

“Taking a cross-country journey with a world map”: Examining the construction of practitioner researcher identities through one case study

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Abstract:

Research about how teachers construct practitioner researcher identities is central to teacher education and professional development because it provides insight into how teachers continue to learn about and implement practices that meet the needs of their students. The paper explores how one fourth-grade teacher (Holly) constructed her practitioner researcher identities over two years. It draws upon data gathered from a year-long Teacher as Researcher course and a monthly practitioner researcher group (Triad Teacher Researchers) associated with a Southeastern university in the United States. In particular, this paper examines moments of tension when Holly was challenged to negotiate multiple identities in order to situate herself as a practitioner researcher within multiple contexts. Findings suggest that learning to ‘become’ a practitioner researcher is an identity process that involves moments of tension that are best supported through a collaborative community. The paper concludes with implications about how to facilitate spaces of identity work through various types of reflective practices in courses and groups.

Keywords: teacher research | professional development | teacher identity

Article:

Introduction

As a researcher, I am not completely there yet. A few weeks ago, I was centered more than I am now. My round stones were placed on top of each other and seemed to teeter. Now they’re wavering a bit more ... I think this is because I knew where I was going and I was just gathering the data. Over the weekend, I have begun to analyze some of my journals, and I’m scared of the messiness of it all ... If my round stones tumble, I’m not sure I will be able to clear my head enough to begin again ...

In this reflective statement, Holly, a fourth-grade teacher practitioner researcher, related the difficulty of practitioner research to that of balancing stones. Her comparison was in reference to an article written by Gerry Duffy, who stated that ‘the image of people struggling to balance round stones’ is like ‘classroom teachers, who also must bring seemingly incompatible forces into harmony’ (1998, 777). Similarly, Holly’s experience as a researcher created moments of tension in which she struggled to complete her research paper at the end of a ‘Teacher as Researcher’ course. She stated that the *messiness of it all* scared her and she was afraid that she would not be able to clear her head and *begin again* after choosing a new question to examine. Through such reflections and interviews Holly uncovered how she constructed her identity as a practitioner researcher over two years. In particular, she highlighted several moments of tension in which practitioner research challenged her to negotiate identities in order for her to situate herself as a practitioner researcher at her school.

As instructors for the course, we deliberated about Holly’s wavering round stones for several reasons. First, we worried that her struggle was an indication that we were not giving her enough guidance and support about how to construct and implement a practitioner researcher project. Second, we were concerned that the tensions she experienced in this research project would deter her from future inquiries. The following summer, however, Holly admitted that she needed to experience this tension in order to form a meaningful research project for herself and her students. She also committed to another year of practitioner research in The Triad Teacher Researcher group. Her commitment to the group and her admittance that the tensions were a necessary and valuable part of the process led us to think more about what it meant to support practitioners who are learning about research and about professional development in general. We recognized that these tensions were an important part of her learning process and viewed them as moments when she negotiated multiple identities in order to author herself as a practitioner researcher within multiple contexts.

These tensions raised more questions about how students learn to be practitioner researchers and what it meant for us as instructors and facilitators. As strong believers in practitioner research as professional development, we wanted to know more about these tensions and in what ways they facilitated the construction of practitioner researcher identities. We were also curious about what aspects of the course and group fostered guidance and support during these tensions. Research about how teachers construct practitioner researcher identities is central to teacher education and professional development because it provides insight into practitioners’ learning processes about instruction. Although much research has studied the construction of teacher identities in pre-service programs, less research has examined how teachers negotiate and navigate teacher identities through professional development, particularly through practitioner research (Assaf 2005; Britzman 1994; Danielwitz 2001). The purpose of this study is to examine how one teacher constructed her identity as a practitioner researcher over two years to offer insight on how teacher education programs and professional development can better facilitate such identity work. Specifically, we organized our discussion about Holly’s identity construction within the following three periods of her research process: developing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and transforming practice. Because identity construction often occurs during moments of struggle (Bakhtin 1981), we examined moments of tension within those processes in which Holly was challenged to negotiate multiple identities in order to author herself as a practitioner researcher within a teacher researcher course (year one) and group (year two).

Framework for the study

Below, we cover two areas of literature that frame our study. First, we briefly describe practitioner research as a form of professional development. Second, we discuss concepts of identity construction to illustrate how learning is an identity process.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) use the term ‘practitioner research’ to describe systematic and intentional inquiry by practitioners about their own classroom, school, or community. Similar to teacher research or action research, practitioner research includes research that is conducted by teachers, student-teachers, teacher-educators, and/or school leaders in classrooms, libraries and/or homes where one gathers information to improve learning and instruction (Lankshear and Knobel 2004). There are common characteristics to those who engage in such research. First, researchers typically raise and investigate questions about their teaching and learning. They then systematically collect and analyze data (sometimes with the help of students) from their classes or schools, including their own observations and reflections.

