“I’m Fighting My Fight, and I’m Not Alone Anymore”: The Influence of Communities of Inquiry

Rob Simon

This case study explores an urban secondary literacy teacher’s involvement in communities of inquiry over time. I draw on data from a multiyear study that documented the intellectual work of a community of teacher candidates I worked with as an instructor in a literacy methods course and cofounder of an inquiry community they participated in during their first two years in the classroom. Using document analysis and interviews with the focal teacher, Laura, conducted five years after the initial study, I explore how participation in critical inquiry-based teacher education and teacher research communities in her early years in the classroom led Laura to initiate change-oriented collaborations in her ongoing professional practice. I conclude with a discussion of how inquiry can support preservice and inservice teachers—particularly those working in embattled and underfunded urban schools in a time of heightened accountability—to develop activist orientations toward educational policy, critical solidarity with peers, and relational approaches to educating diverse students.

When I think about what frustrates me about teaching sometimes, it’s that I’m all alone, or that I feel isolated or helpless. So being able to have people in my school, or to be reaching out to other people and meeting other people who are like me and having these conversations again, it is kind of invigorating. You know, yes and I can do this, and it matters. And this person is doing this, and they are fighting their fight, and I’m fighting my fight, and I’m not alone anymore.

—Laura,¹ on the importance of critical inquiry communities

Laura began teaching high school English in 2005 in an urban district undergoing a widespread improvement effort, intended to manage and standardize teaching through the imposition of paced curriculum and frequent benchmark exams. The “dropout rate” for new teachers in Laura’s district during her first several years in the classroom was 70 percent—significantly higher than the student dropout rate of 42 percent (U.S. Department
of Education, 2007, pp. 7–9). Though many of her colleagues left teaching, as Laura noted in an interview, collaborations with students and like-minded peers sustained her during her first eight years as a teacher. Communities of inquiry helped Laura combat feelings of isolation and reminded her why teaching matters in the midst of competing reforms in her school and district, fueled by discourses of teachers’ failures and heightened accountability (Clayton, 2015; Edelman & Gartman, 2013).

The critical role inquiry can play in urban preservice teacher education (Hamre & Oyler, 2004; Simon, 2013b), inservice communities (Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, 1984), and national networks (Whitney et al., 2008) has been recognized. Less well documented, however, is how participation in communities of inquiry informs the beliefs and practices of urban teachers over time. The latter has informed my inquiry into how urban teachers develop an inquiry stance beyond initial teacher education and the role that communities and collaborations play in this effort.

To address these concerns, I use critical incidents to explore how participating in and creating communities of inquiry have influenced Laura’s practice during her first eight years in the classroom. I begin with a review of literature on critical inquiry communities, examining the role of collaboration and community in teacher research. I then describe the contexts of Laura’s work and outline my methodology. Findings are presented through vignettes that illustrate how Laura developed and sustained an inquiry stance on her teaching over time. Drawing from a multiyear study, I present examples of Laura’s participation in communities of inquiry as a preservice and early-career teacher. I first describe Laura’s work in a methods course I taught that encouraged teacher candidates to consider critical literacy (e.g., Christensen, 2009); ethnographically informed, social practice perspectives on literacy (e.g., Street, 1995); and inquiry as frameworks for teaching English in urban schools. I then explore Laura’s inquiries with colleagues in a teacher research community we cofounded during her first two years in the classroom. Using document analysis and interviews conducted with Laura five years after the initial study, I examine how formative experiences inspired Laura to initiate communities of inquiry in her current practice. These experiences include researching teacher evaluation with students and cofounding a peer-to-peer, activist professional development organization in her school district, Teachers Leading the City. In the conclusion, I look across the data to discuss how inquiry can support preservice and inservice teachers—particularly those working in embattled and underfunded urban schools in a time of heightened accountability—to develop activist orientations toward educational policy, critical solidarity with peers, and relational approaches to educating urban students.
Inquiry Communities as Sites for Cultivating Critical Pedagogy and Activism

Inquiry can be a catalyst for critical literacy and learning in initial teacher education (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Hamre & Oyler, 2004; Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013; Simon, 2015a, 2015b) as well as across teachers’ professional lifespans (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Nieto, 2003; Whitney et al., 2008). Participation in inquiry communities oriented toward social justice (e.g., CEE Commission for Social Justice, n.d.; Picower, 2012) can inspire teachers to become activists who use Freirean (1970/2005) notions of problem-posing and problem-solving processes to make power dynamics visible and address inequitable conditions in schools (Ritchie, 2012; Simon & Campano, 2013). Inquiry communities can also provide a mechanism for encouraging solidarity with colleagues, who work together to mobilize critical literacy as a means of improving student learning (Picower, 2007). Collaborations may include forms of inquiry that lead to action, through cultivating professional autonomy (Dierking & Fox, 2013) or assuming agency in school reform (Christman et al., 1995; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008). Critical inquiry communities are possible sites for developing grassroots approaches to educational innovation (Ghiso, Campano, & Simon, 2015). Such efforts often involve partnerships with community members, parents, and youth as a part of broader social change efforts (Au, Bigelow, Burant, & Salas, 2005). In a policy environment that privileges managing how teachers are held accountable for student achievement (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006), critical literacy educators can use inquiry as a basis for developing “flexible repertoires of field-, discourse-, and text-specific pedagogies” (Luke, 2004, p. 90), as well as adopting more activist responses to curricula and policies that enter their classrooms (Alvermann, 2006; Simon, 2014).

Most teacher inquiry involves professional collaboration or involvement in communities, which help to advance individual as well as collective projects:

[Inquiry communities foster] new kinds of social relationships that assuage the isolation of teaching and other sites of practice. This is especially true in inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus to become spaces where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice can be seen (not hidden) and can function as grist for new insights and new ways to theorize practice. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 57)

They also provide opportunities for individuals to address concerns and develop more critical and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy.
For example, the Bread Loaf Teacher Network, a technology-facilitated learning community in the United States, has supported teachers in rural, urban, and suburban schools for more than 50 years to develop “innovative online projects designed to promote culturally sensitive and transformative literacy” (Bread Loaf Teacher Network, n.d.; see also Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Networks such as the National Writing Project, which has promoted the research and peer-to-peer professional development of thousands of inservice teachers in rural and urban sites across the United States since 1974 (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010), and local inquiry communities such as the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative (1984), who have met weekly for more than 35 years to examine student work and issues in urban teachers’ practices, provide examples of how inquiry-based collaborations encourage social justice–oriented teaching and more equitable approaches to responding to student writing (Simon, 2013b).

