

Commentary

Becoming an Educational Researcher: Exploring the Earliest Experiences

by Lisa Brown Buchanan (buchananl@uncw.edu)

Abstract: *Beginning educational researchers can become overwhelmed with the magnitude of the coursework and field experiences related to the research process. This paper explores one novice researcher's earliest experiences with navigating graduate research methods coursework, designing research studies, entering the field for data collection, and writing manuscripts. Finally, the author discusses lessons learned from the process and provides suggestions for new scholars embarking on the journey from doctoral student to educational researcher.*

Introduction

When I began the journey into teacher education as a graduate student, I had no idea how interwoven educational research was across teacher education. I entered my program of study knowing that I wanted to teach and mentor pre-service teachers, yet I had no idea of the role that understanding and conducting educational research would play in becoming a teacher educator. To be blunt, I did not see the larger, multilayered framework for teacher education where research intersected theory and classroom practice. Beginning educational researchers, often participants in a doctoral program of study, frequently encounter the process of becoming an educational researcher with apprehensions or difficulties that are then compounded by their emerging knowledge about teaching and learning (Labaree, 2003). Although this is a common dilemma among new educational researchers, little is known about how they navigate the process. As a reflective practitioner (Loughran, 2002), I understand that by thoughtfully considering my research practice to this point, I am able to build on both what I have struggled with and my emerging strengths and use each to impact my future research.

This is the story of my own becoming as an educational researcher. In narrative form, I identify and describe the earliest experiences and most significant lessons I encountered - experiences and lessons that as a doctoral student I often wondered if others around me were experiencing. Therefore, I hope to speak to and encourage other emerging scholars who, like me, have felt at times overwhelmed and uncertain in this unfamiliar and complex nexus where coursework methodology and practical application collide. This has become an ongoing process of peeling back the layers of educational research through methodology courses that joined teacher education theory, deliberate classroom experiences, and meaningful encounters in research methods with implementing research, and, ultimately, learning about myself through the process.

Meaningful methodology courses: A foundation for understanding educational research

At the heart of every research study, the researcher's knowledge assertions (what constitutes knowledge and how we know that, what we value, and how we will study problems and phenomena) influence each component of the research (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, the researcher is an integral element in each aspect of the research process and affects the credibility and dependability of the study (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Across my

research methods courses, I was repeatedly encouraged to examine my own knowledge and assertions and consider how these very personal attributes influence the questions I explored, the designs I generated, the ways in which I collected data and interacted with participants, and the ways in which I communicated the findings in writing. I discovered that my research interests and questions were generally qualitative in nature and that I held constructivist and interpretivist knowledge assertions that meaning is socially constructed and the learner and knowledge cannot be separated.

In my experience, the process of becoming an educational researcher began with well thought out and rigorous research methods courses. Across my research methods courses, I was afforded different experiences with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods methodology, contributing to what I believe became a comprehensive understanding and meaningful application of educational research. Each course approached studying and writing about educational research with a different but deliberate method. For example, in my general qualitative methods course, I learned about the various qualitative research methodologies, multiple data collection methods, and analysis procedures. I then applied this new knowledge in my first research project in which I created and conducted a qualitative case study. All of these opportunities took place in one course. In my statistics courses, I learned the foundational statistics skills needed to conduct quantitative educational research as well as the value of quantitative research. In my mixed methods research course, the overall focus was on mixed methods research study design and understanding the role of credibility in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. The writing focus here was on developing a mixed methods research proposal together with a timeline for implementing it. Certainly, it was all intensive and overwhelming, but as I began to design and conduct research, I could see the different facets of educational research that I had read and heard about come to life.

Throughout my methodology coursework, I was assigned practical readings that I could return to as I entered the research process. In my first semester, a survey of teacher education and research, two particular tasks challenged me to expand my ideas and beliefs about research. Throughout the course, I completed five critical analyses of manuscripts both in progress and published, and then I completed the first of five literature reviews in my program. Developing critical analyses and literature reviews of current educational research within my early coursework later contributed to creating and completing initial research projects and the manuscripts that would follow. As early as my first semester, I was pushed to think about the importance and impact of quality educational research, as well as what I believed was sound, credible research and why. Through this recurrent process, I was confronted with the reality that, as the researcher, I must acknowledge my own perspectives, attitudes, notions, and aversions while framing the problem to be studied (Glesne, 2006).

