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A View of Research From Practice: Voices of Teachers

The dynamics of the teacher–researcher relationship—whether embodied in a real time school inquiry or in a writer–reader connection through a piece of literature—are complex and have a significant impact on the meaningful transmission of knowledge between researchers and practitioners. Studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that teachers have a belief system that can be resistant to thinking differently; however, researchers contribute to underlying tensions when they do not pay sufficient attention to the needs of the schools and teachers they study, speak and write in researcher language, or leave the work of professional development to education bureaucrats. This article gives voice to novice and veteran teachers as they talk about the effects of research and researchers on their practice and the obstacles that prevent stronger connections. Teachers’ expectations for a mutually respectful professional learning relationship

figure prominently in the reflections they offer about what works and what does not in closing the research–practice gap.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE research–practice connection—whether embodied in real time school inquiry or in a writer–reader connection through a published article—are complex, and teachers’ perceptions of educational research and researchers have a significant impact on the meaningful transmission of knowledge between these two. Studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that teachers are resistant to research and to thinking differently about their practice; however, educational research contributes to this resistance when it minimizes questions around relevance, presentation, and accessibility.

This article gives voice to teachers, both novice and veteran, as they talk about educational research. During the spring of 2006, 15 Chicago-area teachers from a variety of backgrounds were interviewed about their experiences with and their perceptions of educational research. Ten taught in elementary schools (one is now a district reading specialist, another an assistant principal) and five in high schools. Teacher

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experience ranged from first-year to preparing for retirement. All were recommended by colleagues who characterized them as educators with something valuable to say about what is commonly known as *the research–practice gap*.

Clearly, a sample of 15 teachers cannot claim to be generalizable. Nonetheless, what became particularly striking as interviews continued, and what arguably provides a deeper authority to these reflections, was the commitment to ongoing learning in service to the profession and to students that each of these teachers personified. Shaheena, the reading specialist, defined teaching as “what it means to be a learner,” noting, “As you teach students you are learning about what’s going to make them [students] better and what’s going to make you better.” She acknowledged the problems teachers faced, but said, “For people like myself who are hungry [for learning] those are just challenges.” Peter, a veteran secondary math teacher, makes the time to sit down and read “ ’cause I learn things. That’s why I became a teacher, so I can learn things.” Faren, a middle school teacher who transferred to a professional development school for the learning opportunities, calls himself a “learning junkie.” Nora, who teaches secondary social studies, talked about “get[ting] a little stir crazy every winter . . . the kids are complacent and I’m a little stale, and I’ll go look for things,” and Catherine, an elementary reading coach, joked, “I self educate for fun. . . . I read when I’m camping.”

And they aren’t waiting around to be directed. Arlene, a veteran elementary teacher, described it as “networking in all kinds of situations . . . it’s kind of like being a busybody.” From coauthoring articles to searching out professional development to action research, all of these teachers are lifelong learners, as they hope their students will become. Their perspectives on educational research, I would argue, have a particular authority as a result.

Disconnects

The literature (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Huberman, 1989; Kennedy, 1997) tells us

that teachers do not value educational research—whether presented in journals and books or via professional development—because of what they perceive as its lack of relevance to their own practices and classrooms. This was echoed in interviews, although district-imposed workshops (which may or may not be built around credible research) came in for special scorn because those usually involved significant amounts of teacher time and were non-negotiable. Anne described them: “I’m spoken to, you know, and just told this is how you should do it, and oftentimes I feel like the person presenting could never do it in my classroom. . . . The frustration level is that we’re assumed to be . . . empty vessels.”

Sarada is a secondary English teacher, experienced with research through her own studies and writing, and believes, “It’s important to nurture practice and research, in combination. There are things that people can see outside of the school building that we inside cannot see, because we are dealing with the everyday.” But she criticized the “think tank mold” in which “we’ll think and then you go ahead and try it and see if it works and while you’re trying it we’re going to go ahead and revamp the whole system.” While appreciating the student teachers that universities send to her high school, she wishes that more professors would take the time to come in themselves and “see things played out, and how teachers use theory. . . . It would give them some context [that otherwise] gets lost.”

