Teacher Research as Stance

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This chapter is about teacher research, a genre of practitioner inquiry that has unique potential to challenge common assumptions about knowers, knowing, and knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning that are operating in schools in these acutely conservative times. We take practitioner inquiry as a conceptual and linguistic umbrella for an array of related educational research genres with distinctive features but also an underlying set of common assumptions. In this chapter we focus on one type of practitioner inquiry – teacher research – by exploring its theoretical and epistemological architecture and illustrating its grounding in a fundamentally dialectical relationship or stance. The current policy and political climate raises new questions about the viability of practitioner inquiry at the same time that it brings new meaning to questions that have been considered for some time. Despite the current emphasis on teaching as test preparation and learning as on-demand test performance, however, many educators and reformers still believe that deep changes in practice can only be brought about by those closest to the day-to-day work of teaching and learning. And, in fact, despite all of the forces working against it, teacher research and the larger practitioner inquiry movement are burgeoning in the United States and in many other parts of the world. We conclude by suggesting that teacher research has a distinctive potential for rethinking, resisting, and re-forming the ways we think about, and take action regarding, the arrangements and purposes of schools and schooling.

PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AS UMBRELLA

We take 'practitioner inquiry' as an umbrella for a number of its well-known versions and variants. In using practitioner inquiry as an umbrella, it is not our intention to blur the important ideological, epistemological, and historical differences

that exist between them, but to identify features and assumptions that most versions share (see Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2004).

Versions and Variants of Practitioner Inquiry

Under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry, 'action research,' which is the focus of this handbook, is commonly used to describe collaborations among school-based teachers and other educators, university-based colleagues, and sometimes parents and community activists. Their efforts center on altering curriculum, challenging common school practices, and working for social change by engaging in a continuous process of problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and action. Similar in some ways, but different in others, 'teacher research' refers to the inquiries of K-12 teachers and prospective teachers, often in collaboration with university-based colleagues and other educators. Teacher researchers work in inquiry communities to examine their own assumptions, develop local knowledge by posing questions and gathering data, and – in many versions of teacher research – work for social justice by using inquiry to insure educational opportunity, access, and equity for all students.

The term 'self-study,' is used almost exclusively to refer to inquiries at the higher education level by academics involved in the practice of teacher education, broadly construed. Often drawing on biographical, autobiographical, and narrative forms of data collection and analysis, self-study works from the postmodernist assumption that it is never possible to divorce the 'self' from either the research process or educational practice. Closely related to self-study are 'narrative inquiry' and/or 'autobiographical inquiry,' terms that are generally used to refer to the idea that the narratives produced through systematic reflections by teachers and teacher educators contain knowledge within them. The assumption here is that narratives make the practitioner's knowledge explicit and convey it to others outside the immediate context of the knower.

The term 'the scholarship of teaching' was originally coined by Ernest Boyer (1990), as part of a special report on the priorities of the professoriate. Lee Shulman and colleagues built on this term. They advocate making the scholarship of teaching public, accessible to critique by others, and exchangeable in the professional community (Shulman et al., 1999). Along somewhat similar lines, a form of practitioner inquiry is also sometimes carried out by university-based researchers who take on the role of teacher in a K-12 setting in order to conduct research on the intricate complexities involved in the problems of practice.

Cross-Cutting Aspects of Practitioner Inquiry

Although there are differences in emphasis and intention as well as different historical and epistemological traditions among these various approaches to practitioner inquiry, there are also general aspects that cut across all of them. With every form of practitioner inquiry, the practitioner himself or herself simultaneously

takes on the role of researcher. This duality of roles makes it possible for the classroom teacher, the school principal, the community college instructor, the university faculty member, the adult literacy program tutor, and other stakeholders in given social situations such as parents, community members, and families to participate in the inquiry process as researchers. The common assumption here is that those who work inside particular educational contexts and/or who live inside particular social situations are among those who have significant knowledge and perspectives about the situation. This challenges the idea that knowledge can be generated only by those outside a given social or educational setting and then applied inside classrooms.

