

Authentic Collaborative Inquiry: Initiating and Sustaining Partner Research in the PDS Settingⁱ

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ABSTRACT: This is the story of our collaborative work as educators and researchers. Because writing as a collective is challenging, we have elected Jenn to serve as narrator, but the story is ours collectively. We are Glenda and Rita, elementary school teachers, Ellen, principal, and Jess, graduate research assistant. The story told here is distilled from our shared experience, our recorded conversations, and our individual written reflections. We begin with some definitions, grounding ourselves in the evolving literature on PDS research. We describe how we have come to understand *authentic collaborative inquiry* (ACI) and the unique potential of PDS spaces for cultivating it. We then turn to the telling of our story – our beginnings, as the seeds of our inquiry were planted – and our efforts since to nurture the project we have undertaken. We follow this with a discussion of what this journey has done for us, what remains to be done, and what difficulties we have yet to overcome. We offer our story here as a context for making sense of the possibility, the promise, and the challenges of coming together across institutional lines in a quest for understanding critical issues at the heart of teaching and learning. We do so because we believe it is in the telling of our stories that we best learn from ourselves and from one another.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #5/ Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants

Introduction

At the heart of authentic collaborative inquiry (ACI) is the belief that traditional ways of knowing and constructing knowledge about teaching and learning alone are insufficient for addressing the pressing issues faced by teachers and students in schools. Too often, research on teaching and learning is de-contextualized or fails to capitalize on the expertise of diverse individuals. What is needed, instead, is a way to bring scattered conversations and lines of inquiry together – to connect scholarship and theory building with practice, to bridge the rarely traversed space where the two speak to one another. In forging new lines of inquiry together, which derive from our respective commitments and expertise, teachers and university faculty can, we believe, make real change in real time. This is the heart of authentic collaborative inquiry – authentic in that it occurs within the spaces it seeks to improve and among those with genuine interest in understanding. Collaborative in that it draws upon the

experience and knowledge of many. Inquiry in that it is driven by a desire to understand.

Authentic

Abdal-Haqq (1997) writes, “If children are not significantly benefiting from the investment of time, effort, and resources devoted to PDSs, then both children and investors are betrayed” (p. 31). We agree. And yet, how do we measure the degree to which children are benefiting from PDS work? Beyond test scores and retention rates, what are the markers by which PDS work is deemed worthwhile for the lives of students? It seems to us that one marker ought to be the degree to which PDS work addresses the most difficult challenges facing education today – those confronted by teachers, administrators, families and students in their daily lives. It ought to, we think, address questions of purpose, policy and practice, and to facilitate change toward improved educational experiences for all. PDS work that fails to get “down and dirty” with what makes teaching and learning hard, may indeed leave its members betrayed.

ⁱ Portions of this work were funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation, Chicago IL. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent an endorsement by the foundation.

Work that is *authentic* emerges organically, reflecting and building on problems of practice as they exist in classrooms, schools, and communities (Darling-Hammond, 1994). The authenticity lies in the power of the research to generate meaningful knowledge, relevant to the experience of those in schools. But authenticity has also to do with the nature of the commitment shared by those involved. When inquiry arises from genuine interest and experience, when members of the research team participate voluntarily, the work carried out is more likely to be sustained and fruitful (Bray, 2002). In this way, authentic work is not only grounded in the realities of schools, but also engaged by individuals with a genuine interest in seeing it through.

Collaborative

Theory and practice are inherently intertwined. Research that seeks to understand the intersection of theory and practice can best be served by those steeped in both. *Collaboration*, then, “refers to the participation between academic researchers and practitioners which enables once-competing discourses to be integrated to transform practice” (Sinnema, Sewell and Milligan, 2011, p. 247). When research is undertaken by teachers and researchers collaboratively, lines become blurred; the work of teachers in schools and researchers at universities are reshaped and integrated. Teachers take more responsibility for research and knowledge construction; researchers for marrying the purposes and practices of research, teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Though each retains her primary emphasis, each recognizes the critical contributions of the other. Collaboration demands a more democratic engagement with one another: “group members share power equally and make all decisions themselves—from deciding the research question to creating the research design to deciding whether and how to share the group’s findings with anyone outside the group” (p. 317). As Sinnema, Sewell and Milligan (2011) assert, collaborative inquiry “reflects a range of commitments, most notably the democratic and inclusive processes which build on the expertise that both academics and teachers bring to the task of improving outcomes for learners” (p. 250).

