

When Teachers Have Time to Talk: The Value of Curricular Conversations

Follow the four-year journey of the Center for Inquiry as teachers, administrators, and university partners engage in professional inquiry.

Heidi Mills with Louise B. Jennings, Amy Donnelly, Lyn Z. Mueller, and the Center for Inquiry Faculty

"This is a place that feeds me," Julie remarked when reflecting on our curricular conversations at the Center for Inquiry. This comment echoes the sentiment of all of us as faculty and university partners involved in the Center. In fact, the Richland School District Two/University of South Carolina small-school partnership was established to foster:

- inquiry-based pedagogy to promote student learning;



- teacher inquiry for curriculum and professional development;
- inquiry for continuous school renewal.

While our story chronicles the evolution of teacher study group meetings in one small, professional development school, we believe that the lessons we have learned by studying our own beliefs and practices have the potential to inform and transform professional conversations in other diverse settings. The analysis of our work has made teachers' ways of knowing and communicating visible and accessible. Over time, we have undergone significant changes in our study

group meetings. We have explored diverse topics and created various frameworks and meeting structures. A number of these processes and practices have served us well and have remained consistent over the past four years. This article describes the evolution of the processes and practices that have challenged and validated professional development within our culture of inquiry.

INQUIRY INTO OUR BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

All of the professional community members at the Center—including teacher researchers and university

researchers—intentionally and systematically collect and analyze qualitative classroom data in the form of videotapes, audiotapes, notes, and student products (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Curricular conversations grow out of this collaborative research and provide a foundation for critically investigating the teaching and learning potential at the Center. As a professional development school, we have interns who are learning to teach by working on-site throughout the year. The university/public school relationship is mutually beneficial in a number of ways. The interns have remarkable mentors—at the same time, the interns support their mentors by taking the children to lunch and recess and by working with them independently for an additional hour, one day each week, to allow teachers one to two hours to collaborate.

As the Curriculum and Development Specialist and university partner, I orchestrate the conversations by inviting the teachers, principal, and university partners to share questions and issues they wish to explore. Next, I select classroom data (audiotapes, videotapes and/or student artifacts) related to the focus of inquiry to initiate the conversations. In general, the curricular conversations reflect critical features of classroom practices that the faculty find most compelling.

This process enables us to engage in collaborative inquiry into our profession in much the same way as other professionals do in their disciplines. As Ben Brabson (1996), a physicist from Indiana University, put it so eloquently in an interview:

We find that our most productive efforts are always collaborative. We stimulate in each other thoughts that don't occur in ourselves. It is always less satisfactory to work alone. We

go away from our research meetings with ideas and try them out and then try to get a perspective that is broader. . . . You have an extended mind when you have the benefit of everyone's wisdom.

We wanted for ourselves what Ben Brabson has with his colleagues. As we created our teacher study groups, we did so in ways that would allow us to engage in professional reflexivity—to study ourselves in order to outgrow ourselves (Jennings, 2001). We wanted to investigate the evolution of curriculum and professional development, and so, from the beginning, we audiotaped our curricular conversations. We have transcribed and analyzed the tapes in order to identify key patterns that represent our growth

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as individuals and as a faculty in general. One of our university partners, Louise, received a Spencer Foundation Grant which made it possible to receive transcription support. Using transcripts, meeting notes, videotapes, artifacts, and class newsletters, I have mapped the evolution of beliefs, processes, and practices across classrooms, and I have conducted a metaanalysis of our conversations to better understand what makes a genuine difference in school-based professional development. However, it is important to note that, as author, I use “we” and “our” throughout the text. I do so because the work is truly collaborative. We (teachers, principal, and university partners) have co-created the culture of inquiry that pervades the school. It is *our* school. Our development as individ-

uals grows out of and contributes to our growth as a learning community. In other words, together, we look closely, listen carefully, and bring the insights, questions, and expertise of individuals to the group so that *all* might benefit from the growth of *one*.

