

Teachers as Researchers

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Abstract

The noble profession of teaching has at all times played a significant role for the development and firmness of societies as it helps preserve ethics, values and morality. That happens to be the primary reason as to why adherents of the education community have continuously been greatly respected. However it is not enough for them to make decisions about what it is appropriate in their practice since most times such theoretical support comes from sciences external to the teaching practice. Teachers have started to get hold of increasingly practical tools and experiences to do research on their own. But there is still the necessity to improve them so that they can obtain more reliable data. On the other hand, management, administration and education establishments should encourage this kind of practices so that there will be webs of institutions working in an organized way in one single direction to promote social responsibility.

Key Words: Teacher, Researcher, education, social responsibility

Teaching activities began as an attempt to deal effectively with the basic needs of mankind at the early ages of development because providing other members of the group, especially children, with basic information on what was important to live in a specific community guaranteed not only their survival, but also the establishment of the bonds necessary to keep the group together: their set of beliefs and principles. Group leaders, at first, started performing this activity empirically and determined different activities and groups inside their communities and this labour-based stratification, along with gender-based distinctions, determined what kind of information should or had to be passed onto certain members of the social group, even to the first group of teachers-to-be. This kind of strategy was evident, for instance, in ancient Greece, where the main difference between Spartans and Athenians as groups was basically the scope of their education: developing their citizens' thinking or warfare skills, respectively.

Teachers have been important members of social groups since then, but only as late as in the 17th century, there started to be advances both in the socialisation of education as in the quality of the profession through the training of new candidates and the establishment of methods and techniques to carry out this job in the best possible way: "The 17th and 18th centuries saw the greatest growth in education for more than the privileged, and also a dramatic rise in the training of teachers, and propounding of educational theories." (A Short Story, n.d.). Teachers are so important to societies that this description made by Raina (2007) as flattering as it may sound, is nothing but true: "The role of a teacher in society is both significant and valuable. It has far-reaching influence on the society he lives in and no other personality can have an influence more profound than that of a teacher. Students are deeply affected by the teacher's love and affection, his character, his competence, and his moral commitment. A popular teacher becomes a model for his students. The students try to follow their teacher in his manners, costumes, etiquette, style of conversation and his get up. He is their ideal." (Raina, 2007)

Most theoretical support for learning and teaching used to come from sciences such as sociology, psychology, linguistics, economy, and even politics, but not from teachers, which made it an odd situation: people outside the teaching profession reflected on the teachers' job, theorised about it and suggested the best alternatives for teachers to implement in their settings. This situation, however, has started to change in the last decades as more teachers with wider perspectives and better qualifications have become knowledgeable professionals who have started to do research-like activities to improve or solve teaching problems in their own context. This situation has even led to the creation of organisations whose main aim is to support teachers doing research and to disseminate the information collected in such activities. My intention in this paper is to consider the advantages, disadvantages and challenges for teachers to engage in this kind of activities.

I. ADVANTAGES

Teachers, by being immersed in specific teaching contexts and as long as they are properly qualified and have enough experience, also have privileged and knowledgeable first-hand access to crucial information

about their students' needs, learning styles and available resources and about the schools they work for and about the education policies framing their professions, which allow them to reflect on their own educational settings so they can provide effective, reliable and realistic possibilities to solve or improve them.

Teachers nowadays do not act as simple disseminators of information but they have the possibility to change their roles constantly, even within the same lesson. As stated by Spratt, Pulverness and Williams (2005), "Every teacher changes roles during a session. These roles will be appropriate to the type of lesson, activity, lesson aims and the level and age of the learners (...) Here are some roles teachers often use. (...) planner (...), informer (...), manager (...), monitor (...), involver (...), parent/friend (...), diagnostician (...), resource (...)" (p. 145). This multi-functional role allows teachers to approach learners and issues from different viewpoints, enhancing the scope of their actions as well as the quality and appropriateness of the changes and solutions they propose.

