DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 249 278 TM 840 634

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TITLE The Researcher-Teacher Relationship: Observations and Implications from Naturalistic Studies in Classrooms.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (West Palm Beach, FL, February 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Observation Techniques; *Classroom Research; *Educational Researchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Experimenter Characteristics; Naturalistic Observation; *Participant Observation; Research Methodology; *Research Skills; *Teacher Attitudes; Teachers

ABSTRACT

This paper represents an initial exploration of researcher-informant relationships which develop when naturalistic researchers spend long periods of time watching and recording the details of classroom activity for which a teacher has basic responsibility. The goals of this paper are to present a discussion of the significance of researcher-teacher relationships in naturalistic classroom studies; to discuss observations drawn from several classroom studies conducted by the authors; and to describe a continuum of researcher-teacher relationships. The continuum ranges from antagonistic-defensive relationships, through reluctant-protective and accommodating-cooperative relationships, to participating-collaborative relationships. Several implications designed to assist researchers are drawn: (1) decisions regarding researcher-teacher relationships should be made as part of the project design and should be based on research objectives; (2) the desired researcher-teacher relationship and a plan for maintaining it should be made explicit; and (3) researcher-teacher relationships should be actively monitored as studies are implemented. (BW)

The Researcher-Teacher Relationship: Observations and Implications from Naturalistic Studies in Classrooms

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
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West Palm Beach
February 1984

THE RESEARCHER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP: OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM NATURALISTIC STUDIES IN CLASSROOMS

The nature of relationships between qualitative researchers and their subjects, or "informants," and the effects of these relationships on the performance of subjects in natural settings with the researcher present have been areas of ongoing interest and concern to qualitative social scientists (e.g., Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Schwartz and Schwartz, 1955; Spradley, 1979). This paper represents an initial and tentative exploration of researcher-informant relationships which develop when naturalistic researchers spend long periods of time watching and recording the details of classroom activity for which a teacher has basic responsibility. The goals of this paper are to present a discussion of the significance of researcher-teacher relationships in naturalistic classroom studies; to discuss observations drawn from several classroom studies conducted by the authors; to describe a continuum of researcher-teacher relationships, and to suggest implications for qualitative classroom researchers.

Researcher-Teacher Relationships

The perspective taken here is that the relationship developed between classroom researcher and teacher is a special instance within the general case of qualitative researcher-informant relationships. Several characteristics which are specific to the researcher-teacher relationship distinguish it from the general case. These characteristics may be problematic to the researcher whose goal is to capture the naturally occurring flow of classroom life. Some of these characteristics are outlined below:

(1) Researchers who conduct classroom studies are usually experienced educators who have completed or who are working on advanced degrees in educational fields. Teachers who perceive such researchers as possessing special knowledge and status may be threatened or intimidated by their presence.

(2) In classroom studies, teachers are automatically "key informants" because they have such a broad influence on classroom events. Teachers may be uncomfortable as the focus of the researcher's persistent attention.

(3) Teachers are accustomed to practicing their profession "behind closed doors" (see McPherson, 1972). They may be more reluctant than other kinds of informants to expose the intimate details of their worlds.

(4) Teachers are currently receiving criticism from many quarters. They may be particularly sensitive to and threatened by the presence of an educational researcher.

These characteristics suggest the possibility that the researcher's presence in the classroom may in some way disrupt the teacher's behavior. Teachers may be influenced by a number of concerns. For instance, they may be suspicious of the researcher's motives in conducting the study. Related to this is the concern about what will be done with the information collected. Teachers may fear that information will be used by superiors for evaluation purposes. Clearly, the potential for teacher tension and anxiety is great. Even teachers who want to cooperate with researchers may alter their behavior out of concern over the researcher's activities. When the teacher's behavior is altered, the naturally occurring flow of classroom life may be disrupted thereby interfering with research goals.

The success of any naturalistic study depends on the researcher's ability to gain a clear understanding of the knowledge which "insiders" use to make sense of their world. In classroom studies, the insiders are students, aides, classroom volunteers, and teachers. Teachers are special insiders because they have powers to influence classroom activity not usually given to other participants. Establishing "harmonious relationships" between researchers and informants is vital to all qualitative investigations (Spradley, 1979). Establishing such relationships between researchers and teachers may be critical if classroom studies are to reflect naturally occurring activity. In an effort to assist researchers as classroom studies are designed and implemented, observations drawn from research experiences, a continuum of researcher-teacher relationships, and implications will be presented.

