

Participant Observation in Canadian Classrooms: The Need, Rationale, Technique, and Development Implications

W. Gordon West
queen's university

L'auteur fait la critique de la recherche appliquée dans le domaine de la pédagogie. C'est à la rigidité des méthodes et à la faiblesse de l'épistémologie qu'il attribue le peu de connaissances dont on dispose sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage qui se font en salle de classe. L'auteur propose une nouvelle méthodologie qui s'appuie sur une composante individuelle (intentionnalité des êtres humains) et sur une composante sociale (édification sociale du monde). Il préconise l'emploi de techniques d'observation active (participant observation) qui, parce qu'elles exigent l'implication et la participation de l'observateur, lui semblent des instruments plus propices pour la compréhension de ce qui se passe en salle de classe. Le renouvellement de la recherche appliquée ne pourra vraiment se faire que si on résout certains problèmes de taille: la validité de la méthodologie, l'accès à la salle de classe et le soutien politique des autorités.

There has been a growing disenchantment in the last few years with the process and results of traditional educational research and development approaches. At the same time, a number of critiques of educational research have been offered (e.g., Bidwell, 1974; Cosin, Dale, Esland, and Swift, 1971; Hansen, 1975; Jackson, 1968, pp. 157ff.; Richer, 1975; Ryan and Greenfield, 1975; Young, 1971) centred around the methodological, theoretical, epistemological, and political problems of "mainstream" quantitative research. After a cursory review of these, this paper will outline the rationale for an alternative methodological approach which attempts to address some of these difficulties and has implications for research and development. Participant-observation techniques and some existing studies using these will be examined to illustrate the utility of the approach, and some problems peculiar to this alternative method will be explored.

DATA PROBLEMS WITH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

There seems to be a never-ending supply of policy issues in Canadian education (e.g., Stevenson, Stamp, & Wilson, 1972). Social class barriers to educational success, the necessity for free, child-centred learning, flexibly open vs. structured schools, community participation vs. professional autonomy, educational change and innovation within conservative bureaucracies remain unresolved topics from the sixties. Large-scale

immigration, the assertion of ethnic minority rights, class-size questions, teacher workload and unionization, discipline and authority, sexism, financial constraints, and job-training inadequacies are only some of the dilemmas added in the seventies.

Educational research efforts have generally been justified on the grounds that applied social research methods will yield aid for such policy questions. In spite of some noticeable successes, the image of educational research and development has become rather tarnished in the past decade as these issues have remained unresolved. For example, demonstration projects for low-income slow learners have been successful, but social class barriers generally remain in the larger school system. Child-centred education has not resulted in a burst of creativity, but has rather — at least in the eyes of its most vocal critics — led to a lack of standards and discipline problems. Although we have more job-training vocational schools than ever before, our youth unemployment is also higher than at any time in recent history. The world appears much more complicated than a decade ago; one can no longer be as optimistic about educational reform. Such disillusionment and threatened funding cutbacks have led to calls to re-evaluate our R&D efforts in order to improve them. Many reasons for the above-mentioned failures have been suggested in greater detail elsewhere (Byrne & Quarter, 1972; Fullan, 1972; Lind, 1974; Myers, 1973), but a few bear repeating.

Although more than research is needed, accurate empirical information and useful, powerful theories are demanded for informed resolution of the difficulties. It is thus strikingly noticeable how few research studies have attempted to obtain behavioral data on classrooms, the central setting of most of our educational concerns. Sociologists, for instance, have devoted most of their attention to the social-organizational and aspiration-achievement aspects of education. Large-sample survey research, organizational case studies recounting administrative experiences, laboratory experiments, textbook content analyses, and economic flow-charts have told us little about the process of what actually occurs under what policy options in which classrooms. The bulk of such research utilizes an input-output model whereby various resources (e.g., equipment, teaching styles, curricula) are fed into the “black box” of the classroom to produce various outcomes (usually cognitive achievement). How these effects occur remains a mystery. As Ryan (1975) and Ryan and Greenfield (1975) have argued, such a model of the schooling process barely does justice to our common-sense notions of learning, and falls far short of the ideals of precise research knowledge. Given the inadequacy of much of our past research, we should consider Ryan and Greenfield’s alternative expanded-process model of schooling, which insists on attention to experiences within educational settings. In this “service” model, focus is placed on how teachers and students perceive and use resources.

Almost all of the few classroom studies produced over the past decade have been made by social psychologists, the predominant empirical group among educational researchers. Significant work has been done by Adams and Biddle (1970) regarding the effects of classroom physical organization on teacher–pupil interaction, Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968), and Brophy and Good (1974) regarding the effects of teacher expectations on academic achievement, by Flanders (1970) regarding direct and indirect teacher influence on learning, and Kounin (1970) regarding teacher qualities most useful for maintaining discipline. Although often excellent, even this work has inherited some of the weaknesses of its social psychological background, weaknesses often shared with research using the input–output model.¹

Specifically, when avoiding weak methodological designs for which educational studies are notorious within the social research community (Greenfield, 1975), most of the research has relied upon positivistic experimental and survey traditions. These emphasize control of variables, careful coding of pre-selected indicators (e.g., Flanders, 1970), testing of previously selected hypotheses, and so on (Walker, 1972). Although methodologically competent and with findings of high statistical significance, many studies fail to isolate factors which explain more than a miniscule percentage of the variance in the independent variable (e.g., Coleman et al., 1966; Richer, 1975). This suggests that high-powered designs are being used to test inadequately formulated theories. We all too often do not know which factors to test, and are prematurely structuring research.

