Research on Teaching and Teacher Research: The Issues That Divide

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Neither interpretive nor process-product classroom research has foregrounded the teacher's role in the generation of knowledge about teaching. What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching, therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices. Limiting the official knowledge base for teaching to what academics have chosen to study and write about has contributed to a number of problems, including discontinuity between what is taught in universities and what is taught in classrooms, teachers' ambivalence about the claims of academic research, and a general lack of information about classroom life from a truly emic perspective. This article proposes that teacher research has the potential to provide this perspective; however, several critical issues divide teacher research from research on teaching and make it difficult for the university-based community to acknowledge its potential. The article also proposes that in order to encourage teacher research, the educational community will need to address incentives for teachers, the creation and maintenance of supportive networks, the reform of organizational patterns in schools, and the hierarchical power relationships that characterize much of schooling.

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Although there has been considerable emphasis in current educational research on developing a systematic and rigorous body of knowledge about teaching, little attention has been given to the roles teachers might play in generating a knowledge base. That few teachers participate in codifying what we know about teaching, identifying research agendas, and creating new knowledge presents a problem. Those who have daily access, extensive expertise, and a clear stake in improving classroom practice have no formal way to make their knowledge of classroom teaching and learning part of the literature on teaching.

In the first part of this article we argue that efforts to construct and codify a knowledge base for teaching have relied primarily on university-based research and ignored the significant contributions that teacher knowledge can make to both the academic research community and the community of school-based teachers. As a consequence, those most directly responsible for the education of children have been disenfranchised. We propose that teacher research, which we define as systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers, makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning. In the second part of this article we identify a number of critical issues that divide research on teaching from teacher research and thus make it extremely difficult for the academic community to recognize the contribution that teacher research can make. Finally, we assess the value of teacher research for the school and university communities, claiming that a broader context for research on teaching requires the systemic reform of school structures.

In this article we hope to contribute to the dialogue recently begun among practitioners and researchers, to explore audiences for teacher research in the academy and in schools, and to argue for the potential of teacher research to help in the reform of schooling. We do not pretend or presume to speak for the school-based teachers whose activities as teacher-researchers are the focus of this paper. Rather we address this topic from our own perspectives as university-based teachers, teacher educators, and researchers.

Theoretical and Research Frameworks

Research on Teaching

Two paradigms have dominated research on teaching over the last 2 decades (Shulman, 1986a). The first, which has been characterized as process-product research, accounts for the majority of studies. For more than 15 years, researchers have been exploring effective teaching by correlating particular processes, or teacher behaviors, with particular products, usually defined as student achievement as measured by standardized tests. (See, for example, Brophy & Good, 1986; Denham & Lieberman, 1980; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974.) Underlying this research is a view of teaching as a primarily linear activity wherein teacher behaviors are considered "causes," and student learning is regarded as "effects." This approach emphasizes the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviors reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next. Research of this kind has been associated with the view of teacher-as-technician (Apple, 1986), wherein the teacher's primary role is to implement the research findings of others concerning instruction, curriculum, and assessment. With this view, the primary knowledge source for

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the improvement of practice is research on classroom phenomena that can be observed. This research has a perspective that is "outside-in"; in other words, it has been conducted almost exclusively by university-based researchers who are outside of the day-to-day practices of schooling.

The second paradigm includes a diverse group of qualitative or interpretive studies that Shulman (1986) refers to as studies of "classroom ecology." This family of inquiries draws from anthropology, sociology, and linguistics, and from the traditions of qualitative, interpretive research. (See, for example, recent syntheses by Cazden, 1986; Erickson, 1986; Everton & Green, 1986.) Research from these perspectives presumes that teaching is a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity in which differences across classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important. Interpretive research provides detailed, descriptive accounts of customary school and classroom events that shed light on their meanings for the participants involved. For example, many interpretive studies explore the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students through extensive interviews, and some studies are conducted cooperatively by classroom teachers and university-based researchers (Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976; Erickson, 1989; Perl & Wilson, 1986; Yonemura, 1986). Although a small number of research reports are coauthored by university-based researchers and school-based teachers (Edelsky & Smith, 1984; Heath & Branscombe, 1985; Smith & Geoffrey, 1968), most are published singly by university researchers and are intended for academic audiences. Cooperative research provides valuable insights into the interrelationships of theory and practice, but like more traditional interpretive research, often constructs and predetermines teachers' roles in the research process, thereby framing and mediating teachers' perspectives through researchers' perspectives.