Observations

The observations presented here have been drawn from data collected by the authors as part of five naturalistic classroom studies. In these studies, qualitative research perspectives developed by sociologists and anthropologists (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1978; Spradley, 1980) were applied to the study of naturally occurring events in real classrooms. Participant observation techniques, informant interviewing, and the collection of classroom artifacts were the data gathering tools utilized in all of the studies.

The five original research projects, which focused on various issues in the areas of reading and peer interactions, were conducted in six primary classrooms located in five different elementary schools within two large urban school districts in the southeastern United States. The data which were utilized in preparing this paper consisted of interview transcripts, field note records, and research journal entries related to the relationships

developed between researchers and classroom teachers as each study evolved. In recognition of the importance of monitoring and reporting their relationships with the teachers, both authors kept careful records of interactions with teachers, identified field note entries which seemed to include behaviors influenced by the presence of the researcher, and maintained research journals which included a history of each study. An important component of these histories was the development of researcher-teacher relationships.

Our observations are divided into four areas: Teachers' willingness and ability to operate their classrooms as if the researcher were not present; Teachers' needs to know what the researcher is finding as the research progresses; Teachers' needs for researcher feedback on their classroom performance; and The relationship between the nature of researcher-teacher involvement and teachers' classroom practices. As each area is discussed examples from our data will be utilized to illuminate important points.

Each of the six participating teachers agreed prior to the beginning of observations to operate their classrooms as if the researcher were not there. We found, however, that teachers varied in their willingness and/or ability to do so.

Even though all teachers assured the researchers that classroom activity was proceeding in the normal fashion, some teachers seemed to maintain a natural atmosphere more easily than others. (Of course, within classrooms there were instances of both natural and staged or edited events.) In one classroom, for instance, there were several indications that the researcher was observing naturally occurring behavior. This was particularly apparent on occasions when the teacher left the room. On these occasions the students continued to behave and misbehave as if the researcher were not present. On another occasion the teacher was genuinely shocked to find that the researcher

had been observing for several hours before she noticed him. During this observation period the teacher's behavior followed the same patterns as when she was aware of the researcher's presence. The similarity between this teacher's behavior patterns during periods in which she was aware and not aware of the researcher's presence gave the researcher confidence that he was indeed capturing naturalistic descriptions of classroom life.

On the other extreme, one teacher, after initially agreeing to conduct the classroom as normally as possible, became very guarded about what she would permit the researcher to observe. This quote from the research report indicates her unwillingness to comply with the researcher's request to observe classroom activity planned and implemented without the influence of his presence.

> The teacher exercised tight control over observation days and times. She established the patterns of visitations and on three occasions 'vetoed' tentatively scheduled observations. She cited parent visitations, special holiday activities, and the effects of these activities and the holidays on children as the reasons for not allowing the observations.

The point is not that this teacher's concerns were unreasonable, but that she was willing to let the researcher into the classroom for only brief periods of time, periods for which she was well prepared.

Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) discuss ways in which research subjects edit, withhold, or conceal data from investigators and ways they produce data by putting on performances. We found indications, based mostly on children's reactions to teachers and the staged quality of some teacher behaviors, that some teachers edited and performed. The frequency and extent of such "unnatural" behavior varied from teacher to teacher. We take these differences in the abilities of teachers to conduct their classrooms as if

the researcher were not present to be functions of individual teacher confidence, perceptions of the researcher's role and relative status, and the level of understanding of research objectives.

The second area of observation has to do with teachers' varying needs to know what the researcher is finding as the research progresses. Although all but one of our six teachers asked informally as studies progressed, "How are things going?" or "Are you finding what you expected?," some teachers were far more noticeably concerned with the progress of the study than others. One teacher seemed to become preoccupied with what the researcher was observing and recording. She was often observed glancing at the researcher to see if he was recording what she had just said in class. While this teacher appeared to be anxious about the researcher's activities, another teacher could be characterized as exhilarated by the researcher's presence. The latter teacher frequently expressed her excitement about having research conducted in her room with such statements as, "Oh, this is wonderful! You're just like Margaret Mead!" This teacher expressed her interest in the findings through offering to help the researcher in any way she could; however, she also stated repeatedly that she did not want to interfere with the researcher's work and even apologized for "getting in the way." She communicated a strong interest in the topic being studied and a great curiosity about the findings, yet she actively monitored her comments and questions. For instance, after asking a question, she said, "I probably shouldn't ask that now. Don't answer if . will mess things up for you."

