Traditionally, teachers are seen as consumers rather than producers of research. Researchers produce knowledge, and teachers consume it by applying it in their schools and classrooms. In this traditional model of the researcher-practitioner relationship, those who produce research and those who use it are two different categories of people, doing very different jobs.

Once a strong separation is established between researchers and practitioners, then a problem is posed about how the gulf between the worlds of practitioner and researcher can be bridged (Robinson, 1993). Very quickly, difference becomes polarity and opposition. On some occasions, practitioners experience researchers as arrogant, ready to criticise and recommend change, without appreciating the complexity of the contexts they are investigating (Hammersley, 2000). Conversely, researchers can experience practitioners as defensive and unresponsive, with a limited understanding of the intellectual and practical challenges involved in doing worthwhile school and classroom-based research.

The oppositional discourse of practitioners versus researchers is unfortunate, because it emphasises difference and separation, rather than similarity and overlap. It is also unwarranted, because many of the dispositions, skills and understandings required of good research and researchers are the same as those required of good practice and practitioners.

Instead of thinking of practitioners and researchers as different categories of person, we should think about them as different roles. This allows us to see the overlap between the two roles, and the possibilities for their integration.

In this article I want to explore the possibilities of the practitioner/researcher overlap. This overlap is illustrated by the following scenario:

A deputy principal is concerned at the low reading scores of the children in the junior school. Her teachers have told her for years that when the children come to school, they are not ready to begin learning to read, because they lack the necessary pre-reading and social skills. As a consequence, the first six weeks after school entry is spent teaching these skills.

It would be easier for the deputy principal to accept the views of her staff than to challenge them. Good practice requires, however, that the deputy principal:

1. Recognise that the beliefs of her teachers constitute a "theory of practice" which like any theory, might be wrong (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985).
2. Identify the particular set of assumptions that comprise these teachers' theory of how to organise their reading programme.
3. Craft ways of checking and testing the teachers' theories.
4. Challenge her teachers to join her in this checking and testing process.

We see from this example that theories are not confined to the academy. They also include the implicit, yet powerful, assumptions that determine how teachers teach. Since theories of practice have powerful consequences for students, there is a professional and ethical responsibility to investigate their adequacy (Hall, 2001). If the deputy principal challenged her teachers in the manner suggested in Table 1, she would be engaging in good practice.

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**Table 1: Testing Teachers' Claims about Reading Failure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers' claims</th>
<th>Possible inquiry into the claims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The junior school children have low reading scores</td>
<td>What evidence is this conclusion based on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How good is that evidence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cause of the low reading scores is lack of pre-reading and social skills</td>
<td>What evidence is there for this claim?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on school entry</td>
<td>Has the school assessed these pre-reading and social skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What other explanations have been considered?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Questioning & evidence*  

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*not assumption*
Best Practice: Research and Adapted to Individual Groups

To engage in good practice, it is important to understand the role of research in informing teaching and learning. Effective professional development requires continuous reflection on practice and evidence-based decision-making. The importance of good teaching practice is recognized at all levels of policy and practice. Teachers need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas. The New Zealand Ministry of Education’s 2002 study on effective teaching practices is a valuable resource for teachers. It highlights the importance of ongoing professional development in both initial and ongoing teaching. Teachers who are effective in practice are those who have a clear goal, are reflective, and are open to feedback. They need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas.

The second reason concerns the role of evidence and data in professional development. Research evidence can inform decisions about how to improve teaching and learning. Effective professional development requires continuous reflection on practice and evidence-based decision-making. The importance of good teaching practice is recognized at all levels of policy and practice. Teachers need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas. The New Zealand Ministry of Education’s 2002 study on effective teaching practices is a valuable resource for teachers. It highlights the importance of ongoing professional development in both initial and ongoing teaching. Teachers who are effective in practice are those who have a clear goal, are reflective, and are open to feedback. They need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas.

The third reason is that research evidence can inform decisions about how to improve teaching and learning. Effective professional development requires continuous reflection on practice and evidence-based decision-making. The importance of good teaching practice is recognized at all levels of policy and practice. Teachers need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas. The New Zealand Ministry of Education’s 2002 study on effective teaching practices is a valuable resource for teachers. It highlights the importance of ongoing professional development in both initial and ongoing teaching. Teachers who are effective in practice are those who have a clear goal, are reflective, and are open to feedback. They need to be supported in their development, and they require appropriate conditions to implement new ideas.
Many teachers are not used to providing an evidential basis for their claims about their practice, or asking their colleagues to do the same. These are the discourse patterns required to develop an inquiry culture in our schools. They can be learned in tertiary courses in leadership, or in courses on practitioner and action research. They can also be learned on the job, in those syndicate and school cultures where there is an insistence on collective responsibility for the quality of teachers’ decision making.

In summary, the overlaps between the requirements of good research and good practice provide both a foundation and a rationale for the development of teachers as researchers. As researchers, teachers inquire into their individual and collective practice. The inquiry is both scaffolded on the research findings of others and productive of new knowledge about their particular context. Enhancement of the research role of teachers is central to sustainable school improvement, to effective teacher development and, most important of all, to the professionalism of teachers.

References

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VIVIANE ROBINSON is Professor of Education and Head of the School of Education at the University of Auckland. She coordinates the Master of Educational Management Programme and is academic leader of the national First-Time Principals' induction programme which is run through The University of Auckland Principals' Centre.
Email: vnm.robinson@auckland.ac.nz