

Editorial: English teachers as researchers

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Teachers as researchers, as a term, carries with it a particular dynamic. It seems to lack an authenticity. Try it out elsewhere: librarian as poet, unemployed single mother as writer, seamstress as political activist. That these refer respectively to Philip Larkin, Rosa Parks and J.K Rowling may give a flavour of the feeling we have that the term is simply patronising. In our respective roles as pre-service teacher educators, we do not recognise ourselves in the term researcher as teacher. We are both – not one acting as the other. So we should like to offer the term teacher and researcher to describe the group of people who have contributed to this special edition of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. Some of us work in a school context, which in itself is not an homogeneous concept, representing as our contributors do academically successful schools, struggling schools, comprehensive schools, single-sex schools, independent schools, community schools – labels do not do justice to variety but may indicate the diversity of perceptions the group holds. Some of us work in a University context; some in advisory roles with a variety of schools. We are all involved in the same quest: developing an understanding of the ways in which education works and how different practices impacts on the English/literacy classroom. And this volume, it is hoped, will enable us to contribute to that body of knowledge.

Roni Coggins, in this issue, begins by exclaiming that she is both excited and surprised by the notion of being both “teacher” and “researcher”. She goes on to explain that there was a time when she was highly sceptical of the concept of teachers as researchers, given the high workload teachers carry, their lack of skills as researchers and who might possibly be interested in the findings. Now she proclaims that research is embedding itself firmly into her teaching and professional persona! How could such a change take place? Why has she let research become part of herself as teacher? Who is reading teacher research?

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, there are teachers worldwide for whom, for a range of reasons, research is becoming embedded as an undeniable part of their lives as teachers. But what is also clear, from these pieces contributed from Asia, England, the Seychelles, Australia and New Zealand, is that the way that teacher research is understood, enacted and written up is almost as varied as educational research in general.

According to Lankshear and Knobel, “Teacher research is a strongly contested idea” (2004, p. 3) and, as these authors continue, different people take competing positions on the key issues that exist within this rapidly expanding field of activity. For example, they cite debates between such protagonists as Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and Ann Berthoff (1987). Stenhouse argued that teacher research can provide illuminating and fruitful insights into classroom-based teaching and learning that offer teachers and other educators a sound basis for making professional decisions and

judgments when it is carried out systematically and rigorously, most often as case studies. On the other hand, Berthoff emphasized an approach to “re-search”, in which teachers drew on their already-existing and rich funds of teaching experience and wrote these into knowledge. She stressed the importance of theory as standing in a dialectical relationship with practice, in the same way that “knowing” and “hearing” are related within the composition process.

In composition, says Berthoff, you can't really know what you mean until you hear what you say. In my opinion, theory and practice should stand in this same relationship: theory and practice need one another....The primary role of theory is to guide us in defining our purposes and thus in evaluating our efforts, in realizing them (cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 14).

Yates (2004) in her readable book *What does good education research look like?* focuses more on pragmatics than what teacher research “should be”. She claims that aspects such as visibility (research can't be judged, taken up, used, approved or initiated by practitioners if it is not heard of), usability (it needs to be decipherable by practitioners in order that they can understand and do something with it) and addressing something that matters are important. And of course, “something that matters” can be different for different practitioners. Hopefully, by limiting this issue of the journal to “English teachers” as researchers, the topics illuminated in these articles will relate to “somethings that matter” for other teachers of English/literacy. We would hope that the matters researched and reported on here will be of use to the wider English/literacy teaching community and, through the accessibility of this journal, the research of these teachers becomes more visible.

At the heart of the discussion about practitioner research, though, we believe is the issue of purpose: Why do teachers undertake research? The answers to this question are probably as varied as the teachers who undertake the research, but it appears that the twin goals of reflecting upon and improving their practice rank highly. In this issue, all of the articles consider, through a range of research strategies and perspectives, how studied reflection upon their own practice might make teachers' practice better.

Additionally, as several of these authors bear witness, teachers undertake research as part of their own further education. As teaching has become a degreed profession, and as an increasing number of governments have implemented teacher standards and reward structures that include recognition for higher qualifications, teachers have become a high percentage of the postgraduate population entering education research degrees at Universities worldwide. Moumou, Tulk, Feldman, and Bellamy – from contexts as diverse as England, Australia and the Seychelles – exemplify this trend. While they have all drawn on their teaching contexts for inspiration, qualifications were the reason for undertaking the research.

