

Teacher Research and the Rockefellers

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I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) to begin research on my next monograph, which I am currently titling *Teachers of Action: The History of Teacher Participation in the Production of Education Research*. As a teacher educator, I value the research that teachers produce and publish out of data they collect from their own classrooms both because it is good for teachers' professional development and because it can reveal information that is unique and distinct from other forms of education research. As someone who also studies education policy, however, I know teacher research holds virtually no currency amongst policy makers and many groups of education reformers. I hypothesize that this disregard for teacher research stems in part from the social status of teachers as well as a wide skepticism of teacher knowledge shared both by people inside and outside of education. In *Teachers of Action*, I want to challenge this skepticism by examining the historical roots of teacher research and what it has contributed, not just to the field of education but for the practice of teaching and to the ways in which we conceptualize teacher development.

The documents at the RAC offer a rich database for beginning this investigation because the General Education Board (GEB) helped to fund some of the most recognized and significant experiments in teacher research. From the Lincoln School (established in 1920) to the Progressive Education Association (PEA)'s Eight-Year Study (1932-1940), the GEB took a lead

in transforming teachers from “school workers” to “research workers.” In addition to these two major projects, I examined reports on a number of smaller and less known experiments in teacher research, the largest of which was the Southern Secondary Study (1940s), which was intended to be an equivalent of the Eight-Year Study in Southern schools (both black and white) since neither had been invited to participate in the original. I have found that because teachers’ participation in each of these projects connected their teaching practice to universities, other schools, and other classrooms in ways that were not readily available to mainstream teachers, the thousands of participating teacher-researchers who worked in partnership with the GEB (and professional organizations that channeled funds from the GEB to teacher-driven studies) often conceptualized student achievement and their own professional development differently from others. Specifically, they often came to measure their professional success not just in terms of their service to their students but in terms of their service to the profession. Whereas we often tend to think of definitions of professionalism as formulated within individual occupations, my findings at the RAC offer a compelling and important example of the ways in which inter-organizational partnerships can expand and deepen existing professional standards.

From the beginning, I knew that I was less interested in the actual research products created within these projects, which are almost impossible to assess outside of their original context, and instead wanted to focus on what GEB officers, school of education faculty, program administrators, and teacher-researchers saw as the objectives and gains of teacher research and what they learned from their work together. In my month at the RAC, I examined many files. I have distilled some of my finding into several major subcategories here, focusing my ideas around what I gleaned from examining the Lincoln School and Eight-Year Study files, especially, because I spent the most time with them.

The Challenges of Developing Teacher Researchers

If there was one fundamental problem that underscored all of the projects I examined, it was the difficulty of transforming teachers into researchers. GEB program officers could express frustration with teachers' research abilities, but they also often voiced clear and keen insights into the challenges that stood in the way of developing teachers into scientists of education as much as practitioners. I found interesting debates about this within almost every project I examined, from the Lincoln School, whose staff was often comprised of experienced teachers plucked from other high-profile progressive schools, to projects in the rural South, where teachers received far less professional training.

Over time, teachers from the Lincoln School, a GEB-funded laboratory school established at Columbia University for the express purpose of conducting and modeling teacher-research in K-12 classrooms, wrote textbooks, created new standardized exams, and published articles on teaching in almost every subject area. The expectations that the school founders, including Abraham Flexner, developed were that all Lincoln School teachers should have a strong teacher training, outstanding teaching skills, and a "flair for experimentation."¹ However, this "flair," Lincoln School administrators often found when interviewing prospective faculty, was difficult to locate. Instead, administrators often found applicants who were prepared, diligent teachers who lacked "independent thinking," "clear-cut ideas of what [they] would do...if [they] had free reign," and "cherished problems on which [they] wanted to work."² The candidates may have been fine classroom teachers, but they lacked the skills to be good researchers.

