1  A teacher’s guide to classroom research

This is a practical guide for teachers who wish to undertake research in their classrooms and schools for the purpose of improving practice. Classroom research, in the sense that I refer to it here, is an act undertaken by teachers, to enhance their own or a colleague’s teaching, to test the assumptions of educational theory in practice, or as a means of evaluating and implementing whole school priorities. So, when I write of classroom research or of the teacher as researcher, I am not envisioning scores of teachers carrying out technical research projects to the exclusion of their teaching. My vision is more of teachers who have extended their role to include systematic reflection upon their craft with the aim of improving it.

Although lip service is often paid to this idea, we live in an educational system that tends to limit individual initiative by encouraging conformity and control. Teachers and pupils (and society too) deserve better than that. Undertaking research in their own and colleagues’ classrooms is one way in which teachers can take increased responsibility for their actions and create a more energetic and dynamic environment in which teaching and learning can occur.

The origins of teacher research as a movement can be traced back to the Schools Council’s Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) (1967–72) with its emphasis on an experimental curriculum and the reconceptualization of curriculum development as curriculum research. The HCP, in its attempt to encourage a non-partisan and critically reflective attitude to teaching on the part of teachers, had a radical and controversial influence on teaching in British schools during the 1970s.

Following HCP, the concept of teacher research was nurtured by John Elliott and Clem Adelman in the Ford Teaching Project (1972–75). The project involved 40 primary and secondary school teachers in examining their classroom practice through action research. These teachers developed hypotheses about their teaching which could be shared with other teachers and used to enhance their own teaching.
At about the same time, Lawrence Stenhouse, who directed the Humanities Curriculum Project, further popularized the concept of ‘the teacher as researcher’ by utilizing it as the major theme in his influential book, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (Stenhouse 1975). Encouraged by the considerable impact that Stenhouse had on the theory and practice of curriculum and teaching, and the popularity and publicity enjoyed by the Ford Teaching Project, the teacher research movement mushroomed. As well as burgeoning teacher research groups in the UK, Australia, the USA and Canada, there are pockets of teacher-researchers in Scandinavia, France, Chile and many other countries. Although teacher research was not an entirely new concept in the late 1960s, it is from this period that it became an identifiable movement.

Much, however, has changed in the context of education in most Western countries since the concept of the teacher as researcher became popular. The main difference between the 1970s and the first decade of the 21st century is that classroom research has to be seen within a whole school and increasingly system context. It is no longer sufficient for teachers to do research in their own classrooms, without relating their enquiries to the work of their colleagues and the aims and direction of the school and the system as a whole. We need to strive consciously for a synthesis between teacher research, school development and system reform. That is why this book is not just a primer on classroom research techniques, it also attempts to relate teacher research to whole school development and the wider context of education.

All books emerge out of a specific set of individual circumstances that have influenced the author, and this book is no exception. The journey that preceded this book is still continuing, and so the story remains unfinished. But two influences in particular have been crucial in developing the ideas presented here and provide a context in which to consider the book. The first is the work of Lawrence Stenhouse whose intellectual and personal example still challenges me. In the HCP and his other work, Stenhouse was primarily concerned with the concept of emancipation. He wrote (1983: 163):

> My theme is an old-fashioned one – emancipation . . . The essence of emancipation as I conceive it is the intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognise when we eschew paternalism and the role of authority and hold ourselves obliged to appeal to judgement.

There are three levels at which this concept of emancipation can operate – at the level of the student, the teacher and the school.

At the level of the student, emancipation refers to the ability to stand outside the teacher’s authority on forms of knowledge, and to discover and own it for oneself. It was in the HCP that Stenhouse most notoriously signalled his commitment to this theme. In that project he was principally concerned
with the emancipation of pupils through a particular teaching strategy. There were three elements to this aspect of the project: the use of discussion, the use of documents as evidence to inform discussion, and the assumption by the teacher of the role of neutral chairperson. By adopting this approach, Stenhouse was moving away from a teacher-dominated classroom to a setting where pupils, unconstrained by the authority of the teacher, could create meaning for themselves on the basis of evidence and discussion.