I can do this: Conducting research in education

My journey into conducting educational research was neither unusually successful nor difficult, yet it provided critical and defining experiences along the way. For me, the entire process of developing a research study, entering the field, and analyzing the data was motivational. I was energized by the 'aha' moment when I realized that what I had learned in my courses would soon culminate in my first research projects. In the subsequent section, I provide a narrative of the first encounters I had with conducting educational research.

Looking at the literature and reality: What will I study?

Deciding what to study is a considerable feat. In my earliest research projects, I began by looking at the literature base for the broader subject to be examined, and then narrowed my focus by what had not yet been studied, and identifying who the audience was (Creswell,

2003). I was challenged by this because, as a doctoral student, I was just beginning to learn how to locate and read noteworthy research. For me, locating and then investigating a gap in the current literature felt like I was looking for a needle in a haystack. I think part of this can be attributed to learning how to locate what I was looking for as well as thinking about the boundaries of my own research opportunities. I was a full-time student and a part-time teaching assistant. I did not have large chunks of weekdays to go into schools and study teachers and students or a budget that funded other researchers transcribing data. So there were temporal and financial boundaries. It was critical here to identify and accept the limitations to the study, which then allowed me to develop a realistic proposal for studying the problem within my circumstances (Creswell, 2003). I also believe that these boundaries are not specific to inexperienced educational researchers. Instead, these limitations are experienced by most teacher educators who struggle to find the time and financial resources to explore teaching and teacher education in the ways that they desire.

As I embarked on my first research studies, I encountered the same problem. Everything initially interested me, and most issues and content in teacher education still do. With the mindset that I would change the world, I wanted to study it all. This was not only poor research design, but also the pitfall of many beginning researchers. Glesne (2006) cautions novice researchers, "You must figure out which issues, uncertainties, dilemmas, or paradoxes intrigue you" (p. 22). The notion that we can and should study everything is a common misconception among beginning researchers. Creswell (2003) suggests engaging a more focused study, urging novice researchers to "Consider how the study might address a topic that has yet to be examined, extend the discussion by incorporating new elements, or replicate (or repeat) a study in new situations or with new participants" (p. 29).

With the help of critical and proactive advisors, I found that I could not study everything! When I began to design my first independent research project, my qualitative research teacher asked, "What do you want to know and does that match the study you are designing?" This important question helped me to better define what I wanted to know. At this place, I had to thoughtfully consider what I wanted to know, what I had the time and resources to study, and how these two factors could work in tandem to develop my first independent research investigation. I began this process by creating a researcher memo. The following excerpt reveals my thinking at the onset of the study:

I want to know more about how and why discussion is used in the elementary classroom. This means that I need to study teachers, and if I want to know about elementary teaching as a whole, I need to study several teachers across the grades. But I need to access them. Who can I gain access to? What types of data do I need to collect?

Additionally, as Glesne (2006) recommends, narrowing my study focus to a one-sentence description helped to streamline my first study. Subsequent researcher memos also helped me to flesh this out until I crafted a single sentence that represented what I wanted to know and how my research design would facilitate this new understanding.

Developing a research topic required me to immerse myself into contemporary scholarship and then whittling away at the larger problem or issue until I arrived at research questions that I would be able to explore. When I began the literature review, I did not limit myself to educational journals, but instead expanded my search to include other disciplines and even a broader topic than what I hoped to study (Glesne, 2006). This choice yielded a richer collection of literature that would help me to develop an initial research design and research questions. By casting a wide net with my search, I found that many issues I had interest in had already been exhausted in the literature. Here, I began to really understand the purpose of the literature review and appreciate that the literature review begins in the proposal stage

but does not end there. Instead, as the research process continues, the review of related literature continues to build and the design and research questions continue to develop (Glesne, 2006).

Similar to my first independent study, my next research experiences helped to shape how I narrowed research topics and design studies. In my second research experience, I worked with my committee chair to develop a case study in secondary education. Working from the current literature, we developed research questions that would contribute to the current literature while also addressing the gap in the literature base. Likewise, my third study, which was also an independent research experience, examined pre-service teachers' ideas about teaching with Socratic dialogues. It was an extension of my first study of discussion and contributed to the small amount of related work in teacher education literature. Each of these three studies, while unique in design, were embedded within the current scholarship and allowed me to extend what I had already learned in the first study and improve my initial data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing skills.