Critical inquiry communities are predicated on more horizontal rather than vertical conceptions of knowledge generation (Campano, Honeyford, Sánchez, & Vander Zanden, 2010), on the assumption “that beginning and experienced teachers need to engage in similar intellectual work” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 55). This horizontal approach to professional learning—rooted in Freirean (1970/2005) conceptions of dialogue as a basis for developing pedagogical relationships based on mutual trust, partnership, and solidarity (p. 89)—runs against the grain of models that position early-career teachers and teacher candidates as novices entering a field of hierarchical expertise, as well as school-based professional development that regards teachers as recipients rather than producers of knowledge. Because of their emically determined orientations and non-hierarchical structures, critical inquiry communities can provide a basis for developing coalitions among school-, university-, and community-based partners, who work together to find local solutions to address seemingly intractable educational problems (Au, Bigelow, Burant, & Salas, 2005; Campano et al., 2010; Ghiso, Campano, & Simon, 2013).

Inquiry communities often adopt unique processes for supporting teachers’ classroom research. For example, the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS), a research community made up of teachers of varying years of experience and grade levels, met weekly in smaller working groups, organized around specific topics, to analyze members’ tapes and transcripts of classroom conversations through the lens of “literacies as talk” (Michaels, 2004). The emphasis on sharing “raw data” in the form of transcripts allowed the group to revisit “hard-to-interpret” remarks made in class, “rehearing . . . and re-seeing talk” as a way to give students “more time and space to be
heard” (Michaels, 2004, p. 3). As BTRS member Ballenger (1999) argues, this process allows for “creating a new kind of time in our classrooms” (p. 84), supporting teachers to better understand and respond to students’ concerns. Impact in communities such as BTRS is linked to what Lather (1986) has described as “catalytic validity,” the degree to which research “re-orient, focuses and energizes the participants” in their classrooms and in cross-school initiatives (p. 67).

Inquiry is often the catalyst for change in communities. For example, Kamler and Comber (2005) describe how early-year and experienced teachers worked together in an inquiry community they formed to explore the roots of school inequities. This community provided a “discursive space where teachers could talk about poverty, violence, racism and classism,” among other issues, with the goal of addressing the problem of unequal literacy outcomes in their classrooms (Kamler & Comber, 2005, p. 228). Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, and The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (2009) describe how a teacher-coordinated collective comprised of teachers “across the lifespan” collaborated with university-based educators and activists to explore how critical literacy pedagogy can “make changes in people’s lives” (p. 22). These examples demonstrate the role inquiry can play in critical literacy education, supporting new and experienced teachers to link teaching English with working for social justice (Miller, Beliveau, Destigter, Kirkland, & Peggy, 2008).

**Context and Methods**

This case study involved aspects of ethnographic immersion, participant observation (Heath & Street, 2008), and practitioner research. Although findings are not generalizable to every preservice or inservice teacher, as Dyson and Ganishi (2005) note, case studies are a useful means “to understand others’ understandings” (p. 12; emphasis original). Laura’s example is an instance in action (MacDonald & Walker, 1975), documenting one teacher’s efforts to cultivate and sustain an inquiry stance on her practice over time. This research is guided by the following question: How does an urban teacher’s participation in communities of inquiry in her early years in the classroom, including inquiry-based preservice teacher education, help her to develop and sustain an inquiry stance over time and across multiple experiences and contexts?

I became a teacher educator after years in the classroom, as a founding teacher of a high school for urban adolescents who had been inscribed within narratives of academic failure, deficit, and risk. My colleagues and I
developed this alternative program in partnership with community activists and residents of a self-help program for former convicts and drug addicts. The process of building our school involved sustained inquiry that often unsettled our own and others’ assumptions about adolescents’ abilities and traditional instructional approaches, which we recognized had failed our students. As I have described elsewhere (e.g., Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012), my formative experiences as a teacher informed my belief in the capabilities of all students, my critique of structures and practices that position urban adolescents as deficient, and my recognition of how critical inquiry can be a means of encouraging formerly disenfranchised students to thrive socially and academically.

I had the pleasure of meeting Laura in 2005 as a master’s student in a methods course I taught, Teaching English/Language in Middle and Secondary Schools. This course was situated within a one-year, master’s-granting teacher education program at a university located in an urban center in the Northeastern United States. The course was designed to support teacher candidates to interrogate their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning with adolescents, and invite them to consider critical literacy and inquiry as frameworks for social justice education in urban English classrooms. Like many of her peers, Laura chose to attend this program because of its stated commitment to social justice in urban schools. She was 22 when she entered the teacher education program, directly after receiving her undergraduate degree from a large public university in the Midwestern United States. Laura’s interest in teaching was initially sparked through tutoring inner-city youth as well as volunteering with a human rights and popular education initiative that provided a range of services including health care and job training for families in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Although Laura and I have remained in contact in the years since her graduation from the teacher education program, this study provided an opportunity to revisit our work together. I have found that such reflexivity is central to practitioner research, which commonly involves returning to and “working through” contradictions, including resisting dominant ideologies, with the goal of improving practice (Simon et al., 2012). As Bourdieu (1990) notes in The Logic of Practice, “doubling-back,” returning “persistently” to objects of study and relationships, can provide a basis for developing new knowledge of practice and new understandings of how that knowledge develops and changes over time (p. 2).

My efforts to double-back are situated in the time-span analyzing Laura’s work. Inquiry is thereby not merely a “time bounded project within a teacher education program, or one of another ‘proven-effective’ strate-
gies for staff development” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 50); rather, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) suggest, it is an ongoing intellectual and political stance that involves “teachers and students working in communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others” (p. 50). For this study, inquiry is fundamental to critical pedagogy, shaped by power and ideology, relationships within and outside of the classroom, as well as teachers’ and students’ autochthonous histories and epistemologies.

Contexts
This study explores three contexts of Laura’s inquiries. The first is her teacher education program located in an urban center in the Northeastern United States, and in particular, a secondary methods course I taught in which I presented inquiry and critical literacy as frameworks for teaching, research, and curriculum. The second is an inquiry community, the Ethno Group, which grew out of the context of this course, and provided opportunities for extending teacher candidates’ inquiries into their first two years in the classroom. The third is Laura’s involvement in several communities of inquiry in the years following the dissolution of our inquiry community, working in the same urban school district in which she completed her student teaching.

