ENRICHMENT OF TEACHING PROFESSION THROUGH INQUIRY: VALUE OF TEACHER RESEARCH

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Abstract
Teachers are among the oldest of society’s occupational groups. The status of teaching as a profession, however, has developed in comparatively recent times since this profession involves activities which are essentially intellectual. Besides this quality this profession commands a body of specialized knowledge requires extended professional preparation, exalts service above personal gain and last but not the least demands continues in-service growth. A teacher engages himself in a variety of in-service growth activities but the most important one is research and writing because research influences the kind of teaching a teacher is doing but the gulf between the two can at times seem large. This paper examines the value of teacher research which lays the bases or foundation for nurturing professional and personal growth through inquiry.

Introduction
Anyone who has ever been a teacher knows that teaching is a complex, challenging, and often uncertain process. There are no absolute answers for how best to teach young children. If there is one thing confirmed by both the professional literature on teaching and the anecdotal experiences of many teachereducators, it is the assertion that teaching is more than technique, (Schön 1983; Ayers 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999) a process involving continualinquiry and renewal, and a teacher, among other things, is first and foremost a questioner (Ayers 1993; Hansen 1997). Insights about teaching and learning can be gained only through teacher research and the five key competencies which are required to view teachers as researchers who take seriously the study of self with the aims of bringing about personal, social and educational change are-

1. Thinking: Thinking is about using creative, critical and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences and ideas. These processes can be applied to purpose such as
developing understanding, making decisions, shaping actions, or constructing knowledge. Intellectual curiosity is at heart of this competency.

2. **Using language, symbol and text**: Using language, symbols and texts is about working with and making meaning of the codes in which knowledge is expressed. Languages and symbols are systems for representing and communicating information, experiences and ideas. People use languages and symbols to produce texts of all kinds: written, oral/aural and visual: informative and imaginative; informal and formal; mathematical, scientific and technological.

3. **Managing self**: This competency is associated with self motivation and a “can do” attitude. Teachers who manage themselves are enterprising, resourceful, reliable and resilient. They establish personal goals, make plans, manage projects and set high standards. They have strategies for meeting challenges. They know when to lead, when to follow and when and how to act independently.

4. **Relating to others**: Relating to others is about interacting effectively with a diverse range of people in a variety of contexts. The competency includes the ability to listen actively, recognize different points of view, negotiate and share ideas. Teachers who relate well to others are open to new learning and able to take different roles in different situations. They are aware of how their words and actions affect others. They know when it is appropriate to compete and when it is appropriate to co-operate. By working effectively together, they can come up with new approaches, ideas and ways of thinking.

5. **Participating and contributing**: Participating and contributing is about being actively involved in communities. This competency includes a capacity to contribute appropriately as a group member, to make connections with others and to create opportunities for others in the group. Teachers who participate and contribute in communities have a sense of belonging and the confidence to participate within new contexts. They understand the importance of balancing rights, roles and responsibilities and of contributing to the quality and sustainability of social, cultural, physical and economic environments.

**Now the question arises- What is teacher research?**

Teacher research is a form of action research, research designed by practitioners to seek practical solutions to issues and problems in their professional and community lives (Corey 1953; Stringer 2007). The ultimate goal is change or the improvement of the problematic situation. Teacher research and action research are often used interchangeably. However, as noted by Meier and Henderson (2007) not all teacher research is action research. Although teacher research has
The goal of some type of action to improve practice, action research typically focuses on behavior or organizational change through inquiry conducted collaboratively among researchers (not necessarily teachers) and those who will benefit from the action. Teacher research takes many forms and serves a range of purposes, but it is conducted by teachers, individually or collaboratively, with the primary aim of understanding teaching and learning in context and from the perspectives of those who live and interact daily in the classroom (Zeichner 1999; Meier & Henderson 2007). Teacher research stems from teachers’ own questions about and reflections on their everyday classroom practice. Although these questions and reflections are context-specific, they enable the teacher to relate particular issues to theories of teaching and learning by documentation and analysis of such issues; hence, teacher research links theory with practice (Bullough & Gitlin 2001).

