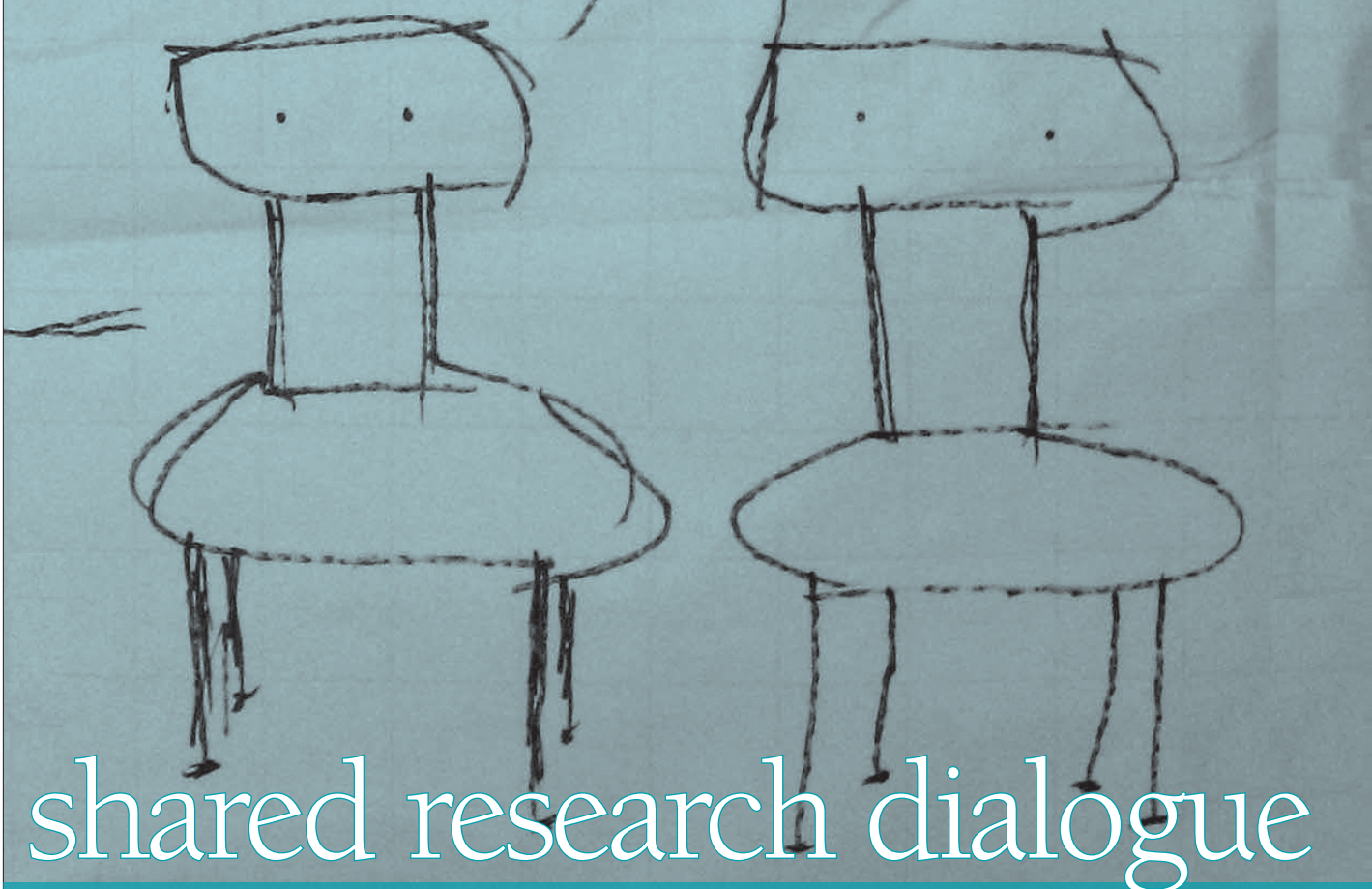

shared research dialogue

One College's Model for Professional Development of Youth Practitioners

by Dana Fusco and Ivana Espinet

You are hired by a community-based organization because of your passion, energy, and understanding of youth and local culture. You begin developing relationships with program youth and are off to a good start—fitting in and building trust. Now what? You know the mission of the organization and the objectives of the program, but you are not sure how to reach them. How do you structure opportunities that support team building and cooperation? What approaches can you use to maximize the participation of diverse groups of youth? How do you know when you are having the desired effects and when you need to try something different?