Inquiry

We use the word “*inquiry*” intentionally – as a way of representing our quest for understanding. Research in its many iterations can seek to do many things – explain, prove, disprove... To inquire, we believe is to ask a question that resides at the heart of our work. We borrow from traditions of inquiry-based pedagogy that emphasize intentional investigation of an open-ended question, the exploration of which will lead to deeper understanding and offer insight into potential courses of action (Bray, 2002). Perhaps the best means of explaining what inquiry is by naming what it is not: Inquiry is *not* top-down research initiatives undertaken to prove the worth of a particular intervention. It is not research that seeks to document and

compare attrition rates or falling test scores. These are the sorts of research often engaged when school districts and universities come together.

Despite the fact that PDS partnerships are intended to unite professional education programs at colleges and universities with preK-12 schools, to challenge individuals within institutions to re-conceptualize their work and their roles, to develop relationships rooted in reciprocity, collaboration and shared ownership of needs, very often they do not. So much can and often does get in the way. Among other things, genuine quests for understanding – inquiry – are too often made impossible by a lack of shared vision for teaching and learning or an inability among partners to see one another as valuable sources of knowledge. Institutional constraints such as scheduling can also contribute to making such time-consuming work feel impossible. So when it does exist – when people from across institutions come together authentically, to work democratically and to inquire, it is rare indeed. It is a story worth telling. And it is a phenomenon worth trying to understand.

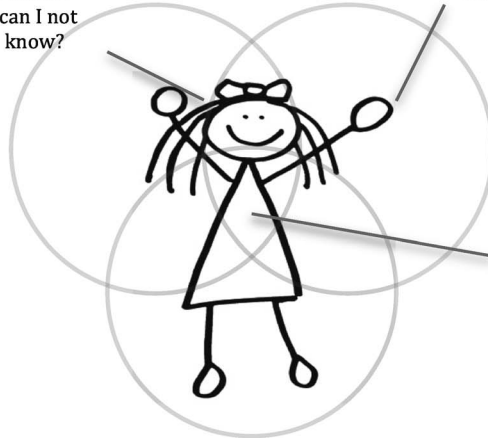
Our Story: Planting Seeds

Rita (Art) and Glenda (3rd Grade) are teachers at a school located in the southeast United States that serves approximately 485 children (39% of whom are African American, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic, 46% White, and 3% Multi-racial.) Students hail from 30 states and 23 countries. The school is seated in a city with one of the highest poverty rates in the nation (nearly 40%). As is often the case, faculty at the participating school are under incredible pressure to close the achievement gap among their socio-economically and racially diverse students, 65% of whom receive free or reduced lunch.

Our story begins with Glenda and Rita porch sitting, chatting during their morning carpool, and dreaming of more meaningfully integrated curriculum. Together, they began exploring what it might mean to implement their shared vision of teaching and learning – a vision that emphasized tending to students’ social and emotional growth as well as their academic performance. It was a vision that they felt stood outside of and often in tension with other visions at play in their school setting. On the porch, in the car, and in those other in-between spaces, Glenda and Rita found that they were able to let their guards down and do their best thinking. As their trust in one another grew, so did their confidence that they could enact their vision together. They began to take risks in their practice, to foreground new priorities, and to celebrate the small successes they had. Their work was (and is) rooted in their shared belief that learning ought to be connected and flexible, that students learn best when content is integrated and that art has the potential to deepen students’ exploration and understanding of themselves and the content under study.

Initially, their efforts involved the creation and implementation of units of study that integrated art, where children could carry their work between Glenda and Rita’s classroom spaces. With each day that passed Glenda and Rita felt increasingly

HEAD (Cognitive): What do I know?
How do I know it? What do/can I not
know? What does it mean to know?



HANDS (Interpersonal): Who are the
people in my community? How do I
know them? What does it mean to be
in community with others?

HEART (Intrapersonal): Who am I?
What do I care about? What are my
strengths? What role do/can I play in
my community? How can I express
myself?

Figure 1. “Head, Heart, Hands”—Civic Mindfulness in Children

invested in their work together and longing for a way to help it grow. Considering the potential this kind of thinking and planning held for transforming what transpired in their classroom spaces excited them. Their shared work became an avenue for seeing, knowing and teaching their students as holistic, complex individuals. Rita says, “We wanted to address other areas of students’ lives and learning. We wanted to take it a step further and help our students grapple with the challenges in their lives and see themselves as important members of our community.” Glenna and Rita began to wonder how they could more systematically plan instruction that positioned authentic purpose as the foundation of the learning process, which was supported by the development of the skills and knowledge that were embedded in the standards.

