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**Different Conceptualisations, Similar or Different Approaches?**

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# **‘I’ is for ‘Insider’: Practitioner Research in Schools**

Inda Schaenen, Angela Kohnen, Pablo Flinn,  
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In this paper we five teachers and teacher educators draw upon our personal classroom experiences in order to explore the definitions, descriptions, and nature of educational practitioner research, what we call teacher research. We highlight the tensions that can exist between and among teacher research, institutional needs and macro-policies, and argue that as both stance and method, teacher research can complement traditional, outsider-driven social science research. Further, practitioner research can check the errors and inequitable outcomes which may result from educational policies strictly reliant on the large-scale quantitative research designs currently dominant in the United States.

**Key words:** teacher research, educational action research, teacher inquiry, practitioner research in schools, insider research

These are tough times for educators in the United States. Politicians and pundits of various stripes seem to agree that schools are flailing and failing. And teachers? We are characterised as unwitting participants in the system, lazy, not so bright, unwilling to accept responsibility for our failures, or sometimes, in ways taken up by Hollywood screenwriters, isolated and heroic. The current and most frequently suggested fix is to use tests and standards to make practitioners more accountable and offer “research-based” guidance to those willing to improve.

In this paper we seek to examine the twin issues of accountability and research, and explain why we argue for a radically contradistinctive view of both research and teaching: we seek research-based guidance from the heterogeneous, local, participatory voices of teachers themselves. We argue that as both stance and method, teacher research offers a powerful inquiry paradigm, one that can both complement traditional, outsider-driven social science research and check the possible errors and inequitable outcomes which result from educational policies strictly reliant on the large-scale quantitative research designs currently dominant. Our hope is that this different view will allow teachers, classroom insiders, to reclaim some of the dignity that practitioner studies can afford them, and at the same time explain to outsiders what it is that careful and dedicated insiders view as part of their practice. This paper is not an attempt to theorize teacher action research, or to offer a comprehensive method for the doing of teacher inquiry. Our aim has been to clarify and describe, with examples, how concepts critical in teacher research are interpreted by people who understand themselves to be teacher researchers situated in various educational contexts. Lots of people talk about what makes something “Research with a capital R.” We’re talking here about what makes it “*Teacher* Research with a capital T.”

### **1. We Five**

Enacting our commitment to local, heterogeneous voices speaking from a variety of life experiences and educational backgrounds, we co-authors came together in the winter of 2010/2011 to sort through what we are talking about when we talk about teacher action research. Although composed collaboratively, this paper includes the very specific and particular perspectives each of us brings to this subject. As practitioners ourselves, we are committed to grounding our knowledge-making in our own lived experiences.

Angela was introduced to teacher research in her pre-service programme and has been gathering data to improve her practice as a high school English teacher ever since. She has investigated her responses to student writing, her use of technology and media, her students’ thinking and talking, and their ideas about gender. Much of the time, she has been a solo researcher in her

classroom, though often she has concurrently taken a graduate class where she can bounce ideas off other adults who were not part of her high school community. She is comfortable working on her own or in a class, but says, “It has to be my question, my problem.”

Inda was a journalist and fiction writer when she broadened her professional life to include teaching at the elementary, high school, and university levels. Between 2005 and 2008, specifically, she was a teaching artist who spent one day a week in an urban school doing creative writing and reading with primary grade students. She gathered data through observation, audio and video recording, informal interviewing of students and of adult school colleagues. She engaged in “close and thick analysis” of her data, and then figured out “how to cull, sort, organise, and create a cohesive narrative that drew upon both wide and narrow perspectives.” Though an outsider to the school, the community, and the culture, she was an insider to her own enrichment classroom.

Pablo has engaged in teacher research from two different roles in special education. As a teacher of teenagers with behaviour issues, he gathered a variety of data to find out what his students were learning: socially, emotionally, academically, and to improve his own skills in addressing the problems he identified. Subsequently, as a special education administrator, his job mandated that he require teachers to gather data (test scores, number of suspensions, nurse visits); he then led “data teams,” in which teachers analyzed classroom data as a basis for improving their practice as measured by student performance. Observing the low degree of teacher “buy-in” around these processes, Pablo came to wonder whether what he was doing could even be called action research.

Jane is a retired teacher educator whose most powerful experience with teacher research was a multi-year study, where she was consultant to a team of teachers who chose to tackle the race and class achievement gap in their school. She also engaged in many ongoing studies in her own university classroom, involving future teachers and graduate students as her co-researchers. Carrying the insider role further, she once conducted a self-study of her own writing process while drafting a journal article via online collabo-

ration. In each of these positions, her data and analysis were the basis for action to change and improve her own practice.

Wendy is also a teacher educator, with a career-long emphasis on teacher research (Saul, 1989, 2010). In her university classes she regularly gathers data and reports back to her students to engage them in thinking about the complexity of teaching and learning. She is distressed that university folks often teach action research without practicing it. She also works with K-12 practitioners to help them understand that their involvement with students, the daily-ness of their interactions, should be viewed as a research advantage, not a detriment. She believes that all teachers need to see teacher research as serving their own professional development along with the needs of their particular students.

Together, we bring a heterogeneous set of perspectives to the process of thinking and writing about the sorts of practitioner research detailed above. For one thing, all of us consider these activities to be examples of practitioner research, although we do not normally call it that. We use the term practitioner research primarily when it is set by a journal or book editor. Furthermore, since all of us spend a lot of time talking with other teachers, the term *practitioner research* also feels a bit generic: After all, who is *not* a practitioner of what they do every day? Some of us prefer the broader term action research. Through recursive and ongoing cycles of action, observation, and reflection, action research as a research model emphasises, for us, the documenting and changing of our own practices as professionals. Others prefer the term *teacher research*, with the emphasis on the key player, the teacher, whose ownership and autonomy drive the study. Finally, another broad term that makes sense to us is insider research, as it contrasts to what we might call outsider research, inquiries driven by people without a deeply vested interest in and connection to the long term well being of the study's stakeholders and participants.

Last year, as Wendy and Jane co-taught a seminar, they concluded that when done well, educational action research and teacher research look the same: the teacher is actively and personally present in the research, and the goal is making changes to improve practice and optimise learning. When

done badly, they seem to fail in different ways; we will look into those failures later on.

