

## **Teacher Research: Who Is It For and What Is the Point?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper was written by a teacher educator and five of her former students who completed a research project as part of a graduate course. Each of the students produced an exemplary project and spoke about the benefits of teacher research at the conclusion of the course. One year after completing the graduate course, none of the teachers continued conducting teacher research. In email reflections, these teachers described teacher research as beneficial and explained why they are no longer conducting research. Their comments challenge teacher educators to examine the goals of teacher research courses and the sustainability of teacher research for classroom teachers.

Similar to many others writing about teacher research, I am now a teacher educator at the university claiming the benefits of teacher research. I have taught several teacher research courses to graduate students. I have even published on the positive potential of teacher research (Fallon & Massey, 2008; Massey & Duffy, 2004). That is the problem. I am not a teacher conducting research on my own teaching; rather, I am a university educator saying how good it is for teachers to conduct research.

I am certainly not alone. In one of the most recent publications devoted to teacher research (Lassonde & Israel, 2008) almost all of the contributors are university educators singing the praises of teacher research for teachers. Of the few classroom teachers included, all wrote about their experience as either (a) graduate students conducting research while at the university or (b) a collaborator with a university educator. The same is true of a recent issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* dedicated to teacher research in which all voices are from university-based educators (Levin &

Merritt, 2006a). Are we as teacher educators claiming benefits of teacher research that do not exist or are not sustainable for classroom teachers?

I wanted to know what my former teacher research students would say about teacher research beyond the coursework. I contacted my former graduate students and shared my observations: teacher research publications include research done with the help of a university educator and there are almost no teacher research studies published by teachers conducting research separate from university coursework. I asked my former students if they would help me by reflecting on their own process of teacher research, discussing their insights into the benefits and challenges of teacher research, and honestly examining the impact of teacher research beyond the coursework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Throughout this article, I use teacher research to refer to teachers conducting action research about topics of interest within their own classrooms and/or schools. The literature reminds us of the potential power of teacher research. Proponents cite at least six positive influences of teacher research, including helping teachers (a) build a knowledge base (Burnaford, Fisher, & Hobson, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999; Lampert, 2000); (b) learn about research (Burnaford et al.; Cochran-Smith & Lytle; Hubbard & Power); (c) improve classroom instruction (Allington, 2001; Henson, 1996); (d) connect with other teachers and colleagues (Burnaford et al.; Hubbard & Power); (e) bring about change (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Grisham, 2000); and (f) gain new understanding of students (Hubbard & Power). The call for manuscripts for this themed issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* (2008) echoes some of the benefits:

Action research has the potential to be a powerful change agent encouraging educators to more fully investigate and consider possible solutions for real-world problems. Educators engaged in action research efforts not only identify specific areas of inquiry and systematically examine possible alternatives, but they also enhance their practitioner knowledge and improve student learning. Action research empowers educators as decision-makers and self-regulated professionals (p. 125).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) state that teacher research can and should be an important part of teacher empowerment and educational reform. Such inquiry can be viewed as knowledge-based, outcome-centered, and as resulting in learning opportunities for students. Teacher research also allows teachers to build local and public knowledge, through ongoing learning (Cochran-Smith, 2001). This learning is crucial, given the increasing diversity and complexity of schools. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain:

Hence, what is required in both preservice and inservice teacher education programs are processes that prompt teachers and teacher educators to construct

their own questions and then begin to develop courses of action that are valid in their local contexts and communities (p. 63).

Several key factors are critical to the ability of teachers to create reform through teacher research. First, researchers have noted that it is essential for teachers to be able to choose their focus of research (Levin & Merritt, 2006b). Second, teachers need to be able to change their practices based on their findings (Esposito & Smith, 2006), requiring some freedom in making curricular decisions. Finally, teachers benefit from an audience for their findings, through either explaining their findings to their students, students' families, and other colleagues, or broadening their audience to include presenting at conferences and publishing their results (Falk-Ross & Cuevas, 2008). Such sharing creates an atmosphere of reform and is often a generative process that leads to more change and research.

Certainly, there are many potential challenges for teachers when trying to conduct teacher research. For example, teachers' roles are constantly changing. They are frequently moved to new grades, new schools, and/or new positions. Within any of these transitions, the teachers are often asked to take on new roles. Many of these roles, such as test and curriculum facilitators or political activists, are linked to the increased pressure to raise test scores (Fallon & Massey, 2008). As the pressure rises for teachers to increase student test scores, time for research and reflection is limited (Massey & Duffy, 2004). Hubbard and Power (1999) note that teachers tend to concentrate on the most immediate needs and pressures coming from many competing spheres of influence, which negatively affect the outcome of the research process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For example, current decisions about what to teach and how to teach it are being made at district levels, without teacher input.

