4-2014

Teacher Researchers as Local Agents of Change: Exploding the Myth of the Bad Teacher

Cathy Fleischer

Ellen Daniel

Lisa Eddy

Kris Gedeon

Jessica DeYoung Kander

See next page for additional authors

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

Teacher Researchers as Local Agents of Change: Exploding the Myth of the Bad Teacher

Authors

Cathy Fleischer, Ellen Daniel, Lisa Eddy, Kris Gedeon, Jessica DeYoung Kander, David Kangas, and Nicole Guinot Varty

Teacher Researchers as Local Agents of Change: Exploding the Myth of the Bad Teacher

CATHY FLEISCHER, ELLEN DANIEL, LISA EDDY, KRIS GEDEON, JESSICA DEYOUNG KANDER, DAVID KANGAS, AND NICOLE GUINOT VARTY

We need to make our voices speak through the fire and invite the noisy public to listen. When we speak as teachers informed by our own research, we can control the fires and inform the noisy public about what works in our classroom . . . systematic inquiry is both a form and a method for teacher resistance and teacher agency.

—Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater

[P]erhaps too much research is published to the world, too little to the village.

—Stenhouse

Let's face it. This is a tough time for teachers. It seems that every day teachers are blasted by the current "popular story" of schools, a story that mythologizes teachers in a number of ways. This story suggests that teachers don't work all that hard, don't have the expertise to know what works best in their own classrooms, and don't know how to assess student knowledge and growth in their classrooms.

Sensationalist headlines and "news" stories are a primary source of this bad teacher myth, but the story has grown beyond the media: the entertainment industry creates their version of story through film and television shows that demonize or make fun of teachers; government and elected officials further that story through passage of state and national legislation and federal mandates (often created by policy groups such as ALEC [American Legislative Exchange Council] that write this model legislation); even philanthropic foundations contribute as they grant money that supports particular educational agendas in unprecedented ways (Hall & Thomas, 2012). Sadly, when everyday people are bombarded with these words and images on a daily basis, a narrow and false view of teachers and schools seems to take on a certain kind of truth. What can we do to change the bad teacher myth? A growing number of teachers across the country are trying to do so, taking bold and courageous steps as they use their own voices and experiences to create a counter-narrative. From the teachers at Garfield High School in Seattle, who started a media buzz and gained popular support when they refused to administer standardized tests (Shaw, 2013), to blog posts and newspaper columns from teachers and teacher educators such as Peter Smagorinsky (2013) and former middle school teacher Beth Shaum (2014), to Penn State professor Anne Whitney and the Centre County Teacher Writers with whom she works (2014)—all of these educators are stepping forward to tell their own stories. Going public with a local and intimate portrayal of their classrooms and their teaching, these teachers offer a new perspective on education.

But going public is not always easy for teachers. They often worry that while they know what works in their own classes, they may be accused of being *just* practitioners when they bring those stories forward. They worry that they're not good enough at public speaking or sound bites. And they worry that being a lone voice sets them up for attacks by others—parents, other members of the public, and even their own colleagues and administrators.

We recognize and share these fears. However, as members of a long-standing teacher research group, we have found that when we shift our identity from teacher to *teacher researcher*, we are uniquely positioned to contribute to the growing movement to change the popular narrative about education in two related ways.

First, as Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater suggest, because our work is based in systematic research conducted in our own classes, we gather evidence gleaned from real students in real classrooms to support our claims about teaching and learning. As we meticulously gather and analyze this data, we gain expertise in how students learn, an expertise that gives us the confidence to be both creators and disseminators of knowledge. But what, realistically, might we do with that knowledge? For many teacher researchers, the call to publish

blogs, write op-ed pieces for national publications, or visit congressional representatives seems out-of-reach.

