

Educational Research Standards – Challenging Mythconceptions

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Introduction

A recent study (Mackenzie 2005a) into teaching excellence awards within a large education system in one state of Australia provides the context and opportunity to reflect on educational research as it impacts upon classroom teachers. It is, however, the research methodology and unintended outcomes relating to the methodology, rather than the content or findings of the study, which provide the focus of this paper. The findings of the study, as they relate to standards of teaching, have been reported and discussed, elsewhere (Mackenzie 2005b). For the purposes of this paper 'standards' are defined as 'anything taken by general consent as a basis of comparison; an approved model' (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, 1997, 2064).

Teachers and research

In the study Mackenzie (2005a) involved teachers who had received teaching excellence awards, teachers who had been nominated but had not received awards, colleagues of teachers who received awards and principals in schools where teachers had received awards. The knowledge and perceptions of the participants provided the basis for the findings but it also became apparent as the study progressed, that the participants gained a sense of being valued and listened to, and that this was not necessarily something that commonly occurred for the teachers involved. Some teachers remarked on the fact that speaking to the researcher was cathartic and thus the research served a therapeutic purpose, which was totally unintended. What this pointed to was the fact that for the most part, educational research is something that is more frequently done *to* teachers rather than *by* teachers. This situation may prevail for a number of reasons such as lack of research training in their pre-service teacher education courses or perhaps more probably, the fact that more and more tasks are being expected of teachers, and thus there is not time

or energy left to undertake research. The intensification of teachers' work (Sachs 2003, Smyth 2001) has become an issue, which is dealt with in recent literature regarding teaching as a profession. The most cynical rationale for this intensification could be to suggest that keeping teachers overwhelmed with mundane and increasingly onerous duties means they may not have time to reflect, read or research on their own work and the conditions of their work. Time for reflection or research may lead teachers to become more demanding in terms of their conditions and opportunities, causing them to question the bureaucracy and its desire for the *status quo* to prevail.

The status of teaching as a profession is yet to be resolved (Hoyle 2001). Historically, teaching was not considered a profession because 'it had no code of ethics', no 'demonstrated knowledge base', or 'commitment to the pursuit of new knowledge' (Sarason 1999, 40) and its members had no input into their working conditions. To be regarded as a profession, teachers would therefore need to take control of and create the knowledge for their own profession, becoming active researchers into their own work and the profession itself. However, if this is to occur teachers will need to be given time, training and opportunity to engage in research in a manner, which does not perpetuate the already abounding myths and misconceptions about research. This leads to a discussion about the kinds of literature, which may be available to beginning researchers in the field of education, and the standards which some of the literature promote.

Standards of educational research

In selecting the paradigm within which research is to take place, the researcher accepts the research purpose and thus the standards that are to be adhered to. Unfortunately, however, in much of the research, which occurs within the field of education,

and many other fields as well, researchers ignore the notion of the paradigm. This occurs because they, influenced by many misguided textbooks on educational research, set up a false dichotomy between qualitative methods and quantitative methods of data collection. It is this confusion, perpetuated through some textbooks and some classes in Universities on research methodology, and exemplified in many research theses and journal articles, which creates a problem for standards in educational research.

The study, which is the focus of this paper, was undertaken within the Interpretive Paradigm, which clearly set the standards of being about a socially constructed reality involving hermeneutics, in that it was a study of understanding and meanings. The study provided for multiple perceptions and meanings, and rejected any notion of there being a knowable or objective truth about teaching excellence awards and their impact. The researcher was able to use both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection because in each case the purpose for using them was to deepen understanding and interpretation, rather than to find cause and effect or attempt to formulate generalisable laws and truths. With this understanding, the researcher was then able to bring the study participants into her zone of understanding allowing the participants to be clear about the purpose of the research.