Second, researchers typically collaborate in small groups to discuss their research with their colleagues and students for support as ‘critical friends’ to validate their findings and interpretations of their data. This research is typically collective, and practitioners meet regularly to jointly construct knowledge around authentic concerns (Fairbanks and LaGrone 2006; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Third, many practitioners will make their work public by writing or presenting about their research (school-wide publication, national), or participating in practitioner research web sites, online forums, and email communications (Bissex and Bullock 1987; Mohr et al. 1999; Little and Curry 2008).

Researchers have found that involvement in such inquiry projects can enhance practitioners’ sense of professional role and identity, because it supports the idea that practitioners are legitimate agents of knowledge rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Britzman 1991; Lankshear and Knobel 2004). Practitioner research provides the opportunity for educators to engage in an inquiry stance that continually searches for significant questions, engages in problem solving, and seeks out alternative viewpoints from other practitioners (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Although research illustrates the benefits of practitioner research as professional development (Mohr et al. 1999; Lankshear and Knobel 2004), research has not concentrated enough on how educators learn to become practitioner researchers. Such a focus is important in offering more insight into the learning process of practitioners in order to construct educational spaces that foster such learning under current conditions.

Maxine Greene argues that learning to teach, ‘is a process of identity development ... it is about choosing yourself, making deeply personal choices about who you are and who you will become as a teacher’ (1981, 12). In agreement, Wenger (1998) specifies that learning is an identity process in which students construct and negotiate identities in order to become members of particular communities, such as educators. Viewing learning in this way means that ‘being’ a teacher is a constant process of ‘reconstruction, reformation or erosion, addition or expansion’ (Danielwicz 2001, 10) in which members need constant support.

Such theories draw from postmodern perspectives of identity construction that define identity as fluid, unstable, and multiple (McCarthy and Moje 2002; Mishler 1999; Sarup 1996). Holland et al. view identities as ‘self-understandings’ or the ways in which people ‘tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are’ (1998, 3). Identities are dynamic and continually shaped by numerous interactions with others and within different discourses and are situated in social, cultural, and historical worlds (Holland et al. 1998). Positionality is one way in which people enact their identities (Davies and Harré 1990). For example, educators can position themselves (reflective positioning) as practitioner researchers by developing research questions that they explore in their classrooms. Educators can also be positioned (interactive positioning) as a practitioner researcher by their colleagues if, for instance, they were asked to present their research at a faculty meeting. These positions occur discursively and along storylines that are elicited through both personal experiences and larger cultural narratives (Davies and Harré 1990). Positionings reflect daily relations of power and entitlement within a particular context and illustrate how multiple identities are constructed, enacted, and negotiated over time.

Research has attempted to study how educators negotiate multiple positions in order to situate themselves as teachers and/or construct teacher identities (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Rex and Nelson 2004; Assaf 2005). For example, several studies have examined how teachers negotiate their beliefs about teaching literature (e.g. multicultural literature) in relation to high-stakes testing (Agee 2004; Rex and Nelson 2004). Such research concluded that practitioners must learn to deal with many competing ideologies about instruction and learning in order to teach in the way they want to teach. Ritchie and Wilson (2002) found that their teacher education program offered a space for future teachers to navigate teacher identities through collaborative narrative practices; in particular, critical reflection in relation to learning and instruction. Assaf (2005) found that pre-service reading teachers used multiple discourses to make sense of learning in an undergraduate teacher education program. The negotiation of these discourses within a collaborative community shaped how the teacher fashioned her practitioner identity in the program.

All of the studies mentioned above found that the process of identity construction is often difficult and challenged with multiple negotiations of identities. Bakhtin (1981) theorized that our voices are often in conflict and we must sort through or orchestrate those voices in order to put them together in some way and fashion identities. In other words, a person develops an ‘authorial stance’ when they begin to ‘rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices’ in which they strive to ‘liberate themselves from others’ influences and expose limitations’ (Holland et al. 1998, 182–3). Similarly, Alsup (2005) found that pre-service teachers experienced moments of tension when constructing their teacher identities. She used the term ‘borderland discourses’ to describe moments of negotiation when pre-service teachers ‘did not completely repudiate their own discourse’ but also ‘accepted some of the discourses of the “other,” or of the educational community they were entering’ (Alsup 2005, 9). She argued that the borderland is an ‘in-between ground, the place of becoming, the space of ambiguity and reflection’ in which teachers were able to become ‘teachers without giving up themselves’ (2005, 8). Thus, the fashioning of identities requires negotiations or rearrangements that inevitably cause tension. As practitioners take on practitioner researcher identities they will be challenged to sort through conflicting identities in order to do so.