We propose that current research on teaching within both process-product and interpretive paradigms, constrains, and at times even makes invisible, teachers' roles in the generation of knowledge about teaching and learning in classrooms. The contents of the Handbook of Research on Teaching (Wittrock, 1986), widely viewed as the most comprehensive synthesis of research in the field, is indicative of this exclusion. Described on the dust jacket as "the definitive guide to what we know about teaching, teaching, and the learning process," the 1037-page handbook contains 35 research reviews. Although a few of these include studies carried out by university researchers in cooperation with teachers, and several focus explicitly on teachers' thinking, knowledge, and the cultures of teaching (e.g., the syntheses by Clark & Peterson, 1986, and by Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), none are written by school-based teachers nor, as far as we can determine, are published accounts of teachers' work cited. Rather, in most of the studies included, teachers are the objects of researchers' investigations and then ultimately are expected to be the consumers and implementors of their findings. Missing from the handbook are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions that teachers ask, and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices.

Teacher Research
We take here as a working definition for teacher research systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers. This definition is based in part on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (as cited in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985), who defines research in general as "systematic, self-critical enquiry," and in part on an ongoing survey of the literature of teacher writing. This literature includes journal articles written by teachers, in-house collections of teachers' work in progress, monographs about teachers' classroom experiences, as well as published and unpublished teachers' journals and essays. With this definition we wish to emphasize that there already exists a wide array of writing initiated by teachers that is appropriately regarded as research. By systematic we refer primarily to ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside of classrooms, and making some kind of written record. By intentional we signal that teacher research is an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous. And by inquiry we suggest that teacher research stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers' desires to make sense of their experiences—to adopt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life. We have proposed four categories as a working typology of teacher research: teachers' journals, brief and book-length essays, oral inquiry processes, and classroom studies. Teacher research in these four categories begins to make accessible some of the knowledge and interpretive frames of teachers that are missing from the literature. (See Lytle & Cochran-Smith, in press, for a detailed discussion of the working typology and an analysis of the contribution of teacher research in these categories to the university-based and school-based educational communities.)

The term teacher research has been used as a kind of umbrella to describe a wide range of activities, which many trace to the "action research" notion of the 1950s and 1960s. Characterized by Lewin (1948) as "comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" (pp. 202–203), action research presented an implicit critique of the usefulness of basic research for social change. Corey (1953), one of the first to use action research in education, emphasized that its major value was increasing the individual teacher's effectiveness with subsequent classes in similar situations over time rather than extending generalizations across educational contexts. Schaefer (1967), on the other hand, asserted that schools could be organized as centers of inquiry, actively producing knowledge in the field of education. In the 1960s and early 1970s, action research by teachers was typically carried out in collaboration with consultants, partly in response to critique that action research was not scientifically valid. Many of the action research initiatives have aimed both to improve school and classroom practice and to contribute to knowledge about teaching and research itself (Elliott, 1985; Oja & Smulian, 1989, Tikunoff, Ward & Griffin, 1979).

One of the most influential interpretations of action research is found in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and his colleagues, who established the Center for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia in 1970. The goal of the center was to "demystify and democratize research, which was seen as failing to contribute effectively to the growth of professional understanding and to the improvement of professional practice" (Stenhouse as cited in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985, p. 1). Stenhouse, and later his
colleagues (e.g., Elliott & McDonald, 1975; Nixon, 1981; Rudduck & Hopkins; and others) encouraged teachers to become intimately involved in the research process. They believed that through their own research, teachers could strengthen their judgment and improve their classroom practices. Stenhouse's argument was radical: He claimed that research was the route to teacher emancipation, and that "researchers [should] justify themselves to practitioners, not practitioners to researchers" (Stenhouse as cited in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985, p. 19). (For more extensive discussions of the historical roots of action research, see Kyle & Hovda, 1987; and Oja & Smulyan, 1989).

Like action research, the work of Patricia Carini and her teacher colleagues at the Prospect Center and School in Bennington, Vermont, is related to the current concept of teacher research. For almost 2 decades, the Prospect Group has developed a number of processes for documenting children's learning in school contexts; for helping teachers uncover and clarify their implicit assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling; and for solving a variety of school-based educational problems. (See, for example, Carini, 1975, 1979, 1986.) Carini's work is unique; it not only provides formats for teacher research and collaboration, but also, through the Prospect Archives of children's work and records of teacher's deliberations, serves as a living resource for the study of children's development over time. The work of the Prospect School group has influenced many teachers to document and reflect on their classroom practices. Similarly, the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, guided by Vito Perrone and many teachers, has long provided a forum for collaborative teacher inquiry into their own and children's work. (See, for example, North Dakota Study Group monographs on children's thinking and language, teacher support systems, in-service training, and the school's relationship to the larger community.)

