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Voices of Reform: Editor Statement

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Within the field of educational research, teacher voice is rare. An underrepresentation of teacher voice in research continues to produce policy, curriculum, and reform that does not address the realities and needs of teachers in classrooms today. However, this is not a new issue. In 1985, Lawrence Stenhouse argued that the road to teacher emancipation was through their own research. He further suggested that academic researchers should be justifying their work to practitioners, not the other way around (Ruddock & Hopkins, 1985). In *Reclaiming the classroom: Teacher research as an agency for change*, Goswami and Stillman (1987) provided exceptional examples of the benefits of teachers conducting and sharing their research within their communities, citing benefits such as transformational teaching, professionalization, critical classroom discourse, and personal empowerment.

Thirty years and countless publications later covering the value that teacher research plays to the profession as a whole and on the individual transformation of educators, and it seems that we are no further along in our efforts to create a valued space for the research conducted by classroom teachers within the academy. In the current educational climate in the United States, the lack of representation of teacher voice in educational research is a hugely consequential issue in education. If scholars, leaders, and stakeholders are using published research to construct our own truth about the experiences within classrooms, how can the results be equitable without representation from classroom teachers as authors? If educational research is to inform policy, what are the consequences for our silenced teaching population?

This special issue is filled with brilliant teacher researchers who are dedicated to their profession and masters of their craft. One of my roles at Florida Atlantic University is to teach a capstone course in action research to our graduating masters students. This course is taught twice a year to 20-50 licensed educators who are primarily teaching in PK-12 classrooms. At this point, I have worked with hundreds of classroom teachers to develop their own identities as teacher researchers, each teacher choosing research topics based on values and/or needs that they identify as important to them. In my work with teacher researchers, we often begin with a frank conversation about power and decision-making in their contexts when it comes to research and data. Which data seems to carry more power in their schools and why? Inevitably, we come back to the same conversation time and time again, data is the language of power in their schools and, to create change (or sometime disrupt change), teachers need to be fluent in the language of data.

With that lens, we then think strategically about what data could be included as part of their research and how they can add to that picture to really tell the whole story as they see it. Teachers report to me that they feel frustrated that the data selected to “measure” their success is not capable of capturing a child’s academic journey throughout the year...how students persisted through challenges, found a new love for a genre of reading, and became more engaged in mathematics. By synthesizing the data that is deemed to have more power (achievement) with data that shares student and teacher voice (perception, observation), teachers report a sense of ownership over the narrative being told about their teaching (Vaughan & Mertler, 2021). This ownership empowers them to enact change but also to resist change by wielding the data and ensuring their voice and those of their students is accurately represented (Vaughan et al., 2019).

Bringing teacher research into the academy has value to bridge the research-practice gap and bring more practice-based research into academic journals. However, the question remains, ‘Should teacher researchers be attempting to fit their research into the narrow definition of acceptable research by the academy?’ or should the aim be to decolonize our academic journals and reexamine how representative they are of the work being done in the field of education.

In Patel’s text *Decolonizing Educational Research* (2015), she urges those who have been privileged by the academy to shift their sense of ownership towards accountability. Making the point “researchers who have succeeded have been validated through settler colonial structures of schooling and consequentially are answerable, minimally, to working to dismantle those structures” (p. 74). It is not a question of whether teachers *can* conduct research, it is a question of who values the research they are conducting and how the academy can and should dismantle our existing structures to honor their knowledge as an essential voice in the field. Cain (2011) adds to this argument by urging educational researchers to work with teachers to bridge the research gap.

If teachers’ classroom-based action research is to fulfil its potential to improve the theory and practice of teaching, educational researchers should work with teachers to find methods which are congruent with the nature and ethics of teaching. There is evidence that such methods can generate rigorously researched and inspiring narratives of change, showing teachers’ and students’ struggles to achieve their educational ideals – not simply reporting strategies which work, but rich and detailed accounts of the interactions which lead to realizing educational ideals (p. 14).

Cain’s argument occurred over a decade ago and twenty years after the initial push for space for teacher research in the academy. In the US, we are seeing drastic changes to the teaching field - unprecedented numbers of educators leaving the profession, high levels of burnout, and reduced enrollment in teacher preparation programs. But who can blame them? Research continues to reveal how support and space for teacher research increases professionalization, empowerment, and, as a result, stronger pedagogy, and renewed enthusiasm for the profession. Yet, the spaces for teacher researchers to grow and share their work are minimal.

I am thrilled that *Voices of Reform* is highlighting the work of our teacher researchers in this special issue. The commitment to bringing this work into the academy is a valuable step in the right direction. I hope readers will be inspired by the research conducted by the authors in this issue.

They have nuanced, embedded knowledge about teaching and learning that we do not get an opportunity to hear about in many academic articles published. This issue highlights nine teacher researchers, but there are thousands of teachers who are doing this research everyday in classrooms across the world. As educational researchers, I encourage the *Voices of Reform* readers to examine their own research practices and the role that teacher researchers play in their scholarship. Working together, I believe we can continue to create inclusive academic research spaces where teacher research is highlighted, and teacher researchers are included as essential members of any research community.

Dr. Michelle Vaughan

Guest Editor-in-Chief

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