

Repositioning Teacher Education: Teacher Research as Professional Development

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Teaching is an incredibly complex and challenging activity. No amount of theory can substitute for the experience of “doing” teaching and then reflecting on one’s teaching (Dewey 1933; Schön 1983). The importance of effective teacher education has never been greater, with proposed federal teacher preparation regulations threatening to undermine the progress of current teacher education program reform efforts (see statement released by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education on November 26, 2014). Although teacher education continues to focus on whether teachers have the necessary skills to succeed in the classroom, we know that learning to teach involves more than mastering a set of skills, techniques, or competencies (e.g., Feiman-Nemser 2012). To really understand teaching one must study it. Moreover, teaching is a developmental journey, a process of becoming that involves continual inquiry and renewal (Ayers 1993; van Manen 1991).

In this article, I maintain that an important goal for teacher education is to help preservice teachers develop and sustain a positive attitude about lifelong learning across their professional lives. Specifically, I emphasize that learning to teach takes a lifetime and is nurtured by developing the attitude and skills of inquiry that enable teachers to reinvigorate and reinvent themselves again and again. I make the claim that engaging in teacher research, the intentional and systematic study of teaching and learning by teachers themselves, whether individually or collectively, is essential to building a grounded theory of what teaching actually is—what it involves, how it is learned, and what it means. Furthermore, teacher education, which is only one small fragment of the sustained and lifelong professional

development of all teachers, requires a shift from a view of teaching as the development of technical skills and expertise to teaching as the development of understanding through inquiry (see Hoban 2002; Loughran 2006).

Teaching as a developmental process

The journey of becoming a teacher begins long before students of teaching start their formal teacher preparation. They come to us with a rich history of experiences that form personal theories (tacit understandings) that are tenacious and powerful, and which influence their beliefs about what it means to teach. In his seminal work *SchoolTeacher*, Dan Lortie called this period prior to formal teacher education, “the apprenticeship of observation” (1975, 61). In teacher education prospective teachers filter formal knowledge gained through their coursework and field experiences through their own value and belief systems, sometimes accommodating new ideas with previous understandings, sometimes restructuring new information to fit existing beliefs. Often, however, as a result of experiences that confirm previously evolved conceptions (e.g., modeling experienced teachers), personal theories go unchanged (Stremmel, Cherian, & Martin 1991). It is precisely at this point of the journey, during teacher education, that prospective teachers must critically examine their previous experiences and understandings, and carefully observe, reflect on, talk about, question, and intentionally study teaching in order to develop a fuller understanding of it. As I will discuss below, teacher research is essential to this process. In fact, it is the cornerstone of teacher education because it creates opportunities to engage in reflective practice, authentic conversation, and professional dialogue, and to theorize one’s lived experience in the classroom.

Once teachers enter the field, they continue to develop. Others have written about the stages teachers go through as they begin their professional lives (e.g., Fuller & Brown 1975; Ryan 1986). Robert Carlson (in Lindley 1993) has suggested that teachers go through at least three stages in their teaching lives. The first is focused on “survival.” Initially teachers are concerned primarily with becoming comfortable in a room full of children, having a sense of control of the classroom, and getting children to like and respect them. According to Lindley, this is such an intensely emotional time that any real teaching—or learning for that matter—is purely accidental or serendipitous. In the second stage, teachers are concerned with developing competence, mastering the curriculum, and learning the procedures and strategies that will make them effective. Lindley suggests that some teachers stay in this stage their whole professional lives. I would argue that much of teacher education is geared to addressing the needs of teachers at this stage of their development, especially when those outside our classrooms and schools set the expectations for what the curriculum should be, how

children should learn, how learning is assessed, and whose knowledge is of most worth. In stage three, teachers are no longer merely teaching a set curriculum, but now feel creative and innovative, having developed a unique self and a pedagogical orientation with the children that enables them to learn. As Lindley points out, this is a time of making connections between teaching and one's life journey. The goal no longer is to teach well but to create possibilities for children and oneself to learn and grow. Teaching becomes an extension of one's whole being.

Reframing teacher education as teacher development

Programs that prepare teachers and the schools that hire them often assume that students of teaching should be ready to hit the ground running when they graduate, with the technical skills needed to be successful. If they are fortunate, prospective teachers have been inspired by a few excellent teachers who served as their mentors or cooperating teachers, some of whom may have reached the third stage. More often than not, however, prospective teachers have identified with, and want to be better than, the many mediocre teachers who have likely stayed in the second stage—those who have gone through the motions and followed the curriculum, with little motivation or energy to change their methods or improve their practice.

