

EDITORIAL

Are Educational Researchers Fair To The Classroom Teacher?

Given the current thrust toward centralist determination and prescription of curricula in provincial curriculum policies, it is clear that the classroom teacher will continue to be subjected to growing pressures to accept and give effective expression to pre-specified curriculum designs. With the additional prospect of mandatory external evaluations, the burdensome task of adjustment, reconciliation and adaptation will tax the capacities of even the best of teachers in our schools.

At the same time, much of our research evidence and our field experiences underscores the dominant play of the teacher factor in efforts to develop and implement new curricula. This acknowledgement prompts the question, "How are we, as educational researchers, providing for the teacher factor in our conceptual speculations as well as in field investigations?" What, in other words, is the general tone of the character of teacher presence in our conceptualizations of curriculum change? My sense of this tone suggests that, (1) current thought and research investigations in this field of interest gravitate around the specifics of teacher desire (or lack thereof) for change, the adequacy of knowledge and understanding of a proposed change in curricular prescriptions, and the adequacy of skills in effecting appropriate translations of new curriculum designs into instructional operations; and (2) critical impediments to successful curriculum change, as disclosed through such investigations or experience, take the form of shortcomings or *deficits* in teacher response, presumed or implied, at the point of teacher engagement.

Our conceptual and empirical studies of curriculum development and implementation and school innovation continue to orient around primarily organizational priorities and interests. The net result is that such preoccupation tends to be outside of the purview of the classroom teacher and tends to lead to the identification and disclosure of apparent deficiencies in the teacher's response to the implicit requirements for change in curriculum and schooling practices.

I ground these contentions on the following premises:

(1) Rational technical models currently dominate the shaping of our planning development and implementation strategies and the ordering of collective tasks at various levels of decision making. These models, by and large, reveal a marked dependence upon such systems constructs as the prior specification and implicit dichotomization of ends and means, the linearity of decisions in development and designing operations, the overriding commitment to *product* outcomes and the dominant play of the criteria of efficacy and efficiency. Particularly significant is the practice of subsuming the human factor, typically the classroom teacher, into the category of "inputs" and thus *submerging* the individual teacher into the conceptual scheme.

(2) It is further contended that our efforts to improve our conceptual approaches to school innovation will lead to the generation of ever more precise, more extended and more elaborate prescriptive system designs. This outcome or "payoff" will be in response, albeit inadvertent, to a virtually universal propensity among academic researchers — a penchant for expanding analytic explication, or what Schwab calls "stable inquiry".

A more recent methodological and tactical approach to the matter promises greater facilitation of participant engagement in school innovation. It represents a modification of the earlier stress on “managerial” and “decision making” constituents in change processes with the prominent inclusion of clinically based strategies. Even here, however, there is still an implied, if not an explicit, attempt to influence individuals or groups to decide to do something differently. In some respects, this approach resembles that of a “soft sell” marketing strategy in engineering “voluntary” recognition by the client-consumer of a *need* to change, followed by a *decision* to change. While the facilitating tactics appear more respectful of the teacher in the process, the intention still carries with it the implied necessity or need to *do something* to teachers, and such a need is based logically upon a prior assumption: that teachers *need* to have something done to them.

At first glance, ethnomethodological studies offer the prospect of a more neutral if not more respectful treatment of the classroom teacher. Focussing as they do upon interactional phenomena and keyed as they are to the ascertainment of school “facts” as lived by active participants, such studies do logically precede causative speculations that try to account for differences in performance. Despite their ostensibly more descriptive mode of enquiry, however, there is the continuing danger of researcher bias unwittingly coloring, if not shaping, substantive findings. We need not remind ourselves of the inescapable play of pre-cognitions and pre-conceptions in ascertaining the character of the “world out there” and the actions of participants in that world. Our notions or beliefs about the nature of schooling and teaching, for instance, go often unacknowledged and unexpressed, yet arouse expectations about what is likely to be discovered or discerned during the actual processes of selecting and analysing evidence. Such expectations tend to generate a propensity (selective attention) toward some set of events and their significances among, say, the natural utterings of teachers and pupils in interaction and away from others (selective inattention). Seeing, then, becomes looking for and hearing becomes listening for. Particularly suspect, in this respect, are our beliefs about how schools *ought* to function and how teachers *ought* to behave in them. Such beliefs become manifest in a heightened critical mind set and our observations tend, subsequently, to gravitate toward events imbibing the discrepant, the disparate or the deficient.

Perhaps we, as researchers, need to begin with an open examination of our own biases, our personal ideological views about the kinds of schools we would prefer to see and the kinds of teachers we would prefer to see in them. Perhaps then the teacher component and, hence, the teacher would attract more respectful treatment in our research endeavors.

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