

# Devaluing Teacher Knowledge: One Woman's Experience

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## Abstract

This paper explores several reasons why knowledge developed by classroom teachers is often devalued in American society as opposed to the more highly revered educational research and writing done by those in academia. I explore this problem through a personal narrative that recounts a recent experience where my roles as experienced teacher and novice graduate student merged. I argue that although it is often assumed that a classroom teacher's job amounts to no more than creating lesson plans, grading papers and managing students' behavior, teachers do much more than dispense and replicate knowledge created by outside experts. Teachers are immersed in the ongoing creation of knowledge and theory that is rarely made public or recognized by others in the field. The historical feminization of the teaching profession, the private nature of teaching, and the socially constructed definition of "expert" are considered as reasons for this ongoing dilemma. While teacher research has been suggested as a means of challenging the model of teachers as knowledge consumers, I advocate for researcher-teacher partnerships that bridge the traditional research-practice divide and work towards educational change using a combination of ideas, theory, and experiences from both the university and K-12 worlds.

*As a woman, former urban educator and department co-chairperson, I was once recognized as an experienced teacher and one who helped to 'run' the department. Both roles positioned me as someone who knew her job well and was highly competent. However, as respected as I might have been, I was not considered the "expert." I worked alongside an excellent group of peers whose work was largely collaborative. As an urban school committed to de-tracking and providing all of our students with a high-quality mathematics program, we were engaged in a variety of reform efforts. We met weekly to restructure our curriculum, discuss student work, create new assessment tools and share pedagogical strategies. We supported new teachers' development and maintained ongoing partnerships with several teacher education programs at local universities.*

*For years I had bumped up against policy and practice that I felt disrespected me as a professional and my students as learners. Our efforts to change the mathematics curriculum and the ways in which teaching and learning were conceptualized in our classrooms did not come without a fight. In addition to the bureaucracy associated with managing any large department, we also found ourselves engaged in regular battles with the administration about such things as who could or should learn algebra, which textbooks to use, and the need for paid time to discuss student work or revise our curriculum.*

*I didn't leave teaching because I was burned out or tired of my students. I didn't leave teaching because I had better things to do. I left teaching temporarily and came to graduate school because I was fed up with the huge amount of time I had to spend trying to convince our administration that our departmental efforts were academically rich, intellectually powerful, and good for our kids. I blamed myself for these philosophical debates: I wasn't articulate enough, I just didn't "get it," and as many teachers do, I often believed that the answers to such questions about access, equity, and quality resources for urban students and schools laid elsewhere.*

*Now, as a new graduate student, I find myself strangely positioned between two worlds. Having left my high school classroom, I can no longer claim status as an experienced urban teacher, and stretching up this new academic hierarchy are more adept graduate students, associate professors, and full-fledged tenured faculty. Once at the top of my game, I am now considered a novice by many, yet ironically, many people in my program consider my new position in the university of greater value than my role in the urban classroom.*

Teachers' work in K-12 classrooms and the knowledge gained from it is undervalued. The lower a person is on the food chain of education, the less their work is publicly acknowledged, valued or rewarded. Extending upwards from the classroom teacher to the graduate student of education, assistant professor, and finally to tenured faculty, the hierarchy of education tends to valorize the work of those who spend their days reading, writing, and researching the teachers and teaching jobs they left behind. Labaree (1996) suggests that the economic market factors of both the past and present have contributed to the marginal status of teachers in the United States. Given the charge of producing a large number of teachers in a short period of time and at a low cost per candidate, "normal schools emphasized quantity over quality in educating future teachers" (p. 5). The combination of large numbers of students enrolled in teacher education programs with low quality instruction created a poor reputation for normal schools and the teachers they produced.