A third teacher represented the extreme of expressing no interest in the progress of the study. This teacher rarely made any kind of contact with the researchers. She did not acknowledge them as they entered and left the room, nor did she make eye contact during observation periods. While the teacher

was cooperative when interviewed, she did not initiate conversation with researchers at other times during the course of the study.

Our data reveal that teachers express varying degrees of interest in the progress of studies conducted in their classrooms. The manner in which researchers deal with teachers' comments and concerns before and during the study may influence teachers' future behavior and potentially influence project findings.

Teachers' needs for feedback on their classroom performance is the third observation area. Even though our teacher-informants were each assured that researchers were not interested in evaluating their performance as classroom teachers, some teachers persisted in seeking feedback. Evidence that teachers were self-conscious about researcher perceptions of their classroom practices shows up in field notes when teachers "over explained" classroom assignments to students, providing complex, sometimes technical, rationales which were meant for the researcher and not the students. The following field note excerpt is an example of "over explaining" by a kindergarten teacher.

> Teacher has the children at table #1 making red, yellow, and orange "snips" (strips of construction paper). Teacher walks to table #1, to children: "This is good practice." Child: "I like this." Teacher: "I'm glad you like it. It's fun and it helps you learn to remember and follow directions and it develops eye-hand coordination."

Another teacher, in asides to the researcher, often tried to explain her reasons for handling the discipline of particular children in the ways she had while being observed. She occasionally asked, "What would you do?" during such interactions. This teacher "checked" with the researcher in private conversation by explaining elements of her program in such a way as to get feedback from the researcher. She would interject statements such as, "I know that's not what they're teaching in college now, but..." as a device

for eliciting researcher evaluation.

A third teacher seemed to perceive the researcher more as a resource than as an evaluator. Rather than feedback on performance, the teacher sought input regarding her curricular and instructional plans and her theoretical knowledge. Often the request for input was indirect, as this quote illustrates:

> Teacher to researcher: "I think I'm going to have Tara and Polly join one of Mrs. C's reading groups after Christmas. I don't know what to do about Sam, though. Should he join the Dragons or not? He doesn't have such a good attitude about reading, and I don't want to make it worse. I'm just not sure what I'll do about him."

This teacher frequently attempted to use educational theory to help make decisions and to interpret children's behavior. She seemed to perceive the researcher as a resource for theoretical knowledge, as the following incident illustrates:

> Teacher shows researcher the self-portraits children had drawn on the previous day. Teacher: "I was surprised by this one. It's really advanced, don't you think? Wasn't it Goodenough who said that children who are really good artists have superior intelligence?" Researcher: "I'm not sure." Teacher: "Well, I think it was him. I'm not sure what I think about that, though. I don't think I believe it." (pause)

In sum, teachers vary in the amount and kind of feedback they seek from researchers. If naturalistic classroom behavior is to be maintained, the researcher must anticipate and take steps to manage this potentially disruptive aspect of the researcher-teacher relationship.

Our observations in the last area treated here were guided by the question: What relationships exist between the nature of researcher-teacher interactions and teachers' behavior in the classroom? Our data provided some

insight into this important question. We will present two contrasting cases from our studies. These cases were chosen because they represent researcher-teacher relationships which differ widely. These cases will be used to establish a framework for drawing a continuum of researcher-teacher relationships.

The first case is an example of a researcher-teacher relationship which lacked the "harmonious" quality we believe to be essential to such relationships. The relationship had an antagonistic tenor from the initial meeting. The meeting was arranged by a senior associate of the researcher. That senior researcher had had contact with the teacher through a survey research project in which the teacher had participated. The senior researcher attended the initial meeting. At that meeting, the teacher cross-examined the prospective researcher regarding his ability to recognize and understand appropriate teacher and student behavior in her kindergarten classroom. The teacher began by insisting that she have access to the researcher's field notes as the study progressed. The senior researcher explained that seeing field notes might affect her behavior. An agreement was reached wherein the researcher assured the teacher that research findings would be shared at the end of the study.

As observations began, the teacher appeared to accept the researcher's presence. Researcher-teacher interactions were limited to formal greetings and good-byes. However, after two classroom visits, the teacher began to ask, "When will you be finished?", even though they had agreed that his observations would last for sixteen weeks. The teacher began "telling" the researcher when and for how long he could observe. As noted above, she vetoed scheduled visitations on three occasions.