If practitioners are faced with such tension, then support and guidance through those struggles is key if they are to continue to take on practitioner researcher identities that transform their teaching practices. The described research studied the identity constructions of teacher candidates, but few researchers have examined the construction of practitioner teacher identities. Looking at practitioner development through an identity framework will probably add to our understanding about the learning process of practitioner researchers. With this understanding, teacher-educators may learn more about how to foster spaces that provide support and guidance for practitioners engaged in research that is likely to improve instruction and learning.

Method

This study draws upon case-study research methods, to build an interpretative analysis of how Holly constructed her practitioner researcher identities over two years of research. Specifically, this study addressed the following question: In what ways did one practitioner construct practitioner researcher identities during a Teacher as Researcher Course (year one) and a Triad Teacher Researcher group (year two)? A constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was used to investigate how Holly constructed practitioner researcher identities through interviews, online and face-to-face discussions, field note observations, and written artifacts.

Context

This study began in October 2007 in a Teacher as Researcher Course at Theory into Practice University in the southeast United States. TPU has approximately 17,157 students (31% male, 69% female) from 49 states and more than 70 countries. Minority enrollment is about 26%. Graduate students in teacher education and higher education could take this year-long Teacher as Researcher course. As the instructors of the course, we required the 25 students to write a proposal for practitioner research during the first semester and to carry out the research project during the second semester. Students wrote a paper at the end of the year describing what they found and described implications for their research. The overall objective of the course was to provide a space for practitioners to systematically research questions that transformed practice to meet the individual needs of students. A typical night in the three-hour weekly course began with questions about research in general. We then moved on to discussions about our readings, which included examples of practitioner research, pieces about how to implement practitioner research and theoretical perspectives. After discussions, practitioners shared research, worked in research groups, and held conferences with the instructors.

After the course ended, three students from the course volunteered to participate in a monthly practitioner researcher group that they later called The Triad Teacher Researchers. We met monthly to discuss research questions, methods, and findings related to their classrooms. We followed a similar protocol to the course; however, some meetings related to conference proposals and manuscripts for professional and practitioner journals. As the instructors and facilitators of this course and group, Amy and Gail situated themselves as participant researchers. Both of us engaged in practitioner research (i.e. this research study) during the course and group, and frequently talked about data collection, analysis, findings, and conclusions with the class and group.

Participants

Holly has been a teacher for seven years in a K–5 rural elementary school with approximately 700 students. She taught third grade for three years, fourth grade for three years, and now teaches Exceptional Children (EC) for Grades Four and Five. Her school did not meet adequate yearly progress targets in 2007 and was designated a school of progress with 60–80% of students at grade level, according to achievement scores. Holly decided on graduate school because she wanted to surround herself with people who were interested in teaching. She found that there were very few teachers at her school who were interested in practitioner research. During the Teacher as Researcher course, Holly studied how reading journals shaped students' metacognitive awareness of their reading skills, based on her own struggles with reading as a child. During the second year (in our group meetings), Holly researched student engagement. She chose this topic after attending a conference based on Schlechty's (2009) principles of engagement that was highly encouraged by her administration. Her purpose was to learn more about how these principles worked with her and her EC students. Holly was chosen for this study because she was heavily involved in The Triad Teacher Researchers and because she was extremely reflective about her research process.

Data collection

Data collection occurred over a period of two years. During the first year of the study, we collected artifacts from the Teacher as Researcher course, which included the following: 12 online discussions about the readings; eight online feedbacks on research proposals and papers; 11 annotations about research and practitioner journals related to research; five rough and final drafts of a research proposal and paper; five daybook entries about issues related to research; three reflections about development as a practitioner researcher; and observations from 24 class meetings. We also interviewed Holly at the end of the first year to gather information about her development as a practitioner researcher.

During the second year of the study, we collected data from The Triad Teacher Researcher meetings from the following sources: 10 audio-taped discussions of the monthly meetings; three audio-taped group interviews; a conference presentation in the form of a PowerPoint; a draft of a manuscript written about her second study; and observations and field notes from 10 meetings. These data served as artifacts for how Holly constructed and enacted her identity as a practitioner researcher over a two-year period.

