

2021

Introduction to the Special Issue: Inquiring Into, About, and During Covid-19

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Dana, Nancy Fichtman and Kilgore, Karen L. (2021) "Introduction to the Special Issue: Inquiring Into, About, and During Covid-19," *Journal of Practitioner Research*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
<https://doi.org/10.5038/2379-9951.6.1.1197>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jpr/vol6/iss1/1>

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Exploring Inquiry During the COVID-19 Pandemic: When a Crisis Becomes an Opportunity

Abstract:

One of the most pervasive ways the inquiry movement has needed to be reshaped since its inception is as a mechanism to respond to a global pandemic. As COVID-19 necessitated an abrupt transition to remote delivery of instruction, teachers needed a powerful form of professional learning to understand and respond with changes to serve their students during this challenging time. At P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School, a K-12 school, the leadership team designed a Canvas website devoted to teacher inquiry, enabling teachers to share experiences, collaborate, and address issues regarding the abrupt transition to emergency remote instruction. In this issue, five pandemic inquiry teams present their reflective essays, to describe their collaborations to re-imagine classroom communities, empower students to express their views of the pandemic, re-construct curricula to capture essential learnings, modify for students who struggle, and bridge the opportunity gap for students of color.

While *Journal of Practitioner Research (JPR)* is a relatively new journal established to disseminate the knowledge generated through inquiring into practice, the process is one that has been around for a long time. Some trace its origins all the way to Aristotle (McFarland & Stansell, 1993), with others noting its educational foundation in the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Stephen Corey, in the 1930s through 1950s (Adelman, 1993). Since its inception, practitioner research has evolved through time, “being shaped and reshaped in relationship to the era within which it has existed” (Dana, 2016, p. 1).

Arguably, in recent times, perhaps one of the most pervasive ways the inquiry movement has needed to be reshaped since its inception is as a mechanism to respond to a global pandemic. COVID-19 necessitated that schools around the world transition abruptly to remote delivery of instruction during country-wide lock-downs enacted in Spring of 2020 to mitigate the spread of the disease. Teachers completed the entire 2020-2021 school year, impacted by the threat of COVID-19 spread. They needed a powerful form of professional learning to understand and respond to changes necessary for teaching in these unique and uncertain times. The systematic and intentional study by teachers of their own practice could serve that role. Hence, the purpose of this special themed issue of *JPR* is to capture the ways teachers have inquired into, about, and during COVID-19.

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School (PKY) is featured in this special themed issue, as a K-12 school that intentionally designed a professional learning system that created conditions needed for innovations in teacher practice and systemic school change through engagement in practitioner inquiry (Andrews et al., 2020). This themed issue contains five essays written by faculty members that capture their efforts to inquire into, about, and during COVID-19. To contextualize the pieces in this issue, in this introductory article, we first describe this K-12 school that framed teacher professional development as practitioner research. Next, we describe the structure PKY employed prior to COVID-19 to engage all teachers in professional learning through inquiry, followed by the ways this structure was uniquely adapted when the pandemic initiated an abrupt shift to emergency remote instruction. We end this piece with an overview of the five essays that appear in this journal, as well as insights that can be gleaned from the ways the pandemic shaped the practitioner research experience at PKY.

The Context for This Issue: Introducing PKY

PKY serves as a developmental research school affiliated with the University of Florida. Established by state statute, the mission of this and the other three research schools in the state is to develop and disseminate innovations in education. As such, the four developmental research schools serve as sites for both small- and large-scale research studies completed in collaboration with faculty from each university that the developmental research school serves. Further, at PKY, every faculty member engages in a cycle of practitioner research each school year, contributing to the developmental research school mission.

To ensure the research produced in and by each developmental research school is generalizable and/or transferable, students are selected by lottery with spaces allocated to specific ethnic and socioeconomic groups, representative of Florida's population. PKY serves approximately 1150 students; PKY's student population includes 49% White, 22% African American, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 7% multi-racial, <1% Asian. Additionally, 26% of the total student population is economically disadvantaged and is eligible for free and/or reduced lunch, and 17% of the student population have mild disabilities (Geiger & Dawson, 2020). PKY, and its sister developmental research schools, are all considered public schools in the State of Florida, and function as their own district. As such, in addition to their research mission, they must comply with mandated accountability measures, including demonstrating and reporting student levels of proficiency on standards across the full spectrum of the Florida K-12 curriculum.

