

# A Call to Action: Why We Need More Practitioner Research

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## Abstract

As teacher-educators we need to embrace practitioner (action) research of our own classroom practice. Such research serves to improve our practice, inform the teaching profession, and serve as modeling for future teachers to become practitioner researchers in support of their efforts to meet the learning needs of the students with whom they work as well as have a voice in policy decisions that impact their professional lives.

## This article is a response to:

Simms, M. (2013). A Teacher-Educator Uses Action Research to Develop Culturally Conscious Curriculum Planners. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2). Article 3. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/Iss2/3>.

**I**N OUR CURRENT educational climate of Common Core Standards and increased pressure on teachers to ensure that students pass standardized tests, teacher-educators face hard questions about how best to prepare beginning teachers as well as to sustain practicing teachers. What do teachers really need to know? What is the best way to support the continued development of teacher knowledge? How do we prepare teachers to meet the needs of the diverse learners with whom they will work? There is much discussion about teacher preparation options, including multiple routes into teaching, school-based residency programs, and calls for more attention to clinical practice. There is also continued debate about the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of professional development for practicing teachers.

The role of classroom inquiry is part of these conversations, in support of teacher preparation and continued professional development. This attention to classroom inquiry, or action (teacher) research, is not new to teacher education. A number of teacher-educators have written about the need for teacher research as part of teacher preparation (Graham & Hudson-Ross, 1999; Kosnick, 2000; Monroe, Gali, Swope, & Perreira, 2007; Moore, 1999b; Ostorga & Lopez, 2009). This research recognizes that teachers are uniquely positioned to provide an insider's view that "makes visible the way that students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 43). Several features define or explain teacher research:

(a) teacher researchers have an insider, or emic perspective; (b) they

*mix theory and practice (praxis) while teaching and researching within their classroom worlds; (c) teacher research is pragmatic and goal-oriented—there are practical classroom problems that need to be solved; and (d) teacher research involves disciplined inquiry (Shulman, 1997) which means that studies are intentional and systematically conducted. (Baumann & Duffy, 2001, p. 611)*

Simms's (2013) article "A Teacher Educator Uses Action Research to Develop Culturally Conscious Curriculum Planners" illustrates well these features of teacher (action) research. The question "How do we support teachers in developing culturally conscious curriculum within our teacher education coursework?" frames Simms's action research study of veteran teachers in a master's-level course focused on curriculum.

Simms's (2013) study serves as a call for more self-study by teacher-educators. In these complex times of accountability, changing student demographics, and questions about teacher preparation, self-studies inform our own classroom practice; model the importance of classroom inquiry, including risk-taking

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and reflection, for the teachers with whom we teach and learn; and introduce or reacquaint teachers with the importance of who they are as professionals, returning to teachers their voices as thinkers, curriculum creators, data analysts, and generators of knowledge about teaching. If we are going to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classrooms, we need teachers who recognize and know how to raise questions about curriculum, standards, and required testing. As teacher-educators, we need to model this inquiry approach and collaborate with the teachers with whom we work in support of their development as practitioner researchers.

### Action Research, Teacher Research, and Self-Study

I recognize that the terms *teacher research* and *action research* are often used as synonyms. And the term *self-study* is often used interchangeably with *action research*. Simms (2013) uses both self-study and action research in describing her research study. But these terms warrant further clarity.

