Supporting Practitioner Inquiry in Teacher Education: Opportunities and Challenges in ESOL Contexts

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Abstract
Formal preparation and professional development with an explicit focus on the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is essential. Thus, teacher preparation programs play a vital role in meeting this pressing need. Practitioner inquiry has the potential to be a powerful anchor in clinical field experiences for teacher candidates working with emergent bilingual/multilingual students (EB). The purpose of this paper is to present practitioner inquiry as a promising pedagogical practice for teacher education, drawing from examples of implementation in an elementary, preservice teacher preparation program that leads to state credentialing in ESOL. Opportunities and challenges related to the use of this practice with teacher candidates, as well as recommendations, are discussed.

Keywords
practitioner inquiry, professional development, teacher education, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), bilingual/multilingual students

Background

As the cultural and linguistic diversity of the K–12 education system increases, the need for well-prepared teachers for emergent bi-/multilingual (EB) students has never been greater (Castro, 2010; Coady et al., 2011). In recent decades, Georgia has seen rapid growth in immigration (Hooker et al., 2014), and consistent with nationwide trends (Loeffer, 2007), its growing population of EBs in K–12 schools outpaces general student enrollment. According to the Georgia State Department of Education, EBs currently make up approximately 8% of the state's PK–12 student population (Sugarman & Geary, 2018).

Both nationwide and in Georgia, wide and alarming gaps have been reported between EBs and their peers in both achievement and graduation rates (Sugarman & Geary, 2018) despite increased accountability and performance monitoring under federal regulations described in the Every Student Succeeds Act (Callahan et al., 2020). To remediate these gaps, formal preparation

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and professional development to develop expertise for teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is essential for all teachers, especially given widespread efforts toward inclusion in general education classrooms (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). To this end, all teacher preparation programs must have a strategic and intentional focus on the academic, linguistic, instructional, and socio-environmental needs of EBs.

Teacher Preparation Programs

As the first phase of the teacher development continuum, teacher preparation programs play a vital role in the educator pipeline (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Strong teacher preparation programs support teacher candidates in developing the knowledge, disposition, and pedagogical skills to effectively meet the needs of EBs in terms of language development and content acquisition (Coady et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2019). Effectively prepared teachers are also better positioned to serve as advocates for and with EBs and their families (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2008; Linville, 2020). Effective teacher preparation programs also challenge misunderstandings around multiculturalism and social justice in order to foster the critical consciousness necessary to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse settings (Castro, 2010). Likewise, Smolcic and Katunich (2017) emphasized that practice-oriented programs (i.e., those that utilize field experience opportunities) are a necessary pathway for developing educators who are prepared to work effectively across cultures. However, a "pivotal dilemma of teacher education" (p. 354) is determining how to fully prepare educators to meet the nuanced and varied needs of EBs within a short period of time (Reeves, 2010).

Field experiences are a frequently used approach in teacher preparation programs to develop teacher candidates' pedagogical skills. These experiences can provide teacher candidates the opportunity to work directly with EBs and the teachers who support them. Field experiences offer an opportunity to provide deeper connections between coursework and the practical realities and daily experiences of EBs in local classrooms (Reeves, 2010). These experiences, combined with a strong framework for content and language learning embedded within coursework, can contribute to teacher candidates' perception of general preparedness to support EBs (Coady et al., 2011) as well as the overall quality of their pedagogical practice (Bollin, 2007). However, teacher educators need to be intentional in the design and implementation of field experiences for teacher candidates to maximize their effectiveness. Careful attention needs to be given to where teacher candidates are placed, with whom, and the expectations once assigned to their placements.

Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner inquiry, defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 3), is increasingly being used as an anchor for field experiences. As an umbrella term that sometimes encompasses related approaches such as teacher research, action research, and self-study (Dana, 2015), this type of disciplined inquiry blurs the lines between research and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It positions teacher candidates as reflective practitioners and natural inquirers (Delane et al., 2017), and therefore, can be both a valuable learning tool and an ideal professional stance.

According to Ginns and colleagues (2001), practitioner inquiry is particularly well suited for use with teacher candidates because it can "empower teachers to examine their own beliefs, explore their own understandings of practice, foster critical reflection, and develop decision making capabilities that would enhance their teaching" (p. 129). In this way, engaging in practitioner inquiry can help dismantle deficit perspectives and stereotypes of EBs commonly held

by teacher candidates that impede the likelihood of student success (Castro, 2010; Schroeder, 2020). By providing teacher candidates with a greater and more nuanced insight into the varied ways that EBs experience the social, academic, and environmental dynamics of a specific classroom (Nguyen et al., 2019), practitioner inquiry helps teacher candidates to be more responsive to the unique needs of their students. It also allows them to use their own voice by sharing their experiences through "insider stories of learning to teach" as they develop and study their practice simultaneously (Phillips & Carr, 2009, p. 223).

