

5-26-2016

Developing as Teachers and as Researchers: Emerging Professionals' Experiences with Cooperative Inquiry

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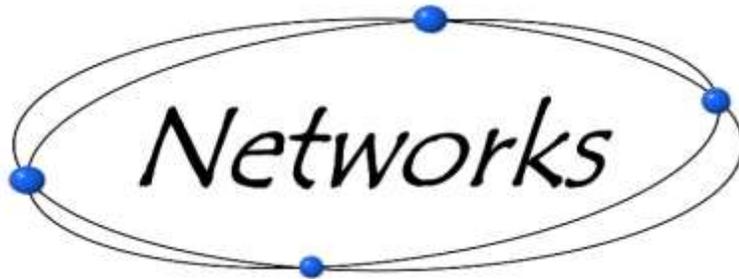


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Recommended Citation

Bower-Phipps, Laura; Cruz, Maria; Albaladejo, Cristina; Johnson, Arlette; and Homa, Thomas (2016) "Developing as Teachers and as Researchers: Emerging Professionals' Experiences with Cooperative Inquiry," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1021>

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**An On-line Journal for
Teacher Research**

Emerging as Teachers, as Researchers, and as the “Other”: A Cooperative Inquiry

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Abstract

This article details the second cycle of cooperative inquiry undertaken by emerging educators who self-identify as “other” because of gender, language, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation. The current cycle focuses on the impact participation in cooperative inquiry had on researchers’ teaching practices. Data sources include transcripts of group discussions and reflective writing completed six months, eighteen months, and two years after the completion of the first cycle of cooperative inquiry. Findings suggest that as a result of engagement in cooperative inquiry, the teacher/researchers established practices to decrease isolation, build unity, and understand students’ backgrounds. Teacher/researchers viewed themselves as advocates for diversity within the classroom, took a collaborative approach to teaching, and came to see research as an essential element of effective teaching.

The value of practitioner research is indisputable. Teacher research serves as an important tool for reflective practice and professional development (Schön, 1995). Teachers who research their own practices become more effective teachers and gain professional efficacy (Vetter, 2012). The benefits of research conducted by in-service teachers are so great that learning to research has become increasingly common in graduate teacher education programs and professional development, yet teaching research practices in undergraduate teacher preparation is far less common (Mencke, 2013).

This article details a cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996) initiated when four of the five

authors were undergraduate pre-service teachers and the fifth was a novice teacher educator. Our work together spanned various transitions across professional roles and strengthened our practices as teachers and researchers. The group comprised two immigrants from Latin America, a US born Latina, a White male, and a lesbian. Having come together from various marginalized perspectives, we named our project “The ‘Other’ Side of Us.” The goal of our first cycle of cooperative inquiry was to better understand our experiences as self-identified minorities in a teacher preparation program; we had united to discuss our “Otherness.”

The goal of our second cycle was to learn how our roles as researchers in a cooperative inquiry shaped our identities and our teaching practices. The following questions guided the second cycle of cooperative inquiry: How has our engagement in cooperative inquiry shaped our understanding of ourselves as the “Other”? How has our engagement in cooperative inquiry impacted our interactions with those whom we consider the “Other”? How has our engagement in cooperative inquiry impacted our professional practices?

Perspectives on “Otherness”

Said (1978) used the term “Other” to describe those who are marginalized and positioned as inferior in dominant cultures. Such marginalization occurs as institutions and institutional discourses prioritize some ways of being over others, naming some ways of being as normal/natural and others as deviant (Foucault, 1978). Our divergence from the majority of individuals within teacher preparation programs, White, middle-class women from the suburbs (Morell, 2010), yielded experiences of isolation and alienation (Bower-Phipps, Homa, Albaladejo, Johnson, & Cruz, 2013). It was important for us to understand these experiences as a means of successfully navigating our teacher preparation program and achieving our professional goals, but also as a means of facilitating the entrance of additional women of color and men into the teaching professions.

