

RESEARCH AND TEACHER POWER

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"With assistance, the American teacher will engage in active research. What school does not need the service of a resident researcher whose job it would be to train teachers in the consumption and production of research?"

Every American teacher is an active researcher. As a consumer and producer of action research, each teacher makes of his or her classroom a learning laboratory which reflects the surrounding school community and all it has to offer. Thus, all children are receiving the gifts of a busy, bursting-with-life research that they deserve—a never ending world of changing images, values, and awarenesses where they have the freedom to train and enjoy their own minds.

IF A Test of American Culture were constructed, asking which of the foregoing statements were true, the right answer would be "none of the above."

If only these statements were true, then we could expect that anyone's life would be greatly enhanced just because he or she went to school. But we know that schools are not research centers, and school communities

are not necessarily learning environments, and teachers are not engaged in research.

No, the teacher is not really a researcher. Moreover, the teacher is not really expected to be a researcher by anyone. Research and evaluation are simply left to university faculties, testing experts, or merely to the dictates of the standardized testing process which various agencies mandate upon a school, regardless of anything that is happening within that building. Teacher power and research do not go together.

For the purpose of this discussion let us define research as "action research." The teacher sets forward certain learning hypotheses based on individual diagnosis and prescription; then applies some treatment and revision until the hypotheses are confirmed or rejected. This process serves as research, as well as evaluation. In short, "research" and "evaluation" are taken together broadly to mean recorded activity by a teacher which forms not only an ongoing basis for curriculum revision, but also a basis for universal construction in standardized test development.

For example, if a teacher discovered

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that certain sentence completion items make it easy for disadvantaged children to acquire concepts that previously were incomprehensible to them, an "action research" model would serve to supply the rest of the school and the research community with one "who, what, when, and how." Such information, whether we call this "research" or "evaluation" would hopefully grow past the limits of that classroom, perhaps even as far as the standardized- or criterion-test manufacturers.

But how is teacher power related to teacher research? Essentially, the power of a teacher is apparent in that teacher's decision-making influence. The teacher's influence in making decisions is a very direct measure of power. To the extent that teacher decisions are supported by teacher research, his or her power is that much increased.

In this discussion, we will examine some of the reasons that teachers customarily perform on all levels except that of research, and what the effects of this "research gap" are. Additionally, a practical suggestion for developing teacher research that is both consistent and meaningful will be examined.

Effects of Role Expectations on Teachers

Just what is the role of the teacher? In over a decade of my own experience in educational research and evaluation, this question has been of great interest to me—and I have never hesitated to ask it on many occasions in meetings with hundreds of educators and lay persons. The perceptions vary according to the situation of the persons replying to the question.

Many educators and parents perceive the role of the teacher as that of an "instructor" whose success depends on "getting the material across." Political or social movement persons perceive the teacher as an "activist" whose mission is to reform. The trade unionists, on the other hand, have an image of the teacher as a labor organizer and negotiator. A recurrent perception of parents is that the teacher is a counselor who can "get through to a child"—somehow. Now, what all of this means is simply that the *teacher as a researcher* is nowhere in the perceptual hierarchy.

It is fortunate that teachers are the incumbents of such worthwhile roles, and these roles should persist, of course. But whatever became of research?

It is clear that teachers are not perceived as researchers and because of this, teachers feel they are not expected to fill that role—and therefore they do not. They are the subjects of the researcher; it is not they who perform the research. They are, in the research vernacular, “targets” of the investigation.

School Climate as a Barrier to Teacher Research

There are some rather obvious hindrances in the development of teacher researchers, and some others that are more subtle but difficult nonetheless.

A clear lack of training in research methodology or philosophy is apparent in most training curricula. This is undoubtedly caused by two situations. First, the highest priorities for beginning teachers are teaching technique and content knowledge in particular areas. Second, neither universities nor in-service training are responsive to the need for an understanding of evaluation and research methodology by the teacher.