Until recently, youth practitioners learned the answers to these questions through experience, ingenuity, mentoring, and an occasional workshop. As research amasses about the critical role of staff quality in predicting positive outcomes for children and youth, the professional development of youth practitioners is becoming more intentional (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Phelan, 2005). Even higher education is playing an increasingly intentional role in the professional development of youth workers. Well into the 1990s, youth workers who enrolled in college had to register for courses in multiple departments such as education, psychology, or business because there was no

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centralized curriculum for youth work. Ten years later, college programs designed for youth workers and afterschool practitioners began emerging across the United States at a rapid pace. Many of these programs earn participants a certificate and/or college credits transferable toward a degree. York College, a senior college of the City University of New York, developed such an offering in 2001. The Certificate Program for Child and Youth Workers is an interdisciplinary program designed to support the increasing number of competencies needed for youth practitioners to handle their jobs effectively. One author of this article, Dana Fusco, developed the curriculum for this certificate program. The other, Ivana Espinet, taught its capstone course, Action Research for Educators.

In this paper, we reflect on how what we call the "shared research dialogue" emerged throughout the semester and served as a valuable component in the professional development of youth practitioners. We discuss the Action Research method used in the course and consider how the participants grew from the experience. We conclude by arguing for the inclusion of a consistent set of competencies in the college curriculum for youth workers, making the claim that supporting the capacity for reflective practice should be a component of that curriculum.

The Action Research Course

Practitioners often feel isolated in their work sites because of a lack of time to interact with colleagues and share their practices. The action research course at York College fostered a community of learners and researchers. Collaboration with other practitioner-researchers gave students a crucial source of support to sustain and enrich their work as they shared their research projects and received feedback from their peers. In the course of the semester, students came up with a research question about their practice, collected data using a variety of methods, analyzed their findings, and considered how to use the findings to improve their practice. An explicit goal of each research project was to affect change in the students' practice at their work sites.

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In addition, the objectives of Action Research for Educators were that students would:

- Deepen their knowledge of pedagogy and research through an intensive study of an educational issue related to their practice
- Learn to question the assumptions and biases of knowledge and knowledge construction as they learned about the principles of action research and critiqued existing research
- Recognize that teaching and learning require ongoing, critical reflection
- Engage in a cyclical process of raising questions about practice, planning and implementing data collection, reflecting on and analyzing their data, sharing and discussing results in and out of class, and using what they learned to improve their practice
- Contribute to a youth development knowledge base for practitioners through their action research projects

The teaching that brought these objectives to life was informed by the Critical Friends model, which fosters professional inquiry communities as a form of staff development for educators (Curry, 2008; Himley & Carini, 2000; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008) and the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship, which uses an experiential model to foster afterschool practitioner research (Hill, Matloff-Nieves, & Townsend, 2009).

Students

The students enrolled in spring 2009 in the action research course taught by Espinet included four females and three males. All but three were of traditional college age. They were afterschool practitioners from various community-based organizations in New York City. All were frontline workers, with the exception of one program coordinator who had additional responsibility for staff training. Some had been working as youth practitioners for up to thirty years; others had just begun and were uncertain about their commitment to the profession. All of the students were from ethnic minority groups. Some had prior college experience, but only one was steadily working toward a bachelor's degree.

Strategies and Activities

Action Research for Educators placed strong emphasis on self-reflection and ongoing group dialogue as means to deepen inquiries and interpretations and to examine implications. Various tools supported reflection throughout the semester. For example, in a "video confession

booth," students talked to the camera early in the semester about their experiences, questions, and challenges. They viewed these "confessions" later to reflect on their learning process.

