sometimes framed with a collective “we”, we felt the majority of abstracts indicated that the interns’ inquiries began with critical incidents from their own classrooms that raised questions about their imagined, future teaching practices. In the example above, looking out to a “sea of jaded faces” is unlikely to be a specific moment, but rather represents a collective experience that led the intern to question how she intends to deliver material. Similarly, another intern spoke of her struggle when grading student writing and how it led to questions about the effects that

“regulating writing to a quantitative variable” has on students’ views about “the act of writing itself”. We found this pattern of critical incidents encouraging because it seemed to indicate attempts to own the practices in question as the interns consider how to approach these practices in the future. We also found this pattern encouraging, because it suggested they are bringing a level of criticality to teaching practices that have developed into traditions. While practices may be said to “work”, inquiry can problematise what “working” means. An inquiry stance places all practices in harm’s way, to be (re)explored and examined from multiple angles.

### **Inquiry within a community of collaboration**

Dana and Yodel-Hoppey write that: “In an inquiry-oriented professional development school, teacher inquiry is a central part of the professional practice of all members of the PDS – practising teachers, prospective teachers, administrators, and university teacher educators” (2009, p. 10). In the following analysis we examine evidence of language that suggests how interns take up this inquiry stance through their collaborative efforts with other teachers, researchers and writers, and also with their students.

My inquiry examines my 11th grade students’ experiences with different discussion techniques in English class. Throughout the year, my mentor and I have experimented with a variety of small group and full class discussion activities. In my presentation, I will describe these activities and share my students’ reflections by highlighting observations, surveys, and interviews.

There are numerous examples in the abstracts to indicate that interns are collaborating with mentor teachers and other teachers in the building. In the example above, the intern describes how “my mentor and I” experimented. There were also some examples where interns recognise themselves as a part of a professional network, such as in the following example, where the intern is affected by veteran advice: “While planning to teach *Lord of the Flies*, I became increasingly concerned, due to warnings from experienced teachers, that I would not be able to adequately engage my students in the novel.” What we found interesting here was that the experienced teachers’ advice provoked the intern’s inquiry. Rather than simply adopting the other teachers’ practices, the intern conducted an inquiry to discover her own approaches to “adequately engage [her] students.”

Are grades an accurate determinant of learning? This is a question that many teachers struggle with, including myself, so I really looked at whether grades can effectively show not only that students are learning, but what and how they’re learning. I included many anecdotes from my own classroom, along with those theories of Frank Smith and the famous Jamie Myers, and also the popular non-fiction book *The Overachievers*. I explore this idea while also keeping in mind the reality that grades will never completely leave the classroom – or at least not anytime soon.

Viewing research as offering a collaborative voice within the community of inquiry resists the grand narrative’s tendency to privilege the experience of researchers over practitioners. In the above example, the intern places her own “anecdotes” alongside the work of “famous” educational philosophers and “popular non-fiction” writers as sources of potential lines of action. Similarly, we saw evidence of interns taking up alternative forms of data and research presentation in order to position themselves as

full members of the educational research community. One intern, about his narrative inquiry, writes that it is “an attempt to contextualise the teacher’s experience, the English classroom, and *shifting identity in theatrical terms*. The presentation will be a guided tour of a *personal website* designed to archive past experiences in theatre, current experiences in education, and a synthesis and examination of multiple ways the two fields interrelate” (emphasis added). Another intern proposed an examination of “personal emails, journal entries, and critical incidents in the classroom...to unravel the events that were significant in [becoming a teacher]” The interns in these examples experiment with alternative methods and data sources, pushing the limits of how the grand narrative narrowly defines research topics and research presentations. As such, they position themselves as equal collaborators with educational researchers. In these instances, we see how the interns may view research as a collaboration to inform action.

This inquiry focuses on co-planning with students in order to emphasise the value of writing. By co-planning with me, my students will have a voice in what we do within our final unit. Within this project, I will evaluate the effectiveness of co-planning with my students. Can it help to show them that writing can be both a valuable and enjoyable means for expression both inside and outside of the classroom?

Taking an inquiry stance means involving all people affected. Ultimately, the educational enterprise is one that focuses on the experiences of students. Taking an inquiry stance means placing students at the centre of education and therefore logically includes them in inquiries into practice. In the abstract above, the intern recognises this and positions herself in collaboration with the student and co-construction of the educative experience through “co-planning.”

