

National mandates and statewide enactments: Inquiry in/to large-scale reform

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ABSTRACT: Since the inauguration of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) in the United States, with a billion-dollar budget to induce educational reform, American schools have been under the microscope for meeting accountability standards for students. The performance pressures have intensified as the consequences for not achieving academic benchmarks have escalated. Schools have been mandated to report on student performance as measured by standardized tests and other instruments using scientifically based research. Across the nation, state departments of education, supported by federal funding, work diligently with schools to implement instruction and assessment practices required by NCLB. In this article we will examine one state's response to NCLB. Specifically, we will analyze the impact of an action research project on the teaching and learning of reading teachers at sixty schools involved in the Indiana Reading First program. Reading First, the reading education component of NCLB, provides funding for professional development in schools that have not successfully achieved their designated benchmarks in reading. We present a brief synopsis of the controversies surrounding Reading First, debates necessary for understanding the politics of large-scale reform initiatives as they materialize on local and national playing fields. Next, we describe the rationale, goals, and phases of the action research project. We then look across the teachers' action research projects to consider their impact. Next, we examine one teacher's project in more depth. In the last section of the paper, we reflect more critically on the successes and shortcomings of the action research projects as well as the struggles of working with/in a large-scale systemic reform initiative.

KEYWORDS: Reading First, Professional development, teacher research, university-school partnerships, No Child Left Behind, In-service reading teachers, K-3 reading teachers

Since the inauguration of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), with a billion-dollar budget to induce educational reform, schools have been under the microscope for meeting accountability standards for students. The performance pressures have intensified as the consequences for not achieving academic benchmarks have escalated. Schools have been mandated to report on student performance as measured by standardised tests and other instruments using scientifically-based research, and across the nation state departments of education, supported by federal funding, work diligently with schools to implement instruction and assessment practices required by NCLB. Reading First, the reading education component of NCLB, provides funding for professional development in schools that have not successfully achieved their designated benchmarks in reading. At the classroom level, for instance, Reading First requires 90 minutes of sustained reading instruction daily, including instruction and assessment techniques that reflect

Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR) and cover five building blocks of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension).

We are university faculty members and graduate students who have engaged in collaboration with the Indiana Department of Education to implement a large-scale professional development program in reading mandated by Reading First districts with a high number of schools that had not made annual yearly progress reaching the benchmarks in reading education, K-3.

This collaboration, herein referred to as the Indiana Reading Academy Project (IRAP), is now in its fourth year. The university offers graduate courses that reflect Reading First principles, based, in part, on a series of online modules developed by a commercial subcontractor; the state department of education pays tuition for participants. Participants pursuing graduate credit for professional development were also required to complete an action research project. In this article we will analyse the impact of the action research project on the Reading First program involving over 60 schools, the state department of education, and multiple offices at two universities – all of whom must not only coordinate, but also collaborate on the vision, goals, and implementation of the project. In order to situate our project against the backdrop of Reading First, we present a brief synopsis of the controversies surrounding Reading First, debates necessary for understanding the politics of large-scale reform initiatives as they materialise on local and national playing fields. Next, we describe the rationale, goals, and phases of the action research project. We then look across the teachers' action research projects to consider their impact. Next, we examine one teacher's project in more depth. In the last section of the paper, we reflect more critically on the successes and shortcomings of the action research projects as well as the struggles of working with/in a large-scale systemic reform initiative.

NCLB AND READING FIRST UNDER FIRE

While many states, including Indiana, indicate that schools are making progress toward achieving benchmarks in reading, thus demonstrating the positive impact of NCLB on student achievement – these strides have not been without a cost. Within the universe of reading teachers, researchers, and policy makers, the Reading First program is controversial, to say the least. In a recent Google Scholar search we conducted using the key words, *Reading First*, 5,240 books and articles were identified (October, 2007), suggesting its impact on academic conversations. Part of the controversy issues from the sources of data used to formulate policy in Reading First. The National Reading Panel (NRP) conducted a literature review of reading research, but the study relied primarily upon experimental research designs, ignoring the findings of ethnographic and qualitative research. In its report, the NRP proposed policy based upon its literature review (National Reading Panel, 2000), and developed recommendations that manifested themselves as the mandated Reading First guidelines. Local educational agencies seeking funding would need to implement reading programs and professional development based upon SBRR as outlined in the NRP report and student standardised tests (that is, DIBELS, Terra Nova) so that student performance scores could be compared across states.

