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# Returning Education Research to Teachers: Education Research As Advocacy

by *Mark Girod, Michael Pardales, and Gina Cervetti*

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This article represents the collaborative efforts of three teachers. Each of us is currently enrolled in a doctoral program at a Research I university, struggling with the pressures and stresses of balancing newfound researcher voices with our teacher voices. Although this is collaborative, it is written in the first person as our voices mingle a reflection of our experience. We hope other teachers will find our ideas compelling, resonant with their own, and feel moved to action in the style we suggest. Education research should be the domain of teachers and this is a call for teachers to take back the endeavor.

The field of educational research was largely homogenous in terms of its methods, epistemology, and values until the mid 1980's (Zeichner, 1999). Since then, the field has witnessed an incredible proliferation of methods and voices. This diversity has led to much innovation, provided needed breadth and depth of insight into educational phenomena, and illuminated areas and issues previously unexplored. Educational research today is a unique mix of genres and values. This diversity should be viewed as a strength of the field, as multiple voices speak to similar issues. It has truly become Shulman's "Great Conversation" (1986).

As more voices and perspectives gain access to The Conversation, more "work" gets done. What is this "work" that education researchers try to do? Broadly, and in my opinion, that "work" is to "make a difference" in educative settings. Of course "make a difference" also has multiple interpretations that perhaps range from increasing the quality and quantity of learning to providing more and better access to learning opportunities. For most education researchers, however, two parties remain at the core of interest: teachers and learners. Whether education research purports to help one and/or the other, directly or indirectly, both parties remain critical participants. Educational research should work to "make a difference" in the lives of teachers and students. Hopefully these criteria are broad enough to include most research and phenomena of interest, most importantly, the ones of interest to the reader.

If we all agree that "making a difference" should be the goal, then what's wrong with this picture? Why is it that so much research just doesn't? Gee (1990) provides us with some insight, arguing that the single most important factor in determining the success or failure of an innovation is the degree to which teachers buy into its philosophy and intent. If what we really hope to do is make a difference, then it matters less that the research community agrees on the standards that determine quality research and more on how teachers interpret, appreciate, and use it. As Donmoyer (2001) argues, the paradigm wars are over or, if they aren't we should

certainly let them be. Paradigms don't matter, it's making a difference that matters. Educational research should be the province of those closest to the work, with their hearts and hands in the trenches, with the values and goals of caring and advocacy. Rarely does educational research get translated into a systematic program of advocacy. Perhaps it should isn't what we really need is more action?

Research doesn't seem to make much of a difference in the lives of teachers and their students, for a number of reasons - both personal and systemic. In this paper I articulate only one small reason for this paralyzing disconnection: the mismatch in held values between educational researchers and practitioners, the ultimate implementers of innovation. I speak from my perspective of teacher growing into researcher. I'm straddling these two divergent sets of values and trying to reconcile their messages daily.

### **Disconnected values emerge from disconnected communities**

Most educational research has taken its guiding metaphors from the sciences. Most teachers, however, are not scientists and have not drawn their lessons about human nature from charts, probability statistics, and meta-analyses. They've drawn their lessons, instead, from people, working closely with kids, their problems, fears, and possibilities. I am a teacher who's left his classroom to join The Conversation but the discourse of the field sticks in my throat for lack of shared values. My values come from the lessons of practice and my experiences with the children I have taught. The messages of these lessons were implicit but intensely powerful. I remember several of my "teachers" especially well.

#### **Chris**

Chris lived in a 14-foot trailer with his sister, little brother, mom and dad. Electricity came to their trailer through an orange extension cord plugged into the neighbor's outlet. About six months out of the year, when it was warm enough, Chris slept outside in a shelter he made from old pallets, a tarp, and scrap lumber. Looking very tired one morning, Chris told me he couldn't sleep because his parents were up all night screwing. Chris qualified for special education services as severely emotionally disturbed. I was actually quite impressed that he was as well adjusted as he seemed, living in those conditions. However, Chris didn't have the right shoes, wasn't very smart, was blind in his right eye, and smelled like sweat. Other kids avoided Chris like the plague - calling him freak, gross, and weird. It wasn't as if he didn't want any friends.