Variables which are poorly formulated are often chosen. For instance, Meehan (1974) and Leiter (1976) have argued that the achievement test results so frequently chosen as dependent variables are not only culturally biased but also difficult, if not impossible, to interpret, since they fail to discriminate validly among children with regard to logical reasoning. Often piecemeal single factors are examined in an oversimplified fashion when interacting variables deserve our attention. Since the research methods usually involve cross-sectional analysis of one-shot survey or short-period observational reports, processes cannot be described over time, and careers of teachers, students, and classes are ignored. The categories and units used in classroom observational checklists (Rosenshine & Furst, 1973) are frequently atheoretical, and may not catch the significant processes:

(Unit categorizations) are left, however, with the one great deficiency that such procedures do not preserve the complexities, and interdependencies, and the continuity of behavior and situations. The patterns of simultaneous and sequential variables are not recorded. Instead . . . single variables are selected and defined in advance; then aspects of the behavior or the situation which fit the definitions of these variables are abstracted from the observed constellation; the actual events and their context are not saved for study. (Barker & Wright, 1954, p. 199)

What is needed is a methodology which allows more flexible and careful

structuring of the basic units presupposed by much research, in order that more appropriate data be generated.

Most of the psychologically based classroom research has, not surprisingly, theoretically focused on characteristics of individual students and teachers rather than drawing additional strength by viewing the classroom using concepts from other disciplines, such as the "small group" from sociology. Where interaction has been of concern (e.g., Flanders, 1970), it has remained narrowly dyadic in conception. Social structural factors and settings have been largely ignored, as well as nonverbal behavior.

The positivistic epistemological basis of such research is being increasingly called into question, especially from within sociology. Modelling educational research along an outmoded philosophy of natural science fails to take account of the unique nature of human subjects, who do not respond to "forces and factors" as mute and fully determined atoms but as thinking and evaluating actors. Not all research is guilty of this; attitude studies, for instance, focus on actors' constructs. But almost all of even the best educational studies failed to address the emergent complexities of social interaction, instead tending unquestioningly to use as resources social reifications such as IQ, SES, reading abilities, teacher expectations, achievement motivation, and so on.

What has been lacking . . . is a framework for analysing how these different qualities are made relevant in the classroom and how they come to function as criteria of success and failure. . . . We need to know how particular education *identities* (e.g., the "good pupil, and the difficult" pupil) are *constructed and taken for granted* through the rules and procedures of the classroom and through the definitions which teachers apply to their pupils. . . . In terms of the sociology of education neither the educability studies nor the social systems model have taken the everyday activity of school life seriously as phenomena to be explained. Neither has endeavoured to focus on the intersubjectivity of their everyday life, on the processes through which individuals negotiate and attach meanings to their worlds. (Cosin, Dale, Esland, & Swift, 1971, pp. xi-xii)

The political style of educational research is noteworthy. The problems worthy of research expenditure are those formulated by educational ministries and bureaucracies, rather than by parents, students, or teachers. The findings are usually prestructured to suggest manipulation of the latter groups in the interests of the former. Achievement research, for instance, is relevant in a meritocracy dependent on sorting its available talent, and suggests policies to modify or eliminate the effects of "extraneous" background factors such as social class. It does not provide answers which might be deemed relevant by students, such as how to "beat the system," or how to develop an alternative system. By directing attention to certain questions only, such research can thus be used ideologically to justify the differential distribution of material reward on the basis of IQ and achievement.

The most popular styles of research have thus been politically isomorphic with the top-down R&D model, and hence most favored by high-level

administrators (Rothman, 1968). Research based on concepts irrelevant to classroom actors has often generated policy implications seen as equally irrelevant by such users. Most reform attempts have been impositions by administrative planners upon local schools and teachers. The implicit hubris is obvious. Given the political resistance such procedures often generate among users and the lack of training in new roles for implementers, it is not surprising that many innovations and reforms have been effected only on paper, and have never actually been implemented. (Fullan, 1972; Fullan & Pomfret, 1975). We often do not know if a planned innovation worked or not, since we don't even know if it was carried out.

In sum, when we have attempted to solve educational problems using research knowledge, and have actually managed to implement innovations, all too often the knowledge base has been faulty. A lack of classroom focus, inadequate methodological designs, absence of theoretical guidance to relevant data, an inappropriate philosophy of science, and top-down research and development have undermined our best (and most expensive) efforts.

What seems to be most needed at this point are studies of Canadian classrooms executed with flexible methods most open to discovering and developing appropriate data and theory. In Canada, educational research remains in its infancy, with the result that we have often had to rely on American and British studies. It is quite unclear that the appropriate conceptualizations of learning problems of lower-class black students in Chicago are the same as those of recently immigrated Italian-Canadian students in Toronto. Our own experience, then, must be taken as the problem from and for which theory is generated if we are to escape our academic colonialism (Smith, 1975).

RATIONALES FOR AN ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY

Another research tradition, developed largely within sociology and anthropology, explicitly offers better hope for the discovery and development of the new types of knowledge demanded in such an unexplored area as the classroom. Although other techniques may also be appropriate, there is some heuristic value in examining participant observation in explicating a rationale or methodological approach which meets the above-mentioned problems (Smith & Brock, 1970; Wilson, Note 1). Participant observers have discussed at length the implications of human intentionality for concept formation and data collection. As well, the flexibility of the technique and its observational emphasis exemplify the approaches needed for classroom knowledge.

