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# MODERN APPROACHES IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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## CONTENT

### **Fred Chapel and J. Cynthia McDermott**

HOW PLAY DEFICIT DISORDER IS CREATED AND WHAT CAN BE  
DONE TO CHANGE THIS CRISIS ..... 7

### **Anna Kožuh**

MULTICULTURALISM AS A CHALLENGE  
TO MODERN EDUCATION ..... 21

### **Gavin T. L. Brown**

THE QUALITATIVE SECRET WITHIN QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH:  
IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT NUMBERS ..... 33

### **Weipeng Yang**

RETHINKING SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION: CHALLENGES, APPROACHES,  
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ..... 43

### **Josef Malach**

PROGRAMMED INSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL  
THEORIES AND TECHNOLOGIES ..... 65

### **Natasha Angeloska Galevska**

WHY SHOULD TEACHERS BE RESEARCHERS? ..... 91

### **Darjo Felda, Mara Cotič and Amalija Žakelj**

SUPPORT TO PUPILS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN  
MATHEMATICS ..... 99

### **Jelena Maksimović**

CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION, ACTION RESEARCH  
AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS ..... 111

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Jingying Wang, Dan Wang, Hui Li and Ling Li</b><br>FAMILY EFFECTS ON THE URBAN-RURAL LITERACY GAP AMONG<br>CHINESE PRIMARY STUDENTS .....                          | 125 |
| <b>Luboslava Sejčová</b><br>ACTION RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGICAL DIAGNOSTICS IN THE WORK<br>OF AN EDUCATION COUNSELLOR IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC .....                        | 149 |
| <b>Jurka Lepičnik Vodopivec</b><br>QUALITY OF PRESCHOOLS AND INCLUSION .....  | 163 |
| <b>Burmistrova Elena and Khokhlova Elena</b><br>SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY<br>OF ASPECTS OF INTERACTION MOTHER AND YOUNG CHILD<br>OF PRESCHOOL AGE ..... | 173 |
| <b>Zornitza Ganeva and Valentyna Pavlenko</b><br>HOW OLD DO UKRAINIAN EMERGING ADULTS FEEL .....  | 191 |
| <b>Anči Leburic and Maja Dadić</b><br>METHODOLOGICAL STRENGTHS OF INTERNET RESEARCHES .....   | 205 |
| <b>Joanna Gjorgievska</b><br>THE CONCEPT OF THE 9-YEAR PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE<br>REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA .....  | 221 |
| <b>Monika Kusiak-Pisowacka</b><br>FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINEES AS ACTION RESEARCHERS:<br>EVIDENCE FROM TEACHING PRACTICE PORTFOLIOS .....                        | 237 |
| <b>Barbara Sitarska</b><br>KNOWLEDGE IN ANY PLACE AND AT ANY TIME - THE MOTTO OF<br>CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH .....   | 251 |
| <b>Penka Nenova Tsoneva</b><br>ORIGIN, CHARACTERISTIC AND MANIFESTATION OF THE RELATION<br>CHURCH - BULGARIAN EDUCATION 865-927 .....                                 | 273 |

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## **WHY SHOULD TEACHERS BE RESEARCHERS?**

### **Introduction**

One frequent topic in contemporary academic discussions is related to the competencies of teachers. Curricula at teachers' faculties are reformed according to the new defined competencies. General framework of teacher competencies is structured in various dimensions such as: competencies for developing curricula, communication competencies, ICT competencies, lifelong learning, social, cultural, emotional, environmental competencies, etc. All of them are of great importance for good school work and quality of teaching and learning process.

This paper focuses on research competencies of teachers. Gaining skills and knowledge about research is an immanent part of the set of the competencies that each teacher has to possess as a precondition for planning and implementing of classroom research.

Classroom research can be used for student progress monitoring, measuring of their achievements and self evaluation of teachers.

## **Research competencies - definition**

In European documents and other relevant literature, competencies are viewed as holistic concept and they are defined as knowledge, understanding, skills, values, beliefs and attitudes. (European Commission, 2013)

In category of knowledge and understanding, teachers need to be introduced to research methods and procedures for evaluation and assessment of students.

In category of skills, it is expected from teachers to be skilled in data gathering, including data of measuring, testing, external assessment, etc. Critical interpretation of facts is also one of the skills that teacher should possess.

In category of believes, attitudes and values, the teacher has to be open to changes, flexible, motivated for professional development. Through research and discussions the teacher should build critical attitude toward school practice. Research competencies are needed because they can enable teachers to explore, improve and enhance their work.

Another topic that is frequently discussed and related to the former one is how we can assess teacher competencies. Describing, defining and assessing teachers' professional knowledge and competence at any career stage is not simple or straightforward, neutral or universal, fixed or certain, but historically and culturally bound, subject to change and contestation. (Caena, 2011) In the last decade, there are several attempts in Macedonia to describe and define statements of the characteristics of teachers at different career stages, starting from teacher beginner, teacher, mentor-teacher, and teacher-advisor. Making standards for assessing teachers' professional knowledge is complex and delicate because they cannot be treated as fixed and universal.

## **Initial education of teachers and research competencies**

In line with new requirements, teacher-training curricula include courses that develop research culture and positive attitude toward research. In the teacher faculties in Macedonia, research competencies

of future teachers are mainly developed through courses such as: Methodology of Pedagogy, Research methods, Research Techniques, Planning of research, Statistics, Evaluation, etc. They are included in curricula in the first, second and third cycle of studies.

The aim of these courses are students to find, read and understand research literature, to be able to identify a research problem, to plan research and to design a research project, to collect data, to analyse and interpret results and further on to apply the results of research in practice.

The Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, as the first institution of higