

## EDUCATION 391-4

### Special Topics: Developments in School Improvement

Summer Session, 1988  
July 4 to August 12  
Monday and Wednesday  
5:30 - 9:20 P. M.  
MPX 8651

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*PREREQUISITE:* Education 401/402 or permission of the instructor.

#### Description

This course provides an overview of recent developments in school improvement and staff development and examines various programs that have been designed to improve the schools. It takes the perspective that teachers must play a key role in such programs. One focus that will be developed in the course is the notion of teacher as researcher.

#### Areas to be Examined:

- the concept of school improvement
- the role of staff development in improving schools
- teacher as researcher

#### Course Requirements:

- contribute to class discussion
- prepare a background paper and develop an action plan for improving some aspect of practice

#### Required Texts:

Hopkins and Wideen. Alternate perspectives on school improvement. Falmer.

Wideen and Andrews. Staff development for school improvement: A focus on the teacher. Falmer.

# Teacher as

# Researcher



Throughout North America, Australia, and Europe teachers are engaging in classroom research. Far from the ivory-tower variety, this research is a self-determined inquiry into real-life problems related to curriculum, teaching, and learning.

MARVIN F. WIDEEN

**S**taff development frequently conjures up the image of teachers' needing repair, because they lack something. They sit, they listen, they learn what others apparently know about how they should improve. The teacher-as-researcher concept produces another image: a practising professional identifying his/her own problems and seeking ways to solve them. I would argue that the latter is the much more effective staff-development model.

The concept *teacher as researcher* has been around for a long time: undertaking research in one's own classroom and school is a powerful way one can improve one's work and grow professionally. This research is not an esoteric project one takes on in addition to one's work; nor is it research in the traditional sense. It is closely tied to the work the teacher does. Hopkins, in *A Teachers' Guide to Action Research*, refers to research as "an act undertaken by teachers

either to improve their own or a colleague's teaching or to test the assumptions of educational theory or practice."

I have worked with teachers attempting to apply what they had learned from university coursework, and I have also observed teachers who have simply undertaken, on their own, to change their practice to achieve improvement they have seen necessary. Let me illustrate the notion of teacher as researcher by describing what I saw in one school where I spent several days observing and talking to teachers.

## A case in point

The students are told that this is their language-arts period and that they have three choices. They may write, read, or illustrate their stories. Following some

housekeeping chores, the Grade 3s begin different activities. Some remain in their seats and begin printing on what appears to be a rough notebook; others are drawing. Another group proceeds to different parts of the room to read. The cushions at the back of the room and the several corners created by colorfully decorated book cases are soon occupied by other pupils who are paired off and sharing in reading books.

Two queues have now formed. One leads to a student teacher who is typing student stories; the other, to a volunteer who is helping the pupils edit their materials. The teacher, Cheryl, moves about the room helping different individuals. Pupils talk to one another, sometimes in a friendly, joking manner, but on task. As a visitor, I am presented with a 10-page story book. I feel surprised that a Grade 3 has produced it.

How different and how changed was that classroom from the language-arts

teaching typical in most classrooms. I saw no prescribed textbooks nor basal readers. I learned from Cheryl that she had developed the approach herself with the help of another teacher in the school, Pat. All teachers in the primary section of the school teach language arts similarly. What led to the innovation?

Woodfort, the school in which Cheryl teaches, is an older school in a rapidly growing suburban community. Residents are in the upper middle class, relatively ambitious people.

Within that community, Cheryl took her first teaching position, seven years ago, after graduating from a local teacher-training institution. She found that her teacher training had not prepared her particularly well for her first job, nor had it offered perspectives on how to improve the classroom instruction for children over what she had experienced as a student and observer during her teacher training. She reports having disliked her first year of teaching, simply because she knew it was not the best learning experience for children. In language arts (the subject I concentrated on during my observation), she found herself teaching from a basal reader and using workbooks and worksheets.

During a year's leave of absence from teaching, she substituted in a Grade 3 classroom in Woodfort. There she encountered a different approach to language-arts teaching. The classroom teacher was Pat, who had initiated the approach four years earlier amid storms of protest. Cheryl requested a transfer to Woodfort primarily to learn from Pat and others in the school. Cheryl attributes much of her success to the earlier efforts of Pat, who had introduced an alternative to language arts in her classroom. Her first realization, in coming to the school, was that she could not merely adopt what Pat was doing in her classroom; she had to develop her own approach. Having people who had had similar experiences, with whom to discuss difficulties, was crucial, however. Cheryl talked about the long process of trial and error that she found necessary to clarify both what she wanted to do in language arts and how she was going to implement it.