Theoretical framework

Organisational and sociological paradigms provided the underpinning theory for the study discussed in this paper (Mackenzie 2005a) in terms of the methodology adopted and the theoretical framework employed in the interpretive phase. Literature informing the study at the theoretical level also included that relating to: 'organisational culture', 'schools as learning organisations', 'change and education' and 'the teacher as a unique individual'. Teachers, although they are each unique individuals, all work within social and organisational contexts at school, department, state, national and global levels and are, therefore, influenced to varying degrees by each and all of these contexts. Likewise, the teachers also influence these contexts through their own interactions with them. Literature and research surrounding the status of the teaching profession with specific reference to 'teacher supply and demand', 'teacher accreditation', 'teacher quality', and the morale of teachers in current times with reference to 'teacher working conditions', 'teacher satisfaction' and 'the role of the teacher' provided the context for an examination of extrinsic teaching awards and their impact upon a particular school education system.

Impact of the research on participants

Given that in many instances research is something, which is done to teachers rather than by teachers this research exemplifies a study that is undertaken by a teacher with other teachers. The focus of the study however, is not about teaching processes, products or the work of teachers, but is about teachers as professionals. In this study the teachers became an integral part of the study. Comments were recorded of teachers feeling elated that someone cared enough about what they think and feel to want to explore it with them.

That was an interesting way to spend an hour. I don't often get the chance to discuss these sorts of issues with someone who understands, isn't on staff, a peer who may judge me or my boss who is possibly convening my next job interview panel.

This indicates that teachers welcome the opportunity to reflect

upon issues impacting on their daily work. However unless a structured and systematic opportunity is provided for teachers to do this they are unlikely to make the time to engage in this kind of activity on their own. Such scaffolded experiences as the research study being discussed here was clearly appreciated by the participants. Some participants went further than this by claiming that it gave them an opportunity to articulate some of the more negative feelings they have about their role and context without fear of judgement or consequence.

That was really cathartic. I wish we had talked before the school development day. I can now see why the teachers came in relaxed and buzzing and by morning tea were as flat as tacks. My DP (Deputy Principal) did the mandatory reporting and protective behaviours update first up – we (the DP and myself) thought it should be got out of the way – but I watched the teachers sink and they stayed down for the rest of the day. What a poor way to start the year. It is sad we don't make time for these sorts of conversations – a chance to reflect on the big picture – the day-to-day stuff takes over. I wish I could turn the clock back and have a staff development day that boosted their morale and built on the holiday feelings.

Here the process of the research has provided an opportunity for reflection on action which reveals the way an individual will use the results of reflection to reflexively monitor future action so as to engage in empowered transformative decision making and action. Giddens (1984) discusses as part of the explication of the *Theory of Structuration*, that reflection needs to firstly reach a stage of "discursive articulation" where one is able to provide reasons for their actions in a reflective manner, and as a result of such articulation and reflection is then able to evaluate past action and decisions and monitor and plan future action. It is the process of the research, which provides the platform and the context for the teacher in this case to have the opportunity to reflect. This again underscores the problem of intensification of teachers' work which could at its most cynical, be seen to be one way to ensure that teachers do not get time to question, to challenge and to confront the *status quo* and the conventional wisdom of the way teaching "ought" to occur.

Another outcome of the process of this research was the notion of teachers and their opinions being valued.

It is kind of nice to be asked my opinion. I didn't know anything about these awards until it was announced that X had received one – I sat there at the staff meeting wondering why her? Who made the decision? What does she do that most of us don't do? I wanted to talk about it but I didn't want to sound like sour grapes. I don't begrudge her but I do wonder why?

Here this teacher is expressing the need for someone to listen to her feelings and to take seriously her opinions and experiences. There is a sense of frustration, disillusionment and isolation coming through this comment, and in being able to express these feelings openly and in having these emotions permitted, this teacher has experienced a sense of relief and a sense of being able to be true and authentic to her own stance without having to apologise for it. In indicating that she felt that information had been withheld or at least had not been forthcoming regarding the awards process this teacher has uncovered the source of her perception of disempowerment. Once the source of her disempowerment had been addressed and she had gained some insight and understanding into the situation, this teacher was immediately able to take control of her feelings and to see how she could move forward in a more positive way.

