

THE FORMATION OF RESEARCH COMMUNITIES AMONGST PRACTISING

TEACHERS : SOME PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS*

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This paper attempts to bring together some of the things we have learned about getting teachers started as researchers and the necessary conditions for the formation of research communities amongst practising teachers. In it I draw from our experiences in South Australia and refer specifically to the three papers presented at this symposium by teacher-researchers.

The context in which a research project is initiated will determine the likelihood of the formation of a research community of practising teachers. We have found that research communities amongst practising teachers are more likely to arise in some contexts than others. The context of initiation affects:

- (i) whether a research project, and therefore a research community, gets started or not;
- (ii) the kind of research community that forms, that is who gets to belong to it, the roles and relationships amongst members and others, who tells what to who;
- (iii) the extent to which the research community is 'authentic', and
- (iv) the likelihood that the research community will survive.

a. Contexts of initiation

In what contexts do teachers become researchers?

In this state there appear to be at least three different contexts in which teachers get started as researchers.

Firstly, teachers often become researchers in the context of school based curriculum development and evaluation 'projects'. A primary school staff about to implement a Language Arts curriculum, for example, may seek the assistance of a resource person who suggests the idea of action research (Beasley, 1981a). A high school that has set up a sub-school system may evaluate its functioning (Beasley, 1981b; Newson, 1981). A teacher who has received a grant to evaluate the effects of a project seeks the assistance of a facilitator who points to the benefit of close observation of classroom practices.

The school (a teacher(s) or an administrator) usually initiates the research process, even though the idea may initially come from an external resource person. The stated purpose is curriculum development and school improvement.

1. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide, November 12-15, 1981.

Secondly, teachers become researchers in what I will describe as 'the state of excitement' in which they leave some inservice conferences and workshops in special interest areas. The summer and autumn schools in Language Arts organized jointly by college lecturers and advisers at Wattle Park Teachers' Centre in February and June, 1981, and the series of workshops organized by regionally based advisers (Williamson and Davoren, 1981) also at Wattle Park Teachers' Centre are two recent examples I have been involved in. In addition, workshops and conferences convened by members of existing professional associations spark off groups of researchers. (Kling, 1981).

Teachers attend these conferences and workshops voluntarily, and often in their own time, for the purpose of professional development. The notion of teachers as researchers may be an integral part of the conference programme or may arise 'naturally' in follow-up activities.

Thirdly, teachers become researchers in the context of externally initiated curriculum development projects. The Language Development Project, for example, was initiated jointly by the Curriculum Development Centre and the South Australian Education Department. Teachers were invited to form a network for the purpose of developing curriculum materials (Cormack, 1981). The 'Improving Chances for Girls' Project was initiated by the Transition Education Unit. Teachers in the mixed faculty school at Banksia Park High was one group of teachers amongst four schools who agreed to plan and document the effect of different teaching strategies on students' career choices for the purpose of producing curriculum materials for dissemination to other schools.

b. How do teacher-researchers organize themselves?

As a consequence of each of the circumstances described above, groups of teacher-researchers have formed.

What patterns of involvement of teachers and others are evident in each of these contexts?

- (i) In the context of school based curriculum development and evaluation projects, teachers have focussed on research at the level of the classroom, the faculty and the school. How have teachers organized themselves to do research at each of these levels? Firstly, at the level of the classroom two patterns are clear:
- teachers and their students become co-researchers and link themselves with an external¹ resource person and informally with colleagues in their school. For example, individual teachers working on one floor level in a sub-school at Morphett Vale High School met regularly with an external resource person to reflect on classroom practices. They shared something of their classroom practices with colleagues on that floor level (Beasley, 1981b). Teachers were acting and reflecting individually for most of the time but the beginnings of collaborative reflection were evident. The role played by

1. By external resource person, I mean anyone outside the classroom community. Usually this person is external to the school, but Phil Cormack has described the assistance given to him by his principal. (Cormack, 1981).

an external person varies. For example, she may join the classroom on a regular basis as an observer and co-reflector (Queale, 1981) or interview students on the teacher's behalf (Cormack, 1981) or assist the teacher to self-reflect without entering the classroom. (Beasley, 1981a and b).

- teachers (and usually a deputy) form a group, which may or may not represent the staff, to plan and conduct research on behalf of the research community (the staff). Susan Sweetman (1980) has described how the staff at Newton Primary School, South Australia, formed a committee of interested staff to evaluate the usefulness of a Language kit. No external resource person was invited to assist.

Secondly, at the school level, two patterns of organization are common:

- a group of teachers representing the staff or different faculties form a research team together with administrators and possibly parents. Their task is to plan and conduct research on behalf of the community and present recommendations for action.
- a group of teachers representing the staff combine with others as described above. Their task is to co-ordinate and facilitate research amongst the primary actors in the community (not to do it on their behalf). The actors themselves are responsible for deciding what action to take.¹

(ii) In the context of in-service conferences and workshops at least three kinds of groups form. The focus is usually research at the classroom level.