Writing Research Questions: What do you want to know?

Writing research questions really challenged me to vocalize what I wanted to know. Somehow, in my earliest research experiences, I felt like the research questions that I wrote initially should remain the same. For me, understanding that research questions can and should change as the study unfolds was a mental blockage. I did not really realize how questions could change and unfold until I was collecting study data for the first time. As my first study progressed, I encountered problems with my research questions. I found that the participants were not sharing the stories that I had imagined they would. Instead, their interviews revealed a very different reality and the study went in a different direction.

There, in this unexpected place, I began to see that early research questions can morph into very different questions as a study progresses. For example, in the collective case study of how discussion is used in the elementary classroom, my initial research questions began to change as the data collection ensued. As I was embedded in classroom observations and teacher interviews, I discovered a trend of teachers talking about the benefits of discussion for teaching and learning, but this was contrasted with their vocal concerns about the barriers of teaching with discussion - such as time and assessment demands. This prompted me to reconsider and revise my initial research questions and the upcoming focus group questions to further investigate the benefits and barriers of classroom discussion across the elementary grades. My experience resonates with Creswell's (2003) idea that researchers should strive to develop research questions that are continually reworked and modified to align with the unique direction that the unfolding study takes. Engaging this process in my own work was the best way for me to understand the shifting nature of research questions and study design. In looking back, I realize that each of my first three research projects developed into very different experiences than I had initially designed. Through these early experiences, I learned that qualitative research design and implementation cannot and should not be rigid and fixed, but instead be flexible and practical. I recognized that learning to be flexible in my research agendas was preparation for locating and acquiring participants.

Finding participants: Who can I study?

In my first study, I experienced the unique process of locating and securing study participants. This study began not long after I left the elementary classroom to become a full time doctoral student and to fulfil a teaching assistantship at the university. I knew that for my first study I wanted to examine in-service elementary teachers, but I had no idea how to identify participants and classroom access. I was still quite new to the whole realm of educational research, but I already felt strongly about minimizing coercion and facilitating

researcher-friendly responses. I went to the only teachers that I felt would talk candidly with me about their experiences: teachers that I knew. However, I was realistic about the possibility that studying a location and participants that I knew would constrain the data collection (Glesne, 2006) and likely create bias. In my design and data collection, I addressed this threat to the credibility of the study and worked to better understand how I, the researcher, continually influenced the study.

My second independent research study focused on understanding elementary pre-service teachers' ideas and beliefs about using the Socratic dialogue to discuss course content. Here, I studied my own students - a very convenient sample of participants. However, studying my own students threatened the credibility of the overall research design and implementation. Because of the themes of coercion and researcher-friendly responses, I worked to identify and address the threats to credibility in each of my first two research projects. These experiences required me to weigh the benefits and limitations of conducting research with participants with whom I had a prior or developing relationship. I found that all participant interactions are subject to coercion and researcher-friendly responses, but with careful and thoughtful actions, I could design and implement sound research with participants that I already knew.

Fieldwork: Experiencing data collection firsthand

What began as deskwork quickly shifted to fieldwork as I ventured into the classroom to collect data. This presented a new opportunity to enter the classroom in a different role - moving from classroom teacher to teacher researcher. On the first day of data collection for my first three research projects, I was a total mess. By now, I was comfortable in each of these settings: the elementary classroom, the high school classroom, and the university classroom. However, the idea of accurately recording the classroom as it unfolded was intimidating. We explored participant observations in my methods courses and even worked in groups to observe a research setting and then compare our field notes, but this was the real thing. I was so nervous about the transition from teaching the class to observing the class as a researcher. Although I felt that my elementary and university teaching experiences would only enhance my role as a researcher, engaging this transition certainly challenged my ideas of the process.

