

Chapter 16

Teachers as Researchers: Participatory and Action Research

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce readers to how teachers can be taught about research in ways that are meaningful for them and relevant to their practice. The three main research paradigms are described, paradigms that are defined based on the kind of knowledge being sought. Mixed methods research is also acknowledged as possibly being in a fourth paradigm. It is action research and participatory action research (also called “teacher research”) that most closely illustrates how teachers can meaningfully engage in research relevant to their practice. These methodologies are described, and then a template for a research course for teachers is provided. Finally, practical examples of participatory and action research are provided, followed by suggestions for the future development of teacher research, including narrative inquiry and arts-based research.

INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching variations of a course on “Introduction to Educational Research” at the graduate level in education and adult education since 1976. In 1976, I was a new professor, just out of completing a doctorate in measurement and evaluation in education. I had no teaching experience, not even a teaching assistantship. So, the only thing I could think to do was to teach the educational research course in a way that modeled how I had been taught. The result was a very structured course that focused on positivist empirical methodologies (experimental

and quasi-experimental designs). I included diagrams to demonstrate the designs with X and O representing treatments and observations, and I earnestly explained the importance of controlling variables. I was far younger than my students; I was 26 years old, and they were experienced teachers and counselors. In retrospect, I think my students were kind to me because they pitied me. I made no effort whatsoever to connect research to their practice. I would not even have known how to do this, given that I had never taught anything, never mind in their K-12 and counseling contexts. Worse, I had the idea that when students told stories about their practice, I thought that this was something

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I had to curtail. It was off-topic, I thought. I can still remember, after all of the intervening decades, cringing when a student started off by saying “In my experience...” I looked for some way to prevent that from happening. I am telling this personally embarrassing story with a purpose.

My journey from then until now is obviously a long one, spanning decades, and I don’t plan to tell that long story. But there are two turning points that stand out in my mind. The first took place when I was still a novice educator. I was teaching the “Introduction to Educational Research” course (it probably had a different name, but it was the same kind of course) to students who were doing their M.Ed. degree in Counseling Education. These good folks were not one bit interested in research and could not see why they had to take this mandatory course. They were counselors, not researchers. They sat in their chairs, staring at me, not at all interested in my X-0 models. In desperation, I asked them to form groups and discuss how they might be able to apply the research to their practice. My classroom came alive. I was the one staring at them. This sounds ridiculous from my current perspective, but at the time, it was an extremely important insight. People like to talk to each other about their experiences. In my current practice, conversations are centered on the application of research to the students’ teaching.

My next insight was similar in a way, though I didn’t recognize it at the time. I was teaching “Introduction to Educational Research” to K-12 teachers at another university. I was also experimenting with participatory planning (asking the students to contribute to the planning of the course). With great confidence in my new-found strategy, I asked students to suggest topics for the course after we had a couple of introductory sessions on “what research is.” To my horror (at the time), they suggested topics related to their practice, rather than to research methods in general. They were interested in research on teaching literacy, research on working with ADHD students, research on teaching mathematics.... And so on.

What? What do I do now? This is not at all what I expected. But I did not want to back down from my participatory planning model. I incorporated their suggestions into what I thought should be included in the course, but I’m not sure I did a very good job of that at the time. I now encourage and embrace the research ideas of K-12 teachers, and I wish I had been able to do that with this group.

Currently, I am teaching “Introduction to Educational Research” for all students in the M.Ed. program at the University of New Brunswick. Most of the students are K-12 teachers, but there are a few adult educators and counselors in the mix. Similar to my earlier experiences, and not surprisingly, the course participants are not so happy to be in this course. They see themselves as teachers, and they do not see how learning about research is relevant to what they do. They see a big gap between research that is done “on them” in the schools and their own practice. They resent the researcher who tells them how to conduct their practice without asking them anything about their practice, or even knowing what they do in their practice. They enter the course with hostility and resentment.

And so, it becomes my job to work with the teachers to help them see the relevance of research to their professional lives. This is no small job. But I have come to a strategy that makes sense to me and works for them. It is one of my goals in this chapter to describe that strategy in detail.

It was Joe Kincheloe’s book, *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment* (1991) that originally inspired me to work with teachers in this way. It was a rocky journey. I did not know quite how to implement Kincheloe’s ideas (his book is philosophical and theoretical), so it took me some time to figure this out. There has been considerable writing on action research, participatory action research, and critical research, most of which is designed to draw teachers into the research process and to see themselves as researchers, and I draw on this writing.

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