## 2. Definitions and descriptions

So what do we mean by practitioner research, specifically by *teacher action research*? To us, teacher research does not mean classroom research by an outsider. It does not mean a teacher who has done or read about research, and it does not mean a researcher who knows about teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, pp. 5-22).

Instead, the term suggests a more focused and systematic form of reflective practice: research by insiders in schools. Angela explains, “All good teachers think about and change their work based on experiences, but teacher research is the act of making that thought visible, documented, systematic.” As the name action research suggests, we embed research and reflection into our own actions to improve our own performance as educators. This is a sharp break with traditional social science research where an expert conducts “research on” somebody else, the “others.” Practitioner research in education involves teachers and other professionals, along with their students, as stakeholding participants in an inquiry process.

At its best, research becomes an integral part of how we teach and how we learn. We gather a variety of data about ourselves and our students in the context of school and community in order to understand what is happening, to change the things we can, and to share our findings with relevant audiences. The goal is at once modest, -to figure out how better to help our few, specific students learn, and extraordinarily broad, i.e. to change the notion of what it means to teach.

Our definition has several key features.

- (1) Ownership
- (2) Insider data
- (3) Accountability
- (4) Survival in a dual role
- (5) Ethical engagement
- (6) Community and cultural context

- (7) Flexibility
- (8) Reading, writing, and publishing
- (9) Time
- (10) Stance and power.

### **2.1 Ownership**

“Ownership is central to teacher research,” says Wendy. “You don’t need any permissions, you don’t need any funding. You can turn on a dime, make incremental changes that evolve; you don’t just buy a new curriculum package. It’s not just driven by numbers: you talk with others about what works, what doesn’t work, and why.” The teacher is the active agent who gathers, analyses, and interprets data, and who is in a position to decide what to change in the classroom.

As Wendy’s explanation suggests, the engine of teacher research is fired by the teacher’s sense of being “in charge” of what is happening in her own classroom. All of us have engaged in this kind of research, usually on an ad hoc basis. A problem or puzzlement jogs our attention, so we start to jot some notes, record some data, share our questions with our students, wonder about differing interpretations. Some call this “doing reconnaissance,” checking out what is really going on before we consider taking any action (Elliott, 1991, pp. 69-74). These inquiries can be highly sophisticated, systematic, and ongoing when conducted by teachers who have made research part of their professional identity (Gallas, 1995; Atwell, 1998; Fishman & McCarthy, 2000). Whatever the context, our view of teacher research positions the practitioner as the actor rather than a “subject” to be studied or managed. Instead of an expert outsider peering at the natives in their village, the insiders are doing their own peering, trying to understand and improve their own community. Good teacher research functions as both window and mirror (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2009).

On the other hand, teacher researchers do not really work in isolation, and a new school reform effort, a new department chair or principal may undermine even their best-documented projects. A teacher whose studies were all about formative assessments had her work disrupted by the school’s introduc-

tion of weekly or bi-monthly summative assessments. A science teacher working successfully to support inquiry was flummoxed by the introduction of a new kit program that required “absolute fidelity” to the scripted curriculum. Angela concludes, “If you want to study your own practice, to empower yourself, your bosses may be unhappy.” She adds, “The good teachers I know just kind of keep their heads down, fly below the radar – all those clichés – and then do what they need to when they get to the classroom. Teacher research has the potential to blow your cover or make you more noticeable, particularly once you start writing about it or digging for more information in the main office or trying to get your colleagues on board.”

Teacher researchers are most able to exercise their autonomy when their goals mesh with those of the building, district, or wider community in which they work. Jane says, “In my experience, whenever teacher action research had an impact across a whole department, the principal or curriculum coordinator was always an advocate and often a participant in their work.” Where people in key roles outside the classroom understand and value insider research, a space can open for teacher ownership as well as dialogue among professionals working together to improve their practice. More about that later in section 2.10, “Stance and Power.”

## ***2.2 Insider data***

In the tradition of qualitative research, we strive for richness and variety in data gathered systematically over time. One of the advantages of research by insiders is that they don’t have to leave the “field” , they can pursue an inquiry over long periods of time, until they believe they have made sense of their data.

Pablo, in his role working with special education teachers, is expected to emphasize data that can be observed and quantified, but he stretches that to include reflection on his own actions and student self-assessments. Jane values a range of data: “multiple modes (test scores, journal entries, field notes) from multiple perspectives (teacher, students, outside observers).” Angela says, “By data, I mean all kinds of things – field notes, a teacher journal, student work, student interviews, surveys. I very rarely mean the big



standardised assessments that are often the only 'data' school administrators want you to examine. I don't have a problem with [test scores], but . . . it's an incomplete picture."

Wendy seeks to always include her students as co-researchers and recommends that even teachers of young children do so. Work by Saul and Reardon (1996) and Mitchell Pierce (1999) provide powerful examples of how engaging elementary school students in gathering data has added dimension and depth to their inquiries, their teaching and their students' learning. Other potential data are generated from colleagues or families of students who can also become research partners. Some students, however, have a passive or negative view of teacher authority; before these students choose to be involved as co-researchers, they must learn to believe that their voices will be heard, that their choices may be implemented. As this statement suggests, being a teacher researcher then calls for a particular view of teaching and of the student.

Each of us listed the kinds of data we collected for the various studies we had pursued over the years (see Appendix). Based on those lists, Inda offered this interpretive summary: "Our data comprise anything and everything made, said, written, and done in or about our classroom experience, as well as anything and everything that is thought, felt, suspected, and intuited (as long as these data are recorded in one auditable form or another)." We view this range of data gathered from students, other adults, and ourselves as typical of good action research by teachers.

However, some data seem to "count" more in one professional context or another. University people who practice traditional social science research that relies on experimental design tend to privilege certain kinds of data (often large-scale quantitative data), while school people (particularly teachers) interested in complexities and contradictions may privilege more qualitative, less generalisable kinds of data. Currently, the dominant research paradigm governing educational public policy in the United States emphasises data from student tests (mainly in multiple choice format) as *the* measure of educational programmes. Especially in public schools that serve many students in poverty, this may mean little time for reading or writing extended

texts, little emphasis on social or emotional or aesthetic learning, and little regard for the descriptive data that attend to individual students.

