Inside/Outside
Teacher Research and Knowledge

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Learning From Teacher Research: A Working Typology

In arguing for the inclusion of teacher research in the knowledge base for teaching, we are not simply equating teacher research with practitioner knowledge or with any kind of writing by a teacher, nor are we attempting to attach to the term "teacher" the higher status term "researcher" in order to alter common perceptions of the profession. Rather, we are proposing that teacher research makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning.

In this essay, we propose a working typology for teacher research that includes both empirical and conceptual work: teachers' journals, oral inquiries, classroom studies, and essays. By looking closely at examples of each of these four types, we demonstrate that teacher research takes a variety of forms, each of which provides rich and distinctive perspectives on teaching and learning. In constructing this typology, we are arguing for the importance of a broader notion of teacher research that incorporates some existing teacher writing, prompts wider participation by teachers in classroom inquiry, and generates new knowledge on teaching. Taken seriously, teacher research represents a radical challenge to assumptions about the relationships of theory and practice, school and university partnerships, and school structures and educational reform.

TEACHER RESEARCH: A DEFINITION

We have found it useful to take the following as a working definition for teacher research: systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own
school and classroom work. Even though their meanings overlap to a certain extent, it is helpful to begin by clarifying the three terms. By systematic, we refer primarily to ordered ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside of classrooms, and making some kind of written record. Systematic also refers to ordered ways of recollecting, rethinking, and analyzing classroom events for which there may be only partial or unwritten records. By intentional, we signal that teacher research is an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous, although we do not mean to suggest that important insights about teaching are only generated when planned. Our emphasis on intention is in keeping with Boomer’s (1987) argument that “to learn deliberately is to research” (p. 5) and with Britton’s (1987) notion that “every lesson should be for the teacher an inquiry, some further discovery, a quiet form of research” (p. 15). By inquiry, we suggest that teacher research stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers’ desires to make sense of their experiences—to adapt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life. According to Berthoff (1987), it is not even necessary that teacher research involve new information but rather that it interpret the information one already has—what she calls “REsearching.”

In commenting on the nature of knowledge building in the scientific community, Thomas (1974) argues that each little bit of information may not be significant in and of itself but that when connected to many other bits it can achieve a kind of “corporate, collective power that is far greater than any one individual can exert.” Thomas continues:

We like to think of exploring in science as a lonely, meditative business, and so it is, in the first stages, but always, sooner or later, before the enterprise reaches completion, as we explore we call to each other, communicate, publish, send letters to the editor, present papers, [and] cry out [our] finding. (p. 15)

Connecting this concept to our definition, we can see that teacher research, like all forms of research (educational or otherwise), is a fundamentally social and constructive activity. Not only can each separate piece of teacher research inform subsequent activities in the individual teacher’s classroom, but also each piece potentially informs and is informed by all teacher research past and present. Although teacher research is not always motivated by a need to generalize beyond the immediate case, it may in fact be relevant for a wide variety of contexts.

Corey (1953), one of the first to use action research in education, emphasized that its major value was in increasing the individual teacher’s effectiveness with subsequent classes in similar situations over time rather than in extending generalizations across educational contexts. Schaefer (1967) on the other hand asserted that schools could be organized as centers of inquiry, actively producing knowledge in the field of education. In the 1960s and early 1970s, action research by teachers was typically carried out in collaboration
with consultants, partly in response to critique that action research was not scientifically valid. Many of the action research initiatives have aimed both to improve school and classroom practice and to contribute to knowledge about teaching and research itself (Elliott, 1985; Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Tikunoff, Ward, & Griffin, 1979).

Following the earlier work in action research, we take the position that teacher research should be valued not simply as a heuristic for the individual teacher. Rather, if it is to play a role in the formation of the knowledge base for teaching, teacher research must also be cumulative and accessible to different people over time for a variety of purposes. Furthermore, school-based teachers as well as university-based teachers and researchers must develop standards of value and evaluation for teacher research that are appropriate to various segments of the educational community.

**TEACHER RESEARCH: A WORKING TYPOLOGY**

In its recent iterations, teacher research has been thought of almost exclusively as classroom- or school-based empirical studies that resemble university-based studies in conventions, methods, and forms. Equating teacher research with empirical studies limits in at least two ways what we can learn from teachers about their work. First, teachers inquire about their work in a number of forms other than classroom studies that, we argue, can be appropriately regarded as empirical. Our working typology, which acknowledges a wider range of teachers' empirical research, provides a broader view. It allows us to reclaim and reexamine more of the existing empirical work on teaching conducted by teachers themselves and enables us to make distinctions about a variety of teacher-researcher texts and about the contexts in which they are produced and used. Second, teachers also generate conceptual work about the assumptions and characteristics of teaching, learning, schooling, and research on teaching. Teachers' conceptual work articulates theoretical and philosophical perspectives, making distinctions and connections from the stance of insider and participant. In short, we are arguing that acknowledging both conceptual research and several types of empirical research by teachers makes visible much of the work that already exists and helps to organize the field.

