SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATION

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

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Teachers as researchers of educational change

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Abstract:

This symposium presents research conducted by postgraduate students enrolled in the M Ed unit Educational Change and Career Development offered at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra. To allow maximum opportunity for the design and development of individual learning pathways, students engaged in minor research projects relating to the impact of educational change on their professional and personal lives. Students located their research within a social, theoretical and personal context and drew on background experience in attempting to discern issues, approaches and emphases relating to educational change in schools. This symposium presents the results of that research and includes five papers on: Violence in the classroom; Legislative reform in the ACT; The case for outcomes-based assessment; Introducing students to peer-assessment and self-assessment; and Perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with disorders in the classroom. While a variety of foci are presented through the papers, the overarching theme focuses on the impact of educational change on teachers and their work.

Introduction

The process of educational change is complex and often fraught with difficulty, especially for those caught up on a daily basis with changes to their workplace environments. The possibility of resistance to or rejection of change in education, particularly by teachers in schools, is ever present, and can occur for a number of reasons (Williams, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Hohn, 1998). Further, when individuals feel threatened and insecure by change they will, more than likely, experience some feelings of loss and increased anxiety (Bridges, 1980, 1988; Broadbent, 1997). Individual commitment to the change process then is essential if it is to be accepted, and this implies 'the acceptance of the goals and values of change, and a willingness to participate in the process' (Mueller et al in Brewer 1995).

An important element in any change process is that participants see themselves as having some control over the working environments in which they participate. This is essential if they are to accept responsibility for their own learning and change and to see themselves as actively involved in the learning process. Greater control and participation in the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives and a heightened awareness of the need for change should encourage higher levels of engagement and satisfaction. As Rouse (1993) highlights, the purpose of change and innovation is to not only bring to fruition new products, services and new organisational functions and roles, but to encourage individuals to modify previous patterns of behaviour and willingly accept and endorse that which is new (Rouse 1992, 1993).

The ongoing nature of educational change requires the continual processing of new information and the re-evaluation of individual goals and strategies (Senge 1990). Facilitating such learning involves assisting teachers to become proactive in reshaping their personal, work, and recreational lives (Merriam & Caffarella 1991, O'Neil 1995; Groundwater-Smith et al 1998), to be flexible and actively open-minded in their thinking (Baron 1994), and to value the concept of life-long learning. The concept of teaching and the work of teachers has changed considerably over the years, and accompanying this has been the acceptance that teaching is a 'complex, dynamic, interactive, intellectual activity (Smylie & Conyers, 1991:13). As a consequence, it remains essential that teachers approach their work with a change orientation, which, according to Richardson (1999:3) suggests teachers engage in constant reflection, evaluation and experimentation as integral elements of the teaching role. Teachers are now expected to:
'alter curricula on the basis of new knowledge and ways of knowing, to change styles of teacher-student interaction depending on needs of the student population, and to change methods when research indicates more effective practice' (Richardson, 1993:3).

After a review of the literature on teacher change, including the work of Duffy & Roehler (1986) and Fullan (1991), Richardson (1998:1) conceded that the general sentiment expressed was that 'teachers do not change, that change hurts and that is why people do not change, and that teachers are recalcitrant'. Teachers, she argues, are seen to 'resist doing whatever is being proposed because they want to cling to their old ways' and because 'change makes people uncomfortable'. Richardson further argues that the 'change hurts' and 'teachers don't change' perspective, which was prevalent in the literature 'until the early 1990s', focuses on teachers' reluctance to adopt teaching practices and curricula suggested or mandated by those external to the educational setting in which teaching occurs, and is 'promulgated by those who think they know what teachers should be doing in the classroom'.

With this in mind, the case is argued for a model of educational change that emanates not from those 'who think they know', but from those teachers who cope, on a daily basis, with significant issues and concerns regarding the quality and meaningfulness of learning experiences, the management of student behaviour, the introduction of policies affecting their practice and the adequate support for those students with special needs. Teachers may well be willing to change and accept changes to educational practice, but for this to occur effectively, the change process has to be managed. It should emerge, rather than be imposed, from the workplace and must focus on those issues and concerns most relevant to teachers.

**Teachers as Researchers**

These symposium papers describe important research work conducted by a group of postgraduate students enrolled in the Master of Education unit Educational Change and Career Development at ACU, Canberra. As teachers in the field in a variety of capacities, this group of students undertook to complete a number of research projects as an assessment requirement for the unit. To allow maximum opportunity for the design of individual learning pathways, the only restriction imposed on students was that they ensure the focus of the research project be relevant to the overall emphasis of the unit content. Students were required to position the research within a social, theoretical and personal context and were encouraged to draw on prior experiences, in attempting to discern issues, approaches and emphases presented by authors in the literature. Students were challenged to see the review as not simply a summary of information but rather more as questions posed through an analysis of the differing perspectives presented either by the author, or by the writer of the review, or when viewed in comparison with other theoretical frameworks.

