Communities of Practice: Connecting What We Know With What We Do

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the community of practice model as a framework for integrating educational research and practice. This perspective extends current notions about collaborative inquiry and the role of teacher participation in research aimed at improving educational practices. In addition to defining communities of practice and describing reflective practice and situated learning as the theoretical underpinnings of this approach, the article analyzes applications of this model from the literature and offers suggestions for transforming traditional methods of conducting research on educational practice. The article concludes with a challenge to the field to consider ways to promote dialogue and inquiry to advance our knowledge on this issue.

The growing need to integrate educational research and practice is reflected in the rhetoric of collaboration and partnership now commonly used by research granting agencies as well as in a resurgence in different forms of stakeholder and consumer participation in knowledge generation and dissemination (Barnett & Frede, 2001; Cousins & Simon, 1996). Aside from financial incentives offered by granting agencies to develop partnerships with consumers, efforts to expand consumer involvement in research also are motivated by a genuine desire to study educational issues that are important and relevant to consumers, and the need for more effective methods of translating research findings into useful policies and practices.

The need to integrate research and practice also exists within professional development in education. Prior to entering the workforce, preservice students in both general and special education are expected to know how to apply research-based knowledge to the problems of everyday practice, often with little understanding about how to participate in and evaluate research and with relatively few opportunities for supportive, reflective research-based experiences in the field. Unfortunately, previous attempts to bridge the research-practice gap through professional development efforts have met with only limited success. The scientist-practitioner model introduced by the clinical psychology field, for example, encourages practitioners to develop skills in research methods to allow them to participate directly in making discoveries that are most relevant for ad-
vancing knowledge for the field as a whole (Chiszar & Wertheimer, 1988; Davidson, 1987; Raimey, 1984; Rodnick, 1965).

Although this model has contributed ideas that have strengthened the connections between research and practice, primarily through research designs such as the case study method that reflect the real world of practice, this approach also has been criticized (Turnbull & Dietz-Uhler, 1995). One criticism is that clinicians trained in the scientist-practitioner model do not necessarily engage in more research, but focus instead on their clinical practice. Another criticism is that clinicians trained using the scientist-practitioner approach may not receive sufficient training and experience in either the practice or research realms to meet the demands of professional life. These criticisms allude to the difficulties of conducting practice research in educational settings and the challenges of embracing a research-practice model of professional development, particularly in education, since there is little consensus about what educational researchers need to know and be able to do (Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

Perhaps an even more concrete example of the need to integrate research and practice is the way in which recommended practices in education traditionally have been identified and disseminated to a wider audience. The process of identifying the recommended practices for the early intervention field, for example, included expert and consumer input through focus groups, but also relied heavily on a review of the research literature over a 10-year period to produce the final list of recommended practices (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). For the most part, published lists of recommended practices promote the notion that practitioners should apply techniques and methods that have been found effective by researchers and validated by a group of consumers every 10 years or so. This approach does not promote the responsibility of every member of the broader educational community (including practitioners, parents, and students) to engage in mutual analysis of each other's experiences and observations as a way to continually refine practice and ultimately contribute to the formal knowledge base (Buysse, Wesley, & Able-Boone, 2001; Wesley & Buysse, 2001). Conventional methods of identifying recommended practices in education also raise questions about where knowledge comes from, who is responsible for generating and sharing knowledge, and with whom.

A recent report published by the National Research Council concluded that "the sharp divide between education research and scholarship and the practice of education in schools and other settings" is one of the fundamental reasons for the lack of public support for education (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, p. 14). According to this report, the disconnect that exists between educational research and practice stems, in part, from the fact that researchers and practitioners operate in vastly different worlds in which, historically, most researchers have been men, while most teachers have been women.

One strategy that has been recommended to close the gap between research and practice is encouraging more teacher involvement in educational research. Although some scholars have argued that teacher participation in research leads to more relevant research and is more likely to change teaching practices, others have concluded that teacher inquiry produces a type of "local" knowledge that is fundamentally different from knowledge produced through formal research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Other researchers have noted the problems inherent in engaging in policy-induced partnerships with practitioners, the so-called "dark side" of the issue. These problems emanate from differences in power and status between researchers and practitioners and the efforts required to develop a common language or a better appreciation of one another's incentive systems and work demands (Cousins & Simon, 1996). Barnett and Frede (2001) posed a number of practical and ethical questions that reflect these and other problems related to conducting research in partnership with practitioners: How do researchers maintain independence and objectivity in collaborative inquiry with practitioners as full partners? Who will represent the less powerful constituents such as family members who are also more likely to be excluded from collaborative inquiry? What are the costs of collaboration for researchers who must devote time and energy to identifying and negotiating with participants? What are the costs to participants who must weigh full participation in

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collaborative research efforts against other professional or personal obligations? What motivates people to participate in collaborative inquiry and who benefits most from these arrangements?

A variety of approaches from different theoretical traditions have emerged to promote collaborative research between those whose primary responsibility is research and others who work directly with children and families, administer schools or early childhood programs, develop and implement educational policies, or serve in other roles—most notably, parents. A promising approach to this type of practice research is to build communities of practice based on collective expertise and designed to scrutinize and improve education. Compared to other collaborative research-practice approaches that appear in the literature such as action research (Calhoun, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Patterson, Santa, Short, & Smith, 1993) or professional development schools (Book, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Holmes Group, 1990), communities of practice may offer the most promise for altering the linear relationships through which information is handed down from those who discover the professional knowledge to those who provide and receive educational services. The potential for practitioners and researchers to co-construct knowledge exists in this model because communities of practice represent an ongoing enterprise that invites both groups to share, build upon, and transform what they know about effective practices. Because the focus is not a single research study or professional development program, but rather the development of a professional community, fundamental changes in how researchers and practitioners establish mutual trust and sustain long-term relationships can be expected.

The primary purpose of this article is to examine the conceptual and theoretical underpinning of the community of practice model as a framework for integrating educational research and practice. This purpose reflects an extension of the way in which communities of practice traditionally have been used and described in the educational literature as concentrating primarily on professional development. Although Lave and Wenger (1991) originated the community of practice framework as an approach to conceptualizing learning, they also suggested that this approach could be used to consider new methods of knowledge generation and dissemination in practice fields. Through our examination of the community of practice framework, we hope to stimulate dialogue among researchers and consumers about new ways of connecting what we know through research with what we do in special education and early intervention practice. We also analyze applications of this model documented in the literature, with a view toward transforming traditional methods of conducting research on educational practice, and conclude by challenging the field to consider new ways to promote dialogue and inquiry on this issue.

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DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

As educational researchers, we still are trying to understand what constitutes a community of practice and the implications of this model for generating new knowledge and improving educational services for children and families. The term “community of practice” is most closely associated with the collective work of Lave and Wenger (see for example Lave, 1988, 1991, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) were interested primarily in describing existing professional communities (e.g., midwives, tailors, butchers) and the way in which meanings, beliefs, and understandings were negotiated and reflected in certain practices, through an anthropological lens. The authors suggested that learners enter a community at the periphery and over time move closer to full, legitimate participation as they gain knowledge and learn the community’s customs and rituals and adopt a view of them-
selves as members of the community. This practice-centered approach to human learning challenges the validity of interpreting professional practice on the basis of prescribed codes and structures such as published lists of recommended practices or professional competencies, but instead focuses on the importance of practitioners’ contributions to the social order.

Hanks (1991) described the community of practice framework as a shift with far-reaching and little-understood consequences for describing human thought, communication, and learning. The shift involves rethinking the locus of learning from an individual mind to a process that unfolds within a participatory framework. As a result, learning is viewed as distributed among many participants within the community in which people with diverse expertise (i.e., experts, novices, and those in between) are transformed through their own actions and those of other participants. From this relational perspective of persons and their actions within a socially and culturally constructed world, understanding and experience are in constant interaction.

According to Barab and Duffy (2000), what distinguishes communities of practice from previous attempts to introduce the concept of community into research-practice efforts (i.e., community of learners and thinkers, communities of inquiry, learning communities, and knowledge building communities) is the “development of self through participation in the community” and the importance of legitimate participation as part of a community in that development of self (p. 35, italics in the original). The authors concluded that most of these previous “community” efforts have focused on practice fields, the settings in which learners apply new knowledge (i.e., student teaching or field-based placement sites), as opposed to emphasizing the learner’s connections and patterns of participation in practice communities (i.e., opportunities for regular reflection and dialogue about those field-based experiences with people who have varying levels of expertise).