Practitioner inquiry across types is built on the assumption that the relationships of knowledge and practice are complex and distinctly non-linear, and that the knowledge needed to improve practice is influenced by the contexts and relations of power that structure the daily work of teaching and learning. A third common feature of the many varieties of practitioner inquiry is that the professional context is the site for inquiry, and the problems and issues that arise from professional practice are taken as the topic or focus of study. Questions emerge from the day-to-day experiences of practice and, often, from discrepancies between what is intended and what actually occurs. The unique feature of the questions that prompt practitioners' inquiry is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two. Thus the boundaries between inquiry and practice blur when the practitioner is a researcher and a knower and when the professional context is a site for the study of problems of practice.

Another important feature shared by many forms of practitioner inquiry is that notions of validity and generalizability are quite different from the traditional criteria of transferability and application of findings (often, the identification of causes and effects) to other populations and contexts. All of the forms of practitioner inquiry referred to above share the features of systematicity and intentionality in terms of documentation, data collection, and analysis, which are also characteristic of many other forms of research. What distinguishes practitioner inquiry from other qualitative research that relies on similar forms of data collection and analysis, however, is that the former includes systematic examination and analysis of students' learning juxtaposed to, and interwoven with, systematic examination of the practitioners' own intentions, reactions, visions, and interpretations. Finally, almost all forms of practitioner inquiry are characterized by their emphasis on making the work public and open to the critique of a larger community.

TEACHER RESEARCH: THEORETICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

For the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of one form of practitioner inquiry – teacher research, which has been the focus of much of our joint work with each other and with teachers,

teacher candidates, and other colleagues for the last 20 years. We suggest that teacher research is a theoretical hybrid in that, although it has been influenced by several major theories and intellectual movements, it is grounded fundamentally in the dialectic of inquiry and practice rather than in one particular theoretical tradition or framework.

Theoretical Traditions and Intellectual Roots

As we have suggested elsewhere (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999), the current North American teacher research movement was influenced by several major theories circulated in the U.S. and the U.K. during roughly the same time period. Influential writings about language, learning and literacy were grounded in the paradigm shift in researching, teaching and assessing writing that evolved in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Berthoff, 1987; Bissex and Bullock, 1987; Goswami and Stillman, 1987; Heath, 1983; Mohr and Maclean, 1987; Myers, 1985; Wells, 1986). At about the same time, writings that shared a grounding in critical and democratic social theory focused on the role of teachers in research conceptualized as a form of social change (e.g., Beyer, 1988; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1985; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 1986; Stenhouse, 1983; Stenhouse in Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985). A third influence on teacher research was the work of a loosely connected group of progressive educators, committed to social responsibility and to the construction of alternative modes of understanding students' learning and teachers' development (e.g., Bussis et al., 1976; Carini, 1979, 1982, 1986; Duckworth, 1987; Goodman, 1985; Perrone, 1989; Strieb, 1985; Traugh et. al., 1986). Finally, and also during the 1980s, a body of writing about teacher research rooted in an ethnographic research tradition and a multi-disciplinary understanding of language, literacy, and pedagogy began to juxtapose the possibilities of teacher research with the hegemony of an exclusively university-generated 'knowledge base' for teaching (e.g., Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1987; Erickson, 1986; Florio-Ruane and Walsh, 1980; Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1989).

Although these intellectual traditions were different in important ways, they were compatible with one another. Each constructed the role of teacher as knower and agent in the classroom and in larger educational contexts. They also had in common a critique of prevailing concepts of the teacher as technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementer of other people's knowledge as well as a critique of many of the prevailing social and political arrangements of schools and schooling. These agendas were shaped by teachers and teacher groups, some initiated and sustained by teachers themselves or by groups working to invent new collaborations and partnerships among teachers and university-based faculty. In this way, the North American teacher research tradition had from the beginning a distinctly grassroots character that has informed and been informed by a number of provocative intellectual approaches to educational change.

