



Commentary: Changing Perspectives on Practitioner Research

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this article have been writing together about practitioner research and inquiry for more than 25 years. In this article, they trace the roots of this interest to their work with K-12 teachers and school leaders over many years and their dissatisfaction with the idea that external researchers produce all the knowledge necessary to change teaching, learning and schooling. The article also highlights the notion of “inquiry as stance,” which contrasts with the idea that inquiry is a project or a problem-solving technique.

For the last 25 years, we have been writing together about practitioner research. When we started, the phenomenon of “teacher research” was just surfacing in North America (e.g., Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Like many university-based practitioners and researchers at the time, we were deeply concerned about the significant inequities in the educational opportunities, resources, achievement, and outcomes for differently raced and advantaged students. But we were also concerned about the way practitioners were being positioned in the discourse about teacher education and professional development and with the way university-generated knowledge was assumed to encompass everything there was to know about teachers, teaching, and reforming the schools. In our first article on this topic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), we referred to the then recently published *Handbook on Research on Teaching* (Wittrock, 1986). We pointed out that among the 35 research reviews and the 1037 pages in that massive volume that purported to

contain “everything we need to know about teaching and learning,” there was not a single citation to teachers’ research or to insiders’ perspectives and knowledge about the issues being discussed.

It was our close work with teachers that heightened our awareness of the gap between university discourse and the reality of daily life in schools and made us reject the claim that those located at universities or external research agencies could be the primary agents of enduring change inside schools. Early on we realized that external researchers were not the only actors who had developed critical perspectives about the social and political arrangements of schools and schooling.

Working at the Intersection of Two Worlds

Although our work with teachers was central to the genesis of our interest in practitioner research, we trace the roots of this interest to our work as K-12 teachers, part-time instructors, supervisors of student teachers, and lecturers at the university. In retrospect, we realize that our unwillingness to privilege either scholarship or practice in those early years also pushed us to try to construct a critical integration. We endeavored to locate our work at the intersection of two worlds, a space that deeply informed and continuously called into question our perspectives on collaboration and power, voice and representation, culture and difference, the purposes of teaching and teacher education in terms of social change and social justice, and the interrelationships of inquiry, knowledge and practice.

Working jointly with teachers, student teachers, teacher educators and school leaders, we used teacher research as a way to rethink practice, question our own assumptions, and challenge the status quo, not only in the schools and other sites of professional practice but also in the university. Over time we came to use the term “teacher research”—and later the broader language of “practitioner research” and “practitioner inquiry”—as shorthand for a larger set of premises about knowledge, practice, power, school-university relationships, and educational systems, which are elaborated below.

Our early ideas about teacher research were consistent with the emerging view of the teacher as knower and researcher that was part of the paradigm shift in researching, teaching, and assessing writing that evolved during the 1970s and 80s. At roughly the same time, in critical and social democratic theory, there was an

emerging focus on the role of teachers in research conceptualized as a form of social change. These ideas were in sync with the growing interest in ethnographic and qualitative research methodologies and methods. Much of this work examined the cultures of schools and classrooms and attempted to represent educators' knowledge from their own perspectives inside schools. It also began to unpack many inequities in the structures, opportunities, and outcomes of schooling for various groups of students based on race and culture as well as socioeconomic, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds.

Working the Dialectic

Throughout all our years working at research universities, we have never been solely practitioners or solely researchers. Rather, we have always seen ourselves as negotiating the borders of educational practice and research by wrestling with the daily dilemmas of practice and simultaneously theorizing the emerging domain of practitioner research. From the beginning, each of the papers and presentations we gave about teacher research came from a question that surfaced directly from our practice, usually in the midst of intense discussion about what was going on in our various projects and programs, which we regarded as strategic sites for both research and practice. What we were trying to do was theorize practitioner research and act on its premises in our daily university work as well as in various partnerships and collaborative contexts in K-12 schools and in community-based settings. We came to think of these efforts collectively as "working the dialectic." Here the term dialectic refers to the tensions and presumed contradictions between a number of key ideas and issues that have to do with research, practice and knowledge, in particular the assumed dichotomy between research and practice and the assumed disjuncture between the role of the researcher and the role of the practitioner.

Working the dialectic emphasizes that instead of being oppositional, inquiry and practice relate to each other in terms of productive and generative tensions, and they are understood to have a reciprocal, recursive, and symbiotic relationship. Thus it is not only possible, but also beneficial to take on simultaneously the role of both practitioner and researcher. In addition, this involves challenging and intentionally muddying the distinction between conceptual and empirical research and between practical knowledge and formal knowledge.

