



TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

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Abstract:

The major role players are the teacher, the learner and the textbook. These three principal elements constitute the pillars of success in the educational process, and any deficiency in the role of any of these participants may negatively affect the accomplishment of the anticipated learning outcomes. This paper focuses on what the researchers of the current paper believe to be the most significant and effective factor in this complex process, namely the teacher. However, stressing the role of the teacher does not underestimate the roles of the other participants involved in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, teacher preparation and teacher training have been accorded tremendous efforts in educational professional development plans. Unfortunately, teachers have been treated as passive agents in most of the professional development activities and programs. As a result of the many changes in the society and in the educational system, the professional demands have taken on new meaning altogether. Knowledge is expanding at an unprecedented rate. Curriculum is under constant revision. In this new environment, the role of the teacher is continuously being redefined, changed and expanded. How is the classroom teacher supposed to cope with these changes? One way for teachers to take control of the work environment is to become active in the development of what goes on in the work area. To accomplish this, teachers could be researching questions of personal interest related to their professional activities. This is the basis for thinking of the role of the teacher as researcher.

Teacher as a Researcher:

Several terms for teacher-research" are found in education literature, including: Action Research, Practitioner Research, Teacher-as-Scholar, Practical Inquiry, Interactive Research, Class-room Inquiry, Teacher Research and Practice-centered Inquiry (Ismat, 1995). Teacher Research is that in which the teacher is an active constructor of knowledge rather than a passive consumer of it. Action Research appears to be the most common designation of this kind of teacher research in which the teacher assumes the role of a researcher. It attempts to improve teaching in which teachers systematically reflect on their work and make changes in their practice. Action research is designed, conducted, and implemented by the teachers themselves to improve teachers in their own classrooms, itself a development project in which teachers develop expertise in curriculum planning and effective teaching (Johnson, 1993). Simmons (1984) has indicated that the proper goal of action research is not to enable them to function more effectively and professionally in their role as classroom teacher. The prevailing focus of teacher's role as inquirer about teaching and learning through systematic classroom research (Copper, 1990). Teacher-researcher may work alone or in collaboration with other teachers, student-teachers, or university researchers. Systematic inquiry is the hallmark of effective teacher research (Shalaway, 1990). Although it should be considered that, for a long period of time, the aforementioned concepts have undergone many criticisms, reformulations and developments, it seems that there are still important elements that need to be considered and detailed when searching on these issues. That is, to rescue the contexts that motivate their construction. Contrasting with current educational realities one can find other ways to think about teachers' training and practice.

The Value of Teacher Research:

We have reviewed several examples of teacher research from the spectrum of experimental and clinical paradigms. These teachers have gained valuable information about their teaching and students' learning. Key to their discoveries was the research attitude held by each of the teachers. It is useful to think of the reasons to encourage this attitude as falling into three categories

- Teacher empowerment;
- Promoting a dynamic/process orientation as contrasted to a static/content approach; and
- Teacher research can help in building a scientific knowledge base about learning and teaching.

In the past, "pure" research has been highly valued whereas the practicing teacher has been viewed as a "technician" who applies esoterically generated knowledge. The status differential implied by the theories/praxis dichotomy has contributed to a highly stratified system of education in which the teacher is often relatively powerless. Teachers are prescribed to and directed by administrators, curriculum specialists, and textbook companies, who sometimes act as if the teacher has little right to an opinion and no status as a professional. Since generality is not the goal of teacher research, it can be considered without regard to the criteria of rigid scientific theory. However, teacher observation, documentation, and pilot experimentation can also be used as part of a body of data that might suggest later attempts to create and test more general theories of education.

Importance:

Effective teacher research empowers teachers, giving them greater confidence in their ability to individually and collectively promote change. It is sometimes difficult to convince teachers that change is necessary or practicable when those promoting change are outside the teacher's own classroom or when an innovation is imposed from the 'top down'. By doing research teacher-researchers become more critical and responsive readers and users of research findings for the improvement of the teaching-learning process. Miller and Pine (1990) suggest that when teachers become agents of inquiry the sources of knowledge about teaching shift from sources external to the classroom (e.g. researchers, textbook publishers, administrators) to sources of practical classroom experience (i.e. teachers). This shift enhances the professional status of teaching because teachers, through this knowledge-construction, actively help to shape the knowledge-base of their own profession (Johnson, 1993). Generally teacher research is driven by the practitioner's desire to improve his or her own practice with respect to a specific problem and a specific set of students. Thus, students reap immediate benefits from the teacher's learning (Shalaway, 1990).

Imperatives:

New expectations are evinced from school education and from teachers. A new set of skills such as communication, supporting a position, processes for thinking, problem solving, making decisions, learning, assuming responsibility, adapting to new situations, working with others, and maintaining positive attitudes and behaviours are being expected to be impacted by the educational system on the learners. Denning (1993) stated that curricula must be designed to constantly put students into situations in which they must organize themselves for new learning. It is in this context the teachers are supposed to take a number of decisions relating to policies, programmes and practices. It is not enough for teachers merely to make decisions; they will be called upon to make informed decisions, decisions which are data-driven. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts. Teacher's action research is one means to that end. It is high time to professionalize teaching by enhancing the motivation and efficacy of the teachers and to make teaching responsive to the needs of the extremely diverse body of the students. These goals can be accomplished when our classroom teachers too will conduct research.