After a few weeks of visits, the teacher told the researcher that the

school principal wished to speak with him. In the meeting with the principal, it became clear that the teacher had discussed her reservations about the study with the principal. The meeting began with the principal saying, "I understand that you are taking copious notes in Mrs. T's class. What exactly are you doing in there?"

Interactions with the teacher remained formal throughout the course of the study. The manner of the teacher was polite but defensive. An example of her interactive "style" with the researcher is contained in the following interchange taken from transcripts of an unstructured interview conducted at the end of the observation period, an interview which the teacher refused to have tape recorded.

> Researcher: "My goal for doing this interview is to try to better understand how things work in your classroom by asking you to describe how you see things. What happens in your classroom that's different from what goes on in other classes?"
>
> Teacher: "I'd like to know how you saw things. If you'd tell me what you saw that's different, then I could react."

The study being described focused on the social interactions among children in the classroom. Certainly, the potentially negative effects of the strained researcher-teacher relationship were reduced because the teacher's behaviors were not the primary focus of the study. However, the antagonistic-defensive character of the relationship did influence the study in several ways. As mentioned, the teacher carefully orchestrated what the researcher would see and when he would see it. Because the teacher limited access to certain periods of the day and to days for which she was "prepared," data on the social behavior of children may have been distorted. In addition, the usefulness of the teacher as a reliable informant was greatly reduced. Interactions between researcher and teacher were brief and formal. The teacher's defensive posture reduced the researcher's willingness to ask important

questions and colored the responses when such questions were asked. Further, the amount of time the researcher was able to spend in the research scene was affected by his relationship with the teacher. Observation time was reduced because of the teacher's tight control over visitation scheduling, and because, as the study progressed, the researcher became reluctant to go into the classroom and sometimes cut observations short in an effort to reduce tension between himself and the teacher.

As we will suggest in our implications, there are ways to establish and monitor the development of researcher-teacher relationships which can help protect qualitative classroom studies from the effects suggested. Developing a rapport between researcher and teacher is a dynamic, give-and-take process (see Spradley, 1979). We will now present a second, and contrasting, example of the development of such rapport and its effect on the behavior of the teacher.

The researcher's purpose in conducting the study was to discover the definitions of reading constructed by participants in a first grade classroom. The selection of a teacher was based on several criteria related to the study's objectives. For instance, the researcher wanted to observe in a classroom in which children had opportunities to read throughout the school day. As the researcher wanted to avoid disrupting the life of the classroom, she sought a setting in which adult visitors, helpers, and observers were a regular feature. These and other criteria led the researcher to select a teacher from a pool of teachers with whom the researcher was acquainted through her work as a student-teacher supervisor. The two had already established a friendly rapport during numerous classroom visits. Hence, the foundation for a harmonious relationship had been built before the researcher attempted to gain access to the classroom.

Before the initial meeting between researcher and teacher, the researcher had prepared a simple outline of the purpose and plan of the proposed study. In addition to explaining her project objectives, the researcher explained the reasons for choosing this particular classroom. During this initial meeting the researcher also described what her role would be in the classroom, explaining that it might be difficult at times for both teacher and children to have her hanging around, asking questions, and scribbling madly on a notepad. The researcher attempted to establish her prospective role as "the one who writes and asks questions." Throughout the meeting the teacher responded with great interest and enthusiasm. She repeatedly nodded and said, "mm-hmm" in agreement with researcher comments. Regarding the purposes of the study, she exclaimed, "That's it! That's so important!" She proceeded to talk about the importance of children making the connection between the things they do in class to learn how to read and real-world reading, adding that some first graders never do make the connection. The research topic, or at least the teacher's perception of the research topic, was of great interest to the teacher and continued to be of interest throughout the study.

On this very positive note, the researcher-teacher relationship was initiated. The harmonious, cooperative quality which characterized the relationship at its onset was maintained throughout a four-month observation period. Researcher and teacher interactions covered a wide range of personal and professional topics, some related to project goals, many unrelated. The teacher talked openly about her family, difficult periods in her life, personal and professional failures and frustrations, fears and concerns about students, and school gossip. She often asked the researcher if she would come to lunch and once invited her to a colleague's birthday celebration. The relationship between researcher and teacher was characterized by qualities of warmth, openness, and trust.

