

DEVELOPING TEACHERS
AND TEACHING

ACTION RESEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE



JOHN ELLIOTT

Action research for educational change

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Action research for educational change

Developing Teachers and Teaching

Series Editor: **Christopher Day**, Reader in Education Management and Director of Advanced Post-Graduate Courses in the School of Education, University of Nottingham.

Teachers and schools will wish not only to survive but also to flourish in a period which holds increased opportunities for self-management – albeit within centrally designed guidelines – combined with increased public and professional accountability. Each of the authors in this series provides perspectives which will both challenge and support practitioners at all levels who wish to extend their critical skills, qualities and knowledge of schools, pupils and teachers.

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I am grateful to Pergamon Press for permission to reproduce a slightly amended version of my paper 'Teachers as researchers: implications for supervision and for teacher education', which was published in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1990. This paper constitutes the substance of Chapters 1 and 2.

Thanks are also due to the Trustees of the Lawrence Stenhouse Memorial Trust for permission to reproduce the first Stenhouse Memorial Lecture, as Chapter 9.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the teachers and colleagues I have worked with over the years. For the ideas developed in this book I owe a special debt to Clem Adelman, Wilf Carr, Dave Ebutt, Stephen Kemmis, Barry MacDonald, Christine O'Hanlon, Helen Simons, Bridget Somekh and Brian Wakeman.

However, they will understand if I cite the late Lawrence Stenhouse as the person who exercised the greatest influence on the development of the ideas expressed in this book. Most of them can be traced back to him, although I like to believe that I have woven my own web with them.

Series editor's introduction

This book is about action research as a form of teacher professional development. It begins with the emergence of action research in the context of school initiated change in the 1960s (Chapter 1) and goes on to look at the methodological issues of facilitating it as a form of professional learning in schools (Chapter 2). The case studies in Chapter 2 are based on the author's own experience as a facilitator in three projects spanning over a decade and a half from 1967 to 1983. During that period he was located in higher-education institutions which have played a major role in sustaining the teachers-as-researchers movement within the UK. Yet he experienced the tensions between the clashing professional cultures of teachers and academics. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on action-research as a 'cultural innovation' with transformative possibilities for both the professional culture of teachers and teacher educators in academe. They attempt to identify some of the problems of effecting this transformation, and thereby resolving the theory-practice issue (see Chapter 3) which has bedevilled discussions about the role of higher-education institutions in the professional development of teachers. Elliott claims that we are now at a point where policy initiatives are denying the value of that role.

The 'resolution' of the theory-practice issue is being shaped by government initiatives which are essentially part of a new technology of surveillance and control over teachers' practices in classrooms and schools. Within this technology the role of the teacher is in danger of being deprofessionalized and reduced to that of a supervised technical operative. The tasks of educators become specialized and hierarchized.

Chapter 4 describes such a development which is destabilizing and eroding the traditional craft culture of teachers. But in doing so it is creating the conditions for the spread of a more reflective culture, which emerges as a form

of creative resistance to the technical rationality that underpins government policy-making. It seems that one of the unintended effects of government interventions in education is to create the conditions for a resolution of the theory–practice issue and the emergence of a form of professional development grounded in action research. But the promise is as yet largely unfulfilled. It remains a popular aspiration.

Chapter 5 examines some of the dilemmas teachers confront while doing research in schools as part of a higher-education course. Elliott looks at some examples of the ways which these dilemmas are resolved to reinforce the assumptions that underpin both the traditional craft culture in schools and the traditional research culture in higher-education institutions. The theory–practice divide gets perpetuated rather than resolved by the compromises and trade-offs. The development of an authentic methodology of reflective practice, which is not simply derivative of outsider research methodologies, is in its infancy. A thousand flowers may be blooming, but without vigilance they can die.

