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CHAPTER 15

The Teaching of Research in a Teacher Education Programme

IFFAT FARAH & NELOFER HALAI

The Task Force that recommended the creation of the Institute for Educational Development at the Aga Khan University (AKU-IED) in Karachi, Pakistan called attention to the absence of reflection and inquiry in teacher preparation programmes and the lack of research-based knowledge about teaching and learning in Pakistan and other developing countries. The proposed AKU-IED programmes, particularly the M.Ed. in teacher education, were expected to improve this situation by integrating reflective practice across all courses and modules and by including a research component. The Task Force [1], advised that the research component in the M.Ed. should be based both on the prior experience of the course participants (CPs) and on their future roles as school-based teacher educators. It also recommended an emphasis on qualitative research methods because ‘it accommodated greater cultural flexibility and consistency with current educational practice’ (AKU-IED, 1991). This chapter will describe the evolution of the research component in the M.Ed. and discusses critical issues confronted in the process of preparing teachers to engage in academic research. We, the authors of this chapter, are faculty members who have participated in the development and teaching of the research component over 10 years. Writing this chapter has been an opportunity to share reflections on our experience and on more general issues of the teaching of research. However, to ensure that our analysis and interpretations of the issues were shared we sought feedback from faculty colleagues and some former students.

Developing a research course is generally challenging (Rouhani, 1999; Page, 2001); developing a research course in our context has been particularly so. Almost all CPs of the M.Ed. programmes have been teachers who have had little or no experience of conducting research or utilizing research knowledge. A tracking study of the IED’s M.Ed. graduates

(Siddiqui & Macleod, 2003) showed that not all of them become school-based teacher educators and very few engage in research after graduation. Within this context we have constantly grappled with questions such as what should be the purpose of teaching research to our students. Should all CPs, regardless of their interests, aspirations, and future needs, learn to do research anyway? Why should we teach research? What should we teach? How and how much should we teach? In the rest of this chapter we describe the development of the research component within the M.Ed. programme and our continuing struggle with these questions.

The research component in the first M.Ed. programme consisted mainly of a research-based dissertation carrying 15 credits (out of a total of 70 credits) and conducted after completion of course work. During their dissertation year, students in small groups read about particular research approaches and made a presentation on these in weekly seminars and some faculty led seminars on research methods were conducted during their visit to partner universities.[2] Some modules such as those in Mathematics and Social Studies engaged students in small-scale classroom action research. The dissertation required CPs to design, carry out and report a relatively small-scale research study. Following task force recommendations, the IED seemed to favour qualitative research methods. Consequently all dissertation research projects employed qualitative research methods. Almost all CPs conducted action research so that they themselves might try out a new teaching strategy or study the process of supporting one or more teachers to learn a new teaching strategy. At the end of the M.Ed. programme, the CPs gave feedback on the dissertation process. They strongly recommended that more attention be given to the teaching of research methods during the programme. Participants felt that they had been inadequately prepared to conduct the research for their dissertations and to learn from the process.

In response to students' feedback and recommendations received from external evaluators, some changes were made in the second programme. The teaching of research methodology was formalized by including a three-week segment on research methodology during course work. This was given a weighting of five credits, raising the total credits for the research component from 10 to 15. The three weeks on research methodology were integrated within a module titled Research for Teacher Learning and School Improvement. This integration reflected a belief that research is learnt best as you engage in it within a relevant content area. Students read about and had class discussions on various aspects of doing and assessing qualitative research. They were helped to formulate researchable questions in the areas of school improvement and teacher learning, to collect and analyse data, and report their research in a paper submitted at the end of the now extended course. The research papers were assessed for knowledge and understanding in the area of school improvement and teacher learning as well as on their understanding of research methodology. Student feedback on this programme brought forth several issues and problems. First, while students

appreciated the input and the opportunity to engage in a small research project before the dissertation, they felt overwhelmed by input on two other 'heavy content areas' coming at the same time. Second, their openness to learning from the process of conducting research was negatively influenced by the assessment procedures. The marks carried by the single assignment, assessing understanding of research methods as well as teacher learning and school improvement, and the limited time available for reflecting on and learning from the research process were also concerns for both the faculty and students. Third, students found the readings on research paradigms and theoretical issues in qualitative research extremely difficult in terms of the ideas presented and language used in them.