Inquiry as Professional Learning at PKY: Form and Function

To scaffold the research produced by teachers each school year, over the past 15 years, PKY leaders have invested time and resources to enable teachers to undertake practitioner inquiry as a primary focus of professional learning to implement and sustain school wide reforms (Andrews et al., 2020). During the 2016–2017 school year, PKY formally amended teachers’ professional assignments to include teacher inquiry as a requirement contributing to teachers’ annual evaluation.

Each cycle of inquiry is shaped by a series of faculty meetings that occur at particular intervals throughout the school year. The first meeting, *Introduction to Inquiry*, occurs in September, and is organizational in nature. Teachers are provided a general review of the inquiry process and are grouped, with respect to interests and grade levels, into small Communities of Practice (COP) (Wenger, 1998) to support one another in their inquiries in the coming school year. The UF Institutional Review Board process for student/parent consent is also reviewed. At a follow-up meeting three weeks later, *Reflecting on Inquiry: Preparing for a Wondering*, teachers work in their COPs to identify dilemmas of practice in their classrooms. At the third meeting in November, *Wondering Development*, faculty come together to review their dilemmas of practice and use a protocol designed to transform their dilemma into a focused question to guide their inquiry (See Figure 1). At the fourth meeting that follows shortly thereafter, *Inquiry Tuning*, teachers work either individually or in pairs/trios through a template to develop a final research plan and typically begin data collection in January each school year after returning from the December holiday break.

Figure 1.

Fine Tuning a Wondering Feedback Group Protocol

Step One: Framing and Sharing the Wondering (3-4 Minutes) – Presenter shares the dilemma that led to his/her wondering and shares the wondering with the group.

Step Two: Probing Questions (6 Minutes) – Participants pose probing questions about the dilemma and wondering. Probing questions are open-ended and designed to help the presenter think more deeply about the framing and articulation of his/her wondering as well as provide more information to the group about the presenter's thinking.

Sample Probing Questions:

- What is most important for you to learn related to your dilemma? In what ways does your wondering address what is important to you?
- In what ways might your students benefit from your exploration of this question?
- What do you already know about the topic of your dilemma? In what ways might gaining insights into your question enhance what you already know?
- What aspects of your dilemma are within your control? Outside your control? In what ways does your question reflect what you can control?

Step Three: Fine-Tuning the Wondering (4-5 Minutes) – Based on what they heard in Steps One and Two, participants provide suggestions for fine-tuning the wording of or reframing the wondering.

TIP: *Wonderings are generally not phrased as dichotomous (yes/no) questions. If a question is phrased dichotomously, try rewording using the following question starters*

- In what ways does . . .
- What is the relationship between . . .
- How do students experience . . .
- What happens when . . .
- How does . . .

Step Four: Presenter Thanks. (1 minute maximum) -- Presenter briefly shares insights he/she gained into his/her wondering and thanks group members for their support.

COPs continue to meet monthly during regularly scheduled times to engage in reflective questioning about their practice and explore methods of data collection and analyses. Teacher leaders are available throughout the year to provide support, refine questions, and advise on data collection and analyses. At the end of the academic year, an *Inquiry and Investigations Symposium* is scheduled, where teachers present their inquiries either in poster and/or paper presentation format to their colleagues and UF faculty collaborators. In addition to faculty and COP meetings, PKY also created an online professional learning site, using the learning management system Canvas, to provide resources to engage in inquiry and to support teachers' work.

Adapting Inquiry to the Conditions Presented by COVID-19

When the pandemic necessitated the country to go into lockdown in March of 2020, like many schools across the country, PKY transitioned from face-to-face teaching (f2f) in their brick and mortar buildings to emergency remote instruction. As a school implementing a one-to-one laptop program, PKY was able to provide each student with their own Chromebook at home to enable them to participate in "Virtually PKY," the delivery of daily instruction via live synchronous Zoom sessions coupled with asynchronous learning activities found in a class shell constructed on CANVAS (for a fuller description, see Geiger & Dawson, 2020).

