

Why Practitioner Inquiry?

A few years ago, I answered the question “Why Practitioner Inquiry?” with something about teachers as knowers, how teachers’ voices are missing from educational research, and that, as professionals, teachers should generate knowledge from practice. I saw practitioner inquiry as an antidote to the poison running rampant through the educational system in the form of pacing guides, mandated teaching scripts and other top-down reforms that treat teachers as robots.

While all that is likely still true, teachers as knowers isn’t the only thing that comes to mind anymore. It’s also teachers as learners that’s ringing in my head. I’m still figuring out exactly what I mean (and I’m probably skirting some deep epistemological territory here) and why this difference matters, so I thought blogging about it might help.

Let me start with what I mean by Practitioner Inquiry (PI). There are lots of variations, depending on who you ask, but this description by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) captures how I think about PI: systematic intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work. Over the past few years, I’ve seen practitioner inquiry grow and develop at KSTF. We’ve been exploring inquiry into practice together in a variety of ways and places—in PING (Practitioner Inquiry for the Next Generation, a group of 10 fellows completing their third year as a pilot PI community), among the staff, and with Fellows. Considerable commitment, time, energy, and money support these efforts. So, here are some thoughts on why PI is a pathway worth exploring and why exploring together makes good sense.

One of the most promising things I’ve noticed is that collective practitioner inquiry can flatten hierarchical expert/novice relationships, so we can grow mutual learning communities. Collective practitioner inquiry means that we are all learners together. This is especially true when the inquiry isn’t about trying to fix something but more about trying to understand something better; like the kid who doesn’t participate in class or the classroom management system that’s supposed to get kids to do their homework. In those cases, we aren’t looking for someone to tell us what to do or fix it for us. We’re asking our PI partners to sit with us, look with us, ask with us. That doesn’t mean we set aside experience or expertise. But it does mean that we use those things to offer perspective rather

than pronouncement. In that scenario, a beginning teacher's viewpoint is as valuable as the perspective of a 20-year veteran.

One of the things I've heard from Fellows is that collective practitioner inquiry can call into question what we take for granted. Close and careful questioning with others can help unearth assumptions that may keep us stuck somewhere we don't have to (or want to) be. I'm reminded of several inquiries where Fellows discovered that assumptions they had about students as lazy or colleagues as resistant turned out to be unfounded. Setting those assumptions aside opened up new possibilities for forming more positive and productive relationships.

A third idea we're beginning to discover together is that collective practitioner inquiry can deepen understanding that leads to action. This seems almost counter-intuitive; by slowing down to learn, we often begin to see the way forward. We make connections with other inquiry stories and gain new insights into our own. After a time, we find we have something worth saying or doing; starting a new relationship with a colleague, giving students more autonomy in the classroom, writing an article that chronicles the real implications of testing practices on struggling students. These actions are not products but part of the inquiry process itself. As one PING member recently put it, without this part of the process, the rest can feel empty and useless.

These thoughts seem, to me, to be more about learning than knowing, at least knowing in the traditional sense of the word, where knowledge is a set of assertions. I'm not implying by this that teachers aren't or shouldn't be knowers in that sense. But I'm beginning to see that nurturing teachers as learners may be the greatest strength of PI, and that the teacher as learner position is one of strength, not weakness. It takes great courage and humility to ask "What's going on here?" rather than jump immediately to judgment or action.

I want to close with a caveat. I'm not advocating all PI, all of the time. I don't want to turn PI into some kind of professional development superhero. Remember I said earlier we are exploring *a* pathway, not *the* pathway. I also realize that many schools don't provide the time, space or other resources to support PI. Although we're still figuring out together the role of PI within KSTF, I think we're making progress. I don't think we need to do something big or grand to grow PI in KSTF or wherever we work. We just need to keep saying, "I want to learn and I'm looking for partners to learn with me."