Participant observers give an unusual degree of attention to the perceptions of people in particular situations:

I prefer to think of what we study as collective action. People act, as Mead (1934) and Blumer (1966, 1969) have made clearest, *together*. They do what they do with

an eye on what others have done, are doing now, and will likely do in the future. One tries to fit his own line of action into the stream of actions of others, just as each of them likewise adjusts his own developing action to what he sees and expects others to do. . . . I don't mean, in using terms like adjustment and fitting in, to suggest an overly peaceful view of social life or a necessity for people to succumb to social constraints. . . . Individuals may engage in intense and persistent interaction though they never encounter one another face to face. . . . The give and take of interaction . . . occur as well between groups and organizations. (Becker, 1973, pp. 5–6)

Such a stance necessitates getting close to the subjects of a research project in as full and complete a way as possible, to best understand their viewpoint, while concurrently maintaining objectivity by relating the particular experiences at hand to wider theoretical concerns. Though structural variables (e.g., class size) may provide “limits” and “materials” for actors to work with and must be taken into account, they are unlikely ever to provide a complete explanation of the outcomes of any social process, since they are modified in use by particular actors' interpretation of them. The actors' interpretations or definitions of the situation, in other words, are intervening variables between the “stimulus” of the “objective” conditions and the “response.” To give a simple educational example, the best instructional materials in the world will not help a child learn if he is not “motivated,” as teachers put it, to use books for reading rather than for his own experiments in aerodynamics! The necessity of a firm rejection of behaviorism is thus implied. A scientific study of humans must include the aspects of people which distinguish them as being self-reflexive thinking language-users.

Since it is true that humans redefine their stimuli or “environment,” there is an ephemeral quality in human activities which is difficult to reconcile with scientific procedures adopted from the physical sciences. It suggests that some of our scientific laws about human behavior are not immutable and are only valid within the culture and time-period of their formulation (Weber, 1949), since people can change that intervening variable — their definition of the situation. It also suggests the possibility of incorporating a conception of will into our research (Matza, 1969). Fortunately for us researchers and policy-makers, most of the important definitions people use in situations do not change rapidly or drastically. To the extent, however, that humans create their own social environments, and change them, the study of educational settings over time is necessitated, and techniques predicated in immutable categories are limited.

It is by no means an easy task to understand how another person perceives his situation, and the problem is compounded by the ephemeral and culture-bound qualities of some definitions, as well as people's potential to create new definitions. It is further complicated in that people are often unable to articulate their world-view, and the researcher must

cultivate his awareness without becoming as socialized as the subjects. He can do this by alternating being a participant and being an observer. Despite these problems, to the extent that significant portions of human behavior are fundamentally affected by such definitions, the task of understanding them is an important one.

Qualitative methods allow one to understand how conceptions held by people shape their behavior, at least in part, and how such conceptions and behavior change over time. They thus allow the study of the dialectical process by which people create the very social structures which in turn shape them. If we agree that the expanded production or service model expounded by Ryan and Greenfield (1975, pp. 244, 259ff.) is a sensible description of schooling, since it includes processes, it is imperative that we gather information on the perceptions of teachers, pupils, janitors, principals, parents, administrators, and others who are engaged in the daily creation and recreation of schooling. Otherwise, as Ryan and Greenfield make clear, we have no idea of how various resources (such as personnel, hardware, books) are actually being perceived and used, and how the perceptions of different actors may differ.

In their attention to subjects' categories, participant observers have introduced a participatory style of concept formation and research politics. Actors are able to influence the formulation of research problems and definitions. As a result, the categories used in analysis are more likely to reflect the concerns taken into account by such actors, in constructing their behavior, than are concepts introduced on abstract theoretical grounds. Appropriate concepts are more likely to produce relevant data. The possibilities of bias are increased as the value-relevant context of choosing concepts (inherent in all research) is more openly exposed — especially as the concepts of low-status actors in hierarchical situations are taken into account, often to the displeasure of their superiors (Becker, 1970d).

A second major rationale for participant observation emphasizes the importance of studying human interaction in the complex classroom world where it naturally takes place, using unstructured techniques to maximize unanticipated discovery (Wilson, Note 1). This strategy is opposed to that of experimenters, who try as much as possible to isolate the phenomena they study, to control independent variables precisely, and to eliminate the influence of extraneous variables by such procedures as randomization. The experimental approach maximizes internal validity — the weight of the claim that the hypothesized relationship does indeed hold — at the expense of discovering new unknown interactions, and at the expense of external validity — the weight of the claim that the relationship holds in the world beyond the laboratory. In participant observation, the influence of situations is incorporated in such a way as to maximize the external validity or generalizability of results.

I have oversimplified both methodologies in characterizing them so extremely, for experimenters and participant observers often struggle with similar issues of validity and reliability. Indeed, among the most exciting developments in research methodology over the last decade has been the attempts to apply experimental methods to field situations (e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1963), and attempts on the part of participant observers to formalize their work using analytic induction and constant comparison to achieve more controls (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Berk, Note 2). The convergence should not really be surprising, as the search for underlying “causal” relationships through examination of various phenomena has been a common goal of both groups of researchers.

Attention to the influence of natural settings on behavior has particular relevance in educational research. All too often our theories are developed in isolated research settings, and become “theories” in the worst sense — irrelevant to everyday life in schools. Participant observation allows the incorporation of actor-defined, policy-relevant variables. The effects of physical settings, complex interactions, and pressures of everyday operations should be most susceptible to discovery using unstructured field methods.

Our notions about how learning really occurs in classrooms are in a primitive state. We need to improve our conceptions of how learning takes place. We may then use research to test whether these ideas conform to what happens in real classrooms. . . . Our understanding of how learning occurs in classes — small or large — is poorly-developed and under-researched. (Ryan & Greenfield, 1975, p. 168)

In consciously making a virtue of unstructured and flexible research, participant observation maximizes the possibilities of unexpected discoveries being made and incorporated into the research. New topics can be accommodated as they are revealed. I submit that much educational research (e.g., some studies reported in Ryan & Greenfield, 1975, pp. 199–207) has prematurely closed off such possibilities of discovery by its comparatively rigid design. Participant observation techniques explicitly offer the opportunity for the development of more valid concepts and theories by placing the principal investigator close to the phenomena, where indicators may be refined over time.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES

The rationales described above for an alternative methodology do not imply that any single narrowly defined technique is necessary or sufficient. “Pure” participant observation is only one example of possible methods. As such, it can be amenable to use with other more traditional techniques, and in fact most practising participant observers have developed a style which combines observation and participatory insights with formal and informal interviews with respondents and informants, questionnaire

data, and official records (e.g., Hughes, 1963). For my purposes, however, this style and its core techniques can serve as exemplars of how one might practise research.