Athanases and colleagues (2015) noted that inquiry often emerges from problems of practice identified by teachers. These problems are sometimes characterized as "felt difficulties" (Ma et al., 2018, p. 17) or something puzzling that occurs in daily practice. When coaching to use the process of practitioner inquiry with teacher candidates, they are often simply asked to reflect on burning questions they have. These initial wonderings are the catalyst for short, iterative inquiry cycles embedded within the classroom's natural rhythm and occur regularly over time (Dana, 2015). The goal of engagement in these cycles is improved classroom practice that supports students' learning and development (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019).

Dana (2013) put forth a five-stage cycle that serves as the backbone of the practitioner inquiry process (see Figure 1). The five stages are: (a) develop a wondering (i.e., a burning question about practice), (b) develop a plan to collect data (e.g., field notes, documents, interviews, quantitative measures of student achievement), (c) analyze data (i.e., carefully examining the data to identify its story), (d) take action (i.e., make adjustments to your practice), and (e) share with others. It is important to note this process is neither linear nor fixed; in other words, inquirers move back and forth between stages as needed rather than through a prescriptive and restrictive progression from one stage to the next (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019). That is to say, the process is intentionally iterative to account for the complexities and ebbs and flows of daily classroom practice and lends itself to implementation that is recurring over time (Dana et al., 2011).

Figure 1
Inquiry Cycle (adapted from Dana et al., 2011)
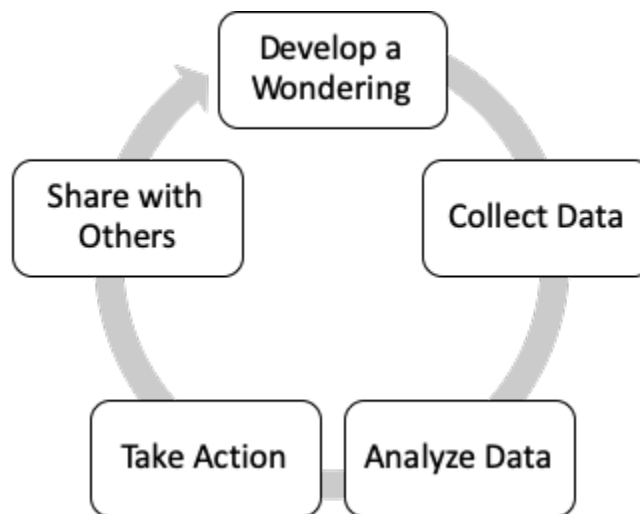
We agree with the argument by Schroeder and Currin (2019) that to be most effective, practitioner inquiry must always start with teacher candidates, regardless of the context. Therefore, in this paper, we present practitioner inquiry as a promising pedagogical practice for developing

teacher candidates who are effectively prepared to support EBs within and beyond the ESOL classroom. We first provide an overview of practitioner inquiry within a teacher preparation program and then describe the experiences of two teacher candidates who engaged in the process. Next, we use insights from these experiences to share opportunities and challenges learned. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for teacher educators to embed practitioner inquiry into their teacher preparation programs.

Insights from Implementation

Here, we share the implementation experiences of two former teacher candidates, Kimberly and Shauna (pseudonyms), in order to discuss both opportunities and challenges when using practitioner inquiry with teacher candidates. At the time of implementation, they were enrolled in a formal teacher preparation program that grants certification in Elementary Education (K–6), as well as endorsements in both Reading (K–12) and ESOL (K–12). Like many other programs of its kind, theoretical and pedagogical knowledge specific to ESOL is taught through two standalone courses in addition to content infusion across eleven different courses (e.g., reading methods, teaching strategies) in the program.

