ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt was made to develop links between practice, theory and research in education. The ethnographic research methods employed allowed for the following of differing lines of inquiry as they emerged, and for incorporation of theoretical concepts when events in the school suggested their relevance. Analysis was not built on an a priori theory. The concepts which were developed from structuration theory included practices, agency and structure. These concepts were used in the analysis of the history and context both of the education system and the school, and the power relations between school personnel. The approach emphasises the importance of a thorough understanding of practices and routines followed in the history and context of the education system and of the school, and the power relations between personnel, which are analysed in terms of agency and structure. Using the concepts from this framework the principal and the researcher worked as research partners as they cooperatively reflected on the activities and interactions of the principal and staff of the school. In the final section of the paper the roles of the principal, researcher and teachers are explored and the issues and concerns which arise in conducting such research are examined.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have discussed the potential of ethnography to link practice, theory and research in education. In this study, an attempt was made to develop these links.

There were several stages in the study. First, a general problem about how principals can analyse the factors which support or constrain proposed changes, had been identified in an earlier professional development program, Principals and Change. Questions and comments from participants led to the idea of formulating processes and procedures, grounded in theory, for analysing both in-school and out-of-school factors, which in this study were referred to as the cultural context.

A principal, who had worked with the writer in the Principals & Change Project, volunteered his school for an exploratory study to attempt to define a set of processes and procedures. During this exploratory study, there was not a set of precise hypotheses, not even a specific research question. Rather there was an attempt to follow-up the feeling among principals and those who worked with them, that examination of the activities in the cultural context, may help in the analysis, and as a monitoring process, during change. Hence the ethnographic research methods employed allowed for the following of differing lines of inquiry as they emerged, and for incorporation of theoretical concepts when events in the school suggested their relevance. Analysis was not built on an a priori theory.

When the concepts had been developed through reflections on events by the principal and teachers at Progress Road State School and through reflections on events and on the sociological literature by the researcher, a tentative conceptual framework was proposed. This framework was considered by all who had been involved in its development and found to suit their needs in analysing
their own particular context. The purpose of providing a conceptual framework for analysis was to facilitate understanding of the supporting and constraining factors of the cultural context when school change is attempted.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS AND THE EXPLORATORY STUDY

In the exploratory study, an attempt was made to establish a link between theory and practice and for the researcher to share understandings with the practitioners. In the school this sharing of understanding of practices occurred in several ways. The principal, whose practices were the main focus at this stage of the study kept a record of his ideas and planning and the researcher recorded his account of his actions and his reflections on them. This recording occurred when the researcher spent one day every two weeks during term-time in the school over a three year period. Added information on school practices was collected from minutes of staff meetings, and interviews with teachers, parents and students at appropriate intervals.

Reflection (cf Jarvis 1987) was a key feature of the interactions. Not only were the researcher and principal engaged in considering the school practices which had occurred, but the processes which could be used for both private and cooperative reflection were explored.

Having shared the experience of reflecting on practices and experiences in the Principal and Change Program, it was possible to reflect on this shared experience.

A systematic approach to reflecting on practice is needed but sometimes collaborative reflection feels like a talkathon and participants feel they are going round in circles getting nowhere. On the other hand, after this initial feeling, participants do feel involvement and start to "own" the course and content of the discussion.

During the second term, only the principal and the researcher were analysing and monitoring the school practices. At the beginning of term 3, a period of three days was set aside for teachers in this school to consider their practices and to decide on any changes which might be made. The writer was present at one of these days in which whole school changes were considered at a day-long workshop.

Following this workshop, consultation was held with the Principal and the teachers to decide what would be the best way for the researcher to continue her monitoring of the actions of all those who were involved in anticipated changes instead of concentrating only on the principal's practices. The focus would still be on his practices. However, if a comprehensive picture of this leader's practices, when he was attempting to initiate changes was to be provided, then his interactions with the teachers must be taken into account also. It was decided by all that the researcher would conduct reflective interviews with the principal, the teachers and the parents for the remainder of her period in the school. She would spend one day per fortnight in the school for a two year period from this time. Access would be provided to school documents and minutes of meeting.

In the early stages of the exploratory study the major issues identified were the pedagogical practices of teachers, the principal's authority and the teachers' autonomy. The Principal reflected,

Are my plans for more evaluation of practices alienating the teachers. I am really keen to improve kids learning, but several teachers seem to think I am just out to supervise them. What is the
role of a Principal in school review?

Some teachers reported that

He is just trying to make me do things his way

while one in particular asserted her autonomy by stating

I've taught in this school for many years and had no complaints so I'm not going to change anything.