In addition to feeling valued, some teachers demonstrated the

need to discuss issues with someone who was both empathic and detached.

It isn't often that anyone asks me for my thoughts on something. It's good that you know where I am coming from but because I don't know you I can talk to you in a way I probably wouldn't at work and at home they don't want to hear about school. So often we don't get a chance to even think about anything other than day-to-day survival. I haven't been interviewed before – is this what it is like to have your ideas and experiences valued?

A sense of being valued for what you could contribute through your ideas is linked here to the need for somebody in a non-judgemental but knowledgeable way to interact with you. This also indicates the way that through discursively articulating feelings and emotions that had previously been denied, a participant is able to take control and experience a sense of closure that allows them to move on. This same sense of having been able to unload a burden onto somebody outside their context is reflected in the following comment made after the researcher thanked the participant for their contribution to the study.

No problem – that was good – I feel as if I dumped on you a bit but I feel better for it. I hope you got what you want because it is good to have a teacher researching issues about teaching.

This comment also demonstrates the need for a researcher to have credibility within the context that is being studied and also to be able to provide a model of the teacher as researcher. This person had obviously given some thought to the need for teachers to research their own profession and appreciated a genuine example of this happening in practice.

Giddens (1984) discusses the concept of unintended consequences, which are linked to actions and experiences. In the instance reported below, the participant completed the questionnaire in spite of himself, admitting that he began with negative feelings towards questionnaires. However the outcome for this participant, although unintended was positive in that it provided the opportunity for this teacher to reflect on his position within the profession. It also demonstrates the need for research to impinge upon the reality of participants, if the results of the research are to be credible and valuable and, therefore, able to inform future directions within the profession.

To be honest I don't usually fill out questionnaires but I was peeved that X was given an award and none of us knew anything about it – or asked our opinion? As much as anything I just wanted him to know that I was filling it out – I intended to throw it away when I got home but the questions kind of sucked me in and I started thinking about how much teaching had changed – it used to be different – so much has changed.

Not only did this teacher surprise himself by thinking more deeply than he had expected about this question, he was able to uncover an important reason for his feelings of frustration and disempowerment. The fact that the researcher is herself a teacher who is aware of some of the ill-conceived and perfunctory questionnaires to which teachers are subjected, ensured that the questionnaire that was provided, demonstrated an insider's knowledge of teaching, of the need not to waste teachers time and of the way that a questionnaire must be meaningful to the respondents.

Whilst the research provided an opportunity for some participants to articulate their frustration and annoyance it also provided the permission and the situation for one participant to express her excitement and elation in a way, which did not

appear to be immodest or arrogant.

Thanks for listening – it was great to talk about my award – I am still overwhelmed but I don't like to talk about it to people – it sounds as if I am big-noting myself. You're the first person who has really understood the mixed emotions.

Again the need for a researcher to be seen as an empathic insider is highlighted in this participant's response. In a similar vein, another award recipient expressed pleasure at being able to talk to somebody who had experienced the same emotions and feelings and reactions as they had.

I am glad you got an award too – it makes it easier to talk to someone who has. You understand! At work I don't really know who is pleased and who thinks it's a joke.

As well as the impact that this research obviously had on the participants it also had an impact on the researcher.

The researcher's experience

The experience of the researcher is an example of what Giddens (1984) terms the "double hermeneutic." By this we understand that a researcher cannot be part of the context of research without having an impact on that context at the same time as the context is impacting upon the researcher. In the course of this dialectical relationship, both the context and the researcher are changed. Research, which is worthwhile, will always make a difference to those involved and also to events that researchers examine or interpret. This research study was no exception with the researcher, through her interactions with the study participants, gaining new insights into her own feelings about being a teaching award recipient and also into her perception of herself as a researcher.