The research training component was restructured as a result of this feedback. A separate course on qualitative research methodology was developed with the aim of preparing students to conduct their dissertation research using qualitative designs. The course introduced the underlying assumptions and principles of qualitative methodology and engaged students in tasks such as developing research questions, conducting qualitative interviews with their colleagues or other teachers on campus, doing observation exercises, selecting and justifying the sample and methods of data collection for particular questions. Simpler introductory readings on qualitative research were assigned. Students were encouraged to develop the work done in this course into a dissertation proposal. This was very clearly a general and introductory course. The faculty teaching it expected that students could go on to learn a particular method such as action research or case study during the planning and conduct of the research project for their dissertation.

Students seemed to find this 'how-to-do research' approach helpful in preparing better, or at least making them feel better prepared, for the dissertation task. However, duration of the module, namely three weeks, was still considered too short for the purpose. Other issues also began to emerge. There were faculty concerns about students' ability to read, understand, and use published research papers and about the exclusive focus on qualitative methodology. Faculty members recommended that the course should be expanded to address these. In response, a seminar series was included in the second year of the two-year M.Ed. where faculty were invited to present their own research, particularly explaining the research design. The seminars were useful to some extent although some faculty continued to feel the need for more input to help understand and, to some extent, use quantitative methods. The demand for more preparation before the dissertation continued to be made. For the faculty offering the research module, teaching both theoretical underpinnings and principles and processes within a short time was, to say the least, extremely challenging. On the one hand, they felt that unless students understood the basis for the different methodologies they would be unable to design and conduct good quality research; on the other hand, they were acutely aware that the students did not have the educational

background to develop this understanding in the relatively short available time.

The next M.Ed. programme included a new non-credit module called Educational Inquiry in its first year. This module aimed to develop an understanding of the significance of inquiry in education, and to enable CPs to become critical consumers of educational research within both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. While the aims and objectives of this module have remained the same over the past 10 years, new components have been introduced such as some basic statistics for use as tools in the analysis, organization and processing of data. To further alleviate concerns about the exclusive focus on qualitative research methods in the credit-bearing course, some input on quantitative research was included in the module. However, feedback from students confirmed faculty fears that to cover both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the limited time was a very ambitious undertaking. The approach being currently taken is to offer Educational Inquiry (an introduction to research paradigms) as a credit-bearing course in the first year of the programme. Plans are also being discussed to allow students to make a decision about the kind of research they wish to engage in by choosing either a qualitative or a quantitative methods course in the second year. The purpose of developing two separate courses for two full semesters will be to provide the time and focus needed to understand a particular paradigm better.

These developments of the research courses in the M.Ed. programme show a shift from an initial focus on classroom action research to a broader view of general educational enquiry. The initial aim was to prepare teachers and teacher educators to study their own practices or to conduct research for the improvement of classroom practice. The shift was towards the more generic course work to prepare educationists, located inside or outside schools, who can conduct research on broader educational issues. There was also a shift in the view about learning how to carry out research. The first few programmes reflect the view that one learns research mainly by doing research (thus the mini studies during certain modules and the dissertation). The later programmes suggest or assume that one can learn about research practice from theory and others' experiences prior to engaging in research. Commonly, research methods courses combine the two by requiring some research project within a research methods course (Glesne & Web, 1993). The separation of the research project and fieldwork (done during the dissertation) from the taught course has contributed to an increasing perception, particularly among students, that the dissertation is the opportunity to demonstrate what has already been learned in course work rather than being itself an opportunity to learn. This has resulted in an almost exclusive focus of the CPs on the dissertation output itself rather than on the process.

The Dissertation

All students in the M.Ed. programme are required to submit a research-based dissertation. From the students' perspective this is a most important and high status activity for several reasons: it carries 25% of the total credit hours; it is seen as the culmination of the M.Ed. programme; and it may facilitate access to a Ph.D. programme. Although students have read about, discussed and practised various parts of the process of doing research (for example, formulating a research question and carrying out an interview and observations), the dissertation research is their first experience of engaging in a research study largely independently, and of writing an extended research report. They face difficulties in making decisions and having to rationalize and justify every decision. They also find it hard to believe that they should learn from the research process as they experience it and write about this learning in their dissertations; their assumption is that the dissertation should tell the corrected and sanitized process. Other difficulties are in transforming their findings into knowledge (putting discrete findings together) and in accepting that the knowledge they create through research is legitimate knowledge. Students feel more comfortable supporting their claims with the literature they have read than with the data they have collected. The dissertation process, along with the M.Ed. programme in general, creates a struggle for the students between new views of knowledge, processes of knowing and the culturally salient concepts about what is valuable knowledge and how it is acquired (from authority normally symbolized by the book). This later form of knowledge (often seen as given, authoritative and unquestionable knowledge) has been learnt from schools and from society in general. As one of our graduates said quite expressively, 'as teachers we never feel that we can generate valuable knowledge, we are recipients of knowledge from authority. The systems leave very little room for us; there is a sense of powerlessness' (personal conversation). This issue is discussed further in Chapter 16.