Critics of NCLB, Reading First, SBRR, and the NRP report have vigorously and vehemently challenged its research base and instructional priorities (for example, Allington, 2002; Coles, 2000; Garan, 2000; Gee, 2000; Goodman, 2006; Stevens, 2003). Reading First has been described as “the most prescriptive federal grant program in education” (Manzo, 2007, p.1). Many cite the “official, singular, and narrow view of the reading process”, and the flawed premise that standardised tests are appropriate tools for building curricula and for assessing children’s reading abilities (Altwerger et al., 2004, p. 119). One thematic issue of *Equity and Excellence in Education* (Bracey, 2005) has been devoted to a critique of NCLB focusing on issues of equity and justice, entitled “Social Justice Implications of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001”. *The American Educational Research Journal* of September, 2007, features a special volume on NCLB (Hollingsworth et al., 2007). NCLB has been indicted for race and class discrimination because it proffers programs that are oblivious to culturally sensitive pedagogy, ignoring issues of difference that impact non-mainstream students – that is, underrepresented groups, special needs, low income, and English Language Learners (ELL) – because they offer a “one size fits all” approach (Altwerger et al., 2004, p. 120; Guisbond and Neill, 2004; Hollingsworth et al., 2007). Ironically, Reading First policy mandates the reporting of test scores by race, class, special needs and ELL so that schools can identify achievement gaps made visible in the standardised test results (Cawthorn, 2007).

Beyond that, the program has been the object of scrutiny by the inspector general’s office as charges of conflicts of interest have been directed at the Reading First consultants who have direct ties to the commercial programs that embody Reading First principles and states that allegedly had districts not in compliance with Reading First mandates (Brownstein & Hicks, 2006; Kitto & Sweeney, 2006). The inspector general’s office of the U.S. Department of Education issued a report asserting that the strict requirements of Reading First were crafted by a group of federal employees who seemed to validate one approach at the expense of others (Manzo, 2007). Keenly aware of the controversies surrounding Reading First, we nonetheless plunged into this partnership, determined to make a difference, hoping to avoid the controversies that had beleaguered other states.

INQUIRY IN THE PROJECT, INQUIRY AS THE PROJECT

In a concerted effort to both challenge and engage the participants, we developed an inquiry project as an additional component of our program. By definition, teacher inquiry seemed to be exactly what the project needed. According to Calhoun (2002), action research (which we use synonymously here with “teacher inquiry”) can be described as “continual disciplined inquiry conducted to inform and improve our practice as educators... [It] asks educators to study their practice and its context, explore the research base for ideas, compare what they find to their current practice, participate in training to support needed changes, and study the effects on themselves and their students and colleagues” (p. 18).

As we designed the inquiry project, we articulated short-term and long-term goals. One of our hopes was that, over time, teachers would adopt what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 288) have defined as an “inquiry stance” into their practice. From their perspective, inquiry involves questioning the larger political and social contexts of

schooling while improving teaching. The fundamental idea behind teacher inquiry is that practitioners can generate knowledge about teaching, learning, and students from the location of the classroom; knowledge does not necessarily have to be manufactured in universities and transmitted to teachers in a top-down manner. The idea of inquiry as “stance” moves beyond the more narrow conception of an inquiry project, where teachers investigate a discrete aspect of their practice within a bounded time frame. Rather, the notion of stance suggests an ongoing process of reflection, questioning, and problem solving as well as problem posing, ideally done in professional communities. This work has been defined as “risky business” (Lytle, 1993, p. 20) because teachers make themselves vulnerable by opening up their classrooms and their teaching dilemmas to public scrutiny. It is also risky because it suggests that part of high-quality professional development entails providing a space where teachers can understand their work within the larger socio-political contexts of schooling. Often, the privileging of teacher perspective and knowledge leads to a critique of prevailing educational ideologies and policies. Teachers critical of practices valued at one’s school can experience adverse consequences that reinforce the notion of risky business.

We embraced Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s conceptualisation of inquiry as the foundation of our long-term goals. We hoped that, over time and with the state department of education, we could cultivate a climate of change, supporting teachers in the creation of an inquiry community. We believed teachers could come to see themselves as powerful intellectuals and socially responsible citizens; we wanted them to see themselves as producers, rather than simply consumers of educational research. If teachers completed their inquiry projects, we reasoned, they would see the power and possibilities that inquiry unleashes and thus would make inquiry an ongoing part of their practice. The hope was that in time we could cultivate an inquiry community with the participants, instructors, and the department of education staff because we ourselves were excited about the possibilities of the formation of such a community.