In education, communities of practice originated in response to several barriers to professional development that were thought to exist within the culture of American schooling and within the very institutions of higher education responsible for preparing practitioners—the separation of research and practice, the isolated nature of teaching, weak or poorly articulated theoretical frameworks for embracing specific educational practices, and the lack of consensus about the goals of education and what constitutes recommended practices. The emphasis in education has shifted from “describing” various communities of practice to “creating” communities for the purpose of supporting learning environments and improving practice (Palincsar, Magnussen, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998).

The use of communities of practice as a model for professional development, for example, is well documented in the teacher education literature (Buyse et al., 2001; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Marshall & Hatcher, 1996; Palincsar et al., 1998; Rogoff, 1994; Stamps, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 1993; see also entire issue of Teacher Education and Special Education, 1999, Vol. 22, No. 4). Drawing from this literature, a community of practice generally can be defined as a group of professionals and other stakeholders in pursuit of a shared learning enterprise, commonly focused on a particular topic (e.g., methods to promote early literacy learning, strategies for increasing parent participation). Pugach (1999) noted that “one of the most important purposes of a community of practice is to establish a learning community across levels of expertise rather than within them” (p. 270). As a framework for supporting professional growth, this notion of a community of practice challenges the one-sided view of learning in which researchers are perceived as experts and “knowledge generators” and practitioners are considered novices and “knowledge translators” (Palincsar et al.). Rather, teaching and learning are viewed as bidirectional; both groups contribute equally to the professional community’s knowledge base. As a model for professional development in education, the community of practice framework also recognizes that knowledge is generated and shared within a social and cultural context. For researchers who embark on collaborative practice-research efforts, this approach requires a fundamental shift from working on to working with the world of practice (Waddock, 1999).
Communities of practice in fields such as education, anthropology, and sociology share three essential characteristics (Barab & Duffy, 2000). First, communities of practice share a common cultural and historical heritage. These communities have shared goals and meanings that go beyond meeting for a specific period of time to address a particular need. Second, the community of practice is situated within an interdependent system in which individuals are part of or connected to something larger. For example, a group of resource teachers who form a community recognize their connections, not only to their own school system, but also to other schools in the state and country. These practitioners recognize that special education is situated within the larger field of education and consider the implications of their own experiences, perspectives, and knowledge within this larger arena. Third, every community of practice has a reproduction cycle, or an ability to regenerate itself as "old timers" leave and new members enter the community and move closer to peers who serve as exemplars of mature practice.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

There are two central tenets of the community of practice framework: (a) knowledge is situated in experience, and (b) experience is understood through critical reflection with others who share this experience. We summarize two theoretical frameworks that have informed these tenets: situated learning and reflective practice.

SITUATED LEARNING

Situated learning is essentially knowledge obtained from and applied to everyday situations (Hummel, 1993). In contrast to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning, situated learning holds that activity and perception precede conceptualization, as opposed to the other way around (Carr, Jonassen, Litzinger, & Marra, 1998). As a framework for understanding how learning occurs, situated learning is considered a sociocultural phenomenon, rather than an isolated activity in which an individual acquires knowledge from a decontextualized body of knowledge. This represents a shift from emphasizing the individual's learning contexts to a focus on what it means to learn as a function of being a member of a community of learners (Barab & Duffy, 2000).

According to Stein (1998), situated learning theory is associated with several major premises that differentiate it from other experiential forms of acquiring knowledge:

- Learning is grounded in daily activities and cannot be separated from the complex environments in which knowledge must be applied.
- Knowledge is acquired through experience and transfers only to similar situations.
- Learning is the result of social processes that require negotiation and problem-solving with others.

Communities of practice reflect this situated learning perspective in several important ways. In a community of practice, shared inquiry and learning center around issues, dilemmas, and ambiguity that emerge from actual situations in authentic practice settings as opposed to formal coursework that is content-driven. The application of new knowledge, not the retention of it, is the benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of a community of practice approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, creating meaning from activities and situations from lived experiences is reinforced by the fact that the community of practice closely resembles the practice environment. Finally, learning occurs within the context of social relationships with other members of the community who have similar, if not identical, issues and concerns from the realm of practice.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Ongoing reflection with others about the intersection of professional knowledge and experience is one of the cornerstones of the community of practice approach. Although researchers and learning theorists have not reached consensus on any single definition of reflection, there is general agreement that reflection refers to the ongoing process of critically examining current and past professional practices against an overarching philosophy as a method of improving future practices and increasing knowledge (Han, 1995; Hatton & Smith, 1995; LaBoskey, 1994). Reflective practice
is predicated on the assumption that knowledge is derived from professionals’ own experience and observations as well as from formal knowledge gained through theory and research, and that each informs the other. Reflection requires practitioners to stand back from their work, to consider the values and principles underlying professional practices, and to realize that some problems pose human dilemmas that cannot be solved fully nor explained (Fenichel, 1991). It is perhaps noteworthy that the process of constructing meaning from experience frequently coincides with a significant new activity or an activity with a renewed focus such as implementing a new curriculum or method of teaching (Reiman, 1999).