Following the distinction commonly made in the field of education, we group four types of teacher research into two broad categories: empirical and conceptual. Teachers' empirical research, which involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data gathered from their own schools and classrooms, includes journals, oral inquiries, and studies. Journals are both published and unpublished. Oral inquiries are usually written records of formalized inquiry procedures and other discussions convened specifically for reflection and questioning. Studies use the documentation and analysis proce-
dures of university-based classroom research. Teachers' conceptual research, which consists of theoretical work or the analysis of ideas, includes teachers' essays on classroom and school life or on the nature of research itself. In essays, teachers draw on examples and insights from empirical and conceptual research, from a wide range of their own and others' teaching and learning experiences, and from published texts, both literary and informational. Figure 2.1 outlines the typology.

In the remainder of this essay, we examine each of the four types as systematic, intentional inquiry, and we demonstrate that each makes a contribution to the knowledge base on teaching, learning, and schooling.

**EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

**Type 1: Teachers' Journals**

Journals are accounts of classroom life in which teachers record observations, analyze their experiences, and reflect on and interpret their practices over time. Journals intermingle description, record keeping, commentary, and analysis. Similar in some ways to ethnographic field notes, journals capture the immediacy of teaching: teachers' evolving perceptions of what is happening with the students in their classrooms and what this means for their continued practice. Furthermore, because journals stand as a written record of practice, they provide teachers with a way to revisit, analyze, and evaluate their experiences over time and in relation to broader frames of reference. And they provide access to the ways that teachers' interpretive perspectives are constructed and reconstructed using data from their classrooms.

During the 1980–1981 school year, Lynne Strrieb, then a first-grade teacher with 13 years of experience, began keeping a narrative journal to supplement her daily notes and records about individual children. Published by the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota, *A (Philadelphia) Teacher’s Journal* (1985) contains selections from that narrative. Working at a large Philadelphia public elementary school, Strrieb had a class of 33 children: 22 black, 9 white, and 2 who spoke only Spanish when the year began. One way to read and understand Strrieb's journal is as a teacher's attempt to make sense of her daily work life as a teacher. In it she addresses how she connects with her students, how students learn to make sense of the world around them, and how she uses writing to perceive and understand her evolution as a teacher. In Strrieb's (1985) words:

The more I wrote, the more I observed in my classroom and the more I wanted to write. As I reread my journal I got more ideas for teaching. I expanded the journal to include other aspects of teaching—anecdotes, observations of children and their involvement in activities, interactions with parents both in and out of school, my
Figure 2.1. Teacher Research: An Analytic Framework

**TEACHER RESEARCH:**
Systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empirical Research</th>
<th>Conceptual Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>(collection, analysis, and interpretation of data)</td>
<td>(theoretical/philosophical work or the analysis of ideas)</td>
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| Type 1: Journals |
| Teachers' accounts of classroom life over time |
| - records of observations |
| - analyses of experiences |
| - reflections & interpretations of practices |

| Type 2: Oral Inquiries |
| Teachers' oral examinations of classroom/school issues, contexts, texts, and experiences |
| - collaborative analyses and interpretations |
| - explorations of relationships between cases and theories |

| Type 3: Classroom/School Studies |
| Teachers' explorations of practice-based issues using data based on observation, interview, and document collection |
| - stems from, or generates, questions |
| - individual or collaborative work |

| Type 4: Essays |
| Teachers' interpretations of the assumptions and characteristics of classroom and school life and/or research itself |
| - recollections and reflections on students' and teachers' work in classrooms and/or on published texts (including curricula, empirical and conceptual research, and literature) |
| - selection of specific examples that warrant the general assertions |

plans, descriptions of the pressures on public school teachers. I also wrote about my continuing education through my own reflections and the questions that emerged, through books, and through association with colleagues in the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, and at the Prospect Summer Institutes. (p. 3)
In Strieb's journal (1985), we find records of lessons, conversations, children's questions, and detailed descriptions of specific interactions with particular children. In some entries, Strieb provides a narrative account of the ongoing daily stream of classroom events. In others, she consciously breaks that frame to review and synthesize her efforts in a particular area. For example, when Strieb had a non-English-speaking child enter her classroom in October of the school year, she responded intuitively to the situation. Later she intentionally made visible her intuitive actions by reviewing in her journal all the things she had done to help the child:

[Use a] soothing voice, hold his hand, chant to calm him. Assign a child to help, one who speaks the same language if possible. Use the child’s language together with English if possible. Have lots of interesting objects in the room to provide common experiences which bring all the children together. Help him to see some familiar faces in an unfamiliar place at lunch by pointing to his sisters, introducing him to the lunch aide, assigning someone to help him, and staying with him for a while. (p. 14)

The journal functioned here as a way for Strieb to step back from the daily stream, take stock of what was happening, and assess the ways that the children responded. Repeatedly, Strieb used her journal to search for meaning: the patterns or structures that organized her own teaching and that characterized the children’s efforts to learn and cope with the classroom environment.

