We consider a disposition toward inquiry as essential to excellence in teaching. Teacher inquiry provides teachers with systematic tools to observe and analyze curricular and pedagogical choices, while honoring their expertise. In this way, inquiry becomes a significant professional development activity for educators at all stages in their careers. Teacher inquiry takes many forms, including action research, performative-based inquiry, and narrative to name a few. While what counts as inquiry within education is broad, this theme issue of Educational Insights focuses on what we call “critical teacher inquiry.” For us, this term implies a deliberative and systematic investigation of educational practice that is power-aware and oriented toward transformative action.
By *deliberative and systematic*, we mean that inquiry should be sustained over a long enough period to allow for the ongoing generation of, reflection upon, and analysis of data. It thus emphasizes an empirical component—an engagement “in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 1998 [1972], p. 53). Inquiry in our sense emphasizes close observation and other forms of data generation, including critical analysis of texts or media representations, informal interviews with parents or students, compilation of basic statistics, videotaping and analyzing patterns of student-teacher interactions, and so on.

By *critical* we mean spotlighting the role of schooling in perpetuating various social inequities and reflecting upon potential opportunities for interrupting prevailing power dynamics in and out of school. Becoming critical, however, is far from simple. Teachers continuously create meaning in context as they are confronted with the specifics of time, place, and circumstance, such as the diversity of students, school micro-politics and bureaucratic constraints, prevalence of material inequalities, and dominant community values. The prevailing ideology often suggests that teachers remain neutral, whereas a critical perspective highlights that teaching is inevitably political and that as they encounter inequities, they must act in one way or another, with uncertain and uneven results.

By *transformative action*, we mean linking deliberative inquiry to an awareness of arenas and possibilities for action and individual (and, later, collective) agency and taking steps aimed at educational reform. Critical teacher inquiry should lead to action that challenges an inequity and results in further study and action. In summary, deliberative and transformative inquiry is a key tool for teachers to investigate their practices and theorize how those practices either challenge or maintain the status quo.

We took this approach when we team-taught three M.Ed. cohorts a two-part course that we developed and called: *Teaching for Social Justice: Teacher Inquiry* (see *Part One* and *Part Two*). In a previous theme issue of *Educational Insights*, we discussed the first cohort (*Brandes & Kelly, 2004*) and now we introduce and reflect upon teachers' inquiry projects from the second and third cohorts. Specifically, we draw from our experiences working with 54 graduate students (all practicing teachers) who (working individually and in small groups) generated 40 inquiry projects. We focus on 9 of those projects that are published in this theme issue.

The articles in this issue are by authors who taught in K-12 public schools in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver, British Columbia. Two authors taught in officially designated inner-city schools (Colleen McDaniel and Harry Yuen). Three pieces focus on students in the primary grades: Colleen McDaniel & Erin Partridge’s students were in kindergarten; Scott Hughes’ students were in grade 1; and Chris Castellarin researched his first-grade students and included buddies in grade 5. Kirk Deutschmann and Bhashy Pather researched students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Melody Ferrer’s students were in grade 10; Harry Yuen’s were in grades 9 and 11; John Sarte & Sherri Hughes’ students were in grade 11; Joni Tsui’s were in grade 10; and Sean Lenihan & Troy Cunningham’s students were in grades 9-12. All the authors taught in multiethnic, multilingual schools.

Social justice was the lens through which we designed and taught our courses on teacher inquiry. We intended that our students develop an understanding of teaching for social justice, which, for us, means pausing, asking critical questions, and taking action to challenge the status quo. In addition, we aimed for our students to develop the possibilities of professional development through the use of inquiry and to learn the rudiments of critical teacher inquiry: develop a socially critical research question; explore methods for conducting a small-scale inquiry; think through the ethical dimensions of doing research in...
schools; and analyze and share the results of one such inquiry.

One of our first goals was to prompt the teachers to critically examine their own social locations as well as articulate their memories, ideologies, and ideals of teaching and learning. As we connected teachers’ personal stories to theories of social justice, we used Kumashiro’s questions:

What are hidden ways that my practices reinforce oppression? ... What are ways to “do” research in my classroom that themselves can bring about anti-oppressive change? What are ways to talk about my research that can prompt the reader to problematize my analyses?
—Kumashiro, 2004, p. 13

We encouraged the teachers to start with their personal memories, consider theories of social justice, and then inquire and reflect systematically on their own practice, with an eye toward enhancing the learning experiences of their students. (See, e.g., Deutschmann & Pather’s reflections on their personal experiences with bullying and racism, respectively, as an incitement to their inquiry project, in this issue).

