Teachers as researchers: A professional necessity?

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Traditionally, teachers are seen as consumers rather than producers of research. Researchers produce knowledge, and teachers consume it by applying it in their schools and classrooms. In this traditional model of the researcher-practitioner relationship, those who produce research and those who use it are two different categories of people, doing very different jobs.

Once a strong separation is established between researchers and practitioners, then a problem is posed about how the gulf between the worlds of practitioner and researcher can be bridged (Robinson, 1993). Very quickly, difference becomes polarity and opposition. On some occasions, practitioners experience researchers as arrogant, ready to criticise and recommend change, without appreciating the complexity of the contexts they are investigating (Hammersley, 2000). Conversely, researchers can experience practitioners as defensive and unresponsive, with a limited understanding of the intellectual and practical challenges involved in doing worthwhile school and classroom-based research.

The oppositional discourse of practitioners versus researchers is unfortunate, because it emphasises difference and separation, rather than similarity and overlap. It is also unwarranted, because many of the dispositions, skills and understandings required of good research and researchers are the same as those required of good practice and practitioners.

Instead of thinking of practitioners and researchers as different categories of person, we should think about them as different roles. This allows us to see the overlap between the two roles, and the possibilities for their integration.

In this article I want to explore the possibilities of the practitioner/researcher overlap. This overlap is illustrated by the following scenario:

A deputy principal is concerned at the low reading scores of the children in the junior school. Her teachers have told her for years that when the children come to school, they are not ready to begin learning to read, because they lack the necessary pre-reading and social skills. As a consequence, the first six weeks after school entry is spent teaching these skills.

It would be easier for the deputy principal to accept the views of her staff than to challenge them. Good practice requires, however, that the deputy principal:

1. Recognise that the beliefs of her teachers constitute a “theory of practice” which like any theory, might be wrong (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985).
2. Identify the particular set of assumptions that comprise these teachers’ theory of how to organise their reading programme.
3. Craft ways of checking and testing the teachers’ theories.
4. Challenge her teachers to join her in this checking and testing process.

We see from this example that theories are not confined to the academy. They also include the implicit, yet powerful, assumptions that determine how teachers teach. Since theories of practice have powerful consequences for students, there is a professional and ethical responsibility to investigate their adequacy (Hall, 2001). If the deputy principal challenged her teachers in the manner suggested in Table 1, she would be engaging in good practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ claims</th>
<th>Possible inquiry into the claims</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The junior school children have low reading scores</td>
<td>What evidence is this conclusion based on? How good is that evidence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cause of the low reading scores is lack of pre-reading and social skills on school entry</td>
<td>What evidence is there for this claim? Has the school assessed these pre-reading and social skills? What other explanations have been considered?</td>
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To engage in "good practice", in the sense in which I use the term, is very different from what is meant when teachers are described as using "best practice". Good practice requires the ability to interrupt automatic classroom and institutional routines in order to inquire, in a sufficiently rigorous way, into the adequacy of their assumptions about the nature of students' needs and how to meet them. Teachers are said to engage in "best practice", on the other hand, when they are using a teaching approach that has a reputation for being "best". The reputation may be founded on well-designed and conducted evaluations, or it may reflect no more than the popularity of the approach.

This example illustrates the considerable overlap between the dispositions and skills required for good research and good practice. Both require attitudes of openness, intellectual curiosity, and a willingness to step outside a frame of reference to see things in new ways. Most important of all is the ability to recognise that all research and all practice proceeds from a particular frame of reference. Changing the frame, or what Argyris and Schon (1974) call double-loop learning, may be required to resolve problems, dissolve dilemmas, or achieve valued purposes in either practical or research contexts.

Why is strengthening the research role of practitioners important? There are at least three reasons. The first is the ethical and professional obligation of teachers. The decisions they make about how and what to teach have profound and material consequences for the lives of children. There is an obligation upon teachers, and the institutions that support them, to review the consequences of those decisions. The purpose of such reviews is continually to strengthen the connection between the quality of teaching, and the level and quality of student achievement.

The second reason concerns the highly contextualised nature of good teaching practice. There are no "silver bullets" in teaching, and no guaranteed ways to improve student achievement. Each school and each teacher has to learn how to create the conditions that will produce the results they desire. This is not to say that their efforts cannot be scaffolded on the work of others. But even well researched "best practice" will not deliver the expected results if the teachers who are implementing it cannot make evidence-based decisions about how to adapt it to their own workplaces. Short-term improvement can be gained by purchasing "best practice". Sustained improvement requires teachers who are skilled inquirers.

The third reason for incorporating the role of researcher into the professional lives of teachers is that it is a highly effective form of professional development.

There is an emerging research-based consensus about the qualities of effective professional development. It is job-embedded, rather than separated out from work contexts, colleagues and daily practice. It is evidence-based, rather than opinion-based. It is collegial, rather than individual, so that teams of teachers who share common tasks and responsibilities can learn together about how to do their jobs differently (Ball and Cohen, 1999). When professional development has these characteristics, teachers have better opportunities to learn the skills of inquiry they need to become researchers of their own and others' practices.

Teachers may also learn these skills in university-based educational research courses. The teacher-researchers who are the authors of articles in this set issue contributed to the improvement of practice in the schools in which they conducted their projects. Far more substantial, however, were the benefits that participation in research brought to their own professional development and the development of their school. Teachers who are skilled inquirers can become catalysts for an evidence-based teacher learning culture.

In New Zealand, in recent years, there has been increasing recognition at government and Ministry levels of the importance of research skills for teachers. There has been investment in the development of tools to help teachers assess the progress of students (eTTe, n.d.), and in school and cluster-based professional development, to teach teachers how to use such information to improve teaching practices (Timperley and Lam, 2002).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education is also funding teacher action research projects and formative evaluation studies, usually as a component of a curriculum initiative. The learning agenda set by all these efforts is very ambitious (Earl and Katz, 2002). There are at least two main challenges to be met. The first involves providing beginning and experienced teachers with enough high quality opportunities to learn the skills required to collect, interpret, and use evidence about the link between their teaching and the learning of their students. External evaluations of some of these initiatives have shown that teachers need a great deal more assistance in developing these skills (Clinton and Ward, 2002; Robinson, Phillips, and Timperley, 2002; Timperley and Wiseman, 2002).

The second challenge is in developing a teacher culture in which evidence-based discussion of the quality of teaching and learning is an expected part of professional life. Evidence from overseas and from some initial New Zealand research suggests that achieving this goal will require substantial shifts in current norms of professional relations and discourse (Annan, Lai, and Robinson,
Many teachers are not used to providing an evidential basis for their claims about their practice, or asking their colleagues to do the same. These are the discourse patterns required to develop an inquiry culture in our schools. They can be learned in tertiary courses in leadership, or in courses on practitioner and action research. They can also be learned on the job, in those syndicate and school cultures where there is an insistence on collective responsibility for the quality of teachers’ decision making.

In summary, the overlaps between the requirements of good research and good practice provide both a foundation and a rationale for the development of teachers as researchers. As researchers, teachers inquire into their individual and collective practice. The inquiry is both scaffolded on the research findings of others and productive of new knowledge about their particular context. Enhancement of the research role of teachers is central to sustainable school improvement, to effective teacher development and, most important of all, to the professionalism of teachers.

References


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