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Teacher Inquiry: A Case of One Kindergarten Teacher's Interactive Read-Alouds

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Abstract

Through interviews and observations, Eva's story of her interpretations of conducting research and its impact on her students' learning emerged. Outcomes suggest that Eva took on an inquiry stance in unique ways throughout the year, which shaped her instruction, specifically through the use of interactive read alouds. Given the tremendous attention that early literacy has received recently and the increasing diversity of our child population, it is important and timely to engage in conversations regarding ways an inquiry stance can bolster literacy teachers' confidence regarding their instructional decisions.

"I thought being a teacher would mean that I was the decision maker in my classroom, but sometimes it does not feel that way." This is what Eva (pseudonym) said to me (the university researcher) during an interview. As a kindergarten teacher researcher, Eva feels that she lacks opportunities to choose how she teaches at her school because of scripted literacy programs. Many school districts have adopted these packaged programs as a way to comply with state and federal mandates, but their required use impacts how much choice teachers have in their own classrooms. For example, only thirty minutes within Eva's two-hour literacy block are "free," meaning she gets to choose for that small window of time what and how she teaches. Eva shared how she feels about this: "I live for those times. That is when I can use strategies I learned in graduate school." Eva feels she must spend this time wisely so she can best meet her students' needs, especially since the scripted lessons do not provide equitable support and access for all students.

Eva invited me into her classroom during the 2013-2014 school year, the year following her graduation from the master's program where I was one of her instructors. While in my class, her teacher research topic was the use of fiction and nonfiction text in the elementary classroom. However, during the year of this study, Eva wanted to shift her attention to interactive read alouds in order to determine if this was a "smart" use of the small amount of "unscripted" literacy time in her classroom.

There has been an abundance of studies about teacher research and the challenges associated with classroom inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Massey & Duffy, 2004; Vetter, 2012). Some of these challenges include a lack of support from administrators (Nolan & Hoover, 2004), a conflict about their ability to serve the dual roles of teacher and researcher simultaneously (Poetter, Badiali, & Hammond, 2000), and a lack of time (Metz & Page, 2002). Although these are valid challenges, teachers across the U.S. are choosing to do research in their classrooms because they see its potential to support and impact literacy practices amid the struggle for standardization within schools. Eva's story highlights the potential of teacher research.

Literature Review

Interactive Read Alouds

Instruction, such as adults encouraging children to question, predict, and explore texts, is one type of support that promotes children's language and literacy development (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006). These interactions contribute to children's vocabulary growth, which is strongly correlated with phonological awareness, comprehension, and subsequent reading achievement. During interactive read alouds, opportunities for this type of instruction, interaction, and support occur. Interaction between the teacher and students during an interactive read aloud is key; thus, it is not only important that the teacher read the text out loud. In this interaction, the "teacher genuinely shares, not abandons, authority with the children" before, during, and after the interactive read aloud (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002, p. 28).

Although this article focuses on how a kindergarten teacher used interactive read alouds, teachers can use this strategy with students of all ages, grades, and subjects. As an instructional strategy, interactive read alouds assist students with language acquisition by enabling them to become familiar with the academic language necessary for school success (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995).

To become a skilled reader, children need a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad and deep vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages that are conveyed through print. Children also must develop code-related skills, an understanding that spoken words are composed of smaller elements of speech (phonological awareness), the idea that letters represent these sounds (the alphabetic principle), the many systematic correspondences between sounds and spellings, and a repertoire of highly familiar words that can be easily and automatically recognized (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). But, to attain a high level of skill, young children need opportunities to develop these strands, not in isolation, but interactively (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000).

A corpus of research (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Neuman et al., 2000) identifies the types of support that promote children's language and literacy development. Children whose teachers engage them in rich dialogues have higher scores on tests of both verbal and general ability (Whitehurst et al., 1994). This is especially the case when discussions consist of adults encouraging, questioning, predicting, and guiding children's exploration and problem-solving (Palincsar, Brown, & Campione, 1993). Such verbal interactions contribute to children's vocabulary growth, which in turn is strongly correlated with phonological awareness, comprehension, and subsequent reading achievement. Researchers have long recognized interactive read alouds as one avenue to achieving these goals (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Ezell & Justice, 2005).

