



## FROM THE BOTTOM UP: RESEARCHING IN THE CLASSROOM

DO TEACHERS KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR THEIR CLASSROOMS? In the continuing attempt to reconcile theory and practice, Penny Milton (in the Winter 06/07 issue of *Education Canada*) suggested that the university needs to make its work in conceptual and theoretical education research more applicable to the classroom.<sup>1</sup> As a classroom teacher, I was always confused about why it was university researchers who had to make *their* applications more accessible so that we could put into practice what they had spent months researching and finally publishing. As a teacher, wasn't I the person best informed to propose and investigate how to improve the learning experience of my students?

This dialogue on the reconciliation between theory and practice consistently addresses the role of the researchers but hardly ever includes the subject of the research – the teacher and the student. Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of teacher-based research in enhancing the classroom experience.<sup>2</sup> To close the growing gap between what is thought and what is practiced, it is necessary to include both the theorists and the practitioners. This will require a

reinvestment in the teacher as researcher, so that teachers can contribute to the search for ways to enrich the learning experience. In the following sections, I will elaborate on how the teacher as researcher can benefit not only the classroom, but the future direction of educational research.

Teachers are responsible for a number of tasks, few of which appear officially on their job descriptions. Between lesson planning, evaluations, parent relations, and administrative duties are the early morning questions, the lunch break consultations, and the after school help. By no means am I proposing that the teacher take on a greater burden by engaging in elaborate government sponsored longitudinal research projects. In their article "Trying on a New Pair of Shoes," authors Megan Blumenreich and Beverly Falk discuss the importance of teachers playing a role in the construction of knowledge in their classrooms by taking on a new role – the researcher.<sup>3</sup> They propose that when teachers are encouraged to self-examine their practice and their students' responses, they come to realize the potential they have to contribute to the creation of new knowledge, both practical and theoretical, about the how, what and why of teaching.

Let me provide an example. One year when I was working in the classroom as a pre-kindergarten teacher, I had a particularly rambunctious group. These four-year olds made a point of being purposefully mean to each other. So off I went to my books to find some kind of solution. Suggestions ranged from making friend bracelets, to a circle talk, and as a last resort, to parent intervention, but there didn't seem to be anything that was addressing the lack of

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**EN BREF** Lorsqu'on parle de concilier la théorie et la pratique, il est généralement question du rôle des chercheurs, rarement des rôles de l'enseignant et de l'élève. Plutôt que de continuer à déplorer le fossé qui se creuse entre la théorie et la pratique, nous devrions inciter les enseignants eux-mêmes à le combler. Ils peuvent le faire en prenant part aux décisions stratégiques qui touchent directement leurs classes. En outre, ils peuvent mettre leur expérience et leurs compétences pratiques au service des personnes travaillant au sein du secteur universitaire afin de faire partie du milieu de la recherche en éducation.

It's not that academic research doesn't interest me; now that I've been working at it for three years, I have the vocabulary and understanding of theoretical traditions to comprehensively tackle academic publications. Except every once in awhile, as I read through the latest findings, I think about my days in the classroom and wonder how separated I've become from researching as a teacher. If those in research want to lessen the gap between academia and those working in the field, they have to redefine the vocabulary and the approaches they use in disseminating their findings. I've often attended conferences I thought my old teaching colleagues would enjoy, only to see them bored in my retelling. "Epistemology, what?...What does that have to do with the students?"

Penny Milton suggested in her piece, "Opening Minds to Change", that those in research or working at the academic level need to make their work more accessible to those who are in the field. I agree, but I say that it works both ways, and that school administrators need to encourage their teachers to become more involved in researching their own teaching and classroom practices. To make this proposal practical, we need to re-examine the goals of teacher education. A report from the American Educational Research Association, published in 2005, suggested restructuring teacher education to develop innovative research designs for educational change.<sup>4</sup> Besides classroom management, pre-service students need to be exposed to the benefits of becoming involved in the process of policy making.

The Quebec education reform that is currently in the process of being integrated into schools took teacher involvement to a new level. Teachers were invited to sit on informative committees along with administrators, policy analysts, and representatives of the Ministry of Education. The results are a reform initiative that stresses competencies and allows students to accomplish the necessary courses over a two year cycle period as opposed to the traditional one-year grade. Teachers were involved at every level of the reform and the results are a well-informed education program that addresses the concerns from both a policy level and the practical level. Its success has yet to be determined, but the approach of opening up educational policy reforms to the people it will inevitably effect (the teachers) seems not only innovative, but obvious.

