ABSTRACT
This research project created a space for teacher candidates and associate teachers to engage in critical collaborative inquiry during practice teaching. The project participants met several times to share their critical inquiry projects and reflect on their collective work. Emerging cultural themes from this project reflect the following experiences: the complexities of collaboration among teacher candidates and associate teachers; the comprehensive planning required to support these partnerships; the possibilities for bridging and strengthening teacher candidates’ experiences at the university and in the field; and, the professional learning practices that honour what teachers know and want to know.

OBJECTIVES
• To strengthen the critical inquiry practices of teachers working in the elementary Midtown cohort
• To create a space to foster dialogue among Midtown teacher graduates, current teacher candidates, and associate teachers
• To explore the possibilities and challenges of critical collaborative inquiry between teacher candidates and associate teachers

Within the prevalent dialogue on professional development, support for teachers is typically conceived as access to expert advice, resource materials, and funding. Our previous research indicates that time, a common space, dialogue, and access to one another’s teaching experiences are critical factors in the creation of collaborative inquiry communities, where members are listened to, supported, affirmed, and challenged as they reflect on their practices and take action in their classrooms. (See Botelho, 2003; Botelho, Gibson-Gates & Jackson, 2006; Botelho & Kerekes, 2006; Kerekes, 2001; Luna et al., 2004.)

The process of critical collaborative inquiry challenges the popular practice of having experts (who are perceived to possess the most knowledge) answer questions that teachers did not ask in the first place. Through critical collaborative inquiry, teachers can closely examine their own personally significant questions together. They use self-reflection, observation, and
interviews, and they analyze children’s work, class curricula, and school documents. They connect their teaching experiences to broader conversations about current educational theories, and practices.

Taking action on the teaching strategies generated from teacher research is central to critical inquiry; however, the work of critical collaborative inquiry demands critical analysis of both the research literature and the process (Comber, 2001). Teachers reconsider their inquiry methods and resources, and ask themselves: What questions do I deem “askable” (Davies, 1999)? What implicit definitions of literacy, and what perspectives, are imbedded in the research literature? Which perspectives are missing? Does the research literature make sense, given what I already know about this practice? In what ways are the power relations of class, race, gender, and language implicated in how a particular research project was conducted, how the data was analyzed, and how the study was represented in writing (e.g., what kind of assumptions were made about children who are poor, or English language learners)?

Since the mid-1990s, Midtown cohort teacher candidates at OISE have explored the power of their own questioning as a means to deepen their understanding of teaching (Beck & Kosnick, 2006; Kosnick & Beck, 2000). During the past two years, the Midtown cohort has included critical inquiry in the Teacher Education Seminar, through a guided process called “Prep Steps for Action Research.” This process introduced teacher candidates to a clear, self-identified, focus for observation and inquiry during their first practica, and later required them to complete a critical reading of a professional article on a relevant aspect of teaching.

The purpose of this project was to explore the possibilities of critical collaborative inquiry between teacher candidates and associate teachers by providing time, space, dialogue, and access to each other’s teaching and critical inquiry experiences. While all Midtown teacher candidates were engaged in critical inquiry within the Midtown language arts course, this project created a context for two 2005–06 teacher candidates and three 2006–07 teacher candidate-associate teacher pairs to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of critical collaborative inquiry process as they investigated questions about critical multicultural literacies teaching within their practicum classrooms. This project also integrated four of the 2005–06 critical inquiry projects as common readings into the Midtown language arts course. These papers served as models of critical inquiry projects and facilitated the dissemination of local knowledge.

STAGES OF THE PROJECT

Naming our burning questions

After critically reflecting on the first year of creating conditions for critical inquiry in the Midtown cohort, we presented our practice during the Ontario Ministry Forum for Faculties of Education. This presentation formalized the experience and helped us name some lingering questions, which in turn became the questions that fueled the first stage of this project. The burning questions included:

1. What are the possibilities and challenges of critically analyzing theories and practices that participants are in the process of coming to know?
2. In what ways can critical collaborative inquiry contribute to participants’ overall professional learning?
3. In what ways can a critical collaborative inquiry project invite participants to learn, learn about, and learn through critical multicultural literacies, and also to learn to critique through critical multicultural literacies and practices?
Calling for participation
Within the language arts course, we introduced the project to teacher candidates when they returned from their first practicum. They considered participation and then shared an informational letter with their associate teachers. A call for participation was sent out in December 2006 to associate teachers who had previously expressed an interest in critical inquiry. Several 2005–06 Midtown teacher graduates, whose projects exemplified critical inquiry work, were also invited to participate. During Student Teacher Experience Program (STEP) days in mid-January, teacher candidate-associate teacher pairs negotiated their participation.

