

Feature Article

The Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network (PALPIN)

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Introduction

In October, 1991, I sat at a large conference table with 14 or 15 other adult literacy practitioners and tried to be patient with the explanation of qualitative research. The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP) seminar had just started, and our mission, as I understood it, was to read some of the research literature and talk about it in the context of our own practice. Since we later would do research projects in our own classrooms or programs, we needed to talk through qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. We received a two-column handout at the beginning of the presentation, and over the quantitative column I wrote, "PI: Politically Incorrect." Over the qualitative column I wrote, "PC: Flaky." I did not understand how qualitative research could possibly count as research. If, on a theoretical level, qualitative research did count, I could never do it. The idea that I might engage in research was not ludicrous or laughable; it was just completely beyond my realm of the possible.

Despite my skepticism about qualitative research I stayed in the seminar, and I am very clear that I stayed because the group gave me opportunities to talk about my work as a teacher. Group members listened while I told big stories about learners and class sessions and how confused I was about my practice. No one tried to solve my problems or fix me. I could

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just talk, and the group just listened and asked questions and made observations.

The idea that I could just talk allowed me to bring myself to that conference table in a way that I had never experienced previously. Rather than trying to wrap all my teaching issues in a tidy package set off with a bow of solutions, I could lay out all the conflicts that beset my practice. I could just talk without knowing the correct answer or the equation that would yield instant success in the classroom. In addition, I had opportunities to just talk in ways that accessed and acknowledged my personal history, identity, and knowledge. Who I was and where I came from was important, and even crucial, to my teaching. Despite my initial skepticism, that seminar became one of the most powerful experiences of my career.

I have three goals for this article. First, I will explain a bit of the history and background of practitioner inquiry in Pennsylvania. Second, I will describe what happens during the course of an inquiry group. Third, I will discuss the implications of involving practitioners in creating knowledge for themselves, each other, and the adult literacy field.

Practitioner Inquiry: History and Background

Practitioner inquiry in adult literacy draws heavily on the K-12 teacher research framework of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993). They define teacher research as “systematic, intentional inquiry carried about by teachers in their own programs or classrooms” (pp. 23-24). The phrase, teacher research, was changed to practitioner inquiry for two reasons. First, the word practitioner was intended to include the diverse range of staff at adult literacy programs. Second, the change from research to inquiry was intended to signal the use of a much broader set of activities than those associated with traditional research. These broader activities include collaborative analysis of data and structured, reflective conversations about practice.

Practitioner inquiry moved formally from K-12 to adult literacy in 1991 when the National Center on Adult Literacy funded the Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP). One of ALPIP’s purposes was to explore the potential for using inquiry as an approach to professional development. ALPIP was facilitated by Susan Lytle, Alisa Belzer, and Rebecca Reumann, and that trio and others generated several seminal publications. Among these are *Invitation to Inquiry: Rethinking*

Staff Development in Adult Literacy Education (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1992) and *Initiating Inquiry: Adult Literacy Teachers, Tutors and Administrators Research Their Practice* (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1993).

Since 1995 Alisa Belzer has received funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Adult Basic and Literacy Education Bureau, for the Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network (PALPIN). Belzer envisioned creating a statewide delivery system for inquiry based professional development. Becoming a statewide initiative has meant being responsive to the diverse contexts in which practitioners work. To accommodate this diversity, PALPIN implements a range of inquiry communities. Inquiry groups in different professional development regions may vary considerably in format, topics, and intensity. For example, the Fall Institute is an annual, four-day seminar. Participants gather in Philadelphia for an intense inquiry seminar and then return home to implement their individual projects with support from PALPIN staff and mentors. The Leadership Institute is held concurrently with the Fall Institute. New facilitators practice inquiry leadership skills as the participants in the Fall Institute learn about inquiry. The leadership institute functions as the primary avenue to build leadership capacity around the commonwealth.

PALPIN also offers two-day mini-institutes for regional groups. In addition, some inquiry groups are program based. In other words, co-workers from one program form an inquiry community. Finally, some inquiry groups meet face-to-face a few times and accomplish most of their work on-line.

No matter the specific context or format utilized by a particular community, each includes four features:

1. Inquiry groups are context based. The work grows out of the realities of local contexts. Inquiry questions are driven by the practitioner's prior experiences and future goals.
2. Inquiry groups build community. An inquiry group builds and sustains professional networks within and across programs, regions, states, and the nation.
3. Inquiry groups generate new knowledge for the individual and the field.
4. Inquiry groups build agency. Inquiry groups enable practitioners to take a more active role in conversations about policy, program development and reform issues. (Harrill & Belzer, 1998, pp. 1.4-1.5)

Inquiry Group Activities

Activities that occur during the course of a group include critically reading, writing, and talking about current reading instruction literature in relation to practice and experience, writing and sharing vignettes from practice, analyzing data from practice collaboratively, and engaging in reflective conversations. Using these collaborative inquiry processes, groups “build on the knowledge and experiences of practitioners as they collectively reflect on and analyze issues of literacy, language, learning and teaching” (Harrill & Belzer, 1998, p. 1.5).

Many of these processes and methods were developed by Pat Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect School in Vermont. Carini (1975) writes,

The process illustrates with equal emphasis the uniqueness of perspective each person brings to an idea, and the power of collective thought generated by this diversity. . . . The outcome of this process is a wider, deeper and more richly textured understanding. . . . Perhaps of no less importance, a strong respect and appreciation is engendered for the contributions of the viewpoints of other persons, to these new understandings. For the individual participant, the process prompts further thought. (pp. 1-2)

In addition, these processes invite inquiry participants to discuss issues or challenges in the field by first accessing their own prior knowledge, background, and experiences. For example, a recent group’s exploration of diversity began with participants writing and sharing about a time when they felt different in school. These personal and often painful memories about feeling outcast in educational settings provided a very personal starting place for the construction of knowledge about diversity.