Each semester of the program is also teamed with a field experience of varied intensity, duration, and focus. The program's initial field experience occurs in a rural setting with an emphasis on ESOL. However, typically, students have had infrequent opportunities to engage with EBs in their subsequent field experiences. In the advanced field experience (i.e., practicum) that occurs during the program's final semester, teacher candidates work alongside their assigned mentor teachers (MT) for three full days per week. They also attend a weekly seminar, focused on supporting teacher candidates to process and reflect on their field experience, while simultaneously completing their remaining program coursework. The seminar is led in small groups by an interdisciplinary team of university supervisors who also provide direct observations and feedback to students during their placements. Practitioner inquiry is a central feature of the advanced practicum. The process as defined by Dana et al. (2011) is used to explicitly teach students each component of the inquiry cycle. They are also expected to engage in at least one inquiry cycle during their placement while being coached through the process by their supervisor. Each student presents the findings of their inquiry at the end of the semester.

Kimberly and Shauna were advanced practicum students at Parkside Elementary (pseudonym), the district's only elementary school designated as a formal ESOL center. In addition to being a neighborhood school, the district also provides transportation to the school for EBs from across the county so that students have access to specially trained teachers and staff with expertise and experience in ESOL. The four most represented languages in the school are Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, and Korean; however, the school has rich linguistic diversity with more than 20 languages spoken by its staff, students, and families.

Kimberly's Inquiry

Kimberly's advanced field experience placement was in a second grade English Language Arts (ELA) class. A White female from out of state, Kimberly was interested in becoming an ESOL teacher after graduation and enjoyed studying Spanish as a second language. She was pursuing elementary certification but hoped to pursue further her expertise in ESOL in graduate school after completing her initial program. Kimberly's MT was a monolingual English speaker and the ESOL lead on the grade level team. Nearly half of the students in her assigned general education

classroom were identified as EB. Their English proficiency levels varied widely, and many received formal ESOL services via a pull-out model during the ELA block.

Kimberly's practitioner inquiry emerged from observations of her students' daily interactions within and beyond the classroom. Broadly, she was puzzled by the limited engagement of EBs in class activities and discussions and wondered how she could be more intentional in her practice to support positive and frequent verbal interactions among students. At the same time, she was attuned to patterns of language use among her students. More specifically, the EBs appeared to reserve use of their first language (L1) to non-academic settings (e.g., during lunch, at the playground) and were expected to interact entirely in English during class time. From these observations, she wondered if and how adoption of a translanguaging pedagogy (García, 2009), an approach she learned through her ESOL coursework and further explored in the practitioner literature, would facilitate more positive interactions for the EBs in the class by encouraging them to draw from the entirety of their linguistic repertoires (Kleyn & García, 2019). Translanguaging pedagogy encourages fluid languaging practices of EBs and is a teaching method that promotes equity, valuing language policies in schools that do not position students' language as singular processes (Sánchez et al., 2018).

Shauna's Inquiry

Shauna's advanced field experience placement was in an ESOL classroom where she, alongside her MT, supported EBs in second and third grade in a pull-out model. She was a White female who had recently improved her ability to communicate in Spanish after living abroad for an extended period prior to the start of the semester. She explicitly requested an ESOL placement for her advanced field experience upon returning to the United States and her program. Shauna's MT was a bilingual Latina, and Spanish and English were frequently used interchangeably in the classroom among the adults and students. Their classroom was also supported part-time by a paraprofessional who was bilingual in English and Mandarin. Among the students in the class, six languages were spoken. However, more than half of the students were Spanish speakers.

Shauna and her MT's frequent use of Spanish in their classroom is what initially triggered her inquiry. She recalled a puzzling encounter with a student whose primary language was Arabic. He greeted her one morning in Spanish and then stated that he wished he could speak Spanish. This interaction made Shauna wonder how students who did not speak Spanish experienced its frequent use in their classroom, especially because of her inability to communicate in the other students' L1. She believed that this discrepancy was likely a common dilemma for teachers supporting linguistically diverse students, though she had not previously considered how to approach it. Shauna wondered how she could provide more L1 support for students whose primary language she could not speak, and like Kimberly, drew from practitioner literature and resources on translanguaging pedagogy (e.g., a translanguaging guide for educators; Celic & Seltzer, 2013) as a guide to her practice.

Closely examining the inquiry experiences of Kimberly and Shauna provided important insight related to understanding the implementation of this practice to support EBs. Several exciting opportunities emerged, both for the teacher candidate as well as for the MT. However, the use of practitioner inquiry to support teacher candidates to develop effective practice for EBs is not without challenges. These opportunities and challenges center around: (a) bridging coursework and practice through the inquiry process, (b) the teacher candidates' preparedness to implement practitioner inquiry, and (c) the frequency of practitioner inquiry's use in practice.