- a teacher returns to her classroom and invites her students to become co-researchers (Cosgrove, 1981). The classroom forms the 'natural' boundary of the research community. Teachers and students share their findings with one another and no-one else.
- members of an already existing network or professional association set up a 'formal' support group for research and invite a facilitator to meet with them regularly over a period of time. Susan Kling has described the development of one such group of early childhood educators which included teachers, administrators and resource persons (Kling, 1981). At this stage members of the group act and reflect individually but use the group to develop research skills.
- informal networks of teacher-researchers form. As individual teachers begin to try out new strategies and document their effects, they share their experiences at informal meetings with teachers, advisers and college lecturers with whom they have made a personal commitment to ongoing collaboration. In these circumstances, research takes place as a quiet process in small groups.

1. The organization of school level evaluation has been described in more detail in Riordan, L., Teachers as evaluators: the potential and limitations, an M.Ed. dissertation in preparation.

(iii) The two externally initiated curriculum development projects resulted in the formation of research groups of two kinds:

- a network¹ of teacher-researchers with a full-time co-ordinator and a small group of resource persons. The organization of the group and the roles and relationships of its members have changed in the eighteen months of the life of the group. Teachers have moved from individual action and reflection within a loose-knit, supportive group to collaborative action and reflection in small groups (Cormack, 1981a,b; Riordan, 1981d).
- a faculty group acts and reflects collaboratively (Cosgrove, 1981).

c. Problems and prospects in the formation of research communities amongst practising teachers.

The formation of a research group and the conduct of a research project does not necessarily indicate that a research community has, or will, be formed. Some modes of organization which teachers adopt especially in the context of school based curriculum development projects are dysfunctional in the sense that a self-sustaining, authentic research community is unlikely to develop as a result. It is evident too that research communities do not often form quickly. Some research groups may develop into research communities over a period of time.

In what contexts are research communities of practising teachers likely to form?

Our experience suggests that research communities amongst practising teachers are most likely to form in the context of inservice conferences which focus on special interest areas (not action research) and in the context of curriculum development projects where groups of practising teachers are the curriculum developers disseminating materials to other teachers.

Why?

To begin with, it is important to recognize the general political and social implications associated with the formation of communities of teacher-researchers. Most schools (and classrooms) are not 'communities'. They are hierarchical institutions. The people in them have no tradition of participatory, collaborative, co-operative work. Consequently, the formation of research communities amongst teachers necessitates a process of restructuring and a redistribution of power inside and outside the school.

If teachers and their students are to be co-researchers into classroom practices, they must step outside the roles and relationships to which they are accustomed. Teachers and students become learners together (Brown, 1981; Cosgrove, 1981; Wilkinson, 1981).

Teachers must work collaboratively with their peers. Teachers have always been 'private performers'. They do not have a tradition of collaboration with peers.

1. I distinguish between a 'network' and a 'group'. A 'network' (or 'cluster') is a specific kind of group comprising representatives from a number of schools. The term "group" does not specify within or cross-school membership. (Robottom, 1981).

At the school level the potential boundary of a research community necessarily extends beyond teachers and students in classrooms and faculty groups to include administrators, parents and external resource persons. Teachers and administrators must recognize each other as co-actors in a situation and therefore co-researchers. The success of any school level innovation such as a sub-school system ultimately depends on the extent to which teaching and learning processes in classrooms are benefited. Evaluation and research at the school level implies a restructuring process. Existing hierarchical structures will be inappropriate.¹

The extent to which the restructuring process is successful at the classroom and school level can be related, it seems, to the context in which the research process was initiated.

Although the school based curriculum development and evaluation movement has undoubtedly given impetus to processes of self-reflection amongst teachers and contributed to the development of participatory ways of working amongst teachers and administrators (see b(i)), we would argue that it has not often led to the formation of authentic, self-sustaining research communities amongst practising teachers.

The reasons are largely 'political'. In the first place, because schools are hierarchical organizations with an inbuilt system of rewards and punishments, teachers have often reacted negatively to the idea of curriculum evaluation, particularly when administrators have initiated the idea. Administrators have tended to initiate curriculum development and evaluations more frequently than teachers have. When teachers have been coopted to join evaluation groups they have often done so without genuine commitment or critical intent. (Riordan, 1981c).

Secondly, curriculum evaluations have often been politically motivated. While the stated purpose might be 'improvement', the not-so-hidden agenda has often been justification and legitimation of innovative practices. School based curriculum development and evaluation has become compounded with the legitimation crisis in education and the accountability movement. Curriculum evaluation has been used to lobby for support from colleagues and funding agencies, to prove the worth of an innovation and so on, rather than 'to increase understanding' or 'to improve'.

There is evidence to suggest that the politics of schools may in fact prevent the formation of a number of potential research communities within schools. Susan Cosgrove described one such situation. (Cosgrove, 1981). A group of teachers met to discuss the evaluation of their innovative project. Their chief concern was to justify its existence to the administration and to colleagues. Some members of the group wanted to understand and improve. But the group decided not to go ahead. 'Why should we?' they said. The risk was too great. The dissemination of information about a teacher-initiated innovation to colleagues and administrators within the school was likely to increase feelings of threat and uncertainty.