As their collaborative work was evolving, I assumed the role of PDS on-site-instructor at the school. An on-site instructor is a university faculty member who teaches his or her course(s) off-campus at one of the PDS partner schools. Typically these courses include various field-based components that allow students to learn by doing, while providing support for children and teachers at the school. In the year where this story begins, I taught two courses at the school: a freshman seminar course entitled, “Learning with Young Children” in which students served as tutors for kindergarten and first grade students and met weekly to discuss readings about teaching and learning in elementary school; and “Hunger in Our Schools” a split-level course (undergraduate/graduate) aimed at deepening prospective teachers’ understanding of the role of poverty and food insecurity in the lives of those in schools. In this course, students worked collaboratively with school faculty to conduct needs assessments and create school-wide initiatives to address the needs identified (initiatives included awareness campaigns, efforts to introduce children to new and healthy foods, and a

morning event aimed at growing the number of children taking advantage of free- and reduced-priced breakfast.)

My first year also involved work with Glenna on a classroom project. Glenna and I quickly learned that we shared a commitment to deepening students’ connections with each other and with their learning. We talked endlessly about the power of community-based pedagogy for bridging home-school contexts and deepening the relevance and meaning students find in their work. And then one day after school, I ran into Rita at the grocery store. We stood in line at the check-out counter discussing the work Glenna and I were doing and the many ways it overlapped with the work Glenna and Rita had been doing. Rita invited me to think and talk with them.

At our first meeting, Rita and Glenna looked to me for advice on how they might proceed with their work and begin to expand their vision, transforming the way learning and teaching happened in their classrooms and attending more fully to children’s identities as members of the community. It was clear from the start that we shared a vision of developing methods for purposeful, authentic learning. As we talked, I introduced concepts around which I had been puzzling – notions of self-authorship and civic mindfulness. For quite a while, I had been writing about the many ways teachers’ instructional decisions seem to open up or shut off opportunities for democratic learning – learning that involved the development of a strong sense of self alongside mutuality with others. I shared scholarship conducted with older students and wondered aloud where and how such development begins, how we might teach for it and measure the results of our efforts. In these conversations we created new language for talking about our commitments – commitments to attend to children’s heads, hearts and hands, in all that we do. And we asked ourselves, how does this new lens shape our practice? For the remainder of that spring and throughout the summer, we read together and met

regularly continuing our conversation and deepening our thinking. We began to codify our thinking in the form of charts and figures that elaborated on these various dimensions of students' identities (see Figure 1). And we began making plans for how we might apply these ideas in the classroom.

Soon, our work shifted – from an informal conversation about teaching to a more formal engagement with the questions that we seek to understand: What does the growth of civic mindfulness look like in young children? What pedagogical methods foster children's civic development? And how? We set out to refine the theoretical framework we had developed. We began by asking ourselves what pedagogical moves allowed us to see children's interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities – a question we answered through continued reading and ongoing observation in multiple K-5 classroom settings across three schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, we determined that spaces where children encountered open-ended problems, had opportunities for reflection, and conversation are where such capacities can be most readily witnessed. The less structured the space, the more students had to call on themselves to navigate the world around them and it was here that we saw (and we assume where they most had a chance to practice) civics in action. In these spaces, we saw children employing creative and flexible thinking, reasoning and critical thinking skills. We watched as they worked to understand one another's perspectives, to collaborate toward shared goals. We observed their body language and listened to their voices as they braved new challenges.

We documented these moments not only for what they taught us about teaching and learning but also because they helped us to name the specific ways civic mindfulness was demonstrated by young children. We began to move from talking about civic mindfulness in its three dimensions to civic mindfulness as a collection of skills, and further still toward how different children demonstrated those skills at different times and in different contexts. Our theory took root as we paid careful attention to how children spoke back to it. With each piece of data we collected, we looked for examples of the skills we had named and those we had failed to name. We highlighted examples and built a much richer, more refined and grounded theoretical framework. And we made intentional choices to implement more Head Heart Hands teaching into the school day – to make spaces where there were none. Among the methods we developed were “Heart Time” and “Talk Time.”

Heart Time is a 45-minute period each week where students work on a project of their choice. The initial goal for this time was to foster self-esteem and efficacy through the development of expertise and opportunities to manage one's own inquiry. Students selected projects in which they studied French language, robotics, origami, the life of an ant, dance, mask-making, drum design, cooking, etc. Projects were rich and varied, representing children's unique interests. Over the course of the first year we worked to connect children with local “experts” who could support their work, and to help them identify and work toward final products that would speak to appropriate audiences. Beyond fostering children's intrapersonal capacities, we quickly learned

that Heart Time also led to increased interpersonal capabilities as students demonstrated greater appreciation and respect for others, to see one another as valuable, though diverse, contributors to the classroom community.