Data analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and took place over several stages. Over several months, we read and re-read the various artifacts, field notes, and transcripts. Extended notes included information about how these practitioner researchers constructed their practitioner researcher identities in a one-year course and group (Miles and Huberman 1994). Throughout these two years, we continually developed and revised our interpretations of the data using constant comparison and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Specifically, we constructed a series of tables using positioning theory that helped us form categories for analysis

to understand how teachers constructed and negotiated practitioner researcher identities. The first set of tables took note of how Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher (Table 1). Because much of our data revealed how Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher, we chose to focus only on Holly's reflective positionings (Davies and Harré 1990). We recognize, however, that Holly's practitioner identities were also shaped by how others positioned her through discursive events. The second set of tables focused on moments of tension after noticing that they illustrated periods when Holly was challenged to negotiate multiple identities in order to take on a practitioner researcher identity (Table 1).

Table 1. Positionings and tensions of a practitioner researcher.

Data	Analysis
<p>I believe my interest stems from my own struggle with reading comprehension. I could read all the words well, but never remembered what I read. There I sat, reading the words, but no pictures came into my mind. I never asked questions or made connections. I now realize I was not thinking about what the words were saying. It never crossed my elementary-aged mind that I was supposed to be making meaning from the text. I thought good readers 'sounded good' when they read! Because of this struggle, I wanted to teach children to be metacognitive as they read ...</p>	<p>Position self as a student who struggled with reading comprehension Position self as teacher who develops practices based on personal experiences and learning difficulties Position self as a teacher who believes that metacognition about reading improves reading comprehension Tension: Holly negotiates between her personal experiences as a struggling learner in order to position herself as a practitioner researcher. Naturally, she wants to work through a tension that she experienced as a struggling reader in her past. Not only might this research help her, but it might also help students who struggle with reading in the same way. Thus, Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher who constructed research questions that sorted through her own learning struggles. Holly may also feel that because reading comprehension was a challenge for her, she may not know the best way to teach it to students. Thus, she positioned herself as a practitioner researcher who chooses questions linked to areas of instruction in which she may need to improve</p>

To verify and confirm interpretations of data, we triangulated field notes, interview transcripts, audio-taped group discussions, and artifacts collected from Holly. We also used other researchers to support claims, member checked with participants and peer debriefed with colleagues (Eisenhart and Howe 1992; Erickson 1986). Thick description of the experiences of this case study provided detailed portraits of what it meant to 'become' a practitioner researcher in hopes that those experiences will be informative for others. The point of the research was not to imply that all practitioner researchers experience these constructions in the same way. Instead, the intention was to provide snapshots to open dialogue about learning as an identity process, especially as it relates to practitioner research.

Tensions: constructing practitioner researcher identities

This study seeks to understand how teacher education programs and professional development can facilitate the construction and exploration of practitioner researcher identities by investigating how one teacher constructed her practitioner research identities. We organized our discussion about Holly's identity construction around tensions that describe how she negotiated multiple identities in order to situate herself as a practitioner researcher within the following three periods of her research process: developing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and transforming practice. By including several quotations from Holly, we hoped to provide a sense of individual voice that illustrated how she positioned herself as a practitioner researcher over time.

Developing questions: making sense of personal experiences

During the Teacher as Researcher course, Holly pulled from her personal experience as a struggling reader when constructing her research question. She described this process in her final paper:

I believe my interest stems from my own struggle with reading comprehension. I could read all the words well, but never remembered what I read. There I sat, reading the words, but no pictures came into my mind. I never asked questions or made connections. I now realize I was not thinking about what the words were saying. It never crossed my elementary-aged mind that I was supposed to be making meaning from the text. I thought good readers 'sounded good' when they read! Because of this struggle, I wanted to teach children to be metacognitive as they read ...

With this interest, she developed the following questions: 'What impact do thinking journals have on higher-order thinking skills?' and 'How do thinking journals impact the level of student talk during book club discussions?' Holly referred back to her personal experiences with reading, including not being able to visualize, ask questions, or make connections.

Because of this personal experience that she described as a struggle, she wanted to help her students think about what it meant to be a reader (e.g. metacognitive) who comprehends. Naturally, she wanted to work through a tension that she experienced as a struggling reader in her past. Not only might this research help her, but it might also help students who struggle with reading in the same way. Thus, Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher who constructed research questions that sorted through her own learning struggles. Holly was also concerned about her capabilities in teaching reading comprehension as a result of her personal struggles. In her paper, she responded to the tension she felt between her past experiences as a learner and her responsibilities and capabilities as a teacher. Her practitioner research study challenged her to negotiate those identities by enabling her to study an alternative way of approaching comprehension that was not traditionally practiced by her colleagues (i.e. metacognitive reading journals) in order to reach struggling readers. Thus, Holly constructed a practitioner researcher identity who posed questions based on personal/past experiences and problem-solved in order to create possible solutions for students who experienced similar dilemmas.