Brian, a first grade teacher, felt that since becoming a teacher he has become more aware of the importance of personality and approach. He “read a lot [in graduate school], and everything sounds great, but it’s not taking into account the different kinds of classrooms there are. I have a hard time thinking of any article that’s really addressed personality, how you carry yourself, how you react to students. . . .” Peter explained, “You’re always comparing [research] to what you see in your particular classroom on that day, and if the research doesn’t match what you see on that day, it doesn’t click for you. . . . That’s not what it’s like in my classroom. . . .”

Schools’ organization does not lend itself to collaborative research-based inquiry either.

Catherine, as a reading coach, feels the effect of “closed door teaching . . . teachers kind of like it; they’re used to it. Getting teachers to open the door [can be] a self-esteem issue; they don’t want people thinking they don’t know what they are doing.” Peter was emphatic: “It’s really clear to me that there is [a] safety issue.” Teachers need to feel safe enough to be “vulnerable,” in front of kids, colleagues, and researchers, “because you’re not setting yourself up as the expert if you’re willing to learn things from other people.” The current accountability climate adds another dimension, adds Theresa, a secondary English teacher:

In general any time teachers are given information that kind of implicates them in whatever negative [is happening], they are very quick to say, “Well, people don’t realize what we deal with here.” There is an instinct of defensiveness. . . . It’s hard to hear “Based on this set of numbers, . . . you need to make a change.”

Giving Research a Bad Name: Professional Development

For many practicing teachers, professional development (PD) is a primary avenue of exposure to what is presented as *educational research*, and it is fair to question just how much these activities encourage appreciation for research or interest in further exploration. Frequently, PD offerings involve claims made on behalf of methods, materials, curriculums, or techniques that are held out as effective in boosting student achievement. Such presentations may or may not be based on credible research findings, but for many teachers the two become merged, and the frustration and impatience aimed at professional developers winds up extending to research and researchers as well. As Trish, a teacher turned assistant principal, pointed out: “In workshops, I hear people say, ‘the research says, the research says’ . . . and I always want to say, well ‘the research’ can say anything you want it to say.”

Teachers identified a lack of coherence and organization to PD that was linked to what they

experienced as a relentless pressure around improving test scores. Sarada pointed out that teacher assessment is based on standardized test results, which doesn’t encourage risk-taking when “I have to get these kids to 24 [ACT].” Mary’s story is especially illustrative. Her school, Andrews Elementary (a pseudonym), had to go through a course of “mid-tier professional development” because, although it was not formally at risk, its test scores were “not high enough to be free and clear” and needed to be “bumped up.” Teachers were informed on a January Tuesday that they needed to be at a local high school on Saturday for a workshop, that materials were contingent on their presence, and that participation was expected. Organizers told them, “We just got the money . . . we didn’t have time to organize.” It appeared to Mary that a lot of money was spent to bring in presenters, including “reading experts” from Colorado, who told teachers from assorted schools to implement particular changes to their curriculums—with “no differentiation” among schools acknowledged or addressed: “It was ridiculous. . . . If you give me all this stuff in January [shaking head]. . . . I already have my curriculum set up, and I go to a meeting. . . . They’re giving us yearlong programs, and vocabulary books, and I already have a vocabulary book.” Workshops and preparation for the upcoming school year continued, and then “Lo and behold, September comes and we meet AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress],” and Andrews no longer has to implement the mid-tier curriculum. “We just got dropped from the list and we never heard from them again . . . thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars for nothing.” She later ran into teachers whose schools were not so lucky and listened to them complain about how “chaotic” the program continued to be. She still has her materials in a closet: “Some of it is really nice stuff. . . . I’m afraid to throw it out.”