With reflection and shared research dialogue as the essential means of engagement, the activities of the course were divided into three sections:

1. Brainstorming topics and questions
2. Learning various data collection tools and gathering data
3. Analyzing and disseminating findings

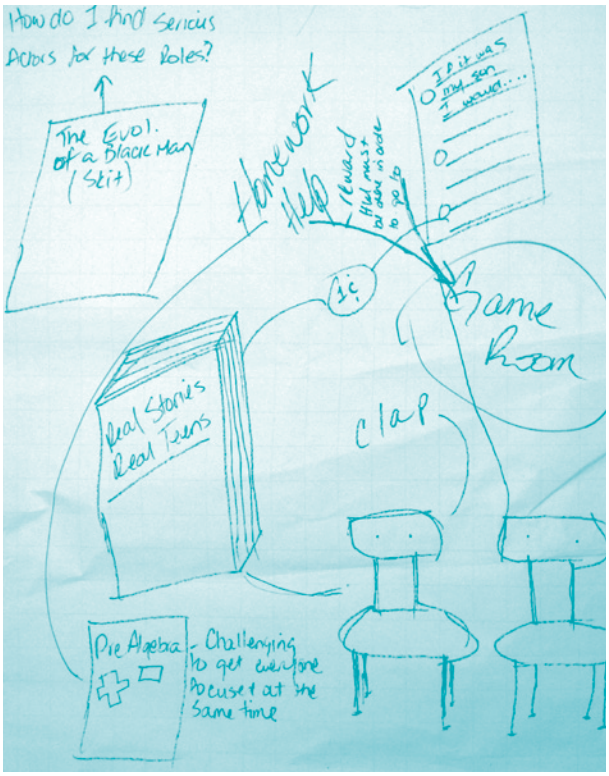
1. BRAINSTORMING TOPICS AND QUESTIONS

TOOLS: Mapping, critical incidents, inquiry briefs

Two initial activities, mapping and critical incidents, were adapted from the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship. Students began their inquiries by creating visual descriptions of their organizations and programs and by identifying and mapping essential components. This activity served as the impetus for students' research projects and helped highlight the difference between pragmatic questions and research questions. For instance, in Figure 1, a student mapped the activities in her program. Under one of the activities, a skit on the Evolution of a Black Man, she asked, "How do I find serious actors for these roles?" She also mapped "Real Teens, Real Stories," an activity in which youth write about their lives. She talked about the difference in young people's engagement when they participated in "Real Teens" *versus* when they were doing homework help. One of her peers suggested that she study the question, "How can programs keep young people engaged?" Here the shared research dialogue scaffolded the student's ability to distinguish between pragmatic questions and research inquiries. Pragmatic questions, such as how to find "serious actors" and understanding why youth connect to "Real Stories," were transformed into a research inquiry when framed in the context of engagement.

A second activity that generated ideas for research topics was identifying "critical incidents." Students had to write about one moment in their practice that was critical, either because it represented an essential aspect of their practice and organization or because it was so different from the usual routine that it begged for examination. Like the maps, critical incidents allowed students to look closely at their work and tease out issues for further sustained study. Writing critical incidents was also of value because it supported the youth workers' practice as researchers without interfering too much with the busyness of their workdays. These tools provide platforms for unearthing questions and tensions that are part of the everyday work but can "disappear" when practitioners are caught up in dealing with immediate needs.

Figure 1. Student map of program activities



One student shared a critical incident involving a conversation with a child in her program. The practitioner noticed signs of problem behavior that were out of character for this child. The conversation with the child helped the student and her staff understand how academic stresses were affecting the child. After reading this critical incident, class members came up with what they saw as significant questions and issues. They generated a long list of topics ranging from academic pressures in students' lives to how afterschool staff members deal with young peoples' emotional issues. In the ensuing dialogue, the key question that this student wanted to explore emerged: "How do we as practitioners find appropriate ways of communicating with children and families?"

These early inquiries capture the starting point of students' thinking in becoming researchers and reflective practitioners. Their initial "video confessions" reflect additional early attempts at inquiry:

> How do I catch my students' attention? I deal with the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. They bore very easily.
>
> How do we give them tools, how do we challenge them to find other alternatives, other programs, growth mechanisms outside of school?
>
> My topic is growth, just people, growing the staff, the participants. Ways to do this, identifying this growth.
>
> How do we bridge the gap between school and afterschool and not make it seem like it's school all over again?
>
> How are teens in the afterschool program being affected by the current economic crisis?