Teacher Research: Adopting an Inquiry Stance

Teacher research means different things to different educators. To some, it may be as simple as observing students during silent reading time and keeping an observation journal. To others, it may be as complex as a longitudinal study examining the reading development of students over several years. For the purposes of this article, I adopt Nolen and Putten's (2007) definition of teacher research as "a practical yet systematic research method that enables teachers to investigate their own teaching and their students' learning" (p. 401).

The ultimate goals of teacher research are to change or improve a challenging situation and to answer questions about teaching and learning (Stremmell, 2007). These questions "often develop gradually as teachers try to figure out why certain things are happening in their classrooms" (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 20). Thus, the motivation to conduct teacher research comes from a passion and desire in which teachers seek to examine their own teaching. As teachers engage in research, they "observe, document, and analyze the daily work of literacy teaching and learning as it occurs in and out of the classroom and school context" (Lytle, 2000, p. 702). Teacher research also provides an opportunity for educators to investigate and revise their pedagogical practices (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Some teachers adopt an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) through their engagement with teacher research. An inquiry stance occurs when teachers begin to see teacher research not as something extra that teachers do, but as part of their daily practice. In other words, when teachers adopt an inquiry stance, it becomes a part of how they think, who they are, and what it means for them to be a teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This kind of stance involves thinking differently about what teachers do and why they do it in order to positively impact the lives of the students in their classrooms. The value of an inquiry stance is that it is a way of approaching teaching and learning that positions the teacher as being in control of their own learning and professional development (Alsop, Dippo, & Zandvliet, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The purpose of this is study is to build on this previous work. Therefore, based on a review of the extant literature, the following research question guided this study: *In what ways did a kindergarten teacher adopt an inquiry stance while conducting classroom research, and how did that influence her use of interactive read alouds as an instructional strategy?*

Methods

This research project employed Stake's (1995) case study approach, which provided an opportunity to focus in depth on a particular situation. This case study focused on one teacher, Eva, and how she used teacher research to better understand the impact of interactive read alouds on her students' learning. I first begin by describing in detail the context and climate of Eva's school, including the tensions she faced. Some of the tensions Eva experienced were directly related to the scripted literacy curriculum that her administrators expected her to follow. Next, I ....

Context and Participant

This study occurred during Eva's first year of teaching at a Priority Title I School, which means the county prioritized improving students' standardized test scores and increasing the number of students working at grade level as measured by standardized testing. The county monitors Priority Title I schools closely to ensure that student achievement scores increase, and if they do not after a given time period, the county takes over and revamps the schools. Prior to teaching at this school, Eva taught for six years at a different public Pre-K through fifth grade school in the same county. Although both schools are located in suburban areas, the socioeconomic status was much higher and the racial diversity much lower at Eva's previous school. Unlike her new school, her previous school was classified as a School of Distinction, meaning 80-90% of the students were on grade level. Eva recognized that there would be new challenges in learning to teach in such a different context, but ultimately, she sought to learn about her new students in order to provide them with access to responsive and high-quality literacy instruction. Eva's commitment to help all students achieve academic success solidified her decision to change schools, and in our first interview, she shared her thoughts about teaching at a Title 1 school:

> I think that a lot of people think those kids don't get read with at home or worked with at home and they are from those kinds of homes or those kinds of neighborhoods. At the end of the day, I teach 5- and 6- year-old kids and I taught 5 and 6-year-old kids last year and the year before that, so to me it is the same.

In this quote, Eva demonstrates how she valued her students in her new school, just as she had valued and devoted herself to teaching her previous students. She didn't buy into the deficit-based discourses that frame children in Title 1 schools as "those kinds of kids." Instead, she saw their value and potential, and she used her teacher research project to examine one way of providing them with responsive, high-quality instruction.

