

A Room of One's Own: Teaching and Learning to Teach Through Inquiry

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that, in the best of all possible worlds, every teacher would engage in teacher-research. In order to become a teacher-researcher, those who teach will require extra resources. We propose that teacher educators can provide a substantial resource by offering the services of a teacher education student to assist practicing teacher-researchers in their efforts. Ultimately, the preservice teachers may gain the most from such a relationship.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929/1957) Virginia Woolf says that rather than deliver a nugget of truth about women and writing, she is able only to offer an opinion upon one minor point: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (p. 4). At least two crucial metaphors are at work here. The first centers on the notion of money. Certainly, if one is to write, one must be supported with resources of some kind because writing rarely makes one financially self-sufficient, especially in the early stages. One must also have the resources to gain the needed supplies to continue.

The second metaphor (the more important one) turns on the conception of "room." Of course, Woolf was referring to a physical room--a place with four walls--in the passage quoted above. But it is obvious that she was also conveying the idea of "artistic room"; that is, freedom from suffocating demands and freedom to experiment.

As we began to stretch Ms. Woolf's metaphor on room and money, it seemed to us that her remarkable essay, written over 60 years ago, related well to what teachers must do in modern schools. As a result, we paraphrased Woolf as follows: *teachers must have money and a room of their own if they are to teach*. Putting aside the many metaphors for teaching that this statement invokes, not the least of which is the notion that teaching is like writing fiction, we can examine the money and room metaphors with reference not only to the teacher but also to the teacher-as-researcher.

We believe that most of what passes as educational research today occupies an uncomfortable middle ground; the research is neither "basic" enough to be theoretically interesting nor "applied" enough to be of much use to teachers. Many teachers have discovered that action research provides answers for questions that are relevant to their professional lives and their classrooms. McKernan (1987) defines action research as "a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings"--that which "invites the practitioner to improve his performance through studying his work" (p. 6). Consequently, it is no wonder that teacher-

researchers find their own research projects to be both useful and theoretically compelling. Berthoff (1987) suggests that we have enough information about teaching and learning and that it is time to begin to use this information. We tend to disagree: what we already know about education is disjointed and misdirected. We do agree with Berthoff's belief that educational research should concern itself with the questions of teachers.

As a result of a movement involve teachers in research, the way has been cleared for practicing educators to uncover what they want to know. However, if teachers are to conduct their own research in the classroom, the conditions under which they now work must change to accommodate such a demanding endeavor. Certainly, the administrative elements standing over the teacher can move aside, thus giving teachers more room, and perhaps universities can engage teachers in teacher-research in continuing education classes, as we have done at the University of Houston. But it is unlikely that this will be enough. Busy teachers, in order to conduct research and write, need more resources.

Perhaps teacher-researchers may be offered some of the resources needed by having an aide, but how could we possibly hope to finance enough aides for teachers who hope to embark upon a research project? One possible step in this direction involves a requirement in the state of Texas that all preservice teachers conduct 45 hours of observation in public schools. If a preservice teacher assisted in a classroom involved in a research project for at least 45 hours, some of the needed resources might be provided for that teacher-researcher.

At the University of Houston, we always attempt to place our student observers in schools where past students have had positive experiences. However, because we cannot specify the individual teachers (the school administration makes that decision) we can never be sure of the kind of experience our students will have. While many of our teachers-to-be at the University of Houston describe their experiences in the schools as rich and engaging or as ones in which long-lasting friendships developed, others report less-than-positive experiences. Recently, a teacher education student with whom we worked wrote the following passage in her observation journal.

On my initial visit to Creekdale [names are changed], I was not made to feel welcome or unwelcome. I arrived at 7:30 in the morning, and none of the office staff knew anything about why I was there. The principal arrived and he apologized that he had forgotten my visit until the previous day. It was 8:30 when I was assigned to my classroom for observation. Mrs. Apple was in the middle of a lesson, so I sat at a table in the back of the room. I understood that she was busy on my initial arrival, but she never in all of four visits that I was there introduced me to her class. On my fourth visit a new student was brought to Mrs. Apple's class. At recess, she explained that she did not mind getting a new student, but she did not like the fact that the office staff had interrupted her in the middle of the lesson to bring him to her class when the office had known about him far in advance. I felt that this was probably the same way she felt about me.

In the fall of 1992, we began a program that we believe will help teacher researchers find the room to research while providing our preservice teachers with a role model who embodies reflective practice. By placing preservice teachers with teacher-researchers who share a common curricular interest, we hope to provide teacher-researchers with extra

resources with which to conduct their inquiry and preservice teachers with mentors who engage in inquiry-oriented teaching.