Chapter 6 is a practical guide to action research. It has been used with teachers, and Elliott still has some doubts. Viewed in retrospect, the chapter seems to represent the reflective process too mechanically, as a set of sequenced steps. Teachers drew this to his attention. It was his unconscious trade-off with the new technology of education. He is also aware that the techniques suggested are somewhat, although not exclusively, derived from outsider research methodologies. So, the chapter should be viewed critically, as a guide to test against experience rather than as an authoritative prescription. Chapter 6 suggests a resolution of the ‘development v. accountability’ issue. Action research is a means of demonstrating, to parents and schools governors, the steps one has taken to improve practice in classrooms and schools.

The final three chapters look at three specific policy contexts in which action research as a form of professional learning has to be forged in the future: the national curriculum, teacher appraisal, and competence-based teacher training. With respect to each, Elliott suggests, higher education appears to have a diminishing role. He outlines alternative models of curriculum, appraisal, and competence-based training and indicates the central role action research would play in fostering teaching quality within these frameworks.

Whilst Elliott claims that he is not over-optimistic about the future of action research as a mode of professional learning, Chapter 7 lays the grounds for some optimism, elaborating upon his theory of creative resistance.

Since the 1960s, the action-research movement has grown and spread in England and around the world. It has become a clarion call for all those who believe in learning through reflecting ‘where the action is’, wherever their workplace. John Elliott has played initiating and leading roles at all levels in promoting this; and this book provides invaluable insights for all who are engaged in professional development.

Christopher Day

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Part I

Action research and professional learning

Teachers as researchers: an historical and biographical context

Drawing on his experience as a teacher in the 1960s, the author argues that action research emerged as an aspect of the school-based curriculum reforms in the secondary modern schools. In doing so he attempts to counter the popular view that the teachers-as-researchers movement was initiated by academics in the higher-education sector.

The chapter concludes with an account of the educational theories that underpinned the curriculum practices of innovatory teachers in the 1960s. The author shows how the idea of action research is implied by the educational theories embedded in teacher-initiated curriculum reform.

The teachers-as-researchers movement emerged in England during the 1960s. Its context was essentially that of curriculum reform within a differentiated educational system. At the age of 11 children were allocated to either grammar or secondary modern schools on the basis of tests known as the eleven-plus. The grammar-school curriculum was essentially subject-based and the syllabuses were orientated towards public examinations at 16, in the form of the General Certificate of Education (GCE). Grammar-school students then faced a choice of whether they left school for a job or proceeded to take certain GCE subjects for a further two years to secure advanced-level passes, which together with their ordinary-level passes would secure entrance into a university. Those who failed the eleven-plus, the vast majority of students, followed a watered-down subject-based curriculum. A small proportion of these proceeded to take GCE ordinary-level examinations at 16. The rest took either no public examinations at all or examinations which were considered to have inferior status to GCE. The national school-leaving age was 15, and many students left without taking any public examinations at all.

I began my teaching career in a secondary modern school in the early 60s as a religious-education and biology specialist. The Education Act of 1944 made religion a compulsory curriculum subject. In fact it was the only subject secondary schools were legally obliged to provide. However, the system of public examinations ensured a broad conformity of curriculum provision. The control over the curriculum exerted through public examinations was greatest in the grammar schools. But the content of GCE syllabuses was reflected in the curriculum framework of the secondary moderns. The GCE syllabuses were devised and the examinations set and marked, by a number of university-controlled examination boards.

Large numbers of students in the secondary modern schools were alienated from the 'watered-down' academic curriculum they followed. They were destined to emerge from their schooling as failures, with the exception of the few who could cope sufficiently to compensate for their failure to pass the eleven-plus test by taking the GCE examinations at ordinary level. (The secondary moderns generally did not make provision for advanced levels.) The grouping practices of the secondary moderns tended to reflect those of the grammar schools. On entry students were grouped into 'streams' according to 'academic ability' and, although in theory movement across was possible, it happened rarely in practice. Students' opportunities for success were largely determined by the streaming system, although the alternative grouping practice of 'subject setting' was adopted in many schools to rectify the perceived deficiencies of the system. 'Setting' was essentially a system of streaming on a subject rather than a cross-curricular basis and normally applied to only a certain range of academically high-status subjects in the upper part of the 11–16 age range. It tended to operate more in the grammar than the secondary modern schools, because its major purpose was to give above-average students opportunities to maximize their number of GCE subject passes.