Bridging Coursework and Practice

One of the most exciting opportunities related to practitioner inquiry is the teacher candidates' ability to build on the knowledge gained in their formal ESOL coursework. Practitioner inquiry allows teacher candidates to strategically "try out" practices from their coursework in order to determine what works and for whom. Through the inquiry process, Kimberly found that she initially had misconceptions about adopting a translanguaging pedagogy in her classroom. For example, she believed translanguaging necessitated a common spoken language between teacher and student. With support from her supervisor, using the practitioner literature base as a data source and useful resource helped her identify and remediate these misconceptions in ways that extended her knowledge and ability to implement in practice with all EBs regardless of language background. Shauna, too, drew heavily from her prior ESOL coursework in conceptualizing her research action plan and potential data collection sources, a part of the process that effectively provided her with insight into her wondering (Dana, 2015). Through their respective inquiries, both teacher candidates demonstrated "critical competencies of a professional educator as they practice a cycle of assessment, planning, and implementation based upon data collected in the classroom" (p. 208).

However, because the students' inquiry experiences were formally tied to participation in a practicum and its corresponding seminar course, it was easy for some students to equate inquiry with an assignment or project rather than as "stance" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). While Kimberly and Shauna appeared to embrace this notion in their written and oral reflections, Schroeder (2020) advised all teacher preparation programs to make this distinction an explicit goal of the inquiry process. The seminar supervisor is an integral part in meeting this need. Supervisors must be aware of this potential misconception to combat it. Streamlining expectations—focusing on the process rather than compliance—and fostering ongoing and reflective dialogue can help students to differentiate a course assignment from an approach to practice (Schroeder, 2020).

Another potential challenge relates to power dynamics and decision-making, resulting from the teacher candidates' unique positioning as guests within the classroom space (Phillips & Carr, 2009). While this challenge did not affect Shauna's inquiry experience, Kimberly found herself making decisions about her own practice that were at times contradictory to the preferences of her MT. These disagreements centered on the MTs preference to uphold a traditional, English-only approach in the classroom space versus Kimberly's insistence on a translanguaging pedagogy. This discrepancy reflected broader shifts in language pedagogy and policy and illustrated Kimberly's ability to disrupt monolingual approaches that she is likely to encounter again in the field (Menken & Sánchez, 2019). Likewise, the high-stakes accountability context can pose similar barriers to implementation (Schroeder, 2020), something experienced by Shauna when working with her third-grade students. She encountered a heavy emphasis on test preparation and supporting EBs in developing strategies to navigate the state assessment when the content is incomprehensible.

Preparedness to Implement

Embedding practitioner inquiry within advanced field experiences in formal teacher preparation programs equips teacher candidates with a highly specialized and useful skillset that they can utilize across their career span. Done well, teacher candidates enter the field as reflective educators equipped to systematically use data to inform and enhance their practice. Practitioner inquiry can serve teacher candidates as a professional learning tool as they continue to develop their practice. Building a cadre of reflective educators who are prepared to adopt inquiry as a stance also

necessitates well-prepared faculty who can facilitate and coach this process. In this way, the practitioner inquiry experience builds a community of practice not just among teacher candidates engaging in the process, but among teacher candidates coaching it as well.

At the same time, several researchers (e.g., Phillips & Carr, 2009; Schroeder, 2020) have raised critical questions about the effectiveness and trustworthiness of practitioner inquiry among preservice teachers. They raise crucial questions about teacher candidates' preparedness to implement systematic and intentional inquiry that improves academic outcomes for students, including EBs. While the supervisor is intended to scaffold the process, it is worth noting that often supervisory teams are interdisciplinary. While they may be well-equipped to coach the inquiry process, they may have less expertise in particular disciplines (e.g., ESOL, special education) or content areas that would enhance their ability to offer suggestions about best pedagogical practice. Collaboration within and among the supervision team must play a central role in rectifying these gaps.

Frequency of Use in Practice

While many teachers do not frequently engage in practitioner inquiry in the classroom (Cole, 2020), Shauna's engagement in the inquiry process served as an invitation for her MT to do the same. Though Shauna initiated the process through the identification of an initial wondering, the two collaboratively used what they were learning about their students to make data-informed decisions (Cole, 2020). On the one hand, their collaborative approach speaks to the potential spread of the practice within classrooms partnered with university field experiences. At the same time, their dynamic was unique in that Shauna's MT was a graduate of the same teacher preparation program and was therefore somewhat familiar with the practice from the start. A bigger question arises, then, as to why the MT did not choose to continue engaging in practitioner inquiry as a professional learning tool. It is also not clear if changes to the support provided to teacher candidates in using practitioner inquiry would have increased the frequency of use in practice by Shauna's MT and other earlier graduates of the program.