Data collection provides the unique opportunity for the researcher to consider data in new ways. One of my most treasured research methods professors stressed to us, "Make the familiar strange and the strange familiar." In the data collection process, I intended to do just that. What a tough challenge it was. To make the strange familiar meant that I had to look at instruction and interactions in a different way than before. This was an ideal concept to attempt during my first data collection experience, where I entered the most familiar place - the elementary classroom. As a former elementary classroom teacher, I was surrounded by the familiar. But now, I was in a different, strange new role as the researcher. I was in fact studying who I used to be! I was now seated in a treasured place with a new purpose. This initial experience with making the familiar strange impelled me to look at student and teacher interactions through a lens that I had not used before. Furthermore, in the teacher interviews, where I had somehow switched places with the classroom teacher, I found my familiar to be strikingly different. Now, this native place was strange to me. Later, when I began to code and analyze the data, I found that this process of engaging the strange and blurring the familiar actually facilitated data that would prove to be some of the most important portions of the study's findings. This was possible only because I allowed the familiar to become strange. This was more difficult than I had anticipated. I was attempting to observe and understand the interactions of students that I did not know, and hear the real challenges of teachers as an outsider, not a colleague. I felt almost invasive in the process. However, this provided the opportunity for me to consider aspects of my study that I may not have

recognized if I had not approached the process through a different lens. The process of zooming in and then widening the lens back out drew my attention to aspects of teaching and teacher education that I had not carefully considered before.

The most challenging aspect of data collection was trying to take in everything that was happening during an observation or interview. Before then, I had not grasped the speed, accuracy, and discipline required for participant observations. Interviews and focus groups yielded a similar burden of representation, requiring me as the researcher to actively listen to participants' responses and allow their responses to guide the direction of the data collection. My earliest experiences with data collection revealed the difficulties of time management that would challenge me as a beginning researcher. I did not know how to manage the time that was required to go into the field, build relationships and gain access, then collect various forms of data over time, analyze the data, and then develop a manuscript. Learning how to work this new commitment into my existing responsibilities was a demanding part of the ongoing process. After data collection ended, I began to transcribe the recorded data. For me, transcribing was unbelievably time-consuming. I did not anticipate the amount of time that would be required to collect the data and transcribe it. Overall, the time commitment required for data collection and transcribing for each research study was much longer than I had expected when embarking on each project. Again, understanding how to meet these responsibilities together with other responsibilities in my coursework and teaching was very challenging.

Although collecting and transcribing data for the first time was intimidating, it was at the same time invigorating. Entering the field allowed me to begin hearing participants' stories and watch their experiences unfold. What is more, I had a meaningful application for what I was learning in my teacher education courses, particularly the methods courses. This application of new knowledge prompted me to utilize a system for me as the researcher to record my own thoughts and reactions to the process, particularly when I was immersed in the data collection. Researcher memos provided a method to record these important pieces of the projects while also creating a reflective account of the study that I could later return to and use to understand the process I had experienced.

Researcher memos: Finding me in all of this

I began writing researcher memos during my qualitative methods course, and found them to be useful and purposeful. They became a place to archive my questions and reactions to the process. I used researcher memos to flesh out difficult parts of a study design, to record my rants and frustrations, and to document my insight about the direction that a study was taking. I continued to write memos through each of my first projects and into my larger dissertation study. Maxwell (2005) urged researchers to write memos throughout the entire research process. He suggested that the researcher

Write memos as a way of working on a problem you encounter in making sense of your topic, setting, study, or data. Write memos whenever you have an idea that you want to develop further, or simply to record the idea for later development. Write lots of memos throughout the course of your research project. Remember that in qualitative research, design is something that goes on during the entire study, not just at the beginning. Think of memos as a kind of decentralized field journal (p. 12-13).

Like Maxwell (2005), I appreciate the flexibility of memos, which can follow a structured, checklist format (following a course meeting) or an unstructured narrative format (documenting reactions to a day in the field collecting data). Memos became a tool for better understanding the research process from beginning to end. They have facilitated my overall

understanding of designing and implementing research; most importantly, they have increased my knowledge of myself as a researcher. Today, I still write researcher memos throughout the design, implementation, and writing phases of research projects.

Coding data: Getting Messy

The most exciting aspect of becoming an educational researcher was handling data that was my own rather than sample data used in a course. When I coded data for the first time, I found that it was more engaging than I had anticipated. This surprised me and truly energized me, encouraging me to keep pushing through this new but revealing process to identify the findings of the project at hand. It was personal and meaningful, and applied what I was learning in my methodology courses. I strongly believe that looking at someone else's data is a practical introduction to the different methods of coding and even analyzing study data, but working with your own data is much more meaningful. I did not realize it would be like this until I began the process.