The term “reflective practice” and the notable body of work it has inspired is most commonly associated with the writings of Donald Schön (1987), who was influenced by Dewey’s (1933) notion that the science of education resides in the inquiries of all practitioners. Schön suggested that professional practice consists of both technical skills (applying a set of rules to a well-defined problem with the assumption that there is one right answer), and the art of practice (solving complex problems in situations that are unique or uncertain). Based on a review of the literature, Hatton and Smith (1995) described four distinct forms of reflection: (a) technical examination of one’s immediate skills and competencies in specific settings, (b) descriptive analysis of one’s performance in a professional role, (c) dialogic exploration of alternative ways to solve problems in a professional situation, and (d) critical thinking about the effects on others of one’s actions, considering social, political, and cultural forces.

Ideally, members of a community of practice could apply one or more of these forms of reflection in collaboration with peers using a variety of methods such as documenting experiences and interpretations of these experiences through journaling, engaging in discourse with professional peers to analyze problems and consider alternate viewpoints, and participating in collaborative research to address practical problems through systematic inquiry. In a community of practice framework, new knowledge generated through collaborative reflection, observation, and systematic inquiry would be used, not only to extend professionals’ understanding and command of their own work situations, but also to advance the knowledge base for the field as a whole.

APPLICATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FROM THE LITERATURE

We now examine several applications of the community of practice framework from the teacher education and special education literature. Table 1 summarizes these applications across key dimensions of communities of practice described earlier (e.g., diverse membership, goals, participatory framework). Our purpose is to provide concrete examples to illuminate the characteristics of communities of practice and offer suggestions on how each community could have extended its efforts to incorporate more of a research focus as a way of strengthening the connections between research and practice. Each application described encompasses at least some of the attributes of a community of practice in terms of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) original concepts and the theoretical underpinnings of situated learning and reflective practice. The first three examples describe professional development within a community of practice framework. The last example is examined to assist the reader in contrasting the community of practice paradigm with a more widely known form of collaborative inquiry-action research (AR), also referred to as participatory action research (PAR).

GUIDED INQUIRY SUPPORTING MULTIPLE LITERACIES

One of the earliest documented examples of a community of practice in teacher education is described by Palincsar and her colleagues (1998). Palincsar and colleagues convened a group of K-5 teachers, a science teacher, doctoral students, and researchers to examine and improve science teaching practices through Guided Inquiry supporting Multiple Literacies (GiSL), an inquiry-based approach to teaching science that was both interdisciplinary and teacher-facilitated. The purpose of the GiSL was to provide teachers with the experience of being learners using the same methods that they had adopted to teach their students. Additionally, the goal was to help teachers reflect
<table>
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<th>CoP Tenets</th>
<th>Palincsar et al., 1998 (GiML)</th>
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| **Common purpose/goals** | - Improve science teaching practices  
- Emerge as a CoP as result of this inservice activity | - Enhance early literacy activities  
- Examine the efficacy of CoP approach to enhance professional development | - Enhance field-based experiences for preservice students in a school community |
| **Diverse membership** | - K-5 teachers, a science teacher, researchers, doctoral students | - General/special education teachers, curriculum specialist, researchers | - Preservice students, teachers, preservice faculty |
| **Participatory framework** | - Met for 2 weeks in the summer and twice monthly for 1 school year  
- Agenda developed by participants  
- Used journaling and inquiry-based discussions to expand practices  
- Planned and practiced teaching strategies in teams that were videotaped and critiqued by participants  
- Shared ongoing teaching experiences and dilemmas in CoP meetings in order to refine and expand science teaching strategies | - Met monthly for 1 year  
- Framework for reflection and critical thinking was used in each group meeting (e.g., journaling, work time, reporting-out)  
- Identified individual goals/projects to implement in classrooms  
- Shared ongoing teaching experiences and dilemmas in CoP meetings in order to refine and expand literacy teaching strategies  
- Analyzed journals, group discussions, and individual projects for evidence of changed practices and efficacy of CoP approach | - Ongoing school-based apprenticeships and weekly seminars  
- Seminars facilitated by all students to reflect upon experiences and expand practices  
- Involved with same local school, teacher mentor, and seminar for the duration of the preservice program  
- Shared ongoing teaching experiences and dilemmas in CoP meetings in order to refine and expand teaching strategies |
| **Connections with larger community** | - Not discussed | - Not discussed | - Not discussed |
| **Reproduction cycle in terms of membership and activities** | - Initiated two study groups—a writing group and Vygotsky reading group—both convened independently of CoP meetings | - Implemented literacy strategies through local school activities (home reading program, books for primary grades, PTA presentation, and action research project for primary grades)  
- Part of districtwide initiative to include research as component of professional development  
- Release time to meet provided by school district | - 7-year history—as new students (sophomores) become student teachers, then graduate, and new students enter each year  
- Approach adopted by university  
- Former graduates continue to be involved in seminars and as mentors  
- Community extends across multiple classrooms and schools |