While the terms teacher research and action research are relatively new, their underlying conceptions of teaching and the roles of teachers certainly are not. Early in the century Dewey (1904) criticized the nature of educational development, pointing out that it tended to proceed reactively by jumping uncritically from one new technique to the next. He argued that the only remedy for this situation was teachers who had learned to be "adequately moved by their own ideas and intelligence" (p. 16). Dewey emphasized the importance of teachers' reflecting on their practices and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning. He urged educators to be both consumers and producers of knowledge about teaching, both teachers and students of classroom life. Dewey's notion of teachers as students of learning prefigures the concept of teachers as reflective practitioners more recently developed in the work of Schön and others. Unlike those who characterize teaching as the acquisition of technical skills, Schön (1983, 1987) depicts professional practice as an intellectual process of posing and exploring problems identified by teachers themselves.

Some teacher-researchers model their classroom and school-based inquiries on more traditional university-based social science research. Myers (1985) has been influential in arguing for the adaptation of basic and applied social science research paradigms to teacher research. He suggests that the norms of generalizability, tests of significance, and optimizing controls of problems apply to teacher research, but need to be defined differently by classroom teachers. Myers calls for teacher researchers to be well grounded in problem definition, research design, and quantitative data analysis, and suggests that they begin by replicating the studies of university-based researchers. In contrast to Myers (1985), Mohr and MacLean (1987) and Bissex and Bullock (1987) argue that teacher research is essentially a new genre not necessarily bound by the constraints of traditional research paradigms; they urge teachers to identify their own questions, document their observations, analyze and interpret data in light of their current theories, and share their results primarily with other teachers. Berthoff (1987) puts little emphasis on data gathering and, instead, asserts that teachers already have all the information they need and should re-examine, or in her word "RE-search" their own experiences.

Each of these sets of recommendations for teacher research contains an image of what the genre might look like—an approximation of university-based research, a more grassroots phenomenon that has its own internal standards of logic, consistency, and clarity, or a reflective or reflexive process that is for the benefit of the individual. Each of these images, although quite different, also implicitly compares teacher research to university-based research on teaching. In the section that follows we argue that several critical issues underlying these comparisons account for the exclusion of teacher research from research on teaching.

The Issues That Divide

We argue in this section that comparison of teacher research with university-based research involves a complicated set of assumptions and relationships that act as barriers to enhancing our knowledge based about teaching. Researchers in the academy equate "knowledge about teaching" with the high-status information attained through the traditional modes of inquiry. They fault teachers for not reading or not implementing the findings of such research, even though teachers often find it irrelevant and counterintuitive. Yet teacher research, which by definition has special potential to address issues that teachers themselves identify as significant, does not have a legitimate place. If simply compared with university research, it can easily be found wanting. Regarding teacher research as a mere imitation of university research is not useful and ultimately condescending. It is more useful to consider teacher research as its own genre, not entirely different from other types of systematic inquiry into teaching, yet with some quite distinctive features. But it is also important to recognize the value of teacher research for both the school-based teaching community and the university-based research community.

To compare teacher research and research on teaching, we explore two major issues in educational research: (a) institutionalization, including content and ownership as well as supportive structures and (b) standards for methodological rigor, including research questions, generalizability, theoretical frameworks, and documentation and analysis. Exploring teacher research along these lines points out some of the salient features of this genre, suggests questions raised by the comparison of university-based research and teacher research, and identifies conflicting conceptions of the nature and purposes of teacher research.
Institutionalization

Ownership and content. Although some teacher-researchers are university teachers who reflect on their own teaching at the university level (Duckworth, 1987; Freeman, 1989; Kutz, 1989; Rorschach & Whitney, 1986), most of those engaged in teacher research are K–12 classroom teachers or student teachers who have participated in some institute, in-service training, or graduate program based at a university where they have been exposed to particular ideas about teaching and learning. They do teacher research as dissertations, graduate coursework projects, as part of their work as cooperating teachers or student teachers, or as ongoing work in teacher collaborative projects. Some teacher-researchers work on collaborative research projects with university-based researchers or teacher educators (Buchanan & Schultz, 1989; Edelsky & Boyd, 1989; Lytle & Fecho, 1989); others form research partnerships with their teacher colleagues (Boston Women’s Teachers Group, 1983; The Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, 1984) or with their own students (Cochran-Smith, Garfield, & Greenberger, 1989; Goswami & Shultz, in press).

