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DEVELOPING CRITICAL MASS
TEACHER EDUCATION AND CRITICAL INQUIRY PEDAGOGY

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This article is an argument for imagining an ecological approach to supporting beginning teachers in critical inquiry classrooms. Working from anecdotal evidence suggesting that beginning teachers suffer from a lack of support for their efforts at establishing critical inquiry, the author suggests that educators need to think beyond the traditional structures of teacher education and consider ways of working that bridge the last years of college with the first years of teaching. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate partnerships between schools and universities that support a range of reflective practices by creating a critical mass of inquiry-based educators within school districts. To support this argument, the author shares the journals of a recent student teacher who benefited from placement in a small learning community that has embraced critical inquiry principles. In essence, educators need to recognize again the process of inquiry and use that process to support its continued use.

Vignette 1

Toward the end of my 24 years as a high school English teacher, I sat talking with Geoff Winikur, a younger colleague. A few years earlier, Geoff had observed our inquiry-based small learning community (SLC), a school within a large comprehensive urban high school. He had decided that he liked the energy and philosophy of the teachers to the extent that when we could offer no position in our SLC, he elected to join the staff of the larger high school in order to take part in our SLC staff-development meetings. To our advantage, Geoff eventually accepted first a temporary and then a regularly appointed position in our program. As we talked, he recounted how his own reading and participation in the Philadelphia Writing Project summer institute had prepared him to take an inquiry stance on his practice. “However,” he added, “if I hadn’t come to this SLC and worked with teachers who were implementing and investigating their own inquiry-based practice, I think I would have given up on critical inquiry long ago.”

Vignette 2

Fast forward to the current year and my current position as an assistant professor of reading education at a major university. Rachel Ravreby, a former student teacher who occupies the position I vacated in the SLC, had phoned me for advice. She was struggling with preparation for a conference talk intended to describe and analyze her attempts as a new teacher to install a form of writer’s workshop in her classroom. As we cleared away the writing and research questions she had called about and addressed life as an inner-city teacher in general, she complained that the school district was offering her precious little incentive to stay. “I love working with the students,” she said, “but the district is mandating more and more of what I can teach and how. If they take away my autonomy, I might as well go somewhere else where, if they dictate my
curriculum, at least I’ll get better pay and better working conditions.”

**Vignette 3**

In a recent off-campus university class session, 15 elementary teachers in Georgia and I explored the characteristics of an inquiry-based literacy classroom. In the county school where the course convened, we discussed the importance of creating community, of allowing for multiple perspectives, of listening for student voice, and of the need for students to learn how to respond to the challenges of learning. Inevitably, we got around to the ways the Iowa Test of Basic Skills dominates the curriculum and how the stakes placed on the test, already high, seem to be rising higher with each new headline. As one teacher put it, “The people in control seem to think that creating an atmosphere of fear will make for better education.”

**Vignette 4**

Just before I initiated the roughest draft of this article, I met with the 11 women who are students in my graduate seminar, a special topics course focusing on inquiry-based literacy. All semester long we had been struggling with readings from Bakhtin (1981), Freire (1970), and Rosenblatt (1938) to get individual and collective handles on what it means to take an inquiry stance on literacy classrooms. As we pressed to consider to whom we thought these largely theoretical pieces spoke to, one student tried to explain that the context in which we read anything has an impact upon the way we construe that piece. As she explained, “I was exposed to Rosenblatt before. I didn’t take anything from her. I wasn’t teaching at the time.”

Although it may not be readily apparent, these stories all share common threads and raise important questions about the state of teacher education, particularly for those of us who encourage young teachers to enact a pedagogy of critical inquiry that considers the social, political, and critical aspects of their classrooms. By critical inquiry pedagogy, I mean the kind of teaching that springs from transactions with Bakhtin’s (1981) sociolinguistic dialogic theories, Dewey’s (1938) theories of experience and education, Rosenblatt’s (1938) transactional literary theories, Freire’s (1970) theories of critical dialogue, and feminist critiques of Freire (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1993), which encourage multiple and contradictory perspectives in the same classroom. Such pedagogy encourages teachers to take an inquiry stance on their classrooms so that students and teachers become an interpretive community that inquires into and reflects on both course content and pedagogy. Such classrooms routinely urge all participants to interrogate the world around them as well as to hold their own beliefs up for interrogation. A critical inquiry pedagogy, therefore, is one that enables students and teachers, both individually and collectively, to make sense of text as the world and the world as text (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Teachers and students enter into a process of social construction of knowledge that encourages critique, diversity, rigor, and meaning making.