In the case of this study the research was conducted within the researcher's own professional experience, as a 'participant observer' in the sense that the education system studied was the researcher's work context at a system level and the phenomenon of teaching excellence awards was one with which the researcher had recent, personal experience. In this context the researcher conducted the research through the eyes of the participants as well as her own eyes with some comments 'ringing true' while others made the researcher stop and reflect from the perspective of experiences which were very different to her own.

Knowledgeability derives from critical reflection upon prior experiences, contexts, situations, background and education, potentially leading to empowered and transformative action (Giddens 1984). In this case the researcher's understanding of the teaching awards process grew from the study because it allowed for both critical reflection of her own experience as well as the opportunity to share the critical reflections of study participants. An unexpected and unintended outcome of the study was the researcher's increased understanding of how the research process has the ability to empower and enable both researchers and research participants. When beginning the research the impact of the choice of paradigm was not fully appreciated by the researcher. On reflection however, it is the researcher's perception that it was the choice of an interpretive paradigm, which allowed for the development of a dialectical partnership between the researcher and participants and led to the collection of rich data.

The supervisor's perspective

It is always difficult as a supervisor, when students refer, as they should, to the conventional wisdom of research textbooks, to disabuse them of the false dichotomy that the majority of these books (for example, Burns 1997, Cohen and Manion 1994) set up between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Initially, research students will tend to defer to the literature in the field until they gain some sense of control of their topic and are able to critique the literature rather than defer to it and speak through it. Once students can gain control of the literature, rather than it controlling them however, they are able to take steps towards the kind of balanced and critical discussion, which one expects to find in academic prose and scholarly works. The textbooks, which assist students to learn about research methodology are, in many cases, quite misleading and incorrect in the way they treat, or worse still fail to treat, the difference between the research paradigm and the research methodology. As a supervisor then, one assists the student to critique these books in light of the need to first make a paradigm choice before one can make a methodology choice.

In the study which is being addressed in this paper, it was fascinating, as a supervisor to watch the way the researcher came to terms with the contradictions between what some of the textbooks were saying and what the supervisor was providing in terms of feedback about the methodology chapter. However over the course of the study, the researcher came to terms with the myth that textbooks perpetuate about the supposed dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methodology and ultimately was able to herself articulate lucidly and academically, why the paradigm is paramount and why the dichotomy, such as there is, is between the paradigms and not the methodologies. This shift did not occur suddenly but occurred over the course of the study as the researcher realised how confused one becomes trying to adhere to the qualitative-quantitative "divide" and how unhelpful and limiting such a divide is.

It was also surprising to the researcher when confronted some time later by the supervisor suggesting that a paradigm shift had occurred by the end of this research, in that whilst the researcher had thought she was squarely in the interpretative paradigm, she may well have finished up with at least one foot in the emancipatory paradigm. As a supervisor then, the course of supervision is always like writing an adventure story without knowing what the ending is likely to be. If the ending is one where the researcher has pushed the supervisor's thinking beyond where it began and beyond the supervisor's comfort zone, it is likely that the research has been worthwhile.

Standards of research

In this research study the result of making the paradigm and the standards, which are built into the paradigm explicit led to the participants gaining a sense of empowerment and value through the research process itself. An unexpected outcome of this research study was that a paradigm shift appears to have occurred. In light of the empowerment and obvious impact of the research for the participants they as a group became liberated or emancipated from a situation, which previously they did not fully comprehend or over which they felt they could exert little control.

Whilst this research did not begin with a view to uncovering oppression, making explicit constraints or confronting frustrations and dilemmas, in essence this is where it led. Perhaps this paradigm shift is not as surprising, upon reflection, as was first thought by the researcher because the researcher

was in part motivated to undertake this study because of a sense of frustration and disillusionment with the education system and with the way it treated teachers within it.

However whilst this research empowered the participants, the researcher was left with her worst fears of the system extended and confirmed. This in no way diminishes the value of the study or the findings; rather it allows for what could have been seen to be hunches about the system and therefore little better than unsupported opinions, to be dignified through the systematic collection of evidence to inform a judgement. Through the evidence and the resulting conclusions of this study a way forward for research into teaching practice can be discerned.

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