At her previous school, Eva's principal had supported her teacher research efforts and had even encouraged her to share her findings with the faculty. At her new school, the focus on student achievement, school rankings and distinctions, and using scripted curriculum overshadowed teachers' efforts for professional development. Eva's colleagues did not understand why she would want to continue with research if she was no longer in graduate school. This was an unexpected

tension for Eva, since she felt so supported at her previous school.

Eva identifies as White and middle class, and she said that for the first time in her career her students did not look like her, nor did they come from the same background. Her class, which included 13 females and 11 males, represented a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds: African American (70%), Caucasian (22%), Latino/a (5%), Asian, (1%), and Other (2%). Her students' characteristics and needs as learners were different than students she had previously taught. Eva embraced these differences as potential resources for literacy learning in the classroom, and she became driven to use research as a way of learning how to support the diverse students in her class at this new school. In an interview, she shared that using interactive read alouds, something she learned about in graduate school but had never tried, might "offer students a way to engage in a story that not only held their attention but could potentially build their background knowledge and vocabulary."

As someone who is interested in teacher research, and who conducted research as a classroom teacher, I wanted to follow Eva into her classroom the year after she completed my graduate course. As the author of this piece and researcher of Eva's practices, I position myself as a White, middle class former elementary teacher. Similar to Eva, I spent most of my career teaching children who looked like me. At the time of the study, Eva was no longer my student. However, the power structure embedded in a teacher/student relationship may have shaped Eva's responses to me. Still, the sustained nature of our time together promoted honest conversations between us.

An additional tension that Eva faced stemmed from the added pressures on teachers and students due to the school's classification as a Priority Title 1 School. As I spent time in Eva's room, it reminded me of a revolving door. During my first hour-long observation, five people came in and out of the classroom. Although Eva did not see these visitors as a distraction, she was upset by the lack of freedom during her literacy block. In an interview, she shared:

> With Common Core curriculum and being a Priority One School, they look closely at our school. Are all the teachers doing the same thing at the same time? If anyone deviates from it then there is a discussion that takes place as a result. So nobody deviates from it.

In summary, the context of Eva's school presented several challenges for her personally and professionally. She chose to use teacher research as a way of helping her learn more about one area of her instruction, interactive read alouds, to further determine if that instructional practice was the best means of using a small window of free choice instruction.

Data Sources and Data Collection

Eva began her teacher research inquiry by following the same steps she did for her first project. First, she chose her question: What is the impact of using interactive read alouds with her kindergarten students? Though not conducting research for a class, Eva felt the need to do outside reading on this topic. This additional reading helped solidify the importance of adding interactive read-alouds to her instructional day as a high-quality practice that had great potential to support her students' literacy learning but was missing from the scripted curriculum. In particular, this practice seemed promising because Eva had learned, through observing and assessing her students, that their vocabulary and background knowledge did not align well with the school's expectations for their literacy learning. Interactive read-alouds provided a space for Eva to engage students in interactions around authentic texts that could support their learning in these areas, while building upon the knowledge and strengths students brought with them.

Next, Eva made a timeline and decided what data to collect and why. She decided to focus on her use of interactive read alouds from October to May. Eva decided to use student literacy scores from standardized assessments, student writing samples, and informal assessments as data sources. She was particularly interested in the students' progress. Eva shared, "I think it will be interesting to look at where they are at

the beginning of the year and then compare it to their progress at the end." In other words, could her use of interactive read alouds, along with the scripted literacy instruction, help support students' learning of vocabulary, of conceptual knowledge, and about texts?

At the same time, I was collecting data to understand the ways Eva adopted an inquiry stance while conducting classroom research and how that influenced her use of interactive read alouds as an instructional strategy. Like Eva, I used multiple sources of data. For example, I met with her formally three times for interviews during the year-long project. By interviewing Eva throughout the year, I was able to better understand how she used teacher research to inform her literacy instruction. Eva and I also had many informal conversations during my observations. These conversations, either face-to-face or via email, provided me with an in-the-moment understanding of how Eva's inquiry shaped her use of interactive read alouds.