The most difficult phase of data coding and analysis during my first study was developing broader themes from many different initial codes or domains. Therefore, to aid with this step in both constant comparative analysis and domain analysis, I created a matrix for each domain or code in my second independent study. This helped me to visually organize the findings and draw out the overarching themes. The gradual practice of sorting, resorting, classifying, and reclassifying study data in order to gain an understanding of what is really happening in the context while reducing massive amounts into findings and implications was and continues to be the most time consuming and demanding phase of the research process (Glesne, 2006). In my earliest research experiences, I created initial codes using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or domain analysis (Spradley, 1980). Constant comparative method involves locating the broader categories and specific themes that are continually present across the different forms of data collection. Domain analysis entails drawing a series of domains from the multiple sets of data and then placing specific themes from the data into one or more appropriate domains. Table 1 illustrates one section of my domain analysis from the discussion study.

Table 1. Sample Domain Analysis of Responses

Domain	Function or Relationship
Teacher Belief	<p>It is essential to develop children as thinkers</p> <p>Successful discussions come from relevant topics</p> <p>I would like to have more frequent discussions</p> <p>Discussion can be used to teach academic content</p>
Role of the Teacher	<p>Pushes critical thinking</p> <p>Embrace multiple perspectives</p> <p>Models discussion skills</p> <p>Provides guided practice in discussion skills</p> <p>To provide specific feedback during discussions</p>
Discussion skill or strategy	<p>Open questions</p> <p>Class meetings</p> <p>Structured peer talk</p> <p>Use text to elicit discussion</p> <p>Use visuals to elicit discussion</p>

I most enjoyed the initial coding. In the first study of discussion in the elementary classroom, I found it somewhat challenging to organize the coding. Therefore, I thought about this project

as I began the data analysis in the Socratic dialogue study, and approached it in a more organized, deliberate way. Before engaging the data collection, I was more thoughtful in my research question development and as I analyzed the data, I purposefully linked each broad theme back to the study's research questions. Table 2 illustrates the relationship between the larger themes and the research questions.

Table 2. Crosswalk of Research Questions and Larger Themes

Research Questions	Impact on Student Behaviours	Students' Beliefs about Participation	Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses	Impact on Student Learning
How can Socratic dialogues be implemented in elementary social studies methods?		X	X	X
What are the strengths and challenges of using Socratic dialogue in elementary teacher education?	X	X	X	X
What is the impact of Socratic dialogues on elementary pre-service teachers' learning?	X	X		X

Although neither experience with coding was seamless, I was able to consider what I learned from the first experience and use it to improve my coding and data analysis in the second case study.

Data analysis was a complex experience. I felt like I was hearing the participants retell their stories or re-teach class periods, but now I had the time to stop and think about the data and re-read it, instead of being lost in the craze of recording an observation or listening intently during an interview. Data analysis allowed me to pore over the data again. Interestingly, I found that there was so much more spoken than I remembered during the interviews, focus groups, and observations. I first realized this when I created transcripts for the recorded conversations. During analysis, I had the opportunity to go back and reread what participants were saying and recognize things that I overlooked during the actual exchanges. For example, when I re-read pieces of data, codes and meanings that I had not previously noticed stood out. Here, I made a conscious decision to illuminate what was not being observed or heard. This process of 'getting at' the things that were less obvious, often contentious, really 'spoke' to me, challenging me to think about the educational researcher that I wanted to become. What is more, I was interacting with the data in a simple but intimate way as I began to write the initial codes alongside of the printed data. I found this to be true for my next two studies as well. Even now, the initial coding process remains my favourite part of the research process.

Crafting a manuscript

When the manuscript state emerged, I began to agonize over whether I could articulate the research that accurately represented the project. For each of my earliest research projects, I organized the study data in a binder. I can vividly remember finishing the coding and analysis for my first study, and realizing that the pages and pages of data and memos would then be consolidated into a 20-30 page manuscript. I had not really thought about this before, this process of packaging a large amount of ideas and interactions into a neat parcel, the manuscript, for others to eventually glean new knowledge from. I began organizing the manuscript in the traditional journal article structure, but eventually, I had to just write. I found over time that drafting my manuscript and then handwriting my revisions and entering those

was the most efficient use of time and mental energy. Much like the initial coding process, working on manuscript revisions seemed to be more effective when I worked with a paper copy. This simple insight came through my early experiences with doing research.