Secondary Methods Course
My course was situated within a teacher education program that is explicitly dedicated to “a commitment to taking an inquiry stance” (program website). As described in my syllabus, this approach also informed the course I taught, which explored “the concept of inquiry as a conceptual framework across the professional life span.” In this course, I encouraged teacher candidates to approach teaching English in middle and secondary classrooms in relation to theories that regard literacy not as discreet skills but as diverse social practices—locally embedded, ideological, and marked by linguistic and cultural diversity (Street, 1995). Through a series of projects that involved using ethnographic methods to collect and analyze data from individuals’ classrooms, teacher candidates explored inquiry as a framework for pedagogy, curriculum, and ongoing learning from practice.

The Ethno Group
Laura and seven of her peers from the teacher education program initiated the inquiry community, along with me, as a means of extending inquiries begun in the methods course. In preparation for a group presentation at
the Ethnography in Education Research Forum, we began referring to ourselves as the “Ethno Group.”2 The Ethno Group’s purposes emerged from immediate questions and issues surfaced by group members. We organically developed processes that helped individuals learn from dissonant moments in their teaching. For example, members brought problems of practice to group meetings. Often these would take the form of written vignettes that others would respond to in discussions and in writing. These vignettes became catalysts for developing shared questions that we explored across our classrooms.

The Ethno Group met regularly at the university and in individuals’ homes through participants’ completion of the teacher education program and during their first two years in the classroom. We used online writing forums to mitigate geographic challenges when members took full-time teaching positions in other cities. The subjects of inquiry in this community ranged widely, from investigations into literacy curriculum and the structures of schooling, to explorations of relationships with particular students, teachers, or administrators.

As a requirement of the teacher education program, which emphasized preparing students to teach in inner-city classrooms, Laura and her peers, who were of European American descent, taught in schools in an urban district in a large northeastern city in the United States. Laura taught in this district as a teacher candidate, and though she changed schools once, she has continued teaching there in the eight years since her graduation from the program. Like many urban contexts, Laura’s district is affected by severe underfunding and racial segregation (Churchill & Socolar, 2005). According to district demographics, 85 percent of students are of color, and more than a third of students attend a school that is 90 percent one race. Laura began teaching in this context in the midst of a sweeping reform agenda that included mandated curricula linked to benchmark exams. As Laura described, legacies of these reforms persist, including more recent privatization efforts and amplified teacher evaluation and accountability measures.

**Communities of Inquiry**

Since graduating from her teacher education program, Laura has been involved in multiple, overlapping projects with colleagues to initiate change at the level of her classroom, school, and district. As Figure 1 illustrates, these efforts have included the City Teachers Institute, an inquiry community at a local university focused on developing inquiry-based curriculum, which overlapped with her time in the Ethno Group. More recently, Laura has collaborated with faculty and students at a local liberal arts college on
### Figure 1. Mapping Laura’s Involvement with Communities of Inquiry over Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities of Inquiry</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Candidate, Urban Teacher Education Program (2005-2006)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ethno Group (2005-2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Teachers’ Institute at University (inquiry community focused on curriculum development) (2007-2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Mentor for Urban Teacher Education Program (2010-2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Project Summer Institute 1 (2011)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Lead Teacher (led school PD and PLC sessions) (2010-2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Representative for Teachers’ Union (2010-2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEH Summer Seminar on Zora Neale Hurston (2011)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Project Summer Institute 2 (including investigation into teacher evaluation with students) (2012-2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Boards Certification (Inquiry into evaluation with students) (2012-2013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Mentor for Urban Teacher Education Program (2011-2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Leading The City (2011-2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers as Writers (inquiry community of urban teachers, faculty, and students at liberal arts college) (2012-2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
action research projects in urban schools, in an initiative called Teachers as Writers. She also continues to mentor new teachers, which she regards as a form of inquiry. Laura has initiated collaborations within the school system, including working as a union representative for several years and coordinating professional learning communities in her school as an English lead teacher. In 2013, she received her National Board certification, which involved sustained inquiries with students. She has also participated in and established teacher-led change initiatives, through an urban site of the National Writing Project, which supported Laura’s initial research into issues of student engagement and teacher evaluation, and an activist organization she cofounded in 2011, Teachers Leading the City.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were drawn from a multiyear practitioner research study in which Laura was a participant. This study documented the inquiries of teacher candidates in the methods course I taught and the inquiry community, the Ethno Group, which developed from that course. I have remained in contact with many of these teachers. Each of the original members of the Ethno Group is engaged in inquiry communities in one form or another in their current teaching practices. In the course of an email exchange with Laura in 2012, I became intrigued by the range of her inquiry-based initiatives. Five years after the completion of the original study I asked Laura if she would be willing to be interviewed about this work. She and I had a series of conversations and email exchanges about her involvement in communities of inquiry over time, and about how the ideas we explored together in the course and the Ethno Group have lived on in her teaching.

Data include excerpts from transcriptions of 15 three-hour sessions from the methods course; several hours of transcribed interviews with Laura; excerpts from transcriptions of inquiry group meetings; email exchanges with Laura over eight years; my field notes, as well as Ethno Group members’ meeting notes; and audiovisual data, including videos from Laura’s school posted on YouTube. Research also involved document analysis. I reviewed relevant policy, program, and course materials, data from Laura’s evaluation research, and websites for the activist organization Laura cofounded, Teachers Leading the City. In addition, I analyzed Laura’s written work, including conference proposals, research papers she authored through the National Writing Project, reflective memos she wrote about her evolving research, presentations coauthored by members of the Ethno Group, a paper on teacher evaluation Laura presented at AERA in 2013, writing she completed online
on the methods class website, inquiry projects that involved collecting and analyzing classroom data, and her course and program portfolios.

Analysis involved open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I invited my research assistant, Will Edwards, to work with me to develop initial codes based on conceptual and thematic categories that emerged from our individual and shared readings of the data. We utilized a collaborative approach to analysis rooted in descriptive processes (Carini, 2001; Martin & Schwartz, 2014; Simon, 2015b) that involved close reading, sharing initial impressions, relating parts to whole, and chunking data together thematically. Given my relationship over time with Laura, it was helpful to have Will’s outside perspective on the data. Working through these data together facilitated problematizing and interpreting aspects of these data that I may have otherwise taken for granted (e.g., Erickson, 1986). Will and I presented initial findings to colleagues who provided feedback as part of a two-day workshop that invited researchers to revisit participants and sites of prior study. Laura and I were in dialogue throughout the research process. She reviewed conceptual categories and findings as we developed them, and commented on drafts of this manuscript.