Our second goal was for the teachers to develop and hone a critical research question for their inquiry, and we used a number of strategies to do this. We used literature about critical inquiry (Tripp, 1990; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994) to help the teachers contextualize their questions. As facilitators, we found ourselves continually posing critical questions, because the teachers sometimes needed prompting to see how inequality is embedded in the day-to-day practices and realities in particular school contexts. The structures of schooling are often taken for granted and “naturalized”; inquiry can thus make the familiar strange and worth exploring further. One of the teachers we worked with, for example, began her inquiry with these questions: How can I get students to submit work on time, and what might be causing students to submit work late? We asked her to consider the social assumptions underlying her questions and how they had been posed within “the constraints of the existing situation” (Tripp, 1990, p. 160). In response, she formulated a second version of her inquiry question: Are there structural barriers at school preventing students from submitting work on time, and how can I challenge these?

Another strategy for helping teachers to frame or reframe inquiry topics was to make them aware of current research, policy debates, and conceptual tools to which classroom teachers might not have ready access. The first time we taught the course, we discovered that quite a few teachers were overwhelmed with how wide open the choice of topics was. Therefore, in the subsequent times we taught the course, we identified several broad topic areas within the field of teaching for social justice. These areas related to expressed cohort interests and our own background knowledge. Examples of topic areas included classroom assessment, multiliteracies, teacher leadership, students’ participation in the classroom and school, and curriculum. The topic that generated the most interest for our teachers was classroom assessment, perhaps because of our research into the topic (see Kelly & Brandes, 2008) or because many felt that their current assessment practices could be made more equitable. In different ways, Ferrer, Sarte and Hughes, and Tsui (this issue)—grounded in literature that informed the foci, design, and rationales for their inquiries—explored various strategies to assess their students’ learning and ways to invite students to participate in evaluating their work.

To take another example: As a primary teacher with a strong background in the arts, Hughes’ (this issue) initial intent was to create a “multi-disciplinary” play, as he had done
many times before. He acknowledged that such a show “would keep him in the role of teacher-in-control,” but he also knew that with lots of practice there would be a performance that the parents “would love.” He also knew the kids would feel “proud and completely relieved” at the end of the performance. In his graduate courses, however, Hughes learned about performative inquiry, which became the theoretical framework and methodology, and allowed him to hone his research question. Instead of writing a script for a play, Hughes created new possibilities for learning with his students. He arranged for the principal to bring a box addressed to the class, and for the next six weeks teacher and students co-created an imaginary world and took on different roles as they used multiple methods to investigate where the box was from and what was in it. The teacher and students co-constructed the text, becoming both the playwrights and the audience for this performative event.

Our third goal in teaching the Inquiry course was to have teachers explore methods for conducting a small-scale inquiry. We began from the premise that there are many valid ways to do teacher inquiry (Anderson et al., 1994). In our experience many people equate research with traditional methods such as survey research. We, therefore, spent extra time introducing ethnographic methods such as participant observation and qualitative interviewing. For a workshop on observation, we showed excerpts from the documentary film *High School II* (Wiseman, 1994). We divided the class into small groups and asked each group to take notes on what they observed related to various topics (e.g., interactions among people in the school and gender, the physical layout and its impact on what was happening). Students then shared highlights of their observations and recording strategies within their small group and later with the entire class. Students’ different (albeit overlapping) accounts and foci within broad topic areas became obvious in the debriefing that followed. For a workshop on interviewing, we invited young people for mock interviews conducted by volunteers from amongst the teachers, which allowed a few to pilot their questions and allowed everyone to learn about the challenges, pleasures, and surprises of interviewing. We have also had teachers interview each other about what it means in practice to teach for social justice. We gave them time to discuss in pairs the specific questions they would ask each other in order to get at this topic.

Following these workshops, teachers chose methods of data collection that fit their research questions. The methods used and reported on in this issue are:

- parent and student pre- and post-questionnaire (Castellarin, McDaniel & Partridge, Sarte & Hughes, Tsui, Yuen);
- teacher field notes, observations, and reflexive journal (Deutschmann & Pather, Ferrer, Hughes, Lenihan & Cunningham, McDaniel & Partridge, Sarte & Hughes);
- student-generated written and visual data: field notes and images taken with disposable cameras (McDaniel & Partridge); journals; and learning logs (Castellarin, Deutschmann & Pather, Ferrer, Hughes, Lenihan & Cunningham, Sarte & Hughes);
- student-generated oral data: conferences (McDaniel & Partridge), individual or paired interviews (Sarte & Hughes, Tsui, Yuen), and group interviews or debriefings (Castellarin, Hughes).

Our fourth goal in teaching the Inquiry course was to have the teachers learn about, anticipate, and address ethical issues in conducting research in their classrooms and schools. The University of British Columbia required a full application to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board for each project, and this became the major teaching tool for us. We believe that researchers (beginning and otherwise) need to be accountable for what and how they inquire into their practices. The ethical review process is among the first steps...
researchers take to be as transparent as possible in their ongoing conduct and relationships with research participants and to avoid or minimize harm. When the teachers had to explain their research procedures to a third party (the school board and the university), it prompted them to be clear, it raised ethical issues that may not have been considered otherwise, and provided an important mechanism for researcher accountability.

