

# *Teacher Research: Questions for Teacher Educators*

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**PROFESSORS HAVE GREAT JOBS.** Even low-status, overworked, and underloved early childhood education professors have it pretty good. I count myself lucky because a big part of my work is getting other early childhood professionals (at all levels) to think in different ways about what they do and what it means for their students.

I remember a “Peanuts” comic strip from years ago in which Sally says to Marci as they chat in school, “I have it all figured out. The way I see it, there seem to be more questions than there are answers.” Marci says, “So?” and Sally replies, “So try to be the one who ask the questions!”

In this article, I take the role of the one who asks the questions. While I offer some possible answers, my intent is to get the questions on the table for discussion. If the questions stimulate teacher educators responsible for guiding the teacher research of their students to think in new ways, then I will have accomplished my goal.

## **What counts as teacher research?**

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Is teacher research equivalent to action research? Is Reggio-style documentation synonymous with teacher research? Are qualitative data collection and interpretive analysis essential to teacher research? The issues embedded in these questions are more than semantic. Being clearer about what we actually mean by teacher research is important if we want it to be taken seriously.

I offer the following as a working definition: Teacher research is systematic, data-based inquiry that teachers use to improve their professional practice. If it is really research, then it must be done systematically—as opposed to randomly or haphazardly. That means that an organized plan for executing the inquiry must be laid out before the project is begun—as opposed to trying to figure out what happened after the fact. It means that a design for carefully collecting and analyzing data must be in place at the outset of the inquiry—as opposed to just seeing what happens and trying to figure out what it might mean.

If it is really research, then it must be data based (empirical)—as opposed to experiential or impressionistic. That means that teacher researchers must collect evidence that accurately represents what is going on in the settings they are studying—as opposed to making judgments about the outcomes of their efforts based only on impressions or feelings. It means that data collection options (qualitative

and/or quantitative) must be applied based on the best fit for the issues at hand—as opposed to a dogmatic insistence on one kind of data collection over another.

If it is *teacher* research, then it must be done by teachers in a self-conscious effort to make improvements in their work—as opposed to studying educational phenomena for pedantic or purely scholarly reasons. That means that teacher researchers must be reflective about their professional practices to the point where they can see issues that they need to address in order to improve—as opposed to seeing only forces outside their control. It means that teacher researchers see their inquiries as opportunities to get better at doing what they do in the settings where they do it—as opposed to doing traditional research that is disconnected from the contexts in which they work.

By starting with a definition like the one I have suggested, we can get closer to figuring out what counts as teacher research. Action research models that have been applied to education and many other disciplines fit within the discussion above, as does documentation as it is usually described in relation to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. That means that the preservice and in-service teachers we are working with can do action research or Reggio-style documentation as teacher research, but that other kinds of inquiry are legitimate teacher research as well. Since data collection and analysis strategies are appropriate insofar as they give teacher researchers evidence on which to assess what's going on in their work settings, limiting choices to either qualitative or quantitative seems wrongheaded.



### **Can teacher research add to the knowledge base in early childhood education?**

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Who is the audience for teacher research findings? Who owns teacher research data? I count these as genuine questions to which a number of answers are possible.

In the current climate of No Child Left Behind and official proclamations that stipulate a narrow set of criteria for studies to be considered scientifically based, teacher research does not meet the standard. Even without the heavy-handed imposition of one view of science on the educational research community, it's not self-evident that teacher research has something important to add to the early education knowledge base. If teacher research is, by definition, focused on the immediate contexts of one teacher's professional practice, then it is fair to ask what it has to do with the practices of others.

I, for one, believe that teacher research that is well done and well described has plenty to contribute to the knowledge base in early childhood education. By *well done*, I mean that it meets the definition offered earlier—it's systematic, data based, and focused on professional practice. By *well described*, I mean that it is communicated with enough detail and clarity to reveal what happened in the study so that other professionals can make up their own minds about the meaningfulness of the report to understanding their own work settings.

This gets a little tricky for me because I insist that the primary audience for any teacher research project be the teacher herself or himself. The whole point of teacher research is to improve professional practice through systematic, planned inquiry. If the intent from the beginning is for the research to generate publishable findings, that's fine; but is it still teacher research? I can see that it's possible to have it both ways, but I worry that the essence of teacher research may be compromised if publishing and presenting become the primary aim.

This also points to tricky territory for those of us who support teachers and teachers-to-be who are designing and doing teacher research projects. As university-based scholars, it's part of our job to generate knowledge. Those of us who guide the implementation of teacher research projects have an important place in the process, and we have experience and expertise that can help well-done teacher research become well-described teacher research. But the limits of our place need to be carefully drawn so that teachers own their own research and we are not appropriating the work of our colleagues.