This kind of pedagogy, however, is markedly different from those of traditional classrooms, and too often we send new teachers into schools full of good intentions to inquire and reflect, but with little else. Frequently, they find their task daunting because they base their groundbreaking practice on limited preservice explorations into critical-inquiry pedagogy, which often raise more questions than they divine directions to follow. Yet, in conflict with Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, we expect independent action on a complex activity without various kinds of scaffolded support. As progressive teacher educators, we need to consider how we can best support the learning and implementation of critical inquiry pedagogy if, as Geoff suggested in Vignette 1, it’s too complicated to enact without support; if, as Rachel suggested in Vignette 2, school districts are once more treating teachers as mindless minions; if, as the elementary teachers suggested in Vignette 3, high-stakes testing is being used to create a hegemony of fear; and if, as my seminar students suggested in Vignette 4, too much teaching of important theory occurs...
when students have no classroom of their own to make the connection.

In addition, the ability of teacher education programs to influence the practice and beliefs of future teachers, particularly in terms of implementing and sustaining pedagogy that challenges the norms of traditional teaching, remains suspect. A large body of research on various aspects of teacher education programs reviewed by Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon (1998) indicates that “beginning teachers enter preservice teacher education with firmly held views about teaching and that beginning teachers are little influenced by the interventions that occur in preservice education” (p. 168). They go on to note, with even more alarm, that, “an increasingly homogenous population of beginning teachers is largely unprepared to teach an increasingly heterogeneous population of students” (p. 168). The authors argue that solutions will occur only when more ecological approaches to teacher education, approaches that take the interrelatedness of the component parts of the larger educational system into account, emerge.

This article is an argument for imagining one such ecological approach, one that considers the ways the stakeholding systems of education—teacher education schools, school districts, and the communities they both support—can collaborate in the mutual education of future teachers who take a critical-inquiry stance on their pedagogy. Working from the impetus provided by the vignettes above, I offer that in order to support the continued struggle for progressive education that Shannon (1990) has argued for, we need to think beyond the traditional structures of teacher education and consider ways of working with young teachers that bridge their junior and senior years of college with their first 2 or 3 years of teaching. We also need better and faster ways to help preservice teachers come to some expressed understanding of the beliefs that they bring to the classroom to jump start self-interrogation of these beliefs. Furthermore, we need to rethink the traditional structures of teacher education as well as relationships between schools and universities by creating a critical mass of inquiry-based educators within schools, within districts, and within schools of education. Only then will we establish conditions that will truly support the learning and implementation of critical inquiry pedagogy, and only then will we gain a valid qualitative and quantitative assessment of the worth of such pedagogy. In essence, to better implement critical-inquiry classrooms, we need to inquire into the ways these classrooms work.

What is both the attraction and curse of critical inquiry pedagogy is that it defies easy categorization into stages or steps for implementation. As a student from a recent course put it, “Trying to enact critical inquiry pedagogy is like trying to achieve Buddha mind. No one can really show you how; they can only point in directions. The learning is in the doing.” This would be all well and good if, like my colleagues Geoff and Rachel, beginning teachers landed in programs that supported such teaching in deep and complicated ways. However, one of my great concerns as a teacher educator is that I am offering students a theory of practice and a practice of theory that has few, if any, working examples within the school communities where they elect to teach. I know how difficult it was, after 10 years of teaching, to slowly nudge my own practice into greater involvement with inquiry pedagogy; even then, it was not until I had the broader collegial support of the Philadelphia Writing Project that I was able to pull inquiry into the center of my classroom. I can only imagine what it is like for intelligent, but untried teachers to buck all the reified tradition around them to establish an inquiry practice.

