

**Simultaneous Inquiry:
Renewing Partnerships and People in Professional Development Schools**

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Abstract: Simultaneous inquiry draws on the traditions of teacher inquiry and simultaneous renewal (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988) concepts at the heart of vibrant school-university partnerships. In this case in point, we identify the key components of our simultaneous inquiry model through the development of a Core Practice Study Group. We describe how simultaneously asking and answering shared questions has renewed and enriched our work with teacher candidates across both school and university classrooms. Simultaneous inquiry can help teacher candidates, participating K-12 teachers, and teacher educators develop new practices, commitments, methods of fostering each other's growth, and desire to engage in more simultaneous inquiry.

KEYWORDS: simultaneous inquiry, teacher education, teacher inquiry

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
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;
6. An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved;
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration;

Introduction

“Participating in the Core Practice Study Group was a way for me to examine and renew my own teaching practices while simultaneously discussing and planning core practices with my teacher candidate. Having the chance to focus on my own use of the core practices and to grow along with my teacher candidate is so beneficial for my teaching, and especially for the students in my classroom. It also sets a good example for teacher candidates to see that teachers should be lifelong learners who need to continually refine their craft as well.”

-Annie, 2nd grade teacher

“I’m a harried faculty member who doesn’t seek out readings or experience that challenge my sense of good teaching practice. How awesome it was to have new input that broke through my taken-for-granted assumptions. I’m so sold on this work that my next sabbatical project will let me engage with more teachers, talk about practice, and try some of these practices myself. The language and insights we generated—and some reading—also show up as preservice teachers discuss, view, and try out discussion facilitation in my methods course.”

-Tom, social studies methods professor

K-12 teachers and university-based teacher educators, alike, face increasing pressure to improve the quality of teaching in the nation’s schools and raise student achievement. In this case in point, we describe how simultaneous inquiry can begin to address these pressures. Simultaneous inquiry involves university-based teacher educators working together with their K-12 teaching colleagues to critically investigate and enrich the learning-to-teach opportunities they provide teacher candidates. In doing so, they not only assist teacher candidates in building a robust teaching practice, but they also improve their own teaching. Simultaneous inquiry thus draws on the traditions of teacher inquiry and simultaneous renewal (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988) at the heart of vibrant school-university partnerships. In this case in point, we identify the key components of our simultaneous inquiry model and describe how engaging in this model has renewed and enriched our work with teacher candidates across our school and university classrooms.

Background

We developed our model of simultaneous inquiry through our efforts to redesign our program on a practice-based teacher education (PBTE) model. PBTE calls on teacher educators to refocus their programs onto high-leverage or core teaching practices that promote K-12 student learning (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009; Lampert, 2010). Following a PBTE model, we worked together to identify 19 core teaching practices, ranging from making content explicit, to establishing and reinforcing consistent routines and positively stated behavioral expectations. The core practices have guided our creation of new university courses

and our re-organization of clinical placements. Importantly, teachers and administrators in our K-12 partner schools worked together with our university-faculty throughout the redesign, reading the same research and coming together to share, critique and co-create new ways of working with teacher candidates and with each other. The Core Practice Study Group arose out of this work and became the site of our simultaneous inquiry.

Core Practice Study Group Model

We created the Core Practice Study Group in the second year of our program redesign. The Study Group brought together four university teacher educators, three of our partner K-12 teachers, and four teacher candidates to explore how we could develop new ways of preparing teacher candidates to facilitate whole class discussions, our core practice #14. The group met several times over four months and organized our work around three activities: shared readings, video analysis and group discussion (Figure 1). The meetings took place in the teachers' classrooms, taking turns in all three of the schools, representing both urban and suburban sites. The meetings occurred on Friday afternoons, and we also had dinner and dessert together.