I tell the teacher researchers with whom I work that they own the data. I sometimes work with students to help them present their projects at professional conferences and publish descriptions of their research, but they report their studies under their own names.

### **How are participants in teacher research projects protected?**

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Are parents, teachers, and especially children put at risk by the dissemination of teacher research? Should human subjects reviews and informed-consent protocols be required for teacher research projects?

Universities are careful about safeguarding the rights of individuals who volunteer to participate in the research efforts of faculty and students. Institutional review boards (IRBs) screen research protocols, adding a layer of bureaucracy to university-based research projects. At my university, every teacher licensure candidate completes a teacher research project (using an action research model) during her or his full-year internship. We have a blanket IRB approval that covers all of the teacher research being done as part of the teacher education programs, except when findings from the studies are to be made public beyond program requirements.

The logic of the blanket approval is that our interns are doing only what good teachers ought to be doing, so they don't need informed consent from parents or assent from students. It follows that if the interns intend to go beyond the classroom and course requirements (that is, to present and publish), then they need an IRB approval that includes appropriate consents.

Even though it is cumbersome and sometimes limits the pool of participants, I generally agree with the policy that when students or teachers plan to disseminate their findings, children, parents, and other adults who are human subjects in those teacher research projects should be informed regarding the extent of their participation in the study, what is intended for the results of the study, and to what degree their identities will be kept confidential. And they must be given the option of refusing participation without penalty.

It's hard to imagine any kind of treatment that would put participants at physical or psychological risk in an early childhood teacher research project. As a teacher educator, I guide my interns' project development at every step of the process, so I would know if a design included anything that might be perceived as involving a risk. But if findings are to be shared in public settings, there is some risk (depending on the data and how they are displayed in the final report) that participants could be identified.

So when students or teachers do teacher research that they have no intention of disseminating to a wider audience, I don't think it's necessary to get IRB approval and participant consent. But if they want to publish or present their work, the same criteria that fit other university-based research should be applied.



## Is it ethical to do transformative teacher research in settings in which we are guests?

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Is it right to encourage transformative teacher research when our students working with K–3 will likely be employed in school settings dominated by conservative forces? By *transformative*, I mean designed to challenge the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic inequalities that are imbedded in education settings.

A major thread in the action research tradition is the application of critical/feminist perspectives to transform social contexts characterized by the unequal treatment of historically marginalized groups. Those of us who teach, guide, and support teacher research need to examine what we believe, say, and do as we work with practitioners who bring a critical/feminist edge to their teacher research projects.

This is a tough issue for me. I work in a program designed to prepare teachers for work in urban-multicultural settings. Students have to apply to be in the program, and we select only those who are open to working in diverse settings. Critical pedagogy and critical literacy are key elements of our teacher preparation curriculum. We want the teachers we prepare for multicultural environments to be aware of and equipped to resist the historical and structural inequalities that characterize society. We want them to be critical in their thinking and transformative in their teaching. When it's time for them to design and implement their teacher research projects, we want our students to apply their critical thinking and generate transformative teaching.

It turns out that most do not—and I don't blame them. After all, they are guests in the schools in which they do their internships and implement their teacher research projects. It seems just plain rude to ask teachers, principals, and parents to let students learn how to teach in urban settings and then have them develop plans to systematically expose racism, ethnocentrism, or other prejudicial treatment in or around the school.

Many of the interns with whom I work find ways to generate transformative action plans as part of their teacher research projects. They use culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, but almost always in the context of improving academic achievement. That way, they are being true to their own convictions while helping the schools move toward their primary objective of educating children and getting off or staying off the No Child Left Behind lists.

Yes, teacher research can be transformative. Nothing in the definition of teacher research limits teacher inquiries to certain political perspectives. But university educators responsible for guiding teacher research should help students balance their political beliefs with the realities of contemporary school settings.

I am a firm believer that institutional change has to come from within. We have to support our future teachers' efforts to first get inside systems, where they can then make changes in ways that do not threaten their careers. My students have taught me that teacher research is one avenue to change that can be shaped so that transformation can happen.



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### In summary

To return to where I began, it's the questions that matter. As early childhood education professionals responsible for directing the teacher research of our students, we need to spend some time reflecting on our own thinking about the issues raised in the questions that organized this essay. My answers are not *the* answers; others have to figure out what their own answers are, given where and who they are.



Teacher research provides many opportunities for encouraging the development of thoughtful, action-oriented teachers who are willing to take responsibility for the improvement of their own practices. It also generates meaningful ways to bring the authentic voices of frontline educators to the professional discourses of our field. But like all opportunities, there are challenges.

I hope the questions and possible answers I have shared will help other teacher educators take better advantage of the opportunities and create sensible responses to the challenges associated with teacher research in early childhood settings.

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