## IMPLICATIONS

Our engagement with this project has provided us with numerous opportunities to think and to re-think our own work as “teacher education practitioner-researchers” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). There is a natural appeal to identifying a problem, finding a permanent solution and then progressing on to the next problem. However, we are in agreement with Dewey (1928, as cited in Shannon, 1989, p. 76) that “the discovery is never made; it is always in the making.” This article and any implications we address in this conclusion are not a finality of the project but rather represent our current understandings. This research process has in fact strengthened our commitment to an epistemological stance that our goal is not to “produce knowledge that leads to the prediction and control of human experience; [but to] produce, instead, knowledge that deepens and enlarges the understanding of the human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 159). In our continued work with teacher candidates, we intend to engage in a process of trial and error as we seek to foster an inquiry stance in future practitioners. For now, we see some possible approaches that may foster this stance and help interns to position themselves as practitioner inquirers.

The first way to foster this stance may be to challenge the grand narrative through awareness and introduction to alternative methodological narratives. This was especially useful for us in our graduate course, and we see its merit for pre-service teachers as well. We see great potential in introducing students to the “wild profusion” of “research methodologies that defy homogenisation and standardisation”



(Lather, in Moss, Phillips, Erickson, Floden, Lather & Snyder, 2009, p. 510). Students can see new possibilities for their inquiry topics, the process, and potential products and outcomes. An introduction to other methodologies will help them to move beyond the constraints of the grand narrative and to recognise the value of experience, collaboration and other ideals of an inquiry stance. What Lather hopes for “in the training of education researchers” is similar to what we hope for in teacher candidates who engage in inquiry: “to be able to negotiate across standard procedures from many paradigms to engage with the uncertainties of knowledge toward more nuanced thinking” (Moss et al., 2009, p. 510). Our students will be working within schools impacted by the era of standardisation and accountability. Making them aware of the grand narrative and fostering recognition of how it impacts their practice may help them to negotiate it in order to maintain their professional autonomy.

Another approach we see as helpful for the development of an inquiry stance is in teaching to read pragmatically. Cherryholmes (1993) asserts that researchers “have been pragmatists all along...choosing community and a way of life...[and] choosing our future as we have described and explained our past”, but that we have not been “pragmatic at all in our arrogance and presumptive search for certainty as we have tried to ‘get things right.’” (1993, p. 32). We would suggest that this universality of pragmatic action is even more apparent in the work of teachers. Teachers are continuously surrounded by the “instabilities, uncertainties, terror and responsibility” (1993, p. 32) inherent to the educational enterprise. We believe that fostering experiences for interns with the “textuality” (1993, p. 2) of research will help them to see researchers as collaborators in the inquiry process. Viewing research from this lens would prepare teachers to read research for ideas that relate to their own inquiries – ideas as potentialities not prescriptions.

The two approaches described above have potential for reminding teacher candidates that the “notion of inquiry as stance is distinct from the more common notion of inquiry as project, which treats inquiry as a time-bounded project or activity within a teacher education course...” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 22). We see inquiry as a way to prepare future educators to position themselves as knowledge-makers in the profession. We agree with Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) that “developing and sustaining an inquiry stance is intended to be a life-long and constant pursuit” (p. 22). We see this as a goal for our students and for ourselves. When future educators engage in a collaborative community of inquiry, they take ownership of the role they *do* play in their classrooms and *can* play in the wider discourse of education.

As researchers, our recognition of the contradictory nature of writing an article through our original approach compelled us to seek a different approach that recognised our relationship to the data being studied, maintaining a recognition of the complexity and nuances of that relationship. We also recognise that as our first endeavour to write in a way that is in alignment with our experiences as practitioners and as teacher educators, we are opening ourselves to criticisms from the grand narrative as well as those that have already made similar leaps to working in other narrative methodological streams. However, we found this approach to be inescapable as we sought to speak from our own truths. It is our hope that by exposing the process of this piece and our struggle to negotiate within the dominant discourse of the grand narrative, we can illustrate the challenges of maintaining an inquiry stance and, in so

doing, provoke further discussion on how to meet these challenges in teacher education.

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Manuscript received: March 31, 2012

Revision received: June 6, 2012

Accepted: July 5, 2012