*Note: GiML = Guided Inquiry supporting Multiple Literacies*
on their experiences as both learners and teachers, to develop new insights, and to identify common values and philosophies to guide and improve their instructional methods. The authors noted that another important goal was for the group to begin to emerge as a community of practice. The process of becoming a community unfolded through a series of carefully planned activities that included two, 1-week summer institutes to learn various reflective practice techniques, implementation of GlSML strategies in the classroom, and group meetings twice monthly for 1 school year to reflect on and share classroom experiences.

The group meetings incorporated reflective practice principles by including time for discussing the innovations teachers had implemented in their classrooms, sharing personal narratives and observations, and generating new ideas for how to continue to improve teaching practices. Most of the agenda was devoted to inquiry-based discussions about teacher practices and issues in teaching science—an aspect of situated learning wherein the participants were creating their own knowledge vis-à-vis the discourse and experiences of this community. Reflection of real-life practices with individuals with diverse expertise who are gathered for a united purpose offered a unique opportunity for bidirectional knowledge generation and scaffolding—a core principle of a community of practice (Pugach, 1999). As an example of how learning unfolded through this process, two of the participants identified 16 different contributions to their thinking about GlSML that had been offered by other participants. One teacher, for example, attributed to another the idea of conveying the process of science learning among her students (i.e., making claims, providing evidence, drawing conclusions) to reflect on her own learning as a science teacher.

As with most communities of practice in education, the GlSML community was created with a specific purpose in mind, in this case, to improve the teaching and learning of science. In addition to having a common goal, it successfully embraced several other fundamental tenets of a community of practice including shared knowledge generated through situated learning and reflection as well as diversity in expertise. Perhaps more than any other, this example illustrates the participatory process through which members moved from learning how to reflect on practices, to expanding their own experiences as learners, to becoming a community in which every person contributed knowledge and was transformed through this participation. In fact, the participants were so supportive of this model that they initiated two study groups that met independently of the monthly meeting; one was a writing group, the other a Vygotsky reading group—a testimony to the potential for participants to move from the periphery to core membership and for the community to reproduce itself in new ways.

Based on what was reported about their experiences, participants appeared to be less aware of how their participation had shaped their own identities as members of a professional community, unique from other groups of science educators. Participants appeared to be equally unaware of the interconnections between the work of their community of practice and that of the larger community of science teachers and researchers, a fundamental component of a community of practice and a missed opportunity for connecting emerging practices with existing empirical knowledge.

The GlSML project offered an ideal context to integrate research activities into this community. Because the practice community included members with research expertise, they were able to articulate clearly defined research questions regarding the nature of inquiry-based science teaching as well as the nature of a community of practice organized around inquiry-based science. In partnership with researchers, participants could have designed a procedure for documenting the successes and challenges of integrating the GlSML model into their science teaching practices or designed a study to compare the effectiveness of the GlSML with standard approaches to teaching science and shared these findings with the broader science education community.

A Community of Practice Approach to Promoting Early Literacy

Perry, Walton, and Calder (1999) described a community of practice that was initiated in order to facilitate opportunities for teachers to design and implement early literacy activities for young children and to explore the effectiveness of the community of practice model in advancing pro-
fessional development for these teachers. The participants represented a range of disciplines and experience and consisted of general and special education teachers, a curriculum specialist, and university faculty.

