This fall the National Writing Project and Teachers College Press copublished Teacher Research for Better Schools. The text takes a leap beyond the research these teachers conduct in their own classrooms to describe the effect of their work on their schools and school systems. In this excerpted chapter, the writers annotate their own emergence as researchers, detailing those influences that shaped their ideas about how teachers and students learn and how schools change.

Out of Our Experience: Useful Theory
(an excerpt from Teacher Research for Better Schools)

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Generating a theory involves a process of research.—Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss

When a teacher remarked during a teacher researcher group discussion, “Theory is only useful if it’s useful,” we all knew what she meant. Theory often seems the last thing needed in a classroom; it seems esoteric, overgeneralized, and unrelated to the practice of teaching. A useful theory, on the other hand, can be a way to see the myriad experiences—the data of a teacher’s life—in a coherent way. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) call this “grounded theory” because it is based on data. Betsy Sanford calls it an “organizing principle,” a framework from which to try out new practices and collect new data.

As teachers, we developed our own theories daily as we taught, and they were constantly revised and adapted as a result of our experiences. We felt excitement when we read a theorist who saw the classroom world the way we did, but we were as likely to add that theory to our own theoretical construct (“He thinks the way I’ve been thinking”) as to feel legitimized by the theory of a more famous researcher or theorist (“My theory is validated by his”).

Discovering the origins of a teacher’s theories is therefore problematic. As with most teacher-researchers, our theory building emerged from a complex mix of classroom experiences, collegial exchanges, reflective opportunities, and selected reading. We did not trace each of our theories to a bibliographical source although we meant no disrespect by our method, and we were not constrained by the theory-building conventions of the academic community. Instead, we were free to explore and connect ideas that were important to us in the company of our colleagues and within the context of our classrooms.

This chapter is a description of our most important theories and the journey of discovery that led to their development. We describe our theories of learning, of the relationship of teaching to learning, and of educational change because they form the foundation for our ideas about teacher research in schools. At the end of each background description is a summary of our theories. After discussing the
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theories, we relate them to our methods and then to the ideas of our colleagues in the field of teacher research.

How Students and Teachers Learn
Mary Ann Nocerino describes her learning process by drawing ideas from two articles from the professional literature:

When I observe the moon wax and wane in the night sky, I feel an excitement, seeded by Duckworth's article "Teaching as Research" (1986), about learning—my own and my students’—the knowledge that through careful observation and questioning, I can learn about whatever I choose—and maybe make sense of it but not always.

Janet Emig's theory of nonmagical thinking ("magical thinking" is the notion that children learn because teachers teach, and only what teachers teach) in The Web of Meaning (1983) freed me to observe and question what students might be learning. This research approach to learning became instilled in me as a way of being—a way of approaching many things in my professional and personal life.

Nocerino derived the ideas of observing and questioning—what she calls a "research approach" to life—from her reading of Duckworth and Emig. As a group, we all see research as our way of learning.

To the idea of research as learning, Courtney Rogers adds the use of writing to learn:

I have learned the most when I was conducting research with the support of other teacher researchers who respond to my talking and writing as I develop questions; collect, analyze, and interpret data; and try to articulate findings and implications. My writing and my colleagues' responses to it have been especially critical.

As a group, we also agree that our habits of journal writing, writing to learn, and writing together are basic to our ideas about learning.

Donald Graves gave us copies of articles he and his colleagues drafted as they were conducting research on the writing of elementary school students. These articles included one by Mary Ellen Giacobbe (1981), the first article we recognized as teacher research. Graves and his colleagues demonstrated for us both writing about research in progress and writing "deadline drafts." We adapted his ways of writing about research to our own context, and his struggles with writing taught us to value our own.

Donald Murray, Graves's colleague, became our colleagues as well. His article "Write Research to Be Read" (1982) freed us from the kind of research writing that we had composed in graduate classes and read in professional journals, and supported our idea that classroom data could be written about in interesting ways without diminishing its validity.

These university colleagues helped us clarify our ideas about writing to learn and see what we were doing in our classrooms in a larger context. There were also K–12 teachers and colleagues, whose learning experiences mirrored ours.

Anne Wotringer (Wotringer and Tierney, 1981), a member of the earliest research group in our area, was a high school English teacher when she enrolled in a chemistry class that was learning with the use of writing—what she ended up calling "think writing." From her research we began to value the role of participant-observer and to use "think writing" in our own work.

Mary Schulman (1987) was interested in the findings of Graves's work on children's writing. She showed us how she learned by analyzing her elementary school students' writing. Each year she continued her research, working toward better understandings, and showed us that learning as a researcher is a continuous process of revision and reanalysis.