Just as other researchers may choose to study a particular education topic on the basis of library research, policy prominence, or some other “off-site” reason, so may participant observers. However, a participant observer is more likely than others to decide that some situation or on-going activity that he already has access to has research interest and potential, and is thus “released” from the conservatism of (possibly incorrect) existing theories. In either case, he resists formulating the research effort in great detail before engaging in it, unlike his survey- or experimentally oriented colleagues. Sometimes this approach causes difficulty in gaining access from hosts, who may be suspicious of the researcher’s intentions. The participant observer must stress his own honest curiosity about the phenomenon, solicit hosts’ interests and ideas, offer an occasional hand in volunteer projects, and generally attempt to establish his personal credibility. The researcher must remain flexible in order to be as open as possible to new discovery.

The researcher must begin consciously to fashion his experience and behavior in order to receive the kinds of data he needs. If he is a “natural” member of the organization he is studying (e.g., a teacher), he must at some point withdraw from this innocent membership. Upon realizing the value of his experience, he begins to think about and act toward the phenomena in a new way as he constructs a research role. His experience as a participant (both natural member and researcher) most fully reveals aspects of human intentionality, by providing invaluable information which he could not have anticipated from his office.

In the first few weeks of contact with the field, the researcher tries to be as open to various events and stimuli as possible. He records as meticulously as possible all conversations, interviews, observations, insights, plans, and tentative analyses. Then he pauses, summarizes what he knows in a few pages, and rigorously questions himself as to *how* he has learned this. How does it answer any of his original vaguely formulated questions? What surprises has he encountered? How can new on-site phenomena be understood? What theoretical questions can be addressed in this situation? What further steps should he take to get access and develop his role for acquiring more data? A vague outline of the project, often with islands of interest and information unconnected in a sea of mystery, fascination, and closed access, begins to take shape. Increasingly, attention is paid to formulating the research into a more coherent set of questions, and to gathering relevant data.

At this point, much like his quantitative colleagues, the researcher may devote much attention to conceiving and using particular techniques of

observation or interviewing, perhaps borrowing questionnaire items from other studies, modifying concepts to fit the data or interview indicators, or pretesting an open-ended interview schedule. But he should have some advantages: his hypotheses, questions, indicators, and concepts have been formulated in the field (with reference to theory) and should possess a high degree of relevance and face validity. He has also incorporated new unanticipated items and questions. He should be becoming sensitive to nuances of his subjects, and able to cross-validate the information he obtains from them by innumerable small checks, immersed as he is in the schooling situation.

Issues of reliability and validity are considered carefully. He tries to maximize the “naturalness” of the field setting, preferring to observe unsolicited events and comments rather than provoking them, leaving actors as entangled as possible in the everyday school relationships which constrain their behavior (Becker, 1970a). He develops multiple indicators for concepts, returning to the field a number of times to retest hypotheses. He checks analyses with key informants to ensure a correct interpretation, often asking them to read his draft reports near the end of the project. He is in a good position to “triangulate” multiple methods of observation, interviews, conversations, and records (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). Where possible he incorporates good design logic, such as that of Campbell and Stanley’s (1963) quasi-experiments, into his data-gathering on key issues. He may push his analyses in seeking to establish causal relationships, ascertaining time order and covariance, and eliminating or controlling rival factors. Like survey researchers, he may have difficulty ensuring internal validity as he lacks the careful controls and randomisation of experimenters. On the other hand, if he can establish that his site is typical, he can make strong claims to external validity, generalizing his findings to wider settings, and enhancing the power and scope of his evolving theory.²

He is able to address some of these problems by consciously developing his sampling design (Berk, Note 2). Our classic participant observer is unlikely to specify his sample beforehand, since he usually cannot determine the population from which he wants to draw it. Instead, he carefully employs “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to define that population and describe it and its correlated features. In a quasi-statistical sense, he piles up evidence that supports his major hypotheses, but he also conscientiously and economically seeks negative cases that refute or modify his claims. Thus, he is able to establish the limits of applicability of his theories in the field over dimensions of time, space, and people. And he carefully describes his sampling after he has done it.

Within participant observation, claims to “proof” or true empirical generalizations may thus be made by a somewhat unusual approach to conceptualization, hypothesizing, and theory building. Qualitative

researchers seldom follow the classic deductive model of the social scientist without modification: they rarely review the literature, design crucial experiments, specify indicators for concepts, and then test them. Rather, they engage in a process called analytic induction (Becker, 1970b; Denzin, 1970, ch. 9; Robinson, 1969; Turner, 1969) or constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With a vaguely defined topic such as class size, our model researcher may begin by collecting teachers' definitions of "a large class," and become aware, perhaps, that these vary with grade level and the social class of the school neighborhood. He may find that inherent in such teacher definitions of "a large class" is a conception of workload and difficulty-of-discipline problems which is independent of a simple numerical count of pupils. Carefully coding his data into such categories, he then consciously seeks negative cases, and perhaps finds that this phenomenological definition of class size holds for classes between 20 and 35 pupils, and that beyond this range the numerical counts overwhelm the other criteria. By such a process of categorizing data, articulating generalizations, and seeking more data to consolidate or delimit these hypotheses, he elaborates a theory that is empirically grounded, and, as far as possible, accounts for every case. As this process evolves, he may attempt to relate his findings to relevant ones in the existing literature, getting new clues and suggestions, modifying existing findings, and integrating his research into that already done. The literature on restriction of work output in industrial sociology, for instance, may suggest clues as to how teachers come to define optimal class sizes.