Can this be called research? Normally, when we think of research, we think of solving problems, testing ideas, and accumulating knowledge by building on our work and the work of others. Where do such factors operate in this example?

One way of viewing a problem is to describe it as a discrepancy between an ideal condition and the current condi-

tion. Sometimes discrepancies arise out of something we do not know, such as an event we cannot explain according to our expectations of reality; at other times, they arise out of something we wish to do but cannot. Our struggle to understand our universe and to make it better is essentially one of solving such problems.

In the case of Cheryl and Pat, their teaching of language arts concerned them. Each had a vision of how their teaching could become better, however fuzzy that vision may have been in the early stages. The discrepancy between vision and practice became the problem. Clarifying the vision and putting it into practice became the way to solve the problem. In many ways, the problems Cheryl and Pat faced are no different from those scientists and social scientists tackle. There are differences in scale and perhaps generalizability, but the essentials are the same.

Once a problem is identified, its solution comes about through a process of testing and refining hypotheses or ideas that will solve that problem. The garage mechanic will successively test such things as the spark plugs and the battery, using the hypothesis that the electrical system is what's at fault. Scientists in the '30s systematically tested different strains of wheat to find the one that best resisted wheat rust. Cheryl, in her attempt to find a better way of teaching language arts, tested different approaches until she found one that worked for her.

In terms of building on experience, we are well aware of the tremendous background of skill and knowledge a scientist brings to a problem. What is often overlooked is the background of experience and knowledge a teacher draws upon in solving problems. Cheryl, in developing the program that was eventually to solve her problem, drew on the work of Pat and others in the school. Both she and Pat drew on a background of information gained through in-service education, university coursework, and various other sources.

Cheryl and Pat's case is similar to research in two other ways: reflection and support. The mindless application of some laboratory technique by a person in a white coat does not constitute science. Research is often distinguished from non-research by what someone once termed the *constant application of intelligence*. People who do research think, ponder, and struggle with ideas and alternatives. They take time to re-

fect rigorously and deliberately. In the case of teachers, the mindless application of programs passed on from high places does not constitute research. What is impressive in Cheryl and Pat's case is how they both struggled with their problems. Cheryl took a year away from teaching simply to explore alternatives and think about teaching. Pat confronted a school board. Both actions required thought and reflection.

People who are engaged in problem solving rarely work alone. They normally benefit from a support group of peers. Scientists consult other scientists, read journals, and attend conferences. Cheryl joined a school that had a certain type of language-arts program in order to benefit from it. The entire primary section of the school became her support group.

While we do not normally think of teachers as potential researchers, this brief analysis illustrates that when teachers attempt to solve problems they face, they are doing a form of research. This recognition has prompted numerous projects, throughout Europe, Australia, and North America, aimed at promoting the concept *teacher as researcher*.

## The value of classroom research

Those who have studied and written about the approach point to a number of advantages. First, it is a powerful means for staff development. Second, it offers an effective method of school improvement. Third, it avoids teacher burnout. And fourth, it gives teachers the means to control their professional activities.

The concept of the teacher as researcher is imbedded within certain social and political perspectives. Let me start there. As Elliot Eisner points out in one of the chapters of his book *The Educational Imagination*, people take different perspectives on curriculum. One commonly held view sees curriculum as a top-down process. Once developed by experts, curriculum becomes a blueprint to be implemented and followed by teachers who are agents responsible for carrying out policies set by the ministry and the district. This perspective views research designed to determine principles of learning and practice on which such curriculum is to be based as an

activity also done by experts. In short, theory developed by experts drives practice. Supervision then becomes a process of judging the extent to which such a curriculum or teaching practice is implemented or in place. This perspective also favors the use of final examinations.

