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AUTHOR Takala, Sauli
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ABSTRACT

The gap between researchers and teachers has minimized the impact that research should have on school development. Using teachers as researchers is one way of empowering them to adopt the perspective of the researcher. Research-oriented activity is then seen as one promising means of improving the teachers' pedagogical expertise. It is assumed that teachers will be better able to make decisions about their teaching if their judgments are supported by their own inquiries. Teacher research is typically action research, which links investigation with efforts to solve practical problems or develop new programs. In order to be able to do teacher research, teachers will have to be solvers of educational problems. They will have to be able to discover and define problems, to think of promising alternatives of solving them, to observe and document activities, to reflect on the observations and, ideally, to report on the changes in their pedagogical thinking. The stages in action research include problem identification, creating a solution to the problem, implementing the solution, evaluating the solution, and modifying one's ideas and practice in the light of the evaluation. Finding and defining a good research question is the most important and difficult part of a research project. In the case of the teaching content through English or a foreign language, classroom research questions could deal with the following: goals of pilot projects; materials; methods; students' learning outcomes; students' affective attitudes; comparison between content-based language classes and "normal" classes; change in one's views and teaching practices; perception of successes and problems; impact on relations with colleagues; impact on the school; parent's views and attitudes; and reflection on what was done and achieved. Some hints for doing action research/teacher research are offered. (Contains 44 references.) (CK)

Action Research in the Classroom

Sauli Takala
University of Jyväskylä
Institute for Educational Research

ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM

The idea of teachers as researchers is often associated with Lawrence Stenhouse, director of the Schools Council's Humanities Project (1967-72) and the founder (in 1970) of the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia (Elliott 1988). Stenhouse once stated that "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it." Stenhouse, like a growing number of educators in other countries in the 1970's, was worried about the *gap between educational researchers and teachers*. Researchers seldom regarded teachers as partners in the research process (Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985). As a consequence of this lack of cooperation, educational research has not had the kind of impact that it properly should have had in school development. Some teachers have responded by dismissing educational research as irrelevant without first examining it critically. Others have equally uncritically sought to apply research results and recommendations without taking sufficient account of their own contexts and underestimating their own pedagogical expertise.

One of the motives of educators like Stenhouse is an "*emancipatory*" view of education. According to this view, it is the task of the teacher to free the pupils from the current limitations of their minds and to lead them to explore new knowledge. When this exploration is carried out in a spirit of critical enquiry, the process helps the pupils to gain also the power of the use of the acquired knowledge.

Just as it was increasingly stressed that pupils should in this way become more autonomous and self-directed, teachers needed to be freed from excessive external control. The emancipation of teachers, "*teacher-empowerment*", was seen to be inextricably bound with pupil emancipation. This movement has brought about increased devolution of decision-making to the schools and teachers. Centralized educational systems have tended to become more decentralized.

One aspect of the delegation of decision making, though perhaps less prominent than the increased power of curricular decisions, is the view

that one way of empowering teachers is for them to adopt the perspective of the researcher. *This means that research-oriented activity is seen as one promising means of improving the teachers' pedagogical expertise. It is assumed that teachers will be better able to make decisions about their teaching if their judgements are supported by their own inquiries. Personal educational practice is then informed by a critical and inquiring approach to that practice.*

This represented a clear shift from traditional bureaucratic education, which suited for passive and receptive learning, to a flexible educational context which allows for active involvement in learning. This is also a shift from seeing a linear and hierarchical relationship between teaching and learning on the one hand and between research and practice, on the other. No longer was the teacher seen as the giver and the pupils as the receivers of knowledge nor was scientific knowledge always seen as preceding practice. The hierarchical and specialized roles of educational theorists (clarification of objectives), empirical researchers (study of process-product correlations), R & D specialists (development of methods and programmes) feeding knowledge to teacher technicians was questioned (Elliot 1988). Like all knowledge, knowledge about teaching is assumed to be constructed, rather than received. Teaching involves uncovering knowledge about learning through inquiry into practice (Linnakylä, Sajavaara & Takala 1991; Levine 1992).