At the same time that we generated our halcyon vision of a statewide inquiry community, we acknowledged the challenges before us. Specifically, some researchers argue that educational reforms require time and multi-pronged approaches. They also caution against relying on a single measure to reflect student and school performance, as it negates deep, substantial change (Guisbond & Neill, 2004), and we had our sights set on deep, substantial change. Other researchers (Dutro et al., 2002; Fullan, 1996) argue that change entails systemic reform: 1) Cultivating a network of support for teachers, 2) Developing new norms and priorities that change the culture of the school, and 3) Restructuring, or creating an infrastructure and new roles that reflect and support the changes in values and norms. Could IRAP help to facilitate such structural changes within and across the state as we implemented a Reading First program? If so, how? In what ways would our Reading First obligations alternately enable and constrain such change? We focused upon the following three short-term goals in conceptualising the inquiry project as an instrument that could promote substantive change in the classroom and beyond:

Goal #1: Invite and enable teachers to choose the direction and goals of their own professional development. The modules used in our project were chosen for participants; and according to Hargreaves (2004), teachers tend to respond

negatively to externally imposed initiatives and often find the implementation of them to be emotionally exhausting. However, teachers are much more open to change when they have some measure of choice and control in the change process; teachers consider the results of such changes to be more positive for both themselves and their students. So, although teachers who wanted university credit for the Reading First professional development experience would be required to complete the inquiry project, yet another externally imposed decision made for them, we hoped that they saw a measure of autonomy in that the focus and direction of those projects were completely up to them.

Goal #2: Encourage teachers' abilities to critically reflect on their own beliefs and practices, exploring the impact of local contexts on participants' practices. Contextualising analysis and reflection in a project designed by the teachers and in response to their own questions and needs seemed to be a logical choice for teachers seeking graduate credit, for we know that professional learning is significantly influenced by “relationships between the dispositions teachers hold, their daily professional life, district and state standards, and the specific events that they experience” (Roe, 2004, p. 54). Professional development initiatives need to be site-sensitive and responsive to the needs and experiences of teachers, who, as professionals, are responding to urgent school, district, and community issues. While we hoped to support teachers in thinking about their situated practices, we wanted the inquiry project to do more: We hoped that information gleaned from the inquiry project could serve as leverage for participants who were campaigning for change.

Goal #3: Reinforce the view that teachers can trust that they do possess the requisite knowledge, skills, and fortitude to produce accurate analyses of children's literacy skills. We invoked inquiry as a tool for teachers to use when exploring classroom issues, when contemplating a variety of approaches and perspectives in making decisions, and “for producing the knowledge and insights that move their profession forward” (Sagor, 2000, p. 31).

In an effort to pursue our short- and long-term goals, we developed our inquiry project by adapting the steps for engaging in action research developed by Sagor (2000):

Phase 1: Questioning and wondering: During this phase, teachers identify possible inquiry questions for their projects. In an effort to support the first goal of the project (to give teachers more ownership of their own professional development), teachers are encouraged to consider questions that are personally interesting and relevant, and that would allow them to try new instructional strategies or to adapt strategies they are already using. In addition to identifying possible questions, teachers are asked to reflect on the relevance and importance of each question in their own contexts. These reflections are important in supporting teachers with the second goal of the project – encouraging them to critically reflect on their own practices and ways in which their local contexts influence those practices.

Phase 2: Reading and learning: During this phase, teachers review professional literature on one or more of their questions. This phase supports teachers in thinking about the complexities of their questions. It also tends to help teachers find ways to focus and/or revise their questions if necessary.

Phase 3: Planning for looking and listening: Once teachers have developed questions for their projects, they develop plans for data collection. Teachers are supported in thinking about ways to collect qualitative data, although teachers may plan to use some numerical data to help them explore their inquiry questions. Teachers develop multiple ways to observe and to listen to their students. Teachers are encouraged to rely on their own professional judgment of students' literacy skills, based on what they see and hear.

Phase 4: Looking and listening: During this phase, teachers carry out their plans developed during Phase 3.