More recently, as the number of teachers needed in this country continues to grow, the "teacher-factory problem has not gone away" (Labaree, 1996, p. 6). The consistently high demand for teachers requires schools of education to enroll large numbers of students at the expense of more rigorous and comprehensive programs that would be possible if class sizes were smaller and the curriculum more intense. At the risk of losing a critical role in preparing new teachers to state governments, schools of education continue to choose quantity over quality and often contribute to a public image of classroom teachers as nothing more than consumers of knowledge.

The feminization of the teaching profession is another reason why teachers' work and knowledge are marginalized in this society. As women entered the teaching profession in the late 1800's, it was acceptable to pay females less than their male counterparts. In 1888, already 63 percent of American teachers were women who earned \$5.38 per month as compared to the \$15.44 per month earned by men doing the same work (Grumet, 1988, p. 34). For some, this discrepancy in pay was encouraged and even

excused due to the assumed "natural" role of women as caretakers and nurturers of children. "Why pay women more for work that is inherently biological?" was the rationale of the day.

Catherine Beecher Stowe, the founder of the Central Committee for Promoting National Education in the mid-1800s and a strong advocate of higher education for women, pushed the biology argument even further by suggesting that the social construction of femininity be commodified. Her words and actions demonstrated superficial support for women's movement from the home into the public sphere. A more careful analysis of Stowe's statements reveal how she condoned the exploitation of cheap labor by women and did little if nothing to disturb the patriarchal status quo. By "maintaining their submissiveness and elevating feminine self-sacrifice, purity, and domesticity into moral superiority" (Grumet, 1988, p. 40), Stowe manufactured the perfect justification for large numbers of women to enter the teaching profession "without disturbing the dominance of patriarchal authority" (Grumet, 1988, p. 40).

To this day, many more women than men are in the teaching profession, and as one moves up in the educational hierarchy, one will find considerably fewer women teachers. As the work moves people further from children, those "stigmatized clients" (Labaree, 1996) of the teaching profession, more men enter the picture. A chronic, gendered dichotomy continues to exist on the education continuum, with lower-status, child-centered women's work on one end and higher-status, research-focused work on the other.

*Ironically, as AERA quickly approaches, and everyone in my department scrambles to write papers and prepare presentations, my two worlds of teacher and student, expert and novice are converging in strange and complicated ways. I will go to AERA as the lowly graduate student. I will walk the aisles and gawk at the famous people I've only read about and referenced in my papers. I will not make any presentations this year, but I will attempt to acclimate myself to this new professional environment, so removed from the chaos of my classroom.*

*When I enter this conference as the academic fledgling, I will simultaneously find myself exposed as the subject of research presented by a few of the more 'famous' people I know. During my career as a mathematics teacher, several university professors and graduate students spent time researching our math department as a place where exciting teaching and learning were taking place. These same scholars are presenting this research as something important for those in academia to consider. It has been removed from my classroom, stripped of any identifying characteristics, and will now be presented for public consumption.*

*Strangely enough, my work as an urban teacher left me little time to pay attention to educational research. Although my classroom was often flooded with people gathering data and making observations, I was too swamped by my daily routines to read journal articles or attend multi-day conferences. Supporting over 100 students each day, meeting with counselors, tutoring after school, advising club meetings, attending staff meetings*

*and department meetings, making parent phone-calls, grading papers, designing lesson plans, filling out report cards, chaperoning dances, mentoring new teachers, finding Isabel a means to eat lunch, making sure Ricardo filed for graduation, checking up on Martha's immigration paperwork...all of this took precedence over attending workshops or reading research. Ironically, the further I move from my classroom and my students, the more time I have to think about both. Graduate school provides me with the flexibility to rearrange my schedule, opt out of classes and postpone reading and writing assignments until after this conference. I'm suddenly privileged with both the time and the funding to attend a public hearing about the work I used to do: critical resources that I never had as a high school math teacher.*