Developing questions: challenging institutional ideologies

During Holly's second year, she chose a topic that questioned a 'highly encouraged' staff development based on Schlechty's (2009) principles of engagement. These principles focused on developing engaging lesson plans and recognizing engaged students. Although interested in learning more about how to engage her students, especially as an EC teacher, she believed that research in her own classroom would reveal more about how engagement worked between her and her students. She explained:

My point in doing this research is we were told we have to do this and I want to look at it in a more systematic way to see if what this guy is telling us is the be all end all like our principal and superintendent are saying. So that's what I did. I designed my lessons based on the components of what he said and seeing how engaged my students were. And I did that through these engagement meters ... and journaling and anecdotal notes ... it's not really the be all end all to get kids engaged in your learning. The big piece of it is the relationship you have with your students.

As Holly constructed her identity as a practitioner researcher, she was challenged to negotiate her identity as an obedient teacher or team player with her identity as a teacher who questioned how staff development would help her meet the needs of her students. By using words such as *systematic* and *be all end all*, she positioned herself as a practitioner researcher who used research to examine gaps in institutional ideologies (i.e. principles of engagement supported by the administration) and produced possible solutions to fill those gaps. Specifically, her practitioner research provided the opportunity for her to add another element to Schlechty's model of engagement by providing case studies about the importance of building relationships and trust between teachers and students, especially those that are exceptionally challenged. It was through these negotiations that Holly was able to simultaneously meet the needs of her students and the demands of administrative staff development.

Collecting and analyzing data: letting the data tell their story

Holly consistently positioned herself as an organized practitioner researcher during the Teacher as Researcher course. In the first semester, she was one of the first students to create her question and created a concise plan about how to collect and analyze her data.

Holly meticulously developed a plan for data analysis. She described a coding analysis of children's thinking that included categories of questioning, visualizing, and reflection. She also planned to focus on:

one academically gifted student, one student of medium ability, and one student representing a lower ability level. Through the case studies, I hope to provide the reader with a clear picture of the thinking done by that particular child. I then plan to provide the reader with an overview of that particular group's thinking in general.

As the second semester progressed, however, Holly grew frustrated with her project and lost passion about her topic. In discussions, reflections, and informal interviews she described the tension she felt between creating a study that was easy to analyze and her desire to do research that informed teaching and learning in her classroom. As she examined her data through categories she constructed prior to data collection, she felt that she was studying something that she already knew. She grew frustrated and stopped writing because she did not see trends that she anticipated seeing across the ability groups. She stated:

I need to find something! ... I am not quite sure how I will possibly make sense of the *mess* I foresee overtaking me as I begin to analyze my data. How will I ever be able to see trends in their thinking? Do I have too much data? (Emphasis added)

Her research group encouraged her to broaden her question and examine the data without pre-constructed categories. Based on their advice, she changed her question in February from ‘What impact do thinking journals have on higher-order thinking skills?’ to ‘What can thinking journals tell us about fourth graders’ metacognition?’ At this point, we see Holly coming to terms with a research question that was meaningful, but messy and difficult. Although her data collection and analysis was planned for her first question, she later found that process to be contrived. Holly explained this realization:

My data was informing my question, I suppose, but my question wasn’t ... I didn’t really feel like it was, it was going to be a *so what* at the end ... When I was trying to find the information, I was like, *who cares?* That doesn’t really matter to me. So what I really want to know is ...

In this conversation, she raised an interesting question: ‘Is the *so what* of teacher research imperative to the research?’ For Holly, she needed to have a clear and powerful *so what* in order for her to be invested in her research. The *so what* was hard for Holly, especially as she struggled to understand what it meant to engage in data analysis. This tension led to feelings of confusion and despair. In an interview, Holly stated: ‘I have changed my research question a little bit and am unsure of the wording. I feel as though I am back at step one in many respects.’ In this statement, she positioned herself from super-organized researcher to one who was uncertain and overwhelmed by the messiness of the data. This messiness almost paralyzed her as a researcher. In a reflection, she stated:

As a researcher, I am not completely there yet. A few weeks ago, I was centered more than I am now. My round stones were placed on top of each other and seemed to teeter. Now they’re wavering a bit more ... I think this is because I knew where I was going and I was just gathering the data. Over the weekend, I have begun to analyze some of my journals, and I’m scared of the messiness of it all ... If my round stones tumble, I’m not sure I will be able to clear my head enough to begin again ...

As mentioned in the opening, her wavering round stones represented her uneasiness with not knowing what her data might reveal. No longer did she feel like everything was in order. Instead it was messy and this messiness caused her to position herself as unsure and wavering. For Holly, the idea of not having a plan was scary. Interestingly, she used the words *disequilibrium*, *confusion*, and *despair* to describe analysis:

Analysis is a state of *disequilibrium* in which a researcher attempts to organize data, refine questions, and draw conclusions based on the data. *Confusion + despair* happen but seem to lead you to where you were wanting to go. Analysis is like taking a cross-country journey with a world map instead of a road map.

