

# Research in Teacher Education: Influence of Multigenerational Stories on Future Teachers

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In this commentary we offer our perspective as teacher educators on the engaging narrative inquiry of Chanelle Peters, Natasha Robinson, and Keisha Ellis learning directly from veteran teachers of color, as documented in their article, “Passing on the Torch: From Veterans to Future Educators.” As researchers, we know the veteran’s stories collected risked being lost. As teacher educators working with new teachers we want to contribute to meaningful experiences that honor diversity among preservice teachers. We seek to contribute a quality vehicle that supports the decisive influence of role models outside the university.

Preparation for meaning-filled experiences over time, such as teacher inquiry, is essential in teacher preparation (DiLucchio & Leaman 2012). Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha each engaged in individual teacher inquiry projects during their student teaching semesters. The teacher inquiry experience in our program consists of: developing an inquiry question, utilizing institutional and practitioner data, and enacting multiple iterations to inform both the teacher’s effect on student learning as well as her own professional growth. Beyond the program-driven requirements, Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha engaged in the independent level of research of which they have written.

The research literature documents the consistent use of qualitative interview protocol as a reflective and/or learning opportunity. The protocol these young women used was informed by Seidman’s in-depth interviewing

methods as well as the methodological influences of life history and case study (Bray 2008; Goodson and Sikes 2001; Seidman 2006; Cole & Knowles 2001; Merriam 1998; Stake 2000; Yin 2002; Collins 2000). These methodologies intentionally value the particular rather than the generalized. Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha engaged in the study of the particular, learning about individuals and making each story visible—be it a dominant or marginalized narrative.

Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha's attention to the particular is germane to the focus in early childhood education on the whole child and the learner. These new teachers afforded great respect to the interviewer/interviewee roles in their interviews with their elders. They understood that a positive relationship with each veteran was important to the quality of their interviews. This intergenerational experience was critical.

In her time-honored work on epistemology, Collins (2000) offers three significant self-preserving modes of self-validation and resistance that we see evidenced in Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha's work: a) lived experience as a criterion of credibility and meaning, b) centrality of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, and c) ethics of caring and personal accountability. The intergenerational exchange captured in their work echoes the work of bell hooks; in a fictitious interview with an elder where she so artfully acknowledges the wisdom and learning opportunities provided by the internalized voice of elders (1994). Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha individually and collectively articulate their learning and how it informs their own trajectories (Peters et al. 2012). Through knowing ourselves and our values, each of us can draw strength from the familiar to learn about that which is less recognizable and/or less comfortable. The teachers' article documents what meaning it held for each of them to engage in their research project.

The stories of teachers who are authors of their own narratives are stories that need to be heard. These teachers listen to those they teach, trust themselves, and attend to the particular learning needs of each young child. Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha's research presents narratives of veteran teachers who muster patience while remaining passionate enough to sustain decades in the early childhood teaching profession. The method of in-depth interviews promotes deep listening to authentic stories. The veterans shared honestly with the young teachers, identifying their excitement, missions, problems, and paths to solutions. As Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha capture in their article, the stories collected highlight for us the outcomes of their research as well as the importance of the vehicle implemented to obtain it. It is clear that engaging in this research was a powerful experience.

## Teacher inquiry and teachers engaging in research—A continuum

Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha were all new teachers prepared for teaching at the University of Hartford in either the undergraduate or graduate programs leading to initial licensure in early childhood/early elementary. The birth–age 8 programs include two full semesters of supervised student teaching. These are at two distinct developmental levels and inclusive of early care and early elementary school settings. During both student teaching semesters, the preservice students complete a 14-week teacher inquiry project. Inquiry requires students to identify a question about an aspect of their professional practice, develop a method of acquiring data to better understand the area of interest, analyze the resulting data, and discuss the results and implications of the work. For many students this is a very new experience.

The two distinctive semesters in different settings reduce the must-complete-an-assignment trap of one-semester teacher research. Two semesters with a consistent student teaching seminar leader enable a pilot/first pass semester when student teachers become familiar with the process. They become comfortable with data and work through the inquiry cycle, including an evolution of their actual question. By the second semester, student teachers start right in with their inquiry and reflexively utilize the professional learning community of the seminar to support their inquiry. This ownership and application of inquiry moves the teacher from technician to author of her own narrative. As a professional tool, focusing on the learning and insight to inform change moves the teacher inquiry from preservice assignment to authentic professional development.