Phase 5: Analysing and interpreting: Teachers consider what the data collected during the previous phase might tell them about literacy instruction and literacy learning. Teachers are encouraged to think about what their observations of and daily interactions with students might suggest about possible instructional modifications.

Phase 6: Developing an action plan: During the final phase of the project, teachers articulate plans for action: the plans highlight changes that teachers will make, supported by inquiry project data.

In laying out the conceptual framework and the processes involved in completing the inquiry project, we have also suggested our short-term and long-term goals for the IRAP partnership and the conditions needed for change.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EXPERIMENTATION AND IMPACT

A look across the inquiry projects

We hoped that the inquiry projects helped create conditions for experimentation as teachers pursued a range of topics with their projects, including readers' theatre, the use and impact of sustained silent reading, spatial learning strategies, repeated readings, blending and segmenting syllable strategies, and graphic organisers that emphasise expository text structure. Being asked to think through possible topics, conduct a literature review, collect and analyse data, and to develop an action plan afforded opportunities for the teachers to rethink instructional and curricular goals. For example, some teachers found that conducting a literature review on their topics confirmed what they knew from experience as it also opened up pedagogical possibilities, such as ways to meaningfully incorporate readers' theatre into their classrooms. However, what seemed to be most generative for the teachers were the data collection and analysis components of the project where they were asked to collect and to consider qualitative measures of student performance in addition to the quantitative indicators required in their curricula. In this sense, teachers used the

qualitative and quantitative indicators in tandem to deepen their understandings about their children's literacy strengths and needs.

Collecting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative data

Teachers *did* value quantitative indicators of student learning. This was evident in their postings in the online discussion forums. For example, three kindergarten teachers discussed the importance of moving students quickly up reading levels, such as helping them jump from level B to D. Similarly, a group of four, first-grade teachers considered the significance of large ORF (Oral Reading Fluency) score increases in a short amount of time. Yet, the inquiry project encouraged teachers to examine these quantitative indicators alongside qualitative forms of data – including interest, enthusiasm and confidence levels of students, their willingness to prepare and practise for class, that is, reading aloud outside of class as well as teachers' narrative summaries describing students' performances during a small group or individual reading activities (that is, a student's intonation when reading).

Some teachers even deemed the qualitative indicators of student learning more significant than the quantitative measures. These teachers described how informal note-taking strategies, which they developed for the "looking and listening" phase of their projects, became their most trusted and useful data source for insights into their children's reading needs. These anecdotal observation notes about individual readers' processes and methods, in the words of one teacher, "provided flexibility that I liked [and] I got into the habit of jotting notes as the student and I worked together. In fact, sometimes the student helped me with my notes by summarising what we did that day as we worked together."

Teacher perceptions of inquiry projects and impact on teacher community

From many of the teachers' perspectives, there were clear benefits to them for participating in the inquiry projects. They identified gains in their literacy pedagogical content knowledge, exemplified in comments like this one from Dana, a second grade teacher:

I have learned more about literacy (not just fluency) in the past six months than I have in the past 10 years. This literacy inquiry has taken my teaching to a new level and I've had the opportunity to get closer to my colleagues, myself and, best of all, my students.

The inquiry projects also provided opportunities for attending more closely to students, as the reflections from Debbie, a veteran first-grade teacher, highlight:

Often in the hustle of everyday teaching, I do not have the chance to actually listen to the amazing things my children have to say to each other and to me. This inquiry project was an excellent reason to do just that, and it was so wonderful to actually see the excitement and improvements the children were able to make in just a short time. It was also extremely beneficial to see what feedback the children offered after the process. Again, this is something that I often do not take the time to do, but I found it very beneficial and will definitely take time to hear what the children think after trying new strategies in the future.

Some teachers even expressed the “rarity” of a professional opportunity like this where they were more in charge of determining what works in their classrooms. For example, a third-grade teacher with a few years of experience remarked:

It’s nice sometimes to actually “try” something on your students to see if it works. Nowadays, many people have ideas of ways to increase motivation, fluency and comprehension. It is very rare for a teacher to be even given the opportunity to even complete the new process thoroughly. The [inquiry] project allowed me to do just that.