If such tradition were merely inert or neutral, I could imagine these new teachers eventually prevailing as they inquired into inquiry. Unfortunately, as the comments from the elementary teacher in Vignette 3 suggest, there is currently a major organized effort by conservative administrators, politicians, and textbook publishers to create curriculum that removes the need for teacher thought or insight. Indeed, the opportunity for teachers to make decisions in their own classrooms about their own classrooms is being seriously restricted in districts across the country. For example, many Chicago teachers now have a curriculum script provided for them for
every teaching day (Schwartz, 1999). Faced with such institutionalized infantilization, many new teachers who want to take an inquiry stance on teaching and learning will either find themselves co-opted or marginalized. Those of us who prepare beginning teachers need to find ways to negotiate support for their efforts against the brute of such organized control.

As a means of showing the importance and possibilities of supporting critical inquiry pedagogy in intensive ways, I offer an excerpt from Rachel Ravreby’s student teaching journal. Like Geoff Winikur, Rachel was able to develop her interest in critical inquiry because she had the advantage of teaching in a community that fostered and implemented this pedagogy. For example, while she was a student teacher in my classroom in Philadelphia, Rachel and I imagined and then team taught an inquiry into racial tensions that existed between Lubavitchers, an ultra-orthodox sect of Judaism, and African and Caribbean Americans in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. Educated at Amherst and Penn, Rachel brought to student teaching critical political perspectives and a sense of how the political should be addressed in schools. Yet, as our group inquiry progressed in the classroom, she came to adjust the stance with which she had entered. As she noted in the journal she shared with me:

I think that the way that I tried to approach the unit planning and the ways that I try to approach teaching in [your] classes reflect a fundamental shift in my philosophy of education. I believe that at its core, teaching is a political act. At one time, I think that this notion of the political in teaching translated to me giving kids my views on the world, and intentionally or not, presenting my views and the “right” way. As exhausting as the Crown Heights work has been, it has illustrated to me the benefits of providing opportunities for further exploration rather than providing right answers. I have heard and read some pretty racist and anti-Semitic stuff in the past two months. While my gut reaction may be to tell a student just how wrong they really are, I can already see benefits of restraining this reaction. If I believe the most powerful meanings are the ones made by students themselves, then I have to be the kind of teacher who will challenge their beliefs, not discount them. By the way, I am in no way claiming that this is easy—these moments are some of the most difficult I have encountered yet.

In this student teaching journal excerpt, Rachel indicated how she had deepened her own sense of what it means to inquire into political issues. By taking part in an ongoing inquiry classroom and taking multiple opportunities to reflect upon practice, she was able to adjust both her beliefs about practice and her practice itself. By implementing a critical inquiry practice with the support of veteran teachers who believed in and implemented such pedagogy, she acknowledged that she had come to trust and use the process of critical inquiry itself.

Rachel went on to write in her journal that it matters where one practices his or her student teaching and under what conditions:

I have been listening to the unit plans of my fellow [School of Education] students this week and I have been amazed at the difference that a student teaching context makes. I created a thematic unit on the Harlem Renaissance to be taught to both English and history classes. I had trouble limiting myself to four weeks; in fact, I feel I probably did not do the period justice. Meanwhile, my cohorts are teaching the entire Renaissance and Enlightenment in two weeks. What really surprised me was that I was the only person in the class who thought a two week frame for this content area was ridiculously short.

What seems to account for Rachel’s differing views is her placement in an SLC that favored critical inquiry and not the political notions she brought with her. Although her peers had engaged issues of critical inquiry in their university courses, Rachel was the sole student among them whose day-to-day practice was immersed in such issues. However, I would also argue that it was the transaction between Rachel and the SLC that afforded her this perspective, and not the setting alone. Seeing inquiry implemented and being the person that she was, Rachel was able to revise her practice in ways that afforded deeper and more deliberate investigation by students and teachers.

Finally, not knowing that she would return to this SLC as an appointed teacher, Rachel wondered if the way of teaching she had come to embrace would prevail if she were in a school where more traditional pedagogy abounded. As she continued in her journal,

I have to wonder just how spoiled I am at Crossroads. The more I teach here, the more I am con-
vinced that the approach [you take], privileging depth over breadth, is an extremely effective way to teach. Will I be able to do this next year? How much will I be ruled by the status quo of my school? … The real question for me becomes: How do you subvert/work within a system whose pedagogy you reject?