Both “No Child Left Behind” (Bush programme of 2001) and “Race to the Top” (current Obama program) evaluate school districts on the basis of improvement in test scores, and grant funding is tied to that improvement. The implications of these policies go far beyond any one teacher’s classroom; a district that cannot show the expected progress on these tests may find that property values decline, and since property taxes are a major source of funding, the public schools lose both the federal race and the local tax support. (For a fuller discussion of testing and its relationship to teacher research, see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 47-85).

Universities emphasise faculty research as a qualification for individual professors’ tenure and promotion. They focus, however, more on whether the research is published in a peer-reviewed journal than whether it deals with big numbers or student test data. Although universities have often devalued qualitative research in education overall, at present in the U.S. we are seeing a narrower stress on quantitative data in elementary and secondary schools than in higher education. This in turn can pressure public school teachers to shift their focus to pseudo-quantitative studies that cannot yield valid or meaningful results from the small numbers of a single classroom. When teachers enter a graduate programme, Wendy and Jane now shake their heads over such research proposals as, “Will daily practice with [some new curriculum package] help my students improve their scores on the state achievement test?”

We try to encourage teachers to approach their research by taking insider data seriously and looking first at the world inside their classrooms.

### **2.3 Accountability**

The goal of all action research is to improve one’s own performance; teachers do action research to improve teaching and learning. “When I observe a problem across several classes or contexts, I can’t just look at the problem,” explains Pablo. “The common denominator is *me*.” We insist on examining our own role in whatever problem we investigate.

For teachers doing research as individuals in their own classrooms, the accountability is to themselves and to their students. Inda's dissertation (Schaenen, 2010) includes rich and varied portraits of her students and of classroom life, along with "candid descriptions" of her own "decision-making processes"; she is vividly present as an active, reflective character in the story she writes. "I never pretend that I could be just anyone at all in any other context," Inda says. "I am aware of the need to answer to my own conscience."

Often, though, accountability includes the judgment of others. What happens when teacher research becomes part of a career ladder or professional learning community? What happens when a supervisor or institution defines what constitutes "improvement"? And what if that institutional definition runs contrary to the teacher-researcher's own definition? In other words, how are conflicting goals of different stakeholders reconciled through teacher research? In his role as an administrator, Pablo hopes to kindle and nurture a sense of independent accountability among the teachers working in his data team.

"I want teachers to analyse the information and do something to change their own actions based on the data," Pablo says. "I don't need them to clock in or to give *me* any data or any report; I need them to use the information to change or modify their classroom instruction." This approach to accountability suggests a supportive, dialogic relationship rather than a merely evaluative one. It also fits Wendy's key question for teacher research: "Does it help me understand my practice?"

Accountability as practiced in some school districts and most higher education settings can bring extrinsic rewards for teachers doing action research. As a group, we discussed the advantages and risks of making teacher research count in a performance evaluation, tenure or career ladder, merit pay, or qualification for a sabbatical or reduced teaching load. We think that when a culture of research has taken hold in an educational setting, action research can dovetail with the professional development program. The "professional learning communities" now being established in many school districts, a more elaborate approach based on the "data teams" model, would ideally

help to generate such a culture. We will discuss the PLC model in Section 3, along with other approaches to practitioner research teams.

Our co-authors agree that there should be some end product, some way to share what we have learned with a wider professional audience. As MacLean and Mohr state (1999, p. ix), in addition to working together to improve their own practice, teacher-researchers “assume the professional responsibility of documenting, analysing, and writing about their work for other teachers.” Today, with the explosion of media resources, we have many options for this reporting (see 2.8, “Reading, writing, and publishing”).

#### ***2.4 Survival in a dual role***

Research cannot be an extra project added to teaching, not if we hope to survive without adopting the “Teacher as Martyr” role. Action research is possible for teachers when it is generated by real classroom puzzlements, not just by the requirements of a university course or school-based reform effort. Our survival as well as the quality of our professional work depend on integrating the research process and the teaching process into a new “I”: the teacher researcher.

Especially as a new teacher, how does one learn to play this hybrid role? We find that many classroom activities can double as research activities. When a teacher researcher sits in with a group of students discussing a book, that teaching activity can also serve as a group interview and an occasion for research field notes. Our group easily came up with examples of classroom activities that doubled as data-generators.

“Sometimes I invite my second graders to write individual poems on a huge sheet of butcher paper taped to the floor,” Inda says. “This is a whole-group collaborative writing project that will wind up on the wall in the outside hallway, and it is also a process and a product which constitutes data. I analyse data like these to help explain or interpret what happened in the making of it. Who had a lot to say? Whose handwriting is biggest and most confident? Who made room for whom in taking a place around the paper? How did the poems ‘speak’ to one another?” In other situations, Inda will

turn a cassette recorder (a standard data collecting tool) into “a prop” for playing radio host during a classroom activity (Schaenen, 2010b).

Angela uses a variety of teaching activities with high school students that also create research data: She allows time for “student ‘quickwrites’ at the end of class: short, reflective statements of what they’ve learned and questions they still have.” Other times, she herself will type up their ideas as they say them aloud so that she can reflect upon them later. And sometimes, she adds, “I even ask a student to keep notes on small group discussions and share with the class, in which case my students are acting as co-researchers, writing the field notes themselves.”

As Pablo explains, teaching and researching can become a joint venture when students are doing some consistent analysis of their own work. Many schools, he reports, are utilising some form of progress monitoring to look at reading progress and may collect data once or twice a month. Part of the responsibility for teachers or teaching teams has been to look at these data to note growth, regression, or flat-lines in regards to progress. “I’ve seen teachers who, instead of doing purely ‘outside’ analysis of this information, have their students chart their own progress so the ownership is mutual,” he says. “This kind of planned charting can be a conversation starter for teachers with their students. It is very true that test scores aren’t a sole factor, but here the progress monitoring allows for conversation and consistent analysis before ‘the big test’” (Flinn, 2011).