Thus, we believe that the second way we can speak back to the bad teacher myth and change this narrative is to do as Stenhouse suggests: to think about ways to "publish" our research not to the world, but to the village. Because teacher research is situated in the local circumstances of our own classrooms and schools, we have an opportunity to share our research-based understandings of teaching in the multiple "villages" in which we work, sparking grass roots change.

When we identify ourselves as teacher researchers within our classrooms, we can affect our students' understanding of who a teacher is and what a teacher does, a change that has the potential to influence their families' understanding of teachers as well. And as we very consciously claim our place as teacher researchers in front of our colleagues and administrators, we have the opportunity to help them see a very different way of defining teachers' work.

In the pages that follow, we introduce you to our teacher research group, a long-standing collaboration of K-college teachers who have met for over a decade to share our research questions, help each other analyze data, and find venues to publish our work. We focus here on how we have begun to challenge the myth of the bad teacher, gaining confidence in our ability to study our classrooms in order to create and disseminate knowledge and building upon that confidence to act as local agents of change.

Our Teacher Research Group Goes Public

The experience of our teacher research group suggests a very different story from that of the mythological teacher who is too often portrayed as both unknowledgeable and unable. In stark contrast, the teachers in this group meet once a month—some driving over an hour—to share their questions and data, to seek insight from colleagues, and to discover new ideas about teaching and learning. The teachers in this group take research seriously—collecting student artifacts, interviewing and surveying students, sifting through data, and writing up findings—in addition to all they do in their regular school day. As a result, these teachers produce important new knowledge about what's going on in their own classrooms. Dave Kangas, a member of this group for many years, contrasts his experience in our teacher research group with other professional development he's experienced:

Most professional development in the large urban high school where I work focuses primarily on a limited range of data and classroom experience, notably the creation of common assessments or scanning test results or data, work that falls under a rubric of accountability and standardization. In contrast, when I'm practicing teacher research, I produce knowledge about my classroom and for my teaching practice.

Dave offers one example of how teacher research works in our group. After gathering his students' reflective notebooks over the course of a semester, he sought help from our teacher research group, both in interpreting what his students were saying and considering what their responses might mean for his teaching. On the evening in which he shared passages from his students' writing with us, we carefully read through the responses, scribbling notes, nodding, and smiling at the ideas his students raised. Some of us offered insights into how Dave might start to categorize and thematize the student responses, while others suggested interpretations of the student texts or raised questions about what the students were saying. As Dave reflected back on this experience, he stressed how this collaboration with other teachers "enriched my perspective and ultimately my development as a writing teacher." He noted:

> This collaborative looking and inquiry is teacher research at its most fundamental level. Intentionally sharing with other teachers questions about student work and teacher practice would be critical to any reform, yet such work is sadly missing from the meager initiatives for more standardized testing and the calls for rigorous standards. [In our teacher research group] we . . . ask together, 'What is really going on here?'

As teacher researchers, we have felt increasingly comfortable in our role as producers of new knowledge who ask together, "What is really going on here." Through problem-posing and critical analysis, we work hard to figure out better ways of teaching and learning. More recently, however, we have begun to recognize and complicate our second and vital role as disseminators of that knowledge. While a few of our members had disseminated findings in some traditional outlets (articles in journals, conference presentations, curricular documents), most of us hadn't. And yet, we began to notice that we were doing a lot of what we considered "smaller sharing" in our own local settings: talking to

Cathy Fleischer, Ellen Daniel, Lisa Eddy, Kris Gedeon, Jessica DeYoung Kander, David Kangas, and Nicole Guinot Varty

students, parents, colleagues, and administrators about our work as teacher researchers. As we mentioned these occasions of small sharing in our teacher research group—something that at first seemed almost inconsequential—we began to realize the large impact this work was having on local audiences. Just as we know that the myth of the bad teacher is furthered by stories and anecdotes repeated so many times that it takes on a kind of truth, we recognized that when we shared our findings and even just our teacher researcher selves with others who are part of our local contexts, the counter-narrative about teachers that we were seeking became more widely circulated in those circles. Students talked to their parents; parents talked to other parents; parents talked to administrators, and so on.

