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Rita C. Richey

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Research Perspectives: The Credibility of the Research Topic

Rita C. Richey
Wayne State University

This is the third in a series of articles which examines the nature of the research process and its effects upon the teacher of reading. Previously examined were issues related to disseminating research to practitioners and the potential of basic and applied research to create an impact upon instruction. This article will discuss the role of the topic of the research study and its implications for creating change in classroom practices.

From a purely practical point of view, the initial selection of the research topic creates a major set which determines the potential for the findings to affect change in the schools. If the topic lacks credibility, the findings most likely will not even be read. The most influential research in recent history has concentrated upon the most critical problems of the day (5, 16, 17). In other words, the topics were relevant.

Defining relevant problems, however, is a complex task laden with personal values; the question is always, relevant to whom? Strike (18) has said:

...human problems are rooted in a kind of theory. Situations do not become problems unless we approach them with values which specify what properties these situations ought to have...our ideologies turn events into problems, and...tell us what human needs are...(p. 10)

The interaction between research problems and social values has major implications which define the extent to which research results will be used in the classroom. For example, the bulk of research indicates class size makes little difference in student achievement. Since these findings do not verify popular theories, the results are largely ignored. (The recent work of Gene Glass has shown conflicting results, however. So popular viewpoints may ultimately prevail in this regard.) After an extensive examination of the impact of research, Clifford (5) concluded that:

Application of, or deference to, research depends less upon its quality or completeness than upon such social and ideological factors...upon the zeitgeist of education and society. (p. 37)

Chall (3) notes the lack of impact of studies whose findings were contrary to "conventional wisdom". But, the notion of research as only a device which tells society it was right in the first place is contrary to all tenets of scholarship. Button (2) said, "Put most broadly, it (research) should not only serve conventional wisdom, but supplement it." (p. 246)

Thus, research reasserts its original purpose of improving schools, a goal which becomes most difficult to achieve if the changes can come only through those who were fundamentally in agreement with the findings originally. Reasserting an advocacy position is hardly a demonstration of the influence of research findings.

How then can research topics be selected which will establish the credibility required to create some potential for affecting schooling? How can topics be selected which are consistent with societal values, and yet still generate knowledge about the way schools should change?

The discontent with educational research seems to stem more from lack of attention to the "educational" than from the attention to "research". (10, p. 48)

The average practitioner often finds the issues of research orientation and methodology a way of avoiding the central problems in the field. Gowin (7) classified these problems in terms of: social setting, concept of education, the educative process, subject matter content, context of inquiry, and the persons. For the practitioner such elements encompass the major problems of education. The difficulty is that much of the current research does not focus on distinctively educational topics (7, 10). Instead, educa-

tional researchers seem to be borrowing topics from other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology. This position does not automatically force the researchers to turn from a basic to an applied research orientation (see *Michigan Reading Journal*, v. 14, No. 2, pp. 58-61), but it does caution the more theoretical researcher to select topics with as direct a link as possible to actual teaching/learning situations.

One frequent suggestion is for researchers to involve practitioners in topic selection. These collaborative relationships would help insure relevance of the problems studied. In addition, collaborative research would involve those in the research process who are ultimately responsible for making classroom applications of the research findings.

Chall (4) calls for a model in which the university-based researchers begin their role only after the problems have been defined by teachers and administrators. Her suggestion is, of course, quite different from the model in which schools make themselves available to researchers. Others have advocated a joint role in the entire research process (6, 11, 14).

Pine (15) has described a collaborative action research process. He characterizes this process by describing a variety of elements:

1. Research problems are mutually defined by practitioners and researchers.
2. University faculty and classroom teachers collaborate in seeking solutions to practitioners' problems.
3. Research findings are used and modified in solving problems.
4. Practitioners develop research competencies, skills, and knowledge, and researchers reeducate themselves in field-based and naturalistic research methodologies.
5. Practitioners, as a result of participating in the adaptation process, are more able to solve their own problems and renew themselves professionally.
6. Practitioners and researchers co-author research reports. (pp. 34-35)

Here, a truly cooperative research process begins with a joint problem identification and problem solving orientation.

This posture has also been demonstrated in the teacher research projects in England (12) and studies by the Michigan State University's Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT). Their teacher-researchers have participated in many cooperative research ventures. Furthermore, a current IRT project in Murfreesboro, Tennessee focuses on consumer-validated research. Teachers provide actual tests of research results and one by product of this is new research questions (19).

It seems that sincere collaboration efforts between teachers and researchers tend to easily identify those problem areas which teachers would like to have research address.

Practitioners have unique sets of experiences which should be used by researchers during problem identification. Jackson and Kieslar (9) describe four key perspectives of educators in the field: their view of reality, their vision of what is achievable, the average level of know-how, and the commitment to act. And Tyler (20) also would emphasize teachers' and administrators' direct experiences with students, parents, and the community.

There is a danger, however, in research playing a purely responsive role. While there should be an element of service in the research effort, the leadership role of research should not be forgotten. Persons in the research community, typically university-based, do have a unique position. They can create time to think, to integrate new ideas, and to devise new solutions to old problems or new perspectives of these problems. Researchers should at times move beyond the demands of the immediate crisis and look to the future. Surely practitioners don't have the time to do this. Begle and Gibb (1) describe a situation in which at times research follows the needs of school practice rather than moving on ahead to illuminate issues and define new problems.

The contributions of basic research have emerged because individuals were allowed the time and resources to learn more about teaching and learning, in the abstract, leaving others to make the

applications. This has been true of many of the great scientific discoveries.

One problem with researcher controlled topics, however, is often traditional research methods limit the definition of topics. "Thus, methods tend to determine the problem investigated rather than the other way around." (13, p. 7) Ianni (8) in his discussion of ethnographic techniques describes ways of letting the theory and the things to be observed emerge from the actual field-work experience. Even though one is going to the field with prior knowledge and experience as a guide, there should be a flexibility which allows the research to be shaped to some extent by the realities observed. Hopefully, some of the naturalistic methods which are now being applied to educational research can provide techniques for dealing with more broadly defined topics.

Finally, to establish topic credibility one must distinguish between researchable and non-researchable problems. Clifford (5) cited Scannell's concession that "many of the important questions of arithmetic instruction are simply not researchable issues but matters decided by philosophical or normative considerations." (pp. 28-29) Problems are often moral issues, complex issues with uncontrollable variables. Current examples of educational problems include desegregation strategies, early drug use of young people, and teenage parenthood. In the field of reading, for example, educators must contend, with the, at times, conflicting demands of those calling for a "back to basics" emphasis and increased test scores, and the need to concentrate on self-selected reading experiences and development of the joy of reading. While there are researchable aspects of these problems, the larger issues will be decided by the courts, by community values, and other methods. The researcher's ultimate belief in empiricism is not the answer to all of society's problems. But in all cases the selection of the topic to be researched is as critical to the ultimate utility of the work as the technicalities of the research process.

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