Teachers who do research activities have to engage in a long-lasting quest for updated information about the approaches and trends to deal responsibly with the issues raised as part of their practice, with permanent activities of reflection and assessment always framed by the policies stated by the government. Should they find inconsistencies between their practice and the applicable government regulation, they could propose changes with the appropriate authorities, and by doing this, teachers will grow both as professionals and as active and responsible members of social groups.

The outcome expected from research should ideally be the solution to the problem initially observed or the improvement of the conditions which originally made teachers reflect on the problematic situation or, at least, the establishment of a path to perform a longer or deeper research attempt. This process, once started and sensibly and responsibly supervised, generates the need to engage the whole educational community in it. This situation makes members commit to their duties by becoming reflective and critical on their performance, improving the institution's profile through constant self-reflection in general. Such commitment can eventually generate the need to create research groups which help assess the decisions made by the institutions as well as the regulations stated by educational authorities, replicating their effect through a network of peer institutions. They can expand the benefits of this kind of processes to the whole society, especially because once standards are applied and analysed in real-life contexts –providing there is a permanent and effective two-way communication pattern between schools and regulators, real-life situations can be solved taking into account as much information as necessary and the rules established are more likely to match real needs since accomplishable and realistic goals can be set.

II. DISADVANTAGES

Teachers –even those having the best intentions, who are determined enough to carry out research because they have identified issues worth paying attention to, may lack the specific skills to carry out successful research because the training needed for such end does not usually make part of their undergraduate degree and, what is even more serious, they do not see the need to obtain or develop it themselves until they face this kind of situations, eventually feeling lost and disappointed at the experience. This indicates that most times good intentions and determination are wasted in a sea of uncertainty. Let us consider that even if they get to obtain data, they need to be trained on how to work with statistical methods and processes for those data to be reliable and not biased in any manner and this kind of knowledge implies a considerable amount of time to master.

Teachers find it very difficult to convince management at schools or education authorities to provide the financial support needed to carry out proper research, mainly due to the sense of being lost dealt with in the previous paragraph and consequently teachers are to face two alternatives: sacrifice their own income to do research or convince the people in charge to make a decision, a process which can take longer than the solution for the problem observed.

The old proverb says "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing", and in case teachers managed to convince administrators to support them, the fact they lack proper background in the field of research can lead them to mislead institutions in processes to implement or change policies constantly for the sake of supposed innovation without having done proper and well-supported assessment of the effects of such decisions on the quality of the students' learning process or even on their lives themselves.

Research done by teachers seems attractive and useful at first, but careful attention must be paid to carry it out in a responsible and sensible way, especially with enough financial and time support from authorities and guidance from experts. In order to do so there needs to be short-term, mid-term and long-term planning ranging from pilot research projects at schools which could be supervised by research groups at universities to the establishment of long-lasting education policies seeking to provide student teachers with the tools they need to do research on their own and schools with the awareness of the benefits of supporting them.

It has to be taken into account that teachers, just as every other member of society who has access to any kind of power to change conditions for members of a society, are obliged to observe and abide by ethical issues which foster equality for everyone, so in case they are interested in engaging in research activities, they

should seriously start training in types of research, statistics and educational policies to minimise bias and adverse effects on the population while doing their projects.

III. CONCLUSION

There seem to be more advantages for teachers to do research than to refrain from doing it, so educational authorities should consider implementing long-term and long-lasting policies and duties for it to become a reality in a few years along with the improvement of specific training so that student teachers are able to try research effectively at universities and their research projects are more focused on specific issues related to the school reality. As Cochran-Smith (1999) stated almost a decade ago, “We argue that part of what makes the current wave of interest a movement and not just the latest educational fad is that teacher research stems from several different, but in some ways compatible, intellectual traditions and educational projects.” (The Teacher Research Movement: A Decade Later, 1999, 1.) Since there is so much to do and so little time to accomplish it, the sooner we start, the better for a society which has always supported us and trusted us even now that they can see that what they have received from us has not met their expectations. We owe so much to them that it seems time has come for us to start paying back.

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