This realization led us to wonder how demonstrating our identities as teacher researchers at the local level—with the students we teach, their families, and our own colleagues—might help redefine for those groups what it is that teachers really do. And if that sharing does help change others' understandings of teachers, could that be another way of challenging the myth of the bad teacher?

For us—and we imagine for others—this focus on the local level was a big shift in our way of thinking. Our prior notion of "going public" consisted of telling our stories at a national level: writing a newspaper column, contacting our congressional representative, or creating/contributing to a public blog—approaches we kept pushing ourselves to do, but not all that consistently or successfully. And while we agree that this public-writ-large way of changing the narrative is vital, we've begun to think that going public to create a changed narrative doesn't exclusively mean doing so at a national level. We've found that telling our stories—based in our own teacher research—at a local level can have a very strong impact. When we start within our own immediate contexts, our stories have the potential to build new understandings for those with whom we interact most immediately; when many local teacher researchers do the same, we as a community of teachers have the potential to help change the larger narrative of teachers and education—based in local context and circumstances.

Village 1: Sharing with our Students

Every year when new teacher researchers join the group, they share a big fear: What will happen when they identify themselves as teacher researchers to students and their parents? Will their students think they're not "real" teachers if they name themselves publicly as learners? Will parents have

less confidence in them? What we've found is that "the reveal"—scary as it is—has had the opposite effect, as students and parents re-think and ultimately appreciate these teachers who position themselves as the kind of people who constantly strive to improve their teaching—a positive re-imagining of the mythologized bad teacher.

For Kris Gedeon, an experienced high school teacher in a rural community, revealing herself as a teacher researcher introduces students to the notion that teachers, too, can be lifelong learners who think carefully about how and what to teach—a stance that has changed her relationship with them. Kris explains that at first, the words *I don't know* seemed "scary words. Risky words. Terrifying words, especially in this political climate. But those words, and the teacher research that followed, transformed my classroom in ways that I am still learning about."

Kris recalls what happened when she first revealed herself as a teacher researcher to one class: "My body still gets tense as I remember how worried I was as I handed out permission slips and explained that I would be making some changes, and that I needed their help to figure out if the changes I planned would actually work."

She continues:

But I need not have worried. After their shocked chorus of "Ms. Gedeon, you're still in school?" my students jumped in with questions and ideas. Students stayed after class to clarify: Did I really want to know what they thought: good and bad? How would I pick students to interview—and could they volunteer? What was an artifact? How often would I do surveys? Did I really have to videotape them? What were field notes? Every time I begin a new teacher research project, this same scene plays out. I am nervous. I admit that I do not know something about my classroom. I ask students for help. They help. And then things start changing. Students become more willing to ask for help—perhaps because I have modeled that learners do that. The sense of community, that we are all in this together, increases. My students see me as an expert not because I hold the title of teacher, but because they see me learning.

For Jessica DeYoung Kander, a part-time lecturer at a large university, going public as a teacher researcher was scary as well. As a younger instructor, she explains,

I spent the first several semesters of teaching self-conscious and buried in anxiety that my students

would not look at me as an authority. Constructing an impenetrable teaching persona that exuded confidence, authority, and all consuming knowledge became an obsession. It only took a year for me to recognize that this was not sustainable. After joining the teacher research group, I began to rethink my role as a teacher.

In order to understand her students, she began collecting artifacts, surveying her students, and conducting individual interviews about her research topic on assessment practices and, as she did, opening up to her students about the research project. She did this, she says, "with great trepidation. Not only was I admitting to my students that I was trying something new, but also that I did not always know what I was doing and was not always right."