Shaheena reflected on PD from the provider end, and shared an anecdote that reinforced the wisdom of “knowing your audience.” She arrived as the presenter for a one-shot meeting with teachers at an elementary school in a struggling neighborhood. The student population was diverse and primarily low-income; teachers were

mostly African American. She brought an article on the *million word gap* (the disparity between vocabularies of advantaged and disadvantaged three-year-olds; see Hart & Risley, 2003) that she intended to share with the teaching staff to underscore the importance of the strategy she was demonstrating. The teachers were “extremely offended by the research,” hearing “our kids will never learn” and little else. The whole situation was “very painful . . . some of those teachers had attended the school. . . . One teacher said ‘Do you know where you are?’” African American herself, Shaheena responded empathically, but realized that this was small comfort. She knows now not to “bombard [teachers] with research initially” but, instead, to find out and “speak to whatever their needs are . . . to start there.”

Other teachers complained of sitting through “technique *du jour*” workshops instead of being able to choose challenging and relevant PD. Nora spoke for many in characterizing district-mandated options as “kind of like banging your head against a wall . . . not very productive.” “And because of the focus on test scores,” said Trish, “schools jump between ‘a million different programs’ with the promise of ‘this is the answer, based on what this researcher says.’” Although it may not be fair, it is likely that, for many educators, PD workshops become the embodiment of educational research, for better or (often) for worse.

Not Ready to Be Seated with the Grown-Ups: Teacher Research

Garrison (1988) noted “the existing mechanism for the production and distribution of scientific knowledge about pedagogy . . . effectively eliminate[s] teachers from the active process of discovering and distributing knowledge, assigning them instead to a passive role as consumers of the final scientific product” (p. 488). Lisa, Faren, Trish, and Nora are all involved with the Chicago affiliate of the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI), an organization that vigorously supports action research in the classroom and educator participation in policymaking. Other

teachers have participated in research projects independently. Their consensus was that teacher research was perceived as a less worthy counterpart to traditional research (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Huberman, 1996).

Even some of the teacher–researchers were uncertain that their contributions were valuable. As Lisa put it, “I am still shocked that my research has an audience; that others can learn from my practice and reflection. . . . I am realizing how deep is my own belief that I do not hold expertise.” Peter found it difficult to recognize that he was, indeed, engaged in research, despite his coauthorship of a paper on his department’s curriculum development work with well-known math scholars. As he put it, “When I think of research I think of more quantitative things . . . this is [just] telling our stories . . . I don’t see myself as a researcher.” When pressed as to why not, he began to laugh. “Maybe it’s that ‘expert’ difficulty again . . . the researchers are experts and we’re all afraid to open our mouths.” Because the work came out of the dailiness of the classroom and because it involved “reflection, and just taking the time to think about what you’re doing,” it didn’t seem to be real research. For Nora, the current preoccupation with numbers is a factor: “What schools are good, how we stack up—I look at that as received more legitimately. People know what to do with that.” Her own work with students around negotiating classroom discussion provides valuable insights about fostering crucial skills, but “Do people really care that kids are able to articulate these ideas?”

Sarada, adamant that “we [teachers] need to think it’s important enough to insert ourselves [into the research community],” described her presentation of a paper at a university conference as “weird. . . . The first question I got was, ‘What university are you affiliated with?’ . . . I felt instantly like, am I not good enough to be here?” Trish attended an American Educational Research Association (AERA) session on teaching action research in 2003; her most vivid memory is of hearing teachers repeatedly referred to as “they” and feeling that the presenters had

“a really bad view of teachers, which is sad, because this is who you’re working with.” The panel’s impression of teacher research seemed to be “‘It’s not real research . . . this has limited value.’ Well, it’s got value to the 30 kids who are in front of me. In my case, my research certainly had value to six classrooms times 30 . . . 180 kids. I would consider that to be fairly significant.”

Because there continues to be the perception that researchers are less interested in teacher concerns than in their own interests, and that teaching in general is less prestigious than research (one need only consider criteria for tenure at most universities), it is not surprising that teachers who are interested in classroom research look to each other for support. Lisa describes it this way:

The fact that these intelligent, dedicated, experienced teachers were finding value in my work made me realize I do have something to share. . . . There is some saying that a bird does not sing because it has answers, it sings because it has questions. I feel like I have lots of questions and action research has taught me how to explore them and share my findings.