Theorizing Teacher Research: Working the Dialectic

Teacher research is informed by the intellectual traditions described above. Over the past 20 years, as university-based scholars and practitioners, we have worked with teachers, teacher candidates and many other school- and program-based practitioners, to explore teacher research as a way to rethink practice, question our own assumptions, and challenge the status quo – not only in schools but also in the university. Over time we came to use the term 'teacher research' as a kind of shorthand for a larger set of premises about: teachers/practitioners as knowers, reciprocal school-university relationships, teaching as both an intellectual and political activity, learning to teach as a process that occurs within inquiry communities and throughout the professional lifespan, schooling as deeply influenced by culture and history, and the need for parallel transformation of universities and schools. Fusing conceptual and empirical research, we have worked to theorize and take seriously the notion of teacher research and its underlying premises and to instantiate and act on those premises in our daily work. We think of these efforts collectively as 'working the dialectic.'

By 'dialectic,' we refer to the reciprocal, recursive, and symbiotic relationships of research and practice, analysis and action, inquiry and experience, theorizing and doing, conceptual and empirical scholarship, and being researchers as well as practitioners. We also mean the dialectic of generating local knowledge of practice while at the same time making that knowledge accessible and usable in other contexts and thus helping to transform it into public knowledge. When we 'work the dialectic,' there are not distinct moments when we are only theorizers or only practitioners. Rather these activities and roles are intentionally blurred. By 'working' we mean capitalizing on, learning from, and mining the dialectic as a particularly rich resource for new knowledge. Clearly this occurs when we study and theorize our practice as university-based faculty members and teacher educators. But in our teaching and program evaluation efforts, we also highlight and learn from the work of those who are engaged in teacher research. We also 'work' the dialectic by collaborating with others to develop the contexts that support the inquiries of student teachers, new and experienced school-based teachers and administrators, university-based fieldwork supervisors and teacher educators, community program-based educators, and many other educational colleagues and collaborators.

For us as university-based faculty members, working the dialectic has been an especially productive way to invent and direct teacher education and professional development initiatives and, at the same time, to theorize and analyze many aspects of those projects. Based on this work, we have theorized teacher research through a series of essays presented and published over a period of 20 years. In each of the theoretical essays we wrote about teacher research, we addressed a particular question or set of questions that had been problematic in our daily work as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. Thus, in a very real sense, the contradictions in our own practice oriented our research just as much as did our reading

of the wider literature related to teacher learning, inquiry, school and social change, and language and literacy. At the same time, the theoretical distinctions we made in our writing provided new lenses on our practice and on our interpretations of the theoretical and empirical literature. These experiences contributed to our growing discontent with the assumption that research by school-based teachers should be expected to follow the epistemological and methodological conventions developed in the university. At the same time, the theoretical frameworks we developed prompted us to formalize and rethink the kinds of inquiry opportunities available in our programs and projects.

Working the dialectic is a decidedly non-linear process – more like improvizing a dance than climbing a set of stairs. As we theorized the relationships of inquiry, knowledge and practice based on critical analysis of others' work as well as systematic inquiry into our own practice, we saw many ways to reinvent practice, which prompted further nuances in our theoretical frameworks and posed new questions to analyze; these, in turn, suggested new interpretive frameworks and strategies. Over the years, working the dialectic changed our work, changed who we are, changed what we do and how we do it. In our location at research universities, it also challenged many of the formal and informal rules universities live by.