There are often logistical challenges (e.g., time, training support; Cole, 2020) to the implementation of practitioner inquiry among practicing teachers, especially when considering the varied and numerous demands and expectations placed on teachers. Some teachers may also be under the misconception that research activities are irrelevant to their practice (Kezar, 2000) or feel unprepared. As a result, MTs are often not prepared to support the inquiry process with their students. In Kimberly's case, her MT took a hands-off approach to the inquiry process. Kimberly engaged in the inquiry cycle nearly independently within the classroom, instead drawing from her peers and supervisor during meetings and when attending seminar. It is unclear if the MT was unwilling or unable to support Kimberly through the implementation of practitioner inquiry within the classroom.

Recommendations

All teachers must accept the responsibility for creating and sustaining learning environments that foster success for culturally and linguistically diverse students, and EBs in particular. Thus, teacher educators play a critical role in preparing teacher candidates who are equity minded (Bensimon, 2012). Practitioner inquiry can be a useful tool in teacher education in that it provides structured opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on their role in disrupting educational disparities and inequities for EBs (Ching, 2018). Even more promising, practitioner inquiry provides an avenue for teacher candidates to reflect critically and intentionally on the extent to which their current

practices effectively meet the unique and nuanced needs of the EBs in their classroom. Considering the opportunities and challenges presented, we conclude with three recommendations for teacher educators looking to implement practitioner inquiry with their preservice teacher candidates in ESOL placements.

First, we recommend providing multiple opportunities for collaboration centered on inquiry and best practice for EBs. This collaboration should be facilitated amongst and between varied stakeholders (e.g., supervisor to supervisor, peer to peer, teacher candidate to MT, teacher candidate to supervisor). Collaboration between the supervisor and MT centered on practitioner inquiry may also be particularly useful. This type of collaboration can help build school-university partnerships and bring practitioner inquiry into more classrooms as an equity-driven professional development tool that centers the experiences of EBs in the classroom. It can also leverage the specific content and pedagogical expertise of the MT (e.g., in ESOL pedagogy) to guide pedagogically sound practice that is reflective of the home languages and cultural backgrounds of the students in the classroom (Baker, 2019). In exchange, the supervisor serves as a support for practitioner inquiry and coaching its implementation in the classroom.

Second, it may be helpful to provide teacher candidates with structured support to guide the implementation and documentation processes by providing a structured journal for students to reflect on initial wonderings, field notes, pictures of student artifacts, and relevant literature from their coursework. The journal can also house additional guidance (e.g., reminders related to data analysis procedures, expectations related to timelines, visuals of the inquiry cycle) and other resources on both the inquiry process (e.g., embedded links and videos, examples from previous semesters) as well as best practices in ESOL taught in program coursework. Using a shared, virtual platform like those available in the Google Suite (e.g., Google Slides, Google Docs) integrated within an existing Learning Management System (e.g., Canvas) allows supervisors to monitor the implementation process and provide asynchronous feedback to students using comment features, an ideal space to pose questions or seek clarification related to students' entries. This asynchronous feedback can be teamed with ongoing, synchronous discussion and professional development that may occur through field experience seminars or other relevant meetings in order to provide robust and comprehensive support for the teacher candidates on practitioner inquiry and ESOL pedagogy. These discussions and opportunities for feedback are crucial in ensuring teacher candidates are engaging in practitioner inquiry from an asset-oriented (Schroeder, 2020) view of diversity, bilingualism, and EBs (Baker, 2019).

Finally, we encourage other teacher educators to engage in their own practitioner inquiry cycles, echoing Campbell's (2013) call to lead by example. Campbell (2013) noted the "unique position of teacher educators to address the research/practice divide" (p. 3), highlighting the power teacher educators hold in preparing teacher candidates who are equipped to do the same. Likewise, through studying their own practice, teacher educators can model how they identify and respond to challenges they encounter (e.g., providing pedagogical support and feedback in areas outside of their primary expertise). In this way, teacher educators can make visible and transparent what it means to engage in equity-minded (Ching, 2018) risk taking and reflection that is the core of the practitioner inquiry process. We encourage other teacher educators to develop inter- and intra-institution communities of collaborative practice centered on practitioner inquiry to support EBs, fostering the collaboration we hope that teacher candidates will emulate in their own practice.

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