If HCP was in part a curriculum designed to emancipate pupils, the phrase ‘teacher as researcher’ was intended to do the same for teachers. Teachers are too often the servants of heads, advisers, researchers, textbooks, curriculum developers, examination boards or the ‘Department of Education’, among others. By adopting a research stance, teachers are liberating themselves from the control and command situation they often find themselves in. Stenhouse encouraged teachers to follow the specification of a curriculum or teaching strategy, but at the same time to assess it critically. Such curriculum proposals and teaching specifications are probably intelligent but are not necessarily correct. Their effectiveness should therefore be monitored by teachers in the classroom. By adopting this critical approach, by taking a research stance, the teacher is engaged not only in a meaningful professional development activity, but is also engaged in a process of refining and becoming more autonomous in professional judgement. This applies as much to the National Curriculum and ‘personalized learning’ as it did to the HCP.

The third level at which emancipation can operate is that of the school. Here it is a question of the school liberating itself from a bureaucratic educational system. The image of the ‘ideal’ type of emancipated school is represented by the words ‘autonomous’, ‘creative’, ‘moving’ or ‘problem-solving’. These successful schools take the opportunity of the recent changes and use them to support developments already underway or planned for in the school. They adapt external change for internal purposes. In the most successful or emancipated schools, there is also a realization that successful change involves learning on the part of teachers. This implies that successful change strategies involve a seamless web of activities that focus on, are integrated with and enhance the daily work of teachers. This can result in quite profound alterations to the culture of the school and the ways in which teachers, heads and governors work together towards the goal of student achievement. More recently we have seen the emergence of the system leader, who is driven by a commitment to the improvement and sustaining of other schools as well as their own. It is here that the genesis of system transformation lies.

The second influence on this book is much more personal. During the 1970s I trained as a teacher and taught, worked as an Outward Bound instructor and mountain guide and read for postgraduate degrees in education. Although somewhat different activities, they were all characterized by a desire, often hesitant and naive: to create ways in which people could take
more control of their own lives. Irrespective of the context – practice teaching, an ‘O’ level history class, counselling a ‘delinquent’ pupil, assisting in a youth club, on the rock face, out in the wilderness, or discussing ideas in a seminar – there were similarities in overall aim and pedagogic structure.

Later, as a teacher in a Canadian university, I taught courses in curriculum development, analysis of teaching and classroom research, and found in Stenhouse’s work a theoretical framework within which I could put my ideas into action. The book emerged from that experience, more specifically from a course I taught in classroom research and some papers I wrote on the topic (Hopkins 1982, 1984a, b). Thus, the book is based on a set of ideas that have the enhancement of teacher judgement and autonomy as a specific goal, and is grounded within the practical realities of teachers and students.

My interest in classroom-based work, although always in my mind linked to school improvement, assumed a broader perspective while teaching at Cambridge and Nottingham Universities between 1985 and 1996, and 1996 and 2001 respectively. Much of my work then was concerned with assisting teachers, schools and local authorities (LAs) to handle and reflect on the change process. I learned an enormous amount from them, as I did from my involvement in the evaluation of the Technical Vocational Education Initiate, the then Department for Education and Science1 projects on Teacher Appraisal and School Development Plans, and in particular our school improvement project. I have also been fortunate to have worked over a slightly longer period with the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) on a number of school improvement-related projects. This work has helped me to see the teacher’s role in the wider context of the school as an organization and workplace. In particular, it has impressed on me the crucial importance of the culture of the school in sustaining teacher development.

