Becoming Knowledgeable Agents of Change: Early Career Teachers Enacting Inquiry-Oriented Professional Learning

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Becoming knowledgeable agents of change: Early career teachers enacting inquiry-oriented professional learning

Abstract:
In pursuit of more effective professional learning for early career teachers, this paper presents findings from a multiple case study of practitioner inquiry with beginning teachers. The study examined the lived experiences of Kelly, Sally, and Donna as they took up inquiry-oriented professional learning in their literacy classrooms. Over the course of a semester, the teachers identified a problem of practice, co-constructed professional learning plans, explored relevant professional learning, and implemented new literacy practices. The findings demonstrated that the individualized and responsive nature of inquiry-oriented professional learning supported the teachers in developing agency and self-efficacy as they addressed areas of dissonance in their classrooms.

In order to improve learning for all students, professional development must move toward models of teacher learning that center teachers as knowers, learners, and generators of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Of special concern is the need for professional learning for early career teachers (ECTs) that builds a continuum of learning from teacher preparation to in-service professional growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Often first-year teachers are supported by induction and mentoring programs that are designed to increase teacher retention (Wei et al., 2009). However, the inconsistency of these programs makes it difficult to evaluate their impact on student achievement and teacher effectiveness (Strong, 2009). Additionally, induction and mentoring may emphasize instructional practices, such as classroom management, rather than supporting specific teacher needs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wei et al., 2009).

In this study, I responded to the need for effective literacy professional development for ECTs by shifting the focus of professional learning experiences back toward teachers. Through inquiry-oriented professional learning, the teacher participants investigated a problem of practice in their literacy classrooms, selected professional learning to support their inquiry, and experimented with new literacy practices. This research was guided by the question: How do early career teachers enact inquiry-oriented professional learning to investigate a problem of practice in their literacy classrooms?

Teacher Professional Learning

Professional learning is a tool for teacher growth that has the potential to challenge teachers’ beliefs about students and learning, refine teachers’
pedagogical practices, and improve learning outcomes for students (Guskey, 1986). Effective professional learning changes teacher knowledge and practices through both external and job-embedded experiences in order to enhance student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional learning experiences that impact student achievement should include these features: focus on content; active learning; support for collaboration; models of effective practice; coaching and expert support; feedback and reflection; and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Wei et al., 2009). Additionally, professional learning must be responsive to the physical, social, and cultural contexts of the teachers and their learning communities (Kelly, 2006; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Early Career Teachers & Professional Learning

Early career teacher professional learning prioritizes the needs of first-year teachers. This primarily consists of induction, such as working with a mentor, common planning time, seminars for ECTs, and district- or campus-based professional learning (Wei et al., 2010), which focuses on acclimating the new teacher to the culture and practices of the local school, district, and community (Krasnoff, 2014). However, the local implementation of teacher induction varies widely with a disparity of access most likely to impact secondary teachers, bilingual and ESL-certified teachers, and teachers in high-poverty or high-minority communities (Wei et al., 2010). New teachers may be assigned a mentor for their first one to two years, but the degree and effectiveness of mentoring programs vary from case to case (Robson & Mtika, 2017). Unfortunately, these short-term programs may not equip teachers for taking ownership of their own professional learning in a way that balances their individual needs with the district or state’s systemic plan for teacher growth. Additionally, studies of mentoring and induction for ECTs often focus on teacher retention, or minimizing the teachers who leave the field, without providing clear evidence about the relationship of these programs to teacher practice or student achievement (Strong, 2009).

Early career teachers need the tools to transition from the guided support of teacher preparation programs to confident ownership of their professional learning needs. It is essential that professional learning experiences support ECTs’ development of self-efficacy, which is the belief that one is capable of performing a task or bringing about change (Bandura, 1978). Teachers with high efficacy are more willing to try out new teaching practices (Thomas et al., 2019) and tackle difficult tasks (Bandura, 1993). To support the implementation of new learning, ECTs benefit from job-embedded experiences, like coaching, mentoring, and inquiry (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Krasnoff, 2014; McCormack et al., 2006; Robson & Mtika, 2017). These authentic forms of professional learning acknowledge that
there is no beginning or end to teacher learning but that professional growth occurs in the daily work of being a teacher (Webster-Wright, 2009). To better address their needs, professional learning for ECTs must shift toward experiences that are flexible and responsive (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978), and recognize ECTs’ professional value as experts in their field (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018).

