



Comments on Bulterman-Bos

## Research Relevancy or Research for Change?

Susan E. Noffke

Three issues emanating from the Bulterman-Bos article (2008) form the core of this commentary. First, the issue of relevancy is addressed from the standpoint of action research and other forms of practitioner inquiry. From this perspective, the divisions between the cultures of university and school are addressed both ways: Each can potentially be transformed by research emanating from the other. Second, another view of the role of theory in research is offered, one that builds on the inherently political dimensions of educational practices, whether in universities or elsewhere. Finally, global changes in the nature of knowledge production demand that research enhance its capacity to work for social justice.

**Keywords:** professional development; research utilization; teacher research

In the article “Will a Clinical Approach Make Education Research More Relevant for Practice?” Jacquelin A. Bulterman-Bos (this issue of *Educational Researcher*, pp. 412–420) provides thoughtful and important insights into questions of the nature of research in education, offering a clinical approach as a way to make research more relevant for practice. Yet she also invokes long-standing issues about the relationship between research and practice and the preparation of education researchers, issues that have occupied many pages of research journals, in particular *Educational Researcher*, especially since the passage in the United States of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The article also is helpful in the way that it invokes debates from earlier discussions about the nature of a research degree versus the professional degree in education (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006), the relationship between research and practice evident in D. Ball and Forzani’s (2007) focus on instruction, and the nature of the research experience in doctoral study education (Labaree, 2003). All of these issues are indeed worthy, and the author presents useful material relevant to thinking these through and planning appropriate educational policy.

The issues that I seek to raise here are residuals from earlier debates on the nature of research in education and the preparation of doctoral students in education, and from the arguments

of both Bulterman-Bos and Labaree. In this article, I address action research and other forms of practitioner research as another way to see issues related to the relevance of education research to practice. I view these issues through the lens of practitioner research, noting the ways in which this form of research has addressed the divide between academic researchers and researchers in schools.

I next address dimensions of difference between these two contexts for research, namely, the conceptual role of theories related to politics and action in framing the divide. The debate over approaches, I argue, marks the fact that there are different kinds of epistemologies at work here, producing differing kinds of research and theory. Finally, I briefly try to contextualize the debate over relevancy within the current global sociopolitical climate. The goal of making education research more relevant to the project of improving student learning in schools is both a theoretical and a practical endeavor, and varied ways of knowing are needed. But it is also a political agenda, one that needs attention to new resources from the mutually constitutive areas of research and practice. The debates on the nature of education research need a different kind of attention to context, one that takes into account the role of research in the global economy of knowledge production. This, I argue, is an important part of the issue of relevancy in education research.

### Transforming Practitioners or Transforming Education Research?

In the Bulterman-Bos article, I applaud the faith in teachers that is evident in their parallel inclusion alongside medical practitioners—researchers, a group whose members are usually accorded far more respect than teachers. Yet I must ask why there is a need for the medical model of the “clinical” in discussing education research. Are there not arguments inside the education research community that might address the same issues? Why not look for a kind of “both/and” argument in education itself that could transcend what the author regards as Cartesian dualisms? What issues beyond those raised by Labaree and examined further by Bulterman-Bos frame contextual/workplace differences and thereby differences in how academic researchers and educational practitioners view education?

One source for addressing these questions exists in the work that Bulterman-Bos cites and Labaree pursues, namely, the important efforts of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990, 1999, 2004) in developing an understanding of teacher research. In

their many articles, the authors lay out arguments that challenge divisions similar to the four pairs of dualisms/positional analysis categories that Labaree proposed and Bulterman-Bos critiques: normative–analytical, personal–intellectual, particular–universal, and experiential–theoretical differences. Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1990) work looked at “issues that divide” research on teaching and teacher research, especially those of institutionalization (involving ownership and content as well as supportive structures) and methodological standards (the origins of research questions, generalizability, theoretical frameworks, and documentation and analysis). A major point of this early work is the identification of the value of teacher research for both the teaching and academic communities. Although teacher research has been increasingly accepted as valuable for the former, to date there has been only partial recognition of the importance of teacher research to the overall process of knowledge generation in education by academic researchers.