*Stenhouse (1975) defines teacher research as “a self-reflexive process that is systematic, critical inquiry made public” (Feldman, 1998, p. 28). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) provide a similar definition but with less emphasis on the public: “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 3). Action research, a term often used as a synonym for teacher research, has been labeled a movement:*

Action research is the name given to an increasingly popular movement in educational research. It encourages a teacher to be reflective of his own practice in order to enhance self-reflective inquiry that is now being used in school-based curriculum development, professional development, school improvement schemes, and so on, and as such, it actively involves teachers as participants in their own educational process. (McNiff, 1986, p.1)

*Simms (2013) defines action research as a “process that uses collaboration and collective problem solving to change organizations and environments” (p. 2) and goes on to describe action research as having “political, social, collaborative, situated, self-reflective, and risk-taking features” (p. 2). I appreciate this focus on the features of action research and the author’s particular attention to taking risks and self-reflecting in her approach to action research (see further discussion of these features in later section titled “Taking Risks and Reflecting”).*

What is the link between action research and teacher research? Action research, as Lewin (1948) coined it, is research in which practitioners, and often an outsider researcher, collaborate in research designed to address pressing educational problems. Action research has been described as a “tradition that links the processes of inquiry to the lives of people as they come to grips with the problems and stresses that beset them in their day-to-day lives” (Stringer, 1999, p. xv). One of the important aspects of action research is that action researchers collaborate with the people they are studying (see further discussion in a later section, “Collaboration”). One of the principles of action research is to “inform and empower people to work collectively to produce some beneficial change” (Berg, 2001, p. 184).

For some educational researchers, there is a distinction between action research and teacher research with respect to methodology. Action research, in its strict sense, refers to research that uses a cyclical, action-reflection model to investigate and attempt to make change in an organization (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). But much of the literature on teacher research uses the term *action research* as a synonym for *teacher research*: “To learn deliberately is to research. The practice of ‘action research’ for many teachers and students is a reacquainting of themselves with certain parts of their brains; a repossession of the ‘secrets’ of research with which they were born” (Boomer, 1987, p. 5).

Action research has also been linked to professional development; it can “empower teachers to examine their own beliefs, explore their own understandings of practice, foster critical reflection, and develop decision making capabilities that would enhance their teaching and help them assume control over their respective situation” (Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters, 2001, p. 129).

Self-study is often used to describe research conducted by teacher-educators about their own classroom practice. Zeichner, during his vice-presidential address to the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, noted, “The birth of self-study in the teacher education movement around 1990 has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research” (p. 19). Self-study is a form of practitioner inquiry that allows educators to reflect systematically upon and study their practice in an effort to identify tensions or dissatisfactions (Loughran, 2002).

Teacher research, action research, and self-study are rooted in constructivism and reflective practice. All three place practitioners in the position of being observers and learners in their own classrooms—learning by doing. The “systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 6) supports practitioners by “fostering professional growth, enhancing instruction and assessment, and building reflective skills (Smith, Yendol-Hoppey, & Milam, 2010). In determining what term to use to capture my own experience with classroom inquiry as well as that of Simms’s (2013) and others’ studies of classroom inquiry in support of teacher education/development, I determined *practitioner research* most accurately encompasses the inquiry and reflection about an educator’s own work inherent in action research, teacher research, and self-study. So I will use this term and *practitioner research/researcher* for the remainder of this response.

But isn’t practitioner research just part of being a good teacher? Is there a distinction between observant, thoughtful teaching and practitioner research? Yes to both questions. Practitioner researchers are intentional in their work of collecting data, using the data to make decisions about their practice and their students’ learning, and sharing their results. The intent to be a practitioner researcher raises the good teacher to a next level: data collection becomes systemized, reflection is built into practice, findings are analyzed, and discoveries are disseminated. This is not to suggest that all practitioner researchers publish or present their research to outside audiences, but practitioner researchers are recognizing the importance of sharing their research-based

knowledge—their voice—with their students, their colleagues, their administration, their community, and their profession.

And if we want K–12 teachers to take on the habit of conducting and sharing their practitioner research, we need to model practitioner research in teacher preparation coursework. Teacher-educators cannot advocate an approach to teaching that we do not practice ourselves. Attention to practitioner inquiry is

*crucial in a teacher education program. It is not just a nice extra; it gets to the essence of effective teaching. Student teachers have to learn how to do research in their own classroom, how to observe, modify, individualize, and assess.” (Kosnick & Beck, 2000, p. 34)*

Sharing our own process of collecting and analyzing data on the work we do with teacher-education students allows them to see the inquiry process and to experience how their feedback as students is an essential part of practitioner research. In a study of beginning teachers who experienced practitioner research as a central component of their teacher education preparation, the importance of the professor modeling practitioner research was cited as a “significant factor in [the beginning teachers’] learning about teacher research” (Campbell, 2011).