ECTs & Practitioner Inquiry

A promising model of teacher learning that addresses the unique needs of ECTs is practitioner inquiry. Practitioner inquiry is “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 3). The individualized and self-directed nature of practitioner inquiry equips teachers to delve deeply into their own teaching practice. In fact, it is a practice that enriches a teacher’s daily work by providing more purpose as teachers observe and respond to the needs of students (Dana, 2017). As teachers select a question for inquiry, they are deliberate about collecting, recording, and utilizing information in ways that generate knowledge about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Therefore, practitioner inquiry is not merely asking questions and seeking answers, but it is a powerful form of research conducted by teachers within their local context that has the potential to improve teaching practices and student outcomes (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

Practitioner inquiry as literacy professional learning provides opportunities for teachers to examine problems of practice that spark from dissonance within their classrooms (Dana, 2013; Fecho & Allen, 2005). In contrast to traditional, “one-size-fits-all” trainings, practitioner inquiry is responsive to the complex nature of literacy learning. One group of teachers used inquiry to critique a reading program and identify more asset-based approaches to students’ reading abilities (Hines & Conner-Zachocki, 2015). Others have utilized practitioner inquiry to explore the complex multiliteracies of students (Sandretto & Tilson, 2016) and to critique a scripted, mandated literacy curriculum (Vaughn, 2016). As teachers enact practitioner inquiry, they are encouraged to embrace dissonance in the classroom as a learning opportunity rather than a problem (Dana, 2013), which is an essential skill for the professional growth of ECTs. Providing opportunities to engage in practitioner inquiry offers a promising pathway for enhancing the professional learning of early career teachers.
Theoretical Framework

Practitioner inquiry positions teachers as researchers that identify problems, reflect on evidence, and take steps to bring about change (Blumenreich & Falk, 2006). Through their inquiry, teachers engage with, rather than resist, the dissonance that emerges within their own teaching practice (Fecho & Allen, 2005; Simon et al., 2012). Practitioner inquiry empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional learning by constructing new knowledge as they address issues related to their interests and needs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Hilton & Hilton, 2017). Instead of acting as passive receivers of knowledge, teachers who engage in practitioner inquiry participate in professional learning as creators of knowledge (MacDonald & Weller, 2017).

During the inquiry cycle, teachers select an area of study, collect and analyze classroom data, and “responsively and iteratively” make informed changes until they achieve their intended goals (Butler et al., 2015; Dana, 2013). In the final, and crucial, phase of the inquiry process, teachers share their findings and learning (Dana, 2013), which facilitates the movement of knowledge from a local context into the broader community of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Therefore, practitioner inquiry offers a valuable emic viewpoint into the field of teaching and learning where teachers can offer their unique perspectives about the social issues that surround the educational context (Fecho & Allen, 2005). In partnership with teachers, educational researchers have access to rich data and in-depth cases that can critique and move forward educational theories (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990).

Researcher Stance

This study stems from my experiences as a teacher participant in professional development, as a professional development provider to in-service teachers, and as a teacher of preservice teachers. I designed this study in response to my belief that teachers at every stage of their career should have more ownership of their professional learning experiences. I am a white woman who has worked in many educational contexts as an elementary teacher, a literacy consultant, and a teacher educator. Throughout this study, I navigated multiple roles, such as researcher, co-learner, professional development provider, and literacy coach. I made every effort to collaborate with and co-construct learning alongside the ECTs by seeking their input in the process, prioritizing their voices, and creating space to share their learning with others.
Methodology

Through this multiple-case study, I recorded and analyzed the lived experiences of three ECTs as they enacted inquiry-oriented professional learning within a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Kelly, Sally, and Donna (all pseudonyms) were early career teachers from central Texas that taught elementary literacy classes and expressed interest in participating in ongoing professional learning. For the purpose of this study, I defined early career as teachers with less than 5 years of experience.