Our work at the Center for Inquiry grew out of an impressive body of literature on teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999; Patterson, Santa, Short, & Smith, 1993) and substantiative, long-term professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Harwayne, 1999; Meier, 1995). While we were committed to operationalizing the models established by this literature, we found it more demanding and complex than we anticipated. It was necessary to “stand on the shoulders of giants” to develop a vision for professional development, but it was not sufficient. We had to *live the process and make the theory our own*.

Our Story

We knew from the beginning that we would need to create our own school culture; one that promoted inquiry for all learners, tall and small. In a sense, we embarked upon a journey much like Morrie Schwartz recommended to Mitch Albom (1997) in *Tuesdays with Morrie*:

Here's what I mean by building your own little subculture. . . . I don't mean you disregard every rule of your community. . . . I don't run through red lights. The little things, I can obey. But the big things, how we think, what we value—those you must choose for yourself. You can't let anyone—or any society—determine those for you. . . . Every society has its own problems. The way to do it, I think, isn't to run away. You have to

work at creating your own culture.
(p. 155)

We recognized that, as a public school, we would be held accountable for upholding the district's requirements and for student achievement as measured by standardized tests. We were committed to exploring what is possible in public education and so did not spend energy on challenging those matters. Instead, we focused on how we think, what we value, and the relationship between our beliefs and practices (Short & Burke, 1996).

INQUIRY FOR CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

For us, inquiry is a philosophical stance rather than a set of strategies and activities or a particular teaching method. Inquiry promotes intentional and thoughtful learning for teachers, children, parents, and university partners within classrooms and across the school. Our classrooms are united philosophically; yet each classroom community is unique as the teachers know it is their responsibility to collaborate with children when making the theory their own.

To begin living the model of inquiry that we had envisioned for our professional development, we decided to access demonstrations from our own inquiry-based classrooms.

We knew that the strategy sharing moments that were woven into classroom life were particularly powerful, and we wanted to bring such power to our meetings. The teachers built formal reflection time into the daily life of their classrooms by inviting the children to bring samples of their work, stories, strategies, insights, and questions to the group for sharing after reading, writing, and math workshops. The teachers also made

contributions to those reflective moments by sharing their kidwatching notes—observations of children's effective use of skills, concepts, and strategies.

To explore the learning potential of strategy sharing sessions, we analyzed some of the videotaped sessions from Tim's classroom. In so doing, we realized:

- the value of formal reflection sessions in promoting growth and change;
- the value of naming a strategy publicly so that others might have an understanding of and access to it;
- the value of using strategies flexibly in alternative contexts;
- the value of engaging in exploratory talk in response to an insight, strategy, or question.

And so we began shaping our professional conversations to parallel those that teachers had with children day in and day out. And we began again, and again, and again. We found that it was a lot harder to hold our model with our colleagues than it was to implement it with young children. While many of the teachers were implementing an inquiry model of curriculum with children in breathtaking ways from day one, we struggled for a couple of years to find our stride as colleagues.

FROM THE GROUND UP

Starting a school from the ground up is quite a privilege. It is also more complex than we ever imagined. After careful analysis of the study group transcripts, four phases emerged that represent the essence of our professional conversations: Hit or Miss; Building Community through Validation; Privileging Theory-Silencing Voices; and Genuine Inquiry.

Phase One: Hit or Miss

We thought we would spend our first summer planning together, exploring big ideas, envisioning our dream school, and investigating and celebrating our professional growth. So we thought. Instead, our professional conversations were hit or miss. While we did have a few moments of brilliance, we most frequently dealt with everyday concerns, like the fire ants that were out of control on the campus, or cleaning the classrooms, ordering playground equipment, and selecting paint for the portables and awnings. By the end of the summer, we did make some important decisions that supported and sustained our work and, in fact, those decisions still prevail. We detailed:

- Curricular Framework that would unite classrooms and yet provide the flexibility for the teachers to make the theory their own;
- Format for the Narrative Progress Report