Knowing that they were destined within the system to fail, large numbers of students in the secondary moderns lacked any interest in the subject-matter of the curriculum. Their slim chances of securing examination success meant that examinations were a poor extrinsic motivator. The alienation was particularly acute in those humanities subjects which students and their parents perceived to have little relevance to the world of work: namely, history, geography and religion.

Faced with both passive resistance and active rebellion, teachers in the secondary moderns had two choices. The first was to develop and maintain a system of coercive control: to turn secondary moderns into 'concentration camps'. The second was to make the curriculum more intrinsically interesting for the students and transform the examination system to reflect such a change.

During the 60s the secondary moderns began to vary somewhat in their ethos. At one end of a continuum were the 'concentration camps' and at the other the quite recognizable 'innovatory secondary moderns', with the majority of schools in between, struggling with an internal tension between these

two climates. I was fortunate in beginning my teaching career during 1962 in a school which was beginning to emerge at the innovatory end of this continuum.

The emergence of the curriculum-reform movement

During my period in the school we destreamed and created mixed-ability groups. Curriculum reform focused on the teaching of the humanities subjects of English, history, geography and religion in the fourth and fifth years. At first they operated within subject boundaries. But teachers across these subjects shared the common aspirations of enabling students to make connections between the subject-matter and their everyday experience. In each subject area content was selected and organized around life-themes such as 'the family', 'relations between the sexes', 'war and society', 'education', 'the world of work', 'law and order', 'the media', etc. Experience taught us that we could not help students explore these themes in depth by maintaining a subject-based form of curriculum organization. Students experienced a great deal of repetition as they moved from one subject to another. What went on in English didn't appear so very different from what went on in history, geography or religious studies. We began to realize that content from the different subject areas needed to be employed eclectically by students in terms of its perceived relevance to questions and issues as they emerged in the classroom. Separate time slots were beginning to look dysfunctional, and teachers needed to draw on each others' subject expertise. So we created 'integrated studies' and worked together in cross-subject teams. Similar developments were taking place in a number of secondary moderns across England and Wales.

Implicit in this school-based curriculum-reform movement were newly emergent conceptions of learning, teaching and evaluation which were explicated in justificatory discourse as the innovatory teachers attempted to negotiate collaborative activities with each other, and to justify them to their more traditionalist colleagues in staffrooms. I well remember the lay-out in the staffroom of my school: a large oval arrangement of easy chairs around the gas-fire. There over coffee we sat during breaks discussing and debating our attempts to bring about change with colleagues who regarded our ideas with some scepticism. The quality of this curriculum discourse was an experience which has influenced all my subsequent thinking and action as an educationalist.

From the standpoint of my own professional life-history the activity of curriculum theorizing was something I initially encountered amongst teachers in a school. The 'theories' of learning, teaching and evaluation we articulated in staffroom gatherings and meetings derived from our attempts to bring about change in a particular set of circumstances, rather than from our professional training in universities and colleges of education. They were not so much

applications of educational theory learned in the world of academe, but generations of theory from attempts to change curriculum practice in the school. Theory was derived from practice and constituted a set of abstractions from it. This view of the theory–practice relationship was quite contrary to the rationalist assumptions built into teacher training at the time: namely, that good practice consists of the application of theoretical knowledge and principles which are consciously understood prior to it.

