

Research and Practice: An Administrator's View

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ABSTRACT. Coping with constant change requires that organizations create internal cooperative networking systems, implement joint decision-making, and transfer responsibility for solving problems to those working closest to them. In the school setting, this requires a change in the role and relationships among teachers, administrators, and students. Rather than being viewed as an authority figure, the administrator becomes part of a decision-making team that helps establish a vision and mission for the school. Teachers must become models who are themselves researchers capable of reflecting on practice and improving it based upon their reflection. This article examines how a teacher-researcher program fits into the reform and restructuring movement of today and presents practical information for the administrator in developing and implementing such an endeavor.

The Need for Change

To deal successfully with the needs of children today we must consider the environment in which schools function. We are living in the midst of a culture labeled by Toffler (1970) as the "Age of Transience," where change is one of the few abiding constants. For this reason, both human beings and organizations need to make adjustments that will permit them to operate effectively and efficiently. New organizational structures must be developed. This requires that organizations create internal cooperative networking systems, implement joint decision-making, and transfer responsibility for solving problems to those working closest to them (Ouchi, 1981). In the school setting, this requires a change in the role and relationships among teachers, administrators, and students. Rather than being viewed as an authority figure, the administrator becomes part of a decision-making team that helps establish a vision and mission for the school.

A major part of this role will be to create an environment in which innovation and experimentation is encouraged and where teachers can develop and implement varied strategies to meet the ever changing demands of the classroom. Due to the knowledge explosion and the increasing cultural diversity of students, schools must ensure that the students of today will be equipped to think, create, and respond to change. This requires that the teacher become a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge. As such, it will be necessary for the teacher to make quick decisions and to guide children into becoming active learners, critical thinkers, and student researchers. Teachers must become models who are themselves researchers capable of reflecting on practice and improving it based upon their reflection.

The concept of the "teacher as researcher" is an essential ingredient in the organizational change process. This concept should not be viewed as an additional burden for teachers to assume, but rather as part of the fundamental shift in the way teachers' roles are defined, the types of research that should take place in schools, and the interrelationship between research and practice.

Research and Practice

Most theorists and researchers would agree that a major reason for conducting educational research, formulating theories, and developing a body of knowledge about education is to improve educational practice. Long ago, John Dewey (1929) stated, "The indispensable necessity is that there be some kind of vital current flowing between the field worker and the research worker" (p. 48). In a more recent article, Eisner (1984) wrote, "That enterprise known as educational research is predicated upon the supposition that research is vital to the improvement of educational practice" (p. 447). He noted, however, that in his experience, research findings and theories derived from them were seldom incorporated into the classroom. Eisner believed this was attributed to the fact that "researchers have not maintained a close enough relationship with the classroom to understand it: they have imported and imposed concepts from other fields which are not appropriate onto education: they have used methods of scientific inquiry which are not suited to the field" (1984, p. 447). Simmons (1981) suggested the reasons were: "a simplistic view of research as the source of solutions which should be applied literally in every classroom setting: a victimization view of the classroom practitioner as needing to be told what to do: a seemingly unbridgeable chasm existing between typical classroom practitioners and typical educational researcher's language, concerns, criteria, and activities" (p. 2). The relationship between researchers, typically from universities, and classroom teachers in schools has taken on a hierarchical relationship, with the university researcher viewed as superior to

the practitioner. The result has been that the impact of research upon practice has been diluted and there has been little integration of research and practice.

Although Dewey (1950) viewed the teacher as a researcher who must critically analyze practice, this notion has not prevailed in American schools. However, a move toward critical or action science in which research and practice are blended holistically is now developing through the work of theorist/researchers such as Stenhouse (1980), Argyis, Putnam, and Smith-McClain (1985), and Carr and Kemmis (1986). This movement is aligned with the need to change the hierarchical systems in organizations, to make connections between research and practice, and to transform the teacher's role in relationship to research. Through the teacher-as-researcher model, a unique opportunity is available to schools and universities to blend their resources and unite to solve educational problems in real and meaningful ways. By using teachers' classroom knowledge as a research base and uniting it with the knowledge and expertise of university-based researchers, both public schools and universities can be strengthened and the students can be better served educationally. This article examines how this program fits into the reform and restructuring movement of today and presents practical information for the administrator in initiating such an endeavor.

Implementing a Program

After serving as an administrator of the Florida State University School, I found that school-level administrators must be an integral part of the research process. They must set a tone and demonstrate an attitude which supports and encourages the teachers' efforts. Unless the environment in which the teachers work is supportive of this approach, they will have a difficult time becoming involved. Administrators must become knowledgeable about the teacher-as-researcher concept so that they can assist the teachers in adjusting to this role. They must be able to explain and clarify its meaning and be aware of its benefits.