The striking incongruity between student demographics and teacher demographic in the United States has led to many initiatives to increase the number of male teachers and teachers of color (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, & McDonald, 2005). Despite widespread agreement regarding the importance of male teachers and teachers of color (e.g. Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), teacher preparation typically focuses on White, middle class, female candidates (Morrell, 2010). Our inquiry into our experiences as “Other” in a teacher preparation program was a means for us to make teacher preparation more relevant for us personally and to increase teacher educators’ knowledge base around recruiting and supporting male teacher candidates and teacher candidates of color in their paths to becoming teachers.

Learning about our experiences as “Other” in a teacher preparation program was only the beginning of our development as teachers and as researchers. Upon reporting the findings from our first cycle of cooperative inquiry, we unanimously agreed that we had far more to learn about ourselves as teachers and as researchers and began a second cycle of inquiry. Now, nearly three years after starting the conversation about our “Otherness,” two of us are full-time teachers in bilingual classrooms, two are teachers in elementary classrooms, and the other is an associate professor. All of us self-identify as researchers, as teachers, as the “Other,” and as advocates for diversity within our classrooms and broader educational contexts.

Research on Teacher Inquiry

As we have experienced first hand, engaging in research has the potential to impact teachers' practices in powerful ways. Some argue that collaborative research groups promote teachers' growth more effectively than traditional professional development, directly informing classroom practice and supporting teacher learning (e.g. Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009; Roberts, Crawford, & Hickmann, 2010). Teacher inquiry groups operating within and across contexts provide important spaces for teacher reflection and connect teachers with current literature in the field (Sense, 2007). Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) promote the notion of "practitioner researcher" not only as a means of teacher professional development, but also as a way for teachers to come to understand inequities inherent within educational systems. Similarly, Cochran-Smith and Deemers (2010) suggest that teacher inquiry "is a powerful way for teachers and teacher educators to understand the complexities of teaching and learning, construct rich learning opportunities for all students, interrogate their own assumptions, and work for social justice" (p. 14).

Developing the habits of mind of a researcher can (but rarely does) begin in teacher preparation (Mencke, 2013). Assuming the role of researcher during fieldwork enhances pre-service teachers' learning (McIntyre, 2003). Taking a research stance during pre-service teaching experiences can have a lasting impact on teachers' practices.

This will develop a reflective habit of mind that is crucial for teachers to be effective in their classrooms and adaptive to the changing needs of their students, and allow for a greater degree of professional self-efficacy and satisfaction on the part of the teachers themselves. (Barbre & Buckner, 2013, p. 1)

While beneficial, the focus of teaching research in teacher education programs tends to be on professional development (e.g. Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters, 2001; McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, & Roz, 2007; Olafson, Schraw, Vander Veldt, & Ponder, 2011), but lacks modeling these research methods for teachers' future use (Mencke, 2013). As seen in the above quote from Barbre and Buckner, the emphasis is on learning to teach, not learning to research. We believe that learning to teach and learning to research can happen simultaneously and that the roles of teacher and researcher can build upon and strengthen one another.

Our cooperative inquiry continues in the tradition of teacher research that promotes social justice, in particular through our focus on "Otherness," yet our research as teachers departs from previous literature in that our research began when four of us were pre-service teachers and the fifth was an emerging teacher educator. Our inquiry explores the impact of engaging in research on teachers' practice when learning to research coincides with learning to teach (and learning to teach teachers). Our engagement in research as a form of professional development and support in the early years of our career was particularly meaningful given our identities as the "Other." Attrition rates for minority teachers are higher than those for White teachers, suggesting that teachers who identify as "Other" would benefit from additional support and mentoring (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). In viewing teacher research as effective professional development, we value cooperative inquiry as a means to provide support to teachers from populations with traditionally high levels of attrition.