As inquiry, Strieb's (1985) journal contains many implicit and some explicit questions: How can I help children learn English? How can I make children feel comfortable in my class? How can I help this class become a community? What counts as play, what counts as work, and how do children figure out the differences in my classroom? What do I do about issues of race and gender in my classroom? As a teacher, what is my role in helping children to develop attitudes about diversity? What does it mean to learn to read in this class, and how do children learn to do it? What roles do they play in each other’s learning? When should I go with a child’s ideas, when should I intervene? How can I connect with children’s emotions? Strieb used her journal to articulate and clarify her own questions and to search for evidence to address them.

The following excerpt, one of many about children’s early reading experiences, reveals both Strieb’s (1985) questions about how children learn to read and some of the frameworks she used to interpret and assess their progress as readers:

January 28. My sustained Reading Time is not silent because the children help each other so much when they read together. I would like to have a real Sustained Silent Reading Time (SSR), but it would have to be separate from this. I’m not willing to take away the help that the children give one another as beginning readers. So many have begun by reading with friends: Benjamin helped Paul, Maria helped Anita, Bethann helped Atiya, Leonard helped Henry, Jimmy helped William, William helped Ali.
Whenever a kid is on the brink of reading or is reading slowly, I suggest he or she read with someone. That usually pulls the child into reading. With my limited time (a conference with each child every other week), I need the kids to teach each other. I’ve also noticed that some kids are more relaxed with friends than with me. Still, I’d also like an SSR period. . . . (p. 39)

About 6 weeks later, she continued to ask questions about how the children in her classroom were learning to read:

March 6. Sustained reading must be getting to me. I see lots of kids reading the Bank Street Primer Around the City. They don’t know all the words, but they usually read together and they figure them out, or at least get the meaning of the stories. But when they are finished with that book, they want to go on to the next one, and it’s really too hard. Many of the kids can’t get meaning from that. But no matter how I try to suggest that they try other books at about primer level (and I have many), they want to stick with the “series.” They’ve seen other kids follow the progression, and they want to do the same. Should I let them do it and struggle? (p. 57)

Strieb’s journal reveals her sense of the push and pull of independent and collaborative learning—of the children’s ability to scaffold each other’s reading and provide emotional support for one another in a way that differed from what she, as teacher, could offer. In the March 6 entry, Strieb compared her own view of progress in reading with that of the children: She understood the need for the children’s emerging skills to gel, but to the children, progress in reading was signified by movement from one level of text to the next. Strieb’s interpretation of these classroom events center around her struggle to make sense of the discrepancy between what she thought might be most appropriate for children’s learning and their own social and intellectual agendas. Her interpretation alerts us to the complexity of conflicting notions of “progress” in learning to read and reminds us that the knowledge that children bring to the classroom includes expectations about traditional symbols of school success. Her journal provides insider information about teachers’ dilemmas and their consequences for classroom learning.

Another first-grade teacher, a teacher educator, a language and learning researcher, and Lynne Strieb herself obviously learn different “lessons” from these journal entries. There are rich data here about many of the central issues of schooling: how a classroom becomes a community; how a teacher uses children’s questions to build, plan, and interweave class discussions; how a teacher connects with the interests and needs of individual children; and how a teacher’s routines express what counts most to her in her unique context. Strieb’s journal also reveals the inherent uncertainty and tentativeness of teaching. The restless questioning that punctuates her journal contrasts rather dramatically with the certainty of the instructional principles asserted by the literature in effective teaching.

Strieb’s account helps to make clear that teachers’ journals are more than
anecdotal records or loose chronological accounts of particular classroom activities. As systematic intentional inquiry, journals provide windows on what goes on in school through teachers' eyes and in teachers' voices and on some of the ways that teachers use writing to shape and inform their work lives. Other journals ask other questions and are guided by different interpretive frames. Palonsky's (1986) 900 Shows a Year: A Look at Teaching From the Teacher's Side of the Desk focuses on structural constraints, issues of power and authority, and teacher-student relationships in suburban high school, while Natkins' (1986) Our Last Term: A Teacher's Diary emphasizes the dilemmas of urban high school teaching. Teachers' journals provide a unique blend of observation and analysis in which classroom vignettes are juxtaposed with more general assertions and interpretations.