Each situation has its own constraints and resources. However, when attempting to implement a teacher-as-researcher program, the administrator must consider the following factors:

1. What is the present conceptual framework most teachers have about their role, research, and the relationship of research to practice? My experience has been that most teachers are fearful and concerned when faced with the idea that they can be researchers. I took time to outline the different types of research and talked about the fact that they conduct research continuously as they deal with students and make adjustments to their needs. This is a very

serious barrier that must be dealt with throughout the development and implementation processes.

2. Who should be involved and how will this be determined? It was decided that this process would begin through a voluntary effort at our school. The idea was presented to our teachers and we talked about how they and the school could benefit. After the first year, many other teachers joined in the effort based on feedback they had received from the teachers who were initially involved.
3. What resources are available? If the school is located near a university, college, or community college, or there is a staff member who might be willing to travel to the school, the administrator may be able to form a working partnership with someone and use their undergraduate or graduate students in the program's implementation. If this is not feasible, the research or evaluation department in the school district may be interested in this activity. Some teachers working on advanced degrees may want to become involved in such a program. Having undergraduate students available to help was a great advantage, but an administrator could proceed with this approach by allowing teachers to develop a team in which they observe and record research for one another. In fact, we tried this approach in a science program we were involved in and it worked very well. Likewise, teachers can design their own questions and collect and analyze their own data. Allowing teachers to share, and/or providing technical assistance to them under such circumstances is extremely important.

Program Considerations

In creating a program, it is important to keep in mind the following issues:

1. **Use a team approach to planning and implementing the program.** It would be incongruous to initiate a program that emphasizes the teacher as a researcher without including the teacher and all other participants in the conceptual, planning, and evaluation stages. It is imperative that the administrator begin by introducing the idea and getting feedback from teachers regarding their questions and concerns. They should be an integral part of the process at all times.
2. **Provide teachers with a reason for getting involved.** Most teachers will respond to attempting new things if they perceive that it will be of benefit to them or the organization, or if they view it as part of their job role (Kochan, 1991). The administrator should emphasize the value of this new approach

in assisting teachers, improving student learning, and creating a school environment that creates new knowledge and benefits all.

3. **Include time for teachers to reflect, construct, and share ideas, problems, successes, and findings.** The more opportunities provided for teachers to share their work, the greater the level of excitement, interest, and competence there will be. Administrators must build time and financial resources into this effort if it is to succeed. We found that even a half-day session in which teachers could talk and share was beneficial. A written memorandum including information on what each teacher is doing is another avenue for sharing that is helpful and assists in acknowledging teacher efforts.
4. **Provide emotional and technical support.** For many teachers, assuming a new role is sometimes uncomfortable and for some even a little frightening. It is important to remember that the idea of the teacher being a researcher is a foreign one for most people. Individuals need time to talk about this issue and to be reassured that "they are doing it (research) right." Hearing from others helps stimulate ideas for further research. It also builds a camaraderie and a mutual respect for one another's work. At our school we were able to use a graduate assistant to provide technical support and assistance. Such support can also be provided in the context of the meetings where teachers can help one another through sharing their own experiences. The administrator should also provide help on an individual basis. It is imperative for the administrator to have research ideas in mind and to be able to suggest them when teachers state that they are having a difficult time formulating such questions. Formulating these questions is one of the most difficult areas to deal with as teachers begin this process.
5. **Develop an environment of mutual trust.** It is important when engaging in a new endeavor, particularly one dealing with research, to allow individuals to fail. It is vital for the administrator to let teachers know both verbally and in actions that it is acceptable if all activities do not work out as planned. Some research efforts might result in findings which seem strange or they might not yield anything which the teacher can really use. An environment must be established that allows for failure and permits participants to share these experiences if this approach is going to work. Administrators should discuss this and work with the teachers to ensure that everyone feels free to share what really occurs rather than what they think should be occurring.

What are the Benefits?

Incorporating the concept of the teacher as a researcher has many benefits. It raises the level of consciousness of problems which exist in a single classroom and school. It also creates an attitude that these problems can be solved at the level at which they occur. This approach empowers teachers and administrators to improve education in a meaningful way, one step at a time. It is a method for integrating theory and practice which creates a dialogue between students, teachers, parents, and universities. Integrating this concept into the teaching task develops reflective and research skills, empowers teachers to create their own knowledge of what works, and transforms the role and concept of teacher from technician to artist, from laborer to professional. As an administrator, it enabled me to assist my teachers in improving education for the children in their classroom and strengthened the bond between us. In the final analysis it has made me more reflective and more involved in addressing the educational problems which we face. I too have come to consider myself as an active researcher who believes that it is possible to change things through research if we will form new networks, develop new concepts, become active problem solvers, and share our knowledge with one another.

It is vital to the success of our educational institutions for us to explore avenues where the blending of research and practice can make things better for teachers, schools, and students. At the Florida State University School, we have made this commitment. We hope that our endeavors will convince others to do the same. By working together, we can form networks throughout Florida and the nation that will make research a part of practice and practice a reflective activity.

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