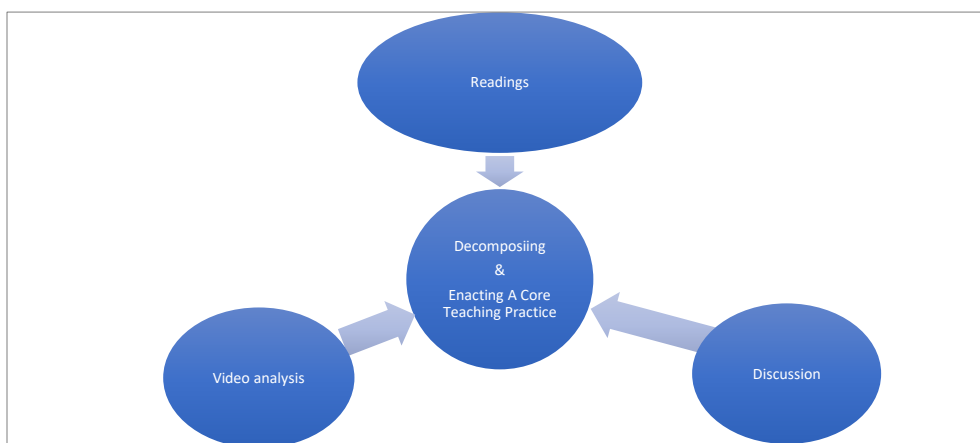


Figure 1. Elements of the Core Practice Study Group Model

We focused the first two meetings on reading literature and watching externally made videos to decompose the practice of discussion. Decomposition is the process of breaking down a complex teaching practice into its smaller, component parts (Grossman et al., 2009). Decomposition helps teacher educators better scaffold teacher candidates' learning as it allows both to focus their efforts on one component at a time. Through our joint reading, we determined that effective whole class discussions require teachers to: establish clear objectives; construct open-ended questions; take up student comments through re-voicing; and facilitate student-to-student talk. June, Annie and Colleen, the teachers, then worked with their teacher candidates to plan for and enact discussions in their elementary classrooms. All of us, the teachers and teacher candidates, both videotaped the discussions they facilitated. We then devoted our meetings to examining these videotapes, reviewing other discussion artifacts, and investigating ways in which the discussions did or did not support student engagement and learning.

At the same time that the teachers and teacher candidates were building their discussion practice in their elementary classes, the university-based teacher educators, René, Robin, Dorothea

and Tom, were revising discussion practices in their university classes. René and Robin attended closely to discussion in their university seminar classes. Dorothea was also working to embed a focus on facilitating whole class discussion in the creation of a new multicultural education course. In the sections below, we briefly describe this work to illustrate how simultaneous inquiry can support the renewal of teaching across school and university classrooms.

Simultaneous Inquiry Renewed Participating Teachers

“The Core Practice Study Group changed the way I conduct discussion with my students. The rich discussions of our group, in addition to the articles we read, allowed me to take a closer look at my own practice of discussion in my classroom. I realized that I was using less student talk than I thought I was, and I began to incorporate more authentic discussion opportunities throughout the day. The shift in my students and their active participation was so powerful. Many more students were engaged and the discussions were much more involved.”

– Annie

Simultaneous inquiry spurred new practices, energy, and methods of supporting teacher candidates among participating K-12 teachers. The Core Practice Study Group enabled us to build tools, take on new roles, and try out pedagogies because we had new insights and commitments developed through the group.

Annie, a 2nd grade classroom teacher in a suburban PK-5th elementary school who worked with a teacher candidate, noted subtle, but powerful shifts in her lesson planning to allow for more student participation. For example, one lesson was initially designed for the teacher to ask the questions to the whole class about historical photographs, thus eliciting one response at a time from students. After the Core Practice Study Group, Annie and her student teacher decided to pose the open-ended questions for students to discuss in small groups. Many more students were able to participate since they did not have to wait to be called on to share their thoughts resulting in much more student talk and much less teacher talk. According to Fisher and Frey (2014), “It matters who’s talking in class because the amount of talk that students do is correlated with their achievement” (p. 19). Almost all of the students were engaged in the discussion, which led to many more keen observations about the historical photographs.

“Collaborating with this cross-section of educators on the topic of facilitating discussions had a direct and immediate impact on the instructional practices of myself and my intern. We consciously planned to talk less and facilitate more. The incorporation of student-generated questions significantly raised the level of discussion and comprehension of the topic. All students experienced validation of their thoughts and ideas by reporting that they “had a voice” in classroom discussions.”

–June

June, the Dean of Students of an elementary school, worked with a Master’s level intern in an urban PK-8 neighborhood elementary/middle school. June and her intern applied the work of the Core Practice Study Group to how they approached teaching a group of middle school boys who were exhibiting low academic achievement and behavioral concerns. June and her intern

realized that lecturing or ‘talking at’ the students would be ineffective and allowing the boys to talk with one another had a much better chance at being an effective strategy. According to Wasserman (2010), when teachers talk too much or tell students what to think, they reduce the opportunities for students to exercise their own brainpower. June and her intern knew it was essential to avoid these pitfalls and focus on creating opportunities for deeper discussion.

By modeling active listening, responding to one another’s statements, and utilizing several discussion protocols, the hope was to increase participation and active engagement. However, having studied and discussed ways to effectively facilitate discussion, June and her intern predicted that the highest level of discussion would be produced from self-generated questions. Therefore, they intentionally planned to provide students with brainstorming time to self-generate questions at the beginning of the session and discuss these topics with each other. This practice shifted the control of the classroom discussion from the teachers to the students, a risky endeavor grounded in the belief that the value of the end product outweighed the chance of off topic discussions and a lack of teacher control. Student exit tickets seemed to suggest that they had developed a deeper comprehension of the content through the discussion practices. All students reported that they “had a voice” in the classroom and believed that they had learned from each other’s contributions.

