COMMUNICATING DATA TO SCHOOLS

T.W. Maxwell

Abstract. The article explores the communication of data to schools by researchers and evaluators. The stance is taken that the research process is one in which the participants are involved in a mutually supportive enterprise in which the relationship should be viewed as co-operation between professional colleagues, i.e., a relationship in which perceived status is minimised but one in which different knowledge and expertise exists on both sides. It is argued that the obtaining of data at school sites requires the researcher to provide data to their sources. Careful consideration needs to be given by researchers to the process and methods of communication of data to school communities. Issues addressed include audience, terminology, prose and other forms of presentation. A case is made for the researcher to become involved in dialogue to enhance the "meaning-making" of practitioners and themselves. The article concludes with a set of guidelines for researchers.

Introduction

Researchers and evaluators in education will necessarily depend upon schools as the primary source of data for their work. The issues of the provision and communication of data to schools follow directly from the decision to use schools as a data source. The aim of this article is to argue that it is the responsibility of the "outsider" to provide data to a school that has acted as a data source. Furthermore, it is also argued that it is the communication of the data that needs to be given careful consideration if teachers are to get the most out of the data being presented. The paper goes on to explore a number of issues related to this theme, including the audience for data feedback and the alternative ways in which data may be provided for the benefit of the school community.

The basis for the arguments rests in the view of the relationship between researcher and practitioner as professional colleagues. This view requires that participants in the research process put aside learned perceptions about the different status of the two positions. Rather, they are people with different sets of knowledge and expertise, neither holding a pre-eminent position. This does not require that differences in knowledge and skills do not exist but rather that at different points in the process these differences will come to the fore and simply
need to be acknowledged. In short, there should be a parity of esteem between researchers and teachers.

The claim is sometimes made of researchers in schools that they seldom give anything back to the schools that they have used as the basis of the collection of their data (Finlayson, 1973; Bates, 1987). This situation is exacerbated when teachers feel that they have had to put themselves out to accommodate the researcher's needs in order to get the required data. There is a sense of being used in the professional relationship that does require to be addressed and it is the "outsiders" - the researchers and evaluators - who have the upper hand in this matter, although the teachers in schools can have an impact.

The researchers have the key to this situation for a number of reasons. First, they are the ones who hold the data. Second, in holding the data they have a certain power over the teachers in the schools since they know something more than the teachers in relation to the questions being asked. Third, there is an obligation on the part of the researchers to provide the teachers with information that might help them in their context of teaching or in relation to their professional responsibilities. Finally, the researchers have an obligation to the teachers who have taken time to support the research to give them some return for their efforts.

Teachers on the other hand are also not powerless in the situation where a researcher, or team of researchers, requests data of them. Firstly, there is usually a requirement that the researcher or evaluator has the project cleared by the employing authority. For example, the N.S.W. Department of Education stipulates that ethical and privacy issues be addressed in any research proposal. It also notes that the involvement of teachers and students is entirely voluntary and that the principal has the power of veto on the research. The Department also requires that a report is sent to it and a summary to the participating schools (N.S.W. Department of Education, 1988). Secondly, where the researcher(s) visit the school, there is an opportunity here to request certain kinds of data as part of a quid pro quo deal and/or the provision of data in certain forms that the in-school people would find useful. A further development of this kind of approach is for the interested teacher to become more involved in the process itself although clearly where the data gathering is based on the mail-out survey and similar techniques this option is not possible.

Communicating Data

Communicating is fundamentally concerned with conveying meaning and obtaining feedback about the perceived meaning. It is a two-way process in which the receivers of the information have an opportunity to interact with the provider(s) whether this is in the form of a printed document or face-to-face or both. When teachers make their own meanings out of personal interaction about data and other matters, especially when this is in the presence of the person(s)