In fact, historically, public schools typically have been rigid, highly un-experimental institutions, and the definitions of professionalism conveyed to teachers in their training in the

1920s and 1930s stressed classroom authority and adaptability—that is, teachers’ ability to reach many diverse individual students—rather than questioning and experimentation. What teacher-research projects required of teachers, then, often conflicted with what mainstream schools demanded of them. When teachers did identify the kinds of “cherished problems” that could serve as the basis of a research agenda, GEB officer Flora Rhind noted in 1937, they too often “look[ed] for definitive answers and were “all too ready to confuse tentative finding with their conclusions.”³ This quick-fix mentality was undoubtedly tied to a Progressive Era penchant for efficiency and a sense of scientific certitude that served as the cornerstone of early twentieth-century public school design and that manifested in many forms, from academic tracking to standardized testing. Program officers like Rhind were critical of teachers’ failures to think more expansively and openly, but in fact, much of the work teacher-researchers embarked on in these projects was antithetical to the institutional environments in which most American teachers worked. I found this strain between the expectations and desires of the GEB and the reality of the teachers whom they were dependent on to perform these experiments to be illuminating and exciting.

Teachers’ own reports revealed something different about what they believed they gained both from the research projects themselves and, just as important, from the research training they received in the process. The PEA Eight-Year Study had multiple goals, one of the most important of which was for teachers from thirty schools (including the Lincoln School) to develop curriculum for all subject areas that was more responsive to students’ needs and surroundings and more liberal in its political orientation. In her work as part of the study, teacher Ruth Sayward confessed that she came to the project unable to “define [her] objectives explicitly” and too dependent on her “unsupported judgment regarding such intangibles as

[students'] attitudes.” After returning from intensive training on student evaluation techniques, Sayward found that she was “much more conscious than ever before of the principles and generalizations” foundational to the courses she taught and, in turn, her “teaching procedures and techniques [were] more successful.”⁴ Another teacher, after attending a workshop as part of the Eight-Year Study wrote, “At the outset I expected to get hints on techniques and classroom procedures. The old formal idea, of course—my only previous experience in learning ‘how to teach.’” Instead, the teacher found that for over a month, participants studied the “concepts of progressive education;” as a result, the teacher “felt freer from techniques than ever before.”⁵ The freedom from established, proscribed teaching techniques was at the heart of the Eight-Year Study; as with the Lincoln School, the Eight-Year Study sought to create more reflective, directed, and purposeful teachers at the same time that it modeled such kinds of thinking through the research those teachers published.

It is impossible to assess whether teacher researchers in these projects actually became more effective and successful teachers, but my examination of the GEB collection shows that *they* often believed they did because they thought more carefully about their goals and decisions in teaching. In some cases, GEB officers and program administrators agreed. By 1940, administrators affiliated with the Eight-Year Study found that participating teachers “rel[ie]d less on ‘arm-chair’ methods” to evaluate students’ needs and interests in the classroom and more on “conferences, class work, tests, questionnaires, and observation.”⁶ In other words, in some cases, teachers became more scientific, and more truly progressive, in their classroom practice because of their participation in the production of education research.

Changing School Cultures through Research

One way to assess the larger gains of the projects I examined is to attempt to measure how the teacher-research these projects yielded influenced teachers or the practice of teaching in mainstream, unaffiliated schools. Project administrators kept detailed records of the publications produced by participating teachers, and administrators at the Lincoln School, for example, argued forcefully for the school's importance. In serving as a "frontier school," one in which "long term experiments" were "based on a detached and impartial consideration of the whole field of educational thought, experience, investigation, and research," administrators argued, the Lincoln School "exercised a wide and profound influence on the schools of the country."⁷ They located this influence in textbooks written by Lincoln School teachers and the development of teaching procedures and curriculum that later became adopted by other schools. I am only in the beginning stages of considering how to measure this influence myself; certainly looking at textbook adoption is one way; looking at the career trajectories of Lincoln School teachers (or teachers in other projects) and seeing how they contributed to the profession over time (including the training of other teachers) might be another.

An equally important way to conceptualize influence, however, is to think about the structures and professional cultures that the GEB programs developed and fostered amongst teachers. As a former director of a branch of the National Writing Project, I immediately identified some of these structures, such as the workshop model of professional development—one in which teachers work as collaborative learners rather than passive recipients of an in-service demonstration or lecture—as foundational to some of the most progressive and influential forms of teacher development in our own time. I realize now that these contemporary practices have their roots in teacher-research projects affiliated with the GEB. And so, again,

more than examining the actual teacher-research products of the GEB's work, I am interested in thinking about the political and professional structures that the work created and that we continue to see in action today.