Encouraged by the widespread activities of the National Writing Project, the Breadloaf School of English, and the work of influential researchers/practitioners such as Donald Graves (1983) and Lucy Calkins (1986), the focus of much of the K–12 teacher research of the last decade has been writing—children’s development as writers (Avery, 1987), classroom environments that support students’ progress (Atwell, 1987), classroom and schoolwide strategies for writing assessment (Making Room for Growth, 1989), teachers’ own writing and classroom inquiry processes (Fruitkoff, 1989), and the generation of theory through sustained reflection on classroom practice (Johnson, 1989). Other teacher researchers have focused on classroom teaching and learning more broadly by looking, for example, at the interrelationships of children’s oral and written language development (Strieb, 1985), the complexities of a single class or a teacher’s experience over time (Harris, 1989), the corpus of a single child’s artistic or written work (Buchanan, 1988), children’s growing and changing conceptions of the world and how these are expressed in their stories, play, and drama (Paley, 1981), and thematic analyses of teachers’ curriculum theory and design (Wiggington, 1985). Many of these address the interactive relationships of students’ language, literacy, and learning (Ashton-Warner, 1963), whereas others focus on the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge (Tierney, 1981), and a few center on more general issues of school organization, policy, and multicultural education (Palonsky, 1986).

Supportive structures. Recently, a number of organizations have begun to focus their efforts on teacher research. For example, both the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) have begun to sponsor national efforts to support and sanction teacher research through direct funding. These two funding efforts represent different approaches to supporting teacher research.

The guidelines for OERI’s funds require that teachers must be the principal investigators and that proposed projects must address issues important to local school improvement; specified topics are broad, including teachers’ roles and functions, instructional processes and materials, subject matter teaching, assessment, professional development, alternative patterns of school management and organization, and ways for schools to find, understand, and use research and practice-based knowledge. This represents a significant federal effort to institutionalize teacher research in planning and decision making at school and district levels. Funding efforts like OERI’s seem very promising, but in order for these initiatives to make a difference, those in positions of power in school districts would need to believe in and act on the following assumptions: (a) that the questions teachers ask about theory and practice ought to be the starting points for classroom inquiry; (b) that teachers can and should play a central role in the creation of new knowledge about teaching and learning; (c) that the benefits of this new knowledge would outweigh the problems inherent in altering standard school routines and practices; and (d) that power in decision making can and ought to be distributed among teachers, specialists, and administrators across the school system.

In contrast, NCTE provides funds for individual teacher-researchers who are asked to identify a study based on concerns directly relevant to their own work. NCTE’s guidelines for would-be teacher-researchers specify that funds may not be used for teacher release time, travel, or other organizational changes or staffing arrangements. Furthermore, to support their proposals, teacher-researchers are asked to include evaluations by three knowledgeable reviewers who may or may not include school-based personnel. Unlike OERI’s efforts, which require school-level commitment and the creation of systemic structures that support changing roles for teachers, the NCTE program emphasizes the professional development of teachers inside their own classrooms. However, the structures of NCTE as an organization, as well as those of the Breadloaf School of English and the National and local sites of the National Writing Project, function as infrastructures that make it possible for teachers to present their work at conferences and publish their writing.

There are no simple ways to create systemic supports for teacher research that, on one hand, encourage teacher autonomy and initiative, but, on the other hand, recognize that teacher research occurs within the context of broad-based efforts of school improvement. Unlike the academic research community, which is organized to provide formal and informal structures to support research on teaching, the community of teacher researchers is disparate, and there are few structures that support their work. Variations in the efforts of OERI, NCTE and other organizations reflect the complexity of the problem.

Standards for Methodological Rigor

Research questions. It may appear to be self-evident that the research questions in teacher research emanate from the day-to-day experiences of teachers themselves, but this is not a trivial issue. In traditional university-based classroom research, researchers’ questions reflect careful study of the theoretical and empirical literature and, sometimes, negotiation with the teachers in whose classrooms the researchers collect data. Teachers’ questions, on the other hand, often emerge from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs: Initially these questions may be the result of
a concern about a student’s progress, a classroom routine that is floundering, conflict or tension among students, or as a desire to try out some new approach. This questioning process is highly reflexive, immediate, and referenced to particular children and classroom contexts: What happens when my “high-risk” second graders shift from a basal reading program to a whole language curriculum? How will I know when my students are on the way to thinking like mathematicians rather than simply learning new routines? How do my digressions from lesson plans contribute to or detract from my goals for the students? How do my students’ theories of teaching and learning shape and become shaped by writing conferences?

There is little disagreement that teachers who engage in self-directed inquiry about their own work in classrooms find the process intellectually satisfying, they testify to the power of their own research to help them understand and transform their teaching practices.