Lesson Learned: *Make time for school business and devote a separate but equal amount of time for teacher study group meetings. Study group meetings function most effectively when a predictable structure is established and all items on the agenda are connected to curriculum, evaluation, beliefs, practices, and so on.*

Phase Two: Building Community through Validation

Once we opened our doors that first day of school, we knew we had embarked upon a journey that would forever change us as professionals. The exhaustion from the manual labor and intensity of the summer work melted away when we began creating curriculum and community with our children and parents. However, when it came to our profes-

sional study group meetings, we struggled to engage in reflexive inquiry. More often than not, our conversations revolved around compliments—we took time to validate one another.

Looking back, we needed to build trust and respect for one another before we could truly inquire into each others' beliefs and practices. When responding to classroom engagements through visits or videotapes, we used the "three pluses and a wish" model (Mills, 1980). In so doing, we began by sharing three positive observations about the teaching and learning in a particular classroom. After focusing on the strengths of the children, instruction, or assessment, we made a wish for the children and/or teacher. We made the decision to use the three pluses and wish model by accessing a framework we found useful when writing narrative progress reports. On these reports, we synthesized children's growth as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and community members by documenting three pluses and a wish in each area. For example, on a second grader's progress report, her teacher made the following comments:

Child's Growth as a Reader

- +_____ is employing effective strategies when attempting unfamiliar words.
- +_____ makes sophisticated connections across texts when engaged in literature discussions.
- +_____ selects challenging books for independent reading—many her peers would find difficult.

Wish: I would recommend that _____ begin reading across genres and offer insights to class book talks. She participates extensively in small-group conversations but is less likely

to offer insights, connections, or questions during whole-class discussions.

While we valued the three pluses and a wish structure when responding to students, it was difficult to honor its intent during our study group meetings. Certainly, it was comfortable to document three pluses. However, it was uncomfortable to make a wish that would truly push the teacher or the professional conversation. This is not to say that our time together during this phase was not well spent. Quite the contrary. We learned how to listen to one another, how to consider multiple perspectives, how community building is at the heart of curriculum development, and how to make connections between our practices and the professional literature. We also noticed, "how all

Phase Three: Privileging Theory-Silencing Voices

While we all knew deep inside that the time we took to nurture one another was necessary, we also knew it wasn't sufficient. In an attempt to find a meeting structure that would push us to take a deeper look, we chose to begin documenting and sharing our personal belief statements. We did so because we found the notion that our actions reflect our beliefs quite compelling (Short & Burke, 1996). We predicted that such a stance would allow us to interrogate the philosophical congruence between our beliefs and practices and, in so doing, provide a vehicle that would promote intellectual exchanges among the teachers and university partners.

Fortunately, we did engage in some pretty dense theoretical conversa-

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of the faculty members participated in the discussions and built upon each other's ideas, which parallels the expectations that these teachers have of students in classroom discussions," (Jennings, 2001, p. 41). We made important strides during this phase. Primarily, we learned to care for, trust, and respect one another enough to take the risks that are needed to grow professionally.

Lesson Learned: *Take the time necessary to build the trust and respect necessary to establish a strong professional community. It is unlikely that exquisite professional conversations will occur until a caring, thoughtful community is in place. Community is at the heart of genuine inquiry.*

tions. Unfortunately, we lost multiple voices and perspectives. As soon as we began isolating theory from classroom practice, there was a dramatic shift in the energy of the group and the language we used. Those of us who had been involved in advanced graduate work found the conversations intellectually stimulating. Those of us who were new to the school and philosophy began to feel threatened and isolated. Unintentionally, we had created an inner circle. By privileging theory, the conversations that grew out of the invitation to share our belief statements were much more exclusive than inclusive. A few people dominated the discussions while the others

listened quietly. And the silence was deafening.