Creating a space for dialogue
The main activities of this project started at the beginning of the teacher candidates’ second practicum. The three teacher candidate-associate teacher pairs, along with the rest of the Midtown cohort, became engaged in critical inquiry. The eight project participants came together at regular intervals: two, two-hour meetings—which allowed time for pairs to work together—took place on the second week of the winter practicum, and during the last week of practicum. The teacher candidate-associate teacher pairs presented their collective work during the critical inquiry conference in mid-April, along with the rest of the Midtown cohort. The 2005–06 Midtown teacher graduates, as honorary guests during the conference, provided a link to the first year of the critical inquiry work.

Negotiating collaborative inquiries
While exploring the possibility of collaboration during this project, we allowed for all kinds of collaboration to unfold, because collaboration happens on a continuum. During the project, collaboration took on many shapes and forms: one pair explored how to imbed critical literacy practices into the study of medieval times within a junior classroom; a teacher candidate explored learning centres—a primary classroom practice—within an intermediate French immersion classroom; an associate teacher inquired into her role as mentor during the critical inquiry process; another pair explored the benefits of drama for reading comprehension within a junior classroom, while the participating associate teacher also reflected on her supporting role during the inquiry process.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
The data collection process included digital voice recording of all meetings, including the project participants’ panel discussion and presentations during the Midtown option critical inquiry conference. We obtained copies of the three teacher candidates’ critical inquiry projects and of materials shared during the teacher candidate-associate teacher pairs’ presentations. All course materials related to the critical inquiry experience and letters to associate teachers were added to the data set.

This study was informed by critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996); that is, qualitative research practices that endeavor to make visible the socio-political motivations and consequences of educational practice. The data were analyzed for cultural themes. A list of themes was compiled and used in the rereading of the data. Cultural themes are reflections of the counter-cultural practices of critical collaborative inquiry, practices that challenge the norms of professional learning. The emerging cultural themes were contextualized beyond classroom practice and connected to broader social factors that shape the practices of school literacies and professional learning.

The themes that emerged from the data analysis demonstrate the possibilities and challenges of critical collaborative inquiry within initial teacher education. Four interconnected themes illustrate the complexities of this work.

Posing versus imposing questions
While we encouraged teacher candidates to pose their personally significant questions as a means of exploring literacy practices relevant to their practicum experiences, the possibility of teacher candidates and associate teachers posing collectively significant questions is under-explored. The challenge is that teacher candidates’ questions sometimes emerge in the first practicum, but they are not related to the context of the second practicum; this is a dilemma that we expect teacher candidates to negotiate and resolve with their associate teachers. However, the negotiation process is difficult for teacher candidates because they feel as if they are imposing their questions on curricula and classrooms that are in full motion. In addition, the critical inquiry process is met with some resistance from the teacher candidates because they are inexperienced with this kind of learning. Some teacher candidates did not recognize the connection between critical
inquiry and critical multicultural literacies, or the value of teacher inquiry. Many teacher candidates worried about the power relationships imbedded in the teacher candidate-associate teacher partnership, a reality of all relationships. The involvement of 2005–06 teacher candidates, as well as associate teachers from the onset, helped address some of these concerns and brought credibility to this work. In the end, teacher candidates are expected to apply a strategy that is generated from their critical inquiry, and it must be meaningful for the children they teach.

The role of the associate teacher is an important sub-theme because viable expectations for critical collaborative inquiry are needed so that teacher candidates can investigate questions that are relevant to their classroom contexts. The scheduled pre-practicum days in classrooms provided opportunities for discussing the teacher candidate-associate teacher collaboration and created curricular opportunities for the application of the practices that everyone learned through these projects. The expectation for this collaborative process will be made transparent through communication with associate teachers: for example, through informational letters, onsite meetings, and the Midtown Associate Teacher Handbook.

**Time and timing**

Time is a scarce resource in initial teacher education; so blocks of time within the Teacher Education Seminar and language arts course were set aside to allow teacher candidates to explore their questions about language arts teaching. They were given time to explore critical reading of professional literature, to share their questions and critical inquiry proposals in class, and also to collaborate with colleagues as their projects were unfolding. The project findings show that the issue of setting aside time for teacher candidates and associate teachers to conduct critical collaborative inquiry within their classrooms is under-explored in the Midtown cohort experience. For example, time is needed for supervisors to facilitate meetings and to bring together associate teacher-teacher candidate pairs within partner schools.

Timing was another key theme. Some participants maintained that the critical inquiry project is best introduced at the beginning of the year to allow teacher candidates to take notice of their emerging questions. However, although the critical inquiry projects were introduced to the 2005–06 cohort in September, some of the teacher candidates claimed that the process was too much to consider at the beginning of their initial teacher education experience. The teacher candidates need to experience teaching and school literacies practices before posing questions about them.

**Planning for critical inquiry**

Time and timing are integral to the planning of critical inquiry in the Midtown cohort, but this theme speaks to the tension inherent in critical inquiry; it is not something that just happens. This process requires a lot of planning. And consideration needs to be given to the ways that mentoring and planning of this experience can become imbedded in other parts of the Midtown experience.