Avenues for Engagement

For the majority of the teachers with education degrees, their undergraduate work provided little helpful exposure to research. Those who were required to engage in research activities felt that their understanding was enhanced by “getting your hands dirty,” as Shaheena put it. Her clinical teacher prep program required her to test a classroom strategy and write up her results, and the experience demystified research for her. Theresa had to submit research memos to her site supervisors and “link the research that we had studied over our summer to what was actually happening in our classrooms,” which kept her “grounded” because “there are reasons why some of these things are actually happening.” The benefits continue, according to Mary: “If you had to do a research project, you [end up] a better reader of research.”

In the Trenches

A mentor, coach, or researcher who comes into a classroom can facilitate meaningful learning experiences for a teacher. Kennedy (2002) quotes one educator whose math mentor stopped her from correcting students:

She just let them make mistakes, and then they saw the mistakes themselves. And then they started to question each other. It was so much more powerful. I think that was the day I went home and cried. I went, “Oh my gosh. This is bigger than I thought it was. This is a major change.” (p. 366)

In confronting research–practice tensions, respect for the classroom and a willingness to take risks will go a long way. Shaheena captured what teachers described as a critical component for learning:

It’s one thing to talk about something; it’s another thing to be able to do it. . . . Being in the trenches with teachers is critical; you’ve got to get in there and get your hands dirty for them to see you as one of them. And I have the research in hand when I’m talking to them. It validates my thinking about what good teaching is, and it allows me to have something concrete to share with them.

Visitors to the classroom learn as well. A faculty member from a local graduate program in child development has observed Stacy’s work with students and marveled, “I don’t know how you do it . . . all of those kids in one room and it’s so noisy but they don’t seem to mind.” For Stacy, this is her everyday environment, but for the observer:

He had not been in a school like this before. I guess he works a lot in the suburbs. . . . He said, “This is really opening things up for me, and making me think of things in different ways.” I really enjoyed the fact that he came in and he looked, and took the time to try and figure out what’s going on and then help us make adaptations.

Catherine firmly believes “a lot of teachers want to try more and they want to make the shift . . . but they want that support, in their room, with their kids.” Both Theresa and Peter have had the opportunity to work with researchers who spent time at their high school, and both found their investment rewarding. When asked what made his work with math researchers so useful, Peter replied, “They spent time here, they offered practical suggestions, they validated the stuff that we’d been doing as opposed to just talking at us, they looked seriously at what we had; they helped us focus this better.” They avoided terms like “best practice” and built on what the department had established. “We all like to work with someone who’s going to validate us. . . . ‘This is good stuff—think about this now.’” Theresa put an irreverent twist on her assertion that researchers had an “obligation to make every effort” to be at research sites, saying:

If I have five ideas about how I would use John Dewey if he were to come back from the grave, I would have his narrow butt in my classroom as often as I could get him here. Maybe it’s just once a quarter and then he could go back to wherever and write about it, but yeah, in an ideal world, sure . . . get him in here.

Often, however, the experience is different. Many (most?) schools don’t have the resources to bring in researchers to work with teachers. For many districts, the focus is on “quick and dirty” PD that addresses perceived system-wide problems (often related to test scores). The coaches and consultants who visit classrooms and observe teachers are often focused on test taking strategies they present as research-based. Anne, for example, heard about differentiated instruction (and little else, despite teacher push-back) from the same speaker on three separate (and mandated) occasions at her elementary school:

Every time he comes he talks about multiple intelligences [which Stacy observed is “thrown at you every time you turn around”] and we

have to come up with strategies for each intelligence . . . nice for a culminating project, but what about the other 16 weeks? He had nothing else to say.