Another challenge for the teacher researcher is becoming a critical consumer of research, understanding and blending quantitative and qualitative approaches (Fallon & Massey, 2008). Research is everywhere: in the popular media, in library archives, and in the social dynamics of the classroom (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Teachers must be able to understand and interpret existing research, set up and conduct their own research methods, and apply their research knowledge to the daily practices and routines of the classroom.

Various models for conducting teacher research have been suggested. One shift in these models is the emphasis on collaboration. While Hubbard and Power's classic works, *Living the Questions* and *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, detail how to conduct teacher research they fail to mention research in collaboration with others. More recent guides to teacher research often address and encourage collaboration with other teachers and/or university educators as one of the first topics (e.g., Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003; Lassonde & Israel, 2008; Levin & Merritt, 2006b; Robinson & Lai, 2006). Research is also encouraged as part of a school-wide process that involves multiple school personnel (e.g.,

Sagor, 2005). What is missing from these models and guides is how teacher research is judged as successful or unsuccessful or if there can be potentially positive outcomes of an unsuccessful research project. As Levin and Merritt (2006b) state, “Unfortunately, given that usually only successful action research projects are shared publicly in writing, we don’t know if empowerment or transformation occurs for stakeholders when an action research project flounders or is deemed to be unsuccessful by the stakeholders” (p. 4).

In spite of the challenges, and in part as a way to address the challenges that teachers face, teacher research has become prominent in teacher education courses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) as a means of school reform (Anderson et al., 1994) and teacher empowerment (Levin & Merritt, 2006b). Many university educators and administrative leaders view it as a way to promote teacher adaptation through understanding the complexity of classroom life (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999) and building knowledge. Anders, Hoffman, and Duffy (2000) suggest that teacher research is one way that teacher educators can help teachers analyze instruction “and then, in a thoughtful way, construct appropriate response. In doing so, professional knowledge . . . is perceived not as an end in itself but as grist for thinking and problem solving” (p. 733).

Teacher educators may believe these benefits, but are the benefits actually true and sustainable? To explore these issues surrounding teacher research, I emailed an entire class of former graduate students enrolled in a teacher research course and asked them to reflect on their experiences conducting teacher research and the current utility of that research. Specifically, I asked them the following questions: (a) What were your initial beliefs about research and how did they change? What are your beliefs now?; (b) In your research process, how did you choose a topic? How did your research affect your instruction? What challenges did you face when conducting research?; (c) Are you continuing to conduct research?; and (d) Has your research had any influence on your instruction in the year since you completed the teacher research course? Why or why not?

Of the 17 teachers that I could find, only five responded. The lack of response may be interpreted in different ways—they were busy or they were not conducting teacher research and felt they had nothing to contribute. These were the same graduate students who only a year before had written reflections about the power of teacher research. Of the five who did respond, three things were immediately apparent. First, these were five of the most dedicated students enrolled in the course. Their projects were detailed and powerful. Second, only one of the five was in the same position that she was in one year ago. In fact, only two were currently working with school-age students, and that work was conducted in addition to their new administrative roles. Third, none of the five were conducting teacher research.

## Teacher Introductions

Each of the five teachers who responded to my initial email inquiry was enrolled in a year-long teacher research course in the 2006-2007 school year. At the time, they were all classroom teachers who were pursuing a Master's Degree in Education with an emphasis in literacy. The teacher research course was the final requirement in their sequence. Only one student, Allison, had conducted research prior to enrolling in the course. Each of the five teachers had unique contexts and questions that shaped their research experiences.

**Melissa:** As a thirteen-year teaching veteran, Melissa has lots of classroom experience. She taught fifth grade during the year she conducted teacher research. Her research question was, "How will asking open-ended questions, while holding small group or whole class discussions about literature, affect students' motivation, growth, and achievement?" At the conclusion of her year of teacher research, she took an official leave of absence from the classroom, anticipating the birth of her second child. However, she returned to work as a long-term substitute reading teacher for a few months at the beginning of the year following her teacher research. She has since had a third child and stays home with her children.

**Penny:** Penny is currently the pullout English as Second Language (ESL) teacher for an elementary school. This is her second year in that position, but during her year of teacher research, she was brand new to the school and to the position. Her teacher research foci included how fluency instruction influenced struggling ESL readers; specifically, how fluency affected comprehension of text. Presently, in addition to her ESL position duties, she chairs a new Response to Intervention team and as such, attends many new program trainings.