Not surprisingly, the abrupt and unexpected shift to emergency remote instruction interrupted the cycles of inquiry PKY teachers had begun at the start of the 2019-2020 school year. At the time of the lockdown, most teachers were in the process of data collection, with the move to virtual teaching making many of the forms of data they had planned to collect impossible. Further, the new question all teachers were grappling with, "How do I effectively deliver instruction remotely in emergency conditions?," overshadowed the research questions teachers had developed in November and were in the process of investigating. It was clear that accommodations needed to be made to the PKY teacher inquiry process to adapt to the changes necessitated by COVID-19.

Hence, PKY re-imagined inquiry to focus on problems of practice as they emerged during the pandemic (Andrews et al., 2020). The PKY leadership team re-designed the Canvas website and re-named it the *PKY Remote Learning Inquiry (RLI)* website, enabling teachers to collaborate, share experiences and address issues regarding the abrupt transition to emergency remote instruction for themselves and their students. Teachers were given three choices in relationship to inquiring during the lockdown: continue the inquiry that was in progress prior to the pandemic, shift to participation in the new *RLI*, or discontinue inquiry altogether for the 2019-2020 academic year. Forty-three teachers chose to participate in the

RLI, with no teachers choosing to discontinue inquiry altogether, attesting to the power engagement in inquiry held for teacher professional learning at PKY.

As data collection for the teacher inquirer is defined as “the process of capturing the action, learning, and thinking that is occurring in the classroom so it can be returned to by the teacher researcher at a later time” (Dana, 2013, p. 28), the *RLI* was structured to generate data related to teaching through the pandemic, capturing teachers’ actions, learning, and thinking. Reflective questions of practice were posted biweekly and teachers responded in written format or submitted audio-recordings of their thoughts. For example, the first round of prompts were posted two weeks after teachers transitioned to remote learning:

1. In what ways were you prepared, or not prepared, both professionally and personally, to lead learning remotely?
2. What has been challenging about teaching and learning remotely?
3. What have you learned about students?
4. What have you learned about yourself and your teaching practice?
5. Is there anything else that has surprised you about teaching and learning through remote instruction?

Teachers engaged in a total of four rounds of responses to different prompts posed every two weeks for the remainder of the 2020 school year. The *RLI* also offered space for teachers to post artifacts related to virtual teaching such as lesson plans and student work.

Taking place via Zoom, team meetings were also audio-recorded and transcribed as a source of data to capture the decision-making and action-taking that transpired throughout pandemic teaching, with some teachers engaging in interviews to reflect on their decisions and actions after the school year ended. Lastly, also after the school year ended, teachers were asked to post final reflections on *RLI* that included, among others, the following prompt:

Write a brief message to your future post-COVID-19 teaching self. As you craft this personal message to yourself, consider what “lessons learned” you want to be sure to remember from this experience and apply to your teaching practice when we are back on campus.

As teachers participated in the *RLI*, one of the editors of this special themed issue of *JPR* was invited to work with PKY teacher leaders to monitor the data that were being generated, and suggest inquiry teams based on commonalities she saw across postings. Once teams were established, both editors worked with the teachers on each team during the summer of 2020 and throughout the following year to analyze the relevant data produced by each team on the *RLI*, generating the essays that appear in this special issue.

Overview of This Special Issue

This special themed issue of *JPR*, “Inquiring Into, About, and During COVID-19,” highlights the work of five pandemic inquiry teams at PKY. Rather than complete full write-ups of an inquiry cycle, to reflect the unique nature of inquiring during the pandemic, each team crafted a reflective essay. Following the same format, the essays begin by introducing each member of the team and the background that led to their collaboration on this unique pandemic inquiry cycle. Next, each team describes what they did, what they learned, and an important take-away from their work that is relevant to all in the post-pandemic teaching world. A brief overview of each essay follows.

Essay One. Addressing Student Isolation During the Pandemic: An Inquiry into Renewing Relationships and Reimagining Classroom Communities on Remote Learning Platforms

The most pervasive concern expressed across all teachers posting on the *RLI* was the difficulty of using remote instruction tools to re-connect personally with students. The well-established strategies for creating caring classroom communities they relied on in their f2f instruction were lost in the abrupt move to emergency remote instruction. In this essay, six teachers inquire into innovative practices to re-establish relationships with their students and re-create caring classroom communities in their new, online environment.

