

# What Counts As Legitimate Research?: The Generalizability of Teacher-Research

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## Introduction

Olson and Viadero (2002) note that the demand for "scientifically based research" appears more than one hundred times in the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education act. The notion of scientific conjures up images of "experimental and control groups" as well as one central criterion of research rigor, "generalizability." Given the repetition of the word, "scientific," it seems almost radical to write about teacher-research as "good" or legitimate research. How could research where teachers conduct studies within their own classrooms, where "n=1," possibly count as rigorous and generalizable work?

Although there are several criteria for considering "what counts as research," we focus on the criterion of generalizability for teacher-research in this essay. We argue that although teacher-researchers conducting research in their own classrooms are more likely to be concerned with deepening local knowledge about immediate practice than asserting what is termed "generalizability" across a larger educational community, this does not preclude the work of teacher-researchers from fulfilling the criterion of generalizability. In other words, we aim to point out that teacher-research is generalizable. To develop this argument, we first briefly define teacher-research, situating it within interpretive research more broadly. This sets the stage for an exploration of the criterion of generalizability. In making the case for teacher-research as generalizable, we make two central points. First, we examine how the particulars of one context help us see across other contexts, and second, we investigate how the particular questions of teacher-researchers tie to more general theories of teaching and learning.

## What is teacher-research?

Cochran-Smith and Lytle define teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (1990, p. 3). "Systematic" primarily refers to ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences inside and outside of classrooms, and creating some kind of written record. "Intentional" describes teacher research as an activity that is planned rather than spontaneous, and "inquiry" accounts for the notion that teacher research stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers' desires to make sense of their experiences within a

general frame of adopting a reflective stance toward classroom life. Thus, teacher-research is not a haphazard or spontaneous activity, nor is it unlike other types of systematic inquiry into teaching since it can be situated more broadly within qualitative or interpretive studies that have been referred to as "classroom ecology" (Shulman, as cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 6). Teacher-researchers are guided by the notion of understanding learning from the students' perspectives (Hubbard and Power, 1999; Wilson, 1995). As a result, context and the origins of research questions are two critical facets of teacher-research that play a central role in a conceptualization of generalizability for teacher-research.

#### Context: The general in the particular

Considering context is one way to help conceptualize generalizability in teacher-research. The criterion of generalizability, traditionally defined in experimental terms as the need for the creation of general or acontextual laws for understanding educational phenomena, has been used to discount the value of teacher-research. One response from teacher-researchers to this critique is that an experimental or positivist paradigm is not the most useful for understanding all educational phenomena. Thus, teacher-research calls for a different conception of methodological rigor. Teacher-research, as part of the larger context of interpretive research, concerns the "*immediate and local meanings of actions*, as defined from the actors' point of view," a feature that characterizes interpretive research more broadly (Erickson, 1986, p. 119, emphasis in original). Erickson explains the role of interpretive research in the field of education as helping understand classrooms as socially and culturally organized spaces for learning and the sense-making of teacher and learners as integral to the process of education. Thus, generalizability from a positivistic framework does not work for teacher-researchers because teaching is not a technical enterprise that can be carried out by identifying sets of behaviors that can be reproduced in any classroom context.

As in other forms of qualitative research, the generalizability of teacher-research stems from gleaning insights into the particulars of how and why something works for whom it works within the contexts of specific classrooms. In other words, the particulars of the work of teacher-researchers are what help illumine what happens in other contexts. For example, teacher-researchers' insights about the consequences of book club groups on their students' reading skills can help other teachers notice what is going on in their own classrooms (e.g., with their own book clubs, with small group work, with the issue of teaching reading more generally, etc.). And, it is the particulars that help others decide if and how specific research findings are relevant, or in what ways the insights from one teacher's research need to be fine-tuned for use in other contexts. In the book club example, teachers are able to evaluate the use of book clubs in their own contexts given the details about the researcher's context. Since the particulars of context matter, teachers are uniquely situated to conduct inquiries because they have opportunities to observe learners over long periods of time and can employ their knowledge of the culture within which they work.

#### Research questions: The general in the particular

A second way of conceptualizing generalizability in teacher-research stems from the nature of research questions. The questions of teacher researchers are highly reflexive and deal with the

immediate and particular contexts of their practice. In other words, what motivates teacher-researchers are questions from their everyday experiences that examine what they intend and what actually occurs in their classrooms. These research pursuits may originate from things like the desire to explore a new teaching strategy, a concern about students' progress, or a tension within the classroom. Because teacher-researchers are concerned with questions that arise from their own lived experiences, expressed in the everyday life of teaching, the question of generalizability arises again. How can research questions emanating from one teacher's practice possibly generalize to other classrooms?

Even though teacher-researchers are not necessarily driven by the need to generalize beyond their immediate classrooms, their research questions and work can still be pertinent to a broad variety of contexts. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain, "Embedded within the particular questions of teacher researchers are many other implicit questions about the relationships of concrete, particular cases to more general and abstract theories of learning and teaching" (1993, p. 15). For example, questions that a teacher-researcher poses about what happens to her students' reading skills when she uses particular writing strategies are more generally about the relationship between students' reading and writing development. Teacher-researchers' questions are not just about the consequences of specific pedagogical moves or techniques or materials; they exemplify the more general because they stem from the intersection of theory and practice. Thus, teacher-research allows for theory and practice to develop interactively. Naming this intersection as fitting the criterion of generalizability reflects a more fluid relationship between the particular and the general.

## Conclusion

Any discussion about generalizability in educational research is rooted in conceptions of knowledge about teaching. Teacher-research is fueled by a critique of the prevailing conceptions of teacher as technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementor of other people's knowledge (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). This essay has intentionally conceptualized teacher-research as generalizable, primarily to speak out or talk back to narrowly conceived views of scientific research currently being promulgated in documents like the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Act. Without critical response to these reforms, the value and impact of teacher-research with the corresponding view of teachers as knowers and knowledge creators is in jeopardy. We can ill afford to take this risk.