Although these questions are not framed in the language of educational theory, they are indeed about discrepancies between theory and practice. Although they are not always motivated by a need to generalize beyond the immediate case, they may in fact be relevant to a wide variety of contexts. The questions of teacher-researchers are, at once, more general than questions that concentrate on the effectiveness of specific techniques, materials, or instructional methods and more specific than interpretive questions that explore the meanings of customary school and classroom events. Teachers’ questions are not simply elaborated versions of What can I do Monday morning? or What will work in my classroom? Embedded in the questions of teacher-researchers are many other implicit questions about the relationships of concrete particular cases to more general and abstract theories of learning and teaching. For example, when a teacher asks, What will happen if I use journals with my first graders at the beginning of the school year before they have begun to read? she is also asking, more generally, How does children’s reading development relate to their writing development? Does some explicit instruction in letter–sound relationships have to precede children’s expressive uses of those relationships? Do children have knowledge of these relationships before they begin formal reading instruction? If they do, where does this knowledge come from? Will the children collaborate on the journals? What kind of a context should I provide for sharing? Who will they imagine is their audience? What is the relationship between “errors” and growth in writing? For which students will this activity be effective and useful, and for which students will it not be? Why? The unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate solely neither from theory nor from practice, but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two.

**Generalizability.** The criterion of generalizability has been used to discount the value of research prompted by the questions of individual teachers and conducted in single classrooms. As Zumwalt (1982) effectively argues, however, there is a growing realization in the research community that the positivist paradigm that attempts to formulate general laws is probably not the most useful for understanding educational phenomenon. Zumwalt points out that generalizations about teaching and learning are by definition context-free. She quotes Guba’s (1980) assertion that “it is virtually impossible to imagine any human behavior which is not mediated by the context in which it occurs” (in Zumwalt, 1982, p. 235), to make the case that rather than laws about what works generically in classrooms, we need insight into the particulars of how and why something works and for whom, within the contexts of particular classrooms.

A similar argument is made by interpretive researchers who demonstrate that understanding one classroom helps us better to understand all classrooms. Teachers are uniquely situated to conduct such inquiries: They have opportunities to observe learners over long periods of time in a variety of academic and social situations; they often have many years of knowledge about the culture of the community, school and classroom; and they experience the ongoing events of classroom life in relation to their particular roles and responsibilities. This set of lenses sets the perspectives of teachers apart from those of others who look in classrooms. Knoblauch and Brannon (1988) make a related point in their discussion on the phenomenological basis of teacher research. “The story-telling of the teacher-inquirer in a classroom devoted to language practices has its peculiar features and makes a distinctive contribution to our knowledge of school experience.... The telling aims not at selectivity or simplification but at richness of texture and intentional complexity” (p. 24).

Holt (1964) did not use the phrase “teacher research” when he called for teachers to observe more closely their children’s classroom activities and then meet to talk about their observations, but his words are very much in keeping with its spirit: “Once we understand that some of the things we teachers do may be helpful, some merely useless, and some downright harmful, we can begin to ask which is which. But only teachers can ask such questions and use their daily work with students to test their answers. All other kinds of research into ways of improving teaching lead mostly to expensive fads and nonsense” (p. 54). While Holt’s critique probably responds to the experimental research of the 1950s and early 1960s, his point about the unique potentialities of teacher questions and classroom inquiry remains significant.
Theoretical frameworks. Not only is the status of teacher questions at issue, but there is also considerable disagreement about the way in which teacher research is grounded in theory. In a discussion of practical theories of teaching, Sanders and McCutcheon (1986) argue that teaching requires intentional and skillful action within real-world situations. The success of these actions depends on the ability to perceive relevant features of complex, problematic, and changeable situations and to make appropriate choices. The knowledge necessary to perform these professional tasks has been called "theories of action" (Argyris, 1982). Rather than make a distinction between professional knowledge and educational theory, as is usually done, Sanders and McCutcheon make the case that professional knowledge essentially is theoretical knowledge.

This position contrasts with North’s (1987) analysis of practitioners’ knowledge in composition. North calls professional knowledge “lore,” and defines it as “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which practitioners understand how writing is done, learned and taught” (p. 22). Although North seems critical of the fact that practitioner knowledge has been devalued, conceptions like his may contribute to its devaluation by suggesting that the structure of this knowledge is experiential and driven only by pragmatic logic. We wonder how “lore,” which North claims is a “very rich and powerful body of knowledge” can be, as he also points out, totally unselective, self-contradictory, and framed only in practical terms. From North’s perspective, then, teachers’ knowledge would hardly qualify as theory, and indeed in North’s discussion of practical inquiry, his version of teacher research, there is little mention of theory.

