Inservice education and educational research

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In 1952, Alice Miel introduced a book about the research work she had been conducting with teachers with the following arresting paragraph.

This book reports the findings of some classroom teachers and other school people who have been working with the staff of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation in an effort to learn more about cooperative procedures in our schools. The way these professional workers went about their study is an example of action research or cooperative experimentation. The group saw a problem needing attention; action to solve the problem just where it arose (in typical public schools) was planned cooperatively; together the experimenters looked at the consequences of what they had tried; this lead to new views of the problem, more action, and more evaluation, with the researchers continually identifying dependable principles and techniques (Miel, 1952, p.1).

This quotation from Miel's work serves to highlight the main issues with which this symposium is concerned: in-service education in schools and the role of research, and researchers, in fostering teacher development. Miel's approach was part of an educational research tradition (Corey, 1953) mainly based at Teachers College, Columbia University, with its roots in Deweyan educational philosophy and the experience derived from school-based curriculum research projects such as the Eight Year Study (Aiken, 1942) and the Co-operative Study in Teacher Education (Prall and Cushman, 1944). The concept of action research being developed at this time by Kurt Lewin also provided a rationale for school-based experimentation which was readily assimilated into their approach. Ralph Tyler, who was a consultant in the Eight Year Study, makes clear the important link between curriculum research and in-service education which underpinned this tradition.

We learned something of great importance to the in-service education of teachers: that the constructive involvement of teachers in attacking real educational problems that they face is a powerful instrument of continuing education (Tyler, 1971, p.13).

The topic of Miel's research, in this case co-operative procedures in learning, is largely irrelevant. It might have been research on reading, learning science concepts, or teacher effectiveness. It does not matter. What is interesting, and pertinent to the symposium, is her view that scientific inquiry in education can contribute a process, not only a framework of
conclusions, for the use of teachers in extending their own understanding and a means for creating reliable knowledge about educational questions concerning their professional tasks and aspirations. The detrimental distinction between the community of researchers as a class apart from or above that of the community of practitioners, which characterizes educational research, is dissolved as the experimenter (teacher) in Mié's tradition is part of the system he or she is seeking to transform. In this tradition the development of educational theory, as theory that actually guides practice, is dependent upon forms of research activity inseparable from the in-service education of teachers. Conventional research in education tends to exclude teachers from participation in this development of educational theory by treating it as essentially 'applied theory' that 'draws on' theories from the social sciences. In this way, in effect, it tends to override teacher judgement, rather than engage it through a sense of participation in a common professional enterprise. Consequently in-service education is restricted in concept to a 'delivery system' of events for communicating the products or findings from research to teachers.

Thirty years later, the research tradition of which Mié was a part is resurfacing in one of the more vigorous current debates within the American Educational Research Association. It centres on the perceived lack of impact on practice of educational research and the extent to which this failure can be attributed to the fact "that too little of it has been focused on educational improvement in local school settings" (Klausmeir, 1982). There is not enough time here to review this debate except to say that the protagonists for such research, variously called 'developmental research' (Sanders, 1981), 'transforming experiments' (Bronfenbrenner, 1976), 'improvement-oriented research' (Klausmeir, 1982), or 'interactive research and development on teaching' (Ward and Tilkunoff, 1976), all argue for a form of research based upon the assumption that there is a necessary relationship between the conduct of educational research and the professional development of teachers, if school improvement is the purpose. 'Action research' seems to be the preferred label in England (Stenhouse, 1979; Elliott, 1979) and Australia (Kemmis, 1980).

There are some researchers such as Elliott (1979), who has conducted some of the most thorough action research allied with in-service education done so far, who would argue further that the generation of knowledge about an educational concern cannot be divorced from the public analysis by teachers of the effects of their own practice, in the light of their own educational values. Such an approach requires the researcher coming into the schools to play an 'enabling' role. The most important 'baggage' he or she brings are the tools of science as a process of inquiry for establishing reliable knowledge about educational practices in that context. The outsider-researcher is dependent for theory-generation upon teachers taking a collaborative research stance towards their teaching around problems they have defined. This approach may be contrasted with the theory-verification role in which teachers are more commonly placed where researchers use teachers to evaluate the strength of static relationships between context-free variables, not framed in the language of teachers' theories about their own practice (e.g Gage, 1978).
(On this last point: it is worth comparing the plethora of teaching ideas, hypotheses and rudimentary theory that emerged from Elliott and Adelman’s (1976) Ford Teaching Project on the problems and possibilities of inquiry-discovery teaching, with the paucity of theory generated from comparative, experimental designs which assumed that inquiry-discovery teaching was a static 'thing' or an independent variable isolable from teachers' values, context-free, and unproblematic in its implementation. Shulman and Keislar (1966) provide a valuable summary of the methodological problems inherent in the latter approach to research on teaching.)