We did not anticipate how divisive such an invitation would be. We had hoped that the opportunity to put our beliefs on the table would promote practices that were theoretically congruent with our beliefs

would both build professional community and challenge us to fine-tune our beliefs and practices. After many false starts and multiple revisions, we did. We created a framework that would help us learn to see more in the videos, stories, and samples of children's work. We did

each study group meeting based on the teachers' burning questions. We watched the video and took extensive notes on the framework form, carefully documenting exactly what happened (not what we thought about what happened). Next, we took a few moments alone to interpret our observations and then shared our interpretations. Our study group meetings began sounding and feeling like we were living the model of inquiry we had originally envisioned. We were having grand and often profound conversations like those the teachers fostered in their own classrooms (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). We were hearing and valuing all voices on the faculty. Together, we were slowing moments in the classroom down enough to inquire into their meaning.

After discussing our interpretations, we asked this question: "Now that we think/know/suspect this, what new questions might we pose?" We found the process of posing new questions took us further than making wishes using the three pluses and a wish model. The wishes often took the form of recommen-

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and theoretical stance. You know, theory into practice; living the model; walking the talk. It didn't happen.

As much as we valued theory, we quickly learned how problematic it was to privilege it. As we reflected on those uncomfortable moments, those moments when we unintentionally silenced those who most needed to develop a voice, we realized that the power of school-based professional development comes from uncovering theory in the context of conversations about practice. It was not about starting with theory and talking about how it gets operationalized in practice but, rather, it was about starting with a moment in time in the classroom and seeking to understand it theoretically. As Karen Smith (2000) put it so eloquently, "It is a lot easier to theorize from practice than it is to imagine practice from theory."

Lesson Learned: Honor theory and ground our practices in it, but do so without isolating theory from teachers' burning questions, daily lives, perspectives, or current understandings. Theorize from practice.

Phase Four: Genuine Inquiry

In hindsight, it was inevitable that it would take some experimentation before we found a framework that

so by revisiting essential features of inquiry in our Center classrooms and those featured in the professional literature (Mills & Donnelly, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Whitin & Whitin, 1997). We simply did what made sense—we let the Center classrooms and influential, distant teachers inform and reform the nature of our study group meetings. We created a framework that allowed us to frame, focus, and theorize from practice (see Figure 1). I selected videos and corresponding classroom artifacts to be featured in

CURRICULAR CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK: CENTER FOR INQUIRY				
Wondering (Burning Questions)	Looking Closely (Focused Observations)	Making New Connections (Interpretation)	New Questions	Making Informed Predictions (New Plans/Curricular Decisions)

Figure 1. Curricular Conversation Framework

dations that felt closed. On the other hand, new questions pushed us to consider multiple perspectives and make thoughtful predictions about learning and learners. Most importantly, new instructional decisions grew out of the curricular conversations.

While it was short-lived in its formal form, this framework truly transformed the nature of our cur-

to Aaron. She adjusted her glasses and pressed "record" on the hand-held tape recorder. She took one final glance around the room to be sure everyone had settled in with their book boxes. Noting that most of them were engaged or at least searching for just the right book to read, she nodded to Aaron and smiled. He knew what to do. He started reading. He read and he read

Our study group meetings began sounding and feeling like we were living the model of inquiry we originally envisioned.

ricular conversations. It was so helpful that we soon internalized the process and let go of the actual form.

Our beliefs pervaded our conversations in new ways. The whole (inquiry philosophy) was in each part (practice). We began having very practical conversations about the Center's instruction and assessment strategies and daily rituals, and yet, we maintained a sophisticated theoretical stance throughout. We decided to call our study groups "curricular conversations" since they were truly generative, engaging, sometimes intense, yet always conversational.

Curricular Conversation: Case in Point

On one particular day we chose to focus on Dori's room since several teachers were exploring strategies for giving readers individual feedback. Following their lead, I selected and cued a tape of Dori coaching Aaron, a first grader, while the rest of the class read independently from collections of books in their own book boxes.