Inquiry as Stance: Teacher Research as a Way of Knowing

Below we discuss the notion of 'inquiry as stance,' a term we coined in the mid-1990s to make the point that teacher research is not simply a project or bounded activity that teachers and teacher candidates complete as part of their professional education, but rather a larger epistemological stance, or a way of knowing about teaching, learning and schooling that is neither topic- nor project-dependent. Theorized in this way, the notion of inquiry stance talks back to, and challenges, many of the assumptions that define teaching and research on teaching in the current era of acute educational accountability with its singular emphasis on test scores at the expense of other educational purposes, the resultant narrowing of the school curriculum and reduction of the roles of both teachers and students, and increased surveillance of teachers' day-to-day work.

In everyday language, 'stance' is used to describe body postures, particularly with regard to the position of the feet, as in sports or dance, and also to describe intellectual or political positions. We use the metaphor of stance to suggest both orientational and positional ideas, to carry allusions to the physical placing of the body as well as to intellectual activities and perspectives over time. Inquiry as stance is distinct from the commonly-occurring instantiation of inquiry (or action research or teacher research) as time-bounded project within a teacher education program or one of a number of effective strategies for staff development. Taking an inquiry stance means teachers and student teachers working within communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others. Fundamental to this notion is the idea that the work of inquiry communities is both social and political – that

is, it involves making problematic the current arrangements of schooling, the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used, and teachers' individual and collective roles in bringing about change. In the remainder of this chapter, we outline the dimensions of inquiry as stance as a theoretical construct and point to some of the significant ways it talks back to the operating assumptions of the current educational regime.

Generating Local Knowledge of Practice

In our theorizing of teacher research, we have broken with traditional formal-practical knowledge distinctions (e.g., Fenstermacher, 1994; Richardson, 1994), suggesting instead that teachers' inquiry communities generate knowledge that may be thought of as both local and public (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1998; Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1992). Borrowing Geertz's (1983) term, we use 'local knowledge' to signal both a way of knowing about teaching and what teachers and communities come to know when they build knowledge collaboratively.

In the sense we mean it here, constructing local knowledge is understood as a process of building and critiquing conceptual frameworks that link action and problem-posing to the immediate teaching context as well as to larger and more public social, cultural, and political issues. Implicit in this process are questions that guide practice, broadly construed: Who am I as a teacher? What am I assuming about this child, this group, this community? What sense are my students making of what's going on in the classroom? What are the implicit assumptions of the texts, tests, curriculum standards, and reporting mechanisms in place at my school? How do my efforts as an individual teacher connect to the efforts of the community and to larger agendas for school and social change?

These questions stand in stark contrast to the questions that are assumed to guide the work of effective teachers, from the perspective of the current accountability regime (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2006). The 'Toolkit for Teachers' (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) that accompanies NCLB, for example, states that teachers are faced with three essential questions: How do I know what works? What intervention is best to support a student who lacks certain skills? How do I analyze a program's or intervention's effectiveness? (p. 31) Framed this way, the teacher's task is complicated chiefly by the array of educational interventions that claim to be supported by evidence. According to NCLB and the various policy tools of the current educational regime, good teachers are wise consumers of the reservoir of products for instructional decision-making created by experts in the field and certified by scientifically based research.

Inquiry Communities Across the Life Span

From the perspective of inquiry as stance, beginning and experienced teachers engage in similar intellectual work. Working together in communities, both new and more experienced teachers pose problems, identify discrepancies between

theories and practices, challenge common routines, draw on the work of others for generative frameworks, and attempt to make visible much of that which is taken for granted about teaching and learning. From an inquiry stance, teachers search for significant questions as much as they engage in problem solving. They count on other teachers for alternative viewpoints on their work.

The idea of beginning and experienced teachers working together in inquiry communities talks back to the current emphasis on teacher 'expertise,' which implies certainty and state-of-the-art practice. The expert–novice distinction assumes that the expert is one who implements the formal knowledge base for teaching, which has been generated by experts outside schools, while the novice is one who learns effective practices by imitating the strategies of his or her more competent colleagues. The image of teacher as life-long learner, on the other hand, implies tentativeness and practice that is sensitive to particular and local histories, cultures, and communities. An across-the-life-span perspective on teacher development makes salient the role of communities and their intellectual projects over time and challenges the individual, in-the-head model of teacher development that highlights individual differences among teachers.