Talk Time is also held for 45-minutes each week. It is a time designated for explicit instruction on interpersonal skills such as listening, perspective taking and collaboration. Here, children engage in authentic dialogue and collective problem solving of real-world issues facing their classroom and school communities. These topics are sometimes teacher-initiated, sometimes identified by the students themselves. Examples include: homework and the purchase of materials for the classroom community. Talk occurs in small and whole-group settings, but typically focuses on specific interpersonal skills and an effort to help children grow not only in their ability to participate but also in their capacity to understand others.

Throughout the academic year, we documented and reflected on students' experience of Heart Time and Talk Time. We tested a variety of tools for capturing students' learning over time. We shared our work with colleagues locally, nationally and internationally. Now in our second year of intentional study of children's civic learning, we pause to reflect on the conditions that made our work possible and the challenges we have encountered.

Rich Soil: Conditions for Growth

We cannot think of a more authentic or organic process than the one we have undergone over the last year and a half. Our work has evolved naturally, addressing the needs and interests of each of us. Over the last year, the three of us have developed a strong, trusting relationship where each voice is valued and the inquiry – the asking and the learning – is shared equitably. Glenda reflects, “The conversations we have shared have been honest and heartfelt. I sense that we all have a deep and sincere commitment to the work we are doing. Though our perspectives and roles vary, we are philosophically aligned with regards to what we think teaching and learning should be.” Rita adds, “After meeting with Jenn, our thinking really blossomed. Instantly, the work that each of us had been doing fit neatly together. Each of us had a desire to impact the lives of children in a way that extended beyond the walls of a classroom and Jenn, with her background in research and grant writing, had the means to help make it happen.” Ellen, the principal, agrees, “For this PDS work, the collaboration happened organically; teachers expressed an interest in working with Dr. James on something they believe is an important issue in teacher and learning, something that they are grappling with as educators.” It is evident that each of us is truly committed to the project, as we put in the time necessary to keep the project moving forward.

What has made this authentic work possible? What lessons have we learned that we might share with others? Among other things, we believe that the existence of a fluid and flexible PDS relationship; time; and the structural and monetary support made possible by grant funding have been critical to our success. We discuss each of these in turn.

A Fluid and Flexible PDS Relationship

The PDS network relationship between the University of Georgia and Clarke County Schools is based on a shared understanding that each arm of the network must grow to reflect the needs and interests of those involved in a particular setting. So while there are now eleven schools in the network, the nature of the PDS work at each site is strikingly and refreshingly unique. At our particular site, Ellen and I agreed from the start that our partnership – if it was going to be meaningful and sustainable – needed to have the time and flexibility to grow in response to evolving needs and relationships.

When I introduced myself to the staff, I tried to make clear that I hoped to spend my first year sitting among them, listening and offering myself as a partner with whom to do the hard work of teaching. I spent a good deal of time at the school – sometimes 20 hours a week – sitting in on meetings, working with small groups of children, brainstorming with and gathering resources for teachers, co-facilitating special projects when teachers needed an extra hand. My presence at the school made possible impromptu discussions and check-ins with Rita and Glenda. My visibility meant that students were comfortable with me as a member of the school community. And my embeddedness meant that I understood many of the underlying issues that shaped the school culture and those living in it. Having this knowledge of place has made me a more ready partner for authentic collaborative inquiry. At the same time, while I am “of” the school, I am not. My inside/outsider role allows me also to bring fresh perspectives to bear, to ask new questions and offer different paths for exploration. As Ellen says of having PDS partners working at the school:

...I think working with other organizations is a great way to do that. Keeping to yourself gives you nothing to compare yourself to. You start thinking alike, coming up with the same solutions to the same problem. You stop asking yourself the tough questions. You tend to make excuses or be satisfied. Observing in other schools, collaborating with colleagues outside the school, gives one a moment to pause, to reflect, to consider other possibilities.

Not having to assume specific roles within the school, not being a conduit for top-down initiatives, has allowed me to live among the teachers, students and administrators who do the difficult work of teaching and learning everyday. This fluidity and flexibility have made possible the relationship building and the trust necessary for authentic collaborative inquiry to take root.