Summary of Video: *Dori pulled up a child-sized chair and snuggled close*

Like when you thought about the person knocking on the door. It made you think that it would make sense if someone answered the door. We also covered up parts of words a couple of times to help you figure them out. I noticed that you read 'and' for 'said.' As as soon as you did, you went back and shook your head and you corrected it. Then you went to the beginning and read it again—just like what good readers do. You self-corrected when you went back to the beginning to see what would make sense. You used some excellent strategies, buddy!" She gently shook his hand and commented, "Keep it up!"

We took extensive notes while we watched Dori coach Aaron. We made observations about exactly what Dori and Aaron said and did. After stopping the tape, we took a few moments to interpret the coaching engagement. Before we knew it, we were all on the edges of our seats, leaning in, listening and thinking hard, making connections, posing new questions and confirming and/or revising our beliefs and practices (sometimes subtly, other times quite dramatically).

Most importantly, we took a moment of time in Dori's class to



learn *with* and *from* her. Themes that emerged from the coaching conversation illuminated the value of *theorizing from practice*. As we talked about Dori's tape, we explored:

- Investment: The importance of getting the children to invest in learning to read. As we watched the children in the background, it became apparent that those children who were using their time to work at reading were also the ones who were making the most progress as readers. It wasn't about rating kids in terms of those who were invested or and those who weren't. Rather, it was about how important it is to get kids to invest and how to accomplish that task.
- Intimacy: We made connections between a presentation by Richard Allington (1999) and the fact that Dori intentionally and systematically connected with individual readers. She gave them feedback crafted from her observations of their strengths, needs, and interests. We also reflected on Bill Ayers' (1993) call for teachers to make learning intimate. Coaching provided consistent opportunities for intimacy.
- Reflection: We discussed how Dori promoted reflection when she reviewed the strategies Aaron used. We also addressed the value of naming strategies for children and, in so doing, making the implicit explicit, and making the unconscious conscious.
- Predictable Rituals: We reminded one another of what we had learned from Ralph Peterson (1992) about the importance of predictable rituals in building community, and we transferred this notion to rituals that promote learning. Dori noted how much the children valued the predictable structure she provides in her coaching each day. Because they an-

Setting Up After-School Inquiry Group Meetings

- Choose a location that most teachers will pass (the teachers' lounge; the cafeteria, if it's on the way to the parking lot; a room near the office).
- Set the date well in advance so people can arrange for rides, childcare, etc. Use a poster or e-mail message to remind people a day or two before the meeting.
- Establish separate meeting times for business and teacher research, such as on alternating weeks. If scheduled on the same day, set time limits for business and consider starting with inquiry.
- Set a definite ending time so everyone knows how much time to commit. End early, rather than late, and some people may come back to continue an unfinished conversation.
- Order pizza—food is a great draw, and the smell may attract people who will decide to stay.
- Don't limit your invitees to full-time, on-site faculty; welcome instructional aides, student interns, and itinerant teachers.
- Appoint a facilitator with enough influence to nudge the group beyond negativity if the discussion edges there.
- Leave charts up or post minutes in a public place to intrigue those who missed the sessions; maybe they'll be curious enough to join the group the next time.

—Brenda Miller Power

ticipate it, they begin thinking and talking about what they are going to read before they gather their individual book boxes.

- Responsiveness: Dori wasn't simply teaching reading, she was teaching a reader. She did so by taking what she knew about the reading process and how children learn to read, and she looked at Aaron, as a reader, through that lens. She gave him direct feedback on the strategies he used effectively. Additionally, she made connections between his strategies and those that good readers use.
- It's All about the Moments: Dori's values as a teacher came through loud and clear. The invitations we extend matter, but it's our responses moment by moment, child to child, day in and day out that are most revealing and convey what we think matters most to our students. Dori demonstrated that coaching demands incredible awareness on the teacher's part. She had to be fully present and aware of Aaron's past as well as his potential as a reader in order to respond to him in thoughtful, helpful ways.
- Valuing Our Culture of Inquiry: We concluded our interpretation of Dori's tape by remembering how lucky we were to grow professionally in a supportive yet challenging context. We commented on how grateful we were to have the school and each other. And we wondered how the profession might change if a critical mass of teachers were given the time to talk, to engage in rigorous conversations about curriculum on a regular basis. What if ...

