MICHIGAN READING JOURNAL

Michigan Reading Journal

Volume 26 | Issue 1 Article 7

October 1992

Paradigm Shifts: Closing the Gap Between Researchers and Practitioner

Mark W. Conley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj

Recommended Citation
Conley, Mark W. (1992) "Paradigm Shifts: Closing the Gap Between Researchers and Practitioner," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol26/iss1/7

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Paradigm Shifts

Closing the Gap Between Researchers and Practitioners

BY MARK W. CONLEY

As I entered the classroom of a good friend, a middle school teacher, I sensed that something was wrong. Normally, she greeted me with a wide smile and a warm handshake. She stared out of her classroom window, lost in thought. She looked troubled.

"How are you doing?" I said, not wanting to intrude.

"Not so good," she replied.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You know how our district always has all of these inservices?"

"Yeah, what are you being trained in now?" Her district was always bringing in "big names" in reading, curriculum and assessment. She continued.

"Last night we had another inservice. They brought in a big gun to talk to us about our new literature series. It was some researcher. She told us about classrooms full of literature, where all the teachers were using the latest methods and technology, where every kid wanted to read, where parents were deeply involved. All the university researchers had to do was record all of this wonderfulness going on so they could tell us about it. I just about lost it!"

I didn't quite know what to say.

"That stuff happens in the district all the time. Why did it bother you so much?"

Her eyes welled with tears.

"Because while I was listening to that researcher, I was thinking about my own classes and my own students. My teaching will never be like that!"

❧

Though this encounter happened more than 7 years ago, I continue to think about what it means to me and to our profession. I once only considered inservice as an innocent way to build awareness or get people excited. Sure, inservice is big business to some and entertainment to others. But at the same time, researchers use inservice to get the good word out about reading, to share the latest literacy techniques, to make teachers and administrators feel good about what they are doing. A comment I hear frequently from researchers at conferences supports this uplifting and respectable view of inservice: "When I do inservice, it is a form of education. I don't do inservice training."

The experience of my teacher friend, however, revealed a different view of researchers and inservice. Rather than feeling uplifted or educated, my friend felt demeaned. The pristine images the researcher painted during the inservice contrasted sharply and cruelly with the everyday realities of her classroom. Rather than going away from the session feeling inspired and armed with a new bag of tricks, my friend's reaction to the researcher's model classrooms was: "I can't get there from here!"

It would be easy to dismiss my friend's reaction as overkill, if not for the growing uneasiness throughout our profession about the limitations of literacy research from the 1970s and 1980s. Many in our profession feel as though research of that era brought us closer than ever toward understanding literacy and effective literacy instruction. Others have lamented a growing gap between the findings of pure literacy research and our understanding of what happens day-to-day in real, messy classrooms.

Two trends hold promise for closing this gap: action research and teacher-researcher collaboration.

Action research is often viewed as a brand new phenomenon. It has actually been around for about 30 years (Elliott,

1988). Popular in England and Australia and with many whole language proponents in this country, action research has spread internationally. The principles of action research are simple: theories are implicit in all kinds of classroom practice, and teachers—not just researchers—are in the best position to research and articulate knowledge about literacy.

Notice how this differs from the more conventional view of research and practice. Rather than having dispassionate researchers generating knowledge that gets applied to classrooms through inservices, workshops or teacher training, teachers themselves develop knowledge about best practices. The emergence of action research and teachers as researchers reduces the chance that the image of classrooms that researchers create will be irrelevant or worse—demeaning to teachers. The movement simultaneously increases chances that knowledge about literacy and best practices will be intimately informed by the challenging realities of today's classrooms.

So now that we have action research, what is happening with researchers?

Across the United States, a growing trend is teacher-researcher collaboration. Both individual researchers and institutions of higher education are participating in this trend.

Kathy Short from the University of Arizona exemplifies the individual researcher collaborating with teachers in new ways. Short and her public school colleagues participate in teacher study groups (Short & Klassen, 1992). The focus of the study groups is on exploring problems of practice and finding ways to improve teaching and learning. Rather than collecting, removing and analyzing data from an "outsider" perspective like a traditional researcher, Short and her colleagues collectively work together "as insiders," identifying and confronting issues of interest to everyone in participating schools and surrounding communities.

Nationwide, Professional Development Schools represent higher education's approach to teacher-researcher collaboration (The Holmes Group, 1990). Professional Development Schools are public schools in which university and public school faculty have agreed to work together to merge their respective roles. Often, this means that researchers teach alongside their public school colleagues while public school teachers and administrators engage in meaningful research and inquiry.

There are currently over 100 colleges and universities across the country who have endorsed the concept of Professonal Development Schools. Many universities—including several across the state of Michigan—are working with public schools to make the vision of Professional Development Schools a reality. Early reports on emerging Professional Development Schools show that we—university-types and school professionals—have much to learn from one another.

Ultimately, the action research movement and teacher-researcher collaboration could close many of the current gaps between teachers and researchers, making schools better places for life-long, professional learning for everyone.

References

Elliott, J. (1990). Teachers as researchers: Implications for supervision and teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 6 (1), 1-26.

Holmes Group. (1990). *Tomorrow's schools: Principles for the design of professional development schools.* East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group.

Short, K. & Klassen, C. (1992). *Conflicting voices: A reflective jouney.* A paper presented for the symposium *Teacher Study Groups* at the National Reading Conference, Palm Springs, CA.

Comments on the Paradigm Shifts column may be sent to Mark Conley, Michigan State University, 201 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Dr. Mark Conley is a professor in Teacher Education at Michigan State University and coordinates the Holt Junior High Professional Development School. He is a member of the Michigan Secondary Reading Interest Council.