Bernadette Glaze (1987), a high school history teacher, wrote about her research on writing to learn history. She made the l-search ideas of Ken Macrorie (1980) legitimate to us and showed us that they aren't, as she put it, "l-search anything, they are just plain research."

Bob Ingalls and Joyce Jones (1993), building both a school-based staff development program and a longitudinal study of high school students' writing, kept the principles of respect for teacher knowledge and the importance of learning from students at the center of their efforts. We saw their research as demonstrating how learning with colleagues takes place.

Much of our learning has been with teacher colleagues and accounts for our belief in research group members learning with and from each other. Sheila Clawson and Sharon Gerow team-taught a social studies/English class at a middle school.

Clawson: I would have to say the most influential person for me is Sharon Gerow (1997)—there is
nothing like watching someone day after day modeling the strategies of teacher research. I wasn't even aware of what they were, but I began to imitate them. Seeing them demonstrated in the classroom and talking about what was going on with someone who is there all the time was a slow realization that I was becoming a researcher.

Betsy Sanford elaborates on this idea, discussing the influence of the Planning Group:

Without question, the people I have learned the most from are this group. . . . First, it was always within a context. We were always wrestling with the philosophical and methodological issues of teacher research within the context of real groups that were really operating. Second, the discussion was ongoing. The issues surfaced and resurfaced, sometimes in slightly different forms, so that we were forced to address them repeatedly.

Sanford's description of our way of learning together shows both its ongoing nature and its context dependence.

We summarize our theories of learning as follows:

As learners and researchers, teachers and students are involved in a process of discovery and construction. Oral and written language promote and enable learning. Learning takes place within a context—a group of teachers or students and teachers in a classroom—and this context is itself situated within a larger societal context, both influencing teaching and learning.

**How Teaching and Learning Are Related**

What we assumed to be true about learning was closely connected to what we believed to be true about teaching. Marion MacLean describes this connection:

I first read Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (1977) in 1981 around the time I went through the writing project. I'd been noticing in my classroom things that didn't fit or make sense: I was doing my best to make things work out in a particular way, but the more I tried, the worse it got. What I saw in M.S.'s work was her embracing the problem—welcoming it as a puzzle—a happy puzzle because of the assumption that logic was at work. Errors were not violations of principles. Errors were sudden flashes of light that could—if you knew how to value them—lead to understanding the principles at work.

As MacLean does above, we began to define teaching as a process of research.

Magdalene Lampert (1985) added another dimension to our thinking with her concept of teaching as “managing dilemmas” rather than solving problems. Marian Mohr describes Lampert's influence:

Her article was one of my first experiences with the Harvard Education Review. Here was an elementary school teacher researcher who was also a university professor researcher. I made copies and took it to the teacher researcher seminar that evening. It came at a time when we were weary, and conceptualizing our work as unsolvable dilemmas, while it could have been discouraging, lifted our spirits. We could see what happened in our classrooms as “data,” not as sinister plots to make our lives miserable!

Teaching and learning were connected for us by Lampert's concept. We could not control our lives or the lives of our students, but we could encourage learning by the way we managed and defined teaching and learning in our classrooms. We could learn to understand what was going on.

Lawrence Stenhouse's (1985) ideas led us to think about the effects of teacher research on curriculum and professional development. Our classroom observations affected our classroom curriculum. Our yearlong research process was like a graduate course; our understandings based on our research were professional development for each other.

Probably our most important influence in the field of teaching and professional development was the National Writing Project (Gray, 2000). Don Gallehr (1987), director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project (NVWP) at George Mason University (GMU) where we were all “teacher-consultants,” learned about teacher research along with us. His openness to learning from us contributed to our thinking about learning from our students and also from teacher colleagues.

Nocerino and Rogers both wrote about the influence of the NVWP.

Nocerino: NVWP was an important professional experience for me. As part of my teaching, I taped first-graders reading their writing aloud and learned some interesting things about self-correction and revision. I used some of the data as part of the presentation I prepared for the
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summer institute. The presentation provided for me a connection between my teaching and teacher research.

Rogers: I remember my amazement at reading Janet Emig's (1971) research on the composing processes of twelfth-graders during the NVWP Summer Institute. That she had actually looked at and documented what students do when they write— as they write—seemed so logical and so unusual. Even though it involved tape recorders and a substantial time commitment, something like it was not totally out of the realm of possibility for me as a high school teacher. I realized how little the so-called experts knew about what students actually do when they compose in writing. And as far as I was concerned, Emig was headed in the right direction for finding out.

Through professional development opportunities sponsored by NVWP, we talked with various university researchers in the field of writing research and learned how they approached the world as researchers.

Mohr: I remember meeting Dixie Goswami. She wore a loose shirt with a big tiger printed on it. She was outspoken, had a large laugh, a deep southern accent. She respected the work of teachers. "When you become a researcher, you cease to be a victim of fads." "Any piece of research is theory building." "Somebody else has to be able to make sense of your data." Those are three quotes from the first time I heard her talk. I think what I got from her, though, beyond the specific ideas, was an attitude. Teacher research can and should be done.