Type 2: Oral Inquiry Processes

Oral inquiry processes are procedures in which two or more teachers jointly research their experiences by examining particular issues, educational concepts, texts (including students' work), and other data about students. These processes are unique in our typology of teacher research in that they are by definition collaborative and oral. During oral inquiry, teachers build on one another's insights to analyze and interpret classroom data and their experiences in the school as a workplace. We wish to emphasize that oral inquiry is not synonymous with teacher talk, just as teacher research is not synonymous with teacher writing. Rather, oral inquiry processes often follow specific theoretically grounded procedures and routines, require careful preparation and collection of data, and rely on careful documentation that enables teachers to revisit and reexamine their joint analyses. For teachers, oral inquiries provide access to a variety of perspectives for problem posing and solving. They also reveal the ways in which teachers relate particular cases to theories of practice.

The reflective-descriptive processes developed by Patricia Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect Center and School in Bennington, Vermont, provide a good example of formalized teacher inquiry procedures that are documented through thorough note taking. Carini and the many teachers with whom she has worked over the years do not necessarily refer to these processes as teacher research, nor are the records of their inquiries typically available to an audience beyond the participants. However, in constructing a working typology of teacher research, we feel it is important to include oral inquiry processes even though they are the least visible of the types of teacher research that are currently occurring.

Since the school was founded in 1965, an important dimension of Carini's (1986) work has been the development of research and evaluation methods, called documentary processes, which promote understanding of children's
learning and both inform and are informed by teaching practices. Carini's introduction to the processes makes the point that oral inquiry is theory based as well as grounded theory:

The Documentary Processes depend on immersion in the focus of interest—a child, a drawing, a setting—and they make available a mode of inquiry with which one can describe and explore a complex human occasion, such as a school, or a child's expressiveness, without interference or manipulation. The child, or the event, is studied "as is," with respect for the integrity and privacy of the person. Regular recording of observations and collecting of children's work gather and preserve events at the Prospect School. The Documentary Processes are ways to re-enter those events in order to grasp, in concentrated form, what occurred at disparate points in time. (p. ii)

Three major processes structure the oral interactions of groups of practitioners who convene specifically for the purpose of exploring teachers' and children's learning: the reflective conversation, the description of children's work, and staff review of a child.

In the reflective conversation, the goal is to explore from teachers' perspectives the various "meanings, images, and experiences" (Carini, 1986, p. 1) embodied in words that are central to understanding teaching and learning. For example, a group might participate in a reflective conversation on "retention," "composition," "basal," or "community." The outcome of the process for the group is a richer understanding of the words and enhanced respect and appreciation for the ways that others' contributions build new understandings; the outcome for the individual is more divergent thinking that leads to more "refined and nuanced observations" (p. 2).

In the description of children's work (Carini, 1986), participants concentrate on children's drawings, writings, or constructions to make accessible both the inherent structures and meanings of the work and the perspective of the child. The inquiry process begins with impressionistic responses to a child's work that is read aloud or viewed. After the chair has noted and restated connections among participants' impressions, the group begins several individual-by-individual rounds of description, moving from surface details to the integrative elements of style, tone, rhythm, and form. The process very intentionally respects careful description and guards against premature interpretation.

Staff review of a child entails the use of multiple perspectives to explore a question posed by the teacher about a particular child. The process is extremely systematic. It specifies not only the categories according to which a child is described but also the roles taken by participants and the steps used as the procedure unfolds (see Kanovsky, Chapter 7). The data include close observations and rich examples organized around six categories that describe children in school. Although each staff review focuses on a single child, each teacher participant draws from the single case some specific teaching strategies that may apply to other situations as well as generalizations about language.
literacy development, and other overarching concerns. Over time, teachers become more acute observers of children in their own classrooms, and they learn how to learn from the children whom they teach.

As examples of systematic intentional inquiry, Prospect's documentary processes are based on a phenomenological view of knowledge and learning. By participating in these experiences, teachers grapple with children's meanings as expressed in their projects and with the varied meanings that their colleagues find in these. Preparing for documentary processes often entails selection and collection of students' work and classroom observations. These serve as the data for the group's analyses. Furthermore, an important part of the procedure is that a recorder keeps almost verbatim notes that are used to create periodic summaries and statements of the organizing concepts perceived in the work at hand. The result is an unusually rich and complex rendering of patterns that invites rather than forecloses further interpretations.