Kelly, a 25-year-old woman, identified as Vietnamese and white. She participated in a four-year teacher education program and a one-year master’s program prior to her teaching career. Kelly was in her third year of teaching, and she taught a self-contained third grade class in an urban school district. I met Kelly when she was a student at a local university, and I invited her to join the study after she began her teaching career.

Sally, a 25-year-old woman, identified as white. She had completed a four-year teacher education program and a one-year master’s program in education prior to her starting her teaching career. Sally was in her second year of teaching a self-contained kindergarten class in a suburban school district.

Donna, a 37-year-old woman, identified as white. She completed an alternative certification program while working as a paraprofessional. Donna had taught one semester before joining the study, so she was in her first full year of teaching in a suburban school district. She taught two sections of fourth grade math and science, and taught writing instruction to her homeroom class. The mentor coordinator for beginning teachers in a local school district suggested Sally and Donna as stellar early career teachers who would be eager to participate in professional learning.

Design & Data Collection

While there are many forms of practitioner research (Gordon, 2016), my purpose for this study was to allow the ECTs to conduct individual inquiries while also building knowledge about literacy content and pedagogy. For each inquiry cycle, the ECTs examined their teaching practices for areas of concern (Dana, 2013), explored relevant resources to deepen their understanding of the topic, made informed changes within their classroom (Butler et al., 2015), and reflected on their experiences (Schön, 1983).
Due to the impact of the COVID-19 virus (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2021), I aligned my data collection with the school district protocols. I conducted in-person classroom observations, but I minimized face-to-face interactions by collecting data through virtual platforms, such as Zoom, Google Drive, and email. After an initial interview and classroom observation, I met with each teacher to co-design a personalized professional learning plan (PLP, see Appendix) that detailed their inquiry topic, timeline for this round of inquiry, professional learning resources, and evidence to be collected. After the teachers selected their topics of interest and learning preferences, I located relevant resources, such as podcasts, blogs, book chapters, and articles, to add to the shared PLP document. The teachers were responsible for exploring the professional learning resources and selecting which literacy practices to implement in the classroom.

Every 2-3 weeks, I visited each teacher’s classroom and immediately followed up with a virtual reflective conference to discuss the teacher’s professional learning experiences, their new practices, and their progress toward the desired outcome for the inquiry cycle. Each teacher would determine if they wanted to continue with the current inquiry cycle or move to a new problem of practice. At the end of the semester, I conducted a post-interview to capture each teacher’s reflection on their professional learning experiences. In addition to interview and reflective conference transcripts, I took observational notes from my classroom visits, wrote memos after each interaction with the teachers, and saved email correspondence. In a few instances, the teachers shared artifacts related to their new practices, such as student work or a product they had created. Although the teachers and I determined relevant sources of student work related to their inquiry cycles, the teachers were inconsistent in collecting this data. Instead, the ECTs shared anecdotal evidence from their classrooms as evidence of shifts in practice.

Data Analysis

I began the analysis process by examining the data for each individual case study. Using Krell & Dana’s (2012, Figure 1) inquiry cycle as an a priori framework, I named codes, such as goals for literacy classroom and inquiry, problem of practice and question, and trying out new practices. During this process, I recorded additional open codes related to professional learning (i.e. attitude toward PD; coaching) and classroom observations (i.e. routines; small groups). Next, I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the data for each individual case study in response to the research question. Finally, I used cross-case analysis (Miles et al., 2020) to look for patterns across the three individual cases. Rather than diminishing the unique experiences of each teacher, I identified
commonalities across their professional learning journeys (see Figure 2). One of these common themes demonstrated the ECTs’ development of increased self-efficacy during the inquiry process. In the following section, I present highlights from each teacher’s inquiry journey related to their experiences with becoming knowledgeable agents of change.