One of the primary goals of a community of practice model is to galvanize scholarship and practice by supporting reflection and critical thinking among participants. Perry et al. (1999) advanced this goal by structuring their group meetings with the following framework:

- **Free write**—participants wrote in their journals for the first 10 minutes in order to reflect on an assignment, identify related issues, and so forth. Free write provided an opportunity for participants to make the transition from the classroom and other responsibilities to the community of practice agenda.
- **Air time**—each participant was given 2 minutes to speak, uninterrupted, about their written reflections or related issues. Feedback in the form of advice-giving, elaboration, and appraisal was not sanctioned during air time.
- **Focus group**—in every meeting, time was allotted for critical reflection through group discussion on topics determined by the participants (e.g., examining critical issues related to assessing literacy skills in young children, evaluating informal versus formal assessment measures).
- **Work time**—participants worked independently in dyads or triads for 60-90 minutes in order to address assessment issues identified during the focus group.
- **Reporting out**—participants summarized work time and identified activities to be accomplished by the next meeting.

The meeting structure in this early literacy project serves as a way to operationalize the integral aspects of a community of practice-focused learning, critical reflection, practice-based inquiry, developing a sense of identity, and diverse expertise into an easily replicated format. In contrast to more conventional models of scholarship that emphasize knowledge found by others or summarized in texts, learners must assume ownership for their own learning needs which stem from everyday practice and work together to resolve issues that they identify as most relevant and important.

The early literacy assessment activities also were informing practice outside of the meetings (Perry et al., 1999), another hallmark of the community of practice approach. For example, one teacher began a guided reading project in her school that resulted in a school-based action research study to examine the effectiveness of guided reading assessment and instruction in all primary classrooms. This illustrates how a community can make the transition from dialogue and reflection on relevant classroom issues to conducting systematic inquiry to inform these discussions. As a component of their research, Perry et al. collected and analyzed copies of free writes, audio transcripts, classroom observations, and sample assessments in order to determine the effectiveness of the community of practice as a professional development model. Additional analyses of these artifacts could have been conducted to develop recommendations to enhance early literacy practices in other educational settings or identify issues to explore through future research. In recognition that the community is part of something larger, the participants could have considered presenting their findings and the process of discovering knowledge at a state or national conference. Again, we are emphasizing how a community of practice approach offers a venue for enhancing and extending the learning obtained from a particular dilemma or practice for both the participants themselves as well as the community at large.

**The Community of Teachers Program**

The Community of Teachers program at Indiana University-Bloomington is yet another example of a community of practice focused on professional development (Barab & Duffy, 2000). The Community of Teachers attempts to move beyond the traditional, short-term practicum or student-teacher model common in most preservice training programs that involve working within a limited number of classroom environments. Reminiscent of the professional development school model, the Community of Teachers program strives to develop a meaningful and long-term relationship between the university and the school community at large in order to move the preservice student from the peripheral fringes of learn-
ing to legitimate participation within an educational community. Students are required to participate in multiple communities to enhance their learning. During the first year, each student is assigned to one school (community), not one teacher, to complete all field-based activities for the duration of their teacher education program. Students also join a community of students who are at various stages (sophomores to student teachers) in their teacher education preparation and must remain with this group for the duration of their studies.

One of the challenges of developing a preservice community of practice is identifying existing communities with shared goals and beliefs that afford opportunities for students to practice and contribute alongside both novices and experts. With their emphasis on practice fields offering a more contrived learning opportunity, traditional preservice programs stand in sharp contrast to the community of teachers program. Barab and Duffy (2000) have described a model that captures the spirit and intent of a community of practice that is engaged in a process of helping participants construct meanings and identities. This community of teachers shares a common heritage and history (7 years), extends across multiple classrooms and junctures to form an interdependent system, and is continually reproducing itself as “cohorts cycle from newcomers to grizzled veterans to graduated students (working teachers)” (p. 47). In our view, an interesting expansion of this model would include ways to encourage the integration of educational research and practice, perhaps by identifying a common dilemma, such as individualizing lesson plans and activities to meet the needs of young children with special needs, and assessing the effectiveness of these practices. The findings from systematic inquiry could then be recycled as part of the process of discovering and testing additional instructional practices. The diverse expertise in this preservice program—from students to experienced practitioners—offers a unique opportunity to readily examine practices and construct meaning that will shape the future teaching practices of both students and teachers.