Juxtaposing North’s concept of “lore” with the recent work of Shulman (1986b, 1987), which explores the knowledge base for teaching, reveals a major discrepancy among views of teachers’ knowledge and theories. By working intensively with beginning and experienced teachers, Shulman is exploring the wide variety of categories of knowledge that teachers have and use. His work suggests that the base for teaching is complex, encompassing knowledge of content, pedagogy, curriculum, learners and their characteristics, educational contexts, purposes and values and their philosophical and historical grounds (p. 8).

Our own work with teachers leads us to believe that all of Shulman’s categories of knowledge can be seen as leading to theoretical frameworks that teachers not only bring to the identification of their research questions but also utilize in the analysis and interpretation of their findings.

These debates demonstrate that the status and role of theory are central issues in teacher research. Just as our earlier discussion indicated that there are controversies in the academic community about the feasibility of discovering generalizable laws, similar questions are raised about the kinds of theory appropriate to applied fields like education. In these fields, various combinations of facts, values, and assumptions may better capture the state of knowledge than conventional scientific theories (Zumwalt, 1982; House, 1980). It may be that the notion of theory as a combination of perspectives will be particularly compatible with, and productive for, the emerging genre of teacher research. Indeed, how and whether teachers theorize is an empirical question being explored in a variety of interesting ways (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Elbaz, 1983; Munby, 1987; Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Shulman, 1987). Teacher research itself may provide evidence of the unique theoretical frameworks underlying teachers’ questions and decisions and grounded in their classroom practice. If we regard teachers’ theories as sets of interrelated conceptual frameworks grounded in practice, then teacher researchers are both users and generators of theory. If, however, we limit the notion of theory to more traditional university-based definitions, then research by teachers may be seen as atheoretical, and its value for creation of the knowledge base on teaching may be circumscribed.

Documentation and analysis. In many respects the forms of documentation in teacher research resemble the forms used in academic research, particularly the standard forms of interpretive research. Field notes about classroom interactions, interviews with students and teachers, and classroom documents (e.g., students’ writing and drawing, test scores, teachers’ plans and handouts) are commonly collected by teacher researchers. In addition, teacher researchers often keep extensive journals and audiotape or videotape small and large group discussions, peer and teacher-student conferences, students’ debates, role plays, and dramatic productions, as well as their own classroom presentations. Like university-based qualitative research, a strength of teacher research is that it often entails multiple data sources that can be used to confirm and/or illuminate one another.

Questions about the demands of rigorous documentation emerge from both teacher researchers and university researchers. Although many teachers collect some of these data in the course of the normal activity of teaching, as teachers readily point out, the complex and extensive demands on teachers’ time and attention place obvious limitations on what teachers can manage to do. Some university researchers, who equate data collection with training in the traditions of social science research, question whether teachers’ data can be sufficiently systematic and teacher researchers sufficiently well prepared as classroom observers. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, however, many teachers have sophisticated and sensitive observation skills grounded in the context of actual classrooms and schools. In analyzing the patterns and discrepancies that occur, teachers use the interpretive frameworks of practitioners to provide a truly emic view that is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom. (See Lytle & Cochran-Smith, in press, for a detailed analysis of the texts and contexts of teacher research).

Teacher Research: Contributions and Future Directions

Underlying much of the debate about methodological rigor in teacher research is a limited concept of what kinds of research can contribute to our knowledge about teaching. This limited concept is the basis of our critique of The Handbook of Research on Teaching (Wittrock, 1986), whose dust jacket describes the contents as “the definitive guide to what we know about teachers, teaching, and the learning process.” As we have shown, the “we” refers only to the academic community, and privileges its particular ways of knowing, writing, and publishing about teaching. In this arena the academy decides what counts as knowledge according to its own traditions. We have been arguing that
teacher research constitutes another legitimate arena of formal knowledge about teaching. The status and value of teacher research, however, have yet to be determined by school-based teachers, the interpretive community for whom it is primarily intended. Just as academics have evolved a complex set of criteria and standards for judging the quality and contribution of research in the academic community, teachers over time will develop a similarly complex set of standards for evaluating the research generated in and for their community.

Value for the Teaching Community

There is little disagreement that teachers who engage in self-directed inquiry about their own work in classrooms find the process intellectually satisfying; they testify to the power of their own research to help them better understand and ultimately to transform their teaching practices. In Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change, the most widely disseminated collection of conceptual pieces about teacher research as well as studies by teachers, Goswami and Stillman (1987) provide a compelling summary of what happens when teachers conduct research as a regular part of their roles as teachers:

1. Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
2. Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. They step up their use of resources; they form networks; and they become more active professionally.
3. They become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn’t have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders can’t.
4. They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically others’ theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods, and materials.
5. They can study writing and learning and report their findings without spending large sums of money (although they must have support and recognition). Their studies, while probably not definitive, taken together should help us develop and assess writing curricula in ways that are outside the scope of specialists and external evaluators.
6. They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways. The nature of classroom discourse changes when inquiry begins. Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing and has the potential for helping them achieve mature language skills. (preface)

Similar claims about the value of teacher research for the teachers themselves have been made by a number of groups of teacher-researchers and university researchers working together (e.g., Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Mohr & MacLean, 1987; Strickland et al., 1989). When more teachers have opportunities to collaborate across classrooms, schools, and communities and when they develop their own set of evaluative standards, it is likely that they will find avenues for broader dissemination and that the value of their work will increase dramatically.