From an inquiry stance, teacher leadership and group membership look very different from what they might look like when teachers are 'trained' in workshops or staff development projects. Taking an inquiry stance on leadership means that teachers challenge the purposes and underlying assumptions of educational change efforts rather than simply helping to specify or carry out the most effective methods for predetermined ends, such as raising test scores. When inquiry is a stance on teaching, learning, and schooling, there is an activist aspect to teacher leadership. From this perspective, inquiry communities exist to make consequential changes in the lives of teachers and, as importantly, in the lives of students and in the social and intellectual climate of schools and schooling.

Critical Frameworks for Change

In teaching, the term practice has typically been used to refer to doing, acting, carrying out, and/or performing the work of the profession. From the perspective of inquiry as stance, however, teaching and teacher development are centrally about forming and re-forming frameworks for understanding practice: how students and their teachers construct the curriculum, co-mingling their experiences, cultural and linguistic resources, and interpretive frameworks; how teachers' actions are infused with multi-layered understandings of learners, culture, social issues, institutions, and materials; and, how teachers develop questions and interpretive frameworks informed by the immediate situation and multiple larger contexts.

The concept of inquiry as stance is intended to capture the nature and extent to which those who teach and learn from teaching by engaging in inquiry interpret and theorize what they are doing. More generative than regarding practice as primarily practical is the idea of 'teaching as praxis,' which emphasizes that teaching involves a dialectical relationship between critical theorizing and action

(Britzman, 1991; Freire, 1970). The key idea here is that teachers theorize all the time, negotiating between their classrooms and school life as they struggle to make their daily work connect to larger movements for equity and social change.

When inquiry is a stance on teaching, it is assumed that teacher development is inextricably linked to larger questions about the consequences and ends of education. This assumption clearly talks back to and challenges current initiatives to boost students' achievement through teachers' wholesale participation in mandated professional development based on scientifically researched or scripted curriculum and instruction. These do not substitute for grassroots change efforts, regardless of their labels. In fact, when teachers work from an inquiry stance, they often challenge fundamental practices such as tracking, teacher assignment, promotion and retention policies, testing and assessment, textbook selection, school-community-family relationships, administrator roles, personnel decisions, school safety, not to mention to raise questions about what counts as teaching and learning in classrooms. They critique and seek to alter cultures of collegiality, ways that school or program structures promote or undermine collaboration, ratios of teacher autonomy to teacher responsibility, norms of teacher evaluation, relationships among student teachers, teachers, and their university colleagues, and the ways power is exercised in teacher-to-teacher, mentor-to-teacher, and school-university partnerships.

The idea of teacher research as stance on practice is something of a paradox in these times. In very real ways, it is completely out of sync with the current emphasis on high stakes accountability and with narrow forms of evidence-based practice. At the same time, however, it offers a compelling framework for enacting change that is grounded in the everyday politics of practice. The multiple traditions that have informed teacher research have lent a kind of intellectual richness to the effort and have fostered ever-widening participation in this kind of practitioner-driven work. No matter what the policy frameworks (generally both impositional and potentially generative) in place in a particular school or district, teachers' questions arising from the daily dilemmas of practice can drive inquiries that reveal critical dimensions of what it means to be teaching and learning in these times. When teachers make the current arrangements of schooling problematic and use daily practice as critical sites of inquiry, they not only mirror the kind of curriculum that many agree is necessary for learning in this complex, global environment, but they position themselves as lifelong learners, people who interrogate and enact inventive pedagogies that address the real learning needs of particular students and that evolve over time. It is this kind of activism as teachers – who rethink, resist, and re-frame the problems of education – that marks the most engaged and productive school cultures.

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