Our Cooperative Inquiry

Our identity as the “Other” informed the selection of cooperative inquiry as our methodology. Cooperative inquiry allows individuals to simultaneously enact the roles of participant and researcher as they investigate their lived experiences (Heron, 1996). As individuals who have been marginalized in schools and in teacher preparation programs, it was important for us to select a methodology that would allow all of us to be equal partners in the research project (Heron, 1996) and enable us to “create social and individual change” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 181). Cooperative inquiry consists of cycles of action and reflection with four distinct stages: (1) initial reflection, including agreeing upon a purpose for the inquiry and establishing research questions; (2) initial action, consisting of engaging in the experience to be studied; (3) continued action with greater awareness; (4) second reflection, focused on reflection upon the previous stages and decision to engage in another cycle of cooperative inquiry or to discontinue the research (Heron, 1992, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). Engaging in these stages of cooperative inquiry allowed for living experiences with greater awareness, a means of developing and refining our practices as teachers.

Summary of Cycle One

As our findings from the first cycle of cooperative inquiry impacted the second cycle, we included them here to provide context [See Bower-Phipps et al. (2013) for more detailed information]. The purpose of our initial cycle of cooperative inquiry was to learn more about our experiences as the “Other” in a teacher preparation program. Our findings were that: we had experienced being labeled as “Other” and positioned as outsiders within the field of education by teacher educators, classmates, and cooperating teachers; we experienced distinct challenges because of our “Otherness,” including isolation, lack of background knowledge, and low expectations of teachers in the field; we felt that we brought important and unique perspectives to our students; and our professional goals focused on becoming educators who meet the needs of those who self-identify as “Other.”

Timeline

Our first cycle of cooperative inquiry occurred during the 2010-2011 academic year. The second cycle has lasted from Spring 2011 through Spring 2013. Based on our perceptions that we had benefited personally and professionally from our involvement in *The “Other” Side of Us*, we unanimously decided to engage in an additional cycle of cooperative inquiry. During this second cycle of cooperative inquiry, we met for data gathering and analysis; completed reflective writing; engaged in our roles within schools and universities; and reported findings of our first cooperative inquiry cycle at national conferences and in peer-reviewed publications, a process that required an additional level of reflection.

Researchers

As novice teachers (and teacher educator), our roles have shifted since beginning this research, as outlined in Table 1. It is important to note that any designation of “student” refers to an undergraduate student completing a teacher preparation program. While Laura, as a professor, was in a relative position of power, all five of us were simultaneously teacher, learner, and researcher. Laura took the lead on all methodological matters, but Thomas, Maria, Cristina, and Arlette were involved in all decisions regarding the research. We communicated frequently throughout the process and view ourselves as equal partners in this research.

Table 1: Shifting Role of Researchers

Researcher	Thomas	Maria	Cristina	Arlette	Laura
Fall 2010	Student	Student	Student	Student	Asst. Professor
Spring 2011	Student Teacher	Student Teacher	Student	Student	Asst. Professor
Fall 2011	Substitute Teacher	Classroom Teacher	Student Teacher	Student	Asst. Professor
Spring 2012	Substitute Teacher & Tutor	Classroom Teacher	Substitute Teacher	Student Teacher	Asst. Professor
Fall 2012	Math Tutor	Classroom Teacher	Teaching Intern	Classroom Teacher	Asst. Professor
Spring 2013	Math Tutor	Classroom Teacher	Teaching Intern	Classroom Teacher	Assoc. Professor
Fall 2014	Classroom Teacher	Classroom Teacher	Classroom Teacher	Classroom Teacher	Assoc. Professor

In addition to our professional identities, our identities as “Other” were important to our research. Thomas describes himself as a White, heterosexual, Catholic male. Maria talks about herself as a native Spanish-speaking woman who immigrated to the US from the Dominican Republic as an adult and grew up in a working class family. Cristina reported that she was the only Latina in a school and neighborhood of African Americans; her parents moved to the US from Puerto Rico. Arlette said that she is a Brazilian woman who realized her dream of US citizenship recently after a brief experience as an illegal immigrant. Laura identifies as a White, married lesbian who is originally from a rural community. Table 2 provides additional information about each researcher.