As a consequence much curriculum evaluation which has arisen in this sort of context has been inauthentic, that is primary actors in the situation have not made a free commitment to the process or research groups have acted on their behalf. Someone else has initiated and owned the process. Not surprisingly, such exercises have been superficial - questionnaires, questionnaires and more questionnaires!

1. It is inappropriate for a curriculum deputy or curriculum co-ordinating committee to assume an evaluation (research) role on behalf of the primary actors in the situation.

(e.g. Sweetman, 1980). Teachers have resisted close observation of classroom practices. Communication and dissemination about classroom practices has been very restricted. If a research community formed in any sense at all, it was 'closed'. The evaluation was often a 'one off' exercise which did not contribute to the development of curriculum theory or practice.¹

Tony Newson and Susan Cosgrove have described some of the conditions necessary, but probably not sufficient, for the formation of successful research communities in the context of school based curriculum development projects at both the classroom and school level. (Cosgrove, 1981; Newson, 1981).

Some of the political problems inherent in the context of school based curriculum development and evaluation are avoided when teachers form research groups in other ways. In the context of inservice conferences, for example, teachers have formed voluntary associations with peers in other schools and with external resource persons for the purpose of their own professional development and the development of classroom practices. These research groups are teacher-initiated and teacher-controlled. They have the potential to become authentic research communities. In the case of externally initiated projects, the development of the group as a research community is dependent firstly on the transfer of ownership of the project to the teachers. This happened quickly in the case of the faculty group at Banksia Park High where the teachers had established a collaborative working relationship and were already committed to the notion of teachers as researchers. In the case of the Language Development Project (L.D.P.), the network of teachers took some time to develop a research community. This was, in part, a consequence of the context in which the project was initiated.

The Language Development Project network differed from the networks formed at inservice conferences in several important respects.

- (i) the project was a National/Education Department initiative. It was not teacher initiated.
- (ii) teachers joined the project by invitation.
- (iii) teachers joined the project with different expectations, motives, commitment.
- (iv) teachers did not know others in the group except the person from their own school.
- (v) the project had a full-time co-ordinator (not a facilitator).
- (vi) a small group of resource persons was attached to the project (not at the invitation of the teachers).
- (vii) group meetings were arranged on behalf of group members.

The Language Development Project evolved as a research community as teachers got to know one another, discovered common interests and concerns and became 'joint owners' of the project. Commitment to collaborative action and reflection grew as teachers became aware that they could not develop useful

1. It is likely that the political problems discussed here have contributed to what Grundy and Kemmis (1981) have described as "arrested action research".

curriculum materials for other teachers without reflecting on their own practices and that the most powerful ways to do so was through intensive interaction in small groups. (Riordan, 1981d). This network is an 'open' community. Teachers write for other teachers (e.g. Wilkinson, 1981). And the network is widening as teachers are joined by peers within their schools (e.g. Queale, 1981) and the potential for new networks arises as teachers become facilitators of action research at inservice conferences initiated by them.

In addition to political problems, it is clear that teachers face practical problems in becoming researchers. Given the existing arrangements in most schools it is not easy for teachers to find time to work collaboratively. The formation of research communities within schools will necessitate a change in the priorities of administrators so that arrangements are made for teachers to work together within school hours. Of course, teachers must want to use the time in this way. It is not surprising that we find that it is more difficult to create conditions for co-operative work amongst teachers in secondary schools.

d. What is the role of the facilitator in the formation of research communities?

In other papers presented at this symposium the term facilitator has been used to describe persons who assist teachers to critically reflect on their own practices. (e.g. Beasley, 1981; Kling, 1981; Newson, 1981).

Facilitators come from within the education system (often they are advisers, project officers and research officers) and from outside the system (universities and colleges).¹ Their various roles have already been alluded to. What role facilitators play in the initiation and formation of research communities is of interest here.

Whatever the context (that is, a school based curriculum development project or a teacher network) facilitators may suggest the idea of action research but join the research group by invitation and through negotiation. That is, the school - teachers, administrators - or the teacher group initiates the process, not external persons. The facilitator then plays an important role helping teachers and administrators understand and establish the conditions that are necessary for the development of an authentic and self-sustaining research community. In the context of school based curriculum development projects, particularly at the school level, this includes building a commitment to 'democratic' principles of operation and an awareness of political and ethical considerations. In a teacher group or network it will mean working with teachers to establish structures, roles and relationships within the group and with others outside the group which will optimize and sustain the research process.²

Teachers must do research before they will want to be researchers. They must empower themselves in order to begin. Facilitators can help by providing opportunities for teachers to get started.

1. For a more detailed discussion of where facilitators come from and their role in teacher action research, see Brown et. al., 1981.
2. The teacher group and the external resource persons in the Language Development Project spent the first nine months working this out. The story of the Language Development Project will be available from the author early in 1982.

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