### Challenges for Practitioner Research

If practitioner research is so important, why are not we seeing more examples of practitioner research written by teacher-educators about their own classroom practice? There are a number of studies about preservice education showing the effectiveness and rigor of action research. Simms (2013) references several of these studies, including the impact of practitioner research in supporting the development of preservice teachers.

My own synthesis of studies that examine teacher preparation programs and that include attention to practitioner research finds that graduates of these programs:

- Acquired a variety of knowledge about teaching and curriculum (Baumann & Duffy, 2001; Kosnick, 2000; McEwan, Field, Kawamoto, & Among, 1997; Moore, 1999a; Rock & Levin, 2002)
- Explored their sense of self as teacher (Rock & Levin, 2002)
- Gained awareness of their students, including knowledge of their students’ perspectives and learning needs (Duffield & Townsend, 1999; Kosnick, 2000; Moore, 1999a; Rock & Levin, 2002).
- Clarified their personal theories of teaching (Baumann & Duffy, 2001; Monroe et al., 2007; Moore, 1999a; Ostorga & Lopez, 2009; Rock & Levin, 2002).
- Gained awareness of and appreciation for the processes of inquiry, reflection, action, and change as roles of a professional teacher (Kosnick, 2000; McEwan et al., 1997; Monroe et al., 2007; Ostorga & Lopez, 2009; Moore, 1999a; Rock & Levin, 2002).

Despite these findings, practitioner research has not been a standard curriculum component of most teacher preparation

programs. But with the increased emphasis on teacher preparation, there is growing interest in teachers conducting their own classroom research. *Educational Leadership* noted that teachers as researchers was a new direction for teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010). The article authors shared several examples, including the University of New Hampshire’s preparation program, “in which teacher candidates complete a yearlong internship in a school, generating questions, gathering student learning data, and modifying curriculum and instruction on the basis of this data” (p. 11).

Yet there is still a divide between theory and practice. Dhingra (2004) notes the “apparent intellectual segregation of educational theory and pedagogical practice” (p. 232). Simms (2013) speaks to this divide in noting “teacher educators regarded action research as lacking an academic tone and rigor” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; McKay, 1992). Kosnick writes of her own challenges in seeking research funding and approval for practitioner research that focuses on her own work with students. A university committee informed her that it was not appropriate for her to conduct research on her own students (Kosnick & Beck, 2000). I know of several colleagues who have faced similar responses during their attempts to get approval from an institutional review board for practitioner research studies.

But there are promising trends. In addition to the recent call for teachers as researchers in teacher preparation programs noted above, recent practitioner research studies speak to the unique position of teacher-educators to address the research/practice divide. Schuck (2002) studied her own classroom efforts to support a constructivist and sociocultural learning theory approach to math instruction. She examined the tensions she experienced in modeling this approach in her instruction of a preservice math methods course. She details the challenge of moving away from a telling stance to creating a classroom where preservice students participated in activities and assignments that required them to be active learners.

Simms (2013) also discusses moving away from the role of being an expert who tells in explaining her action research plan for the course. She notes that her first step was to “open this particular semester with questions, instead of a lecture” (p. 5). In addition, she asked students to define *curriculum* and then used these definitions to frame future opportunities for the teachers in the course to examine material and strategies to become “culturally conscious curriculum planners” (p. 4).