**Jackie:** Jackie was one of the English as Second Language (ESL) teachers for an elementary school during her research year. She examined how systematic word study impacted ESL students' classroom reading performance in regards to fluency, comprehension, writing, and motivation. Currently, she is one of 200 specially trained literacy coaches in her state working at the middle school level. Part of her job description includes helping teachers navigate the National Board Certification process.

**Allison:** Allison taught seventh grade English/language arts at an area middle school. She had recently won the state's teacher of the year honor. Her research question was, "How do quick writes affect the writing behaviors, attitudes, and skills of middle school students?" Currently, she is teaching teacher education courses at the same university where she completed a master's degree and has enrolled in a doctoral program.

**Jennifer:** Jennifer taught fifth grade during the year she conducted teacher research. Her teacher research examined the impact of systematic, leveled word study on the reading achievement of her fifth grade students. Currently, she teaches early

childhood education courses, both face-to-face and online, at a local community college.

These five teachers answered my initial questions and then went further in sharing their thoughts. They discussed the evolution in their thinking, their rationales for research and instruction, and the barriers that frustrated them in their past research and in their attempts to conduct more research. In addition, we formed an email discussion group where they read each others' responses, asked questions of each other, and made comments and clarifications about those responses. Together, we identified themes that appeared in their email responses. We analyzed the original email responses and the ongoing conversations that ensued. I created an original draft, organizing their comments into broad themes that emerged. I emailed the draft to all five participants. They responded to each other, offered further clarifications, comments, and insights, which I then incorporated into each successive draft. This cycle was continued until no one offered further comments. From their responses, the following three themes were identified: thinking about research differently, changing instruction, and valuing the process.

### *Thinking about Research Differently*

All five teachers shared that they experienced a shift in their understanding of what constituted research. This theme aligns with previous literature that highlights understanding the differences between "Research" and "research" (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Melissa summarized the initial understanding of different kinds of research:

I first thought that research was going to be "scientific" research like you do in Science Fair Projects with a control group and an experimental group. I soon found out that that was not how we were going to conduct the research.

Penny's thoughts were similar. She wrote, "When I started the research course I only thought of research as a scientist in a lab coat but it did not take long to realize that is only part of research."

Allison articulated:

In my mind, research was a concept reserved for a team of professionals who had the knowledge, expertise, tools, and access to conduct formal research within K-12 public educational settings. . . .It never occurred to me that I, a classroom teacher, could conduct research that not only benefited my students and my teaching, but also provided support and insights to other educators.

Jennifer came to anticipate the collection of data, finding particular usefulness in choosing a focus and watching students closely. She also began to consider multiple viewpoints regarding a single research question. She noted:



I actually have fond memories of the whole project itself. I remember specifically when a student would comment or do something that went with my project/research and I hurried to write it down or ask them to repeat exactly what they did. Kind of exciting and meaningful! I think my view of research has broadened to not just my view but to include others' views like administrators, parents, co-workers, etc. I NEVER even considered them a part of research before.

### *Changing Instruction*

As the teachers' new understanding of research emerged, so did their awareness of the impact of teacher research on instruction. This theme also echoed the theoretical framework supporting teacher research's potential to impact instruction and student learning (Allington, 2001; Henson, 1996; Hubbard & Power, 1999).

Melissa's new understandings included the importance of data and data collection and the resulting impact on students. She explained:

After doing the research, I gathered information about my students in a different way, analyzed it differently, and what I learned from what I was gathering helped me to be a better teacher to my students. Even in the middle of my project, my new ways of looking at students branched out to many other subjects. I found the triangulation of data to be compelling, [though] not a definitive answer to knowing that exactly what I did my research on made all the difference.

Allison articulated the impact of research on her teaching in the following response:

Becoming a researcher within my own classroom strengthened [my] convictions and provided me with the knowledge to research best practices, experiment with my pedagogy, and take risks with my students' learning. I cannot say that it happened overnight. Examining one's practice, I mean truly breaking down the art and science of one's teaching, requires a different mindset from that of a typical teacher. I believe strongly that in order for my students to grow and for my practice to improve, I must become a teacher researcher. While the knowledge and skill involved in classroom research is acquired through practice and over time, it is the hallmark of a teacher leader. Becoming a "teacher researcher," has changed how I plan for instruction, deliver instruction, and assess student learning.

