

Book Review: Teachers as Learners: Critical Discourse on Challenges and Opportunities

Edited by Ora Kwo.
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The view of teachers as change agents dominates education discourse and reform. Many reform strategies emphasize teacher accountability to ensure that all students receive a quality education. To this end, researchers, policy makers, and stakeholders focus on teacher preparation and performance. Teachers are either blamed or praised for student achievement levels, which constitute the strongest indicator of quality learning and teaching—along with other indicators identified through a hectic process of testing and measuring teacher performance against defined standards.

Teachers as Learners recognizes the importance and relevancy of measuring the quality of learning and teaching. However, it moves beyond measurement to explore how quality has been or may be created and achieved. The editor and authors provide thoughtful insights that invite readers to critically examine the experiences of both teachers and student teachers. Contributors developed their research with teachers, from teachers, and for teachers to successfully uncover the process of professionally constructing and reconstructing teachers' perceptions, which shape and direct their experiences within different curricular reforms in different countries and at different educational levels.

The book's strength comes from adopting the notion of a "learning community," which promotes teacher inquiry into their own experiences and practices, and allows for reflection, dialogue, and action. This in turn empowers teachers and enables them to better understand the complexity of their roles as learners, professionals and researchers while becoming agents of change for social justice. Kwo succeeds in putting together a collection of chapters selected and derived from research papers presented at the World Assembly of the International Council on Education of Teaching, held in Hong Kong. These chapters portray various types of teacher inquiry. In their examination of teacher experiences as learners, researchers, and members in learning communities, the chapters address several challenges and opportunities imbedded in the journey of becoming a good teacher. The examples range from the initial teacher education

program through the process of on going professional development to the policy concerns for the teaching profession.

The first section of the book is devoted to its theoretical framework. The main theoretical focus is constructively addressed in the first chapter by Cochran-Smith and Demers, and focuses on the metaphor of research as stance or inquiry as stance in teacher education and teacher learning. The leading assumption here is that "teaching and teacher education depend on practitioners taking a research perspective on their work and functioning continuously as researchers and learners by being critical, being informed by others research, making decisions based on evidence, and doing research on their own practice" (pp.18-19). This assumption is clearly demonstrated by examples from the work of student teachers and teacher educators who employ an inquiry stance in their work in three cities in the United States. Taking a research stance is proven to be a useful and practical approach to enhance a professional, life-long learning in teaching and teacher education. The following chapters of the book further explore the notion of research as stance and teacher inquiry.

The significance of teacher identity and including the self in understanding teaching practices are deeply examined in the context of China and the United Kingdom. In the case of China by Ying, Huang, and Zheng, the authors use stories of curriculum innovation at a university to examine how a group of teachers develop a better understanding of their professional identities. The study reveals that teachers come to better understand their professional identity when working in an inquiry community. Teachers that participate in the process of self and collaborative inquiry realize the vital role played by one's professional identity in classroom teaching, curriculum development, and professional development. On the other hand, the case of the United Kingdom by Alex Moore sheds light upon the tensions and interactions between private and professional selves in regards to understand teaching practices. Based on data generated from three projects conducted with teachers and student teachers, a fruitful discussion of the power of student teachers' predisposition promotes a call for including the self in understanding practices. The chapter

explores the tensions between externally imposed educational policies, and practitioner preferred pedagogies and ideologies that require practitioners to make compromises and pragmatically reposition themselves. Arguably, adopting more reflexive stances could enable teachers to address these tensions, come to a deeper understanding, and develop strategies for personal professional development.

Teachers as Learners also focuses on enriching the learning experiences of student teachers. For instance, inquiry-driven practices are employed with and by prospective science teachers prior to and throughout the use of videos demonstrating exemplary teaching at the University of Hong Kong. Cheng, Wong, Yung, and Hodson clearly demonstrate that such a process and experience do not just broaden student teachers' perceptions of good science teaching, but also challenge and reconstruct their perceptions by realizing the complexity of classroom teaching. In the context of curriculum development, Kwo embarks with her student teacher on a process of lived curriculum in which the teacher and the student teacher pursue the meaning of learning as a community together. The chapter provides a fruitful analysis that demonstrates well the process in which shared ownership of teaching and learning is promoted.

The book's contributors also address continuing professional development by focusing on mentoring and mentors. In the case of Israel by Orland-Barak, competing discourses of the language of teaching versus the language of mentoring is well explored as a challenge to mentor growth in their professional roles; mentors might often get lost or fail to transfer working knowledge from one discourse of practice to another. The chapter suggests extending the traditional scope of mentoring, which focus on subject matter issues, to include aspects of practices such as communicative competencies and interactive skills that would enable mentors to better managing the competing discourses.

Aiello and Watson use teacher-led action research projects in the United Kingdom to examine how the head teacher supports teachers as researchers in their role as change agents. The chapter includes a valuable analysis of teachers as action researchers in the context of a professional development program. As suggested in this chapter, the role of the teacher as action researcher and change agent needs to be promoted within institutions in order to maximize organizational and teacher learning.

Gorinski, Fraser, and Ayo provide further examination of mentor-mentee relationships in tertiary education. Their contribution to the book uncovers the possibilities and barriers to fostering a community of reflective practitioners through mentoring practices. The most critical challenge identified is the definitional ambiguities, and the wide disparity of practice within the specific organization. As indicated in the chapter, this in turn

negatively impacts efforts to foster a community of critically reflective practitioners.

Teachers as Learners connects classroom and school settings with the policy arena by exploring current discourse regarding teacher performance and the role of professional standards. Drawing on data collected during his teaching experience in Singapore, Liew explores the nature of teachers' professional struggle within the dynamic of educational change. Reaching coherency in presenting facts with fictions, Liew illustrates teachers' struggle within a process of work intensification and appraisal of performance. The chapter calls attention to the importance of considering narratives and stories of teachers' struggle in policy making.

On the other hand, in his presentation of the implementation of standards of professional practice for novice teachers in Victoria, Australia, Emmett argues that professional standards have the potential to improve the quality of teaching and student learning, as well as contribute to improving reflective practices. Nonetheless, in the context of the United States, Yinger draws the reader's attention to the challenges created by "the federalization of a narrowly drawn school performance paradigm emphasizing standardized high-stakes testing that measure narrowly skilled-based curriculum" (294), which from his perspective undermines the democratic and civic purposes of public education. Seeking alternatives to the current professionalization strategy in education, Yinger goes on to identify lessons learned from other professions' struggles towards reconnecting professional work to the work of civil society.

Clearly, *Teachers as Learners* covers a variety of themes and issues concerning the role of teachers as learners, professionals and researches in various contexts. Yet, presenting the community of teachers as a homogenous group invites the need for further research that examines the diversity within community in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity. Finally, praise is due to the variety of methods used by the contributors of this book to uncover challenges facing teachers, and create opportunities for their involvement in the critical discourse of the reform of teaching and learning, which without doubt enriches the repertoire of teaching and teacher education.

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