This autonomy dilemma was very apparent at this time. Because the researcher was a regular visitor to the school and had established a position of trust with all school personnel, the perceptions of the dilemma were discussed openly by all. However, in order to move towards developing a conceptual framework for analysing leadership practices, it was necessary to provide more than a description of perceptions. Woods (1985) suggests that there is a need to move from description to preliminary theoretical concepts as a step towards developing and filling existing theories and as a way forward in formulating new theories.

DEVELOPING PRELIMINARY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Woods (1987) makes the following points about the methods of collecting and analysing data and how such methods can lead to theory construction. He suggests that there should be an immersion first in the field and then in the data. This should be followed by systematic testing. The period of reflection on the data should allow the sociological imagination (Wright Mills 1959) to be employed. Using the sociological imagination gives the researcher the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, to combine ideas that have not been combined before, indeed that may have been quite unexpected in combination, and provides a strong urge to make sense of the world.

Hammersley (1987) also argues for theory construction as a creative process in which competing theories are considered and in which the evidence is checked against the theoretical claims being made. The recording, describing and reflecting on cultural behaviour can be a method for self-evaluation in a school. Furthermore, using an anthropologist’s perspective, schools can be considered as part of the larger social environment and consideration can be given to broad social relations and curriculum issues (Erickson 1984).

As noted earlier reflection is a key feature in such theory construction. What was recorded at this stage were the reflections of the principal on his leadership practices and those of the researcher on her observations. The principal provided interpretations of events. The researcher examined sociological concepts which could be used to analyse and monitor the leadership practices of this principal. While the preliminary theoretical concepts which had been considered, namely, the pedagogical practices of teachers, authority and autonomy, were features which had influenced the actions and interactions of all those involved in the attempted school changes, these concepts did not address adequately the complexity of in-school and out-of-school factors which were identified during the reflective interviews. The final outcome of these reflections resulted in the choice of the concepts of practices, agency and structure (Giddens 1984) for the conceptual framework which would be used for analysing and monitoring the principal’s practices.

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concepts were developed from structuration theory (Giddens 1984, 1987) as had been developed by Evans (1987).
The approach emphasises the importance of a thorough understanding of practices and routines followed in the history and context of the education system and of the school, and the power relations between personnel, which are analysed in terms of agency and structure. Agency refers to the control people have over their practices. Such control it is argued stems from knowledge of how the system works and from the power relations which are not necessarily hierarchical in nature. Power in this sense is a relational concept. Structure refers to social rules, the techniques which are used in interactive situations, and resources, both personal and material which provide power for individual people. Social rules, which may be understood only at the tacit level can either reproduce current practices or might initiate new practices. For example, it is 'well known' that teachers have autonomy to implement preferred classroom practices. This is called a social rule. This 'knowledge' may not be discussed but it is used by both teachers and principals as a guide to actions and as a source of power. It is argued that such rules and resources in schooling provide principals and teachers with a range of options to use in encounters. Rules have three features, the constitution of meaning, the sanctioning of conduct and the legitimation of actions. Each of these elements of the traditions and contexts of schools, agency and structure can be either supporting or constraining factors when principals attempt to initiate school change.

In summary, the processes and procedures of the ethnographic methods used in the study which were developed using these concepts from structuration theory are referred to as a conceptual framework. The concepts of practices, agency and structure informed the analysis of the history and context both of the education system and the school, and the power relations between school personnel. The purpose of providing a conceptual framework for analysis was to facilitate understanding of the supporting and constraining factors of the cultural context when school change is attempted.

ROLES OF RESEARCHER, PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

Brimfield, Roderick and Yamamoto (1983), identify some of the problems which occur when collecting and analysing qualitative data. For example, how is the tacit knowledge brought to the surface during the inquiry? Furthermore the values and views of the researcher orient explanations. How is this acknowledged and how are the implicit assumptions examined? It is not sufficient to describe the questions, contexts, participants and procedures. The rationale behind decisions and choices must also be explored. Edwards and Furlong (1978) also note the dilemma faced by researchers in using this approach.

The ethnographer attempts to record all events and actions as they happen but cannot avoid having preconceptions about what to highlight. No attempt is made to control or ignore features of the interaction but some actions and events are noted while others are missed.

In the present study, this selectivity is acknowledged. The writer has outlined the theoretical position from which she reported the actions and events in the program. Her interpretations of the perceptions of principals and her own reflections defined the field of inquiry in the study and were developed from the theoretical position and the problem areas identified in an earlier project. However, in the early stages, the theoretical position was broadly from a sociological perspective and the specific conceptual framework was developed through reflections on more specific theories which may facilitate understanding of the practice being studied.