Table 2: Researchers’ Identities

Researcher	Thomas	Maria	Cristina	Arlette	Laura
Race/Ethnicity	white	Latina	Latina	Latina	white
Native Language	English	Spanish	English	Portuguese	English
Country of Birth	USA	Dominican Republic	USA	Brazil	USA
Sexual Orientation	heterosexual	heterosexual	heterosexual	heterosexual	lesbian
Gender	male	female	female	female	female
Religion	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	Protestant

Data

Data for the second cycle of cooperative inquiry included reflective writing and transcripts of group discussions. The first transcript was from a discussion six months after completion of the initial cycle of cooperative inquiry. Each researcher responded to the question, "How has participating in this research impacted you?" Eighteen months after completion of the first cycle of cooperative inquiry, researchers engaged in reflective writing to address the impact the cooperative inquiry on their professional practices. The final data source was a transcript of a discussion two years after initial cycle of cooperative inquiry. The question posed was, "How has participating in this cooperative inquiry group impacted you personally and professionally?"

Data were analyzed in chronological order according to research question following Merriam's (1998) approach to qualitative analysis. Each researcher coded the data independently according to three pre-established categories: identifying statements of understanding self as "Other," interactions with those considered "Other," and professional practice. We met to compare coded data. When there was a discrepancy, we discussed the data point until a consensus was reached. We then looked, as a group, at data within each category to determine subcategories. Laura revisited data within each category to code for the resulting subcategories. She member-checked this level of analysis with the group.

Findings

We present our findings in order of our research questions, beginning with how engagement in cooperative inquiry has shaped our understanding of self as "Other" and continuing to how engagement in cooperative inquiry influenced our interactions with the "Other" to provide context for our perceptions of how engagement in cooperative inquiry impacted our professional practices.

Understanding of Self as "Other" through Cooperative Inquiry

We all came to this research with a sense of ourselves as "Other" or outsider within teacher preparation, within schools, and within universities. Our understanding of ourselves as "Other" has been refined through our research in that we have an expanded notion of "Otherness," we view ourselves as advocates for "Otherness" and diversity, and we have an increased level of comfort in talking about and sharing our individual forms of "Otherness." In terms of our views of "Otherness," we have moved beyond simple notions of "Other" or diversity as only race-related, as expressed by Maria, "Before, I was thinking that maybe diversity was just based on the color of your skin, obvious things. But it's more than that. Diversity is everywhere. It could be religion. It could be socio-economic class. It could be anything." Cristina also described a revised view of diversity:

We've become aware that everyone has a story, and no one person is the same. Family structures, gender, life experiences, sexual identities, socio-economic status, where a person lives, what they eat, and what they believe in are all examples of what makes us all different.

For Laura, this expanded view of "Otherness" came through equating "Otherness" with isolation:

What really struck me, and maybe changed me, through this research is all the ways that people can feel isolated. I don't think that I would have ever necessarily described my

experience as one of isolation. But that's completely what it is. Whether it's an age thing or a sexual orientation thing or a race thing, [being the "Other"] was feeling isolated.

Through our expanded understandings of "Otherness," we have come to view ourselves as advocates for "Otherness" and diversity. Cristina reflected, "Arlette said she feels like she's an advocate. That's how I feel. Everywhere I go, if I see an opportunity for me to talk about diversity, I do. I tie everything back to what I've learned here." Maria described this advocacy as "expanding," saying, "We're trying to expand, expand, expand. It's just that we have become full of knowledge and we just want to expand that and give that to others." Laura shared that advocacy sometimes meant overtly self-identifying as "Other":

As someone who identifies as the 'Other,' [our cooperative inquiry] has made me feel like I need to make more sure that people know that I'm the 'Other,' so that they have that personal connection. And when gay marriage comes up, they'll think, 'I like her, and my life hasn't been impacted because she's been allowed to get married.' There's a little bit of an idea of being an activist and self-identifying.

In addition to feeling the need to self-identify as "Other" as a form of advocacy, we also feel more comfortable in talking about our particular forms of "Otherness." Laura shared that the cooperative inquiry group has made her "much quicker to come out to my students now. This group has challenged me to embrace my 'Otherness,' and also maybe trusting students a little bit more and the response that they will have [to me coming out]." Arlette described herself as "feeling more comfortable to talk about diversity. And since we've been talking for so long, we understand more and at a different level now thinking, because we've been working on it for so long."

