

## EDITORIAL

In his President's Report, John Burge points out that one of my long-held aims was to produce this journal on time. We have finally reached a position where we have sufficient copy and finances to be able to fulfil that aim – it's a wonderful feeling. Another aim I have cherished has been to encourage the subscribers of this journal to write for this journal. Many of you are classroom practitioners and, while I value receiving manuscripts from people in any professional sphere, I particularly welcome manuscripts from teachers.

### Teachers as Decision-Makers

Teaching is decision-making! There is rarely a moment in a teacher's day when teachers do not make decisions. The decisions might be as simple as choosing to revise the teaching of ratios or planning to teach the brighter children patterns related to factorials. Decisions may be at a much higher plane, e.g., to teach a particular language form (passive voice) in a particular way (cartoon presentation) to a particular group (10 year old deaf children). Perhaps the key decision is to choose a particular combination of teaching approaches based on recent research and trends, e.g., a programme of intensive basic skills development using systematic instruction coupled with the development of interview skills and work experience for intellectually impaired adolescents.

### Teachers as Evaluators

The list of possible decisions is endless but the interesting point about all of this is that **most** of these decisions are based on some form of **evaluation**. The evaluation may be a process evaluation, that is, a consideration of what is actually occurring within the classroom. To exemplify this, lack of pupil interest in conventional curricular may lead to a 'reality' curriculum – work experience; or, the particular social climate is so non-productive that an analysis is made of the social context of the classroom in order to effect change. Alternatively, your review of your effectiveness may take the form of a product evaluation, that is, measurement of the learning outcomes of your class. In this case, you might assess your pupils' levels of skill development in maths and reading. You might discover that the experiential approach you have adopted has been quite ineffective so you decide to turn to a more systematic model of instruction.

### Teachers as Researchers

While I have represented the two forms of evaluation in a simplistic way, my point is to underscore your role as a decision-maker and to point out that you are involved in a form of research every day. True, in many cases the design of your research may not have been carefully planned before the event, but there is no reason why it can't be. There is also no reason (apart from time, resources, lack of motivation) why you **shouldn't** be involved in this type of research because, if you accept my argument that you are decision-makers who are constantly involved in evaluative considerations, you **must** have a firm basis on which to make future curriculum decisions.

Now, the next logical step in my fairly obvious strategy is to convince you that you should:

- a. plan to conduct a more formal evaluation of the validity and efficacy of your teaching decisions by
- b. undertaking literature reviews after which
- c. you would establish a research design (say a simple pretest/posttest) based on
- d. a simple but effective instrument and
- e. utilising a planned intervention!

After you have done that, all you have to do is to consider the outcomes of your study, draw conclusions, make recommendations and write up your report. If what you have found out would be valuable or helpful to other teachers, arrange to have your report published, as what you have done may prove to be extremely important to other teachers who have been faced with similar problems.

### An Alternative – Replication Studies

Another approach to problem-solving and research in teaching is to replicate a study which has attempted to solve a problem similar to the one of concern to you. Replication of studies is, I believe, an essential step in the construction of 'universal truths' in teaching (there is a point, though, when replication becomes a repetitive and spurious exercise). To amplify my point, I will refer to the paper by Helen Eldridge and Judith Chapman in this edition. The authors used the Q sort technique to solve some very important questions about the services to be provided by a Special Education Unit. The Q sort technique is very straightforward and the compilation of the 69 possible activities for an SEU is, in itself, a very useful piece of information. The study is worthy of replication in different settings to determine whether there is a universal perception of the service role of SEUs.

### Research as a Form of Social Action

Education is the process of engendering change. Research, too, provokes change. We are well aware of the contaminating variables in research, for example, Experimenter and Hawthorne effect, but research often causes a change in the social context in which it is conducted. Either the paper by Eldridge and Chapman or the one by Mike Lally should serve as examples. In the former case, the process of compiling the list of services involved the

providers and recipients of the services in actually considering what services were available and could be available. This may have stimulated the principals to reconsider their administrative policies on the utilisation of SEU services. The second stage of the study, the sorting process, may have highlighted areas where services have been found to be wanting. A good example would be the limited services offered to gifted and talented children, a group which most certainly is deserving of special education services.

Similarly, the research undertaken by Mike Lally at Woden Special School must have engendered some changes within the context of that school. Having a psychologist as a 'long-term staff member' working on educational problems by designing instructional services is not a common occurrence in our schools. The presence of fairly expensive and unusual computer equipment must have raised questions about the future of computers in education.

Without labouring the point any further, I guess what I am trying to do is convince you that research is not just an ivory-tower activity. Research can be real-life decision-making and action within educational contexts. It produces change. It provides a sounder basis on which to make important curriculum decisions. It promotes the development of 'universal truths' within education. It develops the professionalism of teachers and teaching. It is a vital part of the whole process of education.

### **A Final Word**

What I have said above is designed to encourage you to link decision-making, evaluation and research in your teaching. It is also an attempt to convince you that you should identify and solve education problems and to write about your findings and conclusions.

As a professional group, Australian Special Educators seem reluctant to commit their problem-solving endeavours to paper. This journal, along with others, is a vehicle for the publication of worth-while educational problem solving and reporting. Please let us know what problems you are solving.

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