Like teachers' journals and essays, oral inquiry processes such as these represent teachers' self-conscious and often self-critical attempts to make sense of their daily work by talking about it in planned ways. The processes developed by Carini and her colleagues are not the only examples of this type of teacher research, although they may be the most formalized and best documented. In addition, teacher seminars such as those conducted by Bill Hull (1978) or Margaret Yonemura (1982) and teacher groups like the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative (1984) and the Boston Women's Teachers' Group (1983) regularly convene to explore issues and practices across contexts by examining particular cases. Oral inquiry processes are unlike teacher's journals and essays, which may be completed by a teacher-researcher writing alone. The primary outcomes of oral inquiries are the conjoined understandings of the participants.

When documentary records are preserved, teachers can return to the texts of their deliberations to Reseatch their own knowledge and insights, which acquire additional significance over time as teachers confront new situations in their own classrooms and schools. Like the archive of children's work preserved at the Prospect Center, records of teachers' oral inquiry processes have the potential to be of great value for the broader community of teachers, teacher educators, and university researchers. Buchanan (1988b) and a group of Philadelphia teachers are currently working toward this end by proposing the development of an urban archive of teachers' writing and oral inquiry as well as the children's work from which it stems. Buchanan makes an eloquent case for the need for an archive:

Every day teachers' observations and reflections on the teaching process, on their students, and on educational issues are irretrievably lost because there is no provision for preserving them. Such materials are essential for shaping and recording the evolution of the profession. Similarly the day-to-day writing, art work and number work of students is rarely saved in a systematic manner. What children don't take home is often thrown away. Other than the presentation of test scores, there are few large-scale efforts to demonstrate what and how children are learning in
school. The Archive will serve as a rich resource for teachers, researchers and other professionals who are interested in the long view of what is happening to children in our society. (pp. 1–2)

Buchanan's (1988b) proposal emanates from a decade of work with the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative and association with the Prospect Center and from her frustration about the relationship between academic research and teacher knowledge. The first purpose of an archive is to provide a way to make teachers' work in classrooms visible to other teachers. However, as she points out, the systematic collection of teacher's inquiries and children's work will also "give scholars an unobtrusive, 'inside view' of classrooms [that] is currently not available" (pp. 1–2) and that is, we believe, sorely needed.

Type 3: Classroom Studies

In our own typology, classroom studies encompass most of what others currently term teacher research. Several volumes that describe this work have recently been published. In *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research As an Agency for Change*, Goswami and Stillman (1987) trace the roots of this concept among British and American educators who have called for teacher inquiry into practice, provide guidance in planning classroom research, and offer as examples the work of Bread Loaf's teacher-researchers. They characterize teacher research as an activity in which teachers and their students:

... formulate questions about language and learning, design and carry out inquiries, reflect on what they have learned, and tell others about it. In other words, teachers and students are conducting inquiries that are necessary to provide contexts for, and help us make sense (and reject or use), the findings of quantitative, experimental projects. (preface)

Two other volumes have recently been authored by leaders of sites of the National Writing Project: Mohr and Maclean's (1987) *Working Together: A Guide for Teacher Researchers* and Myers' (1985) *The Teacher Researcher: How to Study Writing in the Classroom*. Mohr and Maclean show how a teacher-researcher group works together to design and conduct classroom studies and provide examples of various forms of the reports of teacher research. Myers references his suggestions about teacher research to the assessment of writing in order to promote teacher research more generally. Bissex and Bullock (1987), faculty members of the writing programs at Northeastern University, compiled *Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research by Teachers of Writing* from work by graduate students in the English department and teachers who attended a writing institute. In addition to the studies, Bissex and Bullock include roundtable discussions of the value of these studies for teachers.

Our definition of classroom studies is essentially the same as the definitions common to these volumes. However, we see classroom studies as one
among at least four types of teacher inquiry that ought to be termed teacher research. Within the teaching and university research communities, there seems to us to be a great deal of ambivalence about the extent to which teacher studies resemble or ought to resemble studies conducted by university researchers. As we pointed out in Chapter 1, there are conflicting conceptions in these communities about methodological rigor, theory, documentation, or value to the teaching community itself. It is our position that these questions will need to be resolved in two contexts. The first is the teaching community itself, where teachers will gradually develop a set of criteria or standards to evaluate the usefulness of teacher research for teachers individually or collectively. Second, if and when the university community recognizes the need for an expanded knowledge base, it will need to consider the ways that teacher research contributes to and perhaps alters what we know about teaching, learning, and schooling.