When teacher action research is going well, it adds rather than saps energy; if the study involves students as co-researchers, it can add energy to both students and teachers. Angela explains, “I actually felt less like a martyr when I was researching than when I was not, when I was not it was easy to feel overworked and underpaid, crabby, and so on. When I was researching, though, I felt empowered to understand, improve, and change things that might be making me feel like a martyr. Sometimes the best questions would arise from those ‘martyr’ kinds of moments, overwhelmed by grading, or feeling frustrated and useless by student projects that demonstrated no critical thinking” (Kohnen, 2009).

And speaking of bad days: we have all found that even the worst teaching day is made less horrible when you know you can use it somehow in your

research, almost the way a personal trauma can serve as grist for a compelling piece of fiction in the hands of a good writer.

### ***2.5 Ethical engagement***

Action research presents a stark contrast with the norms of traditional social science, where the researcher strives not to “bias” or “contaminate” the data with any personal involvement. Teacher action research, however, is engaged; the researcher is an “I” whose stakeholder perspective is an ethical stance rather than a threat to validity. Currently Wendy and Angela are working as consultants with Scijourn, a grant-funded project for science teachers incorporating journalism and real audiences. When Scijourn teachers have approached action research, Wendy and Angela write, “we’ve found that misplaced worries about bias make it difficult for them to see their studies as ‘real research.’ Our answer is, ‘Think science. But focus on Darwin’s fieldwork rather than large-N experimental design.’”

In Eikeland’s view (2007, p. 58), “the tacit presupposition for modern social research [is] that we, the researchers, have to study the others. . . . ‘Othering’ is at the root of the trouble, in allocating performance or execution on the one hand and reflection or interpretation on the other to widely different kinds of people, not sharing experience.” As practitioners doing research, our co-authors, too, deplore “this institutionalised division of labour”. For us, action research is driven by stakeholders whose knowing engagement and decision-making are essential. Inda expresses this ideal as the “full, candid, transparent, and reflective participation of the teacher in every stage of the inquiry process: question posing, theoretic framing, inquiry designing, data collecting, data analysing, interpreting, and reporting.”

At the same time, any researcher needs other perspectives to avoid the temptation to see only the data that confirm his or her own expectations. An action research team of colleagues in different roles can provide such dialogue and critique on a continuing basis. And even a teacher doing solo research in the classroom can engage others: students, parents, outside observers, in a dialogue about research in progress. The ethical need for multiple perspectives is central to what we mean by good teacher research.

Unfortunately, discussions of ethics in teacher research often wind up focusing on the institutional review boards (IRB in the U.S.) that govern academic research. The IRB guidelines tend to be based on biomedical, psychological, and sociological research, predominantly quantitative, although many of the ethical principles are relevant for teacher-researchers as well. Some sort of training in ethics is mandated by many review boards.<sup>1</sup>

The role of institutional research boards will vary from country to country and institution to institution. However, the ethics of practitioner research must not be restricted by the issues on an institutional review. This is because action research poses some ethical challenges and risks that do not normally arise in traditional outsider studies, whether qualitative or quantitative. What authority does the university have if a teacher writes about his or her research after completing a degree? Then again, what authority might a school district have if a teacher writes about this research after leaving the employ of the district? When you are researching your own performance in your own classroom, who owns (or is primary custodian of) the data? The individual teacher-researcher? The school? The district administration? Everyone? (And if I were the parent of a child described in that research, how would I answer?)

After struggling with various ethical issues, usually unforeseen, Jane organised her own and others' thoughts into the volume *Ethical issues in practitioner research* (Zeni, 2001). The final chapter is "A guide to ethical decision-making for insider research," a set of questions loosely based on the IRB format but expanded with questions specific to practitioner research in education. It is designed for self-study or for review within a team.

The boundaries of research and professional practice are intentionally blurred in action research, but this can be problematic when findings are shared, reported, published. Who is really inside, who is outside? Who gets to read the field notes or drafts? Who gets named as author or co-author (or mentioned in a footnote)? To whom is action research ultimately account-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, online at <http://phrp.nihtraining.com/> – the "Protection of Human Research Participants" course from the National Institutes of Health.

able? What responsibility does a teacher-researcher have when writing about vulnerable populations who are poorly represented on the faculty?

Informed consent takes on new meanings when research is conducted with and by insiders. The teacher-researcher is a stakeholder playing a dual role (practitioner + researcher), with professional and ethical responsibilities to people in the research setting. The teacher researcher will probably continue working in the same school or district after the research is completed, the report submitted, the article or book published. These situations call for an engaged ethics, whose principles include taking action when justice issues arise in day-to-day practice and respecting the professional dignity of others in the setting.

Recently (in Noffke & Somekh, 2009, pp. 254-266), Jane drafted a more concise set of questions organized by three broad principles: Responsibility and Accountability; Action and Social Justice; and Caring and Respect.

## ***2.6 Community and cultural context***

While teacher research usually starts with a problem in the classroom, the inquiry and the action gain power from exploring the larger community and the cultures that surround our students and us. Talking with parents and walking the neighborhood are research activities that can shed light on tensions in the classroom. Especially when students differ from their teacher (or teachers from their consultant) in race, gender, class, or other dimensions of culture, the research should attend to voices from these communities. This is a necessary part of the reconnaissance mentioned earlier.

Inda is a white, middle-class teacher who worked with African American children from families in poverty. The risk of engaging in "blinkered research" is what made her listen to audiotapes over and over (and over!) again before attempting interpretation. "So often what I think I have heard or understood is not exactly what my students were saying," she says. "Nor is what I think I have said what my students understood me to be saying. Listening to classroom discourse and transcribing it myself post hoc allows me to confront the moments when meaning is negotiated. It is the only way I, for



one, can 'hear' how and when my assumptions got in the way of effective communication with my students."