#### **Kathryn**

Kathryn was in the eighth grade when she and her best friend were walking to the corner store in Los Angeles. A car rolled up alongside. Without warning, a gun was leveled and fired - bullets meant for Kathryn killed her friend instantly. As a gangbanger, Kathryn was among the most troubled. But, marked-for-death, she and her mom moved to our small town - away from gangs, away from shootings, but not away from danger. Kathryn had been in town for about a month when, unbelievably, her mom decided to move back to LA. Knowing she couldn't return, Kathryn was suddenly homeless in a community she had just recently joined. For the next two years, Kathryn drifted between the homes of friends kind enough to let her stay until, as a high

school junior, she was able to rent her own apartment. Working two jobs and trying to complete high school kept her busy. But, like most teenage girls, Kathryn wanted a boyfriend. The one she found was abusive to her and eventually began stealing her money. Soon Kathryn was pregnant by a man she hated.

## **Rafael**

I supervised Saturday detention and Rafael kept me company with his regular attendance. He was a big kid, shy and unassuming, only recently arrived from Mexico. As our relationship grew, I learned more about Rafael than probably any other adult in our school. The form said Rafael was chronically tardy and often fell asleep in class. As I got to know him, I asked him about these infractions. Rafael was the oldest of six siblings and his parents, neither of whom spoke any English, made next to nothing as farm laborers. To help make ends meet, as was his responsibility in his mind, and, in fact, his culture, he needed to find work. Because he spoke English, Rafael could work the graveyard shift at the local food processing plant. He maintained the machines that sliced the potatoes his parents had harvested only hours before. Rafael never complained of his extra duties but often could not stay awake during the day. In addition, because his parents went to work so early, Rafael helped his baby sister to first grade every morning. He told me she was terrified to be in a strange building without any familiar faces. She would cry when he'd try to leave. So, Rafael did what anyone with a heart would do. He'd stay with her, often well into his own school hours, to wipe her tears and ease her transition. Rafael was only a boy but he had adult-sized responsibilities.

These three students, and fifty others with stories just as potent, taught me important lessons about teaching, learning, and becoming an educational researcher. From them I learned about the diversity of human experience, the absurdity of the one-size-fits-all model of teaching and learning, and about the power and potential of care. Each of my students needed an advocate and advocacy is fundamentally about caring.

## **Values at the intersection of love and knowledge**

*Understanding is a lot like sex. It's got a practical purpose, but that's not why people do it normally.*

- Frank Oppenheimer (as cited in Cole, 1997, pg. 5)

Education research is an effort to understand. Like sex, it has a practical purpose. Most research is aimed at finding relationships, causes, and indicators. Researchers often try to model phenomena using complex mathematics that only shift the focus away from the phenomena. Researchers often want to "find" or "discover" answers in an environment that inevitably reveals none. Like sex, and understanding, research has a practical purpose, however, that's not why we should do it. People have sex because it allows them to make connections with other human beings in ways that are fulfilling and beautiful. Understanding, and understanding through research, should be no less spiritual. Educational research should be for the purposes of connecting to students, communities, and schools in human and humane ways. We must not only bring our minds to the process of research but our hearts and souls as well. These are not the values most often expressed by the research community. Why?

I've been told that my job as a graduate student is to find my researcher voice. I worry everyday that this means I'll have to silence my teacher voice. I learned important lessons as a classroom teacher - from my students, the community in which I taught, and my hard-working colleagues. I learned what it means to make a difference in the lives of children. I learned what it means to make a difference in a poor and dying community. I learned what it means to be a good teacher. Most of these lessons don't transfer well to experimental studies looking for answers to impersonal questions. The lessons I learned were fundamentally human and, yes, perhaps even spiritual. To become a teacher is to answer a spiritual call. Becoming an educational researcher should be no less potent. Interestingly, Nate Gage, an educational researcher often accused of "less-than-personal" education research, reminds us eloquently of the role of education, researcher, and researchers.

I find myself better motivated to succeed at this difficult task whenever I remind myself of what we are all about. Educational research is no mere spectator sport, no mere intellectual game, no mere path to academic tenure and higher pay, not just a way to make a good living and even become a big shot. It has moral obligations. The society that supports us cries out for better education for its children and youth - especially the poor ones, those at risk, those whose potential for a happy and productive life is all too often going desperately unrealized. Therefore, even as we debate whether any objectivity at all is possible, whether "technical" research is merely trivial, whether your paradigm or mine should get more money, we must remember that the payoff inheres in what happens to the children, the students. That is our end concern (1989, pg. 148).

I am a teacher. I've been struggling to maintain a grasp on my teacher voice as I transform myself into an educational researcher. I refuse to ignore my experiences as a classroom teacher and want to do the kind of research that's honest to my students, their worlds, and their problems. Why would I want to impose my questions and methods of inquiry on the people I most wish to help? People are not billiard balls moving in straight paths on frictionless planes. Our world is messy, muddled, and confusing. Why would we want our research to be any different? Patti Lather (2001) suggests researchers must "re-muddy" the situations and settings in which they do their research. Too much clarity isn't faithful to the social world "faithful," hell, I can't purge my own language of positivistic references.