It was Kerlinger's 1977 presidential address to the American Educational Research Association that helped to bring the debate to a head. In a nostalgic reaffirmation, of what he claimed to be the 'basic' scientific approach, reminiscent of that toast "Here's to the electron. May it never be of use to anyone!" made by an English physicist whose name I have forgotten, Kerlinger launched a broadside at 'anti-intellectual' trends towards 'applied' research in education.

.... I doubt the efficacy of planned programs to improve schools and education through research. Such phenomena as action research, targeted research, programmatic research, and, in Europe, emancipation research are mostly bizarre nonsense, bandwagon climbing, and guruism little related to what research is and should be. Indeed, such movements have serious negative effects because they distract us from adequate research and because they substitute superficial and mediocre activities for the hard coin of scientific research (Kerlinger, 1977, p.10).

When we involve ourselves in research related to educational issues and problems we adopt, at least implicitly, a stance towards the in-service education of teachers. More specifically, every researcher, with aspirations to benefit practice, adopts a stance with respect to the nature of theory appropriate to education and its relationship to the prevailing theories of educational practice which teachers bring to, and derive from, their experience. Inherent within the view of theory and methodology held by a researcher will be a set of assumptions about how his or her research relates to the framework of understanding held by teachers within which they make sense of what they are doing and why. Most importantly, these assumptions shape the form and purpose of in-service education in relation to educational research.

One of the central justifications for our investment in educational research is its presumed potential for the improvement of practice. The improvement of practice, however is intimately related to the professional development of teachers, surely the most important educational resource possessed by our school systems. What is worth examining, therefore, are the assumptions we hold about the ways in which educational research relates to the professional development of teachers.
Feiman (1981) explores the connections between different kinds of educational research and different conceptions of in-service education. Three research traditions are selected—the scientific, analytic/philosophical, and interpretive/action research paradigms.

In exploring these relationships between research traditions and in-service education Feiman isolates a number of continua—"from a view of the teacher as a consumer of research findings to a view of the teacher as a source of knowledge about classrooms and teaching; from a view of knowledge as fixed and given to a view of knowing as the construction of meaning; from a view of in-service as a delivery system to a view of in-service as a set of enabling conditions" (p.19). This is a helpful conceptualization and Feiman is careful to point out that we should not assume that the linkages between the different research traditions and in-service education are inevitable or fixed. But with action research the teacher is more likely to be playing a role towards the active end of each of the continua outlined above. And this in line with what is known about more effective modes of in-service education (Hutson, 1981).

What is beginning to be questioned here is whether theory in a practical activity such as education should be 'derived from' or 'based upon' some already existing discipline-oriented theory at all. As Carr (1980) points out, "The important question to be asked ... is not one about the kind of academic theory on which educational theory should depend, but the logically prior question of whether a theoretical enterprise such as education should be so intrinsically dependent upon academic disciplines at all." (p.62)

The term 'theory' is, of course, being used here in two different senses. One view (Kerlinger, 1977) is that "scientific research in education ... can not be aimed at practical problems" (p.7). The purpose of such research is to produce theory in such a way as to guide further research within the concerns of an academic discipline. For Kerlinger, for example, "there is little direct connection between research and educational practice" (p.5) because, by his own circular definition, 'basic' research in education is "research aimed at theoretical understanding of psychological, sociological and other behavioural scientific phenomena (which may have) beneficial though indirect effects on educational practice" (p.5). But another interpretation of theory must be permitted that can only be ascertained by reference to the aspirations, beliefs and ways of coping with the daily demands of the job that teachers compose into their educational theory of practice.

The position argued here is that every educational researcher with aspirations to influence practice has an in-service education problem to resolve. As our experience with planned educational change demonstrates (McLaughlin and Marsh, 1978) there are no short cuts to teacher development. The gaps between theory and practice that matter in in-service education can only be closed by teachers themselves transforming the way practice is experienced and understood. It is incumbent upon researchers to demonstrate how their work is to enter this dialogue between theory and practice within the framework of understanding that teachers already possess.
When we assume that 'educational theory' refers to theories other than those that already guide practice, the tendency will be to assume that the appropriate role for teachers to play in in-service is that of audience, consumer, or trainee. The in-service problem will be resolved ineffectually by regarding in-service education as merely a means for bridging the communication gap between academic theory and practice. As Carr (1980) indicates 'The gaps between theory and practice which everyone deplores are actually endemic to the view that educational theory can be produced from within (academic) theoretical and practical contexts different from the theoretical and practical contexts within which it is supposed to apply' (p.65).

Teachers are disenfranchised from participation in the development of educational theory by the failure to admit the possibility of theory that is genuinely educational emerging from the analysis of practice and the need to resolve educational problems. It would be interesting to speculate on the priorities and nature of the educational research we would have if educational practitioners exercised a controlling voice in its funding.

REFERENCES


