
Research and the Teacher

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and

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Research and the Teacher

RESEARCH AND THE TEACHER

A Qualitative Introduction to School-based Research

This major introductory textbook is written with the firm conviction that teachers can and should take responsibility for research into their own professional practice. It will help both student teachers and practising teachers, as well as those engaged in educational research more generally, to develop a sound knowledge of the background assumptions, issues and techniques of social and educational research.

The authors give a clear account of the research process as it relates to the practice of school-based teacher research, and provide a sound basis from which teachers can realistically conduct school-based research. They explore the practicalities of research ethics and responsibilities, writing up school-based research, and the contemporary situation in which teachers work.

By increasing teachers' professional awareness of the complex factors which influence learning, *Research and the Teacher* will do much to improve educational practice.

The Authors

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share both individually and jointly any shortcomings and omissions that remain.

Graham Hitchcock, David Hughes

June 1988

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Part I

The Context and Practice of Research

Introduction

There has perhaps never been a less propitious moment to present an introductory textbook on teacher research than the present time. Rapid and far-reaching changes are affecting the teaching profession and the everyday world of classroom learning. Increasingly education is seeing the intrusion of a market philosophy. Education is encouraged to forge closer links with industry and the world of work. Meanwhile many groups of children are still massively underachieving in our educational system. The Core Curriculum and GCSE will involve schools and individual teachers in rethinking the very shape of the curriculum. Catch phrases like anti-racist teaching, non-sexist teaching, multicultural education, or girl-friendly schooling are increasingly being heard in places where one would never have expected to hear them. Despite, and in part because of, these momentous changes and the increasing pressures which they inevitably place upon teachers we are asking teachers to do something else: to engage in research. Research, as we will go on to define it here, is seen as an essential and important aspect of the teacher's professional responsibilities. The aim of this book is therefore to equip training teachers and serving teachers in a wide variety of contexts from both the reception class to the further education lecture, with a knowledge of just how they might go about researching their own and immediate situations. In doing this we will stress the need for acquiring a working knowledge of the social science frameworks from which social and educational research develops. We will explore both the context and practice of school-based teacher research as well as the most appropriate methodological tools and techniques for achieving this. The book is written from a firm conviction that research is of immense value in improving practice. But what do we mean by research?

We use the term research here to describe what we might call 'systematic inquiry': inquiry that is characterized by a certain amount of rigour and governed by sets of principles and guidelines for procedures. Social research therefore refers to both the collection and analysis of information on the social world, in order thereby to understand and explain it better. Educational research is informed by social research more generally and refers

to both the collection and analysis of information on the world of education. Teacher research refers to the research that the practising teacher is able to conduct in the context of immediate professional practice. This utilizes and modifies the insights and procedures of social and educational research in applying them to school circumstances. In this sense research does have a number of benefits. Doing research will encourage a systematic approach to the collection of information and furthermore will help to develop a respect for evidence which in turn will lead to more critically informed opinions. Those involved in doing research will have the opportunity to rethink taken-for-granted assumptions. A distinction may instantly be drawn between professional researchers and teacher researchers.

Despite the fact that the number of teachers with research experience has grown over recent years, teachers are not professional academic researchers, they are teachers. For many terms *teacher* and *research* are mutually exclusive. Doubts are raised about the knowledge base from which teachers might carry out research. Their jobs are so demanding, it is argued, that they simply have no time in which to do any research. Furthermore, they have not received any training in the skills required and lack the appropriate objectivity or distance from the subject of their research. While many argue quite rightly that teachers should be made more familiar with the assumptions and methods of educational research so that they might better evaluate its products, the process of doing research itself is best left to professional researchers.

In contrast we have taken a rather different view of the relationship between teaching and research. While not underestimating the difficulties involved in teachers undertaking research we emphasize the importance, positive value, and excitement of teacher school-based research. There is also an important sense in which teacher research viewed as a critical, reflexive, and professionally oriented activity might be regarded as a crucial ingredient in the teacher's professional role. This ought to have the effect not only of enhancing the teacher's professional status but also of generating self-knowledge and personal development in such a way that practice can be improved.

Another view which is often expressed is that teachers themselves have little regard for the findings of conventional educational research, seeing it as having limited, if any, practical value. They are especially critical, it is contended, of the divorce (as they perceive it) between theory and practice, and to the abstract and alien language of the social sciences of which conventional educational research is part. The obscurity of the language and the high level of generality implied in much research has often resulted in teachers perceiving this work as being remote and divorced from their needs and situations. This has led some to argue that while teachers should engage in systematic inquiry into their practice, such research should have a strictly pedagogic intent, and teachers need not become over-involved in the methodological issues of social science.

Here again we will argue a different viewpoint. While research into education, especially that undertaken by teachers, has its own individual focus, schools inhabit the same social world that is explored by all social scientists. That being the case, educational research cannot divorce itself completely from the methodological issues that social science research raises, nor from understanding the language in which such research is conducted. As such it is important for teachers considering undertaking research into their own practice at whatever level to acquire an appreciation of the frameworks within which research has been discussed and practised in the social sciences. Any piece of social or educational research is informed by some basic underlying assumption and employs certain procedures. It is vital therefore to know what these are in order both to carry out research and to assess in any meaningful way the products of such research. Our ideas are reinforced by the increasing amount of research which is now being conducted by teachers, some of it coming out in print, and by the enthusiastic way in which some of the teachers we have worked with have tackled the methodological and substantive issues raised by investigations of such topics as gender and schooling, multicultural issues, parental involvement, and mainstreaming children with special educational needs. An understanding of models of research design in education and the human sciences is important since both conventional educational research and that which is applied to the solution of particular problems undertaken by professional academics and others has always been closely linked to educational policy and training. The modern teacher needs, in our view, to be equipped to understand the methodologies and language that underpin research in order not only to make sense of both current policy and initial and in-service training approaches, but also to be able to apply a selective and critical attitude towards its relevance and application in practice. A common response by teachers who have undertaken a course with a methodological or research component is that it has improved their ability to contribute to discussions on school policy in a more critical and effective manner.