GEB officers were quick to assess that school cultures and research cultures were often as distinct phenomena as the labor required in each. Across all of the projects I examined, a fair amount of funding was dedicated to supporting teachers. In the Eight-Year Study, this took the forms of release time and funding substitute teachers so that the participating teacher-researchers could spend up to several weeks working with academic faculty or program administrators on some aspect of their research outside of the classroom. In many of the Southern studies I examined, where teachers often worked on smaller, more localized studies, GEB funds often paid teachers for their time in the summer when they may have needed to find other employment otherwise.

Another important aspect of developing a research culture was to change the working relationships between teachers. One of the fundamental concerns of many educators and school administrators associated with the Eight-Year Study was that teachers, even more than the academic faculty who trained them in teacher colleges and normal schools, had become overspecialized and too removed from other teachers and from their own students. For teachers to perform as “a subject matter specialist, living in a little world of his own” was problematic both on the level of practice, since such teachers were divorced from the context of what and whom they taught, as well as on the level of research since successful education researchers infrequently conducted research in isolation, and, in fact, worked in academic institutions that philosophically and materially supported their efforts.⁸

A major objective of the Eight-Year Study—and every other project I examined—was to develop meaningful working networks between teachers, both within their schools and between teachers of the same subject areas across schools. That is, GEB officers and program administrators realized they first needed to build a research culture within the projects that was substantially different from the work cultures of many public schools. Program administrators wrote of the need to create within teachers a “psychological feeling of security,” which was “the feeling on the part of the teachers that after all she was one of a group of teachers working on similar problems and that problems, as such, were not peculiar to her alone.”⁹ In other words, program directors sought not just to develop productive relationships between teachers but networks that would counter the value for certitude and quick fixes that existed in public schools and undermined the very heart of the research enterprise. In many ways, this may have been the most successful and readily achieved aspect of the GEB’s work in these projects. In the case of the Eight-Year Study, program administrators wrote that teachers “conferr[ed] almost daily about what was being done in one another’s classes.” The result was not just “a pattern [set] for faculty consultation and agreement” but a new sense of “educational statesmanship” in which teachers saw themselves as leaders in improving teaching practices.¹⁰ Teachers’ embrace of collaboration and of studying ideas together was one that I saw appear repeatedly across projects, through their own testimonies, surveys and program evaluations, and the observations of GEB officers.

The Complications of Developing Productive Researchers

One of the additional benefits of developing strong collaborative relationships between teachers was the hope that such working networks would make it more possible for teachers to sustain work that, with the exception of short-term releases in some cases, existed in addition to

all of their regular work responsibilities. Even at the Lincoln School, principal Jesse Newlon found that “a vast amount of valuable research and experimentation ha[d] been initiated, carried to a certain point, and then for lack of guidance and research facilities, allowed to lapse.”¹¹ The solution, Newlon argued, was to create longer-term research projects that depended on the work of groups of teachers, rather than just one. But collaborative research projects were most successful when the participating faculty members worked on the project from start to finish. This was difficult, for the Lincoln School found from its beginning that its success worked against it in some ways. Its well-trained and, in many cases, well-published teachers were “constantly in demand for positions elsewhere,” including university positions that would provide them the time and support to produce the education research they had become adept at producing.”¹²

There were other challenges that came with teachers’ new identification as researchers, as well. Newlon noted that Lincoln School teachers

undertake more college course work than they are physically able to carry, or they become so deeply involved in research projects centering outside the school that their effectiveness as members of this staff is lowered. Energy, interest, and enthusiasm are sometimes seriously sapped by work that centers largely outside of the school. . . . Occasionally a member of the staff becomes so engrossed in writing that his work in the schools is neglected. Professional writing, even the construction of textbooks, is of great value and should be fostered by the school. The difficulty lies in maintaining a balance of interests.¹³

Altogether, Newlon’s observations about the Lincoln School staff set forth interesting and important questions and problems that accompanied successful teacher research then and now. What happens to teachers who find themselves not just competent at performing research but passionate about it? How do they retain this “balance,” and not allow the research to overtake their teaching practice? And how do administrators such as Newlon retain teacher-researchers in

the field, rather than losing them to universities more prepared to support their research over time?