SOME EXAMPLES

A few examples of research using participant observation techniques will illustrate the potential for this alternative methodology in producing useful data and powerful theories on classroom settings. I shall focus on work by sociologists, although anthropologists have also been active in this area (see, e.g., Wax et al., 1973; Gearing & Tindall, 1973).

We have come to know that teachers do not regard all students in the same way. In an early study relying on unstructured interviews, Becker (1970c) carefully described different dimensions (e.g., learning skills and attitudes, respect for the teacher's authority, and "morality") by which Chicago public school teachers sorted students into different groups which largely coincided with social-class background. Rist (1970) has confirmed and elaborated this process. Using participant observation over two years, he has shown how subjective teacher evaluations become reified into "objective" achievement scores. Keddie (1971) shows how such typing becomes amplified in later years by use of differentiated curricula. Sharp, Green, and Lewis (1975) detail the repressive use of typification even in child-centred education, a result they did not anticipate when initiating their observational research. Stebbins (1971), in an exploratory obser-

vational study, describes how teachers came to define student behavior as deviant or disorderly depending upon the type of infraction, the situation (including time of day, type of class work, etc.) and the type of student. Jackson (1968) has pointed out how teachers act as ringmasters directing a circus of 30 performers, engaging in hundreds of personal exchanges per hour with students. Smith and Geoffrey's study (1968) elaborates the process by which a teacher establishes a social order in a class as a prerequisite for beginning the formal curriculum. Their collaborative use of teacher-researcher and simple researcher roles calls for replication. A central theme of a number of recently completed theses and dissertations using participant observation is the social construction of classroom order by the teacher (Wegmann, 1976; West, 1976). In addition, each of these studies deals with a number of separate but related topics, such as labelling and deviance (Wittig, Note 3; Yeung, Note 4), language use (Bosence, Note 5; Novak, 1975), competition (Bossert, Note 6; Singer, Note 7), dyadic relations (Hardy, Note 8), new teacher socialization (McIntosh, Note 9), and supply teacher difficulties (Schotte, Note 10). I think these studies provide some idea of how qualitative techniques can be used in educational research to understand better how teachers carry out their jobs.

Turning to another equally important group of actors, a number of studies help us understand how students behave in schools. In a recently completed dissertation, Bossert (Note 6) found that different display routines in class fostered different levels of competitiveness, which in turn caused students to form different types of peer work groups. In the classroom encouraging ostentatious presentation of work, students became very competitive, and grouped only with peers of equal ability, and hence restricted help to peers of equal ability. In the other class, there were few opportunities for comparison of student work, and peer work groups were formed along fluid friendship and activity lines. In a more wide-ranging study, David Hargreaves (1967) found that streaming in an English secondary modern school markedly affected student performance and orientation to school, even between pupils of equal academic ability. Those who planned on leaving school as soon as possible participated in school activities least, rebelled against teacher authority, and generally found school of little use. Such boys attained high status in the low-stream classes, and were effective countervailing forces to any teacher attempts to encourage conformity to the schools' goals. Hargreaves developed these ideas first by participating as a teacher, then as a more overt researcher, and verified them through using quantitative questionnaire and interview techniques. Werthman (1969, 1971) developed similar findings in his unstructured interview study of delinquent pupils. In a multimethod study, the Center for New Schools (Note 11) found that student subcultural group identification explained more of the variance in achievement scores than any of our standard quantitative variables, such as social background

or IQ. The subcultural variable (and subsequent classification of students into groups) was initially identified by the participant observer on the research team.

Lest I leave the impression that qualitative techniques are only exploratory and always need quantitative confirmation, an evaluation study of Parent Partners reversed this order (Pomfret, Note 12). Researchers using quantitative questionnaire methods began to suspect that parents in the program were being used as aides rather than as equals. Participant observers in the classrooms were able to verify this in great detail, documenting how teachers, parents, and students gradually developed this relationship, and how it was beneficial in classroom interaction even though it was a substitute for the original goal of the innovation.

SOME UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS

Most of these studies have been done in British or American settings. To the extent that Canadian schools are similar and affected by similar constraints, their findings are applicable here. Many substantive issues (such as social-class learning difficulties) may well be similar in all advanced industrial societies. Conversely, to the extent that differences exist among such societies, one must beware of facile utilization of inappropriate research. For example, the existence of a Canadian lower class composed of the majority ethnic groups (white Anglo-Saxons and French-Canadians) suggests some differences from the American experience; different traditions of community participation and professional standing also prevail; and different patterns of relations between different immigrant, ethnic, and religious groups obtain here. In such cases, we might expect the classroom to operate differently when national culture interacts with different administrative policies.

Unfortunately, although done in Canadian classrooms, neither the recent OISE theses (see West, 1976) nor the work by Stebbins (1971) on classroom order, Martin (1975a; 1975b) on negotiation between team teachers and students, nor Richer (1974) on interaction effects of social class and student-centred classrooms have explicitly dealt with any of these larger Canadian issues. Rather, they tend to state their findings in abstract generalizations which seem to apply cross-culturally, or they have not taken wider structural factors into consideration. Some might see this as a problem inherent in the method, but anthropologically oriented work on schooling and ethnicity (e.g., Hobart, 1970; King, 1967; Wolcott, 1967) which has incorporated macro-level factors, suggests the difficulty lies more in the researcher's focus of attention. A recent British study (Sharp, Green, & Lewis, 1975) makes explicit attempts at linking classroom interaction with national issues, and could serve as an excellent guide. It may also be the case that there are far more within-country variations than between-country ones. Classroom research may reveal that differences in official policy between administrative

units may have less effect in the day-to-day life of teachers and students than other previously unnoticed factors. There is clearly a need for more Canadian research to examine such important questions.