This process supported developing themes and patterns relating to Laura’s conceptualization of inquiry; how inquiry informed her approaches to developing curriculum and her relationships with students; Laura’s involvement in communities of inquiry with colleagues; and her interrogation of outside discourses that influenced her teaching. From this analysis, codes included definitions of inquiry; accountability to students; reciprocal inquiry; critical solidarity; taking collective action; investigating what counts as good teaching with students; and linking inquiry to broader reform efforts. I read across the data to determine significant themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and explored relationships among conceptual categories derived from initial codes. These codes were then organized under the two-part schema that structures my findings sections, which analyze the symbiotic relationship between Laura’s participation in and creation of communities of inquiry.

Participating in Communities of Inquiry

Laura was immersed in a teacher education program grounded in inquiry-based frameworks and assignments, and participated in an inquiry community with peers that extended into her first two years of full-time teaching. These were critical experiences for her. In many respects, this formed the ground on which Laura constructed the figure of her practice as an educator. Her inquiry stance was nurtured in situ, which led to proactive questioning,
taking action on behalf of others’ and her own interests, and negotiating structural constraints.

Defining Inquiry: “Following where those questions may lead you.”

I first met Laura in the fall of 2005, as a student in a middle and secondary literacy methods course I taught. I invited teacher candidates to consider inquiry as a framework for investigating and addressing issues in practice, an approach to pedagogy and curriculum, a means of interrogating what counts as literacy in their classrooms, and a basis for constructing their own theories of practice. In a discussion about the course syllabus in our first class session I asked students what the term inquiry meant to them. Laura responded:

> It kind of seems like you don’t need to come to a conclusion. The important part is that you’re asking questions, and following where those questions may lead you. And at the end, it brings you to a new question. And in that way, you’ve accomplished your inquiry, and you keep looking.

Laura’s initial definition captured how inquiry from her perspective was a framework for ongoing learning. Laura suggested that learning to teach could be a process of pursuing answers to questions that lead to more questions. This image of inquiry is not unlike the process of researching teaching that Erickson (1986) described as “[making] the familiar strange and interesting again” (p. 121). As evidenced by Laura’s in situ learning, she found that teaching through inquiry foregrounds this process. Laura’s inquiries over time exemplify how the inquiry process can be a productive end in itself (Campano, 2009; Simon, 2015b).

Accountability to Students: “We have to respond to the questions that they ask us.”

Laura regarded teaching as an opportunity to learn from students how to instruct them. For their first inquiry project in my class, Laura and her classmates taped, transcribed, and analyzed interviews with adolescents about their experiences with literacy in and outside of school. They placed students’ perspectives in conversation with their own autobiographical reflections on literacy and site-based observations about what counts as literacy in schools. In her paper, Laura explored her relationship with a student who had appeared to other teachers to be disengaged:
Will came to second period English a bit distracted. As my classroom teacher and I did our rounds around the room, checking papers and helping students, Will asked me if I knew who Emmett Till was. I told him that I did, and Will began discussing the topic with me. He was angry that he had never learned about Till’s murder before in history classes, and frustrated because he thought that was an important part of history, a part of history that mattered to him. While my classroom teacher shrugged it off as “something that is taught in the upper levels of history,” I was intrigued by Will’s interest in the topic and I wanted to encourage him to learn more about it. By talking with Will, I found that he was frustrated with school as a whole, wondering why African-American history is overlooked, or why all the authors are white. I was intrigued that a 14-year-old boy was telling me the problems with the educational system, shocked because I did not think I would hear a student complaining that they aren’t learning enough, and thrilled because there was a student in front of me asking questions and seeking information.

This extended excerpt from Laura’s writing demonstrates how teachers can learn from students if they are willing to listen to them (Christensen, 2009). Laura learned from Will’s critical stance on institutions that had neglected to expose him to African American history that challenging dominant narratives about urban adolescents’ resistance or disengagement in school (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009) can shift a teacher’s teaching. Will’s critique extended to his current school, with which Laura was in many respects complicit as a teacher candidate in his classroom. At this school, 75 percent of students were African American, and nearly 90 percent of students were considered “economically disadvantaged” according to school district data. Laura noted that the classroom teacher she was placed with “shrugged off” Will’s concerns as outside the scope and sequence of the curriculum. In contrast, Laura became curious about the roots of Will’s frustration with school. Her students’ concerns fueled Laura’s curricular choices:

The next day, I brought two articles about Emmett Till for Will and he literally [sic] devoured them. Although he read them during class, I let it slide because I was certain that he was learning something. The next day, Will came to class early to talk to me. He had gone home the day before and looked up more information about Emmett Till that he wanted to share with me. I was excited to hear that Will had sought out information on his own and could now teach me things that I did not know.

In their longitudinal study of new teachers, Grossman and Thompson (2008) note that available curriculum materials shape not only what new English teachers teach but also their conceptions of “what it means to teach reading and writing” (p. 2016). Grossman and Thompson’s (2008) research
suggests that encounters with curriculum have a “profound effect on how [new teachers] thought about and taught the subject matter” (p. 2019). Laura’s interaction with Will reveals how inquiry can present opportunities for new teachers to regard curriculum as a more fluid construct, informed by their own and students’ questions and concerns, rather than by a rigid set of external standards and expectations.

Laura regarded Will’s interests as central rather than marginal to the classroom, even though this ran counter to the recommendations of a more experienced colleague and the inherited curriculum. In this example, Laura recognized that Will’s critical stance was informed by his own experiences of injustice as well as legacies of discrimination in judicial processes and schooling. Viewing Will’s critique as a starting point for teaching helped Laura to reposition a student who may otherwise have been viewed as disengaged or resistant as a critic and coauthor of curriculum.

Laura further described how this critical incident informed her burgeoning critique of schooling:

There is a disjuncture between what students learn in schools, specifically literacy skills, and how it applies in their real lives. This difference of beliefs is striking, and I wonder if any of it has root in Will’s questioning of his own education, evident in his interest in Emmett Till. It is impossible to have faith in an institution if you believe it is not teaching what you think is important, is not giving you the information you want.

Laura went on to reflect on how this experience altered her understanding of student engagement, relationships, and pedagogy:

Will proved that students do care, but teachers need to give them something to care about. We need to help them discover the motivation and the interest to continue learning outside of the classroom. . . . It is not enough that we go through the motions, but we have to respond to the questions that they ask us.

