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How Teachers Connect Research and Practice

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The importance of teacher's prior beliefs and values as influences on teaching practice has become increasingly apparent in recent years. The presence of these ideas raises new questions about the role of research in teaching. If teachers are guided mainly by their own belief systems, for instance, how can we expect research to contribute to practice? To examine the relationship between teachers prior beliefs and their responses to research, I initiated a study called the *Research and Teacher Learning* (RTL) study. As its name suggests, it is about the relationship between research and teacher learning. We were particularly interested in how research can influence teacher learning. The study addresses two very broad questions:

1. What and how do teachers learn from *reading* research studies?
2. What and how do teachers learn from *conducting* research of their own?

Before going into some of the findings from this study, let me describe the study in more detail.

We interviewed a sample of just over 100 teachers, all of whom were selected because they were participating in some form of continuing education or professional development that involved research. Some were participating in a masters degree program and read research in their classes, some were participating in a district-sponsored teacher-research program. All teachers were participating in a program that included some attention to research, but the programs differed in what they did with research and in whether the teachers were novices, working on their initial degree, or experienced teachers engaged in continuing education.

The interview itself consisted of four main parts. First, because we knew that prior beliefs and values were important, we devised a set of questions that we hoped would enable us to learn about these. We asked them, for instance, to describe a teacher whom they admired and to say why they thought this teacher was admirable, to describe a lesson they had done recently that they felt very satisfied with, and to say why they were satisfied with it, and so forth. All of these questions were designed to reveal their beliefs and values about teaching. The second part of the interview probed their beliefs and values about research, and for similar reasons. We thought that their receptivity to research might depend not only on how the study squared with their own their views about teaching, but also on their belief in the inherent value of research and how it could or should contribute to their work.

The third and fourth sections address their experiences conducting their own research and their responses to research other people had done, respectively. About three quarters

of the sample had conducted teacher research as part of their programs and we queried them about what they studied, where their question came from, how they gathered data, how they analyzed it, and what they learned from the whole experience.

To learn their responses to research conducted by others, we actually gave them five research summaries to read. Then, when we met with them again, we asked them their responses to these studies. We spent between 20 and 30 minutes on each piece of research, asking them what they thought the author's purpose was for doing the study, whether the study was persuasive to them or not and why, what they thought the author's conclusions were, whether the study was relevant to their own practice, and whether they thought the study would be useful to other teachers.

The resulting data base has a tremendous amount of information in it. In this paper, I concentrate on only a very small segment of the study that specifically addresses the way teachers connect research to their own teaching, and I do that by focusing on one particular study. My aim in this paper is to illustrate these processes with just two examples of teachers' responses to one study--Lisa Delpit's "Skills and other dilemmas of a progressive Black educator," published in the *Harvard Education Review* in 1986. Before discussing the ways in which these two teachers connected that study to their own practices, let me briefly review the study itself.

As a genre of research, Delpit's paper could be called a teacher reflection. In the paper, Delpit reflects on a tension she feels between the progressive ideals she learned in college and the traditional skills-based education she herself had received in a segregated Catholic school in the south. In college, Delpit was persuaded that students should not spend their time rehearsing meaningless skills, and that she should focus on the writing process for teaching writing. By the time she graduated she was a progressive educator, and when she began teaching she introduced learning stations, activity-based instructional materials, and a carpeted learning area. As time went on, though, she began to sense that, although her White students were learning, her Black students were playing. So she gradually re-introduced the desks, began making students practice handwriting, and in general becoming more traditional. Then she felt guilty because she wasn't as progressive as she wanted to be, and guilty because she wasn't teaching her Black students as much as she wanted.

This story goes on as Delpit returns to graduate school and gets her progressive ideas again reinforced. The pivotal event in the story, though, occurs when she has dinner with an old friend who is critical of the writing process. The friend

claims it was designed by White people to prevent Blacks from learning the skills they need to function in a White society. The friend says Black students are already fluent, and that what they need is skills.

That dinner had a substantial impact on Delpit, and she began canvassing educators of both races to learn more about their views. She learned that Blacks rarely participated in the writing process, and that even when they did it was usually for no longer than a year. She learned that Blacks felt excluded in writing workshops, and felt that their concerns about skills were not heard or addressed.