Teachers in K-12 sites rarely spend their time professing their expertise to students, parents or peers. There is hardly enough time in the average teacher's day to use the restroom, eat lunch or grade a few papers much less reflect and write publicly about her practice. "The incredible time-consuming work of consulting with students and of responding sensitively and helpfully to their work is too often ignored when the teaching schedule is drawn up, when class size is determined, when salaries are negotiated" (Grumet, 1988, p. 86). Therefore, the knowledge generated in the act of teaching rarely is disseminated or used by anyone other than the practicing teacher or her colleagues. The private nature of teaching, the work done behind closed doors in the space of one's classroom with a group of students we tend to call our own, is often considered mundane and not worthy of public consideration – that is, unless the public wants to criticize it. Given their socialization into the field of education (Lortie, 1975), the general public often assumes that they know exactly what teachers do. The widespread notion that "anyone can teach" and that it doesn't take much to grade a few papers, write up some lesson plans or stand in front of a classroom and talk at a bunch of kids, only adds to the devaluing of the role of a teacher.

Yet if one took the time to look behind these closed doors, to explore the inside of a teacher's world, most likely we would find spaces filled with energy and enthusiasm, brilliant ideas and pedagogies, amazing activities and adventures. One would find the art of teaching. Grumet (1988) speaks of teaching as an aesthetic experience, "an expression of knowledge about feeling" and one "not subordinated to instrumental purposes" (p. 80). Faced with the tremendous responsibility of teaching all children while simultaneously adhering to the imposed structures and orders of the institution, teachers use curricula and pedagogies as the mediums for their artistic expression. If we consider the creative experience as a way of "bringing experience to form" and "expressing our thoughts and feelings about that experience to someone else and finding out what she thinks about it" (Grumet, 1988, p. 94), then we can find teachers immersed in profound artistic expression each and every day.

Too often this art, this teaching, this lively expression of form, style, and way of being gets lost in the isolation of the individual's classroom. "The danger is that a room of one's own becomes a bunker. It becomes a place where we quietly sabotage the skills program without releasing the methods and meaning that we have devised so that they may attract attention, stir comment, ultimately influence textbook selection, state

requirements, and the in-service program" (Grumet, 1988, p. 92). Lacking the time and energy to go public, teachers often opt not to share or celebrate their art in a communal way. Afraid to confront the patriarchy of the institution -- the system that tells teachers that they should be adhering to well-structured schedules, keeping test scores up, and maintaining immaculate records -- teachers retreat to the safety of their classroom studios and continue creating art solely for themselves and their student audiences.

Given the institutional restrictions on a teacher's job and the general assumptions about teaching that continually undermine the powerful aesthetic experiences we create each day, the work we do as teachers often gets represented by an outside "expert," someone who puts our work and knowledge, our art, on display. The professors and researchers critique and analyze, publish and produce their versions of our stories. The teacher's art, the curricular ideas and pedagogical strategies, the very process by which an idea gets shaped and translated into a plan and finally into action, gets interpreted and displayed by someone outside of our own experiences.

Those doing the writing and the storytelling also receive the higher status. Teachers and their art fade into the background of the story as the lead actor takes the stage and delivers her interpretation and analysis, the "truth", about the teacher's work. In the end, it is not the teacher's carefully crafted ideas or strategies for implementing these ideas that are recognized and valued, but rather the knowledge derived by the researcher and based on the teacher's work. Who is the *teacher* in the story? How might *she* describe her thought processes and actions? What was *she* thinking when she constructed the lesson? What expert knowledge does *she* have about her students that allow her practice to take shape in such expressive and meaningful ways? The main characters become mere pseudonyms, invisible to the general public. When "deprived of the opportunity to design the structures of their own lives, their own work, many women, mothers and teachers live through other people's stories" (Grumet, 1988, p. 87).

The observations of a classroom teacher's practice are usually put forth by researchers in some culminating public display of expertise which "can be traced, if not to a particular individual, then to the group to which he lends his name" (Grumet, 1988, p. 23). The final presentation, journal article, video analysis or book is something tangible that can be measured, evaluated, consumed and declared as evidence of work well done. This final product bears the author's name and receives acknowledgement through public recognition, possible book royalties or at least another line on the resume.

