

Trying on a new pair of shoes: Urban teacher–learners conduct research and construct knowledge in their own classrooms

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Abstract

This article explores how classroom-based teacher inquiry research supports teachers in constructing understandings about teaching and learning that are uniquely applicable to their own contexts in American urban schools. This study was conducted by two teacher educators in their year-long classroom-based inquiry research classes with approximately 50 teacher education candidates.

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1. Introduction

“Research is like a new pair of good leather shoes; they hurt in the beginning but gradually take on the shape of your foot. Marlene.”

Kisha looked exasperated at the beginning of the year in her teacher research class as we discussed an article by a teacher in Kentucky who encouraged her kindergarteners to write using phonetic spelling techniques. The article’s author describes how the principal and the students’ parents became involved in an inspiring learning process. Kisha, who teaches pre-kindergarten in a school located in a Harlem public housing development, announced, “You know I read this stuff and I think it seems so great,

but I get frustrated because I know this just won’t work in my classroom.” Kisha did not believe that she would ever have the support necessary to make the Kentucky teacher’s strategy work in her New York City classroom. She wanted to read about what teachers do in urban environments. The problem was, there just was not much research available (Weiner, 2002).

As will be seen in the description of her research below, Kisha eventually was able to find teacher research as comfortable, to use the words of her colleague Marlene, as a pair of good leather shoes. She was able to create a study that valued positive elements of her urban experience, and found, in the process, that her own assumptions changed about what was possible in her classroom.

This article explores how classroom-based research helps urban teachers to construct understandings about teaching and learning that are uniquely applicable to their own settings. The work

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described in this article is the culminating project of a master's level teacher education program in an American urban public university serving the city's working and immigrant population. A large percentage of the program participants are the products themselves of the city's school system, often living and working in the same communities as the children whom they teach. Opportunities for inquiry about children and teaching are infused throughout the program, beginning with an initial child study course that introduces teacher learners to the skills of observing and recording children's skills, understandings and needs; to methods courses that examine and develop pedagogical content knowledge in the different disciplines; to the final research course designed to guide teacher learners through an investigation of a personally relevant issue/question/concern about their teaching. The process is intended to help them acquire the skills needed to inquire about and hopefully solve the myriad problems we expect that they will confront throughout their careers. As they engage in this work, we hope that it helps them to make sense of how theory plays out in actual practice and to deepen their understandings of both. Just as children develop understandings of the world from active explorations within social contexts rather than through transmission models of knowledge dissemination (Chandler-Olcott, 2002), so too, we believe, do teacher-learners learn. Additionally, we want them to experience what it feels like to be a learner so that they gain a better grasp of the skills, resources and supports necessary to facilitate powerful learning for their students. And finally, another goal of the research experience is to utilize teacher-learners own "wisdom of practice" (Shulman, 2004) to develop a body of knowledge about the challenges of urban schools.

Many teachers we have worked with, like Kisha, report that reading professional educational literature leaves them feeling that the information has little to do with the contexts of their classrooms (Ballenger & Rosebery, 2003). This is true especially for teachers in urban schools, where the challenges often exceed the current knowledge base of our profession. In light of this we have come to believe that good teaching strategies alone are not adequate for teacher-learners to be successful, especially when they work in urban contexts. In the unpredictable environments of urban classrooms, where demands on both teachers and students constantly change, teachers need not only to have a theoretical

background to inform their teaching, they also must know how to inquire, critique, and apply theoretical concepts to the individual needs of their classrooms. Inquiry-based experiences in the preparation program teach them how to engage in this work. Inquiry-based experiences "encourage resistance to thoughtless implementation of teaching practices, support dispositions of critical thoughtfulness about teaching, and nurture ongoing learning, professional growth and intellectual development of teacher candidates" (Schultz & Mandzuk, 2005, p. 316). In addition, such experiences help them "to understand local urban cultures, the urban political economy, the bureaucratic structure of urban schools, and the community of social service support networks serving urban centers" (Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers, 2002). We thus see creating classroom-based inquiry experiences as essential preparation for urban teaching (Chandler-Olcott, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Rock & Levin, 2002). Inquiry experiences help teacher-learners question their assumptions about children and adapt their professional knowledge to the particular contexts of their schools (McIntyre, 2003). As urban teachers engage in such experiences, they have a distinctive contribution to make. Because they are familiar with urban schools in a way that outside researchers are not, urban teachers are uniquely situated to unpack how pedagogical practices, as well as educational issues, affect and challenge urban schools and schooling.

2. Related literature

The teacher-learners' projects discussed in this study primarily fall within Rock and Levin's (2002) definition of teacher action research as "systematic inquiry by teachers with the goal of improving their teaching practices" (p. 7).

This study is influenced by perspectives on teacher research and teacher education that emphasize the teacher as a generator of knowledge that informs practice, as a member of a professional community, and as an agent of social change. These perspectives grow out of the paradigm shift that took place in teacher research and education in the 1970s and 1980s when prevailing views of teacher as technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementer of other people's knowledge gave way to a view of the teacher as a knower, a thinker, and as an agent of change (Bissex & Bullock, 1987;

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