A decade later, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) showed an increased understanding of the international scope and complexity of the field of teacher research. Importantly, they indicated the potential of this research genre for the transformation of university culture through the “altering of relations of knowledge and power” and centering on the connections between teaching and research (p. 21). In a more recent work, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2004) carry their ideas further, addressing especially the “role of practitioner inquiry in the university.” Research by and with teachers has challenged the traditional work of academically based researchers and indeed the very foundations of academic culture. The outcome of that challenge is still embryonic and indeed structured by the changes in government policies in many nations, but it is a persistent burr under the saddle of “research as usual.”

In the now large body of research published under the labels *practitioner research* (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001) and *action research* (Noffke & Somekh, in press), one can see that examples of all of the four pairs of categories/dualisms are addressed: how normative notions are problematized through analytic processes; how personal issues are intellectualized; how the personal becomes part of an attempt to universalize (in this area there is attention to how the “postmodern turn” changes the nature of the pair; see Brown & Jones, 2001); and how experiential learnings become identified with and part of theoretical advances.

It is worth noting that many, if not all, of the scholars associated with the various forms of practitioner inquiry (teacher research, action research, self-study, etc.) are former classroom teachers who engaged in doctoral study. Some of these had a very “academic” research experience, but many (including myself here) were in programs or worked with advisors or supervisors who were sympathetic to the need to change not the teachers cum researchers but the nature of research itself. The major bit of this latter point is that for many who are engaged in action research, teacher research, and other forms of practitioner inquiry, the goal is to transform both the workplace of teaching and the workplace of academic researching. The goal is not to assist practitioners in the transition from the world of educational practice to that of academic research; the goal is to transform academic research to encompass research emanating from practice.

## Experience, Theory, and Politics

Both Labaree and Bulterman-Bos seem to accept a framework in which research can be classified as applied or pure, partly by attending to the role of theory in the research process. In action research, this distinction does not come into play, partly because of the multiple roles that theory plays. I cite here but two examples among many that could be derived from analysis of the practitioner research literature. One (Comber, 2005) shows the ways in which social theory becomes part of the way in which teacher–researchers plan and carry out their research. Another (Brennan & Noffke, in press) shows how the inclusion of theoretical constructs helps teachers reconstruct their analyses of practice. In both of these works, theoretical knowledge is not seen as apart from classroom experience, but as a lens with which to view in new ways events in the practice of teaching. An important aspect of these two works, and a silence in both Bulterman-Bos’s and Labaree’s discussions, is the role of politics in the research process. Theory is integrally connected to practice (an important part of the action research framework) in that it provides, through theorizing from practice and into practice, an important source for thinking about “what to do”—an important part of the practical work of education that is often in opposition to academic work. Teachers ultimately must act, and bear responsibility for the outcomes; academic researchers can deliberate and not act, and do not generally assume responsibility for action.

Politics is an integral part, indeed a basic element, of educational practice. In research by teachers, this can manifest itself in the moral dimension of their work, but it can also emerge in the ways in which power relations manifest themselves in practice. Social theory emerges from research by teachers; it is a part of what is generated through action research. But it is also informed by the theories of those who have the luxury of distance from practice. Politics is at play here but, importantly, through the need of practitioners to *act*, to play out in their daily experiences with children their understandings of abstract principles such as justice and democracy. A workplace difference related to this has to do with the nature of educational practice as embodying action: Practitioners must *do*, not just consider alternatives. This point is fundamentally an epistemological issue. Education research is fraught with tension because it demands an epistemology that directly links thought and action.

## Thinking Contextually About “the Divide”

Action research and other forms of practitioner research are about change. Action for change is at the core. There is a deeply embedded recognition that issues of action and change involve power and are thereby inherently political. Relevancy is not only local to the enterprise of education research. It has to do with how we, as researchers and practitioners of education, see action and change in relation to our research work. What do we, as academic researchers, make of the political economy of knowledge production in this era of changing universities? Bulterman-Bos is writing from outside the United States, describing the foundation for a model of clinical research with deep roots in her own cultural context. This is particularly important in that traditions of scholarship in education interface differently with the preparation of teachers in various contexts.

The clinical approach she advocates is a response to what she views as Cartesian dualisms that historically have made it appear as if teachers and researchers had irreconcilable differences, making the relevance of research to practice appear tenuous.

