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# “I Can Ask a Question About The Stuff I’m Already Doing, And That’s Research?”: Finding The Researcher in Everyone

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# “I Can Ask a Question About the Stuff I’m Already Doing, and That’s Research?”

## Finding the Researcher in Everyone

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Serving in my first year as an editor for *i.e.: inquiry in education*, I am honored to write the editorial for our Fall issue. It is chock-full of captivating pieces that range from discussions of equity in early childhood to examples of teacher educator action research models. I feel particularly lucky to get the chance to review these articles, given that many of them speak to the work I have been doing over the last 10 years in early childhood and higher education.

As the director of an early childhood master’s program, I have witnessed the passion and dedication of early childhood providers. Underpaid, undervalued, and often disrespected in the field of education (yes, even in higher education), early childhood professionals are a unique group of individuals. I have been known to brag to my colleagues that you will not find a more impassioned group professionals than in this program! The majority of my students are current directors of child care programs, or early childhood teachers with the aspiration of becoming directors or administrators. Many of these students have not been in school for over 10 years. They are returning to pursue a master’s degree to deepen their practice and improve their leadership skills. They will likely not earn a pay raise after completion of this program; they are here to improve the quality of services they provide for children. The students in this program often sail through the first few classes (with the expected challenges of returning to student life and learning new technology), and are inspired and excited by the applied and relatable content they are engaging with. At about the midway point of this 32-credit-hour program, they are required to take an action research course, and most often I am their instructor. Panic, fear, hesitation, and apprehension are the most common reactions to the course title alone! These early childhood students are so well versed in their profession, yet they do not see themselves as “researchers,” nor do many of them make the connection to the work they are doing on a daily basis that mirrors the formal process we are about to embark on.

Coming up with their research questions and pinpointing what problem or issue they want to tackle is often the most difficult part of the course. The first versions of student-suggested questions or topics often starts big: “How does XYZ influence child development?” After several

round-robins of edits, suggestions, and discussions, the questions narrow down: “Can XYZ intervention decrease biting in the toddler classroom?” On the road to the development of these more specific, “doable” questions, there is often a “light-bulb” moment when students realize they can ask questions about things they are actually already doing, and experiment with small tweaks to their practice. The tension recedes and the early childhood professional begins to see herself as a researcher in residence. I remember after a lengthy meeting with one student, we had finally narrowed in on her topic, looking at how to increase parent engagement in her preschool program. She said, “Hold on, you’re saying I can ask a question about the stuff I’m already doing, and that’s ‘research’? Shoot, had I known that, I wouldn’t have developed this ulcer!” Guiding the students to this point is not easy, and over the last five years of teaching this course, I have likely learned more about my own teaching practices in this process than the students have learned from me. The articles in this issue provide some wonderful examples of questions and topics that are likely the result of many light-bulb moments that have led to thoughtful examinations of practice and inquiry.

This is particularly poignant in a joint reflective piece by Fulmer and Bodner, who capture the process of a teacher educator research capstone project and suggest some inspiring possibilities for revisioning the way we conduct this task in higher education. With the goal of fostering inquiry as a career-long stance, the authors offer some innovative, yet practical suggestions that aim to transform the teacher research capstones to “feature process as the most important element” (p.11). The authors believe “teacher research may possess the potential to cultivate an inquiry stance in our teaching candidates that will not only impact their classroom instruction, but will inform construction of a critically reflective professional identity, sustaining teachers as researchers in this challenging profession” (p.13).

Cue and Casey take an interesting look into a capstone course for college seniors using cultural literacy circles with the goal of studying theories of practice and enacting them. The participatory authors found a lack of action about issues of oppression, but much rich discussion. As the student–teachers expressed reinventions, the authors concluded that the act of reinvention is not reduced to a gesture or a one-time occurrence. They state:

It is not something that we perform to maximize the humanizing potential of our present pedagogical setting, once, and then move on to the next “step.” Rather, we must understand that there are no “steps” to the praxis of humanizing education. The messiness of “real life,” of really existing men and women in the world, requires that we be reflexive and responsive to the complex demands we are presented with. (p.15)

In an insightful qualitative study, Guy explores the use of active learning in teaching practices of STEM faculty in undergraduate programs. Grouping the findings based on faculty persona, Guy details the barriers, support factors, and needs of faculty who have implemented active learning techniques in their teaching at some level. Mirroring other research on individualized education in K-12, this research provides a similar stance of recommending individualized support for faculty looking to implement these effective teaching techniques in higher education. Guy concludes that “because each faculty persona has needs that cannot be achieved by the faculty member independent of outside help, it is clear that administration and faculty members must work together to develop customizable ways to increase faculty use of AL” (p. 6). This

interaction, it seems, may be the hard work that is at stake for institutions of higher education in supporting faculty teaching.