The National Writing Project (NWP) model flew in the face of most of the professional development we had experienced. We were used to knowledge received from outsiders—"what works" and "research says" mantras coupled with an absence of appreciation for our experience and thinking. From the NWP we learned to respect our own adaptations of the work of outside researchers rather than try to replicate them. Respect for the learner became part of our theory of teaching children and adults.

Sanford: As a teacher-researcher in the field of emergent mathematics learning, I have valued the work of Kathy Richardson. When I attended a session by her at a National Council of Teachers of Mathematics annual meeting, she mentioned conducting research in problem solving. I spoke to her at the break, noting that I had been involved in problem-solving research as well. Her instant reaction was to ask, "Well, what are you finding out?" She treated me as a fellow researcher.

Respect for the learner in a teaching-learning situation is complicated, and we were aware that our lives and the lives of our students and colleagues were different in many ways. Because all six of us are white, native English-speaking, and women, we had long worked, as teachers, to become better informed about the diversity of our students and colleagues. We knew that social and cultural influences were always present in our research as well as our classrooms.

We studied the work of researcher James Comer (1980), who was also interested in the school as an inclusive learning community, and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), who was also interested in how teaching and learning interact in a classroom of racial differences. We learned as well from teacher researcher-colleagues such as Renee Moore (1998), who was also interested in language learning and achievement. Researcher Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1993), who was interested in how participating in a community and studying that same community could be both ethical and valid, expanded our vision of our position as teacher-researchers in our schools. In James Banks's (1998) descriptions of "indigenous-insiders" and "external-insiders," we saw ourselves as teacher-researchers on the fringes of some and indigenous to other educational communities.

As we reached out for the ideas of colleagues, Judith Warren Little (1991) gave us an understanding of professional isolation and its effect on our schools and teaching.

Rogers: By the time I knew about her work, it was confirming what I knew through my experience. The collegial relationships she described that countered the professional isolation so prevalent in schools were alive and well among my colleague teachers. I remember the high school teachers in the first teacher research group I helped lead commenting with some amazement that it was the first school experience they'd had of honest professional dialogue with "colleagues" about the teaching and learning in their classrooms, not the teacher lounge "war stories" or laments about poor student behavior or performance but stories about teaching and learning episodes that helped them understand what was happening in their classrooms.
We saw that the daily stuff of the classroom, the work of students and teachers, is valuable data about teaching and learning and can be interpreted by teachers and students given the opportunity. We summarize our theories about teaching as it is related to learning as follows:

Teachers (and their students) can and do study teaching and learning as they teach and learn. Teachers who conduct classroom research initiate and carry out their own professional development and learning. When teachers work together to study teaching and learning, they break out of the isolation of the classroom and begin to teach each other.

The more our ideas about teaching and learning developed, the more they pushed us to consider educational change, especially in classrooms and schools.

How Schools Change
Our ideas about educational change are based on teaching and learning as a process of research. That process, although individual, takes place within a context of trusted professional colleagues or "critical friends" (Costa and Kallick, 1993). When we heard the term critical friends used for a certain kind of professional relationship—one of mentoring or coaching—we coupled it with an idea from Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman (1994). The validity of qualitative research, they assert, is enhanced by the number of research colleagues who examine the data critically and whose responses are incorporated into the understandings being developed by the researcher.

These two ideas reflected our experience in small research response groups. We knew the groups assisted teacher-researchers in speaking freely about their teaching, and we began to see a combination of ideas that made the research group of critical friends essential to the validity of teacher research. It is through questioning and criticizing, agreeing and disagreeing, but with fundamental respect and support for each other, that we interpret and learn from our data.

Mohr: When I opened Teachers, Their World, and Their Work: Implications for School Improvement (1984), written by Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller, I noticed right away its tone of respect and understanding when describing the work of teaching. (I had read many books that advertised a true description of teaching, which seemed way off to me.) When Mary Ann (Nocerino) gave us copies of "Creating Intentional Learning Communities" (1996) by Ann Lieberman, I wanted to read what she had to say. I was excited to discover things in the article that were similar to what we knew from our teacher-researcher groups.

Our experiences verified Lieberman’s description of school-based learning communities and local networks that allow members to accept the responsibility for their own personal and professional development.

We had read Paulo Freire (1970) to learn about teaching adult students to write, but learned as well from his emphasis on the social and political contexts of learning. Patricia Stock’s The Dialogic Curriculum (1995), an interpretation of Freire’s work for North American classrooms based on teacher research, brought together theories based on the concept of context that made sense with our experience.