This issue of the journal called for papers that would raise issues about being both English teachers and researchers simultaneously, about the challenges associated with being a teacher and a writer, and about the kinds of knowledge that such research about practice might (or might not) produce. We have been richly rewarded. Pam Feldman provides an insightful account of learning to be a teacher in a new country, new school and among students of a particular community in Melbourne, Australia. Through self-study she reflects on her own professional growth and learning. Her

explicit example of learning a new way to frame the way she teaches poetry within the Jewish cultural context demonstrates how teaching benefits from research.

Jean Conteh and Saeko Toyoshima also slice across cultures (England and Japan) using a contrasting methodology to explore their participants' perceptions of learning English in bilingual contexts. Their "interviews as conversations" helped them as teachers to make the familiar strange in order to understand their teaching contexts and students' learning in far deeper ways than otherwise might have been the case. Several papers stem from professional development initiatives that have linked practitioners with their University colleagues in different parts of the World. For example, in Hong Kong, Arthur Firkin and Cherry Wong collaborated with colleagues from a local University to undertake their work. Similarly, in New Zealand, Libby Limbrick and Nicky Knight examine how the teaching of writing was improved through clustering teachers to focus on how well they were using the National Exemplars in writing.

Sara Tulk is a Head of Faculty at an academically demanding, highly successful secondary school in Hertfordshire UK. Sara's article is part of her MEd thesis (a route she took as a direct consequence of being involved in an English teachers' research group at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge) and leads us to consider the place of picture books in the teaching of reading in the secondary school. Introducing the idea of "serious fun" Sara takes us through a project in which secondary school students were interviewed about reading experiences, and then asked to respond to the picture book *Paradise Garden* by Colin Thompson, through visual representations of the text. The resulting analysis Sara offers of accessing text paints a revealing and incisive contribution to the reading debate.

Liz Bellamy, a newly qualified teacher working in an all boys' school in Cambridge, has contributed an article based on her work as an English trainee teacher at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge. Liz's particular interest at that point (and since) is with working with gifted and talented students and, as her paper shows, the issue is complex from the outset – but intriguing too. Do definitions matter? Should we even be identifying such a grouping? And if we do, what provision should be offered in schools to meet the needs of those who present themselves as highly successful learners in our subject area? Liz's post-graduate research has led her, too, to follow an MEd route at Cambridge, where she is now exploring teaching gifted and talented pupils by creating a 3D narrative space as part of their working conditions in English.

But as we read the articles for this issue, we kept asking ourselves: Why is this practitioner research? What qualifies it as such? How does the reader know that this is practitioner research and how is it different from other educational research, or, for that matter, reflections on teaching, learning and the curriculum? What claims do these articles make about English/literacy teachers as researchers? Or do they just assume, because they are English teachers doing research, that this is what practitioner research is?

A teacher and researcher explained to Mary, very patiently, that it's all very well for academics to talk about the challenges of research and the writing expectations that accompany such an occupation. However, for teachers, whose primary role is to teach, research and "writing up" are more often obstacles than challenges. This issue

of *English Teachers: Practice and Critique*, then, represents a group of English/literacy teachers who have overcome this obstacle. Not only has each of them undertaken personal or collegial research projects; they have also doggedly stayed the course of writing, facing peer critique, rewriting and resubmitting their work. Some have faced this alone and succeeded while others have worked with colleagues and mentors to revise and refine their work.

For a few though, the challenge to turn their research into a written report is still ahead. Limbrick and Knight's article clearly articulates how the teacher research project they were involved in assisted teachers to become more confident about writing and about teaching writing, but the fact that the article is written about the teachers, rather than by the teachers themselves, foregrounds both the challenge/obstacle for teacher researchers of tackling the research write-up and the very practical reasons why teachers become involved in research. For other English teachers, reading these articles and narratives may produce new ways of thinking and working, new insights and perspectives, or maybe raise possibilities for researching their own (or others) practice. For academics, particularly those interested in practitioner research for its benefits in raising teacher consciousness about education in general and teaching and learning in particular, this issue may broaden ideas about what is possible, practical and of value.

So here is the product of a group of teachers and researchers whose own intellectual curiosity, determined pursuit of knowledge, and enthusiasm for understanding their subject even more deeply, have led them to not only confront and deal with all the practical issues facing teaching and researching, but have also led them on to write up and publish their work as a contribution to the body of understanding and knowledge relevant to all of all of us internationally who are engaged with the passion of teaching English/literacy. We hope you enjoy this volume and look forward to hearing from you on your own work as teachers and researchers. The journal is keen to have teachers reporting on their practice in the form of teacher narratives. In addition, research articles by teachers systematically investigating their own practice can be offered to this journal as "articles in dialogue" with this particular issue.

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