Jackie also wrote about the impact of research on instruction for students:

[Teacher research] helps you make some assumptions based on more than instinct. You recognize strengths and weaknesses in your students and you can then revise your instruction to meet their needs. This is what affects growth. Teacher research looks at trends over time and guides us to stronger

instructional practices that benefit our students. It helps us find our own questions and then leads the search to our own answers. In that moment, with that group of students, in that particular scenario, we better understand our students, their needs, and ourselves.

All of the teachers spoke about the value of the research process and its impact on their instruction. They also reflected on the learning that came through reflection about the research topics and the research process.

### *Valuing the Process*

If these teachers valued teacher research so highly, why were they unable or unwilling to continue researching after it was no longer a requirement? One of the reasons for this absence of teacher research is simply change—change in schools, change in teaching levels or grades, or personal change, echoing previous observations about the ever-evolving role of the teacher (Fallon & Massey, 2008). Only Penny remained in the same teaching situation during the year following her teacher research study; however, it was only the second year for her in that position. She added more administrative responsibilities to her role and attended numerous trainings to learn those responsibilities. Melissa left teaching in order to raise her children. Of the other teachers, Jennifer taught at the community college and developed three or four new courses each semester. Allison accepted a one-year position at the university working with preservice teachers. Jackie changed schools and worked with teachers rather than students. These teachers' experiences are not generalizable to a larger population, thereby offering an explanation for why other teachers may not continue conducting research. However, their experiences are certainly not unique to only these five teachers. Finishing a master's degree often opens new doors to increased responsibilities and different positions, making continued research extremely challenging. Further, as all of them reminded me, just because they are not currently conducting research does not mean that they will not conduct research in the future. They explained that an intense, focused research project, coupled with the demands of graduate school, takes some recovery time. Allison explains why she is not currently conducting teacher research:

I do not think, however, that I can constantly be conducting research by collecting data, analyzing data, etc. . . .in a formal sense. The research process does take time and resources that are not always readily available to the classroom teacher. In other words, while I am constantly looking for ways to improve my practice and thus my students' learning, I cannot conduct formal research on a consistent basis. . .this goes back to the idea of the balancing act.

These teachers encouraged me, and teacher educators in general, not to relegate teacher research to a "either they are conducting research or they are not" dichotomy. The teachers expressed their beliefs that the usefulness was not in the specific topic, but in the research process, and that this process did not end at the conclusion of the formal teacher research project.



Melissa taught as a long-term reading specialist substitute for the first part of the year following her teacher research. She continued focusing on her original research question (using open-ended questions when discussing literature) with a new group of students. Data collection was informal, but new students gave her additional insights into the utility of open-ended questions and further justified the use of such questions. Jennifer was no longer able to use the topic of her research as she worked with college students. Instead, she found herself valuing the process of research. Due to her own value of the research process, she required mini research projects for her college students. Though they were not teacher research projects, they helped the college students build a foundation in reading scholarly articles and examining particular issues in a more systematic way.

Penny reflected, "As I think about research and the fact that it has been almost a year since I completed a graduate course about teacher research, I am amazed at how much of the information I still use." For example, Penny described observing students in much the same way as she had for her research project:

Before my research class, my notes on students were all over the place, but now I try to have a more focused observation pattern with my students, not just a bunch of notes without reason. I still keep two notebooks: one for K-2<sup>nd</sup> graders and one for 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders with all my students. Each day I have certain students I am observing. I gave the spelling inventory at the beginning of the year and will give it again in May to see how the students grow. . . . I now start looking for specific examples to see if the phonics work we are doing is helping. Today I had a student say "wholey" for whole and I knew for sure that he did not remember the silent e and how it works with a long vowel. In other words it is not transferring for this young man **today**. I know enough that I will not assume this is a problem until I see it in other places. I am going to watch that carefully with him to see if it was a one time thing and if my mini-review with him helped or do I need to dig a little deeper with him.

For Penny, her record keeping and observations changed because of what she came to understand about the research process. She looked for patterns, not individual occurrences, and she adapted her instruction based on her observations. She also continued to see opportunities for research, saying:

On several occasions this year I have become interested in doing research on other things like how does SES [socioeconomic status] interfere with learning? I could not help but think some teacher research here is needed to discover who is successful and what do they bring to the learning process.

Penny later noted that her interest in and ability to research was the reason she was asked to take on many of the new responsibilities at her school.

Jackie also valued the process of research and the ongoing learning gained through reflection:

I think learning and doing that kind of “self-study” has helped me reflect on my own instruction and the group with which I am working. I feel like in my current job, it helps me to ask better questions of the teachers with whom I am working so they can look closer at what they do and why they do it.

