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Institutionalizing Field-Based Research Grounded in the Practical

Abstract

Extending academic knowledge and enhancing school practice are often viewed as two distinct and separate activities. The former comes from formal research while the latter is the result of intervention at the practitioner level. This article examines a way in which both purposes can be served through the co-operative efforts of university-based researchers and school district personnel.

Résumé

L'étoffement des connaissances et le perfectionnement pédagogique sont souvent perçus comme deux activités distinctes. La première procède de la recherche systématique tandis que la seconde est le fruit d'une intervention au niveau pratique. Le présent article analyse une démarche qui permet de poursuivre ces deux objectifs en faisant appel aux efforts concertés des chercheurs oeuvrant en milieu universitaire et des pédagogues travaillant pour les commissions scolaires.

Introduction

The relationship between the world of the educational practitioner (as represented by teachers, principals, consultants) and the world of university professors and researchers is the focus of this paper. More specifically, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the model of The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) Field Centres as a means of facilitating the

interactions between these worlds, especially those interactions designed to extend academic knowledge and enhance school practices. As presently conducted, these interchanges often occur in an environment which is contrary to the spirit of trust and cooperation necessary for successful research and the realization of mutual benefit.

In North America we generally divorce the public schools from the faculties of education. Educational practitioners typically interact with university professors and researchers when taking a university class or attending a professional development session. University faculty members, in addition, may interact with practitioners when conducting funded or unfunded research. Research projects, especially funded projects, usually last only for the duration of the study; the researcher most likely has no past history with the school or no future involvement after the project is completed.

Increasingly, both academics interested in public education and educational practitioners have called for educational research based in the naturalistic paradigm and reflective of the practical world of schooling. However, it is much easier to espouse such rhetoric than to conduct the research. In a recent article in the *McGill Journal of Education*, two external researchers openly explored a failure to work collaboratively with three school sites. The authors, Riffel and Levin (1986), partially placed the blame for the failure on the naturalistic research methodology employed. Yet they failed to treat their presence in the school system as problematic. The result was a double implementation project for the schools: developing a new form of working with university researchers and the school improvement project itself. Given the traditional interaction patterns of universities and schools, it is not surprising that this project encountered implementation problems.

The Field Centre Approach

There is a need to institutionalize field-based research and development to become the typical, rather than the atypical, interaction pattern between a faculty of education and a school staff. One alternative structure has been developed through field centres of OISE. Nine field centres are located in regions throughout Ontario. Each centre has a regular staff of two faculty members and one support staff member. These centres and the attached personnel represent the overt portion of two of the three parts of the OISE mandate: research, graduate teaching, and field development.

The centres have institutionalized an on-going pattern of field development and research based in the practical world of schools. An

understanding of the interaction patterns established in the field centres provides insight into the nature of field-based research that can assist other researchers in their endeavours. The operation of one centre, Northwestern Centre, is used to illustrate the nature of on-going field research.

The work of the centre is analyzed through Schubert's (1986) framework of theoretical and practical curriculum work. While describing a number of differences between theoretical and practical research, he argues that practical inquiry must be naturalistic since it is conducted by those who live in a problematic situation. Schubert also cites Joseph Schwab's articles (1978) to support the need for a naturalistic approach to research which is based in the real world of "practical" curricular practice.

These two characteristics, problematic situations and practical needs, summarize the context within which the Northwestern Centre exists. A symbiotic relationship has developed between the centre and the school districts in its region. When educators in a school district encounter a problem or identify a need beyond their resources or expertise, they can request assistance from centre personnel. In return, ready research access is granted to centre personnel. Although simplistic, this description highlights the need for centre-based research to be useful and practical to educational practitioners. If the work of centre personnel is considered too theoretical, the relationship with the field deteriorates as the local educators cease to call on the centre and are reluctant to upset their schools by allowing researchers in and disrupting the normal school life.

Field centre faculty are faced, then, with a dual challenge. The practitioners in the region look for practical, direct solutions to immediate and pressing problems. At the same time, the academic requirements of the university tenure and review procedures dictate that publications and generalizable knowledge be gained from the field work. As a result, centre faculty look for ways to realize both goals.

To illustrate this relationship in one centre, Schubert's article is cited once again. While arguing that the difference between theoretic and naturalistic research is more in rhetoric than in practice, Schubert uses four dimensions of practical inquiry to examine the principles of theoretical research and the shifting focus of research requirements. These dimensions are problem source, method, subject matter, and ends. They are used below to describe how centre activities respond to the practical research requested by school districts and the academic needs of centre faculty.

