



## Teacher research in secondary education: Effects on teachers' professional and school development, and issues of quality

Paulien C. Meijer<sup>a,\*</sup>, Helma W. Oolbekkink<sup>b</sup>, Jacobiene A. Meirink<sup>c</sup>, Ditte Lockhorst<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Education, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80127, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Radboud University, P.O. Box 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> ICLON, Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching, P.O. Box 905, 2300 AX Leiden, The Netherlands

<sup>d</sup> Oberon, P.O. Box 1423, 3500 BK Utrecht, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes an empirical exploration of three initiatives in which teachers in secondary education (learn to) research their own practice in collaboration with university-based research institutes, aiming at professional development and knowledge construction.

We found evidence of professional development, mainly at the level of the individual teacher and to a lesser extent at the school level. Teachers reported that they developed their knowledge and skills with respect to doing research, as well as a more critical attitude, and consciousness of and intentions to change teaching performance. Organisational conditions appeared to be related to results at school level.

The article concludes by stating that, if teacher research is to lead to the collaborative development of more scientifically accepted knowledge, greater attention will need to be paid to the dissemination of knowledge as well as to the quality assurance of the research performed.

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## 1. Introduction

This article describes the results of an empirical exploration of three initiatives in the Netherlands in which teachers in secondary education (learn to) do research in their own practice. The three initiatives all include collaboration between university-based research institutes and several schools providing secondary education (teaching pupils aged 12–18). Based on experiences with teacher research and inquiry-based teaching (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Darling-Hammond, 1999), Dutch secondary schools have set up several initiatives enabling teachers to research their own practice. These initiatives are in line with newly developed views on teacher learning, which attempt to create a more attractive teaching profession, and respond to public demand for more “academic” teachers.

Studies around the globe have shown that collaboration between teachers and researchers significantly adds to teachers' professional development. This is firstly, because teachers regain their interest in scientific issues; and secondly, because teachers and researchers exchange their experiences in theory and practice at a deeper level (Dresner & Worley, 2006). The present article combines an in-depth description of three of these initiatives in the Netherlands with an exploration of long-term experience in other countries. In doing so, we aim to provide recommendations for the further development of such

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 30 253 2141.

E-mail addresses: [p.c.meijer@uu.nl](mailto:p.c.meijer@uu.nl) (P.C. Meijer), [h.oolbekkink@ils.ru.nl](mailto:h.oolbekkink@ils.ru.nl) (H.W. Oolbekkink), [meirink@iclon.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:meirink@iclon.leidenuniv.nl) (J.A. Meirink), [DLockhorst@oberon.eu](mailto:DLockhorst@oberon.eu) (D. Lockhorst).

initiatives. Such a development will also require a reconsideration of the present relations between teachers, schools and researchers when conducting research in education.

This article aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the learning outcomes of secondary school teachers' research for both teachers' professional development and school development?
2. How are these learning outcomes related to the organisation of teachers' research projects in the schools?

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Teacher learning

Nowadays, studies about teacher learning tend to value teachers' own knowledge and beliefs (see, for an overview, Calderhead, 1996; cf. "knowledge *in practice*" as described in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b) and are often based on the idea that their learning is situated in the workplace (e.g., Putnam & Borko, 2000). In a review study on teacher professional development, Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink (2011) found that teacher learning is fostered when professional development trajectories meet the following criteria: the content needs to be closely related to teachers' daily teaching practice; teachers should work in close collaboration with colleagues (cf. Meirink, Meijer, Verloop, & Bergen, 2009); a substantial amount of time should be allocated to the project; and trajectories should be aligned with school policy or a national reform. Also required is a clear idea about how the trajectory will influence teachers' knowledge and behaviour in the classroom, a focus on the active participation of teachers and an inquiry-based way of learning. The latter of these has become an increasingly central topic in research studies. Burton and Bartlett (2005) viewed teacher research as a highly effective way of working in collaboration with teachers on their professionalisation. Zeichner and Noffke (2001) indicated that, next to contributing to teachers' personal professional development, teacher research also contributes to the teacher knowledge base as well as to the status of the profession. Recently, in the Netherlands as well as in other countries, the context in which teachers' professional development takes place is also influenced by a call to "academise" teaching staff. We will elaborate this in the next section.

### 2.2. "Academising" teaching

Huberman (1996) stated, "Teachers collect, analyze, and interpret data; and they are meant to do it carefully, systematically, and rigorously" (p. 132). Freeman (1998) similarly defined the relationship between education and research and stated "that teaching is about asking questions, and that in asking questions, you will learn" (p. vi). He maintained that teachers should ask questions more frequently, which would result in an inquiry-based attitude and a more academically inclined interpretation of teacher-hood. About twenty years ago, the concept of "scholarship" was introduced (e.g., Boyer, 1990; cf. Coppola, 2007; Hatch, 2005) and this became a crucial concept at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Foundation argues that teachers should aim to be "Scholarly Practitioners"; these are individuals who, among other things, employ inquiry to inform their decisions, are agents of change and possess an ethical obligation to engage in critical examination and to share. Coppola (2007), in line with the work of Boyer (1990), claimed that it is time to abandon the time-honoured debate about teaching versus research, and focus on the concept of "scholarship", which does more justice to the full scope of academic work, where teaching and research coincide. In Coppola's work, scholarship has the following characteristics:

- A scholar's work is "informed": the teacher/researcher should be well-informed about the subject of teaching/research and all its designs and methods. Hatch (2005) added that this can only be achieved if teachers collaborate in their teaching/research.
- A scholar's work is "intentional": the teacher/researcher has to be able to underpin all choices in teaching/research based on his or her aims.
- The knowledge developed is "impermanent": the teacher/researcher has to be aware that his or her work and knowledge are always evolving, and never "done".
- Results and processes in a scholar's work are "inheritable": this type of work is transferable – it is something which can be learned. As a condition, results and processes should be public, in order to trace how the results (in teaching/research) came about.

According to Coppola, teaching and research should be integrated. If education is academic in nature, the abovementioned characteristics will apply, so dividing the two is artificial and unnecessary. For example, a teacher observes students to assess whether they grasped the explanations, and the use of tests allows the teacher to examine the students' learning processes. Bryk (2009) added that in order for this to be the prevailing standard, which is applied systematically, teachers and researchers should closely collaborate. This requires that *all* those involved have an open mind, that is, teachers as well as scientific researchers, school administrators and all others involved in developing knowledge in and about education.

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