The Leadership Factor

Principals and superintendents who resist pigeonholing teachers as passive consumers of research may reap unexpected dividends, and teachers are quick to give credit to school leadership for encouraging their development. For Ann, a secondary science teacher/department chair, an administration’s “openness and permissiveness, if you will . . . a certain willingness to go with ideas” is key to creating a culture where teachers can grow. Brian and Arlene, who are colleagues, see their principal as encouraging, and even challenging, in terms of their professional growth. Brian, for example, mentioned a science program that he wanted to try when no one else on his team did, and his principal connected him with a math and science specialist who brought “tons of stuff” to use in his classroom. Arlene laughingly described the principal “pushing stuff” towards her. She says that he knows she will not say no, and that he trusts her. Ultimately, this all provides her with more resources for herself and for students. On the other side, Catherine described her school’s involvement with a school improvement organization and the efforts to create a “critical mass” of teacher buy-in. Things had been moving along, with fruitful work being done through researcher-teacher collaboration, but the principal retired, was replaced by someone she labeled “corrupt,” and the partnership foundered. “I didn’t know how much a principal impacted teaching. . . . It’s amazing how long it takes to build a school up and how swiftly it can crumble.”

“There’s gotta be a reason this is happening.”

Ann offered a fascinating example of what can happen when a school environment supports teacher inquiry. The science department at her suburban high school had a problem. There were

“8–10 kids [in chemistry and physics honors classes] who weren’t cutting it and nowhere to put them. . . . I started wondering ‘Why are these kids not doing ok?’” Biology honors students had routinely been placed in honors chemistry and physics, but after conversations with her staff and examinations of student profiles, she began to wonder about the correlation between math and chemistry/physics achievement, given the amount of math proficiency needed for these two sciences, explaining, “When you look at the correlation between math and chemistry/physics, then you get a better fit.” The suspicion that average achievement in math—regardless of achievement in biology—should result in placement in regular chemistry or physics classes has led to placement decisions that are “75% better, more accurate.” Science and math teachers are now meeting to coordinate placements, and preliminary examination of potential correlations between math, science, and languages has begun.

We’re Over Here! Paying a Little Attention to Practice and Policy Implications

Teachers actively involved with action research and organizations like TNLI feel particularly frustrated by Chicago district administrators’ lack of interest in their work and in the insights they could offer about programs and practices. Arlene, with over 30 years of experience as an elementary school teacher and 10 years as a mentor in the district mentoring program, gave a short answer when asked if the feedback she provided about the mentoring program went anywhere: “No.” Trish sought out a teacher research organization because, “If you look at [the district], where do teachers have input? Our input is not valued.” She perceives administrators as looking for interventions or programs that they can apply system-wide—“going to scale” as fast as possible—and “we are saying, don’t do that.”

Stacy teaches in a school that has dispensed with textbooks and made a point of providing theatre, music, and art activities. When asked if the district was paying attention to the fact that

their scores are steadily rising, she laughed and said, “No. . . . They pay attention to what’s going to make them look good right there and then.” She thinks the low profile is probably smarter anyway. Ann, in a nearby suburban school that provides strong administrative support, believes, “In Chicago you never would have had that. It’s too bureaucratic: ‘Stick to business and do what you’re supposed to do.’” Arlene contends Chicago could do things differently:

They could do something to give teachers more of a voice and more of a future. . . . There should be a dialogue. . . . I think that the system has become more punitive. . . . Everything’s sped up to get it done fast. People are afraid of speaking up. Principals are afraid to speak up to superintendents, superintendents are afraid to speak to legislators. Teachers are afraid to speak up to principals. . . . They’re afraid they’re going to lose their jobs. . . . Maybe it’s a survival thing.

One of TNLI’s goals is “to get our research valued,” Faren commented, because teachers feel so disconnected from policy discussions. TNLI fellows in Delaware meet monthly with the state Secretary of Education, but “In Illinois it’s different, from a power standpoint.” Faren did not see the Illinois State Board of Education as particularly powerful, given their ceding many curriculum decisions to districts: “If you had their ear would it make much difference?” Delaware teachers are “able to make some change because they have that connection. . . . I wonder sometimes how much interest the people who make the decisions have in research; I don’t know if research is seen as particularly valuable in Chicago.”