Jane tells of a wake-up call she received from teachers she thought she understood. "When I wrote a grant to support an action research team of teachers in our urban public schools, I was never able to break through the mistrust. Administrators as well as teachers challenged my enthusiastic description of the project: 'So who will get credit for our research?' and 'What if you see things in our classes that you think are bad, will you write about them? What if we don't want you to?' I did know and trust Rosalynde Scott, the teacher leader, and although I am white and Ros is black, I felt confident that the trust was mutual. We were both active in professional circles and had worked together occasionally through our Gateway Writing Project. But one day she confessed that as she explained action research to her teachers, she sometimes felt like "Nurse Evers" in the infamous Tuskegee syphilis research. In this experiment, medical researchers documented the course of untreated syphilis among indigent black men in the U.S., continuing the study for decades after drugs were developed to cure the disease. Their work was made possible by the assistance of an African American nurse who trusted the doctors and in turn was trusted by her community. The Tuskegee syphilis study is often presented as a negative case study in research ethics (NIH/PHRP, pp. 6-8.) Rosalynde wondered if she was selling out her colleagues in order to support Jane's university research agenda.

"At the time, I was devastated," Jane admits. "But gradually, I came to see the legitimacy of the insiders' concerns." A decade later, Rosalynde, her writing project consultant, and her school district supervisor reflected on this experience by writing an essay, "Insiders and outsiders: Perspectives on urban action research" (Harris, Lowenstein, & Scott, 2001).

Because teacher-researchers are insiders, it is tempting to see ourselves as native, the authentic voices in a school. However, as Fred Erickson put it, "Neither the outsider nor the insider is granted immaculate perception" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. ix). Each of us enters a research setting with cultural lenses and expectations; perhaps the first object to explore is our own "instrumentation", how we see and select some people and behaviors for comment, while taking others for granted.

## ***2.7 Flexibility***

An oft-cited problem that practitioners have with the institutional review process has almost nothing to do with ethics and much to do with the fact that qualitative research cannot easily be defined from the outset. “Tweaking”: adjusting the research focus, data gathering, interpretive lens, is a series of decisions made by the teacher and her co-researchers, the students.

Typically, the teacher begins with a problem or curiosity or interest and as she gathers data finds herself redefining the issues to be researched. Then another set of data pops up, a good idea created on the spot for a writing assignment that she realises tells her a great deal about the issue she seeks to better understand. And sometimes it is the data itself that leads to the question.

Laura, a grad student in one of Wendy’s classes, was interested in teaching hands-on science to a group of youngsters who were having lots of trouble reading. Had she begun her project at that point her question would have been something about involving these 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in work that was cognitively challenging, but did not require much engagement with text. So she began with a hands-on experiment that she drew for her students, accompanying it with limited text. The students loved the book she had drawn, and so she made another book with them and ended up doing a teacher research project about their own creation of books to accompany hands-on learning. The teacher’s research plans changed because the teacher’s teaching plans changed. What a shame it would have been had Laura not adapted her teacher research, and frankly caused the research to follow, to be subsumed by what she understood as a practitioner.

## ***2.8 Reading, writing, and publishing***

When and how much do you read before you gather data? Who mandates the reading? Insiders doing action research differ in the emphasis they place on reading scholarly research, writing detailed field notes, and publishing/presenting to a wider audience.

Wendy believes that the extensive literature review required in most graduate courses is useless or worse for planning insider research. Teachers wind up narrowing their views of the problem, investigating what published researchers have written about, and doubting their own instincts. Typically they identify a topic and look for what others have said about it, e.g. "How should I teach pronunciation to my Chinese students?" Those focused articles are often not available or come from problematic sources. Because practitioner researchers are short of time, taking graduate courses, teaching, and completing a project, they often do a sloppy job and reify the studies they are able to lay their hands on. To do a thorough search on pronunciation and to understand the varying perspectives on the subject would take more time than they have.

Jane acknowledges the risk of losing an independent perspective in the ocean of literature. But without some fresh reading, she finds that teachers draw mainly on in-service courses, textbooks and staffroom talk while conceptualising an inquiry. A few well-chosen texts early in the process can challenge or problematise that conventional wisdom. Rather than a "best practices" reading (that may provide just a more current set of answers), Jane often suggests a broader theoretical reading, one that calls into question the taken-for-granted beliefs. For example, Plato's argument for speech as superior to writing can jog a teacher into asking, "How do students use oral language in my class? What happens if I give a larger role to speaking?" And this is the sort of question that can spark a genuine inquiry.

An alternative approach, one that Wendy recommends, is to have students work with a few excellent teacher research studies, not necessarily about the topic at hand, and think more generally about the implicit questions these studies raise: Where did the teacher's questions come from? What did she use as data? What made this study credible to you?

We came to this consensus about the place of reading other people's research: Do your own "reconnaissance" first in an effort to understand what you think are the problems worth exploring. Then read, not just before, but also during your data gathering and analysis. Engage in a dialogue with your "distant teachers," the published scholars: "Imagine a dinner party for twelve where we can invite anyone we want, living or dead. . . to discuss our re-

search project. Whom would you want at that table?" (Hubbard & Powers, 1993, pp. 100-101). Throughout the process, be informed by literature, in contact with it, but not driven by it. Talk with other practitioners, both to try out your tentative interpretations and to get perspectives outside your own. A consultant or professor may be able to suggest (or summarise) some readings that address your issue, and this may be more efficient than combing the library's catalogue for references.

How important is writing by teachers doing action research? As described by Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2009), we see a distinction between *writing down* data in the process of action research and *writing up* the final product. All of us find it essential to write down what we do and what we see while in the process of research. Too much is happening, and too much will be distorted if we try to record the data (and our initial thinking about it) retrospectively. We all maintain some written records, more or less systematic, during our research. Some of us write detailed, 2-column field notes; others write observations on class lists or seating charts; others jot brief notes in class and expand to a teaching journal during prep hour or in the evening. Literacy teachers would find this analogous to "writing to learn" (gathering data) and "learning to write" (how to make this data accessible and interesting to others).

We recognise that our experience may not be typical. Our five co-authors have degrees in reading, writing, English or other areas of literacy, so it is no surprise that all of us write fluently and find field notes and research journals useful. Teachers who are less experienced and less comfortable as writers, or those less willing to adopt writing as part of their research process, may create other forms of inscribed and dated documentation: sketching images, preparing diagrams and seating charts, devising concept maps, making lists or tables which record classroom experiences.