“The Core Practice Study Group was an invaluable experience that completely changed my style as an educator. Through this study, I had a shift in mindset about the value of student discourse. I learned that student discussion is necessary to increase student learning and a valuable tool to help teachers to release more responsibility to their students and make their classrooms largely student-led.”

– Colleen

Colleen, a 4th grade teacher in an urban PK-8 elementary school worked with one teacher candidate. The Core Practice Study Group led them to purposefully create opportunities for student discourse during math lessons, the subject in which students had the least confidence and were the least participatory. Colleen reports it was difficult, at first, to determine how to effectively increase student discussion during math. The Core Practice Study Group helped her feel more confident with experimenting because of the support and feedback she received in study meetings as well as the input of the teacher candidate, who helped her facilitate changes and shifts in practice from the beginning. As the year progressed, Colleen found incorporating student discussion into her lessons became easier, more natural and extended discussion strategies into all areas of her teaching.

Colleen cites some of the positive student outcomes resulting from her experience in the Core Practices Study Group and the shifts in her planning. Students appeared to become more confident and willing to share their ideas or collaborate with others. Through the development of discussion techniques, students responded more appropriately to peers and they began using more academic vocabulary in their daily language because they were using those words more frequently within lessons. In addition, students developed more independence with their learning and asked for support less frequently. Students were comfortable consulting with peers when they came across a problem, and had increased confidence in their classmates’ abilities.

Jessica, who worked with Annie, considered a variety of topics through her participation in the group. She felt newer teachers may fear facilitating student led discussions as a result of not having well established classroom management, especially in areas like math where discussion is not always promoted. She noted “one of the articles discussed getting out of the students’ way,

and really stepping back and allowing them to take it in the direction they want to go in. I think often times we want to control everything.” Jessica concluded by saying she is hoping to work with other professionals who are equally interested in this type of inquiry. In fact, she was able to see how she might be the person who takes a lead role on this when she stated, “I’m hoping to be that person, in whatever school I end up in, that’s willing to have these conversations and ask these types of questions of other professionals I’m working with.”

The Impact of Simultaneous Inquiry on Role Changes for Participating Teacher Education Instructors

Those of us who are teacher educators have commitments to developing partnerships, doing research, and preparing future teachers that often preclude engaging in professional development about best practices for K-12 students. For us, however, the benefits of participating in this group went beyond making us better facilitators of discussion; we also acquired new language, insights, and experience that have improved how we prepare future teachers. We also realized that we would have to risk changing the roles we traditionally play in facilitating discussion among pre-service teachers. Generally, we initiate the discussion and then continue to participate by echoing student responses and making comments to shape the discussion. Our simultaneous inquiry participation caused us to rethink our roles and explore the possibility of stepping back to allow the pre-service teachers more space and opportunity to shape the discussion.

René, a university professor responsible for teaching the first seminar course to newly admitted juniors, changed several weeks of her course outline to reflect what she learned during the Core Practice Study Group. Participating in the group helped her realize some of the key issues seasoned teachers and teacher candidates struggle with when facilitating discussion, as indicated by the teachers above. It left her wondering how she could renew her course to allow teacher candidates more time to practice facilitating discussion *in class* with peers as well as in their clinic placements. Initially designed as an in-class activity, students would get examples of critical incidents in schools, work in small groups and report out possible solutions. When the assignment was modified, it required small groups of students to work together on a critical incident of their choice. The small groups were asked to construct an activity for their peers, in a mini-teach format. The one requirement of the activity they designed was that it had to include facilitating a discussion. This activity took two class periods instead of one, but the result was rich student-led discussions, creative pedagogical approaches, and collaboration among students. René deliberately reserved commentary for a feedback form she filled out while the students were facilitating the class. René describes the Core Practice Study Group as, “creating a space where everyone was curious and open to better understanding a complex core practice more deeply. Reading, watching and discussing real problems of practice with teachers, teacher candidates and university colleagues was not only enlightening, it was fun and inspired me to be a better teacher educator”.

Robin is another university professor responsible for teaching the first seminar course to newly admitted juniors. Typically, the seminar leader provides structure, order, and consistency to the various classroom discussions and encourages students to probe the intricacies of professional issues together. The seminar is divided into topical sessions with a focus on the critical issues mentioned by Robin and other experiences teacher candidates face in their clinic placements. Additionally, this fall seminar focuses on the influence of democracy on schools and classrooms, both on a macro and micro level (policy and practices).