Similarly, the training of supervisors is geared heavily for observational and workshop leadership rather than management by objectives. Here, too, there is little concern for research-oriented activity. Lack of support for teacher research is produced by these training deficiencies to some extent, but there are more serious obstacles for the teacher.

Essential Characteristics of Classroom Research

Research or evaluation or assessment or whatever designation it pleases us to accept, must contain two elements if it is to be meaningful and practical.

First, there must be *forecasting* of one sort or another. Whether we talk about behavioral objectives, criterion-referenced objectives, domain-referenced objectives, mastery of objectives, or any other similar

system, we are talking about the idea of predicting an outcome. Without such a predicted outcome, we lack the basis we need to revise, rethink, or change.

The second element of a teacher's research is accountability. The willingness of the teacher to account for that which is accomplished is a result of prediction. Whether it is the expected success, or unexpected success, or even failure itself, accountability functions as a stimulus for teachers to explore and make changes.

There are, however, a number of problems concerned with this. As stated, we should not expect school personnel, pedagogical and supervisory, to do that for which they are not sufficiently trained. Then why is it that there are no competent salaried persons to oversee research and evaluation at the level of the school? Are research and evaluation sideline activities?

The idea that teachers can build curriculum from a self-imposed set of priorities is no great comfort to supervisors who, burdened with business managerial tasks, feel that their decision-making power would be lessened if teacher decision making increased. Especially in cases where teacher forecasting brings revisions which are not supported by supervisors, but by research instead. We must confront the fact that forecasting contains uncertainty and no school machinery wants to run on such high octane.

Other problems for the would-be teacher evaluator stem from the traditional concern of supervisory personnel for standardized test rankings. In this sense the effect of the commercially published test on the classroom experimental climate is devastating. This excessive concern for percentile ranking accounts for emphasizing curricula in the basic skill areas, so that what meager experimentation survives is on the worn-out track of “mean score gains” and “school rank reports” in the urban centers. Exploration by teachers that is inconsistent with the aims of standardized test score gains is largely unsupported.

The imposition of supervisory or other hierarchical barriers does not stop here, either. The teacher is responsible for constructing

the kind of three by five square lesson plans which are excessively process rather than product oriented. How many supervisors have boasted that success in a classroom could be detected by a single fragmentary "visitation" in which an atmosphere of *true* learning would be *immediately* apparent? Of course the long term classroom objectives are usually ignored in this "estimation of success."

Another pitfall for the researcher is the possible construction and use of invalid tests. If the teacher is following a pattern of *diagnose, prescribe, test, and revise* with students, he or she then must gear research to an externally imposed situation where the departmental test this teacher helps to construct is not so easy that it is passed by all of the class. Some children *must* fail. Such a test would then be so easy that it would provide no guidelines for retesting. Let me be blunt. Classroom research has no place in such an abusive situation. This wholly erroneous application of item difficulty and discrimination makes failure guaranteed for some human beings in advance just by an external imposition item difficulty.

The effect of this is to frustrate the researcher-teacher. It is a host of house-keeping necessities, combined with the standardized scores, which flouts whatever hopes for research the teacher has.

Who supports the *teacher's* ideas as to what should be accounted for? Except for beginning teachers, so naïve as to be unaware of the folkways of the school system, very few teachers want to swim against the inevitable tide. Why should anyone develop a personal system of forecasting and accountability? Would it gear into the school's machinery? Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that the teacher does come up with some new successes in evaluative performance. Is there a mechanism for sharing and replicating the situation? Usually not.

Why should the teacher build a structure which the school will not let him or her comfortably occupy? The school climate is a barrier to research simply because it does not expect change on the basis of *self*-evaluation. It will simply not tolerate accountability that is *self*-imposed.

Effects of the Teacher Research Gap

Whatever the fate of teachers in their relationship to evaluation or research, it is within the normal course of events that some research activity eventually does get performed by others. As has been mentioned, much of the research activity in schools is centered in the politics of norm referenced testing.