Lessons Learned: We need to recognize the power of conversation in learning—to allow the focus of meetings to emerge from the teachers' concerns, insights, passions, and

questions, to theorize from practice, and to promote inquiry as a stance that pervades our classroom practices and curricular conversations.

PROCESSES AND PRACTICES THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

While there are no cookie-cutter classrooms at the Center, there are a number of common practices that have grown out of our curricular conversations. The teachers take a theoretical insight or specific practice and make it their own. It has been fascinating to track the ways in which insights and ideas evolve over time and across classrooms. A number of processes and practices that now pervade the Center classrooms were originally introduced during a curricular conversation.

After the conversation described above, Susanne made important revisions in the ways in which she coaches readers. However, she did not simply emulate Dori. She accessed demonstrations from the tape and insights from the conversation and made new decisions that made sense for her particular children at that particular moment in time. In fact, after working through the coaching process herself, Susanne has now created an effective system of recording and responding to miscues that will push us when we revisit coaching this spring. Next time, Susanne will be our mentor.

While the content and form of our curricular conversations have changed dramatically over time, there are several features that have remained constant. They have sustained our professional development and have the capacity to help others do so as well. By reflecting on our study groups over time, we have learned the value of:

- A Predictable Structure for Weekly Meetings: While our meeting frameworks changed over time, these structures were not ends in themselves but means to an end.
- Making Space for Stories: It was essential to leave space in the agenda for stories: our stories, the children's stories, and the stories of the historians, mathematicians, scientists, and authors whose ideas have helped us shape our understanding of the world. When we shaped our experiences into story form, we made them accessible.
- Recognizing the Power of Conversation in Learning: The videos and student artifacts were important, but it was the talk that surrounded the work that made the biggest difference. The most sophisticated ideas were born, refined, and often transformed through honest teacher talk.
- Honoring Teachers' Ways of Knowing: It was absolutely essential that the teachers' genuine concerns, insights, passions, and questions dominated. In so doing, we learned to honor how teachers think, work, and communicate and learned how to best support our growth and change.
- Theorizing from Practice: By examining our practices via videotapes, audiotapes, transcripts of classroom events and student artifacts, we learned to unite our beliefs and practices. We developed a richer appreciation of theory and its role in teaching and learning while theorizing from careful observations of our own practices.
- Promoting Inquiry as a Stance: Inquiry became a way of living and learning together once we realized it was a stance we take toward knowledge, learning, learners, schooling, and society. As such, inquiry transcended time and space. It allowed us to create our own culture, to

focus on the big things, the things we truly valued.

CULTURE OF INQUIRY

After years of working together, we have institutionalized the processes and practices that promote teacher inquiry for curriculum, professional development, and continuous school renewal. This institutionalization, while not static, provides important stability. It helps us honor our past and invites new colleagues and voices into our future. When Jennifer and Brent joined our faculty they said the curricular conversations were essential to their successful transitions. They helped them appreciate the philosophy, common practices, and the language of inquiry. Within a few months, they were participating in conversations as if they had been living and learning with us for years.

When Lyn, our new principal, joined our faculty, she fully embraced our curricular conversations. The processes and practices were in place. She simply honored them. In her words:

Just think about how much I can learn as an administrator by participating in curricular conversations. I can get information on teacher planning, evaluation strategies, teachers' successes and struggles—all in authentic ways. These conversations bring me to a new place. They remind me to reconnect with the teacher in me, to be the kind of teacher/administrator I want to be. We always talk about being a reflective teacher. I'd like to be a reflective administrator. Curricular conversations provide that path for me to walk down (Mueller, 2000).

For those who dream of creating or enhancing cultures of inquiry within classrooms, across schools, and throughout university/public school partnerships, we invite you

to take the lessons we have learned and make them your own. •

Author's Note

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