Laura interpreted Will’s critique of schooling as a form of “budding . . . critical social consciousness” (Fine, 1991, p. 126). She encouraged his perspective and his curiosities, as well as his critiques. This was advanced by developing solidarity across racial and cultural differences and asymmetrical positions of power. More often than not, students like Will are expected to accede to school policies and practices (Nieto, 1999). Inspired by this incident, Laura argued that, more justly, teachers should respond to students’ concerns, instead of merely “[going] through the motions” or complying with external forms of accountability in educational policy.
Reciprocal Inquiry and Critical Solidarity: “It’s hard for me to be thinking about ‘reflective practice’ when I can’t teach a class.”

Laura’s interaction with Will underscored how teachers’ inquiries often develop from issues raised by students. Relationships with colleagues were also important to the development of Laura’s inquiry stance. They helped her negotiate the political contexts of schooling and develop solidarity around social justice issues. For Laura and others, the Ethno Group began as a vehicle for reciprocal inquiry and critical solidarity. As Jocson (2013) has noted, critical solidarity can serve as a “catalyst for collective social action” (p. 72). In this section, I highlight how critical solidarity and reciprocal inquiry allowed individuals in the Ethno Group to collectively interrogate and explore alternative worldviews and address issues across differences as well as sites of connection (Mohanty, 2002).

Like other inservice teacher inquiry communities (e.g., Brookline Teacher Research Seminar, 2004; Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, 1984), Laura and her colleagues used the Ethno Group to help them confront challenges they encountered in schools affected by underfunding, poverty, and racial segregation (Useem, Offenberg, & Farley, 2007). For example, in a group meeting in December 2005, Laura described feeling trapped in a school where she had little professional autonomy and few material resources, in which teachers and students were inscribed within deficit discourses: “What do you do then? I mean, like, yeah, I’m stuck here.” In her first year teaching full-time, Laura’s feelings of frustration increased rather than abated, as she confronted a rising tide of violence in her school.

At a group meeting in January 2007, Laura talked about how recent outbreaks in her school threatened her ability to teach:

It’s hard for me to be thinking about “reflective practice” when I can’t teach a class . . . the students in my classroom are in their seats, and you look out my classroom door window, and there’s a kid against it getting pummeled. Or there’s a security guard getting beaten up. The violence in my school right now is just so out of control.

The violence Laura described to the group was documented online. The attack on a security guard Laura recounted was filmed by a student and posted on YouTube: Aporia transformed into public spectacle (Debord, 1967/1983; Derrida, 1993). The video was 22 seconds of chaos punctuated by screams. In the foreground a riot broke out. Eight or more students hit and kicked the fallen security guard. When Laura showed us the video, she paused to point out a door in the background. On the other side of the door, Laura told us, she was trying to teach Macbeth to her seniors.
Reflecting on events at her school, Laura expressed frustration with what a fellow Ethno Group member referred to as “the hostility of police-state ‘order’ that makes some of us question our resolve.” Another group member noted how images like these fed into media representations of adolescents as out of control and needing to be controlled, diverting attention from the systemic roots of school violence (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). Incidents at Laura’s school were a catalyst for others in the Ethno Group to address issues of school violence. This became the subject of a panel presentation at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum.

In our presentation, Laura described her attempts to invite students to make sense of the violence in their school through writing:

Many of my students wrote about the school changes in their journals. Some wrote that they were scared and could not understand what was happening. Others wrote about how they looked down upon those students that were causing all the trouble, while others thought the fights were amusing and fun to watch. And again, the sentiments that they would “leave it all behind” echoed throughout many of them.

Many of Laura’s graduating seniors expressed relief that they would soon escape the violence in their school. Some of them had taken to calling this kind of writing “playing Freedom Writers [2007]” after the Hollywood film that was in theaters at the time. This reference troubled Laura, who worried that it obscured rather than focused students’ inquiries:

Do they see it as a game? That the lives of those students in the movies are that different or far away from them? I asked one student who saw the movie if she could relate to any of it and she said, “Nah, those kids are in LA. We don’t have those Bloods and Crips problems here.” Meanwhile, the [South Side] kids are beating up the [West Street] kids in the hallway.

Although Laura felt troubled by some of their responses, encouraging students to write about these traumatic experiences helped them to express their collective outrage. Similarly, the crisis in Laura’s school prompted members of the Ethno Group to write. Others responded to Laura in our group presentation. One member of the group asked: “Will more layers of accountability, expectations, and consequences ever overcome these circumstances?” Another wrote: “This is political. I think that may be why the Hollywood band-aid image may be so uncomfortable for you to buy into or wear. Your halls are bleeding and there is no montage soundtrack.”

Responses by Ethno Group members point to how communities of inquiry can encourage individuals to position themselves in what Mohanty (2002) has described as coimplication with the struggles of others, a means by
which community members focus not merely on intersections of difference but also on mutuality, interweaving their individual histories and experiences as a basis for developing solidarity and collective action (p. 522). For Laura, the Ethno Group became a crucial extension of the formal teacher education program, where she could address troubling issues in critical solidarity with colleagues.

Creating Communities of Inquiry

The teacher education program structured Laura’s inquiries through predetermined frameworks and assignments that she did not direct. Laura used these opportunities to explore what it means to take an inquiry stance on students’ concerns, build camaraderie with like-minded peers, and develop institutional critiques which in turn fed her pedagogy. The Ethno Group provided a means of more proactive participation and co-creation, helping Laura to envision a critical literacy practice in which concerns for students and connections with colleagues could coexist.

These formative experiences prompted Laura to create inquiry-based collaborations with colleagues and students beyond the life of the Ethno Group. Many current reforms, such as privatization efforts and heightened accountability measures, present visions of educational change as driven by profit motives and entrepreneurial models (Lipman, 2011). As the following examples demonstrate, Laura’s attempts to create communities of inquiry involve more grassroots forms of educational innovation (Ghiso et al., 2013).

Taking Collective Action: “I cannot express how amazing it has been to have a ‘we.’”

Feelings of isolation have been among Laura’s greatest frustrations as a teacher. Laura described how initiating connections with like-minded colleagues helped her to combat isolation and work for change. This has included taking a leadership role with an urban site of the National Writing Project, developing action research with faculty and students at a local liberal arts college, and founding a cross-school network, Teachers Leading the City, which is designed to encourage teachers to take leadership roles in educational reform efforts.