Attempting manuscripts was a long but beneficial procedure, and it was here that I realized my own writing leaned heavily towards narrative storytelling. I was enthusiastic about using direct quotations from the participants to describe the themes I was writing about. I felt compelled to create a rich and accurate account of what I studied in each project. Like Glesne (2006) and Maxwell (2005), I believe that using a storytelling approach with embedded phrases and direct quotes from the participants contributes to a more precise description of their experiences. Learning to write about educational research was and still is a continual progression. I can remember sending my advisor a revised draft of my second solo manuscript. During the process, I began to think, when am I ever going to get good at this? Without reservation, I asked him his advice for writing better manuscripts. He shared three invaluable suggestions: the more you write, the better you get; the more you read good research, the better writer you will become; and finally, it takes time. Several projects and manuscripts later, I still hold tightly to this advice.

Throughout my earliest experiences with becoming an educational researcher, I was fortunate to receive critical and detailed feedback on study designs and manuscripts from my advisors and even peers. At times, I provided feedback to colleagues and co-authored with colleagues. When the opportunity presented itself, I volunteered to review conference proposals and journal articles. This helped me to see the work of others in a different way and continue the critical analysis of manuscripts that I began in my first doctoral course. Although I struggled through the process, one thing was certain; I never stopped reading and writing!

It's a Personal Process: Becoming an Educational Researcher

Woven through my early experiences in educational research were lessons I learned about myself. These lessons are critical for understanding how I think, what motivates me, and how to improve my practice. For example, my most current was situated within a class that I taught. The process of studying my own teaching impacts my teaching in this new semester. The research experiences have stayed with me and influenced how I understand myself as a researcher and as a teacher. Because of these significant lessons in my early experiences, I believe I can acquire more from the overall research process as I develop and conduct inquiries and write throughout the process.

To begin, I learned more about how I think. I found that I am qualitative-minded. I think in words and stories and I am energized by the traits of qualitative research. The nature of qualitative research and the data collection methods corresponded with my own beliefs about the functions of research, methods of participant input, and the nature of research. For example, I found out that what participants had to say was so much more important than I ever realized. This became evident when I began to work with open ended, language laden personal responses. I began to realize that there was the opportunity for multiple layers of meaning in every response, engagement with participants, interview, or open-ended survey. This is evident in the questions I ask in my research, questions that are best answered by listening to others think aloud and sharing their stories. It is manifest in the data collection methods that I use, where participants 'quilt' their responses to my questions and flexible researcher protocols. I discovered what I attended to taught me about myself and the ways in which I think also taught me about myself. What I did not realize or give attention to also taught me about myself. I also learned that for me, the focus of research is not about finding data that supports what I think is true, but about posing questions and listening to what the participants believe to be true for them. I began to understand that it is not about confirming

my assumptions or highlighting the 'right' answers but instead the process is about the participants' perspectives and answers, and honouring what they share. All of these early lessons have directly impacted the research that I develop and the stories that I write. What a powerful series of lessons!

As I continued through my first research projects, I realized that I am most interested in engaging a cyclical relationship between my classroom practice and my research experiences. This relationship between my teaching and research challenges me to continually improve my teaching and informs my future research efforts. For me, the process of engaging research that improves my teaching is deeply personal and if I am aware and reflective, the opportunity emerges for me to continually question and push the margins of my current classroom practice while examining ways in which I can design and implement better educational research. I see my earliest experiences in educational research as not only a contribution to teacher education and the larger domain of educational research, but also an impetus for continually developing as a teacher educator and educational researcher. Furthermore, I believe that for the process to transform my own teaching practice, I had to identify and explore educational issues that were important to me. Although each of the first three projects I took part in had very different purposes and questions, each was embedded in teacher education and practice.