Delpit closes her narrative by saying that she now feels she can understand both sides of the issue. On one hand, minority students should not be subjected to a daily regimen of rehearsing meaningless, decontextualized subskills. A minority person who simply acquires basic skills becomes a low-level functionary. On the other hand, minority children need the skills that employers and guardians of higher educational institutions demand. Helping them become more expressive in their writing does not necessarily mean that they have acquired the skills needed to improve their social standing once they leave school. So, Delpit says, we need to find a way to teach these skills in the context of critical and creative thinking. She also believes that there is a lot to be gained from opening up the dialogue between advocates and critics of either approach, and that it is particularly important that leaders of the process approach pay attention to the legitimate concerns of minority educators.

Delpit's article is an excellent example of a teacher reflection, in that it is both earnest and penetrating. Delpit's genuine concern is apparent throughout the article, as is her intellectual honesty and rigor. It also is a complex story, for it addresses tensions between structured and open classrooms, between teaching fluency and teaching skills, and between Black and White values. It certainly should stimulate teacher thinking and it certainly should be relevant to most teachers.

To learn from research--or from anything else, for that matter--teachers must do the following:

1. Understand what the main message is from the study.
2. Test the validity of the message somehow.
3. Connect that message to their own situation.

To learn what teachers learn from Delpit's reflection, I first wanted to know what teachers understood Delpit's message to be. One of the questions we asked was what conclusions they thought Delpit had drawn. Some teachers described a conclusion having to do with pedagogy, some a conclusion having to do with race relations, and some listed both types of conclusions. Later, we reviewed the data and grouped teachers' responses into a few main categories, shown in Table 1.

Table 1 suggests that most teachers did correctly understand Delpit's main messages. With respect to pedagogy, the largest fraction understood Delpit to be saying that both sides were right, that teachers need to teach both skills and

fluency. With respect to race, some thought Delpit's main point was that minority views need to be attended to in reform movements, and some thought it was that different races need different kinds of instruction. Interestingly, many teachers, instead of articulating a conclusion, volunteered that they liked, or didn't like, Delpit's treatment of the race issue.

Table 1

Conclusions about Pedagogy Attributed to Delpit

Percent	Conclusion
1	Don't know
14	No conclusion about pedagogy mentioned
56	Both sides are right, need to do both
16	Different kids need different pedagogies
5	Delpit was in favor or (or opposed to) the writing process
8	Other Responses

Conclusions about Race Attributed to Delpit

Percent	Conclusion
40	No conclusions about race are mentioned
20	Minority views need to be attended to
25	Races need different kinds of instruction or have different needs
15	I like/don't like Delpit's treatment of the issue

Examples of "Other" Conclusions about Pedagogy

Ms. Whalon's conclusion:

Delpit wants minority kids to succeed and yet she wants them to keep their cultural heritage.

Ms. Woodland's conclusion:

If minorities are to create changes in society, we have to help them get to that point.

At the foot of Table 1 I've included two examples of "other" interpretations. These make it clear that some teachers did not fully understand Delpit's message. They've inserted some different ideas into the text. These anomalous interpretations are important, I will return to the problem these pose later on.

Once teachers understand the main message from a study, they need to evaluate the validity or invalidity of that message. To learn how teachers evaluated these studies, we asked if they agreed with the author's conclusion or not, and we asked them why. Again, we did not impose any categories of reasons on them, but instead categorized their reasons later on. Table 2 summarizes the main reasons teachers offered for either agreeing or disagreeing with the conclusions they had just attributed to Delpit. In addition, it shows the reasons they gave for agreeing or disagreeing with all the other studies they had read.