In this paper, we first discuss how classroom inquiry can assist the preservice teacher in understanding the work of professional educators. We then describe the results of our first semester of placing preservice teachers with teacher researchers. Finally, we report the results of an assessment of our program and the strategies we will use to improve it.

Assisting in Reflection on Teaching

The literature in teacher education has grappled with the problem of meaningful observations and student teaching. For example, Cochran-Smith (1991) argued that teacher education has not taken advantage of those teachers who hope to alter existing practices--those teachers who "teach against the grain." Instead, she suggested that the best way to educate prospective teachers is to place them with experienced teachers who hope to work for school reform. We wonder, however, what reform such teachers wish for and how they propose to enact such reform? School reform is a vague goal. Preservice teachers and teacher-researchers may gain more by working together in action research projects: beginners who are learning to teach will see evidence of a reflective practitioner in the midst of experimentation, discovery, and change. It is much more likely that preservice teachers will note the relationship between teacher thinking and educational reform if they see phenomena first-hand that result in the change (or perhaps absence of change) in teaching practice.

Furthermore, by assisting a teacher-researcher the preservice teacher will gain rich, experiential learning. Letiche (1988) makes clear the advantages of this type of learning:

Experiential learning can be defined as not merely abstract: it is the learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. Experiential learning typically involves not merely observing the phenomena being studied but also doing something with it such as testing the dynamics of the reality to learn more about it, or applying the theory learned to deliver some desired result. Not abstraction or observation alone, but cognitive activity coupled to (appropriate) contextual action is what takes place (p. 17).

Pine (1992) made a similar suggestion: observing without a purpose is perhaps as dangerous as not observing at all. Purposeful observation is the hallmark of the preservice teacher's work with a teacher-researcher.

The Importance of Early Field Experience

The early field experience is often considered to be a critical event in the education of teachers (Goodman, 1985). Yet, Goodman argued that the importance of the early field experience has not typically led teacher educators to examine the quality of the experience. Instead, according to Goodman, teacher educators have focused on legal and logistical design questions. While these issues are important to teacher educators, they can detract from the pedagogical influence of early field experiences.

However, it is difficult not to wonder about the preservice teacher's first experience "on the other side." For instance, exactly what does this impressionable experience actually

teach? Zeichner (1981-82) argued that "the critical question with regard to field-based experiences is not whether such direct experiences with children should occur or for how long . . . The major issue here is . . . The *quality* of the experience that results . . . No attempt has been made to address the nature or quality of the experience itself" (p. 1). He worried that modeled practices and attitudes automatically become accepted by students placed in early field experiences. Thus, preservice teachers may acquire "cookbook recipes," accepting methods at face value, since they seem to work for veteran teachers. This may dangerously perpetuate school practices that do not benefit students, stagnating the system as students who do not question become teachers who do not question. Research has historically supported the notion that student teachers do not easily deviate from the practices seen during student teaching (Copas, 1984; Seperson & Joyce, 1973; Yee, 1969; Zeichner, 1980; Copas, 1984). More recently the importance of the relationship between the preservice teacher and the cooperating teacher has been discussed by Piland and Anglin (1993) and Williams and Graham (1992). By accepting this importance, we move on to the question, "What are quality experiences and how can we be assured that our students gain such quality experiences?"

We have grounded the answer to the first question, "what are quality experiences," on the notion of reflection. The students who leave our university should have acquired the three attitudes that Dewey (1933) saw as prerequisite to reflective action: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness is seen as the ability to examine one's own beliefs (even those most cherished) and one's actions. If they are found lacking, one must search for something better. A reflective teacher always listens and learns and seeks out better ways. Burton (1986), a teacher-researcher, describes how this questioning attitude evolved in his writing project:

I moved from merely remembering impressions of Alan to a point in which I began to raise tentative questions, use my imagination to reflect on the *potential* meanings of Alan and his written work, and finally to intentionally seek out more encounters with him in a purposeful manner. At that point, I became engaged in the process of *disciplined reflection*. (p. 722)

He further wrote:

Reflection is not an act of looking backward to what is known, nor merely remembering. Rather, it is an "engagement of impressions" that results in the illumination of layers of meaning. (p. 723)

Responsibility, the second prerequisite proposed by Dewey, is closely related because it requires teachers to tie what they do in the classroom to their vision of "what kind of world they want to live in" and why. They morally connect their world (the classroom) with the "real world" into which they will send their students. Decisions made in the classroom are based upon the responsibility they feel to their current students, as well as to society and to the students as they will be. Again, they always question. Burton (1986) suggested how action research serves this purpose:

Action . . . is the content of reflection. It gives reflection substance and grounding. It helps to keep us intellectually honest and allows us to not only *think* ethically, but

a chance to *be* ethical. In this way, both action and reflection are forward moving. (p. 723)

The third trait Dewey saw in reflective teachers is wholeheartedness. Teachers open themselves to a professional life of examination, particularly self-examination, never allowing themselves to settle into one way of teaching or classroom management by declaring that "finally, I've found the best way." Although often these teachers are excellent, they never sit back and accept accolades. Instead, they always question if there is a better way--with their whole hearts.

Becher and Ade (1982) found that modeling good practice necessarily did not improve the performance ratings of students in early field experiences. Feedback was found to be important. Although observers are not in student teaching positions and are rarely in a position to receive specific feedback on lessons taught, teachers who engaged in reflection of the type we discuss here seem always to be engaged in dialogue that can be seen as self-feedback. They are modeling how they give feedback to themselves, and the observer becomes a vicarious learner in this process.

How can we find practical examples of excellence coupled with reflection for preservice observation? Classroom teacher involvement in research projects seems to indicate that pairing students in teacher education with teacher-researchers may be an answer. At times the teachers in our project were reflective before they began their research project--at times, the reported project had an almost "born again" quality to its narration. By the end, most of our teacher-researchers echoed the feelings stated by McConaghy (1986):

One of the things that has kept teaching alive and exciting for me over the past couple of years has been the experience of being a teacher-researcher within my own classroom. I found that researching as a way of knowing became an adventure in learning I had not previously experienced. However, it was not until recently, when I began to reflect on some of the things that happened during the research year, that I realized the tremendous impact this experience has had on me as a teacher and learner. It allowed me the opportunity to construct and to build my own knowledge about some of the things I was doing in the classroom and to build this knowledge in such a way that it helped me to understand children and learning more fully. Because of this I know it has helped me to become a more effective teacher. (p. 724)

We believe there is an answer to the dilemmas of how to provide preservice teachers with quality experiences and to provide teacher-researchers with a "room of their own." Why not use these excellent, reflective teachers as examples for our student observers while at the same time engaging preservice teachers in the process of concrete reflective questioning?

Method

Participants

The teacher-researchers who participated in the program ($N = 8$) were all members of a district/university collaborative in a large urban/suburban area of the southwestern United States. Five of the high school researchers taught in various subject areas from

physics to language arts to math. Another researcher taught eighth-grade language arts in a middle school. Two elementary school researchers taught fourth grade.

The preservice teachers placed with teacher-researchers ranged in gender, age, and experience. One was a young man following the traditional educational route from high school straight through to college. Another was an older, highly educated man who was training for his second career in teaching. The remaining students were all women, ranging in age from the mid-twenties to the early forties. One woman was an Afro-Jamaican who had recently become a U.S. citizen. Two were in the process of changing careers, while the remainder had interrupted their education to raise families. These students were typical of those seeking certification at the University of Houston. Although they were all enrolled in the same initial education course with other beginning education students, they were divided among four instructors.

Procedure

First-semester teacher education students at the University of Houston are required to participate in 45 hours of early field experience. During the first class meeting all students enrolled were asked to complete an observation request for a school within traveling distance from their home. In addition, after a brief explanation of the program, the instructors asked students to complete an additional form if they would be interested in being placed with a teacher-researcher.

Fifteen of these students were initially placed with veteran teachers in nearby districts who are involved with such projects. These students were chosen from a total of 32 students who indicated an interest. They were matched as closely as possible in subject area interest, grade-level certification, and location. In the first few weeks of the semester, four of the students had to be reassigned to schools nearer their homes because of transportation difficulties, one was reassigned because the major area of specialization and grade level was not a good match, one foreign student had language difficulties, and one student dropped out of all classwork for personal reasons. Eight students remained with their placements in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools.