Writing a final report is a different matter, however, and even our literacy-focused authors agree that telling a complex story is a challenge. "The hard part was figuring out how to cull, sort, organise, and create a cohesive narrative that drew upon both wide and narrow perspectives," says Inda (who has written novels).

Angela expands on the theme: “The hardest part is the report. It’s hard to stop the cycle of collecting and analysing and changing in order to write something up because things are always changing and you are always collecting new data. Stopping to write about what you’ve done (or even present it) is time-consuming and time is what teachers do not have a lot of. It also often feels like you are ‘not ready’ to say anything about the issue yet because you’re still investigating. That’s where doing this through classes or other official outlets forces you to stop and report about what you’ve done. The report is important because only by stopping and writing about what you’ve done can you fully understand it. Even if you’ve analysed already, you haven’t had to put the pieces together into a coherent ‘story’ until you are trying to write about it or tell someone else. The act of writing/reporting can lead to more analysis as you work through the tale that you are trying to tell.”

We believe that for teachers doing action research, some sort of reporting to a larger audience is worth the effort. We also value publishing some of these reports more formally, in books, journals, or online, but we always ask whose agenda publishing serves. Although a professor may urge teacher researchers to publish, the professor is expected to publish on the job; not so for most other teachers.

A more important issue, we think, is the way practitioner research is written, with a capital “I.” Avoiding first person in academic research is a rule seldom questioned from high school to graduate school. Action research, however, must acknowledge who is acting/ teaching/ interpreting. We consider “voice” an ethical issue in reporting our work. Whether a teacher or a consultant prepares the report, it must be in direct language that makes sense to the stakeholders: to classroom teachers and parents, not in a scholarly dialect in which even well-read teachers are not fluent. Writing in a non-technical voice allows other insiders to learn from practitioner research and opens our work to those who can critique our errors and misinterpretations.

Some research teams seek alternative ways for teachers to share their knowledge and findings with audiences of practitioners. Conference sessions are popular with teachers, but transitory. DVD presentations and websites

allow a wider audience to visit asynchronously.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not (and how) to go public with our work must be negotiated among the stakeholders (Hollingsworth, 1994).

## **2.9 Time**

We follow our comments on publishing with “time” because it is time that often defines the supposed beginning and end of a project. Teacher research, however, is ongoing. For the teacher-researcher, time runs like a stream. A study becomes bounded by damming the waters at a particular points or moments: when beginning and ending a class, or from the beginning of a unit of study until the end, or from the start of the school year till the end, or from the origination of an idea until the teacher feels he’s “figured it out.”

But here’s the truth of the matter: action research of any kind entails cycles of action, observation, and reflection. It takes time to work with our data, to follow our questions through several cycles of inquiry, and to check out whether what we think we see in our data happens again with another class, another semester. Often (especially when constrained by the 15 weeks of a typical American university course), teachers move from question to presentation before they have closely examined and reflected on the data. Instead of nurturing long-term teacher inquiry, universities can distort the nature of this work; teachers leave with the sense that action research is just another kind of semester project to be written up quickly and filed away.

Schools or grant-giving agencies seeking to support teacher research sometimes provide a bit of time off, such as an afternoon a week, or a day each month. We have known several research teams who tried this approach. The teacher had to plan with and for a substitute who came in and out of the class during the research time, while the teacher retained full responsibility for overall planning and grading. Those who experienced this so-called reward decided they would rather teach their classes every day; it was simply too much work not to be in class!

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<sup>2</sup> (for example, see the Carnegie Foundation’s “living archive”:  
<http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/insideteaching/quest/collections.html>).

Having time and space to look at data is surely an advantage, although numerous, excellent studies have come from the rooms of fulltime practitioners. One action research team, after rejecting an afternoon-a-week release for their study, discovered a better approach to time. The English teachers asked their middle-school principal to revise the schedule so that all of them had the same planning hour. He agreed. Over the years, this shared hour within the school day supported informal sharing of questions, tears, and triumphs, as well as plans for conferences and publications (Krater, et al., 1994).

### ***2.10 Stance and power***

As noted in section 2.1, teacher ownership or autonomy is key to teacher research. Thus, as a genre, it is poised to go toe-to-toe with comprehensive, top-down institutional reform efforts. Despite the mantra of “scientifically-based” methods, we remember the decades of top-down reform projects that fizzled, often because the researchers didn’t bother to get their hands dirty by observing how the reforms were implemented in real-world classrooms (Elliott, 1991). We see small-scale research by insiders as an essential check to large-scale errors. And yet teacher research is often dismissed and the teachers who successfully engage in it are seen as anomalous. “That’s fine for Bob, but how many Bob’s are there in the world?” goes this sort of dismissal. But teacher research recognises, even celebrates the fact that individual efforts are often more effective than large-scale mandates. Which leads to the issue of stance. What kind of confidence must a teacher muster in order to identify as a “teacher-researcher”?

Much as we want to see all participants in the school drama as equal, some may be more equal than others: the teacher in a classroom is paid less than an administrator or consultant in school. Power is also realised in the way resources are allocated. School systems can be bolstered by the resources of nearby universities, federal funding agencies, and/or private curriculum developers looking for school-wide purchases. Given the many hands that feed them, such districts might privilege the capital R kind of research currently favored by those with funds, the kind of inquiries shaped

by experimental design paradigms familiar in the hard sciences and traditional social science. Each term, teachers enter Wendy's graduate course knowing something about control groups and the need for unbiased research, but with no reading or practical knowledge of insider research. This is despite the fact that the university requires a teacher research project in order to receive a Master's degree in "Teaching and Learning."

How do power relationships play out when a professor in a university graduate programme (or a consultant or administrator) "requires" that practitioners do "action research." Whose action is at the centre of the study? Jane comments, "I struggle with this when I teach university classes that involve (OK, require) teacher research. I try to set flexible guidelines so that members of my class make most of the decisions, but at the end of the course, I still give the grade."

Pablo's experience working with teachers in what his district terms "data teams" also shows how hard it is to move from administrative support to ownership by insiders. "Working with teachers was easier when I was not an evaluator," Pablo says. After he visited a few classes, gathered some data, and reported back (confidentially) to individual teachers, they began to trust that he might be offering something useful. "Then I started to get some buy-in, but not real ownership in most cases. The distrust centered on teachers' belief and past experience that if they put a lot of time and effort into a 'district' initiative, after a short time it would be changed and ultimately thrown aside. I find that in most school districts the biggest bar to student gains is the lack of open and trusted peer conversation among the teachers and other professionals."