Rather than receiving the expected apathetic disinterest or a loss of respect from students, she was surprised to find them enthusiastically interested in the research. A number of them had intentions to become certified teachers and saw her research as a model for their own careers. Additionally,

Students recognized my changed persona as an opportunity to contribute more authentically to the class. Several reflected that they often saw teachers as sole arbiters of knowledge in the classroom, meaning they were simply there to receive information. But by creating transparency around my own learning and growth as an instructor, I was unintentionally inviting them to reflect on their own learning and growth.

Village 2: Working with Parents

While most teachers realize that working with parents is an important component of creating good learning experiences for students, many identify it as one of the most stressful parts of teaching. What happens, then, when teacher identify themselves as classroom researchers? Kris's revelation to students that she spends time and energy as a researcher to improve her teaching has trickled down to the parents as well, spreading a new narrative about teachers to the families in her school. As a teacher researcher, she regularly hands out permission slips to her students, which, because of their age, need to be signed by the parents. Parents then need full explanations of the research she is conducting and how it might benefit their own kids. Kris worried at first that parents who were confronted with these permission slips would feel that their kids were guinea pigs in Kris' class or—worse

yet—that Kris didn't know what she was doing as a teacher. In fact, her naming herself as a teacher researcher has had the opposite effect: parents regularly ask her questions about her research and are pleased to see a teacher taking on this role. Kris explains: "It's a change in body posture, leaning in rather than sitting back with arms folded in front. An offhand comment in the hallway when I run into a parent –'my kid loves that you care what she thinks.' It's a recognition of teacher as professional."

Lisa Eddy, also an experienced teacher and teacher researcher in a rural high school, has worked hard over the years to help parents understand her ongoing research. As technology has changed, so has her outreach: early in her career, she sent home paper documents that explained her research to parents, then switched to email updates, and more recently has created a blog about her classroom and her research for parents. This past year, she has gone one step further, posting videos of her classroom online and asking parents to watch them as part of her students' homework. Her purpose: "I want parents to see what their students know and can do—far beyond test scores," an essential part of her research. Parents have responded positively to this portrayal of their teens. According to one parent, "What a great way to show us how our kids appear in the classroom . . . and what they're currently working on in the classroom." Another mentioned how the video led to a conversation with her teen about specific ways of teaching and learning and how those differed from her own experiences in school.

Other teachers who have been in our teacher research group in the past have also exposed themselves as teacher researchers to parents. High school teacher Sarah Andrew-Vaughan, for example, identifies herself as a researcher at the first curriculum night of the year and regularly schedules evening workshops with parents that connect the research she is conducting in the classroom with ways they can support their students at home as readers and writers. Cathy Fleischer, a university English educator and often research partner with Sarah, has noticed how these parents have responded to Sarah's representation, what she describes as "respectful of Sarah's knowledge, impressed with her commitment, and clearly ready to see her as the expert she is."

Village 3: Going Public with Colleagues

Revealing ourselves as teacher researchers to our colleagues and administrators takes another kind of courage. Many members of our group have for years kept silent

Cathy Fleischer, Ellen Daniel, Lisa Eddy, Kris Gedeon, Jessica DeYoung Kander, David Kangas, and Nicole Guinot Varty

about their participation—afraid that colleagues in their departments and schools would be dismissive of the "extra" work or suspicious that teacher researchers' passion for new knowledge implied that they saw themselves as "above" their colleagues. Yet we've found that sharing our teacher research identities and our work with colleagues can play an important role in changing how even colleagues conceptualize teacher identity. For two of our colleagues in particular, modeling a teacher research approach to producing and disseminating knowledge has helped set the stage for thoughtful professional development across their programs and schools and encouraged other teachers to join in. This new way of thinking about the role of teachers as researchers caught on among a number of teachers in their settings, adding to a changed perception about what it is teachers can actually do.