**Figure 1**

*The Inquiry Cycle (Krell & Dana, 2012)*

**Figure 2**

*Data Analysis: Individual and Cross-Case Themes*

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<tr>
<th>Kelly’s Themes</th>
<th>Sally’s Themes</th>
<th>Donna’s Themes</th>
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<td>Experimenting with New Practices</td>
<td>Addressing Immediate Needs</td>
<td>Enacting a Teaching Philosophy</td>
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<td>Shifting Toward Student Ownership</td>
<td>Taking Intentional, Manageable Steps</td>
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<td>Prioritizing Relevant Professional Learning</td>
<td>Building Community &amp; Accountability</td>
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<td>Seeking a Learning Community</td>
<td>Evolving Teacher Identity</td>
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<td>Capturing Student Learning</td>
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**Cross-Case Themes**

- Becoming Knowledgeable Agents of Change
- Shifting Toward Student-Centered Classrooms
- Expanding What Counts as Professional Learning
- Balancing Facilitation and Self-Direction
Inquiry-Oriented Literacy Professional Learning

Throughout the study, each of the ECTs developed a greater sense of confidence in their literary knowledge and pedagogical practices. Although the ECTs completed multiple inquiry cycles, I have selected one example from each teacher that illustrates their professional growth during their inquiry experiences.

Kelly’s Inquiry: Experimenting with Student Ownership

Over the course of the semester, Kelly explored ways to refine the reading instruction for her third grade, self-contained classroom. In this selection, Kelly revised her independent reading tasks in pursuit of increased student engagement and ownership of literacy learning.

As we discussed potential areas for inquiry-oriented professional learning, Kelly shared her concern about her students’ engagement during the hour-long independent work time. She wanted to move from a list of ‘must do’ and ‘may do’ activities to a new system. She said, “I'd like meaningful independent work where maybe they have choice menus.” As we discussed ways to gradually introduce differentiated independent work, I proposed that Kelly develop a choice board to use one day a week. Kelly and I drafted the inquiry question: In what ways does “What I Want Wednesdays” increase engagement through meaningful work?

Kelly explored some blogs related to differentiated independent tasks and created her What I Want Wednesday choice board. Although she felt that students were much more engaged during the time she used the choice board, Kelly wanted to go further with differentiated word lists for word work and spelling activities based on students’ current instructional needs. Kelly continued to pursue professional learning by listening to podcasts and finding online examples of teachers using differentiated literacy stations. In our next reflective conference, Kelly shared that some of the novelty of the choice board had worn off and she was ready to modify the independent work time by increasing student ownership of the daily tasks. For this direction of exploration, Kelly shifted to a new inquiry question: How can stations and/or partner work keep students on task during independent reading time?

Kelly designed a new version of the choice board within Seesaw (a digital classroom tool; Seesaw, 2022) with six activities for the week. She had her students select one or two activities to do each day and she planned to introduce one or two new things each week to keep the work more interesting. After listening to an episode of the Cult of Pedagogy podcast (Gonzalez, 2016), Kelly added an
extension page of activities including listening to a podcast, visiting the MET Museum online (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.), Time for Kids (online news articles; Time USA, 2023), Wonderopolis (more online news articles; National Center for Families Learning, 2023), and Freckle ELA (online word study program; Renaissance Learning, 2023). Students also had the option of selecting a game from the phonics basket to play with a partner. When I observed Kelly’s class, I wrote, “I’m not seeing anyone off-task - students are moving quickly through the activities, they are confident in what to do next and eager to move things to the “I’m done” part of the chart.”

In our reflective conference, Kelly mentioned that the students were proud of their own productivity. She had invited them to contribute to the decisions about what their tasks would be for the next week’s independent work by offering options and allowing the students to help her select specific tasks. Kelly moved onto a new inquiry topic but continued to adjust the choice board as needed to engage her students. In this selection of her inquiry experience, Kelly identified an area to examine (independent work), sought out professional learning (podcasts and blogs), experimented with new practices (choice boards), and reflected on the impact of these practices (increased ownership of learning).

