



Commentary

A Candid Look at Teacher Research and Teacher Education Today

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Ken Zeichner describes the current changes and trends in teacher education and examines the university's role in providing teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge. He advocates a model where the university, community, and school work together as partners to give teachers a more diversified set of knowledge and skills. This type of teacher education can be situated in the university, but it may be more effective if it takes place "outside of the bureaucracy and budget of both the university and the school system." Dr. Zeichner sees teacher research as a critical part of teacher development and firmly believes that each teacher should adopt an inquiry stance, where research is part of the practice rather than a separate activity. In conclusion, he states that, "...the old traditional forms of university-based teacher education...are not going to survive."

Can you tell us how you first became interested in teacher research and why?

My involvement started when I was a teacher in terms of being in an environment that was under a lot of change and we had to figure out how to adjust collectively—those of us in the schools that I was in—to make it more relevant to the local community, which was primarily African-American. There had been a lot of turmoil in this school before I got there. It was an environment that had a lot of things going on. We tried to invent a new more culturally relevant form of education for our students.

I started as a teacher studying my own practice and most of my career as a teacher educator has involved studying work that I've been responsible for in one way or the other: my own teaching in the classroom or programs that I've been responsible for. I have also been involved with trying to support other teachers and teacher educators in studying their practice. It's been something that's gone through my time in education from the very beginning and continues today.

There are varying definitions of teacher research: action research, participatory action research, practitioner inquiry, and so on. Can you define for us what teacher research means for you and for our LEARNing Landscapes audience?

My approach to it is similar to what Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle have talked about as an inquiry stance, where the research is part of, rather than, something that's an addition to teaching. I see teacher research more as an inquiring stance towards one's practice, and the contexts in which that practice exists. It does not take any particular form. There are different versions of teacher research or action research that say there are x number of steps—four steps, five steps; you have to do it this way. I've always felt that those were too restrictive and in the work that I've done I've encouraged the teachers, student teachers, teacher educators—whose inquiries I've tried to support—to create their ways of representing their research that enable them to communicate their findings.

Graduate students whose doctoral work I've supervised have done studies that have examined their own work as teachers and/or teacher educators. A few of those have chosen to use artistic forms of inquiry, and arts-based research methods to represent their research; and I encouraged them to do that. Where others took more narrative forms and there have been some who have taken traditional action research kinds of approaches, identifying a problem and so on. I think it's a problem when people define teacher research in a particular way that does not allow flexibility. It's the quality of inquiry and exploration that matters as well as the relationship between the thinking and action that is involved, rather than letting a particular form of inquiry be mandated and drive the process.

Can you give an example of an arts-based project that you found particularly interesting?

One of my students, Mary Wright, is a professor in teacher education. She used a variety of forms of media to illuminate the themes in her work over many years as

a teacher and then as a teacher educator. There were both elements of a traditional dissertation where she situated her work in a larger body of work and identified how it was building on previous work. But there was also an arts-based element to it that...she was able to express things that she wouldn't have been able to express through traditional narrative forms of dissertation. It was really quite powerful work. Mary composed music and choreographed and performed a dance as a part of her representation for example.

Mary Klehr was another graduate student of mine. She still works in the Madison, Wisconsin public schools today directing a classroom-action research program where teachers, principals, and other educators in the system study their own practice. In her dissertation, Mary studied several teachers, including herself, who used forms of teacher research to study and improve their practice. In that dissertation I remember one of the teachers (who I think was in the Bay area) used poetry as a form to express her work as a researcher.

I've been interested in alternative forms of representing what is learned in research for two reasons. One is the powerful ways in which this teacher inquiry as part of the work of teaching can help people improve their practice. I've been teaching in higher education now for a long time and I'm always still working on aspects in my practice in every course that I teach. It's something that's part of the way of teaching, rather than an addition. But I also became interested in it because of the idea that what is produced in this research by teachers and teacher educators about their own practice can contribute to what's defined as the larger knowledge base of education. The research of academics in higher education about others, or even the research of teachers about others, is not able to get at the kinds of things somebody immersed in the practice and studying in it are able to get at. There is a knowledge-producing element of this teacher research that's very important in addition to its overall positive impact as a vehicle for professional development for both teachers and teacher educators.

Can you talk about the competing explanations about teacher socialization and how this can play a role in teacher education and teacher research?

People come into teaching, into teacher education programs, with particular knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they have acquired over many years. These programs that they enter then try to socialize them in particular ways. In teacher education programs or professional development programs, expertise is often seen to lie external to the teachers and teacher candidates. They come in and the professors or

their professional development providers are supposedly the experts and it's sort of a banking model of teacher development using Freire's notion of a "banking form of education" where the goal is to deposit knowledge from the experts to the teachers or teacher candidates.

Teacher research, and the forms of teacher education that I've tried to support, represent a different view where to me a more democratic process that disrupts hierarchies of knowledge that often exist in the field. It recognizes that teachers bring knowledge and expertise to professional development or to their teacher education programs, and that the process of teacher education is more of a dialogical process of the interaction of the knowledge that people bring with what they're offered in the program, rather than the ways in which professional development for teachers and teacher education programs are usually conducted.