Problem Source

Schubert (1986) identifies the problem source of theoretical research as the mind of the researcher. As such, the researcher's problems are highly

generalized and abstract. The naturalistic researcher may identify the problem in an actual situation, but states the problem in an abstract form, collects data from a number of sources, and produces a "composite summarization" which results in generalizable statements. Schubert claims that the practical inquiry approach requires not only a state of affairs as a problem source, but that the environment in which that state of affairs exists be considered.

Initially, in the field centre, the problem source is that described by Schubert as practical inquiry. Not only does a problematic state of affairs exist within a school or school system, but it exists in conjunction with a certain set of environmental factors. Local educators identify the problem and seek assistance from the centre.

The definition of locus of a problem might not be accepted by centre faculty as stated by the local educators, but judgement is usually delayed until more information can be gathered about why the situation is considered problematic, what background led to the present situation, and the urgency attached to the problem by the school system personnel. Centre staff relate the problem to similar problems encountered in other districts as well as their personal knowledge of the relevant literature.

OISE field centres are in an advantageous position with respect to the uniqueness or commonality of locally identified problems. The longterm relationships between the centres and their regional school districts provide centre staff with intimate knowledge of many environmental factors at work within the districts, historical perspectives of various problems, and pertinent past and present activities in other districts. Problem statements and generalizability of research results can also be explored by centre faculty through the provincial network formed by all nine centres.

Centre faculty may also identify questions for research, but in a way which differs from the researchers-as-source, outlined by Schubert in the theoretical approach. Often when a faculty member provides the problem, it is because similar problems have been noted in other requests. In this situation, the researcher raises the problem statements provided by local educators to a more general and, possibly, an abstract level. Such problems might be of particular interest to the faculty member due to personal studies, previous research, or expertise. When a centre faculty member does act as the problem source, the practical use of the potential knowledge to be gained is explained to interested practitioners both to gain their support for the research and also to assist them in solving some particular problem they have enunciated. The research reported by Hannay and Seller (1987) on how decisions are made by teachers when developing curriculum came about in this manner. Local educators had asked for assistance in developing new course outlines. One of the researchers, who had knowledge, experience, and

an interest in the process of deliberation explained the research to the practitioners who agreed to take part in the research while receiving the requested assistance.

Method

Key assumptions about method, pointed out by Schubert (1986), centre on the effect of the researcher's presence on the environment, the objectivity of the researcher, and the role and type of knowledge employed. Traditional research methods assume that the researcher's presence will not affect the situation under study. Further, since the researcher is not an integral part of the situation, he or she can remain objective about, and detached from, the situation. The set of assumptions about knowledge described by Schubert raises the question about the relative value of generic knowledge and situational expertise. Theoretical research practice assumes the superiority of objective instrumentation and generic knowledge over situational expertise.

The nature of the field centre makes it almost impossible to operate under the above assumptions. Researchers from the centre are in contact with school district personnel on a continuous basis. Within a district, there may be more than one project under way at any one time. If, during a period of "formal research," the field officer attempted to remain detached, it would be out of character and therefore suspicious to the local educators. Under normal working conditions, the faculty from the centre are directly involved with the schools and the people who work there.

When a school district calls on the centre for assistance, it is expected that the actions taken by the faculty will have an effect on the district. This expectation is held by both local educators and centre faculty, but some modification may be possible during a formal research project, assuming no effect by faculty activity is contrary to the nature of the relationship between the centre and the school districts.

The assumptions about relative worth of knowledge and expertise exemplifies the working relationship between the centre and the school districts. Rather than one type of knowledge being of more value than another, both generic knowledge and situational expertise are viewed as indispensable in the search for problem solutions.

A relationship like this demands a different method for research. Much of the research is on-going and not as clearly focussed as a formal research question would suggest. Since the immediate reason for contact between the centre and a school district is the need to address a specific problem, activity centres on that purpose. The field developer, however,

keeps notes, raises questions, and observes actions both to help clarify and to contribute to the solution of the problem. Interventions are planned and executed, and results are noted. All of this may lead to a more formal research project, although years may pass before similarities between situations are noted or the more abstract questions become clear. Then the old notes and observations can be used as the basis for more formal activity. A series of projects related to problems of implementation, for example, were conducted by the author over a period of years. One result of this work was the development of a peer coaching model used in various schools for particular implementation projects. Eventually, formal research on the coaching model and process was undertaken, based on the field notes and results of the more informal, previous work (Seller & Hannay, 1987).