Holly’s comparison of analysis with traveling across country with just a world map illustrated how she was intimidated by the ambiguity and vastness of coding. She tried to control those unknowns through pre-constructed categories, but later learned they did not inform her practice. At the end of the year, Holly realized that this tension was ‘scary’ but necessary. She said:

Even though I got frustrated with myself and felt like I had wasted the entire semester, it was good that I did that as a researcher. I mean, yeah it's frustrating, but if I want to continue to do the research, regardless if it is a new research question or whatever, I think that I needed to go through that so I saw what I really need to think about that question.

Ultimately Holly chose to examine the data in a way that unraveled stories about her students' learning, which led to a more meaningful study. This is an important tension for Holly, because it represents a more sophisticated understanding of research analysis. Holly negotiated a doable but contrived analysis with an ambiguous one in order to reveal findings that informed her practice. Thus, Holly constructed herself as a practitioner researcher who understood that meaningful findings are revealed through a careful but messy process of analysis that is far from simple. Regardless of the challenge, Holly stuck with it and jumped into data collection and analysis about a new topic the following year.

Data collection and analysis: legitimizing her research process

In the second year, Holly began with the following research question: 'What affects fourth and fifth grade EC students' engagement in learning?' She followed a similar research process as her first. In a discussion, she positioned herself as follows: 'I go in with preconceived notions ... not about the answer but about how to do it. I'm an over organizer.'

Holly organized her data collection methods, but as she collected and began preliminary analysis she became frustrated again. She said:

I feel like I already have the answer. It's a common sense question with a commonsense answer. I was all excited about it and this happens to me all the time ... My answer to my question is simply – in order to engage kids you need to know kids.

Again, Holly arrived at a place in which she believed that her research was not informing her teaching and she felt stuck. This year was different, however, in that Holly felt as though she was a practitioner researcher who came to terms with her research process. She said:

I think that I've established myself in my own mind as a teacher researcher ... If I compare myself to last year. I was sort of figuring it out as I went and I was sort of panicking. Well, I'm still panicking, but it's a better panic. I kind of have this mode of operation and I'm actually going to kind of talk about it in my presentation this evening ... I feel like I'm okay with the fact that I overorganize myself at the beginning. I know exactly what I'm going to do and halfway through I just switch gears. But I think that's just how I operate. That's my process. And I knew that going in this time. This is the point I was at last year and now I know what to do this time and I'm a little, I'm just okay with it, I guess ... I have more confidence but I am still questioning things I decide, write, and say. I guess I am more at peace with what I'm doing.

At this point in the process, Holly situates herself as a practitioner researcher intimidated by the messiness of qualitative analysis. Similar to the first year, the collaborative dialogues in the Triad

Teacher Researcher group pushed her to think about her research questions and to examine what the data were telling her. After Holly said that she already knew the answer to her question – that teachers need to build relationships with students, understand their individual needs, and consider their mood when it comes to engagement, especially with special needs students – Joy disagreed:

Joy: That's what teachers don't do ... that's the problem. They don't take time to figure out what makes Jack tick. It's not as natural because it is a struggle.

Holly: I like that ... what makes Jack tick ... I want to come away with something that is useful to me, at the very least to me, then if I can pass that on at a conference or journal article ...

Joy used words like *problem* and *time* to remind Holly that her research was valuable even though it seemed obvious. This collaboration pushed Holly to think about how to engage in a research project that was valuable to her, to her students, and to other teachers. During a practice session, Holly said: 'And then I will tell them my research question: what makes kids tick?' By taking up a more meaningful question, Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher with a clear purpose that would speak to other practitioners.

In order to do this, however, she positioned herself as a qualitative researcher who relied on field notes, interviews, and surveys. This kind of data made her nervous because they were not as easy to analyze as quantifiable data. She also questioned the validity of a study that did not have numbers. In a group meeting, she stated:

I'm glad I did memos, but I don't have numbers ... Do I need numbers? I focused on the characteristics of lessons ... and when I went back through I found three categories, one of those is student mood. Another category is the relationship between teacher and student. Every teacher has a different relationship with their kids and I am starting to see that does play a role ... This is just observation ...

Holly struggled to negotiate ideologies about the value of quantitative and qualitative research. Regardless, she was pulled towards qualitative data because they spoke to questions about her classroom and individual students. In a PowerPoint presentation for a national conference, she provided an example of rich description from a case study that impacted on her understanding of engagement:

Today during our 'swing set conversation', Jordan mentioned that he will be taking a trip this summer to visit his dad (whom he never sees). Immediately, I thought that we could create a meaningful research project about the town in which his dad lives. We called mom immediately on my cell phone, and in 5 minutes we were on the computer looking up [town]. He was excited and highly engaged in finding out information about where his dad lives.