"Relearning to Teach: Peer Observation as a Means of Professional Development for Teachers" is a college classroom study of freshman writing courses conducted by Elizabeth Rorschach and Robert Whitney (1986), then doctoral candidates in English Education at New York University. We use an example from a postsecondary teaching situation to emphasize that teacher research is not limited to teachers who work in K–12 schools but is instead an activity that is relevant to all teachers. Rorschach and Whitney shared what they believed were fundamentally similar goals for their writing courses. For 15 weeks, they attended each other’s twice-weekly classes, taking the role of students by participating in discussions, drafting assignments, and sharing writing with other students. They met weekly to share observations, focusing initially on what they liked about each other’s teaching and carefully moving toward comparison of what was happening in the two classes. Rorschach and Whitney pointed out that “this duality of viewpoints by the same observers reversing roles in parallel cultures . . . led [them] to the most important new learnings and insights” (p. 161). Eventually, Rorschach and Whitney tape-recorded discussions in each other’s classes, contrasted lesson plans and assignments, and tried out new classroom strategies as they began to theorize about what might be happening in the two classrooms. Both teachers better understood their classrooms as a result of their research; Whitney dramatically changed the culture of his classroom by altering some of his strategies.

The value of doing collaborative classroom study for the teachers themselves is eloquently expressed by the authors:

We set out to learn some things which would be useful in our own teaching, and we felt that we succeeded. For that, casual and exploratory methodology was much more appropriate, perhaps even necessary. Indeed, a great deal of what we learned is not in this paper, nor even as yet consciously conceptualized in our own minds—it exists in the realm of what Michael Polanyi calls “tacit knowledge” and informs our decisions in the classroom without our even being aware of what it is.
One of the richest aspects of this project was the direct experience of another teacher's classroom over a period of time, and a chance to think and talk about that experience with another teacher who was present. This is holistic learning of a kind that perhaps can never be understood in the abstract. Though we do not now consider ourselves ethnographers . . . we do understand something of the lure of that discipline, the power of the direct experience of another culture with the goal of understanding its workings. (p. 171)

Classroom studies like that of Rorschach and Whitney exemplify the potential of teacher research to reform classroom practice by prompting powerful intellectual critique of assumptions, goals, and strategies. Their work further demonstrates the recursiveness of the classroom study process, wherein questions are continuously reformulated, methods are revised, and analysis is ongoing.

The value of teachers' classroom studies like that of Rorschach and Whitney is not necessarily self-evident to the academic research community. In this case, the authors address several significant issues that academics are also researching, among them discrepancies between the intended and the enacted curriculum; authority, power, and autonomy in writing classrooms; and the culture of the classroom as a social construction of students and teachers. Rorschach and Whitney's evolving questions suggest avenues of inquiry about these issues that the university community may have not considered or found important. Finally, collaborative studies like this provide, as Rorschach and Whitney (1986) point out, a powerful "means of professional development for teachers" as well as "a method of faculty development for institutions which train teachers or want to support the improvement of teaching" (p. 170).

**CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH**

**Type 4: Teachers' Essays**

In conceptual research, teachers recollect and reflect on their experiences to construct an argument about teaching, learning, and schooling. Drawing on students' work and classroom observations, for which there may or may not be complete written records, teachers write essays to convince others about particular ways to teach and understand the processes of teaching and learning. They also theorize about children's learning and development, the school as workplace, professional growth across contexts, and sources of knowledge for teaching. Unlike journals and oral inquiries, which are initially intended only for the participating teachers themselves, essays select examples that provide for a more public audience a kind of "evidentiary warrant" for the general assertions that are made (Erickson, 1986).

We include in the category of conceptual research some full-length essays such as Dennison's *The Lives of Children* (1970), Kohl's *36 Children* (1967),
Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* (1963), Wigginton's *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (1985) and Paley's *White Teacher* (1979) and *Wally's Stories* (1981). Briefer essays are regularly published in academic or professional journals such as *Harvard Educational Review, Language Arts, English Journal,* and *Educational Leadership,* in national publications of teacher or school organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Association of Independent Schools; in occasional papers and newsletters such as the *National Writing Project's Quarterly,* and in school bulletins such as *Studies in Education,* produced by the faculty at Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia.

Despite these many forums, teachers' conceptual research is not generally counted as part of the formal knowledge base about teaching, perhaps because it is often personal, retrospective, and based on the "narrow" perspective of a single teacher. Rather than disqualifying this work from the knowledge base, however, these characteristics seem to us to be part of what recommends it. All of it is systematic intentional inquiry. It draws on the data of teachers' experiences and reflections, often over long periods of time. To explore teachers' questions, conceptual research selects and analyzes significant events and features from the ongoing stream of classroom and school life. It locates a single teacher's experience in relationship to the teacher's own practices, to what he or she knows of the practices of other teachers, and sometimes to the conclusions of university-based research. By selecting particular questions or problems to write about, teachers reveal in their essays what matters from their perspectives. Unfortunately, teachers' essays infrequently contain citations to the work of other teachers, partly because much of this work is published only locally and there is little exchange among the diverse communities that read this literature.