The Impact of Cooperative Inquiry on our Interactions with the "Other"

Our research has also impacted the way we interact with those whom we view as "other." We feel a greater connection to one another within the group and we have an increased interest in listening to the stories of the "others" in our lives. Perhaps as a result of this interest in others' stories, we have expressed the desire to fight stereotypes on behalf of those who identify as "other." The notion of listening to one another's stories was prevalent within our discussions. Cristina explained, "Every person has their own story. And each one is so amazing. It's really eye opening." We also talked about listening to the stories of family, friends, colleagues, and students. Cristina listed her interest in people's stories as one of the benefits of participating in our cooperative inquiry, "One of those gains is a greater appreciation of differences. One of the best parts of working together in this cooperative inquiry group is that we all had the chance to hear each other's stories."

Hearing each other's stories led to a feeling of connection as a group of researchers and educators. Arlette said, "I believe we are more connected, beyond our differences. Having this experience with you guys has been amazing because I didn't have any friends at school. It's really nice to see the progress and to grow with everybody else." Laura also talked about this growth. She said that "to watch you go from my students to you being my colleagues and my peers has been a really neat process. It's been really exciting." Thomas, who described himself as not getting "to see any other viewpoint. Even making friends, a good majority of them are white," shared at our final meeting that the cooperative inquiry had increased his closeness with the group, but it had not changed his stereotypes about people groups.

[Our research] hasn't changed me that much with my stereotypes, but then I looked at you guys. There's a personal connection. If one of you accidentally cuts me off or anything, I wouldn't throw out anything negative. Because there's a connection between all of us. If you have a connection with someone, you're going to say, "Oh, well, you're the exception."

Despite the minimal impact our cooperative inquiry had on Thomas's personal stereotypes, all of us (even Thomas) expressed a desire to fight stereotypes on behalf of those who are the "other." Thomas explained, "Generally in my life, there are so many stereotypes put onto so many cultures. And not saying I believed all of them, but there were some that I grew up with. After all of our research, I've been looking at ways to accept different cultures or not holding that one stereotype." While the previous quote suggests that Thomas's stereotypes had not changed entirely, he became more aware of them and expressed some interest in disrupting them. He explained the distinction between stereotypes in his personal and his professional lives:

Personally, I've been growing up with myself for over 20 years, and I have my own set beliefs. Two years of doing this isn't really going to change the 20 years of how I've been raised and how I grew up and my own ideas. I still have the same stereotypes that I still carry. I can't change that. In the classroom, I can. I can second-guess myself, especially think about what I'm going to say. I came right out of school, so all of the ideas we talked about, I've been immediately able to put into anything I do in the classroom.

No other group members made these distinctions, suggesting that they wanted to fight stereotypes in their personal and their professional lives as a result of our work. Cristina said, "I feel like I've become less biased. I don't jump to conclusions. Or I don't make assumptions. I mean, I'm not perfect. I just think that I'm more cautious about what I think and what I say and my environment."

Impact of Cooperative Inquiry on our Professional Practices

While our understanding of ourselves as "other" and our interactions with the "other" do influence our professional practices, there were many explicit ways our participation in cooperative inquiry related to "otherness" influenced our professional practices. Our findings from our first cycle of cooperative inquiry led to specific classroom strategies, including those intended to decrease isolation and build unity, teaching about diversity and culture, attending to our students' backgrounds and their many forms of "otherness," and working to maintain high expectations for all students. We talked about a collaborative approach to teaching, by drawing other teachers, community members, and families into our classrooms. We expressed a commitment to learning about our practice, and we have come to view activism as an essential element of teaching.

In terms of specific classroom practices, we focused most especially on decreasing isolation. Laura shared the ways participation in the first cycle of CI had impacted her practices:

I am trying to be so much more conscious when I'm teaching of how I isolate people. I think of language that I'm using, like Thomas has talked about the teacher and always saying, "She" in referring to a teacher or "ladies and *gentleman*." There's no reason to say that. And there's no reason to isolate people.