In a more abstract sense, participant-observation studies have some difficulty establishing their applicability beyond the particular field settings studied. I have tried to suggest above how sampling design can minimize this and specify the scope of the theory. Such participant-observation studies might best be integrated with other methods (Sieber, 1973). For example, qualitative techniques could aid in the development of measures of educational goals, by suggesting better indicators; they could suggest intervening variables which would aid in analytic quantitative research; they could be used to help assess and evaluate the effects of educational experiments. In turn, quantitative techniques could isolate particular situations, in our vast number of educational settings, upon which the "microscope" of ethnographic methods should be used. Typical or extreme cases could be examined in detail. Generalizability could be maximized by quantitative research that allowed the "placing" of qualitative studies within a wider context (Zelditch, 1969).

To the extent that actors' categories used in theorizing differ across settings, propositions are difficult to generalize. Use of higher-level generalizations, often derived from theoretical literature, is one common strategy for overcoming this. Different types of research can then be used for multimethod verification.

In all research, there are some serious considerations about bias, which are accented here because of the unstructured nature of participant observation. The particular personality and role of the researcher are obviously crucial, as researchers may gain unusual contacts which are not always representative, sometimes distorting the phenomena perceived, and shaping the analysis. Such distortion can be controlled somewhat by being made explicit to researcher and report-reader alike. But the best strategies of control seem to be various triangulations of data. Conscious searches for negative or modifying data, data from different sources (e.g., questionnaires, records, interviews, observations, etc.), data collected under different circumstances (in groups and with single informants/respondents, solicited or unsolicited by the researcher, by verbal report or observation), and judicious use of informants as assistant researchers help considerably. Leaving subjects constrained by their everyday life as much as possible heightens validity, compared with most experiments which free subjects from their usual constraints and allow them to distort at will (Becker, 1970a). Teachers in the middle of a class lesson, for instance, are engaged with pupils, parents, fellow teachers, and principals in multifold ways which take precedence over inclinations to "play to the observer," especially if the latter has gained trust, although there are some situations where

reactivity is a problem. It is not true that two different participant-observation projects in the same field setting would necessarily produce similar reports, since the researchers would possibly ask different questions, and hence would get different answers. But with judicious use of the method, they should get reports which are compatible. Comparisons of this method with others (e.g., Campbell, 1969; Becker, 1970a) indicate that the findings produced are as securely based as those using other methods, which are more likely to hide whatever biases they have behind the objective appearance given by sophisticated numerical techniques.

The problem of bias can take on a new guise in qualitative research. Participant observers generally build their theories using actors' everyday categories, such as those which teachers have for pupils. They thus maximize the use of teachers' knowledge. But relying only on teachers' categories leaves such research biased to the extent that the actors' perceptions are distorted, falsely conscious, unaware of latent functions and unintended consequences, and so on (Sharp, Green, & Lewis, 1975). The categories of other actors (e.g., pupils) may be added, but it is still conceivable that collusion exists. The researcher is thus obligated to use his own intelligence (and that of other researchers, authors, etc.) to build the best explanations possible and to take advantage of any fresh insights he may develop as a newcomer on matters teachers may take for granted. The price of such theorizing is the not infrequent charge that the research is irrelevant to teachers; it is seen as "biased" to the extent that it does not simply accept teachers' views. Participant observation's "participatory" concept-formation, in that it takes underlings' perceptions seriously, often challenges the definitions of those authoritatively responsible for institutions (Becker, 1970d).

The effect is compounded because political support and access is a major problem in conducting participant-observation research in educational settings. Social organizations never fully succeed in realizing their goals, in delivering on their promises; for understandable reasons we all have a few skeletons in the closet. Public institutions like education are particularly sensitive to criticism, real or imagined, intended or not, since they exist in a highly political context and depend on the citizenry's faith and goodwill for their very existence. They thus prefer to know in advance the kinds of things a researcher will find, in order to protect themselves. Educators in particular are somewhat insecure about their professional position. They have regularly worked in isolation and are somewhat unaccustomed to teamwork with observers. I have no doubt that some teachers gladly volunteer their time and help with such research, but restricting sampling to such volunteers can introduce unknown biases. Perhaps more understanding of the researcher's quest for knowledge, rather than evaluation of the teacher's "competence," plus the attention given

by phenomenologically oriented social scientists to the viewpoint of subjects, may overcome this difficulty. Teacher-researcher teams (e.g., Smith & Geoffrey, 1968) offer one exciting solution.

Unstructured participant-observation studies may not be easy to sell to educational policy-makers because of the kind of results they produce. Understanding the research logic and process should dispel the scientific mysticism which has popularly decreed that social research must stress the magic of numbers to be rational or scientific. But beyond this fallacy, it is often true that policy-makers can learn more of what they think they need to know from highly quantified research. For instance, participant observation is a poor method for obtaining frequency distributions of population characteristics — which surveys do much better; and it is a poor method to crucially test well-defined hypotheses in a thoroughly researched area — which experiments do well. Policy-makers like to specify in advance the kind of results to be found rather than fund basic research into unspecified areas. Policy-makers also like research which isolates manipulable “handles,” while qualitative research often presents a holistic analysis. Attention to empirical detail has often meant that participant-observation research has lacked a broad time perspective, which is required for obtaining change-oriented practical results.