The impetus for such a book as this now becomes clear. Over the years there has been a growing recognition of the importance of providing training and practising teachers with a knowledge of research orientations in order to enable them to become involved in conducting small-scale school-based research. The idea for this book derives from our own experience with teachers in a variety of contexts conducting small-scale research as part of initial teaching training, INSET work, or work towards a professional qualification. There was a clear need to provide teachers with a background to social research which recognized both the specific context of the teacher researcher and the purpose of school-based research and that offered guidance, advice, and instruction on the most appropriate tools and techniques. While there are many textbooks available they all seemed to sacrifice one or other of these needs. Our solution was to think in terms of

three areas: research and the notion of the teacher researcher, the methodologies and techniques available, and the context and practice of school-based teacher research. These areas correspond to Parts I, II, and III of the book respectively.

Throughout the educational world the teacher researcher movement has been developing rapidly. For example the *Classroom Action Research Network* (CARN) founded in 1977 by John Elliott at the Cambridge Institute of Education together with a group of teachers and educationalists was established as a support group for teacher research and indeed now has worldwide links. Furthermore, teachers are becoming involved in larger collaborative projects either with outside academic researchers or as part of a school- or authority-based staff development programme. A body such as the *Primary Schools Research and Development Group*, founded in the mid-1960s to bring together all those with a professional interest in primary education, including teachers, college and university lecturers, advisers, and specialists in particular areas such as remedial education, special needs, or child psychology, demonstrates the growth of interest in the involvement of all parties in the educational equation. This interest manifests itself in holding conferences, publishing articles and journals, and undertaking collaborative research between teachers and such bodies as the now defunct Schools Council. Its recent survey on morale in the primary school sector, *The Primary Teacher: A Profession in Distress*, is a good example of its work, and shows the value of research sponsored by sources other than the government, the LEA, or other traditional sources, in which practising teachers are actively involved in framing the issues to be researched.

We intend therefore that this book be both read and used. The readers and users will come to it from a variety of backgrounds, and with different professional needs. Some readers will already have views on the contributions that systematic inquiry or research can make to their own circumstances. Some may be involved in obtaining further qualifications and find that one of the course components is methods of educational research. Others still may be involved in school-based 'action research' or 'evaluation' and need to use some of the approaches described in this book to aid their work. Yet others may simply wish to develop their own skills as teachers and their ability to become more reflective about their practice. Finally other readers will also come to the book with varying degrees of familiarity with the contribution that the social sciences in general, and educational research in particular, have made to the study of education. At the end of the book we aim to have built upon these initial foundations and provided a sound basis from which teachers can legitimately and realistically conduct small-scale school-based research.

What counts as research? Some definitions

'Research' is often prefixed by words like 'pure', 'basic', 'applied', or 'action'. What do each of these terms mean, and what are the connections, if any, between them? A distinction is often drawn between 'pure' and 'applied' research. Pure research is not primarily concerned to develop understanding of practical problems but rather to advance knowledge within a particular area of human life or one academic discipline.

Applied research, though in no way less rigorous in its approach, focuses its attention on certain issues from the beginning. An example is modern research into learning theory, which, while extending general knowledge has, as one of its objectives, the application of its findings to a number of areas. The point is that applied research seeks generalizations from a large number of cases and that the link between the research findings and their application need not be immediate. Another feature of applied research is that the link between those who do the research and those who apply it need not normally be a close one. The dissemination of information is often second-hand via books, articles, and teaching.

Action research, on the other hand, might be described as inquiry conducted into a particular issue of current concern, usually undertaken by those directly involved, with the aim of implementing a change in a specific situation. Cohen and Manion have drawn out the distinctions between action research and applied research by suggesting that the conditions which usually govern applied research are somewhat more relaxed in action research since the latter focuses upon a specific situation or problem in a specific setting (Cohen and Manion 1986: 209).

In contrast, by 'evaluation' we mean the systematic study of a particular programme or set of events over a period of time in order to assess effectiveness. This research can be a case of simple appraisal carried out by an individual teacher into an aspect of curriculum, or a nationally conducted survey such as that currently being undertaken by the National Foundation for Education Research into the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). The emphasis in evaluation is with the assessment of the effectiveness of a particular programme or how well it has worked in terms of its aims.

Underlying these various definitions of research are debates about the relationship between research and practice. Nowhere is this more crucial than in the teacher researcher movement. Is the role of educational or teacher research to provide tips for teachers? Is the goal of research the development of more effective teaching strategies? Alternatively ought research to throw light on the social and cultural processes which affect a student's learning or help teachers and policy-makers obtain a better understanding of the context in which teaching and learning takes place? It is clear that teacher research can embrace any of these aims. Teachers may find themselves engaged at different