At the center of this action research plan was curriculum inquiry, “similar to the ways detectives and journalists do their work—asking probing questions that led to finding truth” (p. 4). Simms goes on to note that focusing on questions, including emphasizing the use of what, how, who, why, where, and when, served to remind teachers that they need to ask these questions in support of creating curriculum that motivates their students to ask questions and investigate issues and events related to culture.

This inquiry stance became the focus of the action research detailed in Simms’s (2013) study. And I would argue it served as modeling for the kind of inquiry approach that Simms wanted the teachers with whom she worked to employ with their students. As

Zeichner (1998) notes in his call for disciplined, systematic inquiry into our own teaching practice, it “provides a model for prospective teachers of the kind of inquiry that more and more teacher educators are hoping their students employ” (p. 41).

## Methodological Rigor

One of the criticisms of practitioner research is that it is not really research; being observant of students and noting their responses is just good teaching. But as noted above, practitioner research is more than just everyday observation. It takes the “form of a self-reflexive experimental process in which the teacher monitored his or her interaction with students in determining what constituted educationally worthwhile curriculum experiences” (Shulman, 1997, p. 17). While it can draw on data gathered from classroom records and routines that are part of classroom practice, the observations and reflections are “systematic and intentional” (Shagoury & Power, 2012).

As is true for all research, attention to research methodology in practitioner research is important. While I appreciate Simm’s (2013) candor that she “played the teacher role more than the researcher role” (p. 8), this serves as an important reminder for all of us who engage in practitioner research to be attentive to our data collection methodology and analysis.

While all research methodologies can be used for practitioner research, qualitative inquiry dominates this type of work (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Practitioner research is a process of discovering and framing questions, collecting data, and analyzing data to answer the questions.

Practitioner research questions come from the day-to-day experiences of teachers. Often teachers focus on discrepancies or tensions between what is intended and what occurred (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999). These questions are not framed in the language of educational theory—referencing existing theoretical and empirical literature; rather, these questions are framed to examine the discrepancies between practice and theory. “The unique feature of the questions that prompt practitioner research is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 15).

Documentation in teacher research is reflective of practitioner researcher’s roots in ethnography. Field notes based on classroom interactions and observations are central to teacher research. Wolcott (1999) confirms the importance of observation, noting, “Much stands to be gained for any researcher who pauses long enough to have a look around, with the intention of putting inquiry into some broader perspective” (p. 206). In addition, practitioner researchers commonly use interviews with students and classroom documents/artifacts. Sociograms and audiotape or videotape may also be used to collect data (Hubbard & Power, 1999).

It is important that practitioner researchers have more than one method of gathering information so that data can be triangulated (Berg, 2001). Triangulation, which entails the use of multiple data sources to confirm and illuminate one another, is a strength of practitioner research as well as of university research

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999, Shagoury & Power, 2012).

Data is analyzed, with an emphasis on finding patterns. Drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, practitioners can then formulate hypotheses about emerging patterns. “One of the most powerful aspects of teacher research is that it brings those hunches, the teaching lore we carry quietly with us, to the surface of our teaching” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 19).

Practitioner researchers may choose from several methods to analyze data patterns. Most commonly, practitioner researchers rely on some form of coding. One simple scheme for coding observational notes is adapted from codes that anthropologist Levi-Strauss originally framed (adapted by Coraso, 1981):

*PN: Personal Notes: information relevant to your mood or that of the class.*

*MN: Methodological Notes: questions or statements about how you’re doing your work.*

*TN: Theoretical Notes: hunches about patterns or why events are occurring as they are. (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 148)*

An advantage of practitioner research is that regular analysis of data allows teachers to inform their practice in the midst of their study and to act on their findings without having to revise the study. Since the goal of the research is to inform instruction, there is not a concern that changing practice based on initial data will taint the study (Moore, 1999b).

It could be argued that K–12 practitioner researchers don’t need to write up research—the data collection and analysis processes provide sufficient learning and understanding. But writing up practitioner research has benefits for the practitioner-researcher-author and for the teaching profession. Writing up research provides the practitioner researcher the opportunity to look again at the work. Krall (1988) acknowledges the value of writing research with one’s self as the primary audience, noting, “as a result of our research, we should become more consciously intentional of our actions and more thoughtful and reflective of their consequences” (p. 474).