Most educators ask questions about their work every day, often without consciously acknowledging it. The key is to turn those "wonderings" into research questions that can be pursued systematically. In the action research class, students created "inquiry briefs" (Dana & Yeldon-Silva, 2003) with the help of their peers. In preparing an inquiry brief, students addressed the question: Why is this question important to me, to my organization, and to the field of afterschool education?

As participants wrote these briefs and did some pilot research, their questions shifted and evolved. New insights emerged when they expanded their perspective to include their organizations and the field of afterschool education. For example, the student who originally thought that he wanted to investigate how teens in afterschool programs were affected by the current economic crisis decided, after conducting a few interviews, to broaden his question to "How are *afterschool programs* affected by the current economic crisis?" He determined that this issue needed to be explored from multiple perspectives. He continued to interview program youth, but he also interviewed program directors from various afterschool programs to understand what was happening at multiple levels. In his final paper, he described how this issue affected his own site:

> During the process of collecting my data and interviewing several colleagues and afterschool participants, I was struck with the harsh reality of the situation, when the building that served as a home away from home for me between the ages of six through thirteen (as a participant) and fourteen through twenty-four (as an employee) was slated for closure before the end of the school year, due to budgetary issues stemming from the economic downturn.

As this example illustrates, the inquiry briefs wrapped a context around students' original questions, shifting the relevance of the inquiry to a broader audience.

2. LEARNING DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND GATHERING DATA

TOOLS: Observations, interviews, artifacts

Students needed to experience various research methods in order to decide which would work best for their particular inquiries. They practiced doing observations, interviewed afterschool participants and colleagues, created surveys, and examined how artifacts, such as student work, had been used in previous research.

One of the most significant activities that almost all students referred to in their end-of-semester reflections was their in-class observation of a videotaped afterschool session. Before viewing the 10-minute video, students were asked to refrain from interpretation; instead, they were to take only descriptive notes. After the first viewing, they shared their observations. Most were surprised at how different students had focused on different things in the video. Some also noticed that their peers had made observations that they had completely missed. Then the class watched the video again, this time making interpretations about what they saw. Once again, they found that even though everyone had observed the same events, interpretations did not always match. Some students made interpretations that contradicted their initial observations. Students also observed things in the second viewing that they had not seen the first time.

Many activities in this section, like this group observation, used protocols to structure the conversation. Use of such protocols channeled the focus, so that different conversations could accomplish different tasks. This strategy is based on the Critical Friends model of support for collaborative inquiry. Himley and Carini (2000) explain that, "through oral inquiry, teachers build the 'thick descriptions' that deepen their understanding of the local situation, while also opening up larger implications of their work" (p. 200).

Because the class was set up as a collaborative research process, many of the students brought queries about their process to the meetings. As they discovered the challenges of doing research at their sites, they found support in dealing with those challenges. For example, one student, in sharing the results of a survey of fellow youth workers in her program, noted that her respondents completed the multiple-choice survey items but

not the open-ended items. Her classmates, conjecturing that the respondents might not be comfortable with putting their thoughts into writing, recommended that she follow up the surveys with interviews. When she conducted the interviews, the youth workers talked extensively about how their experiences at home and in other non-work contexts had shaped how they learned to talk to young children. Later, in class, this student talked about how the interviews helped her understand the survey data, providing anecdotes that allowed better interpretation of her findings.

3. ANALYZING AND DISSEMINATING FINDINGS

TOOLS: Data coding, graphing, interpretations

The process of analyzing what a researcher has learned is like fitting the pieces of a puzzle together to create a picture. Even though the bulk of the analysis was done in the last few sessions of the course, the work was scaffolded throughout the course as participants shared with peers the data they had collected. During these sharing sessions, they received feedback about how to interpret the data and how to proceed in their research. Sometimes peers' interpretations of their data were quite different from their own.

Closer to the end of the semester, students coded data collectively, looking for emerging themes. Participants talked about these themes and how they might share their findings with others. In one session, a student brought data from a survey she had done with participants in her program. The class divided into two groups. Each group tabulated her data, came up with a graphic representation of it, and shared what the group thought was most significant about the survey answers and why. Students talked about how the graphic representations shaped their understanding of the data, noting that such graphics could actually misrepresent the results, depending on how they were constructed.