I am by background and temperament a school improvement activist. Over the past thirty years or so I have self consciously located myself at the intersection of practice, research and policy. It is here that I felt I could best contribute to the process of educational reform. Reflecting back over this time, one of the initiatives of which I am most proud, as is seen later, is the work I did with the IQEA school improvement project where we collaborated with hundreds of schools in England and elsewhere in developing a model of school improvement and a programme of support. More recently however I have found myself as a national policy-maker concerned not just with regional networks of schools but with a part responsibility for transforming a whole system. Having served a parliamentary term as the Chief Adviser to three Secretaries of State – Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke and Ruth Kelly – I have now

1 The government department responsible for Education in England is now called Department for Children Schools and Families.
returned to an international role in educational leadership, where hopefully I can use this relatively unique experience to inform practice, policy and research in education. These experiences have convinced me that not only should every school be a great school, but that this is now a reasonable, realizable and socially just goal for any mature educational system. Inevitably this fourth edition emphasizes some of the issues I wrestled with in government – the importance of moral purpose in system reform, the primacy of personalized learning and the absolute necessity of getting all parts of the system moving in the same direction.

It is this commitment to a practical philosophy of emancipation and empowerment as well as a particular set of individual circumstances that underpin the argument in this book. After this introduction, a few case studies of teacher-based research are given to provide a context for what follows. In Chapter 3, two arguments are considered for teacher-based research – the need for professionalism in teaching, and the inadequacy of the traditional research approach in helping teachers improve their classroom practice. In Chapter 4, action research, which has become the main vehicle for teacher research, is discussed and critiqued; from that discussion, six criteria for teacher-based research are suggested. Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which teacher research problems are formulated and initiated. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the principles and practice of classroom observation, and in Chapter 8 various other ways of gathering data described. Chapter 9 outlines a method for analysing these data and Chapter 10 discusses how to report and disseminate them. These six chapters constitute the heart of the teacher research process. There is in Chapter 11 an explicit focus on teaching and particularly learning as well as an emphasis on the importance of personalized learning. In arguing that pedagogy should become the heartland of classroom research, I review the research on effective teaching and models of teaching and provide practical examples of three common models of learning and teaching. The discussion in Chapter 12 locates the role of the teacher-researcher in the broader systems context. It first explains the nature of system reform and then identifies the four drivers for system reform that teacher-researchers can play a central role. In doing this I connect the discussion in previous chapters to the themes of teacher and school development, in particular the creation of a culture that promotes networks and professional learning communities within and outside the school.

A continuing emphasis throughout the book is the importance of establishing a professional ethic for teaching. Implicit in this idea is the concept of teacher as researcher. The teacher-researcher image is a powerful one. It embodies a number of characteristics that reflect on the individual teacher’s capacity to be, in Stenhouse’s phrase, ‘autonomous in professional judgement’. A major factor in this is the teacher’s ability to think systematically and critically about what they are doing and to collaborate with other teachers.
Central to this activity is the systematic reflection on one’s classroom experience, to understand it and to create meaning out of it. By becoming self-conscious, collaborative and critical about their teaching, teachers develop more power over their professional lives, extend their teaching repertoires, and are better able to create classrooms and schools that are responsive to the vision they and we have for our children’s future.

**Further reading**

The key source for any teacher-researcher is still the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and in particular his *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (1975). Although he died before making his own comprehensive statement on classroom research by teachers, Jean Rudduck and I (Rudduck and Hopkins 1985) edited his published and unpublished writing to make such an argument in *Research as a Basis for Teaching*. Until the mid-1980s most of the work on teacher research was either philosophical discussion (Kemmis 1983, 1988), reports by researchers (Elliot and Adelman 1976) or teachers’ own accounts of their research (Nixon 1981). Since that time however, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of books on the topic. Pride of place must go to John Elliott’s (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*, which traces the development of the teacher research movement, describes its methodology and explores how it can be ‘a form of creative resistance’ to centralized policy-making. Other books that attempt in different ways to link teacher research to school development and educational change are Helen Simons’ (1987) *Getting to Know Schools in Democracy*, Rob Halsall’s (1998) collections on *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, our own *The Empowered School* (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1991) and *The New Structure of School Improvement* (Joyce et al. 1999). However, more recently there is an increasing number of books that more directly link teacher research with school improvement as the *Improving Schools through Collaborative Enquiry* (Street and Temperley 2005), *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research* (Sagor 2000) and *Teacher-led School Improvement* (Frost et al. 2000). Much else of relevance to the theme of ‘classroom research by teachers’ has been published recently, and I have referred to them in the Further Reading section at the end of the most appropriate chapter.