Several of us talked about intentional grouping to foster students' working together, assigning groups rather than asking students to choose to reduce isolation and, as Arlette explained,

“encourage interaction between all learners.”

One of the reasons we focused on interactions between students was our desire to teach about culture and diversity. Arlette explained that she aimed for “dynamic and open ended conversation to encourage unity. To foster cultural awareness through learners’ diverse stories, the student-centered conversation should continue with guided instruction and teachable moments. Sharing their voices, students learn and appreciate each other’s culture, differences, experiences.” Maria talked about her strategies for teaching culture and diversity:

I’m going to have students work with their parents to come up with an artifact from their countries or something that represents their own culture. They can come into the classroom and explain, so they can feel proud of where they are coming from. Because sometimes we feel like diversity comes with a stigma, and it pushes you back a little. I’m trying to see how I can bring everybody together.

In addition to making students aware of one another’s forms of “Otherness,” we found it important to develop our own awareness of our students’ “Otherness.” Cristina connected her awareness to our inquiry, “In the classroom, I’m much more observant of my surroundings. Everything that happens, I tie it into the study. I just feel more open about things.” Part of our awareness of students’ “Otherness” included not making assumptions about students based on their differences. Arlette described this as, “Not making assumptions. To listen to the students and what they have to say, and to be open-minded, and appreciate our differences instead of judging and making assumptions.” Thomas talked about this within his professional practices:

Especially substituting, I don’t think, “Oh, they’re not paying attention because stereotypically they [people from this racial group] don’t pay attention.” I’ve been like, “Okay, there has to be something else more to it.” I’ve been avoiding putting different groups into that one stereotype that I had previously.

As we became more aware of students’ “Otherness,” we strove to maintain high expectations for all students. Arlette wrote that her classroom goals were to “Ensure high expectations of all students regardless of culture, abilities, gender, sexual orientation, or social economic status. To set a fun academic tone, monitor students’ progress, give meaningful and specific feedback, ensure a successful academic experience and lifelong memories.” Maria connected her high expectations for students to her participation in our cooperative inquiry, “Even us who come from a different background, I guess we do have some low expectations when it comes to diversity. That [immigrants] are not the same level as the standard students are in this country. And in that case, the research has changed my mind.”

In addition to our findings shaping our classroom practices, the experience of engaging in cooperative inquiry also shaped our professional practices and beliefs. We became committed to a collaborative approach to teaching, feeling that this approach stemmed from our cooperative work as researchers. We came to view other teachers, families, and the surrounding community as collaborators in our teaching. Thomas explained the role of our cooperative inquiry in making him more collaborative:

I came out of college, and I had my own idea of teaching. And I’ve realized, especially this past year that it’s good to get the opinions of other people, especially within the school. So that’s one way this research group has helped.

Arlette talked about reaching out to the community to get them involved in her classroom, explaining, “There’s a strong connection to what we’re talking about in this group to reaching out to the community as a giant group of people.” Maria discussed bringing families into her classroom:

I think parents, especially in the area where I work, they do not get involved. It’s cultural. They come from different countries. Parents just leave it to the teachers and the schools to take care of education. Here it’s a different process. Parents don’t know how to come in and get involved. So for me, it’s a goal that I already have set for next year.

As part of collaborating with families, teachers, and communities; teaching about culture and diversity; maintaining an awareness of students’ otherness; and working to decrease students’ isolation, we have also come to view advocacy as a part of teaching. Maria shared, “I’m trying to bring everybody together. I feel like I want to become an advocate in a sense just to make sure people know that diversity needs to be welcomed in the classroom, because we are not all the same.” Cristina echoed this sentiment:

“Advocate,” I think that’s a really good term. Because that’s how I feel. Being a part of this group, I feel like it will make me a better teacher. And I’m sure that I’ll apply [the research] the way they have. Where I’m currently interning, I tend to share that information [about “Otherness”] especially with other teachers in the school.