Table 2

Reasons for Agreeing or Not Agreeing with a Study's Conclusions		
Reason Offered	Percent giving this reason (across all studies)	Percent giving this reason for the Delpit Reflection
No reason given	9	8
Conclusion consistent with values, beliefs	22	25
Consistent with experience	32	38
Consistent with other ideas or findings	8	5
Evidence supports conclusion	15	11
Critique of evidence	13	14
Study is factual, no agreement necessary	1	0

Two important points can be made about the patterns in Table 2. One is that teachers' reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with Delpit's reflection are not substantially different from the reasons they used to agree or disagree with any other study, even though the studies were quite different. That is, teachers who read Delpit's reflection also read a survey (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, & Jenkins, 1990), an experiment (Collins, Brown, & Holcum, 1991; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Steinbach, 1984), a disciplinary study (Baron, 1982) and an historical analysis (Coleman, 1975). Many would argue that Delpit's reflection is closer to teaching practice than any of the others, but teachers did not use remarkably different criteria for evaluating it.

The second important trend apparent in Table 2 is that teachers used their own values, beliefs or experiences more often than any other criterion to test the validity of these authors' conclusions. Table 2 makes it clear that teachers are *already* connecting the study to their own situations, even at the stage of testing its validity. That is, connections to practice are not a third step in a process, something that is done only after the study is understood and tested for validity. Instead, it is something that is done early on, as part of the process of testing the validity of the study.

This creates an interesting question, for if studies are perceived as valid mainly when they are consistent with teacher's prior beliefs and experiences, how can teachers ever learn something new from research? Clearly, teachers need to do more than simply accept or reject studies. They need to draw some implications from them. We also asked teachers what implications the study had for their own practice, and Table 3 shows teachers' responses to that questions. Here again, I have aggregated across the five studies in the language arts package, but I have also given their responses to Delpit's reflection. Since Delpit's paper was explicitly aimed at provoking thought and dialogue, we might expect teachers' responses to it to differ

somewhat from the others. However, the implications teachers drew from Delpit's reflection were not noticeably different from the implications they drew from entire set of studies.

Table 3

Implications Teachers Saw in Delpit's Reflection		
Implications Mentioned	Percent of Teachers Responding to all studies	Percent of Teachers Responding to Delpit
No Influence	18	14
Gives new information	4	3
Validates existing beliefs	26	29
Sharpens thinking	17	23
Raises questions, provokes thought	15	18
Suggests a new goal to strive for	4	2
Suggests changing practice	3	8
Will try it out	10	3
Can include it in my curriculum	3	0

These findings suggest that teachers connect research to their practice in two very different ways. On one hand, they use their own beliefs, values, and experiences to evaluate the validity of the study, but on the other hand, they also take something new from the study, as it stimulates their thinking and prompts them to reinterpret their own experiences and to reconsider their practices.

Taken together, these tables suggest that teachers are quite able to connect research to their own practices. But they do not explain the fact that some teachers misconstrue the conclusions from research. In fact, our evidence suggests that these misconceptions derive, at least in part, from the fact that they are interpreting the studies in light of their prior beliefs and experiences. Teachers in this study were more likely to generate unusual or idiosyncratic interpretations of an author's conclusions when they used their prior beliefs and experiences to evaluate validity than they were when they relied on the evidence in the study, as Table 4 shows. Table 4 lists again the main reasons teachers agreed or disagreed with a study's conclusions, and then shows the fraction of teachers who used each reason *who also generated an idiosyncratic interpretation of the conclusion*. That is, of all the teachers who evaluated a study on the basis of its consistency with their own prior beliefs and values, 15 percent offered an idiosyncratic interpretation of the study's conclusion. Of all those who critiqued the evidence as a way of saying why they agreed or disagreed, only two percent offered idiosyncratic interpretations of the conclusions.

Table 4

Percent of “Other” Interpretations of Conclusions as a Function of Reasons for Agreeing or Disagreeing

Reason Offered	Percent of Conclusion Statements that were “Other”
No reason given	25
Conclusion consistent with values, beliefs	15
Conclusion consistent with experience	12
Consistent with other ideas or findings	12
Evidence supports conclusion	4
Critique of evidence	2
Study is factual, no agreement necessary	0

Table 4, then, suggests that the teachers who relied on their prior values and beliefs or on their experiences were more likely to formulate idiosyncratic interpretation of the study’s conclusions than were teachers who relied on the study’s evidence or on how consistent the study was with other research or ideas they were familiar with. So we have an ironic finding here: We know that, in order to learn from a study, teachers need to connect it to their own situations, but we also see that when they do that they are more likely to interpret the study idiosyncratically.