That said, in many teacher inquiry projects, teaching and learning activities and data sources are often interwoven. In these cases, data collection procedures ought to be clearly defined, but they are also a part of the teacher’s pedagogical considerations. And therein lay the seeds of our biggest challenges. The Board expressed repeated concern that teachers (as evaluators of their own students) might coerce parent consent and student assent to participate in their projects. The Board’s main suggestion for teachers to avoid coercion was the use of a third party to explain the project and oversee recruitment and consent. This meant that the teachers could not explain the research to the students or parents in their own classrooms. For example, McDaniel and Partridge (this issue) reported how their young (i.e., kindergarten-age) students did not fully understand the third-party person brought in to explain the research and assent and consent process to them. Five-year-olds told third-party recruiters they were worried that their pictures were not neat or good enough, thus revealing the children’s confusion over the purpose of the proposed inquiry and why the teacher wished to collect and analyze their drawings. In another example, Yuen (this issue) agreed to the Board’s suggestion that students turn in their consent forms to someone in the school office, and he would not be informed about which of his students had agreed to participate until after the unit Yuen had been researching had been completed. With nobody to oversee whether the high school students had turned in their consent and assent forms, however, there was a very low rate of return that undermined Yuen’s original intent for the project.

As we navigated these challenges with the teachers, they observed us (a) brainstorm examples of how teacher inquiry can empower and include multiple voices, (b) invite members of the ethics board to address them, and (c) write to the Board as well as other top-level administrators about how teacher inquiry is a distinct form with ethical dilemmas and solutions unique to the context. They heard us take a stand for our belief that teacher inquiry is a partnership among teachers, students, and sometimes parents; therefore, it is important to have the teachers themselves present the proposed project to the students and parents.

In order to reach our fifth goal, to provide opportunities to practice data analysis, we asked the teachers to write a short piece entitled How I Came into Teaching. We shared these stories, looked for patterns (e.g., political goals, family influences, past experiences with teachers), and brainstormed ways to construct a coherent narrative based on these stories. What would it look like to weave these together into an overall portrait of how people come to teach? As they began to draft their own project papers, we drew their attention to questions like: Whose voices are heard, and whose might be silenced? We came to see that those who had a clear grounding in relevant literature had an easier time making sense of the data they generated, because they could key off of a specific conceptual framework and prior studies. Castellarin (this issue), for example, was inspired by the work of Jim Cummins and colleagues on multilingual students in monolingual classrooms and strategies for overcoming cultural imperialism and marginalization of students who speak English as an Additional Language. Clarity at the beginning of Castellarin’s project not only guided his data generation but also provided signposts to structure and deepen his analysis.

Our sixth goal in teaching the Inquiry course was to highlight the importance of sharing the
results of the teachers’ projects publicly. In the last session of the course, we provided the teachers with the time and structure to share their projects. Either in a poster session or in a round-table format, teachers presented their projects, highlighting their research questions and findings as well as what they found most interesting or puzzling. Teachers were encouraged to pose questions and critique each other’s work. The preparation for these presentations, at times, became the catalyst for further insights about the projects. We also encouraged the teachers to report on their projects at conferences, with teachers in their own schools, and with other graduate students.

One forum for sharing teachers’ inquiries into their practice is Educational Insights and its recurring section entitled “Notes from the Field.” Such investigations highlight the messy realities of schools, the power dynamics that shape the lives of teachers and students, and teachers’ pedagogical decisions. As teachers pose questions and collect and analyze data, they theorize about the forces that come into play in schools. Making sense of what takes place in the classroom in terms of larger theoretical discussions invites teachers to look for new pedagogies that may lead to more equitable classroom practices.

The learning that can result from initial inquiry projects is often enhanced when teachers communicate their results to others. One reason is that “it allow[s] for ideas to be challenged and judgment developed” (Naylor, 2007, p. iii). To this end, we have always encouraged M.Ed. students in our Teacher Inquiry courses to polish their written products for publication in Notes from the Field. It is with pleasure, then, that we agreed to serve as guest editors of Notes from the Field; this theme issue on “Critical Teacher Inquiry” showcases what can be seen as one culminating moment in an ongoing process of inquiry for nine teachers. We are confident that they will continue to grapple with the questions that were at the heart of their various inquiry projects and that the feedback that they may receive from the publication here of their work will encourage them to continue the inquiry process.

Another reason that making the products of teacher inquiries public is important is the role it plays in the social change process. If our reflections here to introduce this special theme issue can be thought of as our own inquiry project, then there is an action component that is central: the nine pieces collectively show that things could be done differently in classrooms and schools. The shared examples suggest that teaching for social justice is possible even within current constraints and prevailing power dynamics, albeit within limits. The examples add to a growing and richly detailed set of inquiries done by other teachers that allow readers to see that educators can challenge existing school practices and generate or elaborate upon new and more equitable ones.

References