Not even halfway through an 8-month student teaching stint, Rachel was concerned that trying to enact a critical inquiry pedagogy within a traditionally oriented school was setting her up for conflict. She considered this to the point of feeling a need to “subvert” such a system to gain the flexibility to engage an inquiry stance. The sad reality, as her opening vignette indicates, is that despite her remaining in this supportive SLC, the pressures of the larger district around her are now conspiring to restrict her choices as an informed and reflective teacher.

I can no longer in good conscience send caring and idealistic teachers to work unsupported in uncaring and jaded school districts that assume that higher test scores and substantive student learning are synonymous concepts. It no longer feels acceptable to me to engage students in Rosenblatt’s (1938) transactional theories or Freire’s (1970) dialogic theories and then to say, “Now go make sense of this on your own.” It rankles me to think that an urban school district in particular—but most school districts in general—desperately need to attract innovative and committed teachers and instead are creating conditions that chase away the very personnel that they seek. As teacher educators, we need to help the Geoffs and Rachels get beyond the complexity, the infantilization, and the institutionalized fear in order to create a context that favors investigations of critical inquiry pedagogy.

For the short term, this means enacting an agenda of research and outreach that follows preservice teachers to their inservice literacy classrooms and documents their efforts to enact critical inquiry pedagogy. By engaging student teachers in dialogue about their burgeoning practice, education researchers can offer a form of mentorship built on reflection while also gathering data that might inform others who will follow. As we inquire with our students into our mutual critical inquiry practices, we can extend our discussions from our classrooms into theirs. By using an inquiry stance as a means for continuing our discussions, we use the inquiry process to develop more complex understandings of the process and pedagogy of inquiry.

Yet, as important as this process of mutual inquiry is, it will be of limited use unless we rethink the ways the larger systems around such inquiry transact. I believe those of us in schools of education who embrace principles of critical inquiry pedagogy need to imagine ways of working with beginning teachers that institutionally, and not just individually, bridge the last few years as college students with the first few years as classroom teachers. Although the professional development school movement (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Brink & Grisham, 1999) is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough in conceiving the larger ecological structures needed to support critical inquiry pedagogy in ways that will move it from the margins of most school districts.

As the vignettes and journal excerpts above suggest, support for critical inquiry pedagogy needs to be complex, inquiry-based, ongoing, and immersive. To this end, we first need to rethink how we teach in schools of education. If we advocate critical inquiry pedagogy, we must take such a stance in and on our own classrooms, inquire into our own practice with other like-minded university educators, and rethink traditional university structures to better support undergraduate and graduate critical inquiry programs. As we inquire into our own programs, we need to know more about what our preservice teachers believe about teaching and learning to introduce them to the process of calling those beliefs into question. This means that we need to commit to in-depth work over time with undergraduate and graduate students and encourage inquiry-based relationships.

As student teachers who are benefiting from a more intense preservice experience take positions in the school districts that surround our universities, we need to place them where their struggles to develop and put critical inquiry into practice will be appreciated and supported.
School districts and universities need to enter into partnerships that provide teachers with the kind of collaborative support in the working environment of the classroom that will enable such inquiry to flourish. In particular, they must be linked in ways that allow for a critical mass of veteran and beginning teachers who embrace critical inquiry pedagogy to continue to take inquiry stances as they work together. As such, credit and funding for coursework that involves mentoring, reflective inquiry into practice, and critical inquiry into theory needs to be instituted as support for the care and feeding of new inquiry practice. In short, teacher induction must be shouldered by universities and school districts together.

Given the current conservative climate of many school districts, teacher educators need to be proactive in documenting the inquiry-based practices of K-12 professionals as well as their own inquiry-based practices. Only through our documentation of this work and our willingness to speak out will school districts find the wisdom to consider these efforts. As Rachel’s journals intimate, working closely over time with experienced teachers of critical inquiry pedagogy can provide the type and intensity of support necessary to help new teachers interrogate their beliefs about teaching and learning in substantive and powerful ways. Embracing critical inquiry is to embrace a process, a process that through reflection and self-analysis, is self-propagating. Through this process, we learn that there is no best practice, only continued practice. Existentially, we can never be best, only better. Grasping that paradox and the process that supports it is the most certain way to support continued inquiry by teachers to come.

**REFERENCES**


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