It was this kind of qualitative analysis that led Holly to her final argument about the importance of engaging students by building relationships through events such as swing set conversations. Holly's negotiation between quantifiable data and the rich description of qualitative data

represented that Holly was constructing a practitioner researcher identity who valued case studies because they helped her answer questions she posed about individual students. She started to leave behind the traditional concept of quantifiable research as 'legitimate' and recognized that rich journal entries would provide more insight into ways to engage her individual students. Holly began to take on a more sophisticated position of a practitioner researcher who understood that the type of analysis used in a study depended on the kind of question that was posed by the researcher.

Transforming instruction: disrupting assumptions about students

Holly's practitioner research helped her better understand the individual needs of her students. Over both years, Holly positioned herself as a practitioner researcher who disrupted assumptions about her students through her research, and as a result transformed her practice. Her first study changed the assumptions she made about students and led to more individualized instruction:

So, my assumption was, this is great, I need to teach all my kids this and it will work for everybody the same way it worked for me. What I found was I was only partially right ... these thinking journals, requiring kids to write down their thinking while reading, helps some of them to slow their reading down which was a good thing or a bad thing depending on the child. And then it also helped them remember what they read and talk about it with their peers in book club meetings ... So it was very individualized where I was thinking I was going to see something among high, medium, or low kids so I would just lump them all together ... that didn't happen at all.

Holly's use of words like *assumptions* and *the same way it worked for me* indicated that she assumed just because a strategy worked for her, it would work for all of her kids. She found out she was *partially right*, and learned that these strategies can work if they are individualized depending on the needs of the students. She used 'practitioner researcher' language in her use of *I found* and *informed me* to position herself as a practitioner researcher who critically reflects about the assumptions she made and makes modifications based on those assumptions.

During her second year, Holly described a similar transformation:

For me, research has shown that engaging kids shows more about relationships between teacher and student than the mood of the student ... We do need to design lessons that are engaging that have specific components. This has changed how I teach. I am more aware of relationships. I have a personal part of teaching not just lesson planning. I journal more ...

Through the words *relationships* and *mood*, Holly outlined other factors related to engagement that Schlechty's model does not mention. She positioned herself as a teacher who used practitioner research to reveal specific information about learning and instruction that she did not know otherwise. Based on that information, she transformed practice that *changed* how she taught and made her more *aware* of these factors when engaging students in lessons.

Final thoughts: what does this case study teach us about practitioner research?

Neither interpretive nor process-product classroom research has foregrounded the teacher's role in the generation of knowledge about teaching. What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching, therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices. (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990, 2)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) argue that more research needs to examine the ways in which teachers transform practices and generate knowledge about teaching. This article attempts to illustrate the learning process of one teacher by examining how she constructed and enacted a practitioner researcher identity. We highlighted four major tensions to illustrate how she negotiated multiple identities in order to take on new positions of a practitioner researcher. First, as Holly constructed her first research question, she was challenged to negotiate her past experiences as a learner (i.e. struggling reader) with the teaching practices of her school (i.e. fluency drills). This negotiation led her to try an alternative practice in her classroom (i.e. metacognitive journals) that she legitimized through systematic analysis. Second, Holly negotiated administrative needs (i.e. student engagement) with the individual needs of her students. This negotiation led Holly to take on a position of authority as she questioned these encouraged practices within the context of her classroom. Third, during the data collection and analysis of her research, Holly was challenged to navigate research that was both uncertain and meaningful in both years. The ambiguity of this process caused Holly to feel confusion and despair during the first year; however, in the second year, she became more comfortable with the process and focused on allowing the data to reveal the answer to her question. This led Holly to create more meaningful questions. Finally, as Holly transformed her instructional and professional practices, she was challenged to negotiate between her personal assumptions about the way students learn and the individual needs of her students. This led Holly to not only be aware of student needs, but also construct creative solutions to reach those needs.

Learning to become a practitioner researcher, then, was an identity process for Holly that involved several tensions. Interestingly, Holly experienced similar tensions during data collection and analysis during both years (i.e. negotiating doable, legitimate, and meaningful research). Experiencing similar struggles illustrates how identity construction is constant and always evolving. In other words, as long as Holly chooses to do practitioner research, she will construct her identities as a practitioner researcher and will need the support of other practitioner researchers to help her through that construction, especially as she is challenged with tensions.