These questions were particularly urgent at an institution like the Lincoln School, where the goal was for as many teachers as possible to produce as much research as possible. But they were present, too, in a project like the Eight-Year Study, where many teachers were also engaged in research projects over a lengthy span of time. And, of course, it is more difficult to measure but equally probable that even in the smaller, lesser known projects that I examined at the RAC, that many teachers' worlds were expanded and changed enough by their involvement that their professional goals changed. These issues of teachers' attentions and passions get at fundamental question about what teacher-research is meant to accomplish. Even when teachers collaborate, the sample size of their data is usually smaller than that of the university faculty—including Edward Thorndike, Ralph Tyler, and Wilford Aiken—whom they worked with as part of these projects. And so, to return to my original claims about skepticism towards teacher research, one conclusion we might draw is that case studies, evaluations of student work, and reports on curriculum design, while potentially offering much in the way of depth, have less to offer in scope. Large-scale studies have often dominated education research, in the GEB's time and in our own. Even as many project administrators and affiliated faculty argued for teacher-research's scope of influence, one of the most important ideas we can take away from the GEB's efforts is the way in which they were interested in rethinking what it meant to be a teacher, first by rethinking the very concept of education research itself.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Survey Committee of the Affiliated Schools of Teachers College, Summary Report, June 1930, p. 276, Folder 440B, Box 62, Series G, Record Group (RG) 2, Rockefeller Family Archives.

² F.P. Bachmann to Otis W. Caldwell, March 8, 1917, Folder 3603, Box 348, Series 1.2, General Education Board (GEB). See also, for example, Abraham Flexner to Otis W. Caldwell, August 22, 1917, Folder 3605, Box 348, Series 1.2, GEB.

³ Memo from Flora M. Rhind to Robert J. Havinghurst, July 30, 1937, Folder 2967, Box 284, Series 1.2, GEB.

⁴ Ruth K. Sayward, "A Teacher Develops an Evaluation Instrument." In *Thirty Schools Bulletin* 1 (April 1937), p. 30-32, Folder 2937, Box 282, Series 1.2, GEB.

⁵ Report of the Director of the Northwest Workshop of the Progressive Education Association, Reed College, Portland, Oregon, June 18-July 21, 1939," p. 4, Folder 2972, Box 285, Series 1.2, GEB.

⁶ "An Evaluation on the Effectiveness of Workshops," Committee on Workshops and Field Service of the Progressive Education Association, (circa 1940), p. 101, Folder 2978, Box 285, Series 1.2, GEB.

⁷ Survey Committee of the Affiliated Schools of Teachers College, Summary Report, June 1930, p. 274 and pp. 276-277.

⁸ "The Briarcliff Conference of the Heads of Schools, Members of the Directing Committee, and Advisors," Commission on the Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association, October 25-27, 1935, p. 1, Folder 2936, Box 281, Series 1.2, GEB.

⁹ Conference on Secondary Education in the South, "Summary of Minutes of Conference Called by the General Education Board in Atlantic City, New Jersey, October 7, 8 and 9, 1937" p. 2, Folder 4304, Box 409, Series 1.3, GEB.

¹⁰ "An Evaluation on the Effectiveness of Workshops," Committee on Workshops and Field Service of the Progressive Education Association, (circa 1940), p. 104 and p. 117, Folder 2978, Box 285, Series 1.2, GEB.

¹¹ Survey Committee of the Affiliated Schools of Teachers College, Summary Report, June 1930, p. 70.

¹² Survey Committee of the Affiliated Schools of Teachers College, Summary Report, June 1930, pp. 1-2.

¹³ Survey Committee of the Affiliated Schools of Teachers College, Summary Report, June 1930, p. 131.