DiDomenico investigates teachers' use of music in elementary classrooms and provides some specific and useful suggestions for music integration techniques that improve learning and classroom functioning. Looking into these "alternative" methods of instruction and process, DiDomenico sums up his findings nicely:

The bottom line is that music should be creatively integrated and taught at the teacher's ability level—regardless of what that level might be. As indicated earlier, music is fun, and fun is fundamental to children's engagement level and their motivation to learn. (p. 22)

The author uses his own love of this practice to explore and broaden our understanding of how teachers can be successful at this integration.

In another example of an author using her experience with a unique teaching practice, Baker-Ramos explores the use of signing and gestures in populations of nonverbal children. Through thorough observations of nonverbal children with different levels of expressive and receptive language, Baker-Ramos is able to document the value of positive responses to sign and gesture as a method of communication support:

When signing is consistently produced, encouraged, and supported, the child's ability to be understood increases and leads to greater overall comprehension and mastery of language. When a child lacks the skills to communicate, frustration develops and attempts to communicate diminish. (p. 35)

With a specific goal-driven study of improving fluency for learners of English as a foreign language, Molina carries out an action research project in a Chilean technical university with 40 students learning English. Employing the 3/2/1 technique, the author compares this methodology in a control group using a similar technique to demonstrate an increase in fluency. Her findings also demonstrate improved confidence in conversing in English, based on student feedback. Given that "fluency can be one of the most difficult [areas] to improve" (p.1), this study demonstrates a noteworthy and replicable step in the right direction to helping EFL students gain confidence. This study is another great example of a teacher using inquiry to tweak her existing practice to help her gain enhanced understanding of her impact.

In a related essay on inquiry in teacher preparation programs, Yeigh describes the process of candidate action research from start to finish, culminating in a conference-like event for candidates to present their research. Yeigh describes one of the key elements of success for these projects as "turning ownership over to the teacher candidates," with the goal of supporting "sustained inquiry in ways that contribute to a long and thoughtful teaching career" (p. 4). Supporting this sustained inquiry, it seems, should be the goal of higher education programs providing these experiences for their students.

Heath and Colket speak to many of the elements reviewed in this issue by offering a joint perspective on a unique model of a teacher education program that is guided by a commitment to inquiry-based practice. This retrospective reflective piece details one graduate student's process of deepening his inquiry skills, and at the same time, transforming his understanding of effective teaching and learning. The goal of this article is to offer an example of one teacher's perspective on how learning inquiry *as* he was learning to teach has created a sustained model in his current practice. The authors state, "In the end, he realized that it was the combination of the collaborative and the individual work that made his inquiry process all the richer, and this realization is now feeding back into his practice as a teacher" (p.12).

Finally, Mohan reviews the book *Everyday Equity: Creating Early Childhood Classrooms That Welcome All* (Anderson, 2017), which explores the complex difference between equality and equity in early childhood education. A topic near and dear to my heart, this book looks closely at the silent bias that exists in all of us and how this impacts the care and education our youngest children receive during the most critical years of their lives.

This issue is full of dynamic conversations about inquiry, and explores the many avenues teachers, practitioners, and students travel in search of strengthening their practice. As this quarter nears conclusion for my early childhood action research students, I am eager to read their final reports. And, as I always remind my students towards the end of their data collection, some projects don't "work." There are times when what you hoped to see change based on your actions just doesn't happen. As hard as it is to accept, this is okay! The process of inquiry is not only in service of finding answers and solving problems, but learning more about your burning questions and your practice. Failed research done well is no failure at all, but fodder for our future pursuits. I have ridden the waves of uncertainty, confusion, and clarity along with my students these last 10 weeks, and as in quarters before, I know I will find great satisfaction in seeing their final products, just as I have enjoyed reading this issue of *i.e.: inquiry in education*.

## References

Anderson, P. N. (2017). *Everyday equity: Creating early childhood classrooms that welcome all*. Seattle, WA: Coriolis Press.