In a final example of the ongoing cycle of reflection promoted through conducting teacher research, Allison shared:

For me, the mindset of being a “teacher researcher” has lasted. I view my classroom each and every day through a different lens. . . .To understand myself as a teacher and learner, I must constantly reflect upon the knowledge I have gained as well as any misunderstandings and questions I still have regarding specific topics, issues, or concepts related to my practice. Through such reflection, the learner gleans greater understanding, allowing him/her to move forward in the learning process. Becoming a teacher researcher has perpetuated this transformation for me.

Though Allison was no longer conducting research in a formal way, she viewed the mindset of reflection as directly related to her teacher research and as crucial to her continued learning.

### **How Should Teacher Education Respond?**

The title of this paper asks the question, “Who is teacher research for and what is the point?” While the responses of the five educators described cannot be generalized to a larger population, they do provide insight about teacher research after coursework. It is clear that these teachers believe that they benefited from conducting teacher research. It is also clear that they learned a great deal from the process of teacher research. In their comments, we see evidence of three of the benefits of teacher research previously mentioned: learning about research (Burnaford et al., 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999), learning about students (Hubbard & Power, 1999), and improving classroom instruction (Allington, 2001; Henson, 1996). One teacher, Jennifer, mentioned sharing her findings with other teachers and colleagues to inform her research (Burnaford et al.; Hubbard & Power). What is new, then, from these teachers’ insights? It is that, for these five teachers, these benefits exist *beyond* conducting the formal teacher research.

Certainly, at the teacher education level, teachers should be encouraged to continue using teacher research beyond the requirements of coursework. This may require ongoing support from teacher educators, working with school and district personnel. The literature details barriers and challenges faced by teachers when conducting research within the support network of a course (e.g., Lassonde & Israel, 2008; Massey & Duffy, 2004), but we also know that teachers will face even greater barriers to conducting research beyond the coursework. Coursework provides a supportive environment full of others conducting teacher research, but it is essential that we begin talking about and preparing for future barriers once the teachers leave this

encouraging environment. This preparation might include having teachers conduct research in teams as part of their coursework, helping teachers establish a support-network plan for the time following their teacher research, and/or encouraging teachers to present and publish their teacher research to establish an authentic audience beyond the classroom.

Teacher educators also need to make a commitment to ongoing support of teachers conducting research. While we can encourage individuals to conduct research within their schools, we as teacher educators need to work more closely with schools and districts to facilitate ongoing research. Allison commented, "For me, it is not a question of whether or not I should or could do research in my classroom. It is the logistics, time, materials, resources, support." Ongoing partnerships with higher education provide resources for helping teachers balance the teaching and researching responsibilities, even at the most basic level. Penny shared that since she is no longer a graduate student, she cannot access peer-reviewed journals and articles. To do so would require lengthy application processes and/or payment of ongoing fees. The simple issue of access to others' research inhibits Penny's reflection about what others have done and what she, in turn, should do. This support should not be about us as teacher educators doing the research or getting another publication out of the classroom research. It should be about enabling teachers by giving them the necessary support to implement change.

However, what if teachers do not continue to conduct teacher research? How will we know if a teacher research course is successful? As previously noted, this has been absent from the literature (Levin & Merritt, 2006b). Based on the feedback from these teachers, I propose that there are other ways to think about the success of teacher research courses. Other valuable outcomes of teacher research from these teachers' comments include reflecting more on their own practice, continuing to see problems as potential questions, creating more systematic ways of collecting and tracking data, reading more research, and being better "consumers" of the research that they read. These outcomes can be observed long after the research is done. Many teacher education studies have tracked the impact of methods courses on teachers after they have completed the coursework. More research examining the impact of teacher research on teachers after they have finished their formal research is needed.

The teachers in this paper posed another issue that teacher educators need to address. After reading a draft of the paper, the teachers wondered if there were certain characteristics that make up a teacher researcher. Can all teachers become researchers? Should all teachers conduct research? How often? How formally? These questions point teacher educators to the importance of teacher dispositions. Dispositions (e.g., habits of thinking and action), and not just knowledge, are critical components of effective teachers (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005; Pearson, 2007). We need to examine the role teacher dispositions play in teacher research, both under university supervision and beyond university supervision.

Allison offered one final challenge to teachers in her comments, "If we truly want to change the face of education, teachers must step up to the plate to conduct and share their own research. . . . Teachers can bring an authenticity to research that those outside the classroom cannot." The authenticity of sharing research is needed at the teacher education level, as well. As teacher educators, we need to be dedicated to improving and studying our teaching practices, just as we encourage students to study their instruction.

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