Practitioners also need to look beyond themselves as the audience and share their voices with their fellow teachers. Practitioner research studies in education journals and books about individual classrooms have positively impacted the teaching profession. *In the Middle*, second edition, by Atwell (1998); *Holler if You Hear Me* by Michie (1999); *A Room with a Different View* by Ostrow (1994); and multiple books by Burke and Gallagher have provided important insights to numerous teachers and teacher-educators regarding the practice of teaching.

Practitioner research, when it is written, is most often told from a first-person point of view, with findings presented as narratives from the classroom. Brown (1995) notes, “What informed my teaching were the cases studies, the ‘sloppy’ first-hand accounts of teachers teaching, the observations of what classrooms looked like and felt like” (p. 19). But practitioner research isn’t sloppy; rather, it is reflective of the narrative style of qualitative research studies. Practitioner research is “organic, sometimes messy, unpredictable, and generative—just like

teachers' lives in and out of school" (Patterson & Shannon, 1993, p. 9). The accounts of practitioner researchers written in the midst of their messy practice can serve as information, confirmation, and inspiration for teachers. These written accounts also serve to bring teachers' voices into the professional discourse and potentially contribute to the knowledge base of teaching.

Concerns about generalizability have been used to discount the value of practitioner research. However, as Zumwalt (1982) argues, there is a growing realization in the research community that the positivistic paradigm that attempts to formulate general laws is probably not the most useful for educational phenomena. Interpretive researchers make a similar argument, demonstrating that understanding one classroom helps us better understand all classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

I commend Simms's (2013) discussion of how, if she could do it again, she would address data collection in this way: "write daily in a journal or have the teachers write about how the readings and exercises impacted their views of curriculum or to ask to teachers for interviews" (p. 8). I found myself noting data collection strategies I plan to employ in support of my own practitioner research on my upcoming fall methods course:

- Keep a teaching journal with a plan for writing in it consistently; I find setting two times per week to make journal entries supports this habit.
- Identify the notes I take during class sessions, notes based on class discussions and conversations I hear when students are conferring with each other during group work.
- Ask students to write in-class reflections to capture their thinking.
- Make note of patterns I see in the assignments students submit.
- Keep lesson plans and my syllabus with notes about revisions I made as well as my rationale for these changes.
- Conduct follow-up interviews with students regarding patterns I am seeing from the classroom observation data I collect.

Being attentive to data collection and analysis supports practitioners in having the confidence to immediately change their practices, without waiting for new research from others, new professional development, or new technology (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000, p. 238). Practitioners can use the learning from their research to support changes in assignments, assessments, or course design but also in the bigger-picture structure of their teacher education programs. In a real-life example, a self-study of a math methods course led to the finding that there was a disconnect between methods coursework and what preservice teachers were experiencing in their practicum placements. So the methods instructor instituted class field trips to visit schools where reform math instruction was the norm, creating a collective field experience (Flessner, 2012).

### **Taking Risks and Reflecting**

I am just beginning the process of writing my self-evaluation for my work during 2012–2013, so I am grateful for the opportunity to

reflect on questions inspired by Simms's (2013) focus on the features of risk taking and reflection in her action research study. I will include responses to questions about what traditions I need to reconsider or abandon in my teaching, what questions should I be asking of the beginning teachers with whom I work, and how my background and experience influence my teaching and my research.