Time to Think Together

Always the greatest hurdle in getting any worthwhile project off the ground is the lack of sufficient time to think, to plan, and to act. This has certainly been the case for us. We have worked to overcome this challenge by setting aside weekly and quarterly times to meet. Each Monday, from 3:15-5, we sit together

outside of the school and university to reflect on our work, to share our struggles and celebrations, to plan for the week ahead. And for one full day each quarter, we meet off-grounds for a shared planning and thinking day. Despite our incredibly busy schedules, these are commitments we have taken seriously because we believe them to be critically important. Not only do these meetings help us to maintain our momentum around the project, keeping the work on our plate when so many other things threaten to push it off, but they also contribute to our ongoing growth as colleagues and friends.

We have used this time to support one another as issues arise in our respective spaces, trying always to use our “Head, Heart, Hands” framework as a lens for sense-making. When Glenda struggled with the implementation of a school-wide incentive program, we puzzled with her about ways to attend to institutional demands while remaining true to her commitments as a teacher. When Rita felt pressure to assess students’ art abilities, we reasoned not only about what she might do but also about the socio-political contexts that give rise to the struggles we face as educators.

Our time together has always been a space for attending to immediate concerns in research and practice, and also for pushing each other to think critically about the forces that shape our work and our responses to them. Glenda says, “Our weekly meetings have been precious. The opportunity to connect and reset ourselves has been invaluable. These meetings have been a regular reminder that we share an understanding and vision. More importantly they help us to be a continual support system for one another.” Likewise, Rita says, “Though having a weekly meeting is challenging for all of us because of our busy schedules, it has been a valuable source of support and a way for us to stay connected with the work.” For Ellen too, though she does not participate in our weekly research team meetings, the time set aside for checking-in is important. Every two weeks, Ellen and I sit down to discuss various initiatives in which I am engaged at the school, the research project being one of them.

This steady stream of communication allows for greater transparency, ensuring that all voices are heard, and that the work remains grounded in the realities of the school. Ellen, principal, says, “In working with Jenn, I have felt most successful when we schedule regular time to meet to discuss issues... It takes time to reflect on issues, discuss, read, brainstorm, etc. It takes time to make a plan and follow through.” Though time is always fleeting, we have consistently put our work squarely on the table, and on our calendars so that it will not slip away or be pushed aside. Whether in our weekly research team meetings, the check-ins with Ellen, or the quarterly planning days that Ellen has graciously set aside for us to spend together, the time we spend plays a critical role in making our work possible.

Structural and Monetary Support

Besides the structural and philosophical support offered by Ellen in the way of encouragement, time, and substitutes to

cover classes on planning days, a recent influx of grant support has contributed to the depth and richness of our work. Last year, we managed to secure a grant from the Spencer Foundation, which we are using to support our work in a variety of ways. Small amounts of money go to each of us for the time we work in the summer. Some goes to cover the cost of equipment needed to document our work, but the bulk of the funding goes toward the cost of a graduate assistant to work on the project. This past fall, we invited Jess to join our research team. Because the work had evolved so organically I was determined to find someone whose values, priorities and vision matched ours.

I reached out to Jess because I had worked with her when she was a student at Kent State University years ago, and I knew of her interest in citizenship and civics in elementary school classrooms. I also knew that Jess had very recently (and for four years) lived the life of a classroom teacher. She, like Glenda and Rita, had struggled to theorize about and realize her commitments in the classroom. Fortunately for us, Jess agreed to come on board. She reflects, “The project seemed to align perfectly with what I am committed to as an educator. The team’s vision and commitments were so similar to mine and I wanted in.” Jess now sits on the research team, working collaboratively to reflect and plan, to read and think, to theorize and analyze. She assists with data collection and transcription, with securing and managing resources. She is an invaluable member of the collaboration – and her contributions are made possible because of the external funding we’ve been able to secure so far.

Besides the funding, our grant support does other things for us. Namely, the grant we were given lends credibility to our work. Glenda writes, “Having the Spencer grant does more than just give us the funding for the project. It helps to validate the work we are doing to others. . . The grant defines priorities that may not be the priorities of the school or district. This offers some justification for us when defending the instructional choices we are making as a result of the project.” Rita adds, “There are clearly delineated goals in our proposal that have been approved by the administration and this helps to provide room in our schedules for the work.” The grant demands that we not get off track and brings a level of visibility to our work. People are interested in the work we are doing and waiting for results. . . So while it secures us the time we need to do the work, it adds a layer of accountability that wasn’t there before.