The study had an aim broader than understanding individual experience. Though
there was a concern for the individual, attention was given also to relationships between school personnel, the community and the education system as a whole (cf Argyris 1980). Both school and system constraints and supports as viewed by the principal and other relevant personnel were considered, and the goal was to generate knowledge which would lead to planning actions for future development. Following Argyris (1980), inquiry oriented interaction and cooperative problem solving (in the case of the teachers in the exploratory study) were important. Such collaborative inquiry into school experiences meant that respondents had an important input in guiding the research and that they could benefit from it. (cf Torbett 1981). The observation notes and interviews were given to the principal and teachers for validation and the feedback was incorporated into the developing conceptual framework.

The principal and the teachers were asked to describe and reflect on their actions. Actions were defined as not only what they did, but also the meanings they attached to their own and others' practices. Lines of inquiry were followed as they presented themselves rather than attempting to attend exclusively to events and actions which might fit an a priori theory. In a sense the theory was held in reserve and concepts were incorporated in an inquiry mode during the dialogue with the principal and the teachers. At this stage the emphasis was on traditions and present practices, and on the authority and autonomy of the principal and the teachers. The researcher decided to use the concepts of practices, agency and structure, as the theoretical concepts in the initial conceptual framework.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN THE RESEARCH

The concerns most frequently expressed about this methodology are those of generalisability, validity and reliability of the data. To some extent these issues have already been addressed. However, it is argued that the research methods used in this study have allowed for an emphasis on practitioners' needs; reflection on practices and activities as a basis for future planning; and practitioner responsibility for making decisions in relation to the data recorded. Generalisability, in contrast to other research methodologies, is a task undertaken by the practitioner as he or she uses what is seen as relevant to contextual or personal needs. Similarly, it is the reader or practitioner who judges and either accepts or rejects the reliability and validity of the data in relation to personal knowledge and experience.

In this study where the ultimate goal was the development of a framework for use by practitioners, it was necessary that the practitioners recognise and verify the 'truth' of the cases. As long as both the data and the concepts were accepted by the practitioners, then they would be willing to continue with the reflection and consequent actions for school development. The continued use of the framework in other contexts (see Evans 1988a, b, c.) has demonstrated that practitioners, other than the participants in this study, do see the cases as 'real' and the framework as 'helpful'.

However, there are other issues which are raised by doing research in this way. These are the issues of data control, participant responsibility, acknowledgement of participants' perceptions as legitimate and researcher competence in inquiry oriented research, which can change direction as events and actions occur.

The issue of who controls the data is related to the power relations between researcher and practitioner. Issues, concerns, or problems studied are those of the practitioner. Hence, the first consideration is for the rights of practitioners, not only in relation to what is studied, but also in relation to what is published. The practitioner owns the data and it is the task of the researcher to negotiate for access to, and release of, the data. Hence,
although a final research report is one expected outcome, the initial report goes to the practitioner before release. Interpretations of actions and events are negotiated until all are satisfied with the 'truth' of the report. Such measures were taken in this study.

Secondly, the methods were based on a sharing of experiences, where participants took responsibility for their own learning. In reflecting on practice, the principal and the teachers used the outcomes of the reflection in planning for future action. Participants in such studies share actions, meanings and experiences, and seek to act more effectively and with greater understanding in their own setting. Those who have used both the conceptual framework and case studies written subsequently have considered what elements of the contexts or the strategies can apply to their situation and how to adopt them for personal use.

Thirdly, participants' perspectives and perceptions are accepted as legitimate. The realisation of different definitions of situations which can be the result of differing perspectives lead participants and researchers to recognise and record the existence of multiple realities (Schutz 1962). This issue was kept firmly in mind in the present study, as has been demonstrated by responses from the practitioners.

The final issue to address is the ability of the researcher to carry out this approach to research. The relationships which are built up between researcher and practitioner are most important. This is the case because the quality of the data and conclusions drawn rely on trust from the practitioners and the ability of the researcher to 'let the sociological imagination play'. In using this methodology, it should be noted that social research is reflexive in nature, and we are part of the social world we study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). We rely on the knowledge we have of the culture and the situation we are studying, and so must have some effect on what is being studied. However, while the presence of the writer must be acknowledged in this study, there was an attempt to capture the insider's perspective (cf Hall, 1984), in order to develop and test an appropriate framework which could be used to analyse the cultural contexts of schools.

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