To illustrate how teachers connect research to their prior beliefs and experiences and how these connections influence their interpretations of the study, I have developed a strategy for graphically representing these connections. I include here two such graphic representations, one from a teacher whose interpretation of Delpit’s conclusions seemed very close to Delpit’s intention, and the other from a teacher whose interpretation was idiosyncratic. These schematics are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

In these figures, the different shapes represent different parts of the reasoning process. The figure in the center represents Delpit’s reflection, and the ovals represent the teachers’ interpretation of Delpit’s conclusions. The clouds surrounding the study represent the teachers’ thoughts, and the rectangles represent particular experiences that the teacher has related to the study.

The first figure shows Ms. Foss’s responses to the Delpit reflection. There were three clusters of ideas in Ms. Foss’s discussion. One, shown in the upper right, includes her experiences, which she defines as similar to Delpit, her thinking that she and Delpit are in the same place, her realization that her Black students are more fluent orally, and her interpretation of Delpit’s conclusion that we have to teach skills in the context of critical thinking. The second cluster of thoughts is shown in the lower right, where Ms. Foss realizes that she has not actually taught in a more structured way, and so doesn’t

Figure 1

Ms. Foss’s Interpretation of Delpit’s Article

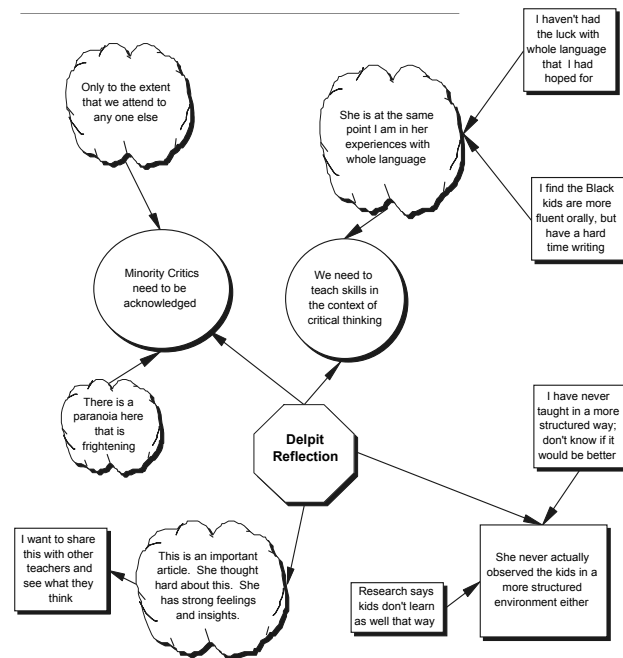
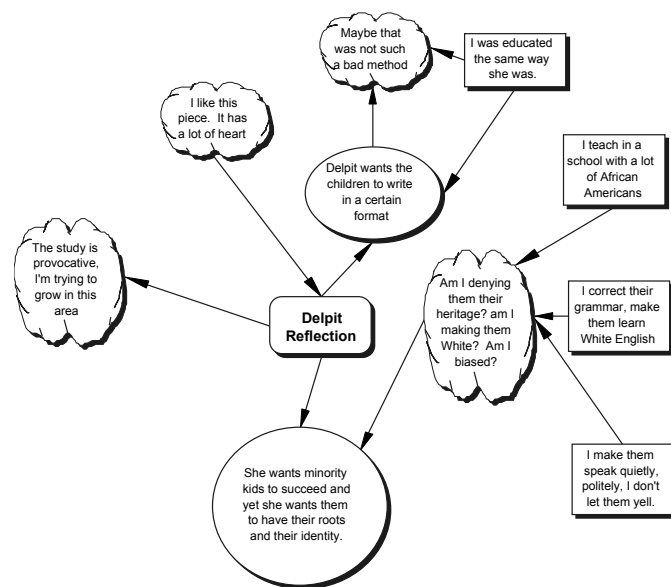


Figure 2

Ms. Whalon’s Interpretation of Delpit’s Article



really know if these particular students would do better with that approach to teaching. In this cluster of thoughts, she also notes that research indicates that whole language is a more effective teaching method, and she realizes that Delpit has also not shown any evidence that Black students would do better in a more structured situation. This second cluster of ideas, then, suggests that Ms. Foss has evaluated Delpit's reflection for its evidence, and has realized that Delpit lacks an adequate comparison group.