Inquiry as Stance

With the background we have provided above, we use the remainder of this commentary to outline the idea of “inquiry as stance” and its potential meanings and usages for the next generation. We first coined this phrase in the late 1990s. Our book, *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), extends previous discussions.

To call inquiry a “stance” is to regard inquiry as a worldview, a critical habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across professional careers and educational settings. This contrasts sharply with inquiry as a time- and place-bounded classroom research project or a method or set of steps for solving problems. When inquiry is a project, the message is that inquiry is something turned off and on at given points in time with the lines separating teaching and inquiry clearly drawn. When inquiry is a method or steps for solving problems, it positions practitioners as receivers of information with little space for questioning the ways problems are posed in the first place or for problematizing the terms and logic of larger frames. Fundamental to inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also (and more importantly), it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what gets done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served.

As we have conceptualized it, inquiry as stance rests on three foundational ideas and four critical dimensions. First, we regard inquiry as stance as a theory of action grounded in the problems and contexts of practice and in the ways practitioners work together to theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students, educational institutions, and communities. Second, inquiry as stance is a counterhegemonic notion that repositions the collective intellectual capacity of practitioners at the center of educational transformation. Third, inquiry as stance assumes that the knowledge and expertise needed to transform teaching and learning resides in the questions, theories, and strategies generated by practitioners and in their interrogations of the knowledge, practices, and theories of others.

There are four key dimensions of the construct of inquiry as stance: knowledge, practice, communities, and democratic purposes. The view of knowledge central to inquiry as stance rejects the prevailing assumption that two kinds of

knowledge, formal and practical, account for the universe of knowledge types for understanding teaching, learning and schooling. From this prevailing perspective, practical knowledge (which is what practitioners have) is bounded by the situation, not necessarily capable of immediate expression, and is about how, when and where to do things. Formal knowledge (which external researchers produce), in contrast, is generated from conventional scientific methods that yield a replicable, cumulative knowledge base generalizable across contexts and people. In contrast to the prevailing view of knowledge, with the notion of inquiry as stance, the local knowledge generated by practitioner researchers is considered a key to educational transformation.

The second dimension is an expanded and transformative view of practice. In discussions of schooling, practice is often juxtaposed with theory and research to suggest disconnections. From the perspective of inquiry as stance, however, neither the work of practice nor inquiry about practice is captured by the idea that practice is simply practical. Rather, practice is centrally about inventing and re-inventing frameworks for imagining, enacting, and assessing daily work in educational settings. Here, what practitioners choose to do at any given moment is understood to be informed by their nuanced sense-making about learners, languages, culture, race, class, gender, literacies, disciplinary content, social issues, power, institutions, neighborhoods, histories, communities, materials, texts, technologies and pedagogies. In this sense, practice is deeply contextual, but also and always theoretical and interpretive.

The third dimension is communities, which are the primary mechanisms for enacting inquiry as stance. This not just about individuals, but rather about collectivities of all sorts—pairs, groups within or across schools, face-to-face or virtual networks, school-community partnership groups—that are linked to larger change efforts. Over the last decade, the concept of learning communities has become extremely common, with some iterations of communities becoming what Diane Wood (2007) called “catalysts for change,” and others a new “infrastructure for the status quo.” In the practitioner inquiry communities central to our concept of inquiry as stance, practitioners work together to uncover, articulate, and question their own assumptions about teaching, learning and schooling.

The fourth dimension of inquiry as stance is democratic purposes and social justice ends. These purposes emphasize that learning communities are not tools for more effectively producing the nation’s labor force and thus preserving its place in the global economy. But these purposes also emphasize that learning communities are not intended simply to elevate the role of practitioners in educational change

efforts and to solidify their professional status once and for all. Rather, when practitioner researchers take an inquiry stance, they are engaged in work both within and against the system—an ongoing process, from the inside, of problematizing fundamental assumptions about the purposes of the existing education system and raising difficult questions about educational resources, processes, and outcomes.

Ways Forward

Currently it seems self-evident that the current United States educational regime is based on the assumption that policy is the driver of education reform with standards and accountability the major policy levers. When these are in place, the logic goes, students perform better, practitioners work more effectively, and everybody tries harder. From this perspective, the relationships among research, policy, and practice are straightforward and more or less linear, and the roles of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are separate.

Inquiry as intellectual stance and theory of action disrupts this approach. As we have said, it emphasizes how practitioners generate knowledge of practice from practice, as well as how they are informed by, but also challenge and talk back to, research in the interest of greater public engagement about education in a democratic society. This inside-outside perspective has long been at the heart of the practitioner research movement. Fortunately, at this point in time, others have somewhat similar views, and there are a variety of current efforts to the day-to-day problems of practice at the center of the research agenda.

References

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