Inquiry Into Teaching Practice

What is Inquiry into Teaching Practice?

Teacher inquiry is defined as systematic, intentional study of one's own professional practice (see, for example, Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003; Hubbard & Power, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Inquiring professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice. They do this by posing questions or wondering, collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others. Hence, whether you are a prospective teacher at the dawn of your teaching career, or a veteran teacher with years of experience facing new education challenges every day, teacher inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and reform. Given today's political context where much of the decision making and discussion is occurring outside the walls of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997), the time seems ripe to create a movement of teacher voices armed with the tools of inquiry and committed to education change.

During this semester, you and your partner (with the support of your Mentor Teacher) will inquire into the learning of a struggling child in your classroom. You will collect student data, develop an approach, method, and intervention for addressing the student's needs, collect data, analyze the data collected, and draw conclusions/implications from your research. The inquiry project must discuss implications for your own teaching and student learning.

Step 1 - Finding My Initial "Wondering"

This is when you should do your observations of your child in different settings (Student Observation Summary form attached). While you collect this data, sharing it with other professionals. What are you wondering about this student at this point? Write this down in a clear question format. Collect as much data as possible during the next two weeks. Gather information from the following sources: observations in a variety of contexts, cumulative folders, talking to prior teachers and support teachers, test scores, informal assessment, student work, etc. Compile this information into a report for your teacher. Be sure that all information remains confidential.

Step 2 - Revising My "Wondering" / Defining Research Focus

Defining the focus/intervention: Based on the data collected (in Step 1), research your "wondering" to decide what adaptations or accommodations could be made to the curriculum or instruction to support the learning of these students. Meet with your Mentor Teacher and discuss the type of issues that emerge in your data. Create a set of instructional or curricular changes that might enhance student performance in the area investigated. At this time, it may be necessary to revise your "wondering" to be more specific.

Step 3 - Collecting My Data Systematically

Collecting data is critical to the inquiry process in order to determine the answer to your research question, or wondering. There are many types of data you can collect:
1. Field Notes
   • Capture actions,
   • Dialogue, conversations, diagrams, anecdotal records, note taking
   • Post-its
   • Video or audiotape
   • Someone else could be note taker
2. Documents/Artifacts
   • Student work - journals, projects (good idea to write date)
   • Notes from parents
   • IEP's
   • Lesson plans
   • Photographs
   • Entire paper trail
3. Interviews
   • Field notes - naturally occurring
   • Interviews - thoughtfully planned and intentional
   • Students, parents, admin.
4. Focus Groups
   • Small group discussion to understand students' perceptions
   • Likely to capture opinion
   • Ask interview questions, listen to discussion
5. Reflective Journals
   • May reflect on field notes
   • Capture thinking - process of thinking, changes in thinking
6. Surveys
   • Can get at more people than interviews
   • Pre and post survey (before and after implementation)
   • May lead to further interviewing
7. Literature
   • This is what you are finding, what have other people found?
8. Test Scores/Informal Assessment

Part 4 - Analyzing My Data Systematically

Analyzing your data is an ongoing, cyclical activity. You will work with your field advisor and peers to get you started in this process.

Part 5 - Writing About What Happened

Now it is time to write up the process you went through and the findings of your inquiry. The writing process can actually help you clarify and make connections in your data in a way that is not otherwise possible. Remember, tell a good story. You want to provide others with as much insight into your unique experience as possible.

Part 6 - Sharing My Findings

Present your findings in the Inquiry Showcase in order to celebrate your work as a professional and to help other educators learn to improve their own practice.