Although research has shown the benefits of adopting an inquiry stance, a majority of the current literature related to how teacher research informs instructional practices relies heavily on teacher perception and self-reporting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Massey & Duffy, 2004). Thus, observations were important in this study. I observed twice a week in Eva's classroom for a total of fifty hours. I began by doing informal observations, which helped me become familiar with the classroom routines and students. The formal observations began a month later and continued so I could determine if the observations supported my interpretations of events (Spradley, 1980).

Because this study utilized case study methodology, I took detailed field notes using thick, rich description during each observation (Patton, 2002). After each observation, I expanded my notes based on additional thoughts and our informal conversations. Taking notes helped me record my perspectives regarding how Eva used inquiry to alter her use of interactive read alouds.

Data Analysis

As she collected data, Eva engaged in ongoing data analysis, meaning that she looked at her observation notes and other data sources to see how they might help her answer her research question. Eva also looked for patterns across her data to see how her use of interactive read alouds impacted her students as literacy learners. My role in Eva's research was to support her efforts. This often meant acting as a sounding board as Eva thought through her data analysis. Since this was only Eva's second time conducting research in her classroom, she often had questions related to data analysis and we spent time examining the data Eva collected.

I also analyzed my data from Eva's classroom as I was collecting it. My analysis took place over several stages (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I examined, read, and reread the transcripts, field notes, and observations. I documented initial patterns and insights using richly descriptive analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, I revisited my initial understandings throughout the year as I coded the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Initial codes included instances when Eva described or demonstrated aspects of an inquiry stance in regards to her use of interactive read alouds. I discussed codes with colleagues in the field of teacher research and literacy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Discussions with experts in the field opened multiple perspectives to the data, such as assumptions and biases I held as a former classroom teacher researcher. Finally, I compared all transcripts, field notes, and observation data collected from Eva and shared findings with her to verify and confirm my interpretations of the data related to how teacher research shaped the ways she engaged in interactive read alouds.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the potential of teacher research to shape one educator's literacy practices. Through snapshots of her classroom instruction, I highlight the ways Eva adopted an inquiry stance while conducting classroom research, and how that influenced her use of interactive read alouds as an instructional strategy.

Adopting an Inquiry Stance

Conducting teacher research supported Eva in adopting an inquiry stance because she began to see that gathering and analyzing data was not something extra,

but rather something that became part of her teaching. During the initial interview, Eva revealed that before graduate school she had always thought of research as something that other people did. Over time, Eva's perspective on who does research and what counted as research shifted. By the end of the year, Eva understood that systematic observations and field notes related to interactive read alouds were just as important, if not more important, to her understanding of her students as the quantitative assessment data that her administrator valued.

Eva's inquiry stance is also apparent in the ways she fostered her skills as a qualitative observer. Viewing teaching through the lens of teacher research assisted Eva in facilitating a more systematic approach to effective literacy teaching because she questioned her practice, re-envisioned her understandings about teaching, and reflected. For example, Eva initially questioned her commitment to using interactive read alouds. She re-envisioned her literacy time to include these read alouds because they were absent from the new scripted literacy curriculum. After deciding to include interactive read alouds, she reflected on their impact in her previous and current school setting. Eva determined that using read alouds benefits all students, and she decided to continue using them in her classroom. Thus, Eva's inquiry stance played a large role in her moving beyond thinking about altering her literacy instruction to actually taking steps to do so.

Furthermore, Eva displayed her inquiry stance as she constructed her own knowledge about interactive read alouds. She did this through outside reading and by introducing a new practice slowly, while analyzing data about the practice. In the next section I describe how, as Eva progressed forward, she improved her use of interactive read alouds and then eventually added a writing component after these interactions to further support her students' learning.

Eva's case study shows that an inquiry stance is not something that a teacher has or does not have; rather, it may exist on a continuum influenced by internal and external factors. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) write that the metaphor of a stance is intended to capture "the ways we stand, the ways we see and the lens we see through" (p. 289). In this quote, the word ways is emphasized suggesting that an inquiry stance is specific to the individual, and each person's stance is valuable.