Value for the Academic Community

We are not suggesting that the audience of teacher research is or ought to be limited to teachers. Just as teachers read and use the research of university-based researchers, many academics committed to teacher education and/or the study of teaching and learning undoubtedly will find the research of teachers a rich and unique sources of knowledge. We can imagine at least four important ways in which the academic community can learn from teacher research. (See Lytle & Cochran-Smith, in press, for a more extensive analysis.) First, teachers’ journals provide rich data about classroom life, which can be used by academics to construct and reconstruct theories of teaching and learning. In this capacity, teachers serve primarily as collectors of data, but their data are unlike other classroom descriptions that have been selected, filtered and composed in the language of researchers. Second, because teacher research emanates from teachers’ own questions and frameworks, it reveals what teachers regard as the seminal issues about learning and the cultures of teaching. Third, as Shulman (1986a) argues, both “scientific knowledge of rules and principles” and “richly described and critically analyzed cases” need to constitute the knowledge base of teaching. Teacher research provides these rich classroom cases. Because cases are often more powerful and memorable influences on decision making than are conventional research findings in the form of rules and generalizations (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Shulman, 1986a), teacher educators can use teachers’ cases to study how practitioners learn from the documented experiences of others. Finally, through their research, teachers can (a) contribute to the critique and revision of existing theories by describing discrepant and paradigmatic cases, and (b) provide data that ground or move toward alternative theories. What teachers bring will alter, and not just add to, what is known about teaching. As the body of teacher research accumulates, it will undoubtedly prompt re-examination of many current assumptions about children, learning, and classroom processes.

Communities for Teacher Research

Participation in teacher research requires considerable effort by innovative and dedicated teachers to remain in their classrooms while carving out opportunities to inquire and reflect on their own practice. Teacher research is unlike university-based research, which occupies an unquestioned position at the center of the institution’s mission. Furthermore, the academic research community is organized to provide formal and informal opportunities for response and critique. On the other hand, teacher research struggles on the margins of K–12 schools, and teacher researchers often work outside school systems. The Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative, which has met weekly in private homes for more than a decade to reflect on classroom practices (Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative, 1984), and the Boston Women’s Teachers’ Group, which studies the effects of teaching on teachers throughout their professional careers (Boston Women’s Teachers’ Group, 1983), are good examples of self-initiated and sustained teacher inquiry groups.
Cautioning against simply adding research to teachers' work loads, Myers (1987) has argued persuasively for the institutionalization of teacher research by making inquiry an integral part of the professional lives of teachers. Recently, a few school districts have moved in this direction by establishing new positions that combine teaching and researching responsibilities, such as lead teachers, teacher-mentors, or peer supervisors. For example, the Pittsburgh public school system has created positions for researchers-in-residence who collect and manage data for the principal and faculty (P. LeMahieu, personal communication, 1988), and in the Philadelphia public schools, teacher-consultants combine classroom teaching with teacher research through a unique cross-visitation program initiated by teachers in the Philadelphia Writing Project (Fecho, 1987; Lytle & Fecho, 1989). These efforts are part of a trend to differentiate teachers' roles in schools and capitalize on teacher expertise. It is unclear at this time what the impact of innovations like these will be. It would be unfortunate, however, if they inadvertently buttressed the traditional association between gaining increased power and responsibility in the school system and abandoning the classroom.