A key feature of action research is that practitioners think about the implications of their research findings. Many of the youth workers said that they were going to share their final papers with their supervisors; all had already engaged in discussions with their colleagues and supervisors during the course of the semester. One student talked about using her findings to prompt a discussion at her site about the need to give older students more ownership and voice in shaping the afterschool activities. Anecdotal information suggests that colleagues and supervisors at the sites were supportive of new ideas and eager to share in the learning. For example, one supervisor in an interview described the certificate program as providing her employee with the opportunity to participate in multiple conversations on issues relevant to the field of out-of-school programming as well as to translate concepts learned in the classroom for the student-employee's staff. The supervisor felt that such professional development had been especially important in the last two years when the mandates of the program had been changing.

The participants also talked about the value of using research tools to improve their practices, and some applied research tools from the course to their sites. For example, one student who supervises other youth workers incorporated the course's observation protocol to help him observe his staff performance and conduct internal staff development.

Becoming Researchers and Reflective Practitioners

"Inquiring professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice. They do this by posing questions or 'wonderings,' collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading the relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understanding developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others" (Dana & Yeldon-Silva, 2003, p. 5).

The main challenge in the action research course was helping the participants shift into the role of researchers. Most of them wanted to find immediate answers to the questions that they or their peers presented. It was hard for them to understand that the goal of the course was to explore the questions before trying to come up with solutions. One student wrote in her final paper:

> Although I knew the staff and children, I had to approach the situation as a researcher. This allowed me to see things I didn't see before. I was able to observe my coworkers and students in activities and see how things really work.

This comment illustrates how the research process helped the students to see their practices with fresh eyes. Looking closely at one issue through a variety of lenses sharpened their powers of observation, making them more attuned to what was going on in their programs and helping them become aware of their own underlying assumptions. In addition, those who shared their research findings with their sites became leaders in fostering conversations about improving their practices and their organizations.

Action research alone might not have the effect we saw here. In a recent external evaluation of the certificate program, one of the key components that participants valued was the opportunity for deep dialogue (Fusco, 2009). Through in-class discussions of concepts and real-world experiences, students found a language to articulate what they knew intuitively. The value of dialogue and the formation of a learning community were critical in allowing participants to share their experiences and views and to learn from others. In short, action research based on the Critical Friends model not only allowed students to learn the valuable skills of observation, reflection, and inquiry but also created a shared research dialogue that supported learning and had an impact on their thinking about their work.

Collaborative inquiry groups for teachers have been part of school reform efforts for many years. Yet this model of professional development is not as common in afterschool environments. The assumption of the model is that practitioners are in a unique position to make regular observations of their practice and of the issues that emerge there and that they bring to those issues a depth of knowledge and response when the observation is framed by systematic and reflective study. This model positions practitioners as co-constructers of knowledge who can contribute richly to their field. The process places practitioners in the center of inquiry as researchers of their own practice.

This model positions practitioners as co-constructers of knowledge who can contribute richly to their field.

What the college classroom added was an opportunity to form a collaborative learning environment that surrounded these individual inquiries and transformed them into *shared research dialogue*. We believe that this shared research dialogue was the key ingredient not only in students' growth as practitioners but also in their future capacity to effect change at their program sites. As one student said in a follow-up interview:

> It was a class based on experience. We got to share different things, you know? 'How would you respond to a student doing XYZ?' And then we'd give each other feedback. And sometimes it got heated, but at the end of the class we all had a response to it. You know, we all knew, that this is the right way to go about this.

Many students in college-based programs bring extensive professional experience to their studies. In fact, the context of youth work is so rich that even less experienced workers have much to share. The shared research dialogue created here was a vital component of the action research course and the certificate program, affording opportunities for sharing, scaffolding, and support. Since youth practice is group based, the shared research dialogue had the added benefit of reinforcing the culture and values of the profession. College classrooms can provide space for youth practitioners to form such learning communities so that they develop competencies in an environment that mimics the best of youth work and supports reflective practice as an essential ingredient.

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