Teachers, on the other hand, are engaged in work that demands a process rather than a product. Our work is never complete and there are rare opportunities for us to reflect back on a child or an activity and label it as "a job well done." Our students are human beings, works in progress that teachers are not ultimately responsible for, but rather willing and eager partners along for only a short part of the journey. Our curricula and pedagogies are ever-changing to meet the shifting needs of new groups of students, new grades, new policies and sometimes new schools. For the classroom teacher, it is difficult to pinpoint a day or time when the work is done and a final theory is realized, packaged and ready for public consumption.

The feminization of the teaching profession reinforces the gendered nature of this product versus process dichotomy. Whereas men's work has been traditionally defined as "contractual, delimited in time, organized around a defined progression toward a finite product, women's work is nonbounded and contingent on others. Women's work is seen as maintenance, repeated in daily chores required merely to sustain life, not to change it" (Grumet, 1988, p.24). The paper or presentation of the researcher, who is more often a man than a woman, earns more public status and has more validity due to its finite, measurable, tangible quality, while the on-going work of teachers, who are more often women than men, receives much less attention and recognition. The work of teachers (women), unless marketed by researchers (men), is extremely difficult to define and measure, and therefore too often gets passed over as natural and easy-to-do.

*It was always difficult for me as a teacher to have graduate students and professors come into my classroom to find out what I was doing, as if I were a research specimen who needed to be poked and prodded and "figured out." Who were these folks who came from this unfamiliar world and what did they want from me? Couldn't they see that I was busy taking attendance, answering the phone, passing back homework and teaching quadratic equations? Couldn't they tell that Jorge wasn't getting it? And what about Lien who hasn't spoken in days? Couldn't they see that what I was doing was really hard and exhausting and overwhelming all at the same time? Why didn't they put down those cameras and clipboards and come over and help me?*

According to Labaree (1996), another reason that teacher's work and knowledge gets devalued is because we work with children. Spending eight hours a day, five days a week with fifteen-year olds means less pay and status than the professor who works with doctoral students in a university. The lower the age of the child, the less society values the work we do. Part of the status problem for teachers in the K-12 system then is that they are guilty by association, choosing to spend their days working with young people, who are valued even less in our society than we teachers.

There is a strong relationship between the age of the student being served, the kind of knowledge needed to work with a particular age group, and the amount of recognition and value a person receives for doing it. For example, knowledge-*for-practice*, defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) as knowledge created by an outside expert, is considered the domain of "university-based researchers who generate what is commonly referred to as formal knowledge and theory for teachers to use in order to improve practice"(p. 250). A knowledge base is created, but outside the realm of a teacher's job. It is published in public spaces and revered as "specialized, firmly bounded, scientific and standardized" (Schön, 1983, p. 23). These particular characteristics of knowledge define the work of people who traditionally have been labeled as "professionals." Embedded in a dominant view of professional knowledge as "the application of scientific theory and technique to the instrumental problems of practice" (Schön, 1983, p. 30), are university researchers, who spend much time producing knowledge and professing it to interested parties through public presentations

and publications. These are the professionals who come to occupy a top position in the socially constructed educational hierarchy.

The job of a K-12 teacher is commonly thought to be made up of mostly organization and management, incorporating lessons generated by others' expert knowledge, collecting and grading papers and ensuring proper classroom behavior. Teachers are most often considered transmitters of information that has been scientifically gathered, analyzed, and disseminated by university researchers, the "major professionals" (Schön, 1983, p. 23) who often spend more time theorizing than practicing. "Teaching, then, is understood primarily as a process of applying received knowledge to a practical situation: Teachers implement, translate, use, adapt, and/or put into practice what they have learned of the knowledge base... Teachers are knowledge users, not generators" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 257).