### **Acquiring shared values**

I recognize that perhaps it's unwise or shortsighted to wish for entirely shared values between practitioners and educational researchers. Perhaps too much overlap would not be ideal either. However, currently these two groups share only a small sphere of values and we should search for ways to bring them closer together. At least two paths exist to help us develop shared value systems. First, research can continue in the same vein but adopt the problems and language of practitioners, thereby attempting to invite practitioners into its discourse. Or, we can opt to change the current state of educational research entirely. Several researchers have argued for just such a transformation. For example, Lather (2001) suggests a completely different standard for validity in educational research. Rather than trying to employ quantitative-reminiscent standards, such as member checking, and triangulation (see Guba and Lincoln, 1985), she argues that these methods still carry the baggage of positivism. Her suggestion is for something much more

anthropologic and local, a standard such as 'usefulness' for instance. Similarly, Zeichner (2001), in his chapter from the *4th Handbook of Research on Teaching*, dedicates most of his text to a re-interpretation of validity - validity in the eyes and language of practitioners. The field needs more of these scholars willing to redefine the standards by which we (and others) do research. Following in this line, I suggest three kinds of research or strategies of inquiry that would serve to close the gap between researcher-held-values and practitioner-held-values.

**Researcher-practitioner: joint construction of research.** A simple way to help close the gap in shared values is through the mutual identification of research questions and execution of inquiry around those questions, issues, or phenomena. Too often educational research is something that gets "done to" others. Few of us enjoy being under a microscope, but that's exactly the position of most teachers and learners in educational research. Their actions and intentions are something to be explained rather than understood. This further widens the gap between researchers and practitioners. One successful strategy would be to conduct joint-inquiry. In such a situation researcher and practitioner would share the role of investigator, tackling problems or exploring issues of joint interest, and having a shared voice in the "telling" of the research. This is a growing genre of educational research that needs further nurturance.

As teachers, many of us have been approached to participate in research studies or allow researchers access to our classrooms and our students. We should welcome these opportunities but do so with the demand that we be made equal partners in the research process. Our voices must also be heard for these studies to be called collaborations.

**Practitioner research.** As Zeichner (2001) suggests, perhaps research should be conducted by practitioners. I agree. The current form of most education research does not speak to the experiences of practitioners in ways that legitimate their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and experiences. An alternative would be to return education research to those who know education most intimately, teachers. In the research field, research reports must have the look of acceptable educational research to be recognized as such. However, practitioner research should not attempt to look like traditional, mainstream educational research - it should develop its own, new, and valued genre. Perhaps this kind of research would be more narrative and descriptive, perhaps with images and student artifacts, poetry and prose. As long as it speaks in ways that practitioners recognize as important and faithful to their experiences, research will be appropriated, adapted, and used in the everyday lives of teachers and learners.

**Practitioner/learner research.** Finally, and even more radical in nature would be research that broadened the authorship to include the voices of learners. Wouldn't it be interesting to give students a voice in our research - allowing them an opportunity to read, critique, and contribute to research in honest ways. Learner voices could be used not to illustrate but to interpret and ground research in authentic contexts. I suspect the kinds of problems and issues most addressed in the research literature would change. Why isn't there more educational research that begins from students' points of view? One could argue that it doesn't really matter how we understand the lives of children, only how they do. How insightful would it be for teachers and adults to listen intently and sympathetically to kids as they relayed their private concerns, fears, hopes, and dreams? This is the kind of research that should be valued, that in which both the researcher

and the researched share voice in the telling of a story. Researchers could take their questions from the results of such powerful and important conversations.

## Conclusions

I think every educational researcher should learn, as part of her or his apprenticeship into the field, what it feels like to have a student cry on your shoulder because she's afraid to go home, or see the pain in the eyes of a boy once again chosen last for the dodge-ball team. These kinds of human, personal experiences teach powerful lessons. It's for these kinds of reasons that millions of teachers work harder than anyone asks them to. And it is for these same reasons that educational researchers should work hard to ask more human and personally meaningful questions. I'm not suggesting the only good educational research would be that which helps one child in an important way. I am suggesting that the field should shift its methods for generating research questions and the investigative methods that are employed. Perhaps researchers could use the suggestions I've made here or generate new, innovative ways to move toward shared values in an effort to "make a difference." I hope teachers will read this essay as a call to be more active and assertive in gaining a voice in Shulman's Great Conversation to use it as a means to advocate and care for children and to enervate and inspire themselves to do more good.

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