Generally, I've been trying recently to envision new forms of university-based teacher education that rely more centrally on the knowledge and expertise of classroom teachers and people in local communities who send their kids to public schools. I'm arguing that the university expertise is important and a lot of people in the U.S. are arguing that it's not. But I'm also saying that going back to the traditional models that I've been critiquing for many years where the expertise is seen to lie with the university faculty, or the professional staff developers, is not a good thing and we need to have a view of knowledge and expertise that includes recognition of the knowledge and expertise that teachers bring.

Not only does this process go on, but the further argument that teachers can help produce knowledge, new knowledge that university faculty can benefit from in their programs, and that professional developers or school systems can benefit from the knowledge that's produced through teacher inquiry. I look at it as both a form of professional development and as a form of knowledge production similar to professors with PhDs producing knowledge. I feel that the current system is too limited.

Can you say a little bit about how you've persuaded colleagues to come on board and do these kinds of things?

That's a process that is still underway! I wrote a recent paper on engaging local communities and educating the teachers of their children. This is just one example of this more hybrid form of teacher development and teacher education in which university faculty come to the table with knowledge, but they recognize the knowledge that

others bring and that the actual teacher education or teacher development represents an integration of these different forms of knowledge and different ways that are less hierarchical than traditional forms of teacher education and teacher development.

To be frank about it, I think over the years I've been focusing a lot on teachers and so-called partnerships between universities and schools in teacher education. There is always a lot of pushback on the ideas of letting teachers in to the world of teacher education in ways that take real advantage of what they have to bring. It's the difference between having teachers come in as guests in university spaces and universities and schools coming together to create new spaces together where there is more mutual recognition of the knowledge and expertise that everybody brings.

I've extended my work in this area in the last five and a half years that I've been here in Seattle, bringing in members of local communities. It's an uphill battle or process of bringing people on board because of the traditions where people with PhDs are seen to be the experts. "Who are these people that you're bringing in to the university space?" Some of them are immigrant parents, for instance, who have limited ability to speak English in ways that are traditional in the academy. They have different pedagogical styles for communicating what they want to say about the kind of education they'd like their kids to receive in public schools. There is a lot of tension that's being created by trying to build these new more hybrid forms of teacher education and teacher development. I don't pretend to have the answers, but I am convinced that the old traditional forms of university-based teacher education, at least in my country and a number of countries around the world, are not going to survive unless they become more contextualized and relevant to the needs of schools and communities. I think in Canada...at least my recent research in Alberta and knowledge of Ontario have shown that there is still more acceptance of the idea of everybody getting a university teacher education before they become responsible for classrooms. That's no longer the case in the United States.

Because of the unresponsiveness of the universities to people in schools and communities, there are a lot of new forms of teacher education and teacher professional development that have emerged in the U.S. that have made little room for universities to contribute. Unless university teacher education in the United States becomes more connected and situated in the ways that I've described, it's going to disappear. I think the tensions are there right now...there is still a holding on by some to these more university-centric models of teacher education and professional development, but policies are being created, new programs have been funded that have brought new non-university teacher educators into the mix. Philanthropy has essentially turned its back on university schools of education.

The US government, in the last two administrations, has funded policies to create alternatives to the universities' own teacher education and teacher professional development. The United States is not alone—the UK started even before the United States. There are a number of examples internationally...I know that what happens in Canada is provincially based to some extent...there's differences but I think there's still this commitment to university-based teacher education before going in to teaching.

Can you describe to us what this vision of the new university-based teacher education might look like?

I've been working for probably almost 20 years on trying to create these models. There was a professional development school partnership in Wisconsin that I helped create and directed for 12 years. I've been leading the community engagement work in teacher education in Seattle in recent years from the university end where we and a group of community organizers mutually decided to partner with one another to educate new teachers who are more knowledgeable and responsive to local communities, including the families of their students.

And I helped create a teacher education program with the Seattle public schools. I was one of the university's point people on this, "The Seattle Teacher Residency." Maybe that would be an example of a program that I could use to respond to your question. Here is a program that was created with the Seattle public schools to prepare teachers for high poverty or what we call "Title One" schools in Seattle, where teacher turnover is very high, where there are often more problems with student achievement under the No Child Left Behind rules. We worked together over a number of years to create a new program. The program itself is situated in a local non-profit. It was deliberately situated outside of the bureaucracy and budget of both the university and the school system.

I'm not that confident right now, based on my many years of experience in the field and knowledge of the literature, that it's possible to put one of these new forms of teacher education that I'd like to see become more common *inside* a university or school system with the particular kinds of knowledge histories that exist there. The residency model to me offers the potential for creating a new space for this work to be actually created and realized. That doesn't mean it's free of problems.

