

**Title:** Engaging early childhood teachers in the thinking and practice of inquiry: Collaborative research mentorship as a tool for shifting teacher identity.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of participation in a research mentorship team (RMT) on early childhood teachers' professional identities. The participants were six early childhood teachers at a university affiliated child care center who volunteered to be members of the RMT facilitated by two teacher educators. The teachers' perspectives regarding the benefits and the challenges they faced in the RMT were explored. The findings of this study offer insight into: (1) early childhood teachers' changing paradigms regarding the research process, (2) the role of research participation on the teachers' engagement in the intellectual/theoretical elements of teaching, and (3) the impact of changing teacher identities on the culture of an early childhood center.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of participation in a research mentorship team (RMT) on early childhood teachers' professional identities. In the field of early childhood education, there is a historically low expectation for intellectual engagement, formal education, and reflective practice. This is due in part to a number of inter-related social factors reflecting issues of gender and class: (1) the view of early childhood education as a caring, mothering task in which the skill set flows from natural abilities; (2) the association as a woman's role; (3) low pay and social status; (4) the high turnover due to teachers' desire to move out of the profession to higher paying jobs. These factors created the image of early childhood teacher as a consumer of other people's knowledge that is mostly based on the findings of professional researchers. Such a narrow view of teaching emphasizes the technical role of teacher as well as excludes teachers' own inquiries and reflection that may affect both teaching and learning experience.

Recently, the teacher-as-researcher movement in the United States sparked interest in considering teachers as active participants and knowledge generators in early childhood education. There is a plethora of research about the notion of teacher as researcher and the importance of action research in early childhood classrooms and its

relation to teachers' reflective thinking (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lee, 2005; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). Teachers of young children are increasingly expected to become reflective and critical in their teaching. Reflective thinking may be encouraged through journal writing, peer supervision and scaffolding, and action research. The research mentorship team (RMT) initiated by two teacher educators in this study was such an attempt to break the traditional image of early childhood teachers and to support a higher level of intellectual engagement by teachers.

The current study utilized a qualitative approach with early childhood teachers in order to explore how teachers experience research collaboration and reconstruct the image of themselves as teacher researcher. This study was guided by the following questions: 1) How does having opportunities to engage in research affect early childhood teachers' identities? 2) How do teachers shift their paradigms regarding the nature of research through their research mentorship experience? 3) What are implications of the Research Mentorship Team for reflective practice and the notion of teacher as researcher in early childhood education?

### **Perspective/Theoretical Framework**

The terms 'action research' and 'teacher research' are often used to refer to the research in which teachers are an integral part. Many researchers have emphasized that teaching must be viewed as more than just actions and activities (Keat, 2005; Price & Valli, 2005). As teachers become researchers within their own setting, they can find a way to communicate and collaborate with colleagues, challenge themselves to try new initiatives, enhance their visibility as a teacher, and eventually enjoy, appreciate, and remain committed to their work.

Social constructivist researchers believe people construct knowledge in an attempt to make sense of, or interpret, their experiences. There is not simply a pre-existing reality or truth. 'Reality' or 'truth' occurs in the interactions, interpretations, and symbolic representations people form through lived experiences. Teachers' beliefs about their own teaching are developed through personal experience and reflection with formal knowledge they already possess. Wood and Bennett (2000) exemplified the value of establishing discourse communities which draw on the intellectual resources of teachers and researchers in order to develop shared ways of thinking and communicating.

Research collaboration and mentorship among teachers can empower teachers to improve pedagogical practice.

Teacher research may range from daily observation of and reflection to systematic long-term study of a particular issue or problem (Stremmel, 2002) and it does not necessarily have to be scientific studies rooted in positivism and statistical analysis. Many teachers may have already employed the tools of research in classrooms – observing, recording, documenting, reflecting, and asking questions. However, there is little research exploring how teachers gain access to learn methodological and technical skills that are required to conduct research as well as what kinds of experiences make them feel confident as researcher. Having few opportunities to gain knowledge about research methods and skills needed may prevent teachers from actively initiating teacher research in their classrooms.

Participating in research can enable teachers to generate theories and models about their teaching practice. Engaging teachers in the thinking and practice of inquiry can also help them reflect her/his own beliefs and sense of self. However, becoming a reflective teacher and teacher researcher is a task that needs mentorship and collaboration. Teachers at different phases need support for various reasons. Collaborative support is needed for teachers in order to develop a strong sense of professionalism in the classroom (Henderson, Meier, & Perry, 2004). New teachers feel isolated and fear appearing incompetent if they ask for help (Brown, 2005). Experienced teachers may need more resources and mentorship for research in order to implement and incorporate their inquiries in their teaching.

### **Methods/Modes of Inquiry**

This study used ethnographic methods in order to explore the shifting culture of teachers committed to furthering their professional development beyond everyday classroom practice. Phenomenological methods were also employed, which explore the lived experience of a small number of people (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The participants were six early childhood teachers who volunteered to be members of the Research Mentorship Team (RMT). The study was conducted in 2003-2006 at a university child care center in rural New England. The center was known for its inquiry-based approach to learning and was recognized as a key research site for faculty at the university from a variety of disciplines. The RMT was a new initiative at the center and the goals of it were to foster collaborative inquiry, to promote teacher as researcher, to

reaffirm the importance of action research in classrooms, and to develop center wide investigations. Monthly RMT meetings were held in the 2003-4 academic year, and again in 2005-6 with a small change in membership. Meetings were tape recorded and transcribed before the next meeting. The topics of the meetings emerged from teachers' own interests and questions and members of the RMT collaborated to extend the ideas with facilitation by two teacher educators. During the meetings, teachers had opportunities to formulate questions, share ideas, read and analyze transcripts from previous meetings and eventually collaborate as investigators and participants in a formal study conducted at the center.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