**Sally’s Inquiry: Refining Reading Curriculum**

During her inquiry-oriented professional learning, Sally examined her reading instruction in a self-contained kindergarten classroom. In this selection, Sally modified a curricular resource to provide more responsive, differentiated instruction for her students.

Early in the fall semester, Sally shared that some students were bored of learning one new letter each day during the grade level’s Kindergarten alphabet bootcamp curriculum. Sally wanted to investigate ways to differentiate her lessons by adding mini-extensions to the curriculum materials. Based on Sally’s preferences, I added a few resources to her professional learning plan related to her question: *What improvement do we see when we add mini-extensions to normal tasks in the ABC bootcamp?*

Sally listened to a kindergarten teacher podcast and read a few blogs, but she was most excited about finding a new community online. She said, “I started the Kinder Tribe Facebook. [It] is probably my favorite thing I’m on and just everything you’re posting feels really relevant and relatable, because it’s in real time.” Sally asked the community about extension activities and someone suggested creating a word-building activity with consonant-vowel-consonant
words. Sally implemented this activity for three of her students that had already mastered all of their letters and sounds. For the rest of the class, Sally asked fast-fin shampooers to draw a picture on the back of their handwriting practice that related to the letter of the day.

In our reflective conference, Sally shared how adding these simple extensions increased student engagement. She said, “they’re more motivated to get through their work because there’s a purposeful activity at the end of it.” Sally was encouraged by the improvement in engagement and motivation that she observed while implementing mini-extensions. She planned to continue using small tasks to extend class work as she moved on to another inquiry topic. In this selection of her inquiry experience, Sally named an area of concern (bored students), discovered a professional learning community (Facebook group), implemented new practices (mini-extensions), and reflected on the impact of these practices (increased engagement).

**Donna’s Inquiry: Creating Space for Student Identities**

Over the course of the semester, Donna participated in inquiry-oriented professional learning cycles related to her writing instruction for her homeroom fourth grade class. In this selection, Donna pursued practices that allowed her students to express their identities through writing.

Donna’s fourth grade students were expected to write an expository essay in response to a prompt for the end-of-year high-stakes state assessment, so the grade-level team spent most of the year focusing on that genre. After starting the year with narrative writing, Donna wanted to ensure that her students were still able to find their voices and demonstrate their passions through expository writing. Donna and I discussed how talking about identity could support students in thinking deeply about how to personalize their writing. Our discussion of identity lessons led to Donna’s first inquiry question: *How can conversations about identity help build a collection of ideas to inspire writers?*

To support Donna’s professional learning, I shared a few of the identity lessons from *Being the Change* (Ahmed, 2018), found two Facebook groups for fourth grade teachers, and suggested some teachers to follow on Twitter. Donna began her expository unit with cross-curricular writing. As we debriefed after I observed her classroom, Donna told me how she shifted her instruction in the middle of the lesson. She said, “everything that we’ve talked about flashed through my mind…I want them to write about something that’s personal to them.” Our conversations about using identity to support writing instruction prompted Donna
to think about how she could give the students the opportunity to write about a meaningful topic.

Over the next few weeks, Donna continued to build on the connection between identity and writing by encouraging students to select a topic that “gives you joy in your heart” and that they “could talk to someone about forever.” Donna used the ideas from the identity lessons to be more purposeful in modeling and supporting her students in writing “heart stories” (Heard, 2016), allowing them to connect emotionally to their topics. Through conferences with students and work samples, Donna noticed that her students were more consistently selecting meaningful topics, so she was ready to move on to another inquiry topic. In this selection of her inquiry experience, Donna picked a topic to explore (identity in writing), expanded her content knowledge (identity lessons), refined her practices (revising lessons), and reflected on the impact of these practices (more meaningful topics).