An important product of the researcher-teacher relationship was the teacher's eagerness to be helpful. In a number of ways the teacher attempted to facilitate the accomplishment of the researcher's tasks. She regularly volunteered information about activities and occurrences which had taken place during the researcher's absence. She often asked whether the researcher needed to talk to her and never hesitated to schedule before, during, and after school times for tape-recorded interviews. In addition, the teacher offered her assistance in securing parental permission allowing children to participate in the study and invited the researcher to attend and to speak at the first parents' meeting. Frequently, the teacher apologized for getting in the way and just as often intervened to get children out of the way. Several times she stopped the class to announce, "Ms. P. is here to write, not to answer your questions. You can come to me or Ms. M. if you have questions."

A related outcome of the accomodating and cooperative researcher-teacher relationship was the researcher's ability to gain access to the teacher's perceptions of her job in general and of reading and reading instruction in particular. Perceptions were revealed through formal and informal interviews as well as through the teacher's observed actions. The trusting relationship between researcher and teacher enabled the teacher to carry on the normal course of events in her room. The consistency of her behavior, when coupled with feedback from the student teacher, the teacher in the adjoining room, and the teacher herself, build a strong case to support the position that the teacher did not alter her classroom behavior in response to the researcher. The following comments from the teacher in the adjoining room who was frequently in and out of the teacher's classroom, are revealing.

> I really don't think you have much influence on her. You're really quiet when you're in there, and you've sort of made it clear to the children because of your posture and your behavior that you're not one of the helping teachers. The only thing that I've noticed is that T's hostess behavior is up a little bit... I mean that I think she is poised for company and for adult questionning more than she usually is. But as far as her behavior with the kids, I can't tell when you're in there and when you're not. Her teaching style and her conversational tone with the kids don't change. I have to go and look to see if you're there... I don't feel like she's conscious of anything except your wish to see the real situation.

Clearly there are many differences between the two relationships described. Some of the differences may be attributed to personality characteristics, but some may be related to the manner in which the studies were initiated, implemented and carried out. Implications of project design elements for the researcher-teacher relationship will be discussed later in the paper. Based on our experiences and the reports of other classroom researchers, we have recognized that a variety of researcher-teacher relationships may develop, each having consequences for project outcomes. In the following section we outline a progression of researcher-teacher relationships with which we are familiar.

A Continuum of Researcher-Teacher Relationships

It may be helpful to conceptualize a continuum of researcher-teacher relationships. We have constructed the continuum presented in Figure 1 based on our experiences doing classroom studies and references to the literature on qualitative classroom studies (e.g., Kyle, 1979; Mehan, 1979; Smith and Geoffrey, 1968). The continuum has been structured around four levels of relationship, moving from "antagonistic-defensive" to "participating-collab-

orative." Each level will be briefly described below.

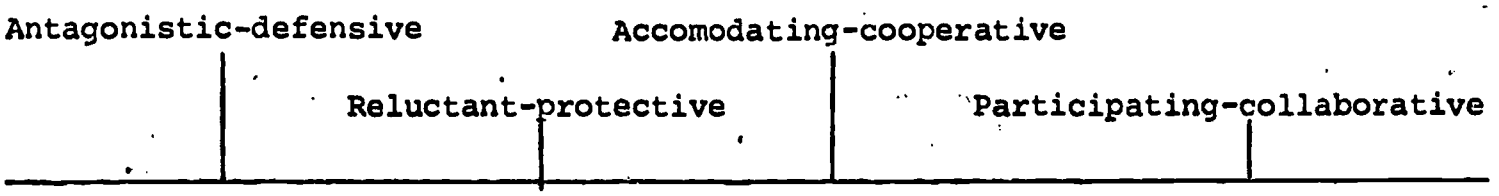

Figure 1. Continuum of Researcher-Teacher Relationships

Antagonistic-defensive relationships are those in which the researcher and teacher never develop "a basic sense of trust [that] allows for the free flow of information" (Spradley, 1979, p. 78). Teachers are distrustful of the intentions of the researchers and act in such ways as to defend themselves and their classrooms from the intrusion of the unwanted observer. The first example above has many elements which qualify as characteristics of an antagonistic-defensive relationship. Teachers may place constraints on the researcher which limit access to important data. They become so defensive that their reliability as informants may be jeopardized.