All of these components came together at just the right moment. The support of the administration coupled with a secured grant, created an opportunity for space and time to do something different. The unification of a philosophically aligned team of individuals from the university and school district situated within an already established Professional Development School enabled the commencement of this research project. As with all worthwhile endeavors however, our work has required commitment and more than a little effort to keep it going. We

turn now to a discussion of some of the ongoing challenges we face in sustaining the project.

Weeding the Garden: Challenges and Constraints

We are now in the midst of collecting data around our efforts to implement these examples of “Head, Heart, Hands” teaching in an effort to understand what these methods do for different children, how and why. We continue to theorize, to refine our framework and to read – pulling together scholarship and experience to make sense of the challenge before us – the challenge to understand and teach for children’s civic growth. It has been a year of ups and downs, of negotiations, of working fast and furiously and of endless waiting. In this section, we discuss briefly some of the highs and lows we have faced and what we think they teach us about striving for authentic collaborative inquiry. Among these are negotiating roles and responsibilities, securing approvals and maintaining support, and staying the course while working in spaces that have very specific and contrasting understandings about teaching and learning than we hold.

Negotiating Roles and Responsibilities

Doing research in schools is hard. Among other things, we find ourselves constantly trying to sort out what is “the work” of the research and what is tangential – general questions of teaching and learning that aren’t directly related to our research questions, issues of school culture and climate, approaches to discipline and guidance, etc. Because our work focuses on civic learning broadly, much of this seems (and is) relevant to our conversation, but in the end, is not part of what is formally under study. We have to start somewhere. We cannot do it all at once. The process of negotiating roles and responsibilities has been possible because we trust one another, we care about one another, and we are committed to the success of our work. So as new issues are put on the table, we engage them as friends and colleagues first, as researchers second.

Rita says, “Often our meetings begin with conversations revolving around problem solving an issue from the past day or week. Of course sometimes these come from needing support as well as fresh ideas. There are times that we must reign ourselves in so that we can continue our grant work. However, there are times that we realize we are using the framework as we come up with a solution to a teaching and learning problem and then the lines blur again. . .”

The lines between teaching and research in our work are always shifting and often difficult to nail down. Glenda faces a challenge with her students – they revolt when a substitute refuses to give them Heart Time – and we begin by dealing with the frustration Glenda feels and how she might proceed with her students in the days that follow. And as we strive to find a way through this latest challenge together, we return to our “Head, Heart, Hands” framework and ask ourselves what this

revolt exemplifies and how our responses may differ whether we consider it as teachers or as researchers. We find ourselves constantly moving between teaching and research and we believe this constant back and forth is powerful for both the teaching and research that results, but there are times when we feel the need to be clearer about the boundaries of our work – for ourselves and for others. Glenna writes, “I am finding it quite a challenge to be both a practicing teacher and a researcher at the same time. It is not an option for me to stand apart from my classroom and put on my researcher cap. It is difficult to focus on the research questions when I am constantly attending to all of the facets of our classroom life. This makes the practice of weekly meetings, reflection and planning days critical in keeping the research at the fore.”

And so as we have moved along this path, we have begun to differentiate our roles. Though we are all teachers and researchers, Glenna and Rita must foreground their teacher identities and use the available spaces to theorize about their work with us. They help with data collection and, through conversation, shape the direction of the work we do. Jess and I must foreground our researcher identities. Not only do we have the time and experience to do the heavy lifting on the research end, but we cannot assume too much responsibility for teaching without putting undue stress on our teacher partners. These are lessons we have had to learn along the way. Jess reflects, “We have had to figure out how to participate and what each of us needs to do in order to make the work happen. We have had to figure out who needs to be involved in what aspects of the research and we have had to decide how to distribute the work because all of us can’t do everything. Everyone having something different to contribute and being willing to contribute and accept what others contribute is important. We have different times when we are free to work and we have different strengths and areas of experience/inexperience. When all of this is brought together we can be most effective.”

Securing Approvals and Maintaining Support

Sustaining our work requires the support of many others. In order to secure that support, we have to be clear about what we are doing and what we hope to find, all the while working to keep our work grounded in inquiry and reflective of the shared commitments we hold. We must appeal to others (institutional review boards, funding agencies, district administrators) showing how our work is situated within their visions of what counts as good, important work. Jess explains, “Navigating both school culture and university culture is challenging. Although each institution has given us space to do this work, they haven’t lowered their expectations or substituted the project work for other musts. They haven’t said, ‘Okay you can do x and don’t worry so much about y or z,’ but rather they have said, ‘you can do x as long as it doesn’t interfere with y or z ...’” All stakeholders have different needs, demands and conditions; we find ourselves constantly explaining how our evolving research

work fits within the priorities and visions of others, while protecting the fidelity of our work.