While the specific activity might vary, all of “these structured conversations are designed to value the multiple perspectives in the group, encourage description over evaluation, and support a questioning stance on issues and challenges from practice” (Harrill & Belzer, 1998, p 2.5). In addition to these group processes, there are other, more individual activities that take place during the course of an inquiry group. These include keeping a reflective journal about the readings, practicing, holding group meetings, documenting practices, and implementing and writing the inquiry project.

The Inquiry Project

Practitioners often enter a group with a question or concern about practice. The reading, writing, and talking in the group often help bring those questions into sharper focus. There are two general kinds of questions that most practitioners ask: “What’s going on here?” and “What happens when?” For example, someone might ask: “What’s going on during meetings of student/tutor pairs?” Or someone might ask: “What happens when I change my curriculum from GED workbooks to a greater variety of materials?”

Once they’ve articulated an inquiry question, participants begin collecting data. Many different forms of data collection are available; observations and field notes, journals, interviews, surveys using focus groups, and document analysis are the most commonly used. Participants are assisted in choosing data collection methods that are the most appropriate for their project.

Data analysis is the next phase of the project. This analysis occurs both collaboratively and individually. Collaborative data analysis involves the entire group looking closely at one piece of data from an individual’s project and giving her/him feedback. Collaborative data sharing is quite similar to the reflective conversations described above.

The collaborative sessions are set up in advance. The group facilitator and the participant work together to choose the piece of data, write a focusing question for the session, and decide on “rounds.” The focusing question is designed to guide the group’s response to the data. The rounds might include the question: “What stands out?” In response each group participant states the facet of the data that she finds the most striking. Recommendations for next steps for research or practice is another type of round that participants might choose.

Data sharing sessions benefit the presenter and the group. The presenter gets feedback from the entire group—a process that deepens his understanding of the data. The group participants may gain new ideas or insights about practice which deepen their own understandings as well.

Participants also engage in individual data analysis in which they examine deeply their own data for recurring themes. Group participants are taught about methods of individual data analysis and are supported through this process.

The final report is generally an 8-to-10-page document, which includes four parts: the story of the question, methods of data collection,

findings, and implications. The story of the question includes information about the practitioner's context and why and how he chose to examine a particular question. The data collection section involves a description of the methods used during the project. The findings section is the analysis of the data: "What do the data mean?" The implications section discusses the questions "So what?" "What do the findings mean?" "What further questions have been kicked up by the project?"

Implications

Adult literacy practitioner inquiry groups offer an alternative to traditional professional development. Lytle, Belzer, and Reumann (1992) write,

Rather than altering participants' practices, beliefs, and understandings, or training them in predetermined skills and knowledge, the staff development participants are active constructors of their own professional practice who acquire and generate knowledge as members of educational communities rather than as individuals. (p. 2)

Practitioners bring richly contextualized knowledge to the table. In a 1999 study I facilitated an inquiry group of experienced practitioners as we explored the reading instruction. One of the findings of that study involved practitioners' contextualized knowledge about practice. In the following quotation a member of that group uses her experience to problematize the idea that the research on children's literacy acquisition can be applied to teaching adults:

How can you compare adults and children? . . . Children have no influences, no bad habits, no other stuff to worry about. So many factors influence adults that don't influence children. . . . Issues that affect learning with an adult just don't happen with a child. . . . They [adults] come in, they do good one day and they come in the next day, and tragedy has happened and . . . they totally cannot remember—so you can't separate what's happening in the brain from what they're going through. (Harrill, 1999, p. 14)

Other researchers have noted that practitioners bring this sort of richly contextualized knowledge to the table (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993;

Duckworth, 1986). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) write,

In teachers' communities, this kind of rich descriptive talk helps make visible and accessible the day-to-day events, norms and practices of teaching and learning and the ways that different teachers, students, administrators, and families understand them. . . . When teachers' conversations build thick description they conjointly uncover relationships between concrete cases and more general issues and constructs. (p. 95)

With their contextualized knowledge and the opportunities for rich descriptive talk, practitioners can serve as important sources of knowledge for each other and the field. In particular, I believe that experienced practitioners have a wealth of knowledge about adult teaching and learning to offer the field. However, the voices of these practitioners in adult literacy are often ignored or silenced. Outcries by makers of public policy for professional development and development of a "knowledge base" often rely on university-based researchers to supply that knowledge (Foster, 1990; Shanahan, Meehan, & Mogge, 1994). The diverse voices of practitioners in the field have no place in the "knowledge base."

It is crucial to add the voices of practitioners to the literature on adult reading development and instruction. This adding of voices is important for the field, which is missing an important resource. It is also important for practitioners. Nagle (1999) writes,

It is . . . important for educational researchers to value the voices of teachers. Educational research should empower teachers. Unfortunately, it rarely does because the voice of the teacher usually is not part of the analysis of schooling. Empowering teachers by asking to hear their school experiences and validating their interpretations of what happens within schools may be one important step toward putting theory into practice. This step would also help teachers examine presuppositions and biases they might bring to their classrooms. (p. 183)

Finally, it is crucial for us to talk together; practitioners in the field, adult learners, funders, policy-makers, and university-based researchers must begin engaging in the rich, generative talk customary in inquiry groups.

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