The study was triangulated using multiple sources of data to confirm the emerging findings. To gain rich data that describe the study and to reduce likelihood of misinterpretation, various data collection methods and procedures were employed: in-depth interviews with the teachers, participant observation, audio taping, and document analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Creswell, 1994). In-depth, semi-structured interviews with the teachers were conducted twice, once at the mid-point and again at the conclusion of the research mentorship team collaboration. Semi-structured interviews acknowledge "that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). This type of interview has been described as "conversations with a purpose and implies an exchange between two equals" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 124). During 2003-4 and 2005-6, teachers' interactions and dialogues were observed and recorded from monthly meeting transcripts and field notes. Finally, teachers were asked to journal regularly regarding the process and content of the RMT collaboration. Any accessible document such as the group notes and idea sketches was subsidiary information.

Data collection and analysis was ongoing and recursive (Merriam, 1998). After the data were sifted through and distilled, data analysis was conducted focusing on the emerging themes and categories. We developed a coding manual that consisted of 34 themes. The development of coding criteria facilitated the identification of conceptual categories that emerged from the data. Each code was an abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment of words (Miles & Huberman, 1984). All phases of the data analysis were aimed at identifying

themes and patterns of teachers' shifting views of their professional identity in relation to engagement in research and reflective practice.

## **Findings and Conclusions**

The following core emerging themes related to the initial research questions are supported by ideas teachers discussed during the research mentorship meetings, issues participants expressed in interviews, and other supporting field notes.

1. Changing research paradigms: Teachers began with a view of research that was scientific and positivist. As such, teachers felt intimidated and lacking in the required skills or dispositions. Teachers came to recognize that they possessed important skills via their work on classroom pedagogical documentation. Teachers developed a broadened view of research that was accessible and relevant to their everyday practice.
2. Teachers need a safe environment where they can express their ideas and thoughts: Teachers in this study felt that their ideas were "safely" presented, warmly received, and productively discussed in the context of a collaborative and reflective culture. Being a member of the research mentorship team seemed to help them have "comfortable," positive feelings about considering research as a critical and almost natural part of their teaching practice and identity.
3. Commitment to the intellectual process: Teachers recognized that the RMT provided a qualitatively different environment for peer dialogue. Participants referred to the shared sense of commitment and the "synergy" that was possible in this volunteer group. In particular, the teachers were attracted by the "multiple voices" and negotiation of ideas in the context of discussing research. The findings suggest that teachers moved from being research "outsiders/consumers" to viewing themselves as contributors to the process through their own intellectual engagement.
4. "Resource" as an element of identity: The teachers were found to have conflicting views between perceiving themselves as a resource for families and communities yet feeling that it is not easy to have access to research knowledge and resources. The teachers take roles as a resource but often they want more resources for themselves, especially technical skills or understanding of the research process.

5. Parallel research orientations. There was a parallel between how these teachers viewed and pursued research and what children do in their classrooms. Teachers acknowledged that the ownership and passion of the team members mirrored what children demonstrate in their classroom endeavors.
  
6. Opportunities to engage in a deepened dialogue: The teachers expressed their desires to have more opportunities to be intellectually stimulated and to collaborate with other teachers. Participants referred to “going to the next level” and considering the “big picture.” This finding is significant because early childhood teachers are often overly enmeshed in the domestic world of the classroom and unable to take a meta-cognitive stance toward their practice. Teachers reported being “invigorated” and “excited” by the focused conversations they experienced in the RMT. These experiences appear to be linked to a growing sense of self-confidence regarding direct engagement in the research process.

### **Educational Importance**

This study suggests that in-service teachers need an intellectually stimulating environment that creates a supportive network for being a teacher researcher. Such an environment can impact teachers’ research paradigms and in turn how the image of teacher-as-researcher is integrated into their professional identities. When facilitators and peers committed to the process encourage teachers to dialogue in an open forum, an atmosphere of caring and respect for multiple perspectives can be created. Teacher researchers can also be more effective decision-makers when informed by their own research, acting rather than just reacting. They can come out of isolation and take a meta-cognitive stance toward their practice by participating in a teacher-research network such as the research mentorship team described in this study. Teachers who are committed to thinking and reflecting and understand the parallels between their research and children’s inquiry may, in turn, seek to make children’s learning more visible and meaningful in the classroom.

### **References**

- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Brown, S. W. (2005). Emily and Rebecca: A tale of two teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*, 637-648.
- Clandin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 413-427). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Henderson, B., Meier, D., & Perry, G. (2004). Voices of practitioners: Teacher research in early childhood education. *Young Children, 59*(2), 94-100
- Keat, J. B. (2005). Theory to practice through teacher inquiry courses in a graduate program: Two teachers' perspectives. *Journal of Childhood Teacher Education, 26*, 207-223.
- Lee, H. J. (2005). Understanding and assessing preservice teachers' reflective thinking. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*, 699-715.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Mass Publishers.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Price, J. N., & Valli, L. (2005). Preservice teachers becoming agents of change. *Journal of Teacher Education, 56* (1), 57-72.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (1998). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sparks-Langer, G. M., & Colton, A. B. (1991). Synthesis of research on teachers' reflective thinking. *Educational Leadership, 48*, 37-44.
- Stremmel, A. J. (2002). Teacher research: Nurturing professional and personal growth through inquiry. *Young Children, 57*(5), 62-70.
- Wood, E., & Bennett, N. (2000). Changing theories, changing practice: Exploring early childhood teachers' professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 16*, 635-647.