Essay Two. Students’ Lived Experiences During the Pandemic: Their Expressions through Art and Poetry

An additional wide-spread concern among teachers was to understand more deeply their students’ lived experiences during the pandemic, as their personal, social and academic routines were unexpectedly and quickly altered. In this essay, two teachers use the process of inquiry to collaboratively explore the ways that they could transform their curricula and instructional strategies to support students during the pandemic, enabling them to express their lived experiences through the creative arts. Their students responded through art and poetry, expressing their sense of isolation and fears as well as their courage, humor, and resiliency.

Essay Three. A Quest for More Equitable Experiences for All Students During a Global Pandemic: An Inquiry into the Differentiation of Instruction During Remote Delivery of De-TrackeD HS Biology and Chemistry Classrooms

The abrupt move to emergency remote instruction left two secondary science teachers wondering how to meet the diverse needs of all the students they served. In this essay, these teachers describe the ways they used inquiry processes to chunk key science concepts into meaningful clusters; master technological

features of Zoom and Canvas to offer individual sessions, small group instruction, and alternative assessments; and connect scientific concepts to students' everyday lives and popular culture, appropriately differentiating instruction in the online environment.

Essay Four. Teachers as Instructional Designers: Unearthing the Essence of the Primary School Curriculum for Delivery within the Remote Instruction Classroom

Recognizing that elementary-aged children could not be expected to learn online sitting in front of computers for five hours a day, it became clear shortly after the lockdown began that the amount of material typically covered in the curriculum would need to be adjusted for the crisis conditions the pandemic presented. In this essay, two 4th grade teachers describe their approach to redesigning their instruction, using inquiry processes to make systematic and informed choices as to what state standards were essential as they prepared their students for the move from 4th to 5th grade.

Essay Five. Building Resiliency with Students of Color During the Pandemic: Providing Remote After-School Activities

Recognizing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Black communities, as well as the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd that occurred early in the pandemic, the urgent need to connect with and support Black students at PKY during the country's lockdown was clear. In this essay, two Black teachers describe their use of inquiry processes to transition their after-school mentoring programs for their Black male students to remote instruction platforms.

Conclusion

Earlier, we argued that teachers need a powerful form of professional learning to understand and respond to changes necessitated to schools and schooling in unique and uncertain times. We also noted in our introduction that crisis offers opportunity. Within these essays, teachers identified other crises defining our times as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers described, for example, the ways that standardized curricula and high stakes testing continued to impede the teacher creativity and the development of pedagogical skills needed to differentiate instruction and provide alternative modes of assessment. Our national awareness of *Black Lives Matters* also challenges teachers to address these issues within the context of their own schools as well as their students' communities and personal lives. Teachers encounter student mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, among their students, that needed to be addressed while maintaining and supporting an academic focus. Practitioner inquiry, embedded and

supported within schools offers teachers the opportunity to systematically inquire into these ongoing challenges of practice. As described in this essay and elsewhere (Andrews et al., 2020), schools have the capacity to structure practitioner inquiry with school-wide systemic supports and provide teachers with the necessary resources, time, and collegial assistance to conduct in-depth inquiries.

In an international study of teaching during the pandemic, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) noted the importance of teachers' agency during this time in history when teachers were expected to become online teachers essentially overnight. They described the phrase used repeatedly by teachers in disparate countries saying, "we made it work" (p. 239). The process of collaborative inquiry, as demonstrated in these five essays, illustrates PKY teachers' sense of agency as they "made it work" for their students, in multiple ways, during the initial months of a global crisis. An essential aspect of "making it work" included their enduring habits of inquiry, embedded in their school context and developed in a community of practice where they were viewed as professionals. The teacher researchers featured in this special issue of *JPR* may not have mastered the skills of remote instruction as the pandemic began, but they were prepared to turn a crisis into an opportunity by inquiring into the complexities of teaching and learning during extraordinary times. These essays provide inspiration for teacher researchers to find ways to continue to inquire despite conditions that might suggest inquiry be abandoned. This, in turn, signifies that in times of crisis, and as the education world recovers from crisis, the systematic and intentional study by teachers of their own professional practice becomes more important than ever.

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