The students’ context for learning, brought to school from family and community life (including societal inequities), intersects with the classroom context and, in turn, with the teacher’s own context. Identifying the interacting contexts forms the basis for building a learning community.

A summary of our ideas about teacher and school change follows:

Teacher-researchers working with colleagues create a learning community within a school that affects student learning, professional development, and school decision making. This community develops because of changes in the way teacher-researchers view themselves and others and through the identification of the contexts in which they work together.

Research Methods
Because of the experiences we have already described and the theorists and
researchers we have mentioned, the research in our schools leaned heavily toward adaptations of qualitative and ethnographic methodology. Some data was analyzed numerically, but no experimental or comparative studies with control groups were conducted. In no way, however, do we limit the use of any kind of methodology by teacher-researchers so long as it is used ethically with respect for students and colleagues.

We searched out methods from a variety of fields—sociology, ethnography, psychology, and anthropology—adapting the ideas we learned to our teaching and researching. Evelyn Jacob (1982), a university colleague and ethnographer, answered our questions about ethnography and qualitative research.

Rogers: Evelyn was the first university-based teacher of research methods I met who valued teacher research for its potential contributions to the professional discourse. She said it, but she also lived it as a practicing teacher-researcher.

Reading Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) taught us about “naturalistic inquiry.” Although they were not writing for teacher-researchers, we saw how classroom teachers might interpret data and develop understandings in the midst of the lively, multivariate classroom.

Mohr: I remember Guba’s little blue book called Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation (1978)—sending away for it, reading it, and underlining “premature closure is a cardinal sin and tolerance of ambiguity a virtue.”

Elliot Mishler’s “Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?” (1979) confirmed for us that classroom context was vital to any understanding of our data. We learned to use and appreciate “thick description” from Clifford Geertz (1973), also learned to value what we already did as teachers and see it in a different light as researchers. Elliot Eisner (1991) showed us how our own expertise and knowledge could become a valued part of our research and challenged us to think of new dissemination and publication forms.

Teacher-researcher colleagues who began publishing their studies also added to our understanding of methodology. Scott Christian’s Exchanging Lives (1997), for example, was full of email data, written by his students to other students in rural areas all over the United States.

Our methods in the research studies included in this book are described in each study. In this discussion, we wanted to explain the general sources of our thinking about these methods as they relate to our experience, our exchanges of ideas with colleagues, and our reading.

Exchanges with Contemporaries
We have benefited greatly from connections with our contemporaries who work in the field of teacher research.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle in their book Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge (1993) offered a taxonomy of teacher research that respects the many methods teachers use to reflect on their teaching, including talk and journal writing. By presenting their ideas about teacher research to their university colleagues, they helped us to consider our responsibilities as researchers to take part in the discourse of the educational community.

Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock in Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research
by Teachers of Writing (1987) published teacher research articles we could compare to the ones we were producing and Bissex's definition started us thinking more about ways of defining teacher research. Our definition in this book owes a debt to hers.

Teacher-researchers from our district published in the Journal of Teacher Research edited by Ruth Hubbard and Brenda Power. Their book The Art of Classroom Inquiry (1993) has been a valuable resource, and we appreciate their emphasis on the practical, the actuality of conducting teacher research in a classroom.

As K-12 teacher-researchers began to publish and give conference presentations, we made every effort to learn from them. Nancie Atwell's success with a book-length teacher research study, In the Middle (1987), encouraged teacher-researchers everywhere. Karen Gallas's (1994) writing about issues of racism, poverty, and anger with sometimes painful honesty was a helpful example of how teacher research examines complex and difficult situations.

Because of our connection to the National Writing Project we became acquainted with teacher-researchers in other writing projects with whom we shared our ideas. Mary K. Healy (Barr, D'Arcy, and Healy, 1982), Bob Tierney (Wotring and Tierney, 1981), and Joan Cone (1994) are just a few of the California teacher-researchers from whom we learned.

By the time this project began, we knew teacher-researchers nationwide in schools at all grade levels and in many different disciplines whom we could email about our work. There were special interest groups for teacher research within professional organizations and teacher research strands in projects focused on other topics such as education in urban settings. Each time one or more of us participated in one of these groups, we brought back to the others what we had learned.

As the field of teacher research grew and we had an increasing number of colleagues with whom to learn, it was apparent to us how much we thought we knew was a result of exchanges with the other teacher-researchers. We are grateful for their contributions to the kind of talk and writing that continues to push our thinking and increase our learning.

Conclusion

We continue to think of our ideas as developing from our practice into revised versions of our theories. Our work together is research—our approach to administration of programs as well as to teaching. At first we wondered, "Why are our meetings so long?" Eventually we realized that seeing our work as a research process is how we learn. That fundamental principle keeps us looking for new data and keeps our theories as useful as we can make them.

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