The course requirements for students remained the same. The teacher-researcher students, along with regularly placed students, were monitored throughout the semester. Several of the 11 course assignments include directed observation and reflective thinking on the following issues: (1) lesson observation, (2) classroom management, (3) moral dimensions, and (4) multicultural issues in the schools and classrooms. Other assignments were both active and reflective. These included: (1) semi-structured interview with the classroom teacher, (2) teaching a small group lesson, (3) teaching a large group lesson, (4) microteaching with peers, (5) volunteer project, and (6) school study. The final assignment, a "Letter to a Former Teacher," asked students to reflect on what they had learned, make concrete their hopes and fears about teaching, and report what had been meaningful to them as students in this particular teacher's classroom. A total of 176 assignments (88 from the teacher-researcher students and 88 randomly selected from all other students in the course) was examined. These assignments were qualitatively coded (Miles & Huberman, 1984) for levels of satisfaction, ideas and attitudes being developed, and knowledge obtained when compared to members of their peer group placed in classrooms where no formalized teacher research projects were conducted. Upon completion of the 45

One question was particularly important. Would students in the beginning phase of their education be able to see themselves in the future position of a teacher-researcher? Each teacher-researcher participant agreed, while maintaining realistic notions of when they might be ready to do so. Thus, when asked, "Do you think you would do a research project sometime in the future," most answered in these terms:

I would do this. It's an empowering tool.

Yes, yes. Yes, mainly for the children, you know. I would love to do a real research project.

Yeah, I would do it in a different context. I'm interested in Latin being taught at younger grades in inner-city schools [went on to describe her future teacher-researcher project].

The way in which these teachers affected our participants may be summed up in the following words of a teacher-researcher student:

Her modeling really forced me to think more about what I was doing and how I was going to do it, what I was saying, and afterwards what I would do differently.

On a final note, an interesting finding related to the reactions of the students to the observers and the research projects can best be told through our participant observer, who was placed with an academically low group:

I think they were a little bit flattered that the University of Houston would actually come to observe them and do some research with them. You know, somebody actually thinks it's important--what they're doing in school--so I do think it affected them. Some of them probably put a little bit more effort into their writing because they knew I was reading it.

Discussion

Educational Importance

Traditionally, schools of education across the country wish for the perfect formula to create students who are ready to step into classrooms and engage in outstanding pedagogy. Early field experiences have been hailed as one part of that formula. Pairing students at this impressionistic phase with teachers who are involved in reflective and introspective practice, professional growth and networking, and more intensive involvement with their students, offers a remarkable introduction for preservice students. Exposure to such an experience early in the teacher-education process may not only increase the possibility that students will enter the teaching profession with a wider perspective of what one can accomplish, but perhaps these students will remain more reflective, sharing, productive teachers throughout their careers.

In addition, for those teachers who are searching for ways to make meaningful differences in their classroom and perhaps even in the larger world of educational research, this arrangement provides an extra set of eyes to help obtain data, an extra set of hands to

help in preparation, another interviewer to talk with students during classtimes--all the resources that come from having a "room of one's own." These teachers with their wealth of ideas are there in the heart of the field where research takes place. They are beginning to see that they have much to offer to the world of knowledge in research education, and we are beginning to see that, as in site-based management, more minds working on problems equals more good and valuable ideas. They are, as Richard Rorty (1989) recommends, advancing their own self-descriptions.

The solution proposed here provides a perfect fit for us. Teachers engaged in research projects often need the resources that university researchers may have available (graduate students, grant funding, etc.) in order to help collect and organize data. Students in early field experiences can offer some of this type of aid to the teachers in the field.

One part of this project originally sought to insure that the educational purposes of the preservice student in an observational situation would not be compromised. We did not want our preservice teachers to be mired in mountains of data each time they arrived at their observation sites. The benefits of this placement situation, however, were equally if not more weighted towards our preservice students. We need ways of predicting and insuring good early field experiences for education students, and each teacher involved in research projects provided a quality initial introduction to the classroom for our students. We do not even have to tell our students this. They tell us how valuable it was to have been with these teacher-researchers:

Observing Amy [her assigned teacher-researcher], in her fourth-grade classroom, has begun to show me how ideas in behavior and teaching can be translated from books to actual practice.

She has managed to get me even more excited about getting into a classroom than I thought was possible. There is so much determination and energy in the way I see her interacting with students and other teachers.

Work Left to Be Done

While we have seen encouraging results of placing preservice teachers with experienced teacher-researchers, we look forward to addressing a number of challenges that emerged during our inaugural semester. First, we placed students from a pool of those who had indicated an interest in working with teacher-researchers. In this large urban/suburban area the distances to teacher-researcher situations were often greater than desired. Although all observers felt that they gained tremendously from being in the classroom with their teacher-researcher, they still expressed some concern that particular areas of their future chosen subject area or grade level may have been missed. Further research is necessary to determine if the same result will occur if we place students from the entire population of observers rather than only those who indicated an interest research situations based on both proximity to the teacher-researcher and a closer fit of subject areas/grade level (especially in the case of secondary-level observers).

