In this essay we explain the impact of our reading in relation to eight ideas that have influenced our thinking about teachers as researchers. We are grateful to these writers and hope that in our discussion of their ideas we are true to their intentions.

1. Challenging Assumptions About How People Learn
Some researchers have served us as exemplars for challenging established, authoritative theories. Margaret Donaldson in Children's Minds, Carol Gilligan with In a Different Voice, and Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule in Women's Ways of Knowing have demonstrated to us the value of assuming a questioning stance, particularly when research marginalizes specific populations or is conducted on marginalized populations.

Donaldson opens Children's Minds in this way: “In the course of this book I argue that the evidence now compels us to reject certain features of Jean Piaget's theory of intellectual development. It may seem odd, then, if my first acknowledgment of indebtedness is to a man whose work I criticize…. No theory in science is final; and no one is more fully aware of this than Piaget himself” (p. ix). Similarly, Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice challenges the work of Lawrence Kohlberg by questioning the extent to which the stages of moral development for men are applicable in the moral development of women. Like Donaldson and Gilligan we learned to challenge existing authorities, question traditional assumptions, and rethink what was "known" in order to see what was actually happening and what might happen.

From these researchers and others we also learned to recognize the power differential between the researcher and the researched. We saw that researchers who work with marginalized populations are ethically bound to challenge their assumptions about the relationships between them as part of the study. These researchers served us doubly well when they themselves were, as teachers sometimes are, part of the marginalized populations.

As a teacher determined to understand the task before her, Mina Shaughnessy saw her students and their writing as the subject of her learning. Her work Errors and Expectations examines the logic behind the errors made by her freshman (basic) writing students when the City University of New York first implemented its open admissions policies in the 1970s. Instead of using their "deficiencies" and errors as ways to rate their writing as inadequate and failing to meet standards, Shaughnessy assumes the stance of a researcher — a teacher-researcher. By probing and understanding the principles of her students' learning and usage, she challenges her assumptions not only about the teaching of writing but also about her students' abilities and capacities for learning.

Both of us came to Mina Shaughnessy's work through the Northern Virginia Writing Project. Her work served as an important example of the basic principles of the
Writing Project — not just about student learning but how teachers learn. Observing students, writing about teaching, asking questions of students about their learning, and challenging assumptions were all part of our shared experiences as teachers in the writing project — a fertile place for the seeds of teacher research to grow.

2. Using Qualitative, Naturalistic, and Interpretive Research Methods

The concepts of qualitative, naturalistic, and interpretive research are basic to our ideas of teacher research. We both originally learned educational research against the backdrop of experimental and quantitative methodology. When we read Eliot Mishler’s question, “Meaning in Context — Is There Any Other Kind?” we recognized a fundamental principle with which we could, as teacher-researchers, agree. When Eliot Eisner asked, “Can Educational Research Inform Educational Practice?” we understood him to mean that, really, there was no useful or meaningful educational research that did not come from the context of the classroom and the teachers and students within it.

The experimental and statistical educational research with which we had been familiar seemed far removed from classrooms. Our own research was grounded in the day-to-day interactions with our students. In the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, we recognized the description of such groundedness in their theory-building methodology. Their explanation fit and articulated further our own theory-building methods. In addition to Glaser and Strauss, the work of Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln gave us a legitimate research vocabulary — terms like discovery, interpretation, and invited interference. Their work also helped us think about limits to a researcher’s claims and approaches to our own involvement in our research.

Mishler, Eisner, Glaser, Strauss, Guba, Lincoln, and others challenged fundamental existing ideas about what research should be and what it should do. Their work helped us conceptualize the broad field of research as one that could include teacher research.

3. Working amid Power Issues and Politics

We recognized that, as teacher-researchers, our work was complicated significantly because of the compulsory and hierarchical nature of public education. How could a teacher not know the answers to questions she asked her students? How could a school principal turn to classroom teachers to discover academic goals for the school? Who would own our research? Who would value it? These questions highlighted the fact that we were in the midst of political issues and that our power to affect those issues was limited. We saw educators and researchers like James Comer, Linda Darling-Hammond, Ann Lieberman, and others including ideas about the political nature of schools as they wrote about educational reform and change.

Other issues we faced as teacher-researchers were political by definition. Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed highlighted the political and often risky nature of teaching (and, by extension, teacher research) by describing education and society in terms of power relationships, construction of meaning, and self-determination. Teacher research calls into question the current structure of school systems and the hierarchical system of the profession, for in both of these the knowledge of teachers is not often rated highly either as knowledge or as a basis for decision-making.

4. Redefining Teaching

One of the early “redefiners” of teaching for both of us was Donald Graves, whose 1981 article “Where Have All the Teachers Gone?” expresses the need for teachers to conduct research in their own classrooms. He helped us see teacher interpretations as fundamental to any understanding of teaching and learning in a classroom.
We also found in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse explanations for a way of seeing connections between the processes of teaching and researching. He describes an educational system that is responsive first to the classroom, a radical shift in the relationships within the hierarchy of a school system and the profession in general, a shift that establishes learning and research as the fundamental purposes of education.