Findings

During the course of the study, Kelly, Sally, and Donna developed more self-efficacy as professionals capable of responding to dissonance and as knowledgeable agents of change within their literacy classrooms. During their inquiry cycles, the ECTs identified problems of practice, explored professional learning in pursuit of possible solutions, implemented small changes, and reflected on the effectiveness of these new practices. The ECTs’ inquiry into their literacy classrooms was accompanied by a deeper knowledge of their own practices and a growing sense of confidence as they began to refine their teaching practices.

Discovering Agency

Each of the ECTs demonstrated the ability to identify dissonance within their literacy classrooms and take productive steps toward resolving those concerns. As Kelly participated in inquiry-oriented professional learning, she learned how to be more attentive and responsive to her students as she enacted multiple iterations of independent reading work. In our final conference, Kelly shared how the process of implementing new practices had evolved throughout the semester. She reflected,

I think What I Want Wednesday turned out to be a very good stepping stone. I learned a lot from it...it was a disaster after a few weeks...so then that got me thinking, ‘How can I get kids more collaborative within having choice?’ And I think that evolved into the reading stations.
Although it took weeks of trial and error, Kelly’s persistence paid off. Toward the end of the semester, she noticed that her students were more self-sufficient and able to solve problems without relying on her as much. In fact, Kelly was so pleased with the reading stations that she began to adjust her math block to include more student-directed work time. Through her inquiry-oriented professional learning, Kelly built confidence in her ability to adjust her literacy practices to meet the needs of her students.

Sally used the word “intentional” to describe how inquiry-oriented professional learning shaped her as a teacher. By closely examining her teaching practices, her literacy classroom, and the needs of her students, she was able to intentionally select new literacy practices that addressed the immediacy and uniqueness of her current context. She noted, “[the inquiry] was specifically what I needed this year in my classroom and next year I’m going to need different things and last year I needed different things.” By the end of our study, Sally had begun to see the impact of her intentionality. She reflected on her journey,

I feel like this year has been really rough for me and I don’t feel like I’ve been like the teacher I was last year. But today I was assessing reading levels and I was like, ‘Oh my god, like you guys are learning and stuff, you can read!’...all the little things I did the whole time that were more intentional have paid off in the long run.

Although it was difficult for her to see earlier in the semester, Sally was able to collect concrete evidence that her shifting practices had led to positive learning outcomes for her students. Through inquiry-oriented professional learning, Sally was able to embrace her own agency in bringing about changes in her literacy classroom through her ongoing intentionality.

Through her inquiry experience, Donna was able to adopt instructional practices that allowed the students to find their voice through writing. In our final meeting, she said, “They are understanding that their writing tells the world something about themselves...I just love that they feel like their opinion is worthwhile in telling the world what to do.” Donna’s small shifts in her writing lessons provided space for the students to share their passion and voice as they learned how to share their identities through writing. She observed that her instructional choices impacted the writing development of her students and that she had the agency to evaluate and shift her teaching practices in order to more effectively meet her students’ needs. Through inquiry-oriented professional learning, Donna gained confidence in identifying areas of concern and using her agency to change her literacy practices.
Becoming Reflective Practitioners

Alongside this growing self-efficacy, the ECTs developed a deeper knowledge of practice as they began to unpack their roles and positionalities as teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As Kelly discussed the changes in her literacy classroom over the semester, she noticed that she had loosened her control over student movement and activity during independent reading time. In the past, she had required her students to be quiet and at their seats while she met with groups. She reflected, “I can just tell like I’ve let go of my power struggle, control problems.” She also observed that she was giving students more opportunities for student choice and differentiated tasks, which was allowing students to be more successful. Overall, Kelly said that the new practices “just completely transformed my literacy time.” Kelly felt that the inquiry process helped her move toward her literacy goals by making visible the teaching practices that were hindering student ownership of learning. As she reflected on her literacy practices, Kelly was able to question and eventually refine her instruction to be more responsive to her learners.