Throughout the process, students were encouraged to be self-directed in their learning, a form of endeavour in which learners have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences, and one that should lead to increased self-esteem, empowerment, optimism and hope (Rowland & Volet 1996). Students are challenged to engage in the use of higher-order cognitive activities, requiring them to question, speculate and generate solutions (Biggs, 1999), and thereby increasing the level of engagement in the learning process, improving the learning outcomes and producing higher levels of overall student satisfaction. In this way, learning occurs as a result of constructive activity by the learner (Biggs, 1999) where students become inquirers, 'questioning assumptions' and being 'consciously thoughtful about goals, practices and contexts' (Richardson, 1998).
Interest in, and enthusiasm for, the subject has also been shown to be an important factor in enhancing learning and maintaining the motivation of students. Ainley (1999) argues that students must have some interest in what they are doing for any effective learning to take place. Learning through interest enables the learner to build on personal knowledge and explore issues more widely. By encouraging students to 'identify blind-spots in their perceptions and so to extend their possibilities in practice' (Walker, Lewis & Laskey, 1996), learning becomes more meaningful. Further, Wrigley (1998) argues, students 'gain meaning from reading authentic materials, writing for an audience; communicating with others outside the classroom; working as a part of a team, and giving voice to one's opinions and ideas, using literacy to affect change' (Wrigley, 1998). The linking of personal interest and cognitive stimulation sets the context 'for one of engagement in learning for its own sake rather than being a means to some other end' (Ainley, 1999).

Focus on research

In her article on the value of research, Merrifield (1997:1) challenges us to ask: 'Why do we do research? Who benefits from it? Who uses the information we gather, and what for? What is worth researching?'

Merrifield argues for a participatory approach where research becomes the tool through which people learn how to access information themselves; 'official' knowledge works in concert with the synthesising and documenting of participants' 'experience-based knowledge'. This approach to research, termed Participatory Action Research (PAR) is about giving participants the power to access and use knowledge to accomplish important work on issues they care about. It is 'dedicated to honouring people's own knowledge and empowering them with the ability to access and interpret information they need to act on their problems...a kind of research literacy' (Merrifield, 1997:2).

Merrifield (1997) identifies three essential ideas as central to the concept of PAR - participation, action and knowledge and these constitute an effective means for improving practice. Essentially, PAR is an approach to research and learning that invariably uses a variety of research methods and the level of participation differs between projects. Ideally, PAR projects are initiated by the community and researchers are invited in. However, researchers committed to the approach search out communities with which to work and to create effective collaborations that are mutually beneficial for both the community and the researcher. From this perspective, insights gained through the research process are not simply filed away, but serve to 'provide a solid and thoughtful basis for change...and not just any change, but one that benefits the people who will be affected by it' (p6). For Merrifield, the overriding challenge presented by PAR to the world of educational research is: 'are we making a difference where it matters; is the world a better place for our work?' (p6).

Research as Professional Development

A key issue in any form of professional development is the identification by individuals of their own learning needs; a process that is inevitably reflective and personal (Walker et al, 1996:35). The need for teachers to engage in quality professional development activities has been highlighted for some time. Recently, Bantick (2000) argues that training for a teaching career must be ongoing and, apart from the initial degree, teachers need to undertake regular professional development simply to keep up with best practice both within Australia and internationally. In emphasising the importance of ongoing stimulating learning experiences in authentic contexts, Bantick quotes Johnson who claims that:

'In order to significantly affect schooling, a staged career in teaching must be more than a professional ladder of ambitious individuals. Rather, it must
become a lattice work of expertise, support, advancement and leadership, engaging more accomplished and experienced teachers in developing curriculum, mentoring junior colleagues, soliciting community support, and participating in important decisions about their schools' (Johnson, 2000:15)

The facilitation of teachers' involvement in researching their own practices is therefore essential in renewing teaching competencies and facilitating change to organisational practices.

The Process

Throughout the learning process, students were guided by the overall aims of the unit, which focused on:

- developing students' understanding of the social, economic and political factors influencing educational change and the nature of teachers' work
- providing opportunities for students to critically evaluate relevant theories and research pertaining to educational change and career development
- increasing students' awareness of the impact of change on their professional and personal lives
- developing an awareness of the value of research as an effective means of promoting educational change and teacher career development

The organisational structure for the M. Ed unit provided several opportunities for students to present an overview of their research endeavours and findings to their peers. Students actively participated in the research seminars, which provided opportunities for sharing and support, as well as facilitating the framing of new directions and questions. The quality of the final research papers provided evidence of the effectiveness of the learning process.

Conclusion

The enthusiasm generated by students during this learning experience has been a noteworthy outcome of this initiative. Throughout the process, students were keen to explore aspects of education they had not documented previously. The research imperative was welcomed; peer review was well accepted and all have developed professionally as a result of this learning experience. While a distinguishing feature of this approach to learning has been to engage students in the structuring of their own learning experiences, the process has also created opportunities for students to make a significant contribution to the life of their professional communities through the sharing of personal expertise and time.
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