Finally, in the upper left corner are Ms. Foss's ideas about race. She is dismayed to discover that Blacks are suspicious of the process writing, and comments on the level of paranoia she perceives in the article. She correctly interprets Delpit's argument that minority views need to be attended to, but offers a qualification of her own to the effect that they should not be listened to any more than any one else's views are.

After considering all of these things, Ms. Foss draws implications for her own practice, and these are shown in the lower left portion of the figure. She says this study is an extremely important article and that she plans to share it with colleagues, particularly her Black colleagues, because she wants to learn their views on this issue.

So Ms. Foss has done all three of the tasks: She has correctly understood both aspects of Delpit's conclusion, she has evaluated the validity of Delpit's evidence, and she has drawn some implications from the article for her own practice.

Now let's consider Ms. Whalon. Recall that I first referred to Ms. Whalon's interpretation of Delpit's conclusion in the context of Table 2, where her interpretation was listed as an example of an "other" interpretation. That conclusion is shown in this figure in two ovals. In the upper oval, Ms. Whalon says that Delpit wants children to write in a certain format. In the lower oval, Ms. Whalon says that Delpit wants minority children to succeed and yet she wants them to have their roots and their identity. This second interpretation is the one I listed as an "other" in Table 2, for Delpit never said anything in her paper about maintaining Black children's cultural heritage. She was much more concerned about assuring that they learned the skills they would need to succeed in a predominantly White society.

Now let's look at the beliefs and experiences that Ms. Whalon brings to this study, and see if they help us understand her misinterpretation. At the top right of the page is a cluster in which Ms. Whalon mentions that she was educated in the same way Delpit was, and she thinks, in retrospect, maybe that was not such a bad method after all. From there, she moves to interpreting Delpit as wanting students to write in a "certain format," by which I think she means standard White English.

The most important cluster, in terms of Ms. Whalon's interpretation of Delpit, consists of the experiences described in three boxes on the right side of the figure. In these boxes, Ms. Whalon tells us she teaches in a school with a lot of African-Americans; she corrects their grammar and tries to teach them White English; and she also makes them speak quietly and politely and doesn't let them yell. At the same

time, she tells us in the cloud that she is worried that perhaps she is biased. Perhaps she is trying to make them into White people and denying them their cultural heritage. She is very unsure of her role as a White teacher of Black students when it comes to teaching language conventions. Ironically, she is probably teaching the kinds of skills that Delpit wants to make sure Black students get, but she is doing it with a great deal of personal angst. Her anxieties about her own role influence her interpretation of Delpit, such that she thinks, although Delpit wants Black kids to succeed, she also wants them to have their roots and their cultural identity. When we viewed Ms. Whalon's interpretation in the context of Table 2, it seemed idiosyncratic and inexplicable relative to the interpretations of other teachers. But when we view it in the context of her own experiences, values, and beliefs, this misinterpretation is not difficult to understand.

Interestingly, Ms. Whalon also has less to say about the validity of this article and less to say about its implications for her practice. With respect to the validity of Delpit's study, Ms. Whalon's assessment, shown in the upper left section of Figure 2, is more informal than Ms. Foss's. She likes the article because it "has heart." She does not really critique the article closely at all. With respect to its implications for her practice, she says it is provocative and that she is trying to grow in this area, but indicate anything in particular that she has drawn from the article or that she intends to do with the article.

So Ms. Whalon has mis-read the main message of the article, and evaluated it more informally than the other teacher, and her connections to her own experience occur more when she is interpreting the article than when she is drawing implications from it.

These two teachers, then, have responded to Delpit's reflection in very different ways. They differed in how accurately they understood the main message, in how carefully they evaluated the validity of the argument, and in how fully they teased out implications from the study for their own practice. They illustrate for us the importance of teachers' prior beliefs and experiences in interpreting research findings, not just in drawing implications from research, but in assessing its validity as well.

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