Reluctant-protective relationships are characterized by teachers who are so sensitive to the presence of the researcher that they edit their behavior in an effort to create a favorable impression. Teachers may be insecure about revealing their routine classroom practices to researchers who often have advanced degrees and university status. They may feel compelled to present the appearance of being a cooperative colleague while at the same time feeling reluctant and self-protective.

Accomodating-cooperative relationships emerge when teachers and researchers share an understanding of research goals and feel comfortable employing the naturalistic model to reach those goals. Teachers understand their role in the research process, feel free to clarify that role if confusion arises, and feel comfortable operating their classrooms in ways not significantly different

from "normal." Teachers view themselves as important resources to researchers who seek to understand participant perspectives. The second example above illustrates an accomodating-cooperative relationship.

Participating-collaborative relationships are those in which teachers participate as researchers while carrying on the role of teacher. Researchers and teachers collaborate on designing, implementing, and reporting their research. Roles are carefully designed to maximize benefits gained when a researcher is also an informant. For examples of participating-collaborative relationships, see Mehan (1979) and Smith and Geoffrey (1968).

The levels we have outlined are intended to provide descriptive benchmarks which may be helpful as classroom researchers consider their relationships with teacher-informants. In the last section of this paper, we will discuss implications designed to assist researchers in establishing relationships which respect teachers and promote quality classroom studies.

Implications

In their discussion of "field relations" between observational researchers and informants McCall and Simmons (1969, p. 28) point out: "The primary reason that the observer finds his field relations so problematical is that his subjects, accustomed to life in a more or less ordinary social world, do not know how to be studied." We believe this observation holds true for the special case of researcher-teacher relations. In order for effective studies to be conducted in natural classroom settings, researchers must take responsibility for helping teachers "learn how to be studied." We will present three "implications" designed to assist researchers in this effort.

Implication 1: Decisions regarding researcher-teacher relationships should be made as part of project design and should be based on research

objectives. A logical progression to such planning would be built on a questioning sequence such as: What are my research questions?; What kind of classroom situations would allow me to study these questions?; What level of researcher-teacher relationship would be most advantageous to accomplishing my objectives?; Are there situations and teachers that meet my criteria?; How do I gain entry?; and so on. The teacher is the ultimate gatekeeper in every classroom research project. That is, the teacher determines whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to desired information. Researchers need to take the importance of their relationships with teachers into account before direct contacts are ever made.

Implication 2: As access to and entry into research settings are arranged, the desired researcher-teacher relationship should be made explicit and a plan for establishing and maintaining that relationship should be shared with the teacher. It is vital that both the teacher's role and the researcher's role be clearly explained as initial discussions of the research project are held (see McCall and Simmons, 1969; Spradley, 1979). In explicating these roles the researcher should address such subjects as the manner in which questioning will be handled and the kind of contact the researcher will have with teacher and students in and out of the classroom. Regarding questioning, the researcher must establish such things as whether the teacher may ask questions of the researcher, whether the researcher will question the teacher during observations, and whether a regular interview schedule will be established. Having established an explanation and rationale for researcher and teacher roles and the level of researcher-teacher relationship, the researcher should share with the teacher a plan for monitoring the evolvement of the relationship and for making necessary corrections.

Implication 3: Researcher-teacher relationships should be actively

monitored as studies are implemented and corrective action taken as problems arise. If the researcher and teacher have made a plan for doing this, then such questions as "How are you feeling about the way things are going?" will be received as more than polite conversation. Researchers and teachers will be able to refer to the expectations established in their initial plan as they monitor and evaluate the development of their relationship. Establishing a relationship in which both researcher and teacher are comfortable is essential to the success of naturalistic studies. We believe that researchers should give the development of rapport with the teacher special attention early in the implementation of classroom studies. We agree with Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean (1969) who argue that because the researcher-informant relationship is so important, the researcher should be willing to sacrifice initial data, if necessary, in order to facilitate acceptance.

In summary, there are several steps classroom researchers may take to facilitate the development of harmonious relationships with teachers: (1) Include the researcher-teacher relationship as an element of project design; (2) Explain roles and responsibilities to the teacher prior to the study; (3) Explicate a plan through which both can monitor the evolvement of the relationship; and (4) Monitor carefully the development of researcher-teacher rapport as an active part of the implementation of the project. If these steps are thoughtfully considered, perhaps the quality of classroom studies and the historically distant relationship between classroom practitioners and educational researchers can be improved.

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