Other work that defined teaching and teacher knowledge helped us to conceive of teaching and research together, and also to clarify distinctions between teacher research and other descriptions of teacher knowledge — action research (Ernest Stringer), teacher lore (Stephen North), reflective teaching (Donald Schön) and critical pedagogy (Paulo Freire).

We turned also to occasional papers from the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT) at the College of Education, Michigan State University. These papers provided us with the work of, among others, Magdalene Lampert, a public school teacher and a university researcher whose “How Do Teachers Manage to Teach? Perspectives on Problems in Practice” introduced us to another researcher reconceptualizing the nature of teaching.

5. Seeing the Classroom as a Field for Anthropology and Ethnography

Similarities exist between teacher research and the fields of anthropology and ethnography. Sometimes laughter ripples through a group of teachers who suddenly imagine themselves anthropologists trying to understand a strange and remote culture — that of their students. Another facet of this point of view, however, is the most important to us — respect for those being studied and their “culture.” To understand that students have knowledge of value to the teacher and not just the other way around, that the context of the classroom is shared, is a change of profound importance.

From the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz we learned to think of “thick description” (The Interpretation of Cultures, pp. 3-30) as a way to build credibility for a context-dependent study of a place, like a classroom or a society, and reminded ourselves often to avoid “we-logical, you-confused provincialism” (Local Knowledge, p. 149) that applied very well to the world of teaching and schools. We found that much about James Spradley’s strategies in The Ethnographic Interview made sense (with some adjusting) for teacher-researchers.

In the 1986 Handbook of Research on Teaching we discovered that Frederick Erickson had concluded his section on qualitative methods with a description of teacher research and the comment that “Real Women and Men who were school teachers, principals, parents, and students, as well as those who were university-based scholars, might find themselves doing ethnography... as a form of continuing education and institutional transformation in research on teaching” (p.158). We began to see that teacher research was not only redefining teaching, but also research on teaching.

The Handbook of Research on Teaching pointed us to other places where we could find other researchers engaged with similar issues — the Anthropology and Education Quarterly and the University of Pennsylvania Ethnography in Education Conference. We were developing both practical and theoretical ideas about research methodology that could be useful to teacher-researchers in classrooms.

6. Seeing the Classroom as a Society

Classrooms work as small social organizations as well as small cultures, and therefore another kind of reading that has been useful to us has been social science research. We read through basic introductions to social science research to glean methodological ideas we could adapt from authors like John and Lyn Lofland in Analyzing Social Settings. George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons's Issues in Participant Observation introduced us to “The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis” by Barney Glaser. Ongoing analysis by constant comparison was a method we could use for managing and making use of a research context that we lived with daily for nine or ten months of the year. A teacher's class could be studied as a whole, we saw, as well as smaller groups and individuals within it.

7. Connecting Teaching, Philosophy, and Language Theory

Many theoretical works from different fields have contributed to our thinking. Lev Vygotsky's Thought and Language and Mind in Society have been important in terms of both seeing language as a tool and seeing research as a way of stepping back to reflect and know that we know. His books articulate the role of reflection and use of language in gaining insight and in making assessments about our teaching, but Vygotsky's work also helped us understand the roles of reflection, language, and play in our students' learning.
Michael Polanyi’s *Meaning and Personal Knowledge* argues that the processes by which we create meaning are those that we implement ourselves, building on our prior knowledge and constructs, and creating a working knowledge that has meaning for us in our own contexts. As a fundamental principle of teacher and student learning, Polanyi’s idea underscored for us the importance of having teacher-researchers identify their own questions and of supporting the individual nature of their research purposes.

Readings from the broader context of philosophy and theory — professional journals such as Educational Researcher, popular magazines such as Scientific American, and books in the fields of literature, science, history, and philosophy — also influenced our understanding of our work. We saw theories of teacher research in places where the authors had no intention of including such ideas. The connections we made resulted from our own questions about how teacher research fit into the larger field of educational research and its standing in theoretical debates like those about positivist thinking and constructivism. Often another teacher-researcher would bring one of us an article from a totally different context and say, “Read this. It sounds just like teacher research.”

**8. Teaching and Researching**

When they became available, we read books about teacher research itself, works written about the subject by colleagues from whom we have learned much. Dixie Goswami’s *Reclaiming the Classroom*, Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*, and *Inside/Outside* by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle were especially influential in our thinking, as were responses to our own *Working Together*. We compared our work with that of others interested in teacher research to see how we were alike and different in continuing conversation.

We have advanced our own reading in the fields related to teacher research mostly by continually exchanging books, articles, tapes of speeches, and bibliographies. Mohr once received two books by Clifford Geertz as a birthday present from MacLean. MacLean once returned a book to Mohr that she had discovered on her shelves with “M. Mohr” plainly written on the flyleaf. Mohr discovered the same book on her shelves inscribed “M. MacLean.” We have copies of articles that show each other’s underlining and highlighting. And, of course, we have talked and talked. As we talked, we examined others’ work in the light of our own experiences as teacher-researchers. Always, our practice was our grounding. This process continues, and our wish is that you will have similar opportunities to talk with colleagues about your ideas as you read further in the field.

**References**