In an email, Laura described how her struggles to transform the culture in her school led her to develop other means of educational activism:
I’ve been focusing a lot on teacher networking and collaboration outside of my school. I’m very fortunate to have a colleague at my school, Julie, who shares a lot of my ideas and perspectives on education. We collaborate a lot on what we’re doing in our classrooms. [In 2010], we tried to work together to improve our school culture . . . and discovered how difficult that can be. Basically, we failed mostly because of non-supportive leadership. However, it did turn our attention to the idea of teacher leadership, so we started joining a lot of outside groups. I cannot express how amazing it has been to have a “we.” It makes teaching less lonely, and having Julie to talk to and collaborate with makes me more reflective about my teaching.

Laura and Julie’s attempt to develop more democratic forms of leadership failed to change the top-down culture in their school. Though they were teaching at an urban school that promotes ideals of democratic deliberation and active citizenship as core program values, Laura and Julie encountered an administration that did not take issues of leadership and school culture seriously from their perspective. In a reflective memo written in 2011 as part of her research for a local site of the National Writing Project, Laura described the need for an alternative vision of teacher leadership:

I am not a leader because my principal has bestowed a leadership position on me. In fact, I currently have no leadership positions in my school . . . I am a leader because I no longer try to please the powers that be in terms of my lesson plans and observations, but listen to my students’ voices. They are the reason I am in the classroom . . . Until politicians see the error in focusing so heavily on testing, and the travesty of underfunding [urban schools], I will continue to fight for my students’ educational rights by teaching and supporting them all I can.

This example demonstrates how teachers can initiate grassroots change efforts. Laura’s description of trying to develop communities of inquiry, including opportunities for teachers and administrators to work in partnership, involved bumping up against institutional constraints, negotiating competing interests, and fighting for change, which sometimes required Laura to reaffirm her commitments, her vision of teacher leadership, and refocus or redouble her efforts.

When they encountered resistance to change in their school, Laura and Julie looked outward. In 2011, they worked together to develop a districtwide activist community of educators, Teachers Leading the City. They envisioned this collaborative as a means of creating more local forms of evaluation than were prevalent in the climate of heightened teacher accountability in their
Simon > “I’m Fighting My Fight, and I’m Not Alone Anymore”

school district. In a conversation in 2012, Laura described why she and Julie put their energies into this wider initiative:

[Julie and I] work together and we plan together and we make sure everything in our classrooms is going well and we are constantly working together that way. But there is not much else we can do in our school. We cannot change the culture that’s set up. We can only handle it among ourselves. So we needed to put our energy outside, and start working on something else that we can have a say in or have some influence on.

Many critical forms of teacher research are fueled by teachers’ desire for professional autonomy (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), to take charge of changing the culture of schools and classrooms “among ourselves,” as Laura put it. The initiative Laura and Julie founded, Teachers Leading the City, encourages critical pedagogy and school reform through cross-visitations and inquiry-based collaborations. As the name suggests, Teachers Leading the City invites teachers to initiate change at the level of their own classrooms, but also to take on leadership roles in broader reform, including challenging public discourses and practices related to educational accountability. The website for Teachers Leading the City has numerous resources for teachers who want to get involved. These include a blog on which teachers document their observations in their own and others’ classrooms. In one post a participating teacher wrote: “Being part of a network of teachers gives me some of the strength I need to keep doing the demanding and complex work of educating our children.”

Strategically, Teachers Leading the City takes advantage of professional development opportunities available in the school system to empower teachers through cross-classroom investigations. Laura explained:

[All] we know about all other schools is what we read in the paper. How can teachers really say “this is what we need” or “this is what we want to do” if we are just stuck in our one classroom and we have no idea what is going on in the rest of the district?

Against the grain of public accounts of the problems of urban schools and a heightened politic of holding teachers accountable to test-based evaluation (Clayton, 2015), Laura and her colleagues worked to reclaim and revise discourses of “teacher leadership” and valuable teaching. Teachers Leading the City has inspired a growing community of educators to develop “new ways to theorize practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37), as well as new forms of social action.
Investigating What Counts as Good Teaching with Students: “Is there room for student voice in teacher evaluation?”

Teachers Leading the City suggests how inquiry can be a catalyst for teacher activism, for rethinking institutional norms, and countering public discourse related to teacher quality, professionalism, and accountability. This project is driven by the principle that good teaching cannot be measured merely by students’ test performances. Mirroring her attempts to facilitate inquiries into teaching and leadership among colleagues, in her own classroom Laura has invited students to inquire with her into what counts as good teaching from their perspectives. This has involved creating alternatives to top-down appraisals of her teaching by engaging students in the practice of teacher evaluation. Laura described the impetus for developing this line of inquiry:

My principal told us he’s not allowed to give us the best scores on everything. The District said, “Don’t give everyone all 4’s!” I always get good [evaluations], but I would like to know if I’m a good teacher. . . . [The premise of this inquiry is] that everyone has a say in what’s going on except for the kids. So what I’ve tried to do is combine my National Boards tapping with letting the kids evaluate the class. Not necessarily on what they learned that day, but on how they learned it. . . . I’m trying to adapt the [district] evaluation form to make it a little more suitable for 9th graders. Then I’m going to reflect on my lesson and write about it like I would do for National Boards, compare it with my students’ [perspectives], and see what they think. So that’s my question: Is there room for student voice in teacher evaluation? And if so, what could it look like?

In one of our conversations, Laura questioned the legitimacy of her principal’s evaluation of her teaching. She stated that her principal gave teachers “the exact same comments, like he’s just photocopying them.” She went on to ask: “Why are we doing this charade?” Laura refused to become jaded by administrative assessment of her teaching that she regarded as farcical. She returned to the concern that inspired her inquiry: “I would like to know if I’m a good teacher.”

Laura was motivated to work for her National Board Certification, which she received in 2013, by a desire “to have other teachers look at what I’m doing, and read about what I’m doing [to help me improve] . . . and evaluate my own teaching.” By inviting students into this inquiry as well as peers, Laura challenged the assumption that measuring what counts as “highly qualified teachers” can come only through externally derived standards (Campano, 2007; Clayton, 2015; Nieto, 2003).

In a conference proposal Laura coauthored with other teacher researchers for the National Writing Project in 2012, Laura described her
frustration with how “educational reform is shaping teacher evaluation,” in particular the fact that “students are excluded from the conversation about teacher effectiveness.” Laura’s research was prompted by the following questions:

How do students perceive effective teaching? What happens when students reflect on how they were taught, not just what they learned? How can listening to student feedback make me a more reflective and effective educator?