Teachers also framed the benefits of the inquiry projects in terms of how it positively shaped the teacher community in the school. Some teachers had opportunities to observe each other’s classrooms as they gathered data about their topics (for example, how to use small groups during instruction, identify effective strategies during literacy block, and how to help students get “the Big Idea” during reading comprehension). These opportunities were particularly significant for novice teachers, as Yoko, a third-grade teacher, and Lindsay, a special education teacher, stated in their inquiry paper:

We [Yoko and Lindsay] were given the opportunity to have Dr. S model strategies to a third-grade general education class. We felt as first-year teachers it would be beneficial to observe experts in reading who could provide us with a good model of what a reading comprehension lesson should look like, sound like and feel like....Watching her model in a classroom exceeded our expectations.

In the next section we step into a classroom where a young teacher, Susan, developed and carried out an inquiry project with her third-grade students. In highlighting Susan’s work and its impact upon her students, we argue that Susan offers an exemplary case study of the power and possibility of inquiry. Her case renders insights gleaned from action research, data that complements what she knows about her students through standardised tests.

CULTIVATING THE PUBLIC VOICES OF A TEACHER AND FOUR “STRUGGLING” STUDENTS

A case study

Susan is a third-grade teacher working in an ethnically and socio-economically diverse, elementary school near a large Midwestern city in the United States. When one of the university-based project team members asked Susan if she would be willing to be videotaped discussing her inquiry project, she agreed.

For her inquiry project, Susan chose to examine how an instructional approach, readers’ theatre, might improve her third-graders’ level of fluency. Susan tried readers’ theatre with some success during a summer school program for struggling students and was eager to implement it in her third-grade classroom during this school year. In readers’ theatre, students read rather than memorise scripts and perform their readings with vocal, facial and bodily expression. A primary goal of this approach is for children to improve their confidence level, motivation and reading proficiency, especially their fluency, through purposeful practice and then performance. Readers’

theatre is especially well suited to developing fluency, defined as “reading orally in such a way that the reader is able to convey and construct meaning with his or her voice” (Rasinski, 2005, p. 9). Readers’ theatre is compatible with methods proven to improve fluency, including repetition, modeling, direct instruction and feedback, support during reading, reading in “multiword chunks or phrases”, and selecting appropriate materials (Rasinski, 1989, p. 691). Readers’ theatre is also relatively easy to implement in classrooms. Costumes, props or stage sets are typically not part of readers’ theatre and there are many resources, including websites that offer grade-level appropriate scripts, that teachers can access and use with their students. Susan, for example, found her readers’ theatre scripts at <http://www.readinga-z.com/>.

Implementation of readers’ theatre in Susan’s classroom

Susan began her inquiry project with a focus on her four lowest performing students as determined by their scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). A foundational piece of the Reading First initiative and, consequently, curricula created to align with Reading First principles, DIBELS is a standardized and individually administered assessment designed to assess the development of phonological awareness, alphabetic understanding, automaticity and fluency regarding early literacy development (DIBELS, n.d.). Susan placed the four students in separate groups, with each group including middle to high performing readers, and then selected scripts she thought would be especially interesting and appropriate for the four students as well as their classmates. After handing out the scripts to the students, Susan invited students to read their group scripts individually. She then read the entire script to each of the four groups of students. This allowed students to learn what each script was about as well as how the voices of different characters in each story might be expressed. The next step in the process was for students to partner read and then echo read their entire script. This enabled students to become familiar with their script as well as consider what individual part each student wanted to select, which was the next step in the process. After selecting individual parts, the students practised their parts on their own and with their groups before performing their readers’ theatre scripts to the whole class.

Due to her inquiry project focus, Susan was especially attuned to the decisions and performances of the four, lowest performing students. She noted that each of these readers selected a challenging part to read and perform. One child chose the lead part in a script entitled, *The emperor’s new clothes*, another selected a part in a script called, *The choppers and the rex*, which entailed a significant amount of expression, while the two other students chose the word-intensive roles of narrator in their scripts. Throughout the process, Susan took notes on the students’ excitement level, which remained “extremely high”. She interviewed the students several times, which included asking them to rate their confidence and excitement levels on a scale of 1-10. Their professed excitement levels never waned and the confidence levels steadily climbed. While high excitement and motivation levels did not surprise Susan, their willingness to practise did. “I was surprised that the [four] children were always having their scripts out. I was surprised that the lowest performing child out of all four of them practised the most out of the entire class.”