In my own teaching practice, I plan to take more risks in inviting students to become detectives and journalists by asking probing questions about the language arts curriculum at their practicum sites and in our methods course. I am also looking forward to the risk of proposing a practitioner research study in support of our program's efforts to infuse culturally conscious curriculum into our coursework. Simms's (2013) four-step action research plan provides practical steps we all can adapt:

1. Begin with questions, including asking students to define curriculum.
2. Assign multiculturally oriented reading and discuss them.
3. Engage students in activities to examine and discuss issues related to culture and curriculum: examining textbooks, discussing books banned by local school districts, reviewing the history of multicultural education, and filling out a What Do You Know formative assessment.
4. Create integrated curriculum projects, which could include an interview with a curriculum expert, that reflect students' understanding of how to engage their future students with issues related to race, class, gender, equality and equity, and historical dishonesty.

As practitioners, we can model our own inquiry and reflection as we collaborate on changing our practice in support of culturally conscious curriculum planning.

### **Collaboration**

Simms (2013) also reminds us of the importance of collaboration in support of practitioner research. I was grateful for the candor about why Simms did not collaborate. I am dismayed by the number of graduates who speak to the sense of isolation they feel as new teachers. So it is heartening to have examples of practitioners who conducted research and made changes in their practice without the benefit of collaboration, including Simms. I also appreciate Simms's recognition that the students in the course technically were her collaborators. I particularly appreciate the Stenhouse (1975) quote, "Effective curriculum development of the highest quality depends upon the capacity of teachers to take a research stance to their own teaching. . . . A disposition to examine one's own practice" (p. 156).

### **Practitioner Research and Teacher Knowledge**

The experienced teachers in Simms's (2013) study speak of their frustration with the district's efforts to educate them about culturally responsive teaching. Human relations consultants lectured them, and they found the district's approach "insulting, not informative, and disallowed conversation about ethnic diversity"

(p. 4). Their voices, their intellect, regarding their work as professionals were not considered.

Simms's (2013) study illustrates the potential benefits of collaboration between K–12 practitioner researchers and teacher-education practitioner researchers to describe and examine practitioner researchers' practice as well as the knowledge their research constructs.

What might be learned from practitioners who are conducting teacher research about the knowledge *they* construct?

Shulman (1987) notes, "One of the more important tasks for the research community is to work with practitioners to develop codified representations of the practical pedagogical wisdom of able teachers" (p. 11). Unlike those of other professions, the best practices of practitioners are lost to current and future colleagues. "Teaching is conducted without an audience of peers. It is devoid of a history of practice" (p. 12). Practitioner research can illuminate what teachers know and help to create a history of practice.

Practitioner research is a process of coming to understand how knowledge is generated in the classroom. There is a dynamic interaction among teachers' stances toward themselves as knowers, their students as knowers and learners, and their knowledge of curriculum (Lyons, 1990). By conducting research on their own practices, teachers

*identify discrepancies between their theories of practice and their practices, between their own practices and those of others in schools, and between their on-going assumptions about what is going on in their classrooms and the more distanced and retrospective interpretations. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 51)*

This statement is not to suggest that practitioner researchers be added as new knowers to the same knowledge base; rather, it is a redefinition of the knowledge base that "alters the locus of the knowledge base and the practitioner's stance in relation to knowledge generation in the field" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 62). It's an expanded view of knowledge about teaching that includes K–12 practitioners research on their own experience as a valid foundation for knowledge production.

Simms's (2013) study highlights the impact of testing, standards, and federal mandates on interviewed teachers' initial definitions of curriculum, which included "district-mandated materials, standards, 'selected courses,' and 'what I teach'" (p. 5). When she asked teachers to interview someone they considered a curriculum expert, their results indicated that "curriculum meant testing" or the experts spoke to the pressure they felt to "comply with the new law and school district administrators' directives to show increased test scores" (p. 6).

The current emphasis on standards and testing dominates the agenda regarding school reform efforts and teacher effectiveness. Underlying this standards/testing movement is a set of assumptions about schools that de-emphasizes the construction of local knowledge in and by school communities and promotes a reduced rather than enlarged role for teachers. Teachers are cast in the role of technicians, delivering scripted lessons and administering standardized assessments created outside of their classrooms.