The reality of teaching, however, is that it is more than content and skill mastery. It is far more than what we see happening in the classroom between a teacher and a group of children. To really understand the complexity of teaching is to tune in to the thoughts, feelings, questions, and assumptions contained within the teacher, and to develop an orientation toward children based on critical reflection on the meaning and significance of teaching-learning experiences (Dewey 1933; van Manen 1991). Teaching involves movement between poles of certainty and uncertainty, knowing and not knowing, joy and sorrow, triumph and failure. When one considers how incredibly complex and intellectually challenging teaching is, one wonders if any amount of preparation can ever be enough. In order to understand teaching, prospective teachers must become learners in their own classrooms. They must become students of their thinking and practice, reflecting on what they believe, the decisions they make, and the reasons underlying what they do. Rather than implementing a prescribed curriculum or following the methodologies of others, teachers must eventually become the source and creator of the theoretical basis of their own teaching techniques. In this way, knowledge of teaching and learning originates in teaching that is grounded in research (see Stenhouse 1975).

Loughran (2006) claims the goal of teacher education should not be to develop teaching expertise or good teaching (whatever that is), but to foster genuine and ongoing professional learning. This starts with embracing a stance of “student teacher as researcher,” and the view that teaching and learning to teach are inherently connected to learning to inquire (Borko,

Liston, & Whitcomb 2007; Loughran 2006). Student teachers demonstrate the notion that teaching is an inquiry process when they reflect on and give voice to their questions and dilemmas, systematically and critically investigate their own practice using methods consistent with everyday teaching (e.g., observation, document collection, journaling, discussions), and generate data that cannot be captured by traditional methods of research.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have called this a “stance” or way of thinking and being in the classroom. Adopting an inquiry stance means learning to question or challenge what happens in the classroom. It means helping our students pursue their own questions and take their inquiries seriously, as well as working with others to generate knowledge and understanding of what it means to teach and learn. In fact, it is difficult to understand how teaching might be improved or how curriculum can be developed and evaluated without teachers researching their own practice.

Viewed this way students of teaching can move beyond a focus on the technical toward a richer understanding of what teaching is and what it means, as they learn from their own experiences, investigate their own pedagogical problems, and engage in conversations with their mentors and peers about their questions, assumptions, and newly constructed insights and understandings. Moreover, if we consider the notion that learning to teach is a developmental process, then it can be enhanced through learning opportunities for which prospective students are actually ready. Inquiry aimed at addressing those issues and concerns of importance to prospective teachers—teaching procedures and strategies, maintaining control of a classroom, feeling respected and liked, and developing a better understanding of who they are in relation to the children they teach—can help them come to understand themselves and others. This is at the core of learning to be a teacher (Feiman-Nemser 2012; Loughran 2006).

We simply cannot provide prospective students with everything they need—content or pedagogy—to be a teacher by the end of four or five years of formal teacher education. What we *can* do is help them understand the importance of being knowledge producers and lifelong learners of teaching, through opportunities to engage in professional dialogue, reflective practice, theorizing lived experience, and teacher research (Feiman-Nemser 2012).

However, our work should not end there. If we adhere to these ideas about teacher development, our mission is not merely to prepare students to be teachers, but to provide sustained professional development to all teachers—those beginning to teach and those already teaching. Seasoned teachers need to become more intentional and aware of their decisions and actions, confronting issues as they emerge in their lives, interrogating their situations carefully, and responding thoughtfully to what they uncover and discover in the classroom. Teacher research can enable teachers to be self-determining, to be self-authoring, and to take some responsibility

for themselves and their actions (Stenhouse 1975). By adopting a research stance, teachers can escape from the outside control and scrutiny to which they are increasingly accustomed and be more proactive in critically assessing their situations. In this way, teachers engage in meaningful professional development and learn to become more autonomous in their judgments on their own practice.

In sum, teachers need access to a continuum of support and professional learning opportunities across their entire professional lives. Seeing teacher education as teacher development, not simply preparation, and making teacher research the foundation is a means to help teachers understand that teaching is a journey, a continual process of inquiry and renewal. It is also a way of conveying the idea that teaching matters. Despite the current obsession with accountability testing, it is a myth to believe that teachers alone can be held responsible for their children's performance or that improving teachers' technical skills will single-handedly improve children's success on assessments (Alexander 2010). Providing opportunities for teachers to participate in authentic conversation and professional dialogue about their practice and work together in intellectual and practical ways through reflective inquiry can open up new ways of seeing children and classrooms and conceiving possibilities for self-initiated collective change (Loughran 2006). When teachers can test their ideas, make sense of their work, improve themselves as teachers and persons, and make stronger connections with children, they may indeed be reenergized and reinvigorated in ways that contribute to improved student learning. Moreover, it may improve teacher status and build a more comprehensive and realistic view of what teachers can know and do as professionals.

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