The complexity of what our work is doing makes it of interest to others but concurrently difficult to define, describe and execute. Navigating the fine line between illuminating and compromising our work in order to demonstrate how it fits into the goals and visions of others is a slippery slope. We find ourselves constantly refining our goals and narrowing our work in order to not lose site of our overarching vision and deep-rooted beliefs while maintaining our ability to report to other stakeholders. This process has challenged us to be articulate, creative and focused. Glenna reflects, “Although articulation and rearticulation are an ongoing challenge, I think this particular tension is the most beneficial to me. Too often, catch phrases, labels, mission statements, and other words that are intended to define the work we do become insincere or shallow. Having to constantly revise and refine the language of this work as it evolves whether for our own sakes or for others affirms our purpose and hones my focus on this work in my practice.” Jess adds, “We find ourselves having to rearticulate what we are doing and why. Although this is challenging, it has also brought more clarity to our work. It has forced us to explain what we are doing and not doing, what we are prioritizing and not prioritizing and how we are going about our work.” Rationalizing our work to many parties over time has forced us to explore how it contributes to their goals without compromising our own.

Our project aligns with the school’s mission and Ellen’s philosophy as principal. Without Ellen’s support the work we are doing would not be possible. Ellen writes, “I fully support the ideas behind the project. Schools should encourage risk-taking, questioning and making hypotheses, piloting methods, and collecting rich data that informs our practice. Isn’t this what we want to teach and model for our students?” Although her support is strong it is also implicated by reservations embedded in the present state of schools that emphasizes accountability, cohesion and standardization. Ellen adds, “Our current culture of accountability and best practice emphasizes ‘common:’ common curriculum, common planning, and common formative assessment. There is little room for ‘different.’ So, I find myself questioning my commitment. What if it doesn’t work? And what would that look like? What will the outcomes be? What if this class’s achievement is lower than that of other classes? How can I support team collaboration for this team? Should I have different expectations during a classroom observation? Can I make the teacher evaluation instrument ‘fit’ this classroom experience? How do I explain this to parents, staff, and district administrators? These are good questions and good conversations to have. When we can find the time to have them...”

The nature of our project requires the implementers and supporters to engage in risk-taking themselves. By articulating our progress and explaining our evolving priorities we have had to constantly revisit our goals. We have been challenged to define what our work is doing and how our work is making a difference. The institutions we are navigating are not designed to

support our work; we therefore have to carefully negotiate these spaces using choice language to explain how our work is contributing to, not countering others' goals and visions. The sustainability of the project requires time and space, within the already full day, to be dedicated to something different and less conventional. We have had to secure and maintain the support and approval of many stakeholders while prioritizing the intimate relationship we have with our goals. Achieving a balance between our goals and the goals of others has been key.

Competing Agendas

Meeting the needs of many stakeholders while staying the course has proved challenging and has required us to situate our work within a context that is designed to accommodate different priorities and engage in a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Ellen explains this tension: “As a school principal, I have seen that the most effective practices and initiatives are those that are implemented school-wide. This has been true for initiatives such as School-wide Enrichment Clusters, the Data Team Process, Responsive Classroom, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). In our district, we have a common curriculum, non-negotiable practices that include a common instructional framework, and a teacher evaluation instrument that is aligned to this expected framework. We have implemented these shared practices and I have seen that it unites staff in a common language. It helps teams work for a common purpose, and focuses our professional learning efforts. It also standardizes the classroom environment. . . The PDS work does not necessarily fit into this tidy framework. It is different. It is action research that incorporates new instructional techniques, and requires schedule changes. In a team of three with one team member doing something different, it has made for challenges with team planning. At times it appears there is not a common purpose. Colleagues are trying to unite, yet are really going in different directions with the way they think about the curriculum and deliver instruction to students.”

As Ellen has described, our work has created a rift in Glenda's grade level team dynamics. Our work gives Glenda space to think about common practices, the curriculum and school from a different perspective. When sitting together as a research team we unite as similarly driven colleagues; our thoughts and discussions often lead us to challenge the status quo and reimagine what school could be. We do not abandon the curriculum but rather think about how it can be reinvented, meeting the children in a different place. Ellen's support has granted Glenda space to act on what has been imagined by the team. When Glenda returns and sits with her teammates, she hears them speaking about enacting the curriculum, using standard practices and implementing the curriculum in the commonly accepted ways. Glenda has been granted time and permission to imagine and enact something different and the same opportunity has not been granted for her teammates. When Glenda and her two teammates convene, they willingly share their ideas, successes and struggles but each comes from a

different place, envisions their role as a teacher in a different way, prioritizes different practices and implements curriculum with different purposes. Although all are prioritizing the needs of their students and making thoughtful decisions about their teaching practices, the place from which they are coming differs, as does the vision for where they are heading.