While we are writing from the perspective of teachers doing research to improve their own practice, we also value (and work in) the more collaborative modes. Perhaps what finally identifies significant teacher research has to do with the centrality of the insider's action. This centrality indicates that a given study is "the real thing." When investigating a problem, we observe and gather data on our own actions as well as those of our students; we reflect; we talk it through (a little or a lot) with others; then we start to take action, to change the things over which we have personal control. What



practitioner research is not about is “othering”: analysing or fixing somebody else. That is the essential stance.

### **3. Practitioner teams: Collaboration and intervention**

Our co-authors have all done research in more than one professional role: as classroom teacher and also as consultant, administrator, professor, supervisor, or some other position that involves new issues of power as well as new opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Among the classic examples of teacher research were the teams inspired by John Elliott and the Classroom Action Research Network (in the UK) and those affiliated with the National Writing Project (in the US). Both groups regard some sort of collaboration as a core value for practitioner research (see Elliott, 1991, 2009; Mohr & MacLean, 1987; MacLean & Mohr, 1999.)

Consider the Fairfax County (VA) Teacher Research Network, which began in 1981 under the leadership of two high school teachers, Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean. Both had been involved in the National Writing Project. Over the years, members have engaged in learning conversations, shared data, and tested their interpretations in supportive groups of peers. In time, their work led to numerous publications by dozens of teachers; administrators in their large school district sponsored their work, and nearby George Mason University offered academic credit for their seminars. Today, the Teacher Research Network continues, with courses and an annual conference. However, it has been absorbed into Fairfax County Public Schools’ “Professional Learning and Accountability” department. Reflecting, perhaps, the current mood of institutional control, the autonomy of teachers’ action research seems to have diminished.<sup>3</sup> A slight shift in emphasis? A wholesale takeover? The language of empowerment and accountability can send mixed messages. The classic work of Elliott, Mohr, and MacLean resonates with our understanding of collaborative practitioner research. Ian Mitchell (2004) gives a detailed and astute analysis of the varieties of collaborative inquiry and when they also qualify as action research. Like Mitchell, we look for the role of the

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<sup>3</sup> see website: <http://www.fcps.edu/plt/tresearch.htm>.

insiders to identify what we would call good collaborative practitioner research.

How does our view relate to the classification the editors have proposed to frame this journal issue? We find the three categories of action research: collaborative, intervention, practitioner, useful and provocative. But at least in the U.S. context we think the borders are more permeable; a practitioner research team, we think, would often fit two or even all three categories.

Collaborative research has long been understood as an insider-outsider partnership between a research consultant (often university-based) and classroom teachers (Smith, 1968). Most of us have been involved in such partnerships from time to time. We think the locus of power and ownership would determine the overlap, if any, between inside-outside collaborations and practitioner research. Collaborative research can fit our own definition when the practitioners, as stakeholders, own the problem and when they are willing and knowing partners throughout the research process: engaged in analysis and co-interpretation, not simply in data gathering for the outside researcher. Consider some examples.

Dissertation research, as a collaboration with an academic mentor, might also be practitioner research. When Nancy Robb Singer was working as Jane's doctoral assistant, they developed a listserv to support student teachers in Jane's course during their weeks off campus. Nancy's dissertation became a conversation analysis of that online seminar. In their partnership, Nancy was the researcher and Jane the teacher investigating her own practice (Singer & Zeni, 2004).

Angela (who is currently engaged in her own dissertation with Wendy as mentor) sees it this way: "Doctoral students are taking the lead, but the university people are still guiding them. The doctoral student, though, is the primary author." Of course there are counter-examples. We all know of cases where a dissertation topic is simply proposed by a mentor to the doctoral student as a quick route to the degree.

Jane's experience as consultant involves more practitioner ownership. Joan Krater, an eighth-grade teacher, with a group of colleagues in the suburban schools of Webster Groves, MO, decided to tackle the race and gender achievement gap. As she recalls, "We believed passionately that a good

teacher could do something in the classroom to make a difference. . . [Yet] despite everyone's good intentions, the schools were still failing some of our kids in disproportionate numbers. Why. . . ?" (Krater, et al., 1994, pp. 17-18). With a small grant, the teachers hired Jane, who suggested they bring the inquiry into their classrooms through action research. So began a seven-year collaboration in which the power rested solidly with the insiders, the consultant gradually identified as a member of the team, and the performance of African American students improved significantly. The middle-school teacher became the lead author of their book, *Mirror Images: Teaching writing in black and white* (Krater, et al., pp. 15-50).

The concept of the "Professional Learning Community," a collaborative approach currently popular in U.S. schools, also has elements of practitioner research. The PLC is formed by team of teachers and administrators who share a common goal, work interdependently, and meet regularly (Dufour, et al., 2006). Pablo considers the PLC as having the potential for the kind of collaboration that supports teacher ownership. "The process requires team input and trust," he says. "Unlike many opportunities for action research, the PLC model depends upon group participation and removes teachers from living alone in what is often 'my classroom and my students.'" What action research might absorb from the professional learning communities, Pablo suggests, is the focus on team collaboration. A decentralised, multi-agent effort offers an important opportunity for addressing the tension between teachers and administrators around the quality of changes in schools. Furthermore, PLCs are intended to be a permanent process, in contrast to the short-term action research projects that teachers are often encouraged to do, those which aim for more immediate, short-term goals shared through a report.

None of our co-authors has worked directly in a PLC, but we have all heard from teachers that in practice the success of these efforts varies dramatically. What we feel sure about, however, is that without community, teaching is a less effective and significantly lonelier enterprise. Sometimes community is an outgrowth of the teacher-student relationship; sometimes it is born from formalised, organised efforts such as classes or PLCs; and sometimes, when teachers are lucky, community grows naturally as friend-

ships. The PLC model aligns with the definition of collaborative research in this issue of IJAR, in that a consultant or administrator sets the team in motion and continues to play a lead role. If a Professional Learning Community were to evolve in practice as a site for what we mean by practitioner research, the key would be ownership, the “buy-in” by teachers.