This role of teaching as the transmission of knowledge, that which belongs to an outside "expert" or a larger body of static knowledge, but not to the teacher herself, is shifting over time. Once regarded as merely "trial and error" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 265), teaching is starting to be recognized as "an uncertain and spontaneous craft situated and constructed in response to the particularities of everyday life in schools and classrooms" (p. 262). The job of a teacher stretches beyond reporting others' facts and findings to the exploration and generation of knowledge with their students. "Teaching then, is understood primarily as a process of acting and thinking wisely in the immediacy of classroom life: making split-second decisions, choosing among alternative ways to convey subject matter, interacting appropriately with an array of students, and selecting and focusing on particular dimension of classroom problems" (p. 266). The knowledge teachers use to make these split-second decisions that change from moment to moment and day to day are based on their experiences. The professional expertise is generated from their daily interactions with students, teachers, curricula and pedagogy. It is developed from reflecting on their practice, making adjustments based on outcomes and creating methodologies and theory from experience.

A tension exists, then, between the traditional definition of professional and the necessary and inherent components of a teacher's job. If practice, and theory generated from practice, are continually perceived as somehow "less than" theory based on empirical knowledge and scientific principles, and the definition of a professional relies on "a stable institutional context" (Schön, 1983, p. 23) in which scientific knowledge is produced and applied by experts, teachers are in a no-win situation. The very nature of our job requires flexibility, shifting perspectives, adjusting pedagogies, analyzing outcomes, recognizing relationships in subject matter, making decisions, and planning lessons. The landscape on our canvas is always shifting, from minute to minute and from day to day. The profession of teaching includes both the theory and the practice, the ability to understand and effectively use our subject matter and to help others come to know, understand, and love it as well.

*While the cameras were rolling or the interview questions were asked, I also felt this strong sense of pride that someone was finally paying attention. Someone who had some*

*status in the world had noticed that we teachers were doing good things with our students. The 'famous' people, the "experts," were using their tapes and notes from my class to write papers with fancy language in well-known journals about what they saw in our school and classrooms. This must mean I'm good at something.*

Historically, the structural model of schools has had teachers, who are mostly women, working in isolated boxes with windows on our doors that open to the corridor. Rows and rows of windows stretch on and open out to the administrators, who have easy access to the women teaching inside. While the women teach, the men walk up and down the hallways, maintaining order, judging progress, evaluating strategies, validating women's work for the good of the school and society. Recognizing how the feminization of teaching only adds to the on-going oppression for women, Grumet (1988) claims that school "was a refuge both familiar and alien, a boardinghouse where she didn't make the rules and didn't even have her own key" (p.44).

Clamoring for work outside of the household, women often used teaching "to escape the horrifying isolation of domestic exile" (Grumet, 1988, p.56) and ironically found themselves working under the constant scrutiny of men. Principals, administrators and district personal invited women into the classrooms and carefully watched over them just as fathers do with daughters and husbands do with wives. For women seeking independence from their stifled roles as daughters, housewives and mothers, the school became just another place where women were required to "put away the personal self, become an instrument, an abstraction, working upon certain material, the class, to achieve a set purpose" (Grumet, 1988, p.49), and succumb to patriarchal order and control.

Still today, we teachers tend to be positioned behind our classroom doors, waiting for someone to walk by, peer through our windows and commend us for what we do. Too often we are women, dominated by the confines of the patriarchal institution, yet privately creating our own artistic revolution. We've been socialized to believe that our work really is "less than" the work of others due to its proximity to children and its ever-changing, unscientific nature. We are caught in a paradox of knowing that what we do is important and valuable yet often we have to rely on outside "experts" in the form of researchers, standardized tests, newspaper clippings or administrator reviews to tell us that this is so.