Use of Interactive Read Alouds

Eva's inquiry stance shaped her use of interactive read alouds in several ways. First, before conducting teacher research, Eva had never tried using interactive read alouds with her kindergartners. Eva started using interactive read alouds slowly to combat her students' "zoning out." Especially at the beginning of the year, Eva said, "they don't know how to sit and listen to a story and there is a lot of let's go to the bathroom or let's turn to our neighbor and look at their shoe." To encourage students to participate, Eva began pausing after she read a sentence that could be turned into an action, like *the boy sighed.* At first, none of the students knew what to do, so she would hold her hand up to her ear and repeat that part of the sentence, *the boy sighed.* Eventually, some of the kids would make a noise and Eva would say, "That is right, that is what a sigh sounds like." Eva started recognizing how much the interactive read alouds built students' vocabulary because students could associate sounds with words. Eva shared, "The words and sounds become teachable moments in the story." Eva realized during the course of her study that the interactive read alouds were helping build background knowledge for students. Choosing to use interactive read alouds during her literacy block affirmed for Eva that "I can make decisions that I know as a teacher are going to make a difference in the long run." Thus, she felt that by engaging her students in interactive read alouds, she offered them opportunities to develop their vocabulary and background knowledge.

Eva used field notes to determine how engaged students were in the interactive read alouds. Her data revealed that, compared with traditional read alouds, her students were more engaged in books when they were active participants. This finding from her research made Eva want to continue to use this strategy, and it reaffirmed for her that this was a productive use of her unscripted literacy time.

Eva's teacher research also changed how she assessed students' understanding of the interactive read alouds. Her observations revealed things that "you can't always see in an assessment." Eva managed these observations by keeping a clipboard handy and taking notes. However, Eva revealed that these types of informal assessments were not valued at her school: "When we have grade level meetings, we just talk about mandated assessments. I don't know if other teachers are trying to use other data to inform their teaching or not." As a teacher researcher, Eva knows the importance of using several data sources to better understand students. Eva used the interactive read aloud time to allow her students to represent their knowledge by showing and talking. Later in the year, she had students write in their journals after the interactive read alouds, which allowed them to further extend their connections with the text and practice other literacy skills. Conducting research reminded Eva of the importance of a "balanced" approach to assessment in order to understand the full picture of a student's progress in reading.

During my visits, I had multiple opportunities to see Eva lead interactive read alouds. One time she read *Chilly Charlie* (Rau, 2000). She began by asking the students what season it was. They all answered, "Winter!" Next, Eva asked, "What does chilly mean?" "Cold," her students answered. "Show me with your body what chilly looks like," Eva said. Some students shivered, while others rubbed their hands together. Eva began reading the book aloud while showing the pictures. The book talks about different places on Charlie's body that get cold. As she said the body parts, hands, head, feet etc., her students pointed to those body parts. The students remained engaged in the entire read aloud, and after she finished, one of the students asked if Eva could read the book again. Prior to engaging in research, Eva may not have taken the time to make this read aloud interactive, but by doing so, she was able to really emphasize vocabulary and social interaction.

Eva's purpose for using interactive read alouds also shifted as a result of her research: "I want kids to like reading, but I also want them to understand that reading has a purpose." It was important to Eva that her students understand that she chose books purposefully and, "this is what I am looking for [students] to get out of it and this is what [students] are going to do as a result." Eva often reflected on what books she should choose next for her interactive read aloud. Based on these reflections, she altered her lessons plans to specifically target vocabulary words and generated ways for the students to interact with each other during the read aloud. Teacher research provided Eva an opportunity to reflect and thoughtfully assess the differences between traditional read alouds and interactive read alouds. This propelled her to take action and address an area in her teaching that she could improve.

The main question that guided Eva's inquiry was what is the impact of using interactive read alouds with her kindergarten students? Eva found that all of her students were more engaged during the interactive read alouds, and that students who needed additional support for vocabulary development and conversational skills especially benefitted. Eva's data on her use of interactive read alouds revealed that not only did the students enjoy the interactive read alouds, but they also provided students with diverse literacy experiences that were equally as valuable as the scripted phonics instruction that she implemented. Furthermore, adding the interactive read alouds "balanced" Eva's literacy instruction since she was now able to address more of the essential aspects of literacy, such as vocabulary and comprehension, rather than only focusing on the scripted phonics curriculum. These experiences provided her students with varied and more authentic literacy experiences.