The lack of appeal of micro-level phenomena for policy-makers is partly attributable to their system-wide conception of educational problems and its concomitant imperative for system-wide solutions. Participant observation's attention to lay actors' categories and perceptions, its non-aggregative character, and its frequent insistence on the situationally bounded nature of its findings imply a different model of implementation than the “top-down” models which have been so popular among policy-makers, but unsuccessful (Fullan, 1972; Rothman, 1968). (Social researchers have also preferred the life-style, consulting possibilities, prestige, and remuneration of routinized large-scale research projects carried out in R&D offices by beavies of assistants, graduate students, and computers.) Participant-observation studies seem to hold more promise for the production of research for consumption by “underdogs,” low-level officials and clients, than do more traditional methods.

An as yet unclarified process of research and development is here suggested, radically different from the prevailing mode and involving many unresolved difficulties. The tensions which already exist between researchers and educators may be compressed from province-wide scope to the hothouse of single communities, schools, or classrooms. Offsetting this are the immediate feedback possibilities offered by small-scale activities, whereby researchers can better accommodate locally relevant issues while educating hosts to the R&D process and findings. Participant observers have traditionally been reluctant to engage in any on-site political activity

while establishing their credibility among the social research community (Bodemann, forthcoming). To what extent one can combine the roles of change agent and researcher is as yet unclear. Research attempts to describe "what is" may well conflict with attempts to implement "what is not" (yet). It may be that these functions are best left to different individuals, but micro-level research at least offers good prospects of co-ordinating them. In any case, the possibilities for creative attempts at praxis lie before us (Fullan, Eastabrook, Biss, 1977; University of Southern California, School of Education, 1975).

NOTES

This article is a revision of papers given to the Seminar on Class-Size Research, May 1975, OISE, 252 Bloor Street W., Toronto, and The Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association Annual Meetings, June 1976, Quebec City. The author extends thanks to Alan Pomfret, Roger Dale, Martin Herbert, and G. H. McPherson for comments.

1. In educational research, these studies tend least to display the problems to be described. Nonetheless, each has one or more of these faults.
2. One may question the claim of some experimenters that internal validity is more fundamental than external. Such a claim implies a peculiar perspective, justifying research which produces only laboratory-relevant findings, and allowing the abandonment of wider-world application.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Wilson, S. A review of the use of ethnographic techniques in educational research. Chicago: Center for New Schools, 1974. (Mimeographed.)
2. Berk, R. *Qualitative methodology*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Department of Sociology, 1974. (Mimeographed.)
3. Wittig, M. *Identification and processing of troublemakers in school*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University.
4. Yeung, A. *Deviance in the school: The interactionist perspective*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1975.
5. Bosence, O. *Classroom context and classroom talk*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1974.
6. Bossert, S. *The organization of work and peer competition among elementary school children*. Paper delivered to the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society, Montreal, 1974.
7. Singer, R. *Cooperative and competitive behavior among students*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1975.
8. Hardy, T. *Teacher-student dyadic relations in the elementary school classroom*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1974.
9. McIntosh, J. *The first year of experience: Influences on beginning teachers*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976.
10. Schotte, F. *The occupation of substitute teaching*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1973.
11. Center for New Schools. *A quantitative-qualitative study of student subcultures in an*

alternative high school. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Convention, Chicago.

12. Pomfret, A. *Parental intervention and the process of planned social change in an inner city school: Final evaluation report on the Donner Project at Park School*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, 1974. (Mimeographed.)

REFERENCES

- Adams, P. S., & Biddle, B. *Realities of Teaching: Explorations with video tape*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970.
- Baker, R. G., & Wright, H. *Midwest and its children*. Evanston, Ill.: Ron, Peterson, 1954.
- Becker, H. S. Field work evidence. In Becker, H. S., *Sociological work*. Chicago: Aldine, 1970. (a)
- Becker, H. S. Problems of inference and proof in participant observation. In Becker, H. S., *Sociological work*. Chicago: Aldine, 1970. (b)
- Becker, H. S. Social class variations in teacher pupil relationships. In Becker, H. S., *Sociological work*. Chicago, Aldine, 1970. (c)
- Becker, H. S. Whose side are we on? In Becker, H. S., *Sociological work*. Chicago: Aldine, 1970. (d)
- Becker, H. S. Labelling theory revisited. In P. Rock and M. McIntosh (Eds.), *Deviance and social control*. London: Tavistock, 1973.
- Bidwell, C. The sociology of schooling. In D. O'Shea (Ed.), *The sociology of the school and schooling*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1974.
- Blumer, H. Sociological implications of the thought of George Herbert Mead. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1966, 71, 534-544.
- Blumer, H. *Symbolic interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- Bodemann, Y. M. A problem of sociological praxis: The case for interventive observation in field work. *Theory and Society*, forthcoming.
- Brophy, J., & Good, T. *Teacher student relationships*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974.
- Byrne, N., & Quarter, J. (Eds.). *Must schools fail?* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972.
- Campbell, D. T. The informant in qualitative research. In G. McCall & J. Simmons (Eds.), *Issues in participant observation*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1963.
- Coleman, J. S.; Campbell, E. Q.; Hobson, C. F.; McPartland, J.; Mood, A.; Weinfeld, F. D.; & York, R. L. *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966.
- Cosin, B. R.; Dale, I. R.; Esland, G.; & Swift, D. (Eds.). *School and society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Open University Press, 1971.
- Denzin, N. *The research act*. Chicago: Aldine, 1970.
- Flanders, N. *Analyzing teaching behavior*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1970.
- Fullan, M. Overview of the innovative process and the user. *Interchange*, 1972, 3(2-3), 1-46.
- Fullan, M., & Pomfret, A. *Review of research on curriculum implementation*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, Workgroup Division, 1975.
- Fullan, M.; Eastabrook, G.; & Biss, J. Action research in the school: Involving students and teachers in classroom change. In R. A. Carlton, L. A. Colley, & N. J. MacKinnon (Eds.), *Education, change, and society: A sociology of Canadian education*. Toronto: Gage, 1977.
- Gearing, F., & Tindall, A. Anthropological studies of the educational process. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Annual Review Inc., 1973.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967.
- Greenfield, T. B. (Ed.). Canada Council. *CSSE News*, 1975, 1(2), 7-10.
- Hansen, D. On education — another perspective. In K. Prichard (Ed.), *The national directory of sociology of education and educational sociology*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska, Teacher's College, 1975.