Laura’s research project involved teaching her ninth-grade students to become close observers of teaching. She introduced students to the evaluation instrument currently used by her district, based on Danielson (2007), which included 25 standards divided into four domains: planning and preparation; classroom environment; instruction; and professionalism. Laura invited students to rank the 10 standards that were most important to them. Interestingly, students did not choose standards related to professionalism or other district-level concerns such as teachers’ use of technology. As Laura reported in her research paper, students’ choices of standards “all related to the relationship between teachers and students . . . [with] a heavy emphasis on a teacher’s ability to connect with students and tailor lessons based on personal knowledge and understanding of students.” Laura noted that while administrative evaluations tended to focus on individual lessons, students were more concerned with a teacher’s ability to connect with them over time.

In addition to introducing standards, Laura taught students terminology to describe common teaching practices:

It’s kind of funny right now because I’m prepping them for it. And when we are working and doing things in class, I’ll be like, “And now we are going to do direct instruction!” I’m trying to teach them those terms. . . . You know, that it’s not just group work and notes. They know that different things have different names.

Laura’s inclusion of ninth graders in the teacher evaluation process represented her confidence in their abilities and insights and her belief that good teaching necessitates learning from students. While this by no means eliminates power imbalances in her classroom, by soliciting evaluations from her ninth grade class, Laura granted students a degree of authority over the direction of her practice. As she stated, “I think they have a right to
say what they think teachers should be doing.” Laura has since introduced this evaluation practice to other classes. Inviting adolescents into a teacher education discourse has forced Laura to make her teaching, in her words, more “transparent” to her students, and allowed her to reposition them as co-inquirers. In the process, Laura reimagined accountability for good teaching as a local and collaborative endeavor.

Linking Local Inquiry to Broader Reform: “[Having] these important conversations while still being able to do the real work of the classroom”

In a conversation in 2012, Laura described the importance communities of inquiry have had for her over time:

I would say that the best years I’ve ever had teaching were when there was someone else in my building that I could sit down and talk to about what I was doing. For me that was my very first year teaching [in 2006, when I was involved with the Ethno Group] and then this last year teaching [when we started Teachers Leading the City]. I think there is definitely something to that: Collaboration and being able to talk to other people is definitely really powerful to help you teach.

Laura’s experiences in her teacher education program and the Ethno Group formed a basis for an inquiry stance she has grown over time. While she regarded her work in the Ethno Group as meaningful, in reflecting on her participation in the inquiry community, she stated that at times she felt “in a bit over my head”:

When I think about the conversations I’m having now compared to when I was in the inquiry group, I always felt so over my head because I was brand new. Like I didn’t really know anything. I didn’t know if what I was saying was right or wrong or if it had already been said. So it is nice to be in groups now where I have the experience, and have done things and know things that I feel more confident about what I’m talking about.

Laura was one of the younger members of the Ethno Group, which may in part explain why she may have felt overwhelmed by what she described as “the big ideas and questions” that others shared. In spite of attempts to develop more horizontal approaches to collaboration (Campano et al., 2010; Freire, 1970/2005), tensions like these are conditions of intergenerational inquiry communities. As Achinstein (2002) notes, the sense of solidarity developed in inquiry communities like the Ethno Group is often marked by micropolitics that can produce “constructive controversy” (p. 448). This
prompts individuals to “begin to doubt the adequacy of their own perspectives and seek to understand each other more” (Achinstein, 2002, p. 448). Self-doubt and uncertainty are in some sense a condition of critical inquiry, but they can be destabilizing. Laura’s comments may suggest how her growing assurance goes hand in hand with her increasing comfort with uncertainty and increasing confidence as a teacher. This provided a foundation for creating new inquiries.

Although Laura regarded her early experiences participating in communities as shaped to some degree by uncertainty, inquiries in teacher education and her participation in the Ethno Group have helped her to feel more confident in developing her own inquiry-based initiatives:

I do think our inquiry group is a reason why I started to get so involved again. After our attempt to improve the culture at [our school] failed, I realized how much I missed some of those theoretical discussions we used to have. I’m starting to get an itch to leave the classroom, mostly because I feel limited and powerless in the greater educational world of events. Participating in these groups helps me have these important conversations while still being able to do the real work in the classroom.

In conversations, written reflections, and email exchanges, Laura repeatedly noted that feelings of isolation and powerlessness were the most frustrating factors in her practice. Echoing the findings of Nieto (2003) and others, Laura underscored that participation in inquiry communities has helped keep her grounded, connected, and in the classroom, yet she wondered about the broader impact of this work:

I know what I’m doing is important and I know that it has value, but I also kind of wonder: Who will care? Like [Teachers Leading the City]. I know for me going and visiting will be valuable. I know actually even the process of starting this group will be valuable. We are figuring how to get incorporated. . . . I can learn from that. But I also wonder: Is this teacher leadership? We are going to go cross-visit each other. What is that doing? How is that improving [our schools]? How does that make a teacher a leader?

Laura viewed inquiry as a means for educators to initiate grassroots forms of leadership, and in the process develop counternarratives to accountability discourses and measures that debase the intellectual capacities of teachers, for instance, by metonymically reducing their effectiveness to aggregated test scores. In the words of one teacher from Laura’s district:
“You are what your lowest score is.” In spite of her belief in the positive benefit of these collaborations for herself, for colleagues, and for students, Laura questioned the impact of this work on school reform, and remained committed to the larger goal of mobilizing initiatives like Teachers Leading the City to manifest widespread educational change.

Implications: Communities of Inquiry and English Teacher Education

For Laura, teaching in the current “demoralizing climate in education in which both teachers and their students are positioned in disparaging ways” (Nieto, 2003, p. 396) demanded pursuing inquiry as a means of humanizing what she described as the “real work of the classroom.” As the above examples demonstrate, communities of inquiry have provided a means for Laura to address her limitations as an educator, in her words, linking “the real work of the classroom” to a broader “educational world of events.” Reading across the examples of Laura’s collaborations with colleagues and students over time, her efforts suggest several ways that critical inquiry can be mobilized by teachers as a means of working within and against embattled and underfunded urban school systems in a climate of heightened accountability.