Throughout this process, field centre faculty and local educators work together to examine and solve problems. When it is decided to pursue a question in depth and beyond the immediate needs of the local school district, teachers, principals, and consultants may be part of the formal research team. The collaborative nature of the research and the on-going contact between the centre and the districts make the research team somewhat amorphous, and roles can be more carefully integrated.

Subject Matter

The knowledge sought by traditional and theoretical research focusses on the general laws governing activity. Where possible the researcher minimizes the effects of the context. The information which is most highly prized is generalized to other situations and describes general tendencies rather than specific actions.

In most centre projects, the reverse approach is taken. The immediate information sought is that which will explain particular, context-bound situations. The most valuable knowledge is that which will help to explain and solve the immediate dilemma or problem.

This is true for both the field developer and district personnel. Since the project is set up with the involvement of interested parties, all participants have a stake and interest in the outcome. The person from the centre may be looking for generalizable knowledge and recognizing certain elements of what is emerging as transferable, but the use and exploration of this aspect of what is learned will be pursued at a later date.

Schubert notes that Schwab's (1978) four commonplaces form the source of the subject matter studied in practical inquiry. This is also true for field centre activities, as teachers, students, subject matter, and milieu provide the information. Interpretation of what is learned is applied in this

context first. If generalizable elements are not apparent, the information is referred to in other projects, rather than ignored because it is site-specific.

Ends

The distinction in the ends sought between theoretical and practical research is succinctly stated by Schubert. Theoretical research seeks knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Practical inquiry seeks knowledge for decision-making and action.

As Schubert notes, the reward system for university-based researchers demands theoretic knowledge because of the publication pressure for tenure and promotion. However, the reward system for school district educators places a premium on efficient curricular processes and effective policies.

This puts the field developer in a difficult situation. As a university-based person, there is a need for generalizable knowledge and publications. As a resource and colleague of school district personnel, action oriented, process knowledge is required. The faculty members of the centre develop close personal and professional links with school people over time and sympathize with their needs while being constantly reminded of their own professional requirements. As a result, centre work seeks both ends: information of value to district educators is sought and shared, while accumulations of observations and information are used to meet the academic demands. The links which are possible between projects, research, and publication can be seen by reviewing the annual reports of the field centres (e.g., OISE Northwestern Centre, 1988) which outline the field project and academic activities of centre faculty members. The relationship between the centre and the districts is such that local educators understand the academic needs of centre faculty and will assist and support efforts to meet them.

Summary

Researchers must constantly ask two questions: (1) What is of the greatest worth to know? and (2) What is the use of the knowledge gained?

From the perspective of a field centre, the answers to these questions must be honest and unambiguous. For a faculty member in this situation, there are two answers to each of these questions. One answer serves the field developer; the other serves the educator with whom he or she works.

The first question centres on the original initiative for action. School district educators generally raise the first question about curriculum

practice. At the beginning of a project, therefore, what is of greatest worth are more effective means to accomplish the stated task. Once this is accomplished, and as time and projects pass, a particular set of problems or a set of questions with a common theme may lead to more general and abstract questions. Worth transfers, then, from local, situational questions to broader, more theoretic considerations. Similarly, methods for gathering, recording, and reporting the information shifts from informal to more formal research methodologies.

The second question, likewise, has two aspects which are not mutually exclusive. Initially, use of the knowledge gained is directed towards solutions to problems and improved decision-making. This emphasis is on local, immediate action. And over time, for the field researcher, the use of the knowledge is publication for both professional reasons and advancement of a field of knowledge.

Addressing the above questions from the perspective of a field-based researcher is a matter of timing, not choice. The immediate questions and needs of the practitioner can be met with action which provides information and strategies and allows the work of the school to proceed more effectively. For the researcher, the on-going nature of the contact allows time for reflection and the recognition of broader issues and potential solutions. Field research allows time to serve everyone's needs, rather than forcing a choice between practitioner and researcher, or worse still, forcing the results of the work to fit the context of either participant.

A key to success in this research approach is collaboration. The structure of the OISE Field Centres has institutionalized long term collaboration between educational researchers and practitioners. The established on-going relationship permits a practical research design that not only assists local educators in systematically solving their immediate problems but also permits the researcher gradually to develop educational knowledge grounded in the practical. Although school district educators and university researchers have different, sometimes apparently opposing knowledge needs, by working together, all parties can emerge enriched.

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