The idea of action research carried out by teachers for improving the environment and conditions of classrooms was put forward by the Lewinian group dynamics school in the 1940's (Lewin 1948, Levine 1992). Corey (1949) saw action research primarily as a means for curriculum development in cooperation with the universities.

The keyword - and an article on - teacher research was first introduced in the influential AREA publication "International Encyclopedia of Educational Research" as late as in its 6th edition in 1992. The idea has, however, longer roots. Like in the case of so many educational ideas, John Dewey was influential in suggesting the idea of teachers as students of teaching, in other words, teachers could and should reflect on their practice and learn from each other. The notion of the reflective practitioner was subsequently strongly advocated by Schon (1984, 1987).

Teacher research is typically action research, research which links investigation with efforts to solve practical problems or to develop new programmes. Teacher research is inspired primarily by the desire to understand the unique characteristics of a particular situation and the needs of the individual pupils in that situation (Levine 1992). Teacher research focuses on individuals, small groups or entire classes and it employs a variety of methodol-

ogies. Teacher research tends to differ from traditional academic research by being primarily *qualitative* rather than quantitative. The methodology utilizes e.g., observation, free and structured discussion, case studies, naturalistic contexts, ethnographic description, journals/diaries, essays.

One strand in this new trend was the ethnographic and other qualitative, naturalistic approaches used in writing research in America, in particular (Goswami & Stillman 1987, Graves 1983, Myers 1985) and in mother tongue education in general. Yetta Goodman advocated this approach calling for "kid-watching". In addition to America, the action research/teacher research/collaborative research was early adopted in Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Clay 1989). In Finland, Blom, Linnakylä and Takala (1989) carried out and reported a teacher-researcher collaborative action research project aiming at developing more effective reading strategies among pupils. Linnakylä, Sajavaara and Takala (1991) have edited a collection of articles written by teachers who were doing pilot work on the introduction of new information technology in class work. The authors took part in a course arranged by the editors on how to report a school-based experiment. The course was based on ideas of *collaborative research* between teachers and university-based researchers and utilized the process-writing approach.

In Finland another recent and well executed example of a case-study, with a clear development orientation, is a project on the introduction of international communications networks and electronic mail into foreign language classrooms by Tella (Tella 1991). It is not, however, an example of straightforward teacher research, as the researcher was not doing research in his own class but acted as a collaborative partner with the teachers and as a participant observer and facilitating change agent.

It was considerations like the above that led to the requirement in the TCE/TCFL programme that all participants were to plan, carry out and report a project during which some unit was taught in English.

Doing teacher research

In order to be able to do teacher research, teachers will have to be solvers of educational problems. They will have to be able to discover and define *problems*, to think of promising *alternatives of solving* them, to *observe and document* activities, to *reflect on* the observations and, ideally, to *report on* the changes in their pedagogical thinking (Takala 1992). McNiff (1993) -

quoting Jack Whitehead - has outlined the stages in action research - oriented enquiry as follows:

1) I identify a problem when some of my educational values are denied in my practice;
2) I imagine a solution to the problem;
3) I implement the solution;
4) I evaluate the solution;
5) I modify my ideas and my practice in the light of the evaluation.

Hopkins (1993) contains a useful survey of several models of action research and concrete advice on how to develop a focus for classroom research, how to carry out classroom observation, how to gather and analyse data and how to deal with ethical questions in classroom research. The book can be recommended for everybody who is interested in teacher research.

All research is guided by research questions or problems. *Finding and defining a good research question is the most important and difficult part of a research project.* It requires imagination to be able to come up with an interesting research question. In case of teacher research, the research question typically has to do with something that is closely related to the teacher's daily work or new projects.

In the case of the TCE/TCFL, the classroom research questions could deal with at least the following aspects:
a) goals of the pilot projects
b) materials
c) methods
d) students' learning outcomes
e) students' affective outcomes (attitudes, motivation etc)
f) comparison between TCE/TCFL and "normal" classes
g) change in one's views and teaching practices
h) perception of successes and problems
i) impact on relations with colleagues
j) impact on the school
k) parents' views and attitudes
l) reflection on what was done and achieved

A review of the project reports by the participants shows that in most cases they were interested in *getting feedback from the students about what they thought of the idea of teaching content through English and what their experiences were.* In most cases information was collected through questionnaires. In some cases students kept diaries. Teacher logs were used by

some participants. In many cases there were informal feedback discussions.