The current accountability climate and its manifestations also may preclude much appreciation for the work of teachers who are actively exploring research options, whether their own or through existing research and researchers. Catherine asked, “What is the city determining as important? When they dropped writing [from the testing regimen], how many teachers will be teaching it?” She explained that coaching priorities tended towards which test scores needed

attention, and added, “They say, yeah, we care [about the whole child], but actions speak louder than words.”

Reflections

As Dewey (1929) recognized long ago, “formal theory” is useful to the practitioner primarily in terms of shaping their perceptions rather than as rules that “should” be applied (pp. 28–30). Hiebert et al. (2002) noted, “Theories offer abstract knowledge that transcend particular classrooms and contexts and ensure that the knowledge rises above idiosyncratic technique” (p. 7). Somehow, this gets lost in the crush of information that overwhelms teachers who have a difficult time seeing the forest for the trees. Some do recognize that, despite the desire for “applied” research, there is a value to simply thinking differently. As Sarada put it, “We don’t see the big picture.” Theresa believes “It’s crazy for people to get their knickers in a twist” over the different roles, which she too sees as complementary: “We think differently; we are trained to think differently . . . and that’s ok. . . . I need researchers because I sometimes don’t know how to pose the right questions or I don’t know how to access the data the way researchers can.”

Educational research—whether theoretical or empirical—may not offer concrete solutions to teachers’ dilemmas (or set out to), but it can provoke thinking differently about educational problems. Greater familiarity with the process of research is likely to promote greater comfort with research in general, particularly if teachers are encouraged to explore their own interests throughout their careers. Although these conclusions seem obvious, the fact remains that research, as many teachers experience it, becomes distorted into “how tos” and “ivory tower thinking,” rather than serving as springboards for experimentation and growth. What can be done?

According to Shaheena, “more teachers are going to have to be involved in research to make research more interesting for teachers.” She sees a clear need for consultants like herself to bring more research to classrooms and to get teachers

to see themselves as researchers, in the process building interest in stronger connections between the two. “We don’t see qualitative research as research. If we’re collecting anecdotal research, that could lead to more research. If we’re examining what we do, that is research. *What are you interested in? What do you want to know?*”

There are accessible supports for teachers to explore these questions: journals such as *Theory Into Practice*, which serves an intermediary function between practice and research, is one; organizations like the Chicago Foundation for Education, which shares award-winning teachers’ lesson plans (“a promising approach for teachers . . . to develop and test hypotheses and theories about the way . . . particular lessons facilitate [and undermine] students’ learning;” Hiebert et al., 2002, p. 8) on their website; action research resources such as TNLI, and college texts that frequently synthesize research for practitioners, to name a few. Hiebert et al. further remind us “Teachers . . . need to change their view that teaching is a personal and private activity and adopt the more risky but rewarding view that teaching is a professional activity that can be continuously improved if it is made public and examined openly.”

Theresa echoes this claim, saying, “Conversations with colleagues are a really powerful way to demystify the relationship between research and practice.” Further, experimentation (as with recipes) can be fruitful. Stacy noted, “I don’t just throw stuff out . . . [I think] ‘What would I have to do to make it work?’ and try it 3–4 times, and do modifications.”

On the other hand, in order to make that forest a bit more visible, researchers who are concerned about “won’t work in my classroom” teacher attitudes may want to keep in mind that the vast majority of teachers experience educational research through the agendas of professional developers/workshop providers, or administrators panicked about test scores, or teacher educators who have 35 undergraduate students with whom they must cover a semester’s worth of material. How many research findings or theories have turned into one more addition to a bag of tricks? Once research is out there, does the research

community have any obligation to keep track of or try to influence how it is disseminated?

The educators who contributed to this article sense that these are matters raised mostly among themselves, and if they are fortunate, by their principals or other administrators. They would like to see the conversation expand to include researchers, along with the district officials and professional developers who most often serve as the intermediaries between research and practice.

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