Labaree's ideas, however, are uniquely grounded in the U.S. context. He outlines not "academic dualisms that simply disappear under close analysis" but rather categories for "positional analysis" (p. 17) derived from analysis of U.S. academies as workplaces. In the United States, academic researchers frame the preparation of researchers and teachers in great part in the context of NCLB, and the resultant emphasis is on problematizing what constitutes "scientific research in education" (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). It is equally important to look beyond these U.S.- and European-based contexts. Our efforts in education at creating new avenues for relevancy are enacted in a global context of neoliberalism (Hursh, 2008) that has a major manifestation in a culture of performativity (S. Ball, 2003). Despite local contextual differences in the relationship of researchers to teachers, no one is really outside of the global economic phenomenon. The political economy of knowledge production, especially the new global economy of knowledge production (Olssen & Peters, 2005), means that discussions of the nature of research and the preparation of researchers and teachers must be transformed. The divides are not only ones embodied in the four sets of dualisms or positional analysis categories. They are real sets of interpretation of reality, in which politics, especially our understanding of the nature and scope of educational change, are at play.

### Some Final Points: Where Next?

The issue of relevancy in education research is important. Nothing less than the lives of children and those who care for them is at stake. All of the dimensions that Labaree and Bulterman-Bos address are important to the research process and to the preparation of researchers and teachers. But equally important is the need to problematize research itself and the ends it serves. Arjun Appadurai (2006) has argued for a view of research that sees it as a fundamental right—the right to exercise "the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet" (p. 167).

This broad view of research as connected to human needs to know brings to mind the cautions about "endless experiment" that T. S. Eliot (1934/1964) makes in chorus I from *The Rock*. In this pageant play, Eliot questions the losses incurred in focusing on information as opposed to knowledge; in knowledge as opposed to wisdom. The changing role of information, of knowledge, and indeed of wisdom in securing justice in our global community demands of education research not just relevancy but an increased capacity for action.

### REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. (2006). The right to research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 4(2), 167–177.

Ball, D., & Forzani, F. (2007). What makes education research "educational"? *Educational Researcher*, 36(9), 529–540.

Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.

Brennan, M., & Noffke, S. E. (in press) Social-political theory in working with teachers for social justice schooling. In S. E. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *Sage handbook of educational action research*. London: Sage.

Brown, T., & Jones, L. (2001) *Action research and postmodernism: Congruence and critique*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Bulterman-Bos, J. A. (2008). Will a clinical approach make education research more relevant for practice? *Educational Researcher*, 37(7), 412–420.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1990). Research on teaching and teacher research: The issues that divide. *Educational Researcher*, 19(2), 2–11.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). The teacher research movement: A decade later. *Educational Researcher*, 28(7), 15–25.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2004). Practitioner inquiry, knowledge, and university culture. In J. J. Loghran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 602–649). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Comber, B. (2005). Making use of theories about literacy and justice: Teachers researching practice. *Educational Action Research*, 13(1), 43–56.

Hursh, D. (2008). *High-stakes testing and the decline of teaching and learning*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Eliot, T. S. (1964) *Selected Poems*. San Diego: Harcourt. (Original work published 1934.)

Labaree, D. (2003). The peculiar problems of preparing educational researchers. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 13–22.

Noffke, S. E., & Somekh, B. (Eds.). (in press). *The Sage handbook of educational action research*. London: Sage.

Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313–345.

Shavelson, R. J., & Towne, L. (Eds.). (2002). *Scientific research in education*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Shulman, L., Golde, C., Bueschel, A., & Garabedian, K. (2006). Reclaiming education's doctorates: A critique and a proposal. *Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 25–32.

Zeichner & Noffke, S. E. (2001). Practitioner research. In V. Richardson, *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 298–330). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

### AUTHOR

SUSAN E. NOFFKE is an associate professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 311 Education, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820; *s-noffke@illinois.edu*. Her research interests include identifying theoretical and practical ways to understand action research in its multiple forms and contexts. Toward this end, she seeks multiple theoretical resources and engages with action research projects in local school communities.

Manuscript received August 27, 2008  
Accepted August 27, 2008