Chapter 2

The Role of Inquiry in Teachers’ Learning from the National Board Certification Process

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors present a framework for teacher inquiry. Drawing on data from two multiple-year qualitative studies of National Board candidates, the authors use case study methodology and document analysis to develop an understanding of the National Board as a site for inquiry in teacher learning. Three teachers’ experiences, representing a range of inquiry stances, are explored to provide an opportunity to understand important elements of inquiry in teacher learning and how the National Board certification process may (or may not) support such learning.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s teachers must address the constantly changing literacy demands of a diverse society in a technology-rich information age. These demands are reflected in policies that set ever higher standards for reading achievement for all children (Alvermann, 2001). As Duffy (2004) notes, it is adaptive teachers, those who can respond to changing environments and diverse students, who can successfully meet the complex demands of contemporary literacy instruction. Intense, collaborative, content-rich, and practice-focused professional learning is necessary to develop and sustain such adaptive teachers (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

One powerful way to develop such adaptive teachers is to ground their professional learning in teacher-driven inquiry (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Horn & Little, 2010; So, 2013) and to focus on the situatedness of teaching, particularly when there is attention to individual children and their work, (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). By focusing

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on individual students and their work, teachers are able to better develop questions about the specific needs of children in relation to instruction, and about the outcomes of their classroom practice. To be effective, however, such inquiry must be something more than a method or set of procedures. Rather it must be, as Wells (1999) describes, “a stance toward experiences and ideas—a willingness to wonder, to ask questions, and to seek to understand” with an aim towards “the disposition and ability to use the understandings so gained to act informedly and responsibly in the situations that may be encountered both now and in the future” (p. 121).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) attempts to provide, through its standards and certification process, a professional development opportunity that is located in the complex environments of teachers’ own classrooms. Consistent findings from recent empirical studies on the NBPTS certification process (Place & Coskie, 2006; Lustick & Sykes, 2006; Darling-Hammond, et al, 2007) show that teachers do have important insights about their instruction and do make changes in their practice as a result of attempting National Board (NB) certification. We have also seen, however, that teachers have varying learning experiences with the process, particularly in terms of their ability to transfer what they’ve learned to their classroom practice (Coskie & Place, 2008). Our experiences and conversations with National Board candidates suggest that an inquiry stance may have played a role in how teachers learned. Our curiosity led us to research the elements of an effective inquiry process and then to examine the ways that the National Board experience supported or hindered inquiry.

This chapter presents the experiences of three teachers and explores how the elements of inquiry played out in their National Board candidacy and their changing literacy practice. These teachers’ experiences represent a range of inquiry stances and provide an opportunity to explore important elements of inquiry in teacher learning and how the National Board certification process may (or may not) support such learning.

**INQUIRY AND TEACHER LEARNING**

Because inquiry has shown promise for professional development that effectively changes classroom practice, it has been incorporated into teacher learning environments in a variety of ways. Teacher reflection (Schon, 1983, 1987), action research projects (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Goswami & Stillman, 1987), and professional development schools (Trachtman, 2007), for example, have inquiry at their heart. More recently, collaborative approaches to inquiry have made considerable ground in schools (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Nelson, et al, 2008; Slavit, et al, 2013; So, 2013). Some of these collaborative inquiry approaches, such as Lesson Study (Fernandez, 2002), focus on curriculum and its effectiveness with students. Others, notably Cognitively Guided Instruction (Villasenor & Kepner, 1993; Wilson & Berne, 1999), have focused more on teachers’ investigation of students and their thinking. Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Garmston & Wellman, 1999) include design elements that work to enhance the group inquiry process in an attempt to deepen participants’ learning opportunities while at the same time take into consideration student success.

While each of these teacher learning approaches involves inquiry, they vary in their focus, in the centrality of investigation, in the structures used, and in the level of collaboration. There are, however, commonalities that can help us understand the elements of inquiry that foster support for teacher learning. What aspects of inquiry lie at the heart of these promising practices?