THE WISCONSIN PRESCHOOL ACTION RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE (PARDI)

PARDI is a researcher-teacher partnership that was initiated in order to advance research and classroom practices in early childhood inclusion settings (Gettinger, Stoiber, & Lange, 1999). PARDI did not set out to follow a community of practice model; rather, researchers implemented a particular form of collaborative inquiry—action research—that incorporated some elements of a community of practice including reflective practice, socially constructed meaning, and peer mentoring. Early childhood teachers were involved in a 2-step process in which they documented critical classroom incidents and then responded to several questions about what facilitated or impeded inclusion of young children with disabilities.

PARDI incorporated reflective practice into their project in order to provide opportunities for teachers to examine their practices and beliefs about inclusion and to document teachers’ practices and beliefs. Meetings were “designed around three dimensions to encourage reflective thinking and professional development among teachers: training, co-construction of knowledge, and collegial support” (Gettinger et al., p. 261, 1999). During the meetings, researchers facilitated discussions that subsequently led to a qualitative analysis of the teacher’s critical incident documentation. For example, teachers worked in small groups to identify categories that represented critical elements in understanding inclusive practices. Comparisons were made across groups and final categories were selected.

PARDI illustrates some of the principal differences between the community of practice paradigm and action research, a more widely known form of collaborative inquiry. First, as opposed to a sustainable and continuously reproducing community of practitioners with a common heritage and shared goals, PARDI and other action research initiatives generally promote only temporary collaboration among participants for the duration of the project. Second, action research projects typically focus on a particular task such as examining teachers’ practices and beliefs about inclusion, whereas communities of practice repre-
sent a shared enterprise involving multiple tasks and a wide variety of topics that emerge over time. Activities related to these topics both respond to immediate learning needs and create new areas for inquiry. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in action research projects, researchers maintain control over the type of inquiry as well as the nature and methods of collaboration with practitioners. In contrast, in the community of practice model, researchers are one among many other legitimate participants who have a responsibility to understand and improve educational practice through shared inquiry and learning.

**CHALLENGES AND NEW DIRECTIONS**

A common reaction when first beginning to learn about communities of practice is to conclude that the approach is not new. Participants in action research or professional development schools may see similarities between those experiences and the collaborative nature of communities of practice. Others may consider efforts to involve consumers in decision making through participation on advisory boards, committees, or focus groups as activities comparable to those of a community of practice.

While these examples may reflect the diverse group membership that is at the heart of a community of practice and, to varying degrees, a common focus or goal among participants, what is missing is the **legitimate linking of the ideas and innovations with the broader educational community.** Although, as a field, we recognize the importance of tapping into the rich perspectives of community members as we conduct research, develop new policies, and prepare practitioners, we do not promote sustained relationships with community members. Our inclination to blame either the researcher or the practitioner for the lack of sustainability of research-based practices (Vaughn, Klingner, & Hughes, 2000) demonstrates a lack of awareness that the rich relationships among members of learning communities, their activities, and artifacts are more powerful than our pedagogy (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice appear to germinate best when participation on many different levels by many different people is not tied to one group, set of meetings, or prescribed social boundaries, but rather is viewed as enduring over time in a way that makes sense of and creates opportunities for learning. The challenge for researchers is to shift the focus from mastery as residing within the experts to mastery as residing within the practice community (Lave & Wenger).

Such a decentered focus challenges the most fundamental assumption of our field: The researcher is ultimately responsible for aggregating consistent and solid evidence that moves the field forward. So ingrained is this notion that recent attention to self-generated knowledge and reflection as sources of guidance for professional practices has been described as indicative of "an antiscience movement" (Walker, 2000, p. 160). As researchers, we expend considerable time and energy sequestered from nonresearchers as we attempt to anticipate emerging problems in the field and identify research priorities and processes to address them. Largely in response to requirements of funding agencies, we develop relationships with colleagues from other institutions, community agencies, and direct service programs, but our recognition of the benefits of such collaboration often is limited to the research itself (for example, the convenient recruitment of participants, assurance of common measures, and replication of effects across sites). We lack the understanding and infrastructure needed to build on such collaboration as a way to situate our research in the world of practice to address persistent challenges in our field. These challenges include the continued dominance in our professional literature of one-shot studies that do not lead to major insights (Keogh, 1999) and the need to improve the trustworthiness, useability, and accessibility of our research (Carnine, 1997) in order to promote consonance between socially and empirically validated practices. Although our

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common desire is to link our work with broad social needs, we are judged ultimately by its technical merit and less by its relevance.