- Hargreaves, D. *Social relations in a secondary school*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.
- Hobart, C. Eskimo Education in the Canadian Arctic. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1970, 7(1), 49–69.
- Hughes, E. C. *French-Canada in transition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Jackson, P. *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Keddie, N. Classroom Knowledge. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control*. London, Ont.: Collier-Macmillan, 1971.
- King, A. R. *The school at Mopass: A problem of identity*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967.
- Kounin, J. *Discipline and group management in classrooms*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970.
- Leiter, K. Teachers' use of background knowledge to interpret test scores. *Sociology of Education*, 1976, 49(1), 59–65.
- Lind, L. J. *The learning machine*. Toronto: Anansi, 1974.
- MacKay, R. Conceptions of children and models of socialization. In H. P. Dreitzel (Ed.), *Childhood and socialization*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973.
- Martin, W. B. W. Teacher-pupil interactions. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1975, 12(4), 529–540. (a)
- Martin, W. B. W. The negotiated order of teachers in team teaching situations. *Sociology of Education*, 1975, 48(2), 202–222. (b)
- Matza, D. *Becoming deviant*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- Mead, G. H. *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.
- Meehan, H. Ethnomethodology and education. In D. O'Shea (Ed.), *Sociology of the school and schooling: Proceedings of the second annual conference of the Sociology of Education Association*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1974.
- Myers, D. (Ed.). *The failure of educational reform in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973.
- Novak, M. *Living and learning in the free school*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975.
- Richer, S. Middle-class bias of schools — fact or fancy? *Sociology of Education*, 1974, 47(4), 523–534.
- Richer, S. School effects: The case for grounded theory. *Sociology of Education*, 1975, 48(4), 383–399.
- Rist, R. Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 1970, 40, 411–451.
- Robinson, W. S. Analytic induction. In G. McCall & J. Simmons, *Issues in participant observation*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- Rosenshine, B., & Furst, N. The use of direct observation to study teaching. In R. W. Travers (Ed.), *Second handbook of research on teaching*. Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1973.
- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. *Pygmalion in the classroom*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Rothman, J. Three models of community organization practice. National Conference on Social Welfare. *Social Work Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.
- Ryan, D. The basic controversy: Implications for secondary school process. *CSSE Bulletin*, 1975, 2(5), 1–6.
- Ryan, D., & Greenfield, T. B. *The class size question*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975.
- Sharp, R.; Green, A.; & Lewis, J. *Education and social control*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Sieber, S. The integration of field work and survey methods. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78(6), 1335–1357.
- Smith, D. What it might mean to do a Canadian sociology: The everyday world as problematic. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 1975, 1(3), 363–376.
- Smith, L., & Brock, J. Go bug go: Methodological issues in classroom observational research. St. Ann, Mo.: Central Midwest Region Educational Laboratory, 1970.
- Smith, L., & Geoffrey, W. *The complexities of an urban classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.

- Stebbins, R. A. The meaning of disorderly behavior: Teacher definitions of a classroom situation. *Sociology of Education*, 1971, 44(2), 217-236.
- Stevenson, H.; Stamp, R.; & Wilson, D. *The best of times/The worst of times: Contemporary issues in Canadian education*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972.
- Turner, R. The question for universals in social research. In G. McCall & J. Simmons (Eds.), *Issues in participant observation*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- University of Southern California, School of Education. *Proceedings of the National Invitational Conference of School Sociologists*. Los Angeles, Cal.: University of Southern California, 1975.
- Walker, R. The sociology of education and life in school classrooms. *International Review of Education*, 1972, 18(1), 32-41.
- Wax, M. L.; Diamond, S.; & Gearing, F. O. (Eds.). *Anthropological perspectives on education*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Webb, E.; Campbell, D. T.; Schwartz, R. D.; & Sechrest, L. *Unobtrusive measures: Non-reactive research in the social sciences*. Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1966.
- Weber, M. *The methodology of the social sciences*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949.
- Wegmann, R. G. Classroom discipline: An exercise in the maintenance of social reality. *Sociology of Education*, 1976, 49(1), 71-80.
- Werthman, C. Delinquency and moral character. In D. Cressey & D. Ward (Eds.), *Delinquency, crime, and social process*. Evanston, Ill.: Harper and Row, 1969.
- Werthman, C. Delinquents in schools: A test for the legitimation of authority. In R. Cosin; I. R. Dale; G. Esland; & D. Swift (Eds.), *School and society*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul/Open University Press, 1971.
- West, W. G. Participant observation research on the social construction of everyday classroom order. *Interchange*, 1976, 6(4), 35-43.
- Wolcott, H. *A Kwakiutl village and school*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967.
- Young, M. F. D. (Ed.). *Knowledge and control*. London, Ont.: Collier-Macmillan, 1971.
- Zelditch, M. Some methodological problems of field studies. In G. McCall & J. L. Simmons (Eds.), *Issues in participant observation*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.

W. Gordon West is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6.