Perhaps the answer lies in a greater overlap between teacher education, research, and in-service practice. If the teacher becomes more of a participant in research, working with pre-service teachers for research purposes, the benefits would be three-fold. First pre-service teachers would have practical in-field research experience that they would then be more likely to incorporate into their own teaching practice. Second, experienced teachers would benefit from the insights into their practice and their students' learning



care I was seeing in my classroom. I decided to take it a step further and read up on aggressive behaviour in children in daycare situations. I read about half of the first page of one complicated study before I closed the journal and realized that this wasn't going to help me.

To solve this problem I was going to have to do what teachers had been doing since the dawn of time – figure it out on my own. So I introduced a reward chart – not for tidying up, but to reward and – most importantly, acknowledge – positive behaviour in the classroom. If Jenny helped clean a mess that wasn't hers, I would ask the friends she helped how it made them feel. Soon the children were going out of their way to help each other because more important than the stickers was the good feeling they received by helping someone else. Through trial and error, I had deciphered a unique and creative way to improve the classroom climate. I had been successfully researching as a teacher.

It wasn't until I returned to graduate school that I realized how accustomed I was to research: finding sources, putting them together, presenting them in a coherent and effective manner. These were skillful tools I had relied upon for the past 8 years of teaching. Yet, in grad school, I had to relearn a new academic way of researching – replacing terms like, "what's the problem" with "what is the preeminent issue that needs to be examined to further this project". Instead of figuring out the easiest, most effective, immediate way to deal with a challenge, I had to spend weeks reading about every other way people had looked at this problem and then lay out how my way was going to be different.

experience. And finally, researchers and the universities would further their objectives by taking advantage of the assistance of pre-service teachers and the priceless experience of in-service teachers.

This gap between theory and practice does not go unacknowledged by those involved in research. It has appeared in journals such as *Education Canada*, *Support for Learning*,<sup>5</sup> and *The British Journal of Special Education*.<sup>6</sup> However the issue seems to be consistently addressed from the perspective of those within research circles. We need to start redirecting this dialogue to focus on the perspective of the teacher. As a teacher myself, I have often been frustrated by the seemingly inaccessible and impractical nature of academic research – as have my teaching colleagues. After a day of teaching, consoling, encouraging, coaching, and negotiating, trying to decipher the secret code of academia was my last priority!

Now that I am working on my doctoral degree, the practicality of my research is important to me. If the perspective I contribute to an issue in education cannot be used or doesn't contribute at the classroom level, then what is the point? The educational discourse needs to involve the people who have the most to gain or lose. Instead of waiting for policy makers and researchers to close this gap, education students need to be involved in the process and see themselves as partners in research from the beginning. In addition, administrators should go beyond opening their doors to researchers and insist on integrating teachers into the projects they allow into their schools.

How do we conceive of education in Canada? Is it a pyra-



mid with the students, teacher's aides, teachers, and administrators building the base with research, policy and politics balancing precariously on the narrowed top? Or is it a spiral with the student in the middle, with parents, educators, the community, the research, and the politics spiraling outwards into what is still unknown, all the while connected? Instead of continuing to bemoan the growing discrepancy between theory and practice, we should encourage teachers themselves to narrow it. Teachers can accomplish this by involving themselves in the policy decisions that will directly affect their classrooms. In addition, they can extend their experience and practical expertise to those working in the university sector so that they are included as part of the educational research community. Connecting theory to practice can be done; it just needs to move past being a theory and be put into practice. |

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#### Notes

- 1 Penny Milton, "Opening Minds to Change: The Role of Research in Education," *Education Canada*, 47, no. 1 (2007): 52-56.
- 2 D. Muijis and A. Harris, "Teacher Led School Improvement: Teacher Leadership in the UK," *Teaching & Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, 22, no. 8 (2006): 961-972.
- 3 M. Blumenreich and B. Falk, "Trying on a New Pair of Shoes: Urban Teacher-Learners Conduct Research and Construct Knowledge in Their Own Classrooms," *Teaching & Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, 22, no. 7 (2006): 864-873.
- 4 M. Cochran-Smith and K. M. Zeichner, eds. (2005) *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Books, 2005).
- 5 A. Watkins, "So What Exactly Do Teacher-Researchers Think About Doing Research?" *Support for Learning* 21, no. 1 (2006): 12-18.
- 6 R. Bourke, A. Kearney and J. Bevan-Brown, "Stepping Out of the Classroom: Involving Teachers in the Evaluation of National Special Education Policy," *British Journal of Special Education* 31, no.3 (2004): 150-156.

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