Outsiders receive the authoritative role for curriculum development and school improvement.

This view of teacher as technician trivializes the complexities of teaching. Focusing on teaching as the technical implementation of curriculum and set routines results in classroom practice that is disconnected from the needs of students. Learning is decontextualized. Who the students are in the classroom is lost. Ongoing assessment of what is working and what is not working is also lost, so systematic adjustments do not happen. Furthermore, students miss out on the opportunity to see teachers modeling inquiry, to see teachers in the act of learning. The Siletz have a proverb that captures the importance of teachers as learners: "One who learns from one who is learning drinks from a running stream" (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 266).

Reducing teaching to a technical endeavor has resulted in policies designed to ensure teaching effectiveness based not on teachers' knowledge about teaching but on observable behaviors and standardized tests of subject area knowledge. Policymakers are supportive of efforts to frame teacher knowledge into minimal expectations regarding what teachers need to know with the intent that these expectations can then be correlated to K–12 student achievement (see Abell Foundation, 2001a, 2001b; Ballou & Podgursky, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2002). Such top-down efforts to correlate teacher preparation to students' performance on standardized tests and to dictate the curriculum teachers can teach are not likely to be any more successful than previous efforts at school reform because they fail to address the importance of teacher knowledge. They have proved inadequate in addressing the real complexities of teaching. In fact, these efforts have already been called into question (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 1994; Haertel, 1991; Maddus, 1992; McLaughlin, 1990).

Teacher development programs have also been under fire for their promotion of the "remote control of teaching—generalizable dicta that would shape the design specifications for teaching via texts, curriculum packages, and teaching procedures" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 323). These programs are based on the assumption that teachers can get all they need from these tools and manuals. But these materials are inadequate in addressing the complexities of teaching—leaving teachers to rely on whatever knowledge they have accumulated on their own. (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This has led to calls for reform in teacher education.

Policymakers need to understand that what ultimately happens in schools is "less related to the intentions of policymakers than it is to the knowledge, beliefs, resources, leadership, and motivations that operate in local contexts" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 214). There is no sure-fire way to ensure that all teachers have the knowledge they need to teach. But there is evidence to support that any reform effort must first focus on teachers' knowledge (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 1994; McLaughlin, 1990). Because policies "cannot mandate what matters most" (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 12), the focus must be on creating conditions that support local learning. As Fullan (1994) observes, "It is only when greater clarity and coherence is achieved in the minds of the majority of teachers that we have any chance of

success” (p. 4). The “sine qua non of education is whether teachers know how to make complex subjects accessible to diverse learners” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 294). Teaching for understanding cannot be produced by mandating curriculum or new tests.

*The teacher remains the key. . . . Debates over educational policy are moot if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well. No microcomputer will replace them, no television system will clone and distribute them, no scripted lessons will direct and control them, no voucher system will bypass them. (Shulman, 1983, p. 504)*

Evidence suggests that teachers know and learn by becoming researchers of their own practice—reclaiming their expertise and their classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Goodlad, 1994; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; Moore, 1999b). Teachers will share their own discoveries—what they know from observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting classroom practice and curriculum to meet those needs. Goswami and Stillman (1987) note that practitioner researchers are rich resources who provide special knowledge about their classrooms and students that outsiders cannot.

Practitioner research emphasizes professional education that is about

*posing, not just answering, questions, interrogating one’s own and others’ practices and assumptions, and making classrooms sites for inquiry—that is, learning how to teach and improve one’s teaching by collecting and analyzing the “data” of one’s daily life in schools. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 17)*

As the K–12 practitioners in Simms’s (2013) study illustrate, they do not want to be told how or what to do; they want to explore, examine, and experience resources and strategies in support of their developing practice as teachers. As teacher-educators, we need to work with teachers so they can experience how practitioner research can inform, affirm, and sustain their classroom practice—and give them voice in their profession.

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