Three components of the research process - McLean (1995) delineates three major components of teacher research:

a) Conceptualization, in which a significant problem and relevant research questions are identified.
b) Implementation, in which data are collected and analyzed.
c) Interpretation, in which findings are examined for meaning and appropriate actions are taken as a result.

The cycle of teacher inquiry can be presented by following flow chart -

The Cycle of Teacher Inquiry
The real value of engaging in teacher research at any level is that it may lead to rethinking and reconstructing what it means to be a teacher or teacher educator and, consequently, change the way teachers relate to children and students.

Evidence suggests that teachers who have been involved in research may become:
- Reflective
- Critical
- Analytical
- Open to professional development
- Committed to professional development.

**Reframing the role of teacher**

The new role of 'teacher-researcher' is considered a critical factor in linking effective teaching practice and continuous professional growth to the processes of inquiry and reflection (Cross, 1987; Goodlad, 1999; Harris, 1998). The generative power of teachers as researchers of their own practice is described by Keyes (1999) as a data driven learning process. When teachers do classroom research, they begin to view themselves as learners, their classrooms as places where they are relearning, and the data collected as data to be understood (Keyes, 1999). Teachers who engage in research are considered to have an increased understanding of the complexities of the school community and learning environment (Caro-Bruce & Zeichner, 1998). The reflective practice implicit in any action research projects undertaken by teachers promotes a self and practice awareness with the potential to enhance effective practice through a deeper understanding of themselves as teachers and learners (Breidenstein, 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). The ongoing nature of reflective inquiry allows teachers to make better use of insights gained from their pedagogical and curricular experiences throughout their careers. Doing teacher research has caused many teachers to look at their teaching in a more analytic, focused and indepth way.

**Ways of making teacher research real research**

Teacher research is often perceived as being a lesser form of scholarship, even though it may contribute to the knowledge base of teaching and learning. Attitudes about the rigor and status of practitioner research still need to be addressed. In particular, there is the view held by academic scholars that teacher research as a form of local knowledge that leads to change within classrooms is unacceptable, but that when it is presented as public knowledge with claims beyond the practice setting, validity may be questioned. Standards for rigor must be maintained while undertaking teacher research (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001; Freeman et al. 2007). Firstly, like any
sound research, teacher research must be systematic and all procedures must be carefully documented. Secondly, multiple approaches to inquiry—multiple sources of data and multiple approaches to data analysis—are essential to the quality and authenticity of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Donnell 2006). Thirdly, teacher research must be relevant to problems of practice and provide legitimate bases for action. The findings and interpretations derived from the research must be trustworthy.

Bell (1985) outlines four criteria that may be used to evaluate the quality or rigor of teacher research:

**Credibility:** Is the study believable to those who are competent to judge the subject of investigation?

**Transferability:** Does the study promote the exchange of experience from one practitioner to another?

**Dependability:** Does the study use reliable procedures and produce findings that are trustworthy?

**Conformability:** Is the study capable of being scrutinized for absence of bias by making its evidence and methods of analysis available? Teacher research that illuminates the difficulty of teaching and relates it to learning is certainly likely to be viewed as convincing. When it is well designed, teacher research has the potential to contribute substantially to the knowledge base of teaching and teacher education, in particular that learning to teach is innately connected to learning to inquire.

**Conclusion**

Teacher research means different things to different educators. To some it may be something as simple as observing a class and keeping a journal about observations. To others it may be as complex as a longitudinal study examining the reading development of several students over several years. Depending on who is asked, the responses could yield screams of horror or excited shouts of joy. However, teacher research is a broad and important aspect of development not only for the teacher-researchers themselves but also for the colleagues with whom they share results in writing or at conferences or meetings. Ayers (1993) has stated that teachers need to be part detective, searching for children’s clues and following their leads, and part researcher, gathering data, analyzing the information, and testing hypotheses. Teaching must be viewed as more than action and activity; it must be seen as reflection, speculation, questioning, and theorizing. If teacher researchers are to make a large-scale impact, they need to have
appropriate and accessible outlets for their discoveries. Teacher research has the potential to make a difference in the lives of those who confront real issues and problems in particular sites, at particular moments, and in the lives of particular individuals and groups. Not only this, teacher inquiry allows teachers to simultaneously study their teaching, their students, and themselves and as a result, it allows the possibility of makeover and revitalization.

References