Our experiences presenting our first cycle of cooperative inquiry at national conferences empowered us to speak up and to make change in our schools and broader educational communities, as Arlette said, “To make noise!”

Finally, owing to our participation in cooperative inquiry, we re-affirmed our commitment of becoming students of teaching (Dewey, 1904/1965). We appreciated the opportunity CI provided to establish a regular time and space for reflection on our teaching and for the opportunity to discuss the broader field of education. Cristina explained,

Because we had a set time and a set goal, we were forced to think about this information and what we were going to do with all of it. It forced us to stop to think and reflect more so than if you were to do it on your own. There is no doubt in my mind that I have become not only a better person but a better educator through the cooperative inquiry process, and I can tell you the same goes for my colleagues and my friends.

Owing to beginning this work in what was, for most of us, the pre-service stage of our careers, we came to see teacher research as an essential part of teaching. Thomas explained, “Professionally, when we started this, I wasn’t even out of college yet. I’ve been able to say, ‘Okay, this is what I’m learning in the group. This is helping [my understanding of teaching].’ Now I apply what I’ve learned.”

Further Reflections on Cooperative Inquiry

This cooperative inquiry impacted our professional and, to a lesser extent, our personal practices. Based on both the findings from our first cycle of cooperative inquiry and our participation in a cooperative inquiry, we have become different teachers, different individuals. We have a deeper understanding of ourselves as the “other.” We seek to understand and engage those whom we consider the “other,” particularly students in our classes. As a result of our cooperative inquiry, we strive to be advocates who decrease isolation and promote

understanding. We now view ourselves as better teachers and as researchers.

It seems that our simultaneous learning to be teachers and learning to research meant that we forged our professional identities as teacher/researchers. Everything we learned in our cooperative inquiry group was applied directly to our teaching practices, and for us, research has become an integral part of teaching. (In the case of Laura, teaching teachers has come to mean not only teaching them to teach, but also teaching them to research.) Engaging in a cooperative inquiry as pre-service and novice teachers (and a novice teacher educator) shaped our beliefs and our practices.

Our Message to Educators

Our participation in cooperative inquiry had positive implications for our teaching practices, our understanding of ourselves, and our interactions with others. The findings from our cooperative inquiry also have implications for teachers, teacher educators, and teacher leaders and administrators. We encourage teachers to seek out colleagues to join them in cooperative inquiry. Cycles of action (teaching) and reflection on that action are a wonderful way to improve teaching practices, to be supported by colleagues, and to engage in a professional community. We suggest that cooperative inquiry groups may be especially meaningful for teachers who, like us, feel isolated and (at times) marginalized. We have found support, encouragement, and mentoring during our induction years through our cooperative inquiry. We expect that other self-identified minority teachers could do the same.

Along the same lines, we encourage teacher leaders and administrators to consider cooperative inquiry groups as a valuable means of professional development and teacher induction. We can imagine cooperative inquiry groups either as a voluntary form of professional development or as an approach to mandated professional development or teacher induction. Teaching teachers to research during their induction years may engender a career-long habit of practitioner research.

Similarly, we encourage teacher educators to consider cooperative inquiry cycles in coursework, particularly seminars. If we want teachers to be researchers, such habits should begin during teacher preparation. As stated by McIntyre, a research orientation to fieldwork can lead to pre-service teachers who have “more confidence in themselves as educators who have the ability to be proactive in their positions as teachers and who have the tools, if they wish to use them, to reconstruct a world rich in possibilities for all their students” (2003, p. 38). We suggest that cooperative inquiry provides an accessible means to learn to research and to teach in tandem.

Having been shaped by our experiences with cooperative inquiry, it is our hope that pre-service and in-service teachers have the opportunity to grow as teachers, as researchers, and as advocates through participation in their own cooperative inquiry groups. As Maria reflected two years after completing our first cycle of cooperative inquiry, “[This research] has made us more knowledgeable about what we’re doing. We’re not blinded anymore. We have become full of knowledge, and we want to give that to others.”

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