A Mechanism for Cultivating Criticality

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) used the metaphor of stance to capture how inquiry involves an ongoing orientation to questioning all aspects of teaching. Laura’s questions expanded and deepened from her initial definition of inquiry in our first class together, an iterative process of “asking questions, and following where those questions may lead you.” As she explored questions related to the needs and interests of diverse adolescents, created new alternatives to top-down evaluation models and more horizontal approaches to teaching, Laura cultivated her own criticality and fueled her desire to work for change at all levels.

Drawing on Gramsci (1971), Campano et al. (2013) argue for what they describe as organic forms of critical literacy pedagogy, which emanate from local communities and often from subaltern legacies. Communities of inquiry can support preservice and inservice teachers to assume more organic critical dispositions instead of interpellating (Althusser, 1971) new teachers into prefabricated roles within school systems in acquiescence or accommodation to external mandates (Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002).

As Laura’s efforts highlight, critical inquiry can be a means of making power more visible, prompting teachers to interrogate outside discourses, promote critical resistance to institutional demands, and regard learning to teach as
a process that occurs across a professional lifespan. In this respect, inquiry can be viewed as a means of collective humanization (Campano, 2009), a process of mobilizing what Mohanty (2002) has called “common differences” (p. 324) in co-labor with colleagues and with students who possess their own emergent critical frameworks.

A Basis for More Democratic Classroom Relationships

When educators begin from the premise that students, particularly those most marginalized in urban schools, need to be “fixed,” invariably curriculum becomes a means of erasing the linguistic and cultural resources adolescents bring to classrooms with them (Christensen, 2009). Laura recognized that those furthest removed from positions of power in schools are well situated to understand and manifest educational change. Throughout her inquiries are moving examples of how she created opportunities to learn from adolescents’ concerns and critical perspectives and attempted to address power differentials with them, with the goal of creating more democratic arrangements in her classroom. The relationship Laura formed with her tenth-grade student Will around his interest in Emmett Till and the space she created for students to write collectively in response to school violence demonstrate how inquiry can form a basis for co-constructing curriculum with students. Similarly, Laura’s attempts to investigate and reimagine teacher evaluation with her ninth-grade students suggests how inquiry can involve realigning hierarchical relationships and accountability structures in classrooms.

A Starting Point for Critical Solidarity

Laura’s desire to find commonalities and shared goals with others is a thread that runs consistently throughout her work, from collaborations with colleagues in the Ethno Group that helped her to keep going in the midst of rising violence in her school, through her work with colleagues to counteract demoralizing evaluation practices through Teachers Leading the City. Communities of inquiry can help educators to partner with others to address and even embrace feelings of “disequilibrium and conflict” (Anderson & Saavedra, 1995) they may encounter in the classroom. This is especially valuable for early-year teachers, for whom aspects of professional practice often feel disjointed or fragmented (Britzman, 1999). In this sense, inquiry may be a means of encouraging individuals to address educational problems collectively rather than in isolation. Laura’s work reveals how inquiry both deepens and depends on forms of critical solidarity with colleagues.
A Vehicle for Changing School Culture

Laura’s inquiries demonstrate a sustained commitment to working for change within and beyond her local context—from reimagining teacher evaluation practices by inviting students to participate in the process to her involvement in broader networks as a means of countering mechanisms that produce isolation and delimit institutional transformation. Laura’s attempts to change school culture were not always successful, but she responded to failure with renewed commitment to challenge the status quo within and beyond her school walls.

That the crucible for this critical work was in Laura’s formative experiences as a teacher candidate and in her participation in the Ethno Group suggests the importance of inquiry as ballast for new teachers. Hollins (2011) has noted that new teachers require support for participation in professional communities, which demand self-direction as well as a desire “to work collaboratively with colleagues to improve learning outcomes for students” (p. 405). Communities of inquiry can encourage new teachers to constructively disrupt (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) norms and practices in schools with the goal of improving the learning and life chances of all students.

A Means of Relocating Accountability Locally

In reflecting on researching narratives of the immigrant and migrant children he taught, Campano (2007) asked: “Are the only versions of accountability worth considering those that have fallen from the policy sky? Might teachers and students, through their relationships with one another, create their own versions of accountability?” (p.45). Communities of inquiry can be a basis for cultivating more relational forms of accountability, informed by what research has suggested are more meaningful forms of valuation. These efforts should recognize the crucial link between teacher collaboration and student learning (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2011).

I have learned and continue to learn from the experiences of teachers like Laura. Most of Laura’s colleagues in the Ethno Group are still in the classroom, and many of them have developed innovative and activist initiatives in their schools and communities. As a part of my own inquiry stance as a teacher educator, and in the spirit of Laura’s efforts, the opportunity to revisit Laura’s work with her has raised questions for further inquiry. In a time in which states are incentivized to tie teacher evaluation to student test scores (Clayton, 2013), how might communities of inquiry be a catalyst for reimagining core values in education? What role might critical inquiry play in developing more pluralistic visions of curriculum and more local forms of accountability? As literacy teacher educators, what kinds of experiences
can we provide preservice teachers to sustain them in working within and against inequitable systems? How might university- and school-based educators partner together to transform institutional structures and hierarchies and nurture opportunities for diverse students to thrive socially and academically? Going forward, supported by a vision of mutuality, coimplication (Mohanty, 2002), and critical solidarity, alliances such as those discussed here may be a key means of inspiring the far-reaching impact that Laura and her colleagues hope to actualize.

Notes
1. The names of all individuals and organizations are pseudonyms.
2. Throughout this article, I use the name Ethno Group to refer to our inquiry community.
3. Quotations in subheadings are from Laura.

Acknowledgments
My thanks to Susan L. Lytle and Gerald Campano for their thoughtful feedback on drafts of this article; to sj Miller, Tara Star Johnson, and reviewers for their detailed suggestions throughout the revision process; and to Laura for her willingness to share her work. I am also grateful to Will Edwards, for his assistance with analyzing and presenting early findings from this research for a seminar titled Revisiting Learning Lives: Longitudinal Perspectives on Literacy Research, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References


Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 119–161). New York: Macmillan.


**Rob Simon** is an associate professor of multiliteracies in education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Drawing on insights from practitioner research, critical pedagogy, and New Literacy Studies, Rob’s current research involves youth and teacher candidates co-researching and coauthoring critical literacy curriculum. In 2015, Rob received the Early Researcher Award from the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation in support of a project titled Addressing Injustices: Teachers and Adolescents Coauthoring Social Justice-Oriented Literacy Curriculum. Rob has been a member of NCTE since 2003. He can be reached at rob.simon@utoronto.ca.