Her collaboration with other practitioner researchers was an important and valuable part of her process. Her membership and recognition within the practitioner researcher class and group fashioned Holly's identity as a practitioner researcher and her commitment to investigating meaningful inquiries that examine the specific needs of her students. It was through collective conversations that Holly pushed through her tensions in order to make sense out of the confusion. Wenger argues that, 'Identification with others who make meaning together has the potential to enable one's identity' (1998, 207). This investigation suggests that belonging to a learning community such as the Teacher as Researcher course and The Triad Teacher Researcher group shaped her identity construction and learning process as a practitioner. Such a

collaborative environment can provide teachers with a supportive network to discuss tensions within practitioner research and shape their identities as both teachers and practitioner researchers. For Holly, this space provided homegrown professional development in which she searched for meaning and legitimacy that enabled her to practice agency within a restrictive context.

Implications

Our goal for teachers is to provide a space for them to experiment in reaching the ‘in-between ground, the place of becoming, the space of ambiguity and reflection’ (Alsup 2005, 8). We believe that teachers need to develop professionally in a space that offers occasions for them to change their minds, realize they do not know everything, realize they know something, and navigate positions that allow them to ‘be’ teachers without ‘giving up themselves’ (Alsup 2005, 10). In other words, teachers need spaces that facilitate and support tensions. Reflection in various forms facilitated the construction of practitioner researcher identities in both the course and group. We stress the word ‘various’ because with the recent trend for reflection we believe that it is important to challenge our students to reflect in diverse ways that go beyond asking them merely to write a reflection. Below, we describe various reflective practices that fostered Holly’s identity work as a practitioner researcher.

Annotations

In annotations, Holly reflected on literature related to the content of her project. One purpose for the annotations was to help teachers shift their focus from a teacher’s perspective to a researcher’s perspective. Holly commented about how the authors of the articles collected and analyzed data and wrote their findings and conclusions. This kind of reflection throughout one semester of the year-long course modeled for her what it was like to write-up practitioner research. It provided an opportunity for her to imagine the kind of practitioner researcher she wanted to become, which evolved over time. These annotations continued in the research group when members worked on literature reviews for new questions.

Daybooks

Holly also reflected in a daybook, which is a notebook in which practitioner researchers record any thoughts, data, clippings, and so forth that relate to their research. Students often think of it like a research scrapbook (Brannon et al. 2008). In class, practitioner researchers were asked to reflect on certain aspects of their research process. For example, teachers were also asked to form a visual roadmap for their study, including data collection, analysis, and a timeline. This kind of reflection helped them ‘do’ practitioner research. They were also asked to write down assumptions, make a top-10 list of wonderings, and position themselves as researchers. Oftentimes, students pasted clippings or student work to remind them of thoughts related to their research. This kind of exercise involved personal, methodological, and theoretical reflection that occurred at any point during the year.

Collaborative groups

Holly was also a member of a small research group in a class of 30, and during the second year a member of a research group of three to five. They engaged in online discussions about their writing and annotations and peer-edited and evaluated proposals and final papers. During face-to-face meetings, these collaborative groups provided constructive feedback and critical reflection with colleagues, both inside and outside their educational community.

Metaphorical reflection

Holly was also asked to engage in metaphorical reflection about what it meant to be a practitioner researcher. At the beginning of the course she chose three pictures that represented what a practitioner researcher meant to her. At the end of the year she updated that reflective piece with either new pictures or the same pictures but an updated reflection. This kind of reflection expected her to think about what it meant to be a practitioner researcher in the hope that she would be able to imagine herself as one. This kind of reflection continued in the group meetings in year two during conversations that I began with open-ended questions such as follows: choose one word/image to describe yourself as a practitioner researcher and explain why.

Memos, proposals, and final papers

Finally, reflection occurred in analytic memos, research proposals, a final paper, conference presentation, and manuscript. Each of these reflective assignments illustrated ‘doing’ research rather than theorizing about it. Holly was expected to use data she collected and make sense out of them in words for a wide audience. Such work illustrated how she enacted her practitioner identities.

These reflective practices, most of which involved a collaborative aspect, provided opportunities for Holly to construct practitioner researcher identities that shaped learning and instruction in her classroom. In his work about reflective practice, Schon suggested:

When teachers move beyond the automatic and begin to consider the effects of their actions on students and to devise alternatives, they find that they deal with uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict. They become better problem solvers, better informed and develop a language that becomes a part of their professional identity. (1987, 57)

This process of inquiry is ongoing and recursive and oftentimes requires the practitioner to unlearn how they teach (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Teacher-educators and researchers would benefit from future examinations about the identity constructions of practitioner researchers and the ways in which professional learning communities foster or stifle continual professional growth.

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