Although many states are mandating the way reading should be taught, teachers are professionals and must have the flexibility to modify literacy methods when they determine children are not learning (Lennox, 2013). Prior to researching this topic, Eva was like many elementary teachers who valued reading aloud in order to demonstrate thinking and acting like a reader. However, reading the research on interactive read alouds, along with the data she gathered regarding this teaching strategy, reaffirmed this instructional choice for Eva.

Implications

Perhaps, you like Eva, took a teacher research class recently or even years ago. Maybe after reading about Eva's success with teacher research and interactive read alouds, you want to incorporate inquiry into your teaching. Here are a few practical steps to get you started.

1. Choose a "burning question." Teaching is exhausting and if you do not pick a question that really matters to you, you will not persist in your research. Make a "top ten" list of things about your teaching or classroom that you wish you could change or learn more about. Then narrow down the list to five. Out of those five issues, which would be a good topic to investigate this school year?

2. Get "smart" about your topic. The best way to begin your teacher research endeavor is to learn more. You can do this by reading articles online or asking others for good sources of information. By taking time to read about your topic, you are building professional knowledge and narrowing the scope of what you want to study.

3. Make a time line and a plan for data collection. What data do want to collect and why? When and how will you collect the data? Think about ways you can use yourself as a data source, student work, student histories, survey inventories, and/or interviews. How can you use the assessments you already administer to your advantage?

4. Sit down with the data. Data analysis is hard for many teacher researchers. They worry if they are doing it "right." Trust yourself. What patterns do you see as you look across the different types of data you collected? How does what you notice help you answer your research question? Do you have an answer or just more questions? That is ok too. Often teacher research opens more questions than it answers.

5. Plan next steps. Many teacher researchers share their findings with others. Who would benefit from hearing about your research? This could be as simple as sharing your work with your grade level team or presenting at a faculty meeting. However, there are also larger venues that welcome teacher research, such as state and national teaching conferences.

6. Get connected. It is important that teachers feel supported in their efforts to conduct research. This is especially true if teachers do not feel supported within their schools. Finding teacher research networks, in professional organizations at the state and national level, may be one way to get connected with other teachers who value inquiring about their practice.

There are many "teacher friendly" guides to conducting research in your classroom. One of my favorites is *What works: A practical guide for teacher research* (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006). If you are new to teacher research and want to learn more, I encourage you to take a look at this book or others to support you in your journey.

Final Thoughts

When asked what she learned from conducting teacher research in her classroom this year compared to while in graduate school, Eva shared, "I think now I am doing it not because of a requirement but from necessity. If I am not doing it, I am not really doing my job the best I can." This quote exemplifies how Eva took on an inquiry stance; she valued engaging in the process of inquiry and learning about interactive read alouds. These realizations did not come from formal professional development, but rather from conducting teacher research in her classroom. Eva's teacher research informed her understanding about the content, it influenced how she taught it, and through that process, she learned about her students.

Teacher research holds great potential for engaging teachers in meaningful self-selected professional development and improving classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). By taking a closer look at their teaching, educators have opportunities to reposition themselves and to speak back to dominant discourse. As Harre and Gillett (1994) point out, "To act with freedom,

the discursive possibilities that are potentially available to an individual must be affirmed, owned and used in some practice" (p. 27). By researching her use of interactive read alouds, Eva pushed back against the scripted phonics curriculum and showed herself and administrators that she could create her own understanding about what is truly best for her students. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (2006) remind us to think of mandates not as acts of oppression but as opportunities for teachers to raise their voices. Teacher research provides professional development opportunities that can shape not only how educators teach, but also how they view themselves as educators (Vetter, 2012). I hope that Eva's story has inspired you to choose a burning question and begin your teacher research endeavor.

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