In addition to the complexity of doing something different within a culture that foregrounds the team over the individual, we have also had to navigate the culture of standardization and accountability. Glenda reflects, “The expectation of standardized learning environment while implementing non-standardized practices is for me the greatest challenge. For this framework and these methods to have a fair chance at success, risks have to be taken by all parties involved. In a climate of accountability through standardized assessment, it is difficult to say whether or not success will be measured by all stakeholders in the same way.” Staying the course in an environment that values standardization, accountability and common practices confounds our work. As a team we support one another in order to navigate this multifaceted environment that expects the individual to adopt common practices and conform to the standard environment. Although we have been granted space to try something different we are still being held to the same expectations and have to perform within a standardized environment.

Looking Back to Look Forward: Becoming Effective Gardeners

Despite these challenges, we remain firmly committed to our work because of what it does for us and what we believe it is already doing for the students with whom we work. Operating as a team allows us to engage in ways that lay close to our hearts despite being situated within a standardized environment that doesn't easily envelop, let alone endorse our work. We find ourselves constantly cultivating our own civic mindfulness as a result of engaging in our collaborative inquiry process. We notice ourselves becoming more aware of where our priorities lie, what we consider powerful, important, quality teaching and learning, and how the choices we make (to do or not to do) impact others; hence we find ourselves engaging in dialogue and taking action that attends to our own and the children's heads, hearts, and hands.

Together, as a team, and individually, we are doing work that would not otherwise be possible. Our inquiry work enables us to be present in schools and have access to students and teachers in an authentic manner; we have relationships with the teachers and students, we each have a presence in the school as insiders, but bring an outside perspective due to our tangential relationship. I am able to ground my work in the realities of school and engage in scholarship that matters for others. The teachers and students, with whom I work, are directly affected by the work and as the word spreads, the research work extends beyond to others in the school, district, community, state and nation.

In addition to being present in the reality of schools and having relationships with the students and teachers involved in the research, being part of this research community gives me the space to mentor doctoral students and junior scholars into the world of educational research. Jess elaborates upon this unique opportunity writing, “Being able to explore a question that has resided close to my heart for a long time with similarly committed colleagues as a doctoral student is a gift. It is making me a more thoughtful practitioner and researcher. I find myself envisioning the possibilities of what research can be and do, and how research can be conducted with others rather than on others. Having the opportunity to explore this as a graduate student is impacting how I think about my future work.”

Glennnda and Rita have found that this process allows them to explore and implement their shared vision of teaching and learning that emphasizes tending to students’ social and emotional growth as well as their academic performance. Doing this work with the students allows them to see the students in another light, giving Glennnda and Rita a more holistic picture of each child. Glennnda reflects, “I am seeing student’s strengths and weaknesses in a different light. I am constantly amazed and delighted in my students’ expertise that we would not have accessed without heart time class meetings and reflections.” Seeing the students in this clearly more representative way allows the teachers to make better-informed curricular decisions. Glennnda continues, “I’m making calculated decisions about next steps based on dialogue in class meetings, surveys, reflections, using the head heart hands framework as a form of assessment to make many instructional decisions.”

In addition, each of us has found that this relationship and the work we are doing encourages each of us to expand our horizons. Glennnda and Rita have challenged themselves to become researchers and Jess and I have stretched our capacities to return to elementary classrooms, navigating public school culture. Rita reflects, “This work has required me to branch out beyond my comfort zone in that I am reading literature on subject outside of my degree. I have always been a reader of fiction, but I am finding myself drawn to articles and books about teaching diversity, mindfulness and self-authorship.”

Most importantly, this work has impacted how we live our lives both in and out of work. We have envisioned a new possibility, followed our hearts, and grown as conscious individuals, not just better teachers and researchers. It has not

been an easy road. Despite the challenges we encounter, we persist because we firmly believe that to have any hope of addressing the issues facing our schools today we must engage in genuine efforts to understand, and that we must do so together, respecting the contributions each of us can make. We hope that the telling of our story deepens our collective understanding of the intricacies involved in engaging authentic collaborative inquiry within PDS contexts, and encourages others with similar commitments to break new ground. ^{SUP}

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