*So, as AERA approaches, I find myself struggling with this new position that graduate school affords me. The hierarchy of the K-12 system and higher education both add to the complexities of my situation and how I have come to understand my role in both worlds. The interplay between the two at this point in time is causing me stress and consternation. The high profile work being done by graduate students and professors as opposed to the unrecognized and undervalued work of teachers is causing me great pain. Suddenly, my private world as teacher is gaining exposure in the very public space of the academy. The "experts" will now peer through that window on my classroom door and decide whether or not what they see is worth sharing with the rest of the world.*

**April 27, 2003: Post-AERA**

*It was terribly strange to be sitting in the audience looking up at the data on the screen and listening to others construct interpretations of my and my colleagues' teaching and the students' learning. Throughout the presentation I kept thinking, "Where are the teachers? Why aren't they here to talk about their work and to offer their own explanations of their teaching practices?" While we were all sitting in some fancy hotel ballroom, the teachers and students were back in their classrooms living out exactly that which was being described. It was disconcerting to me that the people who should be part of this dialogue, those whose work was being touted as exemplary and worthy of replication, were all missing from the conversation. We were literally invisible. While the researcher made claims about what we did, why we did it, and the impact we presumably had with our students, my colleagues and I were masked by pseudonyms and test scores.*

*I came to graduate school not to learn how to do a different kind of job, but to learn how to do my job as a teacher differently. I came to graduate school with the assumption that those with whom I'd work would be immersed in classrooms and in conversations with students and teachers, excited to combine my knowledge and experience with their theory-based understandings to affect educational change. Yet, too often, the work I read or hear about at the university is empty of teachers and students and disconnected from schools and classrooms. To analyze and critique teachers' practices without including them in the process is a little like a coach discussing the success of her team without including the players in the conversation. She can take responsibility for the ideas, the plays on the field and the hard work of her team, but if we never hear from the players, we lose the thoughts behind the action and the carefully crafted decisions that go into making each play. If we researchers and teachers are truly in this field of education for the purpose of creating meaningful opportunities for all children to be successful learners, it would be best to combine our efforts and expertise and do this job together.*

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) have proposed teacher research as one way to challenge the traditional "outside-in" model that assumes knowledge is generated outside of schools and classrooms by university researchers and then used by teachers. Teacher research is certainly one way to bring teachers' knowledge and expertise into a public forum and to expand the knowledge base about education. However, unless the job of teachers is restructured to include time and money for collaboration, data collection, writing and public dissemination, teacher research will continue to be just one more task on the ever-growing and never-ending list of things for which teachers are responsible. Since this kind of restructuring has little chance of taking shape in the near future, I am left pondering yet another option.

I wonder what it would mean for researchers and K-12 educators to work in partnership. Given the status of university researchers, the time available for research that is inherently part of their job descriptions and their connections to available funds, research journals and book publishers, they seem like perfect companions for teachers who are interested in participating in such work. I imagine communities of learners made up of both professors and K-12 teachers, funded research projects that bring teachers on

board not only as objects of research but as equal partners and active participants, professors and teachers working side-by-side digging into the complexities and nuances of teachers' practices while together analyzing video tape of classrooms, deconstructing students' dialogue, sharing ideas, writing and presenting their work in public spaces. Imagine the knowledge that would be generated from such collaboration and the learning constructed by all involved: participants from both worlds using their strengths and understandings from a variety of perspectives, from both inside and outside of the classroom, all to benefit students!

Transforming our schools and doing the work necessary to create successful learning opportunities for students is going to take more than our current model affords. The maintenance of two separate and ongoing conversations about such issues as educational policy, student learning and teaching practices, one at the level of the university and one in the world of K-12 teachers, only works to maintain the status quo. Relying on the few teachers who manage to build a sustainable means for reflection and inquiry into their daily work, or the rare university professor who uses her grant money to pay a teacher to co-author a book will not be enough to sustain the work necessary for change. If we truly believe that teachers have a meaningful role to play in affecting school policies, educational reform efforts, instructional improvement and student achievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), and we are committed to improving the quality of education available to our nation's children, then it is critical to challenge and bridge the normative separation between the worlds of research and practice and invite teachers along for the ride.

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