In an effort to create multiple, meaningful applied learning opportunities for our students, Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha’s research originated with a funded project entitled “Lives Committed to Education: Stories of Women, Veteran Teachers of Color Offering Perspectives to New Teachers.” This project, backed by The Women’s Education and Leadership Fund, was designed to include three new teachers in research that extended the practitioner-oriented teacher inquiry project. The collection of additional stories of exemplary women committed to advocating for children in the context of the last five decades of social and educational reform was not only compelling in its own right, but also fostered an intergenerational exchange with the three new teachers. This was an unanticipated event for Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha. This window into our local educational and social history offers an underrepresented perspective on teaching that contributes to the early childhood profession.

The focus of this research dovetailed with the funder's mission of "increasing awareness about women as individuals and in communities" by documenting and disseminating the stories of women. The Women's Education and Leadership Fund is the fiscal legacy of the Hartford College for Women, and is charged with the promotion of women's learning. Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha's work emanated from a larger research continuum focusing on veteran teachers of color as experienced in particular schools and community contexts. Specifically, their work furthered "advancing women as scholars" by offering direct experience in conducting and disseminating qualitative research. Not only did they learn about the mechanics of conducting meaningful research, but, as they state, "It is clear that we learned a lot from the veterans." They concurred that they were, "impressed with how the veteran teachers responded to a *calling* to work with and for children."

Our education programs embrace a deep commitment to preparing reflective practitioners. Engaging in our own reflective practice, we understand that 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers need not only a reflective stance but also the skill set to utilize formal, institutional data. Time-tested teacher-originated data must also inform their reflection. In turn, reflection must inform actions, not only those that improve teaching, but also those that positively affect student learning. Engaging preservice teachers in at least two semesters of teacher inquiry grounds the effect on student learning within authentic practitioner questions. New teachers enter the profession with a set of skills and honed tools to take on what their careers will bring. When considering the career arc, these new teachers' experience with inquiry fosters the capacity for ongoing, self-directed professional development. With such a skill set, these new teachers merge seamlessly into teacher induction efforts as well as rapidly emerging teacher evaluation systems.

### **Designing an experience for all students: Teacher preparation implications**

As Chanelle, Natasha, and Keisha articulate, learning from veterans should be experienced widely in teacher preparation. Such engagement further validates passion for the early childhood education profession. Compelled by the desire for intergenerational connections, we wanted to make this work more available and consider how more new teachers might benefit from thoughtful, intentional interactions with veteran teachers (Peters et al. 2012). Simultaneously, we as teacher educators turned to the question of how to promote such a research experience with veteran teachers more consistently to new teachers. Our graduate students have the flexibility to engage in this kind of research. However, engaging in qualitative interview research is a very different type of activity for our undergraduates, who find themselves creating programs, lessons, rationales, and learning the specifics

of engaging with children and families. Therefore, these questions are being considered for teacher preparation programs:

- a) How and when should we provide qualitative interview experience with veteran teachers to all students?
- b) What aspects of this experience add value to the novice teacher's professional growth?
- c) When in relation to teacher inquiry skills should this experience be sequenced?

If one learns the skills of inquiry early in a program, then these skills could be applied across a program of study. However, the student may perhaps not know enough about the field to develop critical questions at an early point, making an inquiry activity less valuable. Would engaging in an ongoing inquiry project being directed by a professional in the field make sense at the beginning stage of a program of study? Would starting with a well-structured qualitative interview of veterans enhance the teacher inquiry experience?

Many players take a role in preparing new teachers. Veteran faculty, newer faculty, community teachers all have a part to play. What do we specifically learn from veteran teachers, and how can we avail ourselves of these leaders/models earlier in the preparation of new teachers? Another question to consider is which aspect of veteran teachers' interviews is the most valuable experience for developing teachers. Is it the opportunity to learn from and reflect on wisdom shared, or is it the active involvement in the interview data collection? Developing teachers can also learn from veterans the importance of feeling "safe" professionally and how this differs from person to person. These considerations are worthy of shared inquiry by teachers and teacher educators.

As an experienced teacher educator (now higher education faculty), and a 39-year early childhood faculty emeritus, we have the advantage of having seen many teachers in training and many veteran teachers. Preservice teachers can learn extensively from particular teachers who are still excited about teaching and who themselves are still learning from current research and best practice. These women are professionals, and are inspired and inspirational.

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