Those who argue for teacher as researcher take a very different perspective. Curriculum, for them, becomes that which the teacher organizes and plans for his/her own classroom. They talk of the teacher as an autonomous professional designing that curriculum. Within that context, the teacher is a potential researcher, testing ideas. Research findings and the curriculum guide are not facts and directives to be applied, but hypotheses to be tested by the teacher. Thus, the theory/practice relationship is of a dialectic. Supervision is helping and development aimed at improving the teacher's performance against his/her own standards rather than assessing whether curriculum has been implemented. Consistency of practice across teachers is relatively unimportant in this perspective, giving way to progress on a broken front.

In practice, these two perspectives are not incompatible. It is quite possible to be the teacher as researcher within most school jurisdictions even though their policies may be "top-down."

Let me then return to the question of why a teacher might perform research.

One of the most important reasons for classroom research is professional development. Learning does not occur without participation, involvement, and doing. Through classroom research, a teacher is doing something about his/her own practice, is participating and involved in one's own improvement. In all the project reports I have read, participants most frequently emphasize the opportunity for learning as the most important aspect of such projects.

As educators, we are committed to improving the educational institutions in which we work. Teachers' classroom research offers the most hope in terms of achieving this goal. Wherever exemplary schools are singled out because they are "effective schools," the message is always the same. They have become effective because teachers and principals have worked to make them that way. How that process actually begins and works is not currently well known. But it usually starts with teachers' beginning to work on improving some part of their practice and going from there. The larger the critical mass

of people working together in any one school, the better.

Why propose to busy teachers that they add to their work by performing research in their classrooms? I expect that stress and ennui are contributing causes of burnout. One begins to feel that teaching is no longer fun, and the actions of many of our politicians have devalued teaching. Engaging in teacher research can change such feelings. Teaching can become a type of social inquiry: one learns from one's practice, rather than merely carries out an activity at the behest of others. Also, acting as a classroom researcher soon brings one to the limit of one's knowledge. One seeks outside information and help. The process is stimulating. Also, one sees progress, which is reinforcing in itself. The question of burnout burns out.

Classroom research allows the teacher to take control. Cheryl and Pat are in control of what they are doing. They are not engaged in social revolution, trying to subvert the system wherever possible. Rather, they are exercising the freedom they have as teachers.

## A place to start

Much has been written about how to do research in the classroom. The references available on request provide some starting points. But as the vignette illustrated, one does not need to spend an enormous amount of time learning how to do classroom research. Just start doing it. I offer three suggestions.

**Find a problem.** A problem doesn't come nicely wrapped in a box with the word *problem* written on the outside. Usually one begins with a sense that some aspect of one's teaching can be improved. You might want to implement a particular method in your classroom. You might feel that the organization of your classroom is problematic. Perhaps too many interruptions occur during your teaching day. All you really need is an idea that something might be improved. Ask yourself: What is happening now? Why is that a problem? What might I do about it?

Take on a relatively small-scale manageable project. Try to ensure that the project will be worth while for your students and that it is educationally sound. This is one place where outsiders can offer help. Then get on with it.

The experience of people in numerous projects underscores the importance of keeping a reflective journal in which to write about the experience. This helps you to clarify and reflect on what you do.

**Set out an action plan.** Action plans vary greatly from person to person and from project to project. Describe what you plan to do differently, identify some hypotheses to test, and plan data collection. If it's too early to write down what you plan to do differently because you simply do not yet know, your action plan might be a set of steps to learn what the alternative is: Collect some data from your students, talk to others, visit other classrooms, or attend workshops or courses.

Once you have a vision of where you want to go, be as specific as you can about it. Go back to your problem and try to determine if by achieving this goal you will address your original problem. This link between the plan as a way of solving your problem is a hypothesis. Your activities over the next while are a test of that hypothesis. Think about the data you will need to collect along the way to assess your success.

**Assess the results.** Collect data at every step of the way to keep an eye on how much progress you have made. Three points are critical. First, gather some base line information before you start the process: tape record your class, record how many children do a particular activity, or review the notes made by the colleague who observed your teaching.

Once you have begun, make periodic checks on how much progress you have made in implementing your action plan. Remember, your action plan is a hypothesis about improving your teaching.

At some point, you may want to bring the project to closure and move on to something else. Make a final assessment. Invite that colleague back into your classroom, but make certain you know exactly what you want the person to observe. This is your problem, your investigation, and your staff development — your chance to star in your own movie. Enjoy it!

A bibliography on teacher as classroom researcher is available on request.

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