In addition to informing my work in teaching, these early experiences revealed areas of my research practice and researcher identity. For example, I realized at the close of the third project that I was disappointed that I had not begun each of the three projects with a more critical eye for how to improve my own teaching practice. Even though I strive to be a reflective practitioner and each of the research projects was embedded in teacher education and classroom practice, I was not as reflective as I could have been about how this can affect and improve my own classroom teaching. I could have been more aware of the interconnectedness of the research design, questions, and data collection, and the study's impact on my own teaching and future research. Furthermore, my awareness of myself as a researcher expanded during these early experiences. I learned to constantly ask myself, "Where am I situated as the researcher throughout the process?" This awareness not only supported the development of the research but also enabled me as the researcher to convey to others the significance of the educational problems that matter to me. I found that what motivated me in teaching and teacher education became the larger themes of what I would study. Today, this is still true for me.

Across the three earliest research experiences, the research manuscript writing process also revealed aspects of my researcher identity. Before beginning this journey, I felt that I was a skilled writer, but I had not engaged in the form of writing that I encountered in my first research manuscripts in any prior work. As I began to develop as an educational researcher, I found that I read, write, and revise manuscripts better during certain periods of time during the day. At other times of the day I am much less successful with this type of writing tasks. As I spent more time in the manuscript writing process, I recognized that for my time spent writing and revising to be successful, I had to literally schedule these blocks of time like appointments, and keep to those times in order to stay on the research timeline that was already created for each project. When I came to a stopping point each day, I would prepare my work for the next writing session. This enabled me to begin where I left off while bringing closure to the day's tasks. Having weekly checklists of the smaller tasks helped to organize the specific day-to-day tasks that would contribute to the larger project timeline. Moreover, I believe that creating the project timeline at onset of the study was integral to guiding study components like the manuscript and the overall implementation and completion of each of these early research experiences. Crafting the manuscript required that I demonstrate the self-discipline to keep reading and writing even when I felt like abandoning the manuscript. I attempted to collect data, write memos, or write and revise the manuscript each day during

each of the independent research studies and each week during the shared study. Although there were some occasions when this was not feasible, I attempted to engage with the current project in some way daily throughout each of the three research studies.

The most significant understanding that I gained through my initial experiences as an educational researcher was that the research process joined educational theory and classroom practice. I believe that the entire process of becoming an educational researcher is a successful experience when classroom tasks unite with the field. Graduate students should experiment with data collection methods and design research studies in their research methodology courses, and then implement the projects during their programs of study. Together with meaningful field experiences, novice researchers should seek frequent and constructive feedback from advisors and peers about the written manuscripts. Once the manuscript has been submitted for review, feedback from reviewers will also help to develop the new educational researcher as a scholarly writer. I suggest that new educational researchers should seek critical feedback from peers and faculty advisors, and volunteer to review manuscripts for journals and proposals for conferences in their areas of interest.

Conclusion

As beginning researchers we must be open to critical conversations with others about our scholarship. Advisors, peers, and reviewers may see glaring flaws that we do not see ourselves. Such conversations can provide a different lens for recognizing things that are overlooked or avoided in the research and writing process, as well as the experience of evaluating a broader continuum of colleagues and content. Some may say that this is a matter of growing a tough skin. I believe it is central to developing as a teacher educator and educational researcher. These powerful experiences also challenged me to begin thinking about my own future work with graduate students as a teacher and advisor, as I strive to provide for them what my professors and advisors gifted me with - the encouragement, critique, and challenge that I needed through honest, critical feedback and tough questions.

Becoming an educational researcher is a complex and continual process. Learning how to design, conduct, and report research can be more than acquiring new skills. It can transform the way that new researchers understand their function as teachers, researchers, and writers. My earliest experiences with peeling back the multiple layers of the process revealed the interwoven nature of educational theory, sound research, and classroom practice. These experiences continue to impact the questions that I develop and the research designs that follow. They are, in fact, quilted into the fabric of me as a teacher, a researcher, and a writer. As my experiences with educational research expand, I continue to develop further insight into my development as a teacher, researcher, and writer.

References

Creswell, J. W. (2003) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Glaser, B., and Strauss, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Glesne, C. (2006) *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, Pearson, Allyn, & Bacon.

Labaree, D. F. (2003) The peculiar problems of preparing educational researchers. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 13–22.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Loughran, J.(2002) Effective Reflective Practice: In Search of Meaning in Learning about Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 33-43.

Maxwell, J. A. (2005) *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Spradley, J. P. (1980) *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Reinhart, & Winston.