Intervention research is defined as a project initiated by an outside ally with the goal of changing the practitioners. As educators we would call this transformative or emancipatory research. Such interventions might also fit our definition of teacher research; for us the key issues are “Who owns the problem?” and “Whose actions are being investigated? By whom?” and finally, “Who decides on what, when, and how to change?”

We have struggled with this category because all of us recognise the potential for action research to transform teaching and support teachers in their efforts to create democratic spaces for learning. During the waning years of apartheid in South Africa, the University of the Western Cape offered a Master’s programme in “Action Research and Educational Change.” The leaders of this course recruited participants based on criteria that included the teacher’s active engagement in democratic structures in society. Here the faculty members provided the research tools for teachers to document what was happening in their classrooms, and the seminar context for reflection (van den Berg, 2001). Since the goal of the course was openly communicated to participants who already, to some extent, shared that goal, we would consider this example both “intervention research” and “practitioner research.”

Here in the U.S., the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group draws on similar emancipatory principles (Rogers, et al., 2005). LSJTRG’s website describes it as “a grassroots, teacher-led professional development group located in St. Louis, MO. We believe that educators are public intellectuals who gain strength and wisdom through working with other educators, parents, and community members. Our mission is to develop and support socially just, equitable and sustainable practices in schools and communities. We are committed to connecting educators across the lifespan and building networks to mobilise resources to promote progressive change.” Our colleague Rebecca Rogers at the University of Missouri-St. Louis founded

LSJTRG, but our own experience with members has convinced us of the practitioner ownership. At face-to-face and online meetings, members set their own agendas for research and action.

Other successful examples are difficult to find, though we have all been participants (generally reluctant) in projects designed to change teachers. We agree with Eikeland (2007, pp. 52-53), who sees the “hard core” of action research as “self reflection.” He adds, “Action research is not based on intervention by outsiders into the lives and practices of others. Intervention cannot rid itself of a manipulative taint. Hard core action research is not intervention but collective self reflection.”

In discussing “collaborative” and “intervention” research as defined above, we have considered our own experiences working with teachers in the role of consultant, professor, or administrator. We have seen that action research by groups of insiders can support other professional learning and school improvement efforts (Noffke & Somekh, 2009, pp. 100-103). Teacher-led teams can provide access to feedback and group support, along with better prospects of making school-wide changes. Some teacher research teams involve an inside/ outside partnership, with a team leader coming from a different position; the advantage can be access to scholarly materials and technical support, along with a new perspective.

In short, practitioner research in education can involve many roles:

*Solo teacher-researcher*

- With goal of improving own practice (in order to improve student learning).
- Or with narrower goal of improving student learning as measured by test scores.

*Collaborative consultant*

- Recruited by teacher-researchers; an “outsider” but full member of team.
- Or recruited by (responsible to) administration with goal of improving instruction.
- Or recruited by project or agency to intervene with goal of emancipation.

*Administrator*

- Researching with goal of improving own practice as well as teachers, students.
- Or with narrower goal of improving teacher and/or student performance.

*Professor*

- Action research as part of in academic degree programme with goal of improving own practice as well as guiding teachers in action research.
- Or with narrower goal of teaching graduate students to gather and reflect on data.

The first example in each category is closest to our understanding of practitioner research. In the others, the research agenda is directed by someone outside the school or outside the classroom, someone whose own professional practice is not being examined in the research. However, we have seen research that began with a consultant, administrator, or professor in charge, but developed as the insiders took ownership, adopting the “I” (and the “we”) of teacher research.

For us, finally, this issue is not so much how practitioner research is defined or who makes up the team, but rather what can be done to better understand and dignify the very important work teachers undertake. As insiders, we need to reclaim the word teacher, to put it front and centre in the research we do, the knowledge we make, and the articles we publish. Teacher action research is about teachers and what their students know and do. We, as a group, view it as our goal and our responsibility to think of classroom activity as the enactment of such research, research that those outside and those inside recognise as helpful, thoughtful, illuminating, and transformative. That’s teacher research with a capital T.

## **Appendix**

### **Kinds of data gathered and analyzed by 5 co-authors in various studies**

#### *Documentation of Day-to-Day Action:*

Observations and Field Notes by researcher  
Observations and Field Notes by a colleague  
Daily records/teaching log  
Audio & Video recording of students and teachers  
Records of student interactions with peers (recorded on a grid designed by teacher)  
Teacher self-study and reflective journals  
Notes on conversations with students, colleagues  
Student reflections on actions  
Students' self-analysis of changes, based on behavioral data from teacher  
Printouts from collaborative writing w. distant colleague  
Drafts, feedback, multiple revisions (for self-study of process)

#### *Classroom Artifacts:*

Material culture in the classroom  
Student writing  
Whatever teacher and students did/ used/ made/ said  
Test scores from teacher-made and mandated assessments  
Informal reading inventory (from oral reading)  
Writing samples  
Student work samples and projects  
Listserv messages from online student teaching seminar (over 5 years)

#### *Data Specifically Collected for Research:*

Formal and informal interviews with students  
Informal interviews with adults (teachers, administrators, secretary, custodians)  
Quantitative data gathered by special ed. teachers on each student (on request of admin.):  
Test scores, number of suspensions, nurse visits  
Writing samples gathered by data team teacher and analyzed w. administrator –  
Number of words, number spelled correctly, appropriate word sequence

Survey of students  
Unit planning using survey results  
E-mail dialogue with research partner  
Feedback from student teachers about online seminar  
Student interviews and detailed case studies  
Record of children's writing processes via keystroke recording software  
Children's research notebooks, saving all drafts and printouts  
Descriptions of teacher's own decision-making process  
Noting amount of time taken to respond to each student draft  
Research team – formal assessments of critical thinking at end of year  
Consultant fieldnotes from research team meetings (shared with teachers)  
Teacher researcher annual reports (consultant synthesized and reported back)

*Data collected by outsiders:*

School records and documents as available  
State and district mandated test scores  
Community history project report

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