In conceptual research, teachers connect practice to overarching concepts and show us how broad theoretical frameworks apply to particular contexts. By analyzing the patterns and discrepancies that occur, teachers use their own interpretive frameworks as practitioners to provide a truly emic view that is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an anthropological stance and spends considerable time in the classroom. Teachers' essays attempt to answer questions through systematic investigation and reflection on experience.

Eliot Wigginton's (1985) monograph on 20 years of high school English teaching serves as a highly visible example of an extended essay written from a teacher's point of view. *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* is an essay in three parts: a narrative analysis of the Foxfire story from its inception as a high school English class writing activity; an exposition of the principles distilled out of the 20-year experience; and a description of a sample grammar/composition course that demonstrates the philosophy explained
As Wigginton (1985) points out, the book attempts to answer the broad set of questions that he encountered in talking about his work and to encourage other teachers to continue asking questions of themselves, their students, and others: “For I have found that it is the constant, unrelenting examination and revision of approach—not a package of answers to packaged questions—that makes the better teachers among us the best” (pp. 37–41). To tell the story of Foxfire, Wigginton draws heavily on his own journals, letters, in-school memos and directives, passages from students' writing, and the writing assignments he set for himself.

Like other teacher researchers, Wigginton (1985) comments in his essay on the fact that for him, writing functioned as a primary way to make meaning of his daily teaching life. For example, Wigginton recounts that he was once disappointed and chagrined when he asked his students to recall positive and negative school experiences. When they could recall very few positive experiences to share, Wigginton himself tried the same writing assignment. He discovered that his own memorable experiences were few but could be grouped into several broad categories:

Times when there were visitors to our class from the world outside the classroom . . . . times when as students we left the classroom on assignments or fieldtrips . . . . times when things we did as students had an audience beyond the teacher . . . . times where we, as students, were given responsibility of an adult nature, and were trusted to fulfill it . . . . times when we as students took on major independent research projects that went far beyond simply copying something out of an encyclopedia, or involved ourselves in periods of intense personal creativity and action. (p. 308)

This written analysis allowed him to compare what stood out for him during 13 years of school and the opportunities he was offering his own students. Through this process, he realized there was a great deal he wanted to change about his teaching.

Reflections like these reveal Wigginton's intense, continuous, and systematic interrogation of his personal experience as both teacher and student. These processes of selection, organization, and interpretation are essential to REsearching one's own experience through conceptual research. In this case, writing the Foxfire monograph required Wigginton to add another layer to his teaching, which was already a many-layered and reflexive research process. In his classes, Wigginton's students used writing to explore their roots and to form a community. Wigginton studied their writing to examine the ways in which they were developing as writers and learners, and he wrote constantly and to a wide variety of audiences, including the school principal, his colleagues inside and outside the school, community people, and granting institutions. He wrote as a way to make things happen, to make sense of what was happening, and, although perhaps without a clear end product in mind at first, to document the entire experience for a wider audience.
explicit and implicit questions. All of these seem to be subsumed by the search to understand how teachers can make schools work for adolescents. Among his questions are: How can teachers get students to come together for a “common cause”? How can teachers integrate innovative projects into the normal curriculum? How do schools relate to communities? What is power in education? Who has it and who doesn’t? What is the extent of the teacher’s power? How can teachers help adolescents to understand the problems of the world outside the school? How can teachers help students to move beyond themselves and their new understandings into a caring and active relationship with others? What are the purposes of public high schools? How can teachers find compelling activities that serve all the goals of education simultaneously? Structured by Wiggins’s questions, the essay moves from a primary focus on students to concerns about teaching and the assumptions of teachers in general and then to an exploration of curriculum and schooling. At least two themes function as interpretive frames throughout the book: the discontinuities and connections between life inside and outside of school and the forces that constrain and support the integration of adolescents’ lives and the school curriculum.

The centerpiece of Sometimes a Shining Moment is a long chapter that Wiggins calls “Some Overarching Truths.” In this chapter, he proposes a number of characteristics common to effective teaching that he has generalized from 20 years of experience. The evidence for each proposition is Wiggins’s skillful synthesis of events and interactions that occurred within his own classroom and school as well as his reading of educational philosophers and theorists. The validity of Wiggins’s generalizations is shown by the extent to which they resonate with the experiences of other teachers, his primary audience for this analysis. As Fensternacher (1986) reminds us, only some educational research improves educational practice. This happens, he suggests, “if [the research] bears fruitfully on the premises of practical arguments in the minds of teachers.” Wiggins’s compelling essay, richly textured with narrative analysis, theory, and speculation, has unusual potential to inform the “practical arguments” that teachers use to understand, articulate, and ultimately improve their own practices.