There are all sorts of issues when you bring people from the schools, the universities, the community, and the teachers' union together. I'm quite pleased and excited about

what has happened the last few years. We're in the second year of implementation of the residency. I was frankly very sceptical with the idea that university and school people could sit down and transcend their own self-interests and create a new curriculum for a teacher education program to prepare teachers for Seattle Public Schools. The community component in this program is growing and growing. It keeps moving forward.

I look at other residencies around the country though...and I'm not saying that the residency model by itself necessarily brings hybridity and flattening of hierarchy of power and knowledge hierarchies that exist. Because I see residencies that do not have these characteristics—residencies that are connected to corporate charter schools, for instance. In Chicago, there's a particular residency that's connected to what they call "turn-around schools," where schools are closed down, taken away from their local communities and reopened under a model that's provided by an external charter company. Or residencies, such as the one in Boston where the university is not a genuine player in that program. It's a program that is a response to many years of universities being unresponsive to the needs of the schools. Basically it's the Boston public schools preparing its own teachers and the University of Massachusetts Boston stamping the degrees.

I don't think that the residency model, per se, necessarily brings the kinds of things that I'd like to see, but it offers the potential in ways that putting a program like this in a university bureaucracy or into a school system I don't think can easily bring. Particularly right now in the United States where we've had the defunding of public universities over a period of years that have essentially turned them into private universities, in terms of the ways in which the fiscal situation is managed. I have a real problem seeing right now how we can have these programs in the United States within universities. The same forces of privatization and stripping of public resources have also been dominating most school systems in the United States. I think the "third spaces" sometimes referred to are places that are more hospitable for bringing together knowledge and expertise from different institutional spaces: school, community, university.

What benefits and challenges do we face in terms of augmenting and sustaining teacher research?

I've seen a lot looking around internationally at the deprofessionalization of teaching and giving up on the idea of fully preparing teachers before they go in schools. This is not just in the United States. Again in the UK, but it also exists in much of the world,

and being promoted by a number of international development agencies such as the World Bank. This idea that we cannot afford, for a variety of reasons, to have professional teachers who inquire into their practice, who have adaptive expertise, who exercise their judgment in the classroom and that what we need are teachers who follow scripts.

We see the growing popularity around the world of programs like those based on the work of Doug Lemov in the United States. An example of a program would be “Relay Graduate School of Education,” which is a charter-type teacher education program that was funded by venture capital and it’s expanding like a virus throughout the United States right now. It’s based almost entirely on the work of Lemov who argues that there are 49 strategies to “teach like a champion.” The curriculum and the program are basically trying to get the teacher candidates to teach with fidelity to these 49 strategies. There is really not any vision of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. The teacher research piece would be incorporated into this idea of teacher as a reflective practitioner including the ideas of inquiry stance, of exercising judgment, and of adaptive expertise. There is a growing tendency to give up on that idea for the teachers of “other people’s” children while we still want to have reflective, inquiring, and adaptive teachers for our own children.

They argue that for teachers of *other people’s* children we need the technical teacher who can do things, often with high degrees of control to raise test scores. We begin to see a narrowing of the purposes of public education that comes along with the deprofessionalization of teaching. Again, it’s mainly for other people’s children, because I really don’t know too many of these what I call “reformers” who send their own children to these schools to be taught by these narrow technical teachers who have some kind of ejection of a set of technical skills. Lemov is only one example—a prominent one in the United States, but not the only one.

You have these two visions of teaching and teacher education and of the purposes of public education that exist and we’ve seen a tremendous growth of this narrow technical view around the world and in the United States. The city of New Orleans in the United States has zero public schools left; it’s been taken over completely by this narrow model. Other cities, like Chicago and Philadelphia, are on their way to becoming like New Orleans. We see an exiting from public schools by the middle class and upper middle class. We’re seeing a growing definition of public schools that have existed in other countries for many years: public schools serve the poor, to prepare them for the kinds of low paying jobs that will be waiting for them. And there are not going to be the kind of jobs where they’re going to be going through schools that are dominated by

these narrow techniques and what's referred to as "no excuses discipline." Most of them are not going to be heading to Google.

We're at a very critical time right now in terms of public education, in terms of our willingness to support it, and our willingness to support professional teachers for everyone's children. I don't know where it's going to go. In my own small way I'm trying to contribute to both support for public education and to the idea of a teacher education program that prepares reflective professional teachers who do engage in teacher research as well as in a number of other things consistent with a professional stature for teachers.



Ken Zeichner, a former elementary teacher, is the Boeing Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is an elected member of the National Academy of Education, a Fellow in the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and a former Vice President of AERA. His recent publications include "The Struggle for the Soul of Teaching and Teacher Education" (*Journal of Education for Teaching* 2014), "Venture philanthropy and teacher education policy in the U.S." (*Teachers College Record*, 2015), "Democratizing Teacher Education" (*Journal of Teacher Education*, 2015) and "Teacher Education and the Struggle for Social Justice" (Routledge, 2009). His current work focuses on teacher education policy and engaging local communities in teacher education.