One of the lessons in which juniors participate includes viewing a variety of socially and politically charged visual images. As they view the images, students are given questions to consider and respond to in writing: What story does the image tell? What are other different/possible interpretations of the image? What does the image say or not say about collective or individual democratic conditions? Once students have had an opportunity to generate their responses to the questions, they are placed in small groups to begin a discussion. The goal of the discussion is for the group to come to some consensus on the meaning and/or impact of the viewed images.

In years past, Robin would ask each group to report out and she would make comments and then move to the next group. However, after participating in the shared inquiry group regarding the core practice of discussion, she decided that this year, she would give the students responsibility for running a whole-class discussion. Because the students were familiar with Soder's (2001) democratic conditions, they were able to agree that "respect for civil discourse" would be the only ground rule. As the discussion ensued, students had lively disagreements about the meaning of some of the images. Some students went online to establish a historical context for the images, while others referenced their own personal experiences with oppression.

Meanwhile, Robin found that her role was to actively listen and to suspend judgment and closure so that the discussion could be fully shaped by the students and not by her own agenda for what she thought was important for them to learn from this experience. In the end, the discussion was rich and life-giving, with students truly owning the meaning behind the visual images. It did not matter that some of their interpretations were not "accurate," what mattered more is that they engaged with each other regarding some very sensitive material and they were able to draw their own conclusions and, in some instances, agree to disagree. When evaluating the experience, the students felt proud of their ability to respectfully engage in civil discourse, which was a valuable outcome of the lesson – an outcome that would not have been promoted in the original "reporting out" model.

Simultaneous Inquiry and the Creation of New Teacher Education Tools

In addition to helping us take on new roles facilitating discussions in our university classrooms, participating in the Core Study Group helped us create new tools to support our teacher candidate learning. One goal of our program redesign was to provide our teacher candidates with more robust opportunities to build their knowledge, commitment and skill in working effectively with diverse learners. One way we have addressed this goal is through creating a new course at the beginning of our program, *EDCI3100: Multicultural Education, Equity and Social Justice*. Dorothea led the group of faculty and graduate students who designed the course. Her involvement in the Core Practice Study Group directly informed this work. She used the work that the Group had done decomposing discussion to create a major course assignment that required students to facilitate whole class discussions about key concepts and readings.

We launched the new course in fall semester 2016. Course instructors met regularly to share resources and reflect on our teaching and our students' learning. One of the resources instructors created was a discussion review sheet designed to help students analyze instructors' discussion facilitation, identify moves instructors made to spark and sustain discussion, and consider whether and why the moves were effective. Instructors also developed a set of prompts that students, working with course instructors, addressed to prepare for their own discussion facilitation. The prompts aligned with the components of discussions identified by the Core

Practice Study Group and asked students to identify objectives and plan for questions and moves they would use to promote student engagement and student-to-student responses. The discussion assignment provided teacher candidates with opportunities to develop an initial understanding of and emergent skill in facilitating discussions. It also prompted instructors to improve their own teaching. As Dorothea noted, “As we helped our students plan for their discussions, provided them feedback, and opened our own discussion practice to their critique, we planned more deliberately and reflected more deeply on our own discussion facilitation.”

Future Inquiry

Our participation in the Study Group has not only helped us enrich our practices, it has also spurred us to engage in further simultaneous inquiry. We have restructured our partnership agreements to create a new group of partner schools that we now call Collaborative Inquiry Schools (Parker, Parsons, Groth, & Brown, 2016). These schools have agreed to work with a critical mass of teacher candidates at all stages of our program and to engage with them and with university faculty in inquiry projects aimed at exploring how we can best support teacher candidates building their knowledge and skill enacting our core teaching practices. The Collaborative Inquiry Schools will allow us to bring the work of the Core Practice Study Group to scale. They will be sites on which we will be able to generate new tools, pedagogical practices and new models of working together across our whole program. One of the three schools represented in our Simultaneous Inquiry Group has agreed to be a Collaborative Inquiry School for the next 2-3 years.

Conclusion

Our experience of renewing our commitment to improve our own and our teacher candidates’ teaching practices convinces us that there is much more potential of simultaneous inquiry to support our learning about other core practices. Through creating genuine learning communities that unite teacher educators and teachers in partnering schools, simultaneous renewal can be fully realized.

Preparing effective and ethical teachers who can support all of their students’ learning requires that teacher educators and K-12 teachers work in new ways not only with teacher candidates but also with each other. Simultaneous inquiry provides a model for doing this work in ways that raises the quality of teaching across our school and university classrooms and helps us build the partnerships necessary to sustain this work.

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