I learned as a teacher that theories were implicit in all practices, and that theorizing consisted of articulating those 'tacit theories' and subjecting them to critique in free and open professional discourse. I also learned that high-quality professional discourse depends upon the willingness of everyone involved to tolerate a diversity of views and practices. In my school there was certainly an identifiable group of teachers who could be described as 'the innovators'. But we never became a self-contained and exclusive club or an isolated rebel clique, so we never established an impermeable dogmatism.

There were a number of reasons for this. First, the staff group was a relatively small one of around 25 teachers. This maximized opportunities for each individual to have frequent face-to-face interactions with everyone else. So we got to know each other as persons pretty well. We played cricket, golf and football with each other, socialized together after school and at week-ends, and collaborated in out-of-school activities with students. This knowledge of each other as persons did much to foster free, open and tolerant professional discourse.

Second, the headteacher refrained from using his own power position to impose change on the staff. He had a broad vision of the direction in which he wanted things to go, and everyone was aware of it. They were aware that his sympathies were with the views of the innovators. But he did not put himself forward as the authoritative curriculum theorist, or as the major initiator of reforms. He identified issues and problems and then encouraged staff to develop their own change proposals. He then supported the implementation of proposals, if certain conditions were complied with. One condition was that participation by staff in change should be voluntary. Another was that the innovation should be monitored and evaluated, and accounts of its effects rendered to the staff as a whole.

The headteacher's management practices did much to make the staff at the traditionalist end of the spectrum feel that they were not entirely powerless to exert leverage over the nature, direction and pace of change. And they did much to ensure that the innovators felt under an obligation to communicate and justify their practices to the whole staff group. What the headteacher did was to foster a collegial system of intra-professional accountability grounded in reflective practice.

One example of the headteacher's management style was the introduction of mixed-ability grouping. Streaming had become a controversial issue in the

school. He responded by organizing a series of staff meetings on the subject. Rather than present his own arguments against streaming or inviting a member of staff to do so, he invited a major researcher at the reputable National Foundation for Educational Research to address the staff. By the end of the series of meetings the general feeling amongst the staff was that streaming in the school was having undesirable effects. But many were anxious about a change to mixed-ability grouping. Some argued that 'bright' children would be disadvantaged, while others doubted their ability to cope with the 'less able' in this setting. The headteacher suggested that a one-year pilot experiment should be established with the first years and thoroughly monitored by all the staff prior to any decision about establishing mixed groups throughout the school. At the end of the pilot experiment the vast majority of teachers were prepared for whole-school innovation, but the head of the maths department still held out for grouping according to ability. So it was decided that the maths groups would be organized in ability sets.

I have attempted to describe those contextual factors which contributed to the quality of curriculum discourse in my school. They pick out a personal and a structural dimension. We had opportunities to get to know one another as persons beyond the boundaries of our professional roles. But we also had a management structure which supported a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' change process, and a collegial rather than an individualistic or bureaucratic form of accountability, i.e. accountability to peers as opposed to accountability to oneself alone or to a superordinate.

Handy (1984) claims that management systems threaten the professional autonomy of practitioners when policy is both generated and executed hierarchically. He argues that management systems which establish collegial structures for policy generation but retain hierarchical structures for executing policy are likely to find acceptance amongst professionals. Certainly the management of change in my school reflected this separation of policy generation from executive roles. In fact the deputy headteachers were at the traditionalist end of the spectrum. But this was not a tremendous problem for the change agents in the school, because the deputy headteachers had very little control over the generation and development of curriculum policies.

From the standpoint of my professional life-history I first participated in educational research, as well as curriculum theorizing, as a teacher in my school. Theorizing about practice was not an activity conducted in isolation from researching our practice. For example, we frequently debated whether students were able at 14 years of age to reflect meaningfully about adult experience. Some argued that these students were not in a position to grasp the meaning of certain adult experiences because they had not reached an appropriate stage of emotional development. We didn't resolve such issues by citing theories of adolescent development contained in the psychological research literature, although some of us might have employed them from time to time when defending our own 'theories of readiness' or trying to undermine