Another focus, though less systematically pursued, was *learning outcomes.* Some teachers did set brief quizzes or tests and used the results in student assessment, as well. More typically, teachers based their assessment of learning outcomes on students' own views and on their continuous observation of classroom activity and on students' written work.

A third question that received some attention was the *parents' interest and attitudes* towards the project. Some observations are reported also on colleagues' attitudes and support.

Reports often include comments on the problems related to the (non-)-availability of suitable materials.

A *typical format* used in the reports, which is very practical and useful, is (a) to outline the goals of the project, (b) to describe the target group, (c) to give an account of materials used, (d) to describe how the plan was implemented (often with comments on how well things went), (e) to report on the major findings, and (f) to discuss the experiment and give an overall assessment of it. In many cases teachers also say something about the future prospects.

The impression one gets on reading the reports is that most teachers were pleased with their students' motivation and with their learning outcomes. Students', as well, gave overwhelmingly positive feedback to their teachers. Undoubtedly, the TCFL pilot project was a *positive and rewarding experience to both teachers and students* and the idea worth keeping up and extending to other domains of content.

Some hints for doing action research/teacher research

Drawing on prior work, Nunan (1989) provides a useful list of points to keep in mind in doing action research. The author has selected eleven out of the original sixteen points and added some comments.

1) Get a research group together and participate yourself. Sympathetic colleagues can be of great help and support. Obviously, the intensity of collaboration may vary considerably from active sharing of tasks to sympathetic listeners.

2) Be content to start with a small group. Allow easy access for others. Invite others to come when the topics that interest them will be discussed. Obviously, in the time of modern information technology, "others" can also be colleagues working in other schools.

3) Start small. This is a very important consideration in all innovations. Many innovations have failed because of too high ambitions (Takala 1992).

4) Establish a timeline: set a realistic trial period which allows people to collect data, reflect and report over experiences. Like probably in all new ventures, action research takes more time than one expects. "Things take time."

5) Arrange for supportive work in progress discussions in the group. Again, the discussion partners can, of course, be colleagues or cooperating researchers working elsewhere.

6) Be tolerant and supportive: expect people to learn from experience and help to create conditions under which everyone can and will learn from the common effort. Naturally, someone doing individual teacher-research needs to be equally tolerant and supportive towards oneself and recognize progress, not only problems.

7) Be persistent about monitoring. For obvious reasons, the more systematic one is in collecting "data" about the project the better chances one has in being able to give a good account of what was done and achieved.

8) Plan for the long haul. Change is a process, not an event. In all new activities, one is first a novice and only through extended experience can one hope to develop expertise in the new approach.

9) Remember that how you think about things, the language and understandings that shape your action, may need changing just as much as the specifics of what you do. Previous experience (e.g. Blom, Linnakylä & Takala 1989, Linnakylä, Sajavaara & Takala 1991) has shown that research literature may turn out to be much more interesting and useful than one might think at the outset of a teacher-research project.

10) Make time to write throughout your project. Keeping a running diary (journal, log) is a very useful method to use in teacher research.

11) Be explicit about what you have achieved by reporting progress. It is highly desirable that teachers engaged in action research (teacher research) actively share their experiences with colleagues and parents.

Concluding remarks

Levine (1992) suggests that the implications of teacher research for staff development are twofold. Levine believes that the findings or outcomes of teacher research will enormously *enrich the knowledge base available to all practitioners*. Another contribution is more far-reaching, since teacher research actually can mean a reformulation of staff development. *In-service education could primarily come to mean teachers engaging in constructing their own learning within and through interaction with pupils and colleagues.*

When teachers' work is increasingly defined as finding successful teaching practices that help students to learn, as opposed to simply covering the prescribed curriculum, the educational system as a whole and individual schools will need to support teachers' examination of their current practices and a continuous search for better ways of teaching. *The TCFL concept provides one option in this search for developing schools that are responsive to the challenges that their changing contexts set for them.*

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