Another significant challenge is posed by the difference in perspectives of the teacher and the researcher. McIntyre (1997) pointed out that teachers are not trained to be researchers so that 'it seems unreasonable to demand of teachers that they be researchers as well as teachers, when the expertise required for the two activities is so different' (p. 132). The CPs are teachers and bring their identity, perspectives and moral values with them. Most courses in the programme expect students to review and refine their perspectives but not necessarily to set them aside. The research component seems to require such a setting aside. In a paper about the problems of preparing educational researchers in a doctoral programme, Labaree (2003) points out that the professional practice of researchers is sharply different from the professional practice of teachers. Teachers have a normative and moral perspective and are concerned with solving problems, and doing what is best for the students. They often find it difficult to discard this perspective and adopt a researcher's analytical perspective, concerned with

understanding what is happening and why it is happening first. In Labaree's experience 'this reluctance often leads students in education doctoral programmes to shift the discourse about educational issues from what is to what should be, looking for practical solutions before explaining the problem (Labaree, 2003, p. 18). We have similar experiences in the M.Ed. programme. The CPs are often unable to make the analysis and understanding of a phenomenon their primary concern. Their immediate response to data is a critique of what they have seen or heard and recommendations to fix the situation. This difference in perspectives does not suggest that teachers cannot or must not engage in research. In fact there are very strong arguments for why they should. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) for instance argue that teacher inquiry can make a very significant contribution to the generation of knowledge about teaching, learning and classrooms. That contribution can be useful for the teachers' own practice, for the practice of the immediate community of teachers and for the larger community. Teachers can bring a 'truly emic, or insider's perspective that makes visible the ways that students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum' (p. 43).

A majority of the students find writing the dissertation in English a very daunting task. However, often, it is not only a matter of not knowing the language well enough. Other academic skills such as the abilities to think and conceptualize, to seek connections, synthesize and analyse are difficult for many students. These skills are not part of the repertoire of the majority of participants at the time of entry to the course. While they improve during a year and a half, problems at various levels of severity still exist. Inadequate skills of writing in English and a perception that they must adopt a rather stereotypical, *classy* academic style (Becker, 1986) often lead students to adopt a writing style which is difficult to follow. The dissertation has to be delivered within a given amount of time and the challenge is both to learn about research and about writing research. These, of course, are closely connected tasks particularly if one is doing qualitative research (Glesne & Web, 1993; Labaree, 2003).

The successful completion of a research project typically needs several kinds of expertise. These include: (1) expertise in the substantive areas of the research; (2) expertise of selecting and using appropriate methods; (3) expertise in knowledge of the context in which the research is conducted; (4) personal experience; and (5) expertise in effectively presenting the findings and conclusions (Sandelowski, 1998). Our experience of students' dissertation writing shows that while lack of one or more of the above skills may create problems, it is the bringing together of all of these to the process of completing the research project that poses the major challenge.

Despite all these difficulties, students' feedback suggests that they greatly value the dissertation as an opportunity to synthesize what they have learned over the entire M.Ed. programme. Although such feedback is encouraging for the faculty and the programme, we need to clarify better the

purpose of teaching research and the specific learning outcomes of the dissertation process. Research-related outcomes are rarely directly evident in the students' work after graduation and most graduates have not engaged in research after programme completion.

The faculty also acknowledges the value of the research methods course and the dissertation. However, there is continuing discussion and debate about the purpose and nature of the research component. Should the research component be a necessary input in the preparation of professional teachers? Do teacher educators or educational managers require the research component? Should the research component be provided only for only educational researchers and future scholars? Surely we cannot have one response for all CPs given the different roles they might take on after graduation. According to a recent proposal future M.Ed. programmes will offer a compulsory course in educational inquiry. Beyond this course, students may opt to prepare further as educational researchers by taking another research methods course and completing a research-based dissertation or they may choose to carry out a development project in a classroom, school or school system, and write a report on the outcomes of the project.

Notes

- [1] The task force recommendations were guided by a paper written by a faculty member of a partner university.
- [2] CPs in the first programme were sent to the two partner universities, Oxford University in the United Kingdom and the University of Toronto in Canada, for nine weeks towards the end of the second year. The purpose of the visit was to study teacher education and school improvement in a different context and to use the library resources at these universities. Since the IED library resources at that initial stage were minimal, students were asked to conduct the literature review on the topic of their dissertation while they were at the partner universities.

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