Nicole Guinot Varty, part of a new cohort of lecturers at an urban university, wondered how she could bring her positive experiences as a teacher researcher in our group to her new colleagues. Realizing that the other lecturers were interested, yet hesitant to commit the time, she wondered "what would happen if a cohort of newly hired lecturers conceived of themselves as a community of practice and worked to meet face to face, and digitally?" She explains,

> To help answer this question, I needed to reveal myself as a teacher researcher in order to get permission from my program director and from my cohort members to observe and document face-to-face meetings, as well as to build and run a website to "meet" with the cohort online. Blog posts and discussion threads would serve to connect members in the event a face-to-face meeting was not possible.

Nicole worried that going public with new colleagues and supervisors was a risk, but she believed that,

> focusing research methods on the lecturer cohort would potentially open conversations that would hopefully move the Composition Program in positive directions, so I decided to just go for it. Examining the effectiveness of digital and face-to-face meetings could shed light on how best to connect with part-time faculty who are not always on campus, as well as how to support graduate teaching assistants in their teaching practices. Also, I wanted to make the teacher research process visible to my new colleagues. Despite my teaching at a Research 1 university, my colleagues and administrators were enthusiastic about participating in the research, and seemed genuinely interested in the results and

implications.

Nicole's public demonstration of herself as a teacher researcher led to a cadre of new lecturers redefining themselves as teacher researchers and impressed administrators, who in turn expanded the collaborative "Teaching Circles" to include part-time faculty and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) teaching other courses. Two new Teaching Circles launched in fall 2013 to support brand-new GTAs during their first semester of teaching.

Ellen Daniel, a teacher in a Title 1 middle school, works with a group of teachers who have been bombarded by initiative after initiative, making them a bit leery and skeptical. Ellen explains that too often these new programs "arrive with very little time to figure out a reasonable method of implementation and without plans to accurately assess and evaluate those efforts." Ellen chose to don her teacher research hat as the school implemented one such initiation, taking a lead role in encouraging the teachers in the school to move beyond just implementation of a program handed to them by the administration and instead "to understand and help shape our implementation and to have some kind of teacher-generated data on which to rely when we need to determine the effectiveness of our efforts." Her goal was to move teachers beyond just the initiative in order "to understand our students in our context—by gathering examples of student work, systematically gathering annual pre-test and post-test data and, perhaps most importantly, explaining to my principal what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it."

Enlisting the help of her colleagues and carefully analyzing the material they've all collected, she's begun to identify specific demonstrable results and—perhaps most importantly—"validate the hours of time and effort that staff members have put into" this initiative. She explains, "Instead of having a 'feeling,' or providing just anecdotal evidence to determine whether or not to continue our efforts with this initiative, we now have the promise of having a deeper and richer understanding of what our students can (and cannot) do." Teachers in her school now see themselves as a part of contributing to data collection and analysis, rather than just implementing top-down change.

Ripples in the pond

We believe that these attempts to represent ourselves as teacher researchers—as knowledgeable teachers committed to improving our teaching through systematic study in our classrooms—challenges the popular mythology of the

bad teacher. Each time a student, a parent, a colleague or an administrator hears about the passionate and meticulous work teachers like these are doing to help student learning, that myth breaks down a little more. Each time someone in our local sphere understands what we do and shares that understanding with one or two or ten other people, the myth breaks down even more. Like small pebbles tossed in a pond, we believe that the ripples will continue expanding and that our local work can have a huge impact.

References

Hall, C. & Hall, S. (2012). 'Advocacy Philanthropy' and the public policy agenda: the role of modern foundations in American higher education. Paper prepared for the 93rd annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, Canada.

Shaum, B. (2014, May 1) Finding inspiration in the classroom: Jessica Crawford. [web log] Retrieved from http://useyouroutsidevoice.blogspot.com

Shaw, L. (2013, February 5). Parents joining teacher test boycott as Garfield principals give exam. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved from http://seattletimes.com/

Smagorinsky, P. (April 3, 2013) Seeing teachers as technicians ignores what else they give students: confidence, moral support, and inspiration. Retrieved from http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/

Sunstein, B. & Chiseri-Strater. E. (2009). *What works: A practical guide for teacher researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Stenhouse, L. (1981). What counts as research? *British Journal of Educational Studies* 29 (2): 103-114.