In our discussion we stressed that action research is a catalyst to effective change. In this sense, action research supplements the development of relevant wide range testing—since the latter is constructed of whatever the preponderance of curricula happen to be in the "tryout parameters." Unfortunately, it happens that testing accounts for the development of curricula.

Too much is expected of norm referenced testing. Many schools simply equate progress with standardized test scores. This ostensibly brings in the statistician, the program design specialist, and the norm tables. It creates separate "abilities" for separate human beings, and, aside from perpetuating failure, it is a very imprecise standard or gauge in the daily progresses a teacher makes in affective as well as cognitive domains. Those evaluators who do come to the schools are ostensibly there for the sake of objectivity, but either their itinerancy or contract-consciousness raises some questions as to the extent of independence they might possess.

Apart from this, the criteria for success that are imposed by this "outside" process are either too narrowly related to content, or not related at all. Of course this thwarts the concept of change in a school climate. After all, does not all activity boil down to the same thing—the test? Unfortunately, a great deal of meaningful information is lost by such a circular and mediocre path of evaluation.

Experts in search of demographic characteristics of certain areas, or item universes, or basic techniques have a much reduced source of data when the teacher research gap exists. A rich information resource is un-

tapped, much like a yet to be discovered oil well. Key areas of educational planning are developed outside the very educational parameters they most affect.

Problems in Organizing Teacher Research

If we get past the many varieties of obstacles that imperil the progress of the would-be researcher in the classroom, our journey is still very long and complicated. Even if everyone were to realize the harmful effects, both long and short range, of having a teacher research gap, there would still be difficulties. Research is not within the organizational life breath of the school. Furthermore, there would be some resistance on the part of teachers for their own separate reasons. It is an organizational phenomenon that change does not come overnight despite the best intentions.

But perhaps the most important of all hindrances is something we have not considered. Exactly *whose* job is it to stimulate and guide the growth of teacher research and evaluation within school buildings? It cannot be the principals or their assistants, for they lack the training, the time, or what is more important, the accountability for such an undertaking.

Do we expect, realistically, that people should feel an obligation to do what they are neither trained for nor paid to do? Of course not.

The administrative hierarchy is not constructed to meet the practical, everyday needs of a teacher research and development program. Unbelievably, funds for such an administrative position are as yet not even in the stage of conception. This basic component is missing in research for want of a salaried school specialist who develops and defends the research frontier against the challenges of expediency.

A Practical Suggestion

One of the most effective ways to get a job done is to hire someone to do it. Such a person's presence, rated as it is, becomes a

vested interest. Whoever this person is, he or she will have a following and whether that following constitutes only a minority is not important. The fact is that this person's existence must be acknowledged. It will work. In the creation of a special attitude for teachers there must be an accountability for someone to do it. It is as simple as that.

At present the idea of a researcher in every school or small district is not a familiar one. In fact, it probably seems heretical. But even in the most casual of reflections, is it not a rather good idea to evaluate the school and its many dimensions at the source on a sustained basis? The research design component must be instituted at the initial planning stages of a program. It should not be a sporadic, faltering strategy or a belated afterthought.

What better way is there than to formally train, hire, and rate such persons so that we can attain the advantages of teacher research and evaluation know-how and follow-up? This kind of change must be given formal recognition and status in order to succeed. There is no other way to proceed.

In order that there *may be* some degree of truth in my opening statements, the time has arrived that we should start paying people to establish this research and develop-

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ment scene in our American schools. We need evaluators for more than a couple of days a year per school. Mean gains are not enough. We have plenty of research on teacher power. Now, we must create teacher power in teacher research.

With assistance, the American teacher will engage in active research as stated, even if we never gave it serious thought. What school does not need the service of a resident researcher whose job it would be to train teachers in the consumption and production of research?

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