

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS - POWER AND POLITICS*

Lloyd D. Blazely

Education Department of Tasmania

This paper is written by a person who is responsible in an hierarchical sense for the research in an education system. It is based on experience, discussion and reflection, rather than on the analysis and integration of educational theories derived from research literature.

The point of view that the paper will try to express can be summarized:

1. The power in any situation is not a fixed quantity.
2. The intention of research is to improve practice.
3. People are more likely to implement change if the process starts from 'where they are at'.
4. The greatest potential for change exists in the situation in which the people who have to take the action play a significant role in the total research process.
5. The political process uses the existing power structure to achieve a given goal.
6. The political process in education relates to both the formal hierarchical system and to informal networks.
7. In making judgements about a political process, it is important to look at the intended goal as well as the methods of operating.

In the physical sciences, power is defined as the rate at which work is done. Unfortunately, within the social sciences the concept appears to be a little more elusive. In this paper it is probably sufficient to accept power as the capacity to take action or alternatively, to cause someone else to take action. To be reasonably comprehensive, the capacity to decide not to act should also be included as part of the definition.

A machine has a maximum capacity to generate power. The parts of a car work together to provide a given brake horse power which can only be increased by replacement of, or substantial modification to existing parts. It is likely that the same does not apply to a social group. The sum of the power in the group is variable and can be increased or decreased dramatically by changing the operation of the group and the relationship both within it and between it and the outside world. If this concept of variable power has validity then it is necessary to think beyond the simple notion of redistribution of power to one of growth or decline.

When teachers become researchers they may do so by working independently or in a group. Within the group situation they may be working under the direction of a 'master' researcher doing what they are told in a way designed by him. In this case, they are really no more than collectors of information with

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about as much opportunity to influence the research process as the people who deliver and collect the national census forms. A major difference occurs when the teacher participates in the decision making processes associated with the research, that is, contributes to decisions about the problem to be researched, the data to be collected, the collection techniques, the methods of analysis and the consideration of implications. Perhaps the first and last of these hold the key to the power question. The research team may be composed in various ways from a few teachers within a school, through a regional group, to a cross-section of the system.

Each situation is likely to have its own power implications but before these are considered, it is necessary to say something about the nature of research and the nature of change.

Research in education is the systematic investigation of some aspect of education. The intention of research is presumably to increase knowledge and understanding so that the processes of education may be improved, that is made more effective and efficient in achieving whatever it is that society decides education should achieve. Thus research can be seen as a contributor to improved practices in education.

There are various degrees of teacher involvement in research and these relate to different intentions and are designed for different ends.

1. At the lowest level, the teacher is asked to adopt or adapt another's research findings.
2. Teachers may become a participating member of a group co-operating in a research project.
3. Teachers may initiate research and call in expert advice to assist as required.

Much has been written recently about the nature of change in education and the ways in which teachers and others adopt and adapt changes. Attempts to introduce new curricula, revised teaching strategies and modified resource utilization have frequently foundered and have rarely, if ever, led to widespread genuine changes in education. Various attempts have been made to classify the degrees of change between the two extremes of outright rejection and total acceptance. These tend to suggest that the most important element in effecting a change is the extent to which the starting point is consistent with 'what people already have in their heads'.

Teachers for example have a 'theory of education' based solidly in their own experience. Their particular set of concepts, beliefs and assumptions arises largely from what happens to them in their own classroom with their own students. Their personal experience modifies and consolidates what they have learned from books, their own student days and their conversations with fellow teachers. If a new curriculum is based on someone else's 'theory of education', it may be inconsistent with the base from which the teacher is working. The teacher is then required to change his own perspective or to modify the new curriculum to fit. The extent to which these two processes operate will determine the level of adoption.

It is now appropriate to return to the consideration of power associated with teachers as researchers. The application of the 'Haringey' study may help to illustrate the various issues. In brief, this study

showed that the involvement of parents in listening to their children read, and reading to them on a planned and continuing basis, made a significant difference to the children's reading achievement.

Suppose a 'system' researcher had undertaken this study using accepted research techniques. If substantial gains were demonstrated, he would obviously want all schools in the system to adopt the 'Haringey' approach. However, this is where his problems most likely begin. The researcher may have hierarchical power and the power of his new found knowledge. However, his capacity to bring about a changed practice may be very limited. If we consider the group consisting of the researcher, infant advisers and consultants and infant teachers, then the power of this group in respect to bringing about changes to infant reading achievements is very limited.

The power of the group might have been increased marginally if the researcher had used teachers to collect the relevant information. The teachers concerned would have the opportunity to develop some understanding of what was happening, and hence to modify their 'theory of education'. The power of the group to act would depend on many factors, including the standing amongst their peers of the 'collectors' and the congruence of the new practice with teachers' existing concepts and beliefs.

Rather than analyze all likely combinations, let us look at what might be seen as the process most likely to give the group as previously defined the most power. Suppose a group of infant teachers from their reading, discussions and experience wanted to experiment with involving parents in teaching children to read. If they then called in a researcher to provide technical research expertise, an infant consultant to advise on materials and resources, and a parent, then the group begins to have substantial potential power. Provided there is appropriate sharing in the issue definition, research design, data collection and analysis, and the consideration of implications, then there is likely to be considerable changed practice as an end result. The research may not have quite the same classical validity and rigour as that undertaken by a researcher working alone, but it has a far greater chance of bringing about change.

It has been argued in this paper that the total power and the distribution of power in an educational setting is changed markedly when teachers take on the role of researchers. If the political process is accepted as a process which uses the power structure or power distribution within a situation to achieve a given goal, then it is apparent that the political process is also affected when teachers become researchers.

Having established the above point, it is tempting to look more generally at the political issue, at the efficiency and ethics of process and outcome, at the nature of formal and informal systems, and at the process of getting people with power to actually take action. However, such an analysis is beyond the present scope. Our concern is with implications associated with teachers being researchers.

In order to engage in a political process, an individual or group must have an outcome in mind. Suppose an administrator wants mini-schools developed in the secondary schools in the system. If he accepts the principles put forward in this paper, he will try to establish a group with the task of generating its own power to move towards the outcome. Who will he try to have included in the group? The simple answer is those who will have to take the action. In fact, he may need several groups, all experimenting and researching. He must not alienate those with formal power, such as principals, nor those with informal power, such as opinion leaders. Either could in their own way, prevent an experimental process from

getting started or make it become sterile during its life-time.

The whole issue is becoming complex with a string of unresolved questions emerging. How do we get knowledge of the informal power structure? What is the best way of establishing a group? Is it ethical to 'manipulate' people into a group in order to achieve even a highly desirable outcome? (i.e. does the end justify the means?) Can formal hierarchical power be maintained while informal power is being increased? Does it matter if the formal power structure is not maintained? How important is the status of the initiator in achieving some defined goal? Does the specificity of the goal affect its probability of achievement?

Rather than trying to sort out answers to the above, it may be best to conclude the paper with a couple of assertions.

When a teacher undertakes research, he is likely to change his knowledge and understanding, his theory of education, his relationship with others, including his students, his informal power base, his political role, but beyond all these, his capacity to be a better teacher. The nature of the changes that take place will be influenced by many factors including his intentions, whether he is working individually or in a group, the composition of the group, the nature of the research task and the range of 'others' who may try to use the fact that he is engaged in the research.