Susan was also quite pleased with the performance level of each of these students, describing how “they rose to the occasion” and “didn’t have any problem reading the

words”. While she acknowledged that many of the students in the class had initial difficulties with some of the multisyllabic words (for example, “optimistic”), some additional instruction with chunking and sounding out strategies alleviated these problems. Susan also noted appreciable gains with the four students’ DIBELS scores after the project concluded. The scores of one student in particular moved her, in Susan’s words, from “an at-risk level to more of a middle of the road level” which represented perhaps “the biggest success story.” Susan noted that the students, especially three of the four children, were “reading at a faster rate and more importantly are decoding the words more clearly and quickly and noticing vowel patterns in suffixes and prefixes that we’ve talked about throughout their scripts and they’re locating the words they learned in their scripts in other texts, which is great, and they understand the meaning.”

As another indicator of the project’s success, Susan shared a response from a parent of one of the four students. After Susan told the parent how pleased she was about the child’s level of practising on her readers’ theatre script, the parent echoed this sentiment, informing Susan that her daughter came home and felt good about getting to read a play with “all the good readers” and “didn’t feel like she was being left out”.

Susan’s inquiry project represents just one example of how a teacher created space in her classroom to pose and pursue an investigative question and how she worked in and through phases of practitioner inquiry. While we would argue that the inquiry project work of many of the teachers proved successful, we also recognise the need for more critical reflection about the intended goals and actual outcomes of the inquiry project as an intervention in a large-scale literacy reform initiative. The next section offers a discussion of these issues.

How well did we meet our goals? Ambivalent interventions

The inquiry projects were designed to create a space where the teachers felt empowered to exercise more curricular autonomy, critically reflect on their teaching in local contexts, and analyse their own students’ literacy needs and abilities. How successful and useful was this intervention to both teachers and students? This section explores the critical issues that have arisen in relation to the pursuit of our primary goals.

Goal #1: Invite and enable teachers to choose the direction and goals of their own professional development.

Many teachers capitalised on the opportunity provided by the inquiry project to experience more curricular autonomy. Like Susan in the previous section, they chose an instructional strategy, readers’ theatre, and thoughtfully organised groups heterogeneously, enabling the more “struggling” students to be included and to achieve success. This curricular decision pushed against the dominant practice of ability grouping.

Nevertheless, there were also teachers who were resistant to inquiry. Even though the rationale for the inquiry was to create a space for professional autonomy, some teachers experienced it as just the opposite, as yet another task imposed on the teacher

from above, another potential drain on his or her time and energy. As a result, some projects were indeed completed, but done in a perfunctory manner.

Many coaches also reported that teachers in their respective buildings were resistant because they were intimidated by the processes of data collection and analysis. As Diana, a coach, reported, “Data has unfortunately become a four-letter word in the field of education. It can at times be overwhelming.” The word “overwhelming” was repeated throughout online discussion forums as other coaches described the teachers’ responses to the inquiry project assignment.

Goal #2: Encourage teachers’ abilities to critically reflect on their own beliefs and practices, exploring the impact of local contexts on participants’ practices.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the inquiry projects provided opportunities for the teachers to thoughtfully reflect on their practice with colleagues. In our surveys, the teachers expressed that the most valuable component of the IRAP was the occasion for professional collaboration, “to think deeply in the company of colleagues”, as one participant eloquently put it. Many teachers took time to consider their respective groups of students and meet their needs accordingly.

Nevertheless, it is also important to speculate on what didn’t occur in the inquiry projects. The inquiry project was perceived by many teachers as, quite simply, a very large homework assignment tacked onto the voluminous “to do” list of teachers, who were already feeling overwhelmed by the inordinate pressures to bring students’ test scores up. From this perspective, inquiry was in part employed instrumentally to increase DIBELS scores, which in turn reified the current educational arrangement in which teachers are the consumers, not the producers of knowledge. It became another strategy to meet benchmarks despite our efforts to conceptualise it as an invitation to another dimension of professional identity and institutional empowerment, an alternative to SBRR, another way of knowing. While the test scores of individual children rose and the students became more engaged during the projects, the system of high-stakes testing and standardisation itself was often taken as a given, never questioned, and thus it became increasingly difficult for participants to imagine alternatives and supplements to this form of assessment.

Goal #3: Reinforce the view that teachers can trust that they do possess the requisite knowledge, skills and fortitude to produce accurate analyses of children’s literacy skills.