Impact:

There is a growing body of evidence of the positive personal and professional effects that engaging in teacher research has on the practitioner (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Teacher research provides teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in research methods and applications; and to become more aware of the options and possibilities for change in the teaching-learning situations. Teachers participating in research become more critical and reflective about their own practice. Teachers engaging in research attend more carefully to their methods, their perceptions and understandings, and their whole approach to the teaching process. Teacher research provides support and creates a forum for sharing questions, concerns, and results. Teachers advise each other and comment on the progress of individual efforts. Engaging in collaborative teacher research helps eliminate the isolation that has long characterized teaching, as it promotes professional dialogue and thus, creates a better professional culture.

Lawrence Stenhouse once said, "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it". Teacher research will force the re-evaluation of current theories and will significantly influence what is known about teaching, learning and schooling processes. It has been said, "Teachers often leave a mark on their students but they seldom leave a mark on their profession". Being a researcher, teacher can accomplish both, simultaneously.

Significance of teacher's research

The role of the teacher in the classroom is no longer viewed as merely a provider of information, a manager, a facilitator, or a controller. In addition to these traditional roles and responsibilities, the teacher is currently considered an active catalyst for change in teaching practices, course design and problem solving. Brown (2001) supports the view that a teacher should be an agent for change in his educational environment. He addresses teachers, saying "You are an agent for change in a world in desperate need for change: change from competition to cooperation, from powerlessness to empowerment, from conflict to resolution, from prejudice to understanding."

The role of the teacher as researcher transfers teachers from a state of powerlessness to a state of power and from being mere receivers of training and lecturing to initiators of change and more efficient and active teachers. Action research has extended its scope and started to have applications in different fields including teaching. The significance of action research in the context of language teaching can be summed up as follows:

- It aims at improving teaching and learning practices in classrooms because it attempts to find solutions to specific problems that a teacher or a group of teachers may encounter in teaching a certain subject. It is usually conducted at small-scale levels for practical purposes rather than for the purposes of theoretical research.

- It is practical, manageable and can be carried out by a single classroom teacher or in collaboration with other colleagues. That is why it is sometimes referred to as classroom-based or collaborative research because it handles problems that practicing teachers really encounter in their daily teaching activities.
- Action research conducted by teachers contributes to changing and re-defining the traditional role of teachers. Teachers who conduct action research will be in a better position to create desirable changes in their teaching practices. In fact, they become initiators of pedagogical changes and improvements rather than recipients of ready-made proposals. Sagor (1992) emphasizes the necessity for creating a shift in teachers' roles. He holds, "By changing the role of teachers, we can profoundly change the teaching and learning process in our schools."
- Action research promotes the teachers' understanding of the teaching process and enhances their problem solving knowledge and skills. Once a teacher feels that his action research has been fruitful and has led to solving a certain problem, his confidence builds up and he becomes more prepared to take risks by investigating more teaching problems and finding solutions.
- It can revitalize our teaching and lead to positive change in our teaching practices.
- It raises teachers' awareness of the difficulties involved in their jobs and the complexities of teaching and learning.
- Action research is conducive to faster professional development on the part of teachers because teacher changes and decisions will be based on reliable data collection (Burns, 2010).
- It helps teachers develop more effective and more focused teaching materials.
- It develops the teacher's research skills, enhances their self-esteem and promotes their awareness of their students' needs.
- It allows and trains teachers to observe, analyze and reflect on the problematic areas in their teaching.
- It also reinforces the spirit of team and collaborative work among the teachers of the same subject. They can share experiences and solutions for the problems they encounter in their classes.

Supporting Teacher Research:

By now it should be patently clear that teacher research is a valuable enterprise. The question then becomes what can and should be done to cultivate and support such a worthwhile approach to educational research. Locally, districts and teachers can organize research groups to insure an ongoing support network. A research attitude is difficult to maintain in isolation; such an attitude is fostered by interaction with other professionals. Just as collegial support is necessary for research in universities, it is equally necessary for research in the schools.

At all levels, teachers should be encouraged to engage in self-reflection as part of an ongoing research attitude to their profession. They should be challenged to become better clinicians and observers of both themselves and their students. Only then will they be able to truly embark on what Buckingham (1926) called the "great adventure" of teaching.

Conclusion:

I argued that while teacher research can be useful, it does not substitute for educational research of a more conventional kind. I looked at each of the arguments directed against conventional research: that it is irrelevant to practice, that it is invalid, that it is undemocratic, and that it involves exploitation of teachers. In each case I argued that these are not convincing. I looked at the other side of TR: its implications for teaching. I suggested that it represents a broadly progressivist critique of traditional teaching, yet that there seems to be a potential conflict between this and the conception of TR as extending teacher professionalism. I examined the two respects in which TR portrays teaching as a form of inquiry: as discovery learning or discussion-based lessons in the classroom and as a form of practice involving and perhaps founded on critical reflection and inquiry. I argued that in neither respect can teaching be usefully regarded as isomorphic with inquiry. While simulation of inquiry is one useful technique that teachers may use, it is only one of many, and its value is crucially tied to the fact that it is a simulation. Similarly, I suggested that while, like other activities, teaching does involve processes of reflective inquiry, these often, and rightly, take a different form from conventional educational research. Furthermore, they by no means exhaust what is involved in teaching. Nor is the idea that teaching must be fully self-reflexive, forming a coherent whole founded on explicit and justified principles, a convincing one. It has not been my intention in this paper to argue that teachers should not engage in reflection and inquiry. To some degree, and in some forms, this is likely to be of value from both a practical and a research point of view; though it must be said that the space for it in the lives of teachers today is probably even less than it was in the past. Rather, my aim has been to counter the proposal that the roles of teacher and educational researcher should be integrated, which is implied by much advocacy of TR. In my view this is undesirable from the point of view of both research and teaching.

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