When I asked how a typical day in her literacy classroom had changed over the semester, Sally commented, “I’ve just been shocked by the flexibility of my students, I think it’s easier for them to change than it is for me...I changed the way I’ve done things like three or four times and they’re just like ‘Okay.’” Sally found freedom in the knowledge that she could refine her literacy practices and that her students would embrace the changes. The process really encouraged her to embrace opportunities to tweak her classroom. Sally shared that one of her biggest successes was providing differentiation for students that had already mastered letters and sounds, which allowed her time to focus on students that needed specific interventions, like learning to write their names. Sally was confident that her intentionality in the inquiry process had led to improved learning outcomes for her students. As Sally reflected on the gaps between the curriculum and her students’ needs, she was able to purposefully address tensions and provide more effective instruction.

As we talked about the changes in her classroom, Donna explained how the inquiry process helped her to investigate dissonance and take steps toward more effective routines. She commented,

I kind of look at it as a formative assessment for me…it’s so good to have somebody asking me these questions to see where I need to change or continue learning. I think that without that I would probably still be making the same choices that I was, and probably would be far more frustrated at
this point because my kids wouldn’t be getting it. When in reality, it would be me that really wasn’t getting it.

Through deeper knowledge of practice, Donna uncovered how her desire to build passionate writers was out of sync with her lessons. Donna changed her writing lessons, which encouraged her students to share their voices through writing. Like Kelly and Sally, Donna’s reflections led her to implement more effective literacy instruction in her classroom.

**Discussion & Implications**

During their inquiry-oriented professional learning, Kelly, Sally, and Donna constructed new knowledge of their learning contexts and embraced their ability to enact change in their literacy classrooms. Each teacher developed self-efficacy by using inquiry-oriented professional learning to name areas of dissonance, take productive steps toward resolving concerns, and reflect on the impact of those changes. Early career teachers need professional learning experiences that build self-efficacy (Elliott et al., 2010) and enhance teaching proficiency (Ovendon-Hope et al., 2018). Practitioner inquiry addresses these needs by providing individualized, responsive, and job-embedded professional learning for ECTs.

Inquiry also facilitates reflective practices (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Schön, 1983), which support ECTs in moving from these areas of dissonance to creating new understanding in the classroom. Although there is no one way to engage in reflection during teacher inquiry (Johnston & Harper, 2021), I purposefully designed the reflective conferences as a tool to facilitate each teacher’s reflections while also gaining insights into their professional learning. Through reflection, Kelly gained a deeper understanding of the power dynamics in her classroom through her inquiry. By interrogating the balance between teacher-directed and student-owned learning, Kelly increased her knowledge of practice and made shifts to create a more student-driven independent learning time during her literacy block. Sally became more intentional in selecting literacy practices. As she implemented the grade-level curriculum, Sally made small changes to differentiate instruction, which led to increased student engagement. Donna also reflected on her practices by exploring how her teaching philosophy aligned with her actions. Through her inquiry, Donna evaluated and refined her teaching practices as she moved toward writing instruction that empowered student voices. All of the teachers not only gained a deeper knowledge of their practices, but they put their knowledge into action in their literacy classrooms.
Though none of the ECTs in this study fully embodied inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), they each contributed to the collective knowledge of teaching and learning by producing new understandings about literacy instruction within their local contexts (Dana, 2013). Inquiry-oriented professional learning increases the self-efficacy of ECTs by creating opportunities for teachers to productively analyze their dissonance, seek out new learning, and enact changes in their classrooms. Induction and mentoring programs should consider utilizing inquiry-oriented professional learning as a system of support and ongoing professional learning that prepares ECTs to effectively identify and respond to dissonance within their classrooms (Fecho & Allen, 2005; Simon et al., 2012). ECTs’ inquiry could be further enhanced by allowing cohorts of teachers to meet regularly to set goals and share their learning in inquiry-oriented professional learning communities (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Through inquiry, early career teachers can increase their self-efficacy, deepen their understanding of their practices, and enact changes in their classrooms.
References


of purpose, problems and potential. School-University Partnerships, 10(4), 5–12.


Appendix

Professional Learning Plan Template

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<th>Kind of Professional Learning</th>
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**Evidence Tools**

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