In previous sections, we saw teachers in general and Susan in particular demonstrating abilities both to see standard assessment data – the standardised test results, DIBELS scores, and other SBRR data – and to see beyond them, to invite, solicit and to refine the reading skills (for example, performance and fluency skills in readers’ theatre) of her students. Susan, for example, through the inquiry project, extends her understanding of those scores and of those students when she transposes their performance onto the grid of assessment scores. Susan’s students, for example, became more successful through readers’ theatre, and we can say that this is unequivocally a positive outcome. We believe this success is the result of the teachers’ careful observations of students, especially those who were most struggling. She became astute in “kidwatching” (Goodman, 1978, p. 41), taking careful notes,

interviewing children and engaging in alternative forms of assessment to complement the standardised tests.

While these types of successes were evident, we do not have conclusive evidence that most of the teachers came to more fully trust their own knowledge of literacy and of children through the inquiry projects. It is safe to say that the majority of teachers deferred to the SBRR data to illuminate aspects of children's literacy skills, and that didn't surprise us, given the intensive training on SBRR assessments participants experienced in the program. Generally, the inquiry projects offered specific information about a teaching strategy's impact on students during a particular lesson, that is, on fluency or comprehension.

Lingering questions

In looking across these three goals, we note several seeming paradoxes, presented here as two clusters of questions. The first cluster focuses on teacher professionalism. In what ways can professional autonomy be legislated, especially when teachers have repeatedly expressed that time is their most scarce resource? It is important to note that the successful inquiry projects occurred largely because of the passion and commitment of teachers. There were many teachers who worked tirelessly and creatively to meet the needs of their students. Susan, for instance, did much of this work in her own time, during the in-between spaces of the school day and in addition to her mandated responsibilities. Moreover, in an educational climate that is cutting funding for the humanities, drama, physical education and fine arts, should we just rely on the largesse and commitment of individual teachers and the expiring fumes of their passion for children, especially when teacher turnover and burn-out rate are persistent issues in so many urban and poorer rural contexts?

A second set of questions is based on a view of teachers (and teacher educators) as change agents. If teachers are truly empowered to reflect on their practice in local contexts, will they be welcomed for challenging prevailing educational assumptions when they adversely affect students or teachers, such as when the high-stakes testing paradigm is the exclusive driver of instruction and assessment? How do we, as teacher educators, intervene even as we acknowledge our complicity in these matters?

PROJECT TO PROCESS: CREATING A CULTURE OF INQUIRY

From project to process: Creating a culture of inquiry

The interviews, observations, and online discussion forums, as well as Susan's case study, reveal both the promises and limitations of inquiry. We believe that our modest proposal for inquiry was an important, if tiny, first step toward the formation of a large-scale inquiry community in our state. Although our vision may be utopian in nature and epic in stature, nonetheless, we think this work is worth doing because of the long-term impact on education. Mary, a coach, eloquently captures the potential reverberations of inquiry in professional development and student learning:

The action research process gives us the professional framework for making and changing our own practice....I feel that the collaborative inquiry process is just the

ticket to re-professionalise teaching, increase student success and build teacher efficacy.

How, then, do we move from mandating inquiry as an isolated project to creating a state-wide culture of teacher research where inquiry is an ongoing “process,” as Mary says, or “the air teachers breathe,” to quote Susan L. Lytle (personal communication, May 12, 2007). How might communities of teachers adopt a critical inquiry stance into their ongoing collaborative work, with the promise of “re-professionalising” teaching, to invoke Mary’s words?

We believe this quite tall order requires a fundamental paradigm shift with respect to professional development and university-school partnerships. As a result of working on this project, we are convinced that there are several systemic changes that must occur if teachers are to be valued as researchers and if university-school inquiry partnerships are to flourish over time. First, teachers need to be provided with the time and resources to support this labour-intensive form of collaborative research. A majority of the IRAP coaches and teachers voiced that they needed more time to complete the inquiry project and the course, especially because they were juggling so many other professional responsibilities during the year. As one coach, Hatai, reports, “Time is of the essence in everything we do. There never seems to be enough time.” Another member of Hatai’s discussion group, Melissa, explained, “There wasn’t enough time and training to do all that was expected. There was too much good information and not enough time to sort through it.” The tension between gaining useful information and having enough time to thoughtfully process that knowledge was a key theme of the online discussions. Reading First coach, Dan, suggested a solution: “I think the (inquiry) project should have been stretched out over a longer period of time.”