Whitney, A. (2014, April 16). Centre county teacher writers: opt for kids by opting out of testing. *Centre Daily Times*. Retrieved from http://www.centredaily.com

Further Reading

Chiseri-Strater, E., & Sunstein, B. S. (2006). What works?: a practical guide for teacher research. *Heinemann educational books*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Hubbard, R., & Power, B. M. (1993). *The art of classroom inquiry. A handbook for teacher-researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Mohr, M. M. (Ed.). (2004). *Teacher research for better schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cathy Fleischer is a professor of English at Eastern Michigan University where she co-directs the Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP) and facilitates its Teacher Research Group. The co-authors have been active members of the group and EMWP Teacher Consultants. **Ellen Daniel** teaches at Scarlett Middle School in Ann Arbor; **Lisa Eddy** at Adrian High School; **Kris Gedeon** at Britton-Deerfield School; **Jessica DeYoung Kander** at Eastern Michigan University, **David Kangas** at Wayne Memorial High School; and **Nicole Ginot-Varty** at Wayne State University.

Appendix A. How to Become a Teacher Researcher

1. Identify a question about your teaching or your students' learning, something you truly wonder about.

2. Go public with your role. Share with your administrators, your students, and their parents what you're doing: that—in your role as teacher researcher—you are looking carefully into a question that will help improve your teaching and their learning. (Check with your school district. You may need permission forms signed by parents and students about this kind of work, which we've found both legitimizes the work and is part of the "big reveal.")

3. Start gathering data. Pick a particular class or a part of the school day to target and take notice of what happens surrounding your question. We generally keep an observation log, pass out surveys, conduct interviews, and gather documents or artifacts.

4. Analyze your data. After you've gathered all kinds of information, take time to analyze what you notice. (We often do this during the summer.) As you discover themes and support for those themes, you'll begin to make sense of your question and have evidence to support what you've discovered.

5. Make change! Use what you've learned in your research project to make changes in your teaching— and be sure to share with others in your community the changes you've made and why you've made them.

BECOME THE BEST TEACHER YOU CAN BE

STEP 6

Become a Teacher Leader

Mentor colleagues. Take a student teacher. Mentor new teachers. Lead a book club. Craft curriculum. Serve on improvement committees. Present at conferences. Develop workshops. Publish your works. Do classroom research. Be an advocate for public education.

STEP 5

Connect with Other Teachers

Many schools offer professional development communities that will help nurture your growth as a teacher. But also think about communities that connect teachers across school districts, like one of the National Writing Project sites across the state. Or follow the blog of a teacher you admire or join one of the regular twitter chats sponsored by professional organizations.
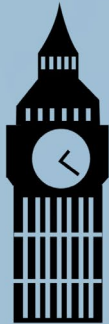
STEP 4

Choose Professional Development

School districts offer many opportunities for professional development. Think carefully about those offerings, considering your long-term goals. Make sure to challenge yourself and attend sessions that truly match your needs and interests as a developing teacher.

STEP 3

Start a Graduate Program

Continue learning about research/practice connections by taking graduate courses at your local university. Ask yourself, "What do I want to improve about my teaching?" and find courses that meet your needs and interests.

STEP 2

Join a Professional Community

Become part of the community of English teachers across the state and nation. Join professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the Michigan Reading Association. As a member, you receive journals filled with current research and learn about conferences.
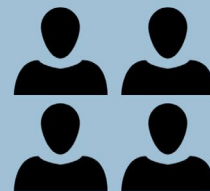
STEP 1

Begin your Journey

Choose an accredited undergraduate institution where you'll learn both the content knowledge of English studies and the pedagogical knowledge of how to teach English to all students.

PRESENTED BY THE MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF ENGLISH EDUCATION