Setting aside philosophical differences and institutional disincentives that may influence our attitudes toward a community of practice approach, we acknowledge the very real constraint of time. Researchers, practitioners, students, and families will find it difficult to take on a long-term and open-ended commitment and may be mystified by the notion that research questions could originate and be addressed within a practice community. Finding ways to overcome practitioner indifference to research and the widespread perception that educational research has not addressed relevant problems or generated useful solutions may present the biggest obstacle to creating research-practice partnerships (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Perhaps one solution lies in finding exemplars of this approach. These exemplars could illustrate strategies used to address challenges in implementing and sustaining communities over time and demonstrate ways in which the impact of individual groups can extend beyond their local communities. Also needed are methods for studying the effectiveness of these collaborative research initiatives and identifying ways to improve them (Shavelson & Towne).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

How do we begin a process that requires us to rethink the way we conduct our profession? Below we offer possible new directions.

1. Incorporate a community of practice perspective into existing research and practice activities. Bringing together a diverse group of people to establish a new community can be a daunting undertaking, particularly if the learning needs and the task are not perceived as legitimate by all participants. Viewed through an anthropological lens, a community of practice is not actually created, but rather emerges based on mutual interests, shared goals, understandings, and common practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The challenge lies in recognizing the opportunities to move existing groups closer to a community of practice perspective. Once these opportunities have been identified, the key to transforming groups into practice communities is not merely to enlarge the group or extend the tasks, but to give members a legitimate role in society by linking their ideas with those of the broader educational community (Barab & Duffy, 2000). As knowledge generated through communities of practice on various topics accumulates, it is essential that we create new mechanisms such as Internet Web sites for collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, and disseminating findings for widespread use (see, for example, http://campbell.ge.upenn.edu/; Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

2. Prepare professionals in a way that ensures that they do not feel compelled to sacrifice either self-generated knowledge or empirically derived outcomes. Professional development programs within institutions of higher education could expand existing groups of teachers and learners by forming partnerships with special education and early intervention practice communities. Current practices to promote interdisciplinary training approaches and the blending of inservice and preservice programs suggest a readiness to explore new ways of incorporating diverse experiences and perspectives in professional development programs. A future direction for professional development efforts will be identifying ways to assist students in participating more fully in collaborative research projects and helping learners make connections between their participation within a practice community and the field as a whole.

3. Seek new ways to inculcate the value of community relationships within our universities. This means defining our service mission in reciprocal terms and rewarding outreach and dissemination activities that not only translate research into practice—a metaphor that many have rejected outright (Shavelson & Towne, 2002)—but also encourage the practice community to inform and collaborate with researchers to carry out the research agenda. In response to recent calls to improve scientific rigor and the quality of educational research, we also need to rethink how the research enterprise should be organized at the federal as well as the local levels to promote connections with educational practice and policy and bring
research results into the professional and public domains (National Academy of Education, 1999; National Research Council, 1999; Shavelson & Towne).

In this article we examined the community of practice model for integrating educational research and practice with a view toward transforming traditional methods of conducting research on practice. This perspective extends previous notions of communities of practice in education which have concentrated primarily on using this approach to promote professional development. It also extends current notions about collaborative inquiry and the role of teacher participation in research aimed at improving educational practices. The idea that practitioners and researchers should work together to co-construct knowledge as part of a common enterprise, rather than through separate endeavors, could have far-reaching consequences for connecting what we know with what we do in education. To further explore this idea, we first identified theories that underpin the community of practice framework (i.e., situated learning theory and reflective practice) and then used these theories to critically examine applications of the community of practice approach from the literature. Through this examination we considered activities the practice communities could have incorporated to produce stronger connections between systematic inquiry and learning for the benefit of the larger educational community and offered several suggestions for moving in this direction.

The idea that practitioners and researchers should work together to co-construct knowledge as part of a common enterprise, rather than through separate endeavors, could have far-reaching consequences for connecting what we know with what we do in education.

In their writings on ways to integrate educational research and practice, Palincsar and her colleagues (1998) posed the following question, “It is possible, however, to imagine that a community of practice frame for professional development could lead to just such a collaborative arrangement between teachers and educational researchers, but under what circumstances” (p. 8-9).

We are convinced that communities of practice offer the intellectual resources to solve even the most complex educational problems by adopting an approach to scientific inquiry that views research production and research understanding as part of the same process, rather than separate endeavors (National Academy of Education, 1999).

REFERENCES


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