Sometimes inquiry itself becomes the subject of teachers’ conceptual research. For example, in two recent essays, Hahn (1991a, 1991b) explores teacher research as a catalyst for teacher change and the problems and possibilities of institutionalizing teacher research. Using as cases the experiences of teacher-research groups in a variety of school settings, Hahn (1991b) argues that local knowledge is critical. For teacher research to be institutionalized within diverse contexts, programs need site-specific forms of support from leaders, group membership, and the institution itself. In his essay on teacher change, Hahn (1991a) discusses teacher research in relation to constructivism:

When we begin to look at teachers as active learners, constructing and reconstructing their ideas about students, classrooms, learning and teaching, as well as
learning about the various aspects of the subjects they teach, we can see that classroom research is a natural activity for teachers to pursue, not an additional burden to be added to an overwhelming workload. In fact, teacher research can become the one way teachers make sense of their often chaotic lives as teachers. Because teacher research is a constructivist activity, it is a good model for real learning in the context of the classroom. It is not something that is learned elsewhere that then needs to be applied to the classroom. The teacher's knowledge is conceived in the classroom and it lives in the classroom. (p. 2)

Drawing on the experiences of individual teacher researchers and the groups with which they worked, Hahn (1991b) describes in some detail the evolution of teachers' questions as they document classroom interactions, share their observations with colleagues over time, and develop plans to reconstruct curriculum and instruction in their own settings. Hahn distinguishes this form of professional development from traditional models:

If one of the goals of staff development is to "get everyone to do the same thing," then teacher research would be a bad model to follow. If, however, the goal is to get each teacher to look more critically at teaching and learning (rather than acting as thoughtless drones who "implement the program"), then enabling teachers to become reflective practitioners could be one of the best forms of staff development. (p. 1)

Taking the research of teachers as his subject, Hahn's work links rich illustrations to broader themes in teaching and learning to teach. Teachers' conceptual research on inquiry leads to the development of conceptual frameworks for the activities of teacher research from teachers' own perspectives. These frameworks are different from those of university-based teacher educators and researchers.

Often, teacher essays explicitly consider the relationships of theory and practice and the ways that these reciprocally influence one another. Ashton-Warner's (1963) full-length essay, *Teacher*, for example, focuses on her construction of a theory of child development grounded in her observations and experimentation with children in a Maori village school. Ashton-Warner proposes a child-centered view of the acquisition of literacy by language-minority children that foregrounds the relationships between cultural background and experience and the materials and processes for literacy instruction. Ashton-Warner's work and the work of other teacher researchers suggest that research by teachers about their own practices can be theoretical, abstract, and generalizable.

The value of teachers' conceptual research for the authors themselves and for the broader community of teachers is obvious. However, their value for the university-based research community is not quite so clear. Wigginton and Ashton-Warner are well-known writers whose work has been acknowledged in many circles as ground breaking and who are frequently cited. This does not mean, however, that their work fits within the accepted paradigms for research on teaching nor that it is part of the official knowledge base. Shulman (1986a)
forcefully makes this point when he notes in his discussion of Dunkin and Biddle’s landmark study of teaching that Philip Jackson’s Life in Classrooms is omitted from their review of research even though it is one of the references most often cited in their conceptual analysis of teaching. Shulman explains its absence by pointing out that members of a particular community of researchers generally acknowledge and build on the work of those whom they perceive as peers in their field. Teachers’ research clearly contributes to the understanding of other teachers. However, it can also contribute to university research efforts, a fact that is currently ignored and sometimes invisible.

Teachers’ conceptual work uses vivid, concrete experiences to build an argument about teaching and learning. This is possible because of teachers’ long-term, intimate knowledge of teaching and the rich perspectives they bring to observing and understanding students’ learning. With opportunities to observe learners over time and in a variety of academic and social situations, teachers often bring to their analyses many years of knowledge about the culture of the community, school, and classroom. The essay form, which builds on the dialectic between argument and evidence, provides a unique context for teacher research.

CONCLUSION

Teacher research addresses a wide range of subjects and takes a variety of forms. We imagine that there are many useful ways to categorize the work, and we do not regard the typology proposed here as an exhaustive or definitive one. However, as we have shown, when the notion of teacher research is broadened to include more of the writing of teachers, it is possible to see the range and variation of questions, types of evidence, modes of analysis, interpretive frameworks, and arguments for implications in classroom work. As more teachers become researchers in their schools and classrooms, they explore innovative forms and formats for documenting classroom activities, interrogating conventional assumptions about the research itself, and questioning relationships between researchers and the researched. These conversations raise many questions about teacher research as a way of knowing: what can be known about teaching, who can know it, how it can be known, and how that knowledge can be used. We explore these questions in Chapter 3.