Second, it is important that inquiry not merely be an “add-on” to an already existing professional development agenda. As an add-on, inquiry may at best function to reinforce or augment pre-existing goals rather than to support teachers as they formulate inquiry questions and projects based upon their roles and goals. For this type of support to occur, we now recognise that all stakeholders at all levels of the project – federal, state, university and school levels – would have to embrace inquiry. All would have to buy into the fundamental idea that teacher-generated knowledge is essential to the quality and systemic durability of reform efforts.

As we argue for teacher inquiry, we nonetheless recognise that large-scale reform projects such as NCLB require a common discourse of professional development so that stakeholders can talk within and across schools, districts and states, so that all can map changes in student learning across schools, districts and states. At the same time, we do think that such conversations cannot afford to ignore the contextualised knowledge that teachers themselves produce, even when that knowledge production doesn’t square with the agendas of the university or the funding agencies. Thus, our third point is this: if inquiry is an organic part of teaching and learning, then the teachers’ questions, by definition, shape professional development agendas and do tie to university and funding agency interests. In our project, for instance, we had to address the following questions: What is the instructor’s responsibility when inquiry questions are not particularly salient to current theory and research in reading education and yet seem keenly compelling to IRAP participants? What is the

instructor's responsibility when inquiry questions exceed Reading First priorities or are not obviously and explicitly tied to the five foundations of reading that Reading First is based upon? We worked with a group of educators in a predominately Latino school with a focus on bilingual education, and we worked with a literacy coach who wanted to introduce more social justice issues in the literacy curriculum. We found teachers who wanted to explore linguistic and cultural diversity issues and those who wanted to learn about the teaching and learning of writing. In terms of our project, the dilemma could be distilled into one question: Can we honour all participants in our project and stay within the parameters of Reading First or any funding agency? As a result of struggling with such questions, our third point is that teacher inquiry that issues from large-scale professional development must stay rooted in the questions that arise from the participants, regardless of the views or standards of university faculty or funding agencies.

Our final point addresses the university's obligations in collaborative inquiry and school partnerships. The university tenure and promotion system does not reward faculty for involving themselves in large-scale reform projects, despite the potential for research projects and educational change. In fact, it could be argued that participation works against faculty members when these collaborations do not yield publications. There are few publications by large-scale collaborations, and part of the reason is that the people running the projects don't have time to write. To illustrate, several untenured faculty members on the IRAP staff spent countless hours driving across the state of Indiana meeting with teachers and coaches, and they still felt that they could not meet the needs of many of the participants. Untenured faculty members devote time to collaborations at their own expense. At the same time, other faculty members worked countless hours at home, creating and maintaining the inquiry website, orchestrating communication, and troubleshooting with long-distance partners – all work that keeps the project functioning but is not a priority in the tenure, reappointment and promotion system. We argue that if school-university partnerships are to be sustained, then universities may have to take special care to promote and reward this type of scholarship of engagement, especially in institutions where the primary emphasis is on individual research and publication.

Beyond that, we think the collaborative nature of this project invites and challenges us to reflect upon the possibilities and power of inquiry in large-scale reform measures. What might education look like if skilful and successful teachers such as Susan received substantial structural support to engage in inquiry communities where they might continually hone their craft based on their own theorising of classroom experience? What might education look like as culturally engaged, based upon the rich experiences and insights that students bring to the class? In short, how could we think about and ascertain educational development and success beyond what Jonathan Kozol (2005, p. 53) has described as “up-ticks” in test-scores, especially in a state where high school graduation rates have declined, in a country in which ten per cent of U.S. high schools are described as “dropout factories” by a recent news report (AP News, October 30, 2007).

This project has compelled us to consider our roles within the present political realities. If, given our current political climate, large-scale accountability and reform efforts are here to stay, then what is our responsibility, as socially responsible citizens and teacher educators, to the teachers and to students involved in those reforms? What

can we, as teacher educators, do to move forward the collective educational imagination to conceptualise the role of the teacher as an inquirer on social and political fronts? How can we, as teacher educators and researchers, teach teachers to more explicitly deal with issues of difference and equity within the context of large-scale reform movements? On a more global level, how might the educational community enable teachers to produce knowledge as experts within their local contexts, even as we acknowledge the inevitability and accountability of large-scale reform measures? These are the questions that compel us to continue to work in this large-scale reform, even as we register our reservations against some of its precepts, simultaneously hoping to work within and against the very structures we have helped to create.

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