Those who observed with teacher-researchers were required to complete the same assignments as those placed in regular observation situations. This proved to be a hardship for participants assigned to teacher-researchers, who were far along in their projects and who

were used extensively by their teachers for help during the 45-hour period. Also, some teachers felt that their time was stretched because they had to deal with areas requiring their help on these assignments along with organizing the research project. In addition, some participants had little knowledge about the educational literature on a given project, making it difficult at times for them to establish an interest or an ownership. Therefore, we believe that the amount of work/assignments for student participants needs to be regulated because of extra time required by teachers for their projects, and assignments may need to be substituted that would relate directly to the research project itself. Some of these assignments might be negotiated with each individual teacher-researcher. In addition, there was no system to confirm the amount of help that a student contributed to the project. Allowing the teacher-researcher to issue a grade to be averaged with other assignments, and asking the teacher to issue a statement for a student's portfolio might ensure accountability and gain information that would be helpful in compiling a resume.

Some concern was also encountered as to the role of the "observer-aide." A few teachers were at the initial stages of their work, and at times had nothing meaningful for their preservice teacher to do with regard to their project. This could easily be amended by timing and perhaps by closer communication with university mentors during the beginning stages of the project. Related to this was a fear that the student might be used solely for the teacher-researcher's project, being denied the opportunity to observe other aspects of the classroom, a consequence that did not arise.

A primary goal of our teacher education program is to prepare students in terms of attitude and ability to deal with the great multicultural mix reflected in the Houston area. Our initial group of teacher-researcher assistants was placed in distinctly suburban schools. Unfortunately, the teacher-researcher movement has thus far caught on primarily in suburban schools. However, we are working hard to introduce urban teachers of minority students to teacher research (Tellez, in press). Participating students recognized the program's emphasis, stating in their assignments and interviews that despite the learning obtained through working with these exemplary teachers, they were not being adequately prepared to teach diverse students. We will continue to increase the number of teacher-researchers in urban schools.

Conclusion

Traditional educational research has attempted to describe teachers and what they do. It is to teachers' credit that they have consistently refused such description (teachers not reading educational research becomes a rallying cry rather than a lament), but it is unfortunate that teachers have not been able to advance their own self-descriptions. Teacher-researchers begin the process of self re-description, reclaiming who they are, what they do, and what they hope to become. This sort of research provides a way to answer questions that ring "authentic" to the world of their own students, classrooms, and schools.

In order to do this, however, teachers must have available to them the room to invent a new vocabulary, because the process of self-description takes much effort. The thesis put forth here--that preservice teachers should assist teachers involved in research--may help to add a part of that critical workspace (room) that teachers will need to understand better the teaching/learning process. Mashburn (1993), a teacher-researcher, conceptualized this viewpoint in her article:

Because my school district . . . chose to become a part of the University of Houston's School/University Research Collaborative, and because its Teacher Research director [Tellez] guided our beginning steps in this process, Kathy Sevir [her preservice teacher/assistant] and I learned that teacher research actively engages both instructors and students in commonly shared goals. My colleagues now *include* my students, and together we explore the writing process as reluctant writers become more confident ones through personal reflection and choice. (p. 38)

The preservice teachers who assist in teacher research projects emerge with an attitude of reflection we rarely see in typically-placed students. One participant told us at the end of her experience about her view of reflective teaching:

It sort of involves the strategy of asking questions, probing, questioning the question itself . . . and you get an answer. But it's never enough. It's like there's something more that could be added to that. It's just a curiosity that you want to go beyond the obvious. It's like 2+2 is no longer four. There's something more to it, and you look into finding that. I would not be satisfied now in just walking into a classroom, standing before a class, and lecturing. I would not be satisfied after seeing the fact that they [the teacher researchers with whom she worked] turn students into teachers.

Teacher educators, we submit, can achieve important goals by utilizing preservice teachers as resources for the teacher-researcher. Experienced teachers enjoy the services of an aide, find a colleague, and redefine a link in the chain of professional teacher educators as preservice teachers assist them in their research. Preservice teachers, on the other hand, feel part of a "real" process. As they gather data, they become familiar with the instructional methods and the process of inquiry of a professional teacher. Finally, preservice teachers, having observed the process of classroom researching, will perhaps be more inclined to inquire and learn with and from their future students. Having observed the mutual benefits to both teacher-researchers and teachers-to-be in our project, we suggest that other teacher educators consider a similar endeavor and share their results.

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