Critical inquiry requires that teacher candidates unlearn and learn new ways of learning, teaching, and researching. However, while protecting the unexpected learning and teaching that emerges from this work is important, the goal is to create conditions and social structures to make critical inquiry practices visible and to strengthen the partnerships involved in this experience. The goal is not to standardize the process, but to know the cohort of teacher candidates, partner schools, critical multicultural literacies (in this case), resources, and critical inquiry processes in order to be able to guide teacher candidates’ investigations.

**IMPACT**

From the outset, the participation of Midtown teacher graduates and associate teachers brought credibility to the critical inquiry experience in the Midtown cohort. The cultural themes that emerged from the data analysis demonstrate the possibilities and challenges of critical collaborative inquiry within initial teacher education.

But what does the “critical” mean in critical inquiry? How can teacher candidates be critical of something that they are just coming to know? Does critique mean finding something wrong with the research literature? The participants’ critical inquiry projects demonstrate that critique is not only about taking apart the work of others. It involves taking note of the contributions of practitioners and researchers in the field, and also being aware of the decisions that one makes. This means addressing such questions as: What practices do we permit in our classrooms? Which ones do we leave at the classroom?
Taking on a critical stance in teacher research means paying attention to definitions, assumptions, and the social implications of the theories and practices applied in classrooms. Identifying what one knows and does not know are beginning places for critical inquiry. A critical stance offers teacher candidates authority, a position that feels uncomfortable to them because they are learning to become teachers. However, this project helped teacher candidates and associate teachers to inquire into, and question, unfamiliar practices. Teacher candidates played key roles in initiating the focus of their professional learning experiences.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

Critical collaborative inquiry in initial teacher education offers great possibilities: it can enrich current school-university partnerships, inspire new investigations, and foster critical reflective teaching within the initial teacher education community. With careful planning and mentoring at the university, and robust partnerships with schools, critical collaborative inquiry can (a) create social structures that encourage dialogue and interaction among teacher candidates and associate teachers, a dialogue that fortifies the teacher candidate-associate teacher collaboration; (b) establish purposeful learning engagements between associate teachers and teacher candidates; (c) make visible the thinking and planning associate teachers are engaged in on a daily basis; (d) connect practice teaching to professional dialogues; (e) establish practices of professional learning among teacher candidates that are critical and responsive to the teaching context; and, (f) deepen and expand teacher candidates’ and associate teachers’ understanding of subject-specific pedagogy (e.g., broadening our definition of language arts beyond reading and writing, and considering cross-curricular possibilities).

Critical collaborative inquiry creates a space for teacher candidates and associate teachers to reconsider teaching practices together. However, the issue of timing needs to be addressed. Doing so will help: the refining of a supportive framework for teacher candidates who go through this process (critically reading research literature, posing questions, writing proposal, etc.); the contact with associate teachers (informational letter); and, the way that course spaces in language arts are used to support this critical inquiry work.

**NEXT STEPS AND NEW QUESTIONS**

This research project created a moment of pause—it is easier for one to keep practicing what one knows. The cultural themes that emerged from the data analysis reflect the possibilities, challenges, and next steps for a kind of partnership that makes visible the thinking and decision making behind socially just teaching practices. What lies ahead is the re-mapping and refining of critical inquiry practices within the Midtown cohort experience. Issues include the course(s) in which the critical inquiry projects will reside; teacher candidates’ workload; a cross-curricular focus; as well as delineating associate teacher participation during practice teaching (i.e., how to strengthen communication with associate teachers and make participation expectations explicit).

An important lingering questions is: In what ways can critical collaborative inquiry transform the power relationships embedded in the teacher candidate-associate teacher partnership so that their roles as teachers and learners are reconciled? These collaborations can bridge the professional learning practices between the university and practicum classrooms, with teacher candidates playing a key role in these processes.

For many of the teacher candidates, the purpose and benefits of critical inquiry did not “click” or make sense until they prepared their presentations or presented their work during the Midtown critical inquiry conference. The conference program and written projects demonstrated that the cohort learned, learned about, and learned through (e.g., multimodal representations of their learning) some critical multicultural literacies. Their conference presentations embodied many kinds of literacies and many dimensions of critical work. This research project helped to name the layers of criticality taking place across the Midtown critical inquiry projects. The next step will be to secure project samples from the 2006–07 cohort in order to make the dimensions of critical work more transparent for the next group. The question remains: What shifts in critical practice will teacher candidates experience because of critical collaborative inquiry? More work lies ahead to deepen understanding of critical multicultural literacies and critical collaborative inquiry, and the roles they each have in the critical practice of inquiry.
Critical inquiry is ongoing, non-linear, and open-ended teaching that happens through listening, observing, participating, analyzing, and reflecting. A final lingering question is: In what ways will the firsthand critical inquiry experiences of teacher candidates and associate teachers help them to invite students to engage in student-generated investigations? Creating conditions for “unexpected curriculum” (Parker, 2007) will facilitate student ownership of classroom learning as well as realize lived experience as curriculum. Critical collaborative inquiry holds great promise for purposeful, meaningful, and transformative learning and teaching in the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE and in partner schools.

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REFERENCES


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