A variety of arrangements have been proposed to enable teachers to do research. These include: reduced loads, release time, paid overtime, and summer seminars or institutes in which teachers write and reflect about their teaching practices (Mohr & MacLean, 1987); collaborative networks, study groups, or research teams; opportunities to visit the classrooms of teachers in other grade levels, subject areas, schools, and school districts; financial support for their research projects; and a number of formal and informal channels for the dissemination of teachers' work. We contend that the most important factor in determining where and how these arrangements work is whether school systems allow teachers to participate on a voluntary basis, in designing and revising these new structures. This new approach will come about if schools and school systems realize that there is a direct connection between supporting the systematic inquiries of teacher-researchers and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

However, in many school systems teachers have not been encouraged to work together on voluntary, self-initiated projects or to speak out with authority about instructional, curricular, and policy issues. When groups of teachers have the opportunity to work together as highly professionalized teacher-researchers, they become increasingly articulate about issues of equity, hierarchy, and autonomy and increasingly critical of the technocratic model that dominates much of school practice. This notion of highly professionalized teachers is consonant with Aronowitz and Giroux's (1985) concept of teachers as "transformative intellectuals" who have the potential to resist what Apple (1986) refers to as "deskilling" mandates and to change their own teaching practices. In a recent collection of case studies by teachers of writing, editors Bissex and Bullock (1987) suggest that "by becoming researchers teachers take control over their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within" (p. xi). In the same vein, they also argue that teacher research is a natural agent of change: "Doing classroom research changes teachers and the teaching profession from the inside out, from the bottom up, through changes in teachers themselves. And therein lies the power" (p. 27).

Although we agree with the direction of these claims, we are concerned about school reform efforts that depend primarily on the efforts of teachers without school restructuring. Because many structural features of school systems constrain bottom-up, inside-out reform, it seems unlikely that school systems traditionally organized to facilitate top-down change will readily acknowledge and build on the potential impact of teacher-initiated reforms. Furthermore, as teachers empower themselves by adopting a more public and authoritative stance on their own practice, they are more likely to create the contexts for their own students to be empowered as active learners. Ironically, and indeed unfortunately, many school systems are slow to realize the potential link between teacher research and enhanced student learning.

If teachers are to carry out the systematic and self-critical inquiry that teacher research entails, networks will need to be established and forums created by teachers so that ongoing collaboration is possible. These networks begin to function as intellectual communities for teachers who, more typically, are isolated from one another. Two examples in which we are involved are PhilWP (The Philadelphia Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project at the University of Pennsylvania) and Project START (Student Teachers as Researching Teachers, a school-university collaborative teacher education program at the University of Pennsylvania). Both of these involve groups of experienced and beginning teachers who meet regularly to read, write, problem-solve, and ask each other a wide range of significant questions about theory and practice. In addition to collaborating with each other, PhilWP teachers are involved in a program designed by project teachers whereby they visit, are visited by, and consult with other teachers not in the project. The cross-visitation program constitutes teacher research in two respects: teachers conduct classroom inquiries across classrooms and schools, and a smaller research group is documenting the evolution of the program as an innovative model of collegial in-service development. This arrangement allows teachers to develop a broad range of perspectives on what goes on in their own classrooms and schools (Fecho, 1987; Lytle and Fecho, 1989). In Project START experienced teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher-educators form teacher-researcher teams to study learning and teaching in single classrooms from their three different perspectives. Part of what preservice teachers learn are the intellectual frames of experienced teachers who in turn examine and develop their own interpretive strategies (Cochran-Smith, 1989a, 1989b). For PhilWP teachers, the school district provides "writing support teachers" who substitute while PhilWP teachers and their teacher partners cross-visit and confer. For Project START, most schools have set aside time in the school day for weekly teacher-researcher group meetings. In both projects, school systems have provided in-school resources to support these unusual collaborative structures.

Teacher research has the potential to play a significant role in the enhanced professionalization of teaching, but it will certainly not be the entire agenda for school reform. As we have shown, there are complex problems involved even in calling for teacher research. As Myers (1985) rightly argues,
“telling teachers they should do teacher research is...an inadequate way to begin” (p. 126). To encourage teacher research, we must first address incentives for teachers, the creation and maintenance of supportive networks, the reform of rigid organizational patterns in schools, and the hierarchical power relationships that characterize most of schooling. Likewise, to resolve the problematic relationship between academic research and teacher research it will be necessary to confront controversial issues of voice, power, ownership, status, and role in the broad educational community. We are not arguing that teacher research ought to occupy a privileged position in relation to research on teaching. Rather we are suggesting that an exploration of the issues the divide research on teaching and teacher research may help raise critical questions about the nature of knowledge for teaching and hence enhance research in both communities.

References


Request for Proposal for a Longitudinal Study of Reading Recovery in Ohio

The Ohio Department of Education would like to determine the long-range benefits of the Reading Recovery program for students who have participated in the program.

Reading Recovery is an intervention program in which high-risk first-grade students are helped to develop the strategies needed to be successful readers. The children work for 30 minutes daily for an average of 12-15 weeks, one-to-one with specially trained teachers. They are discontinued from the program when they can read at an average level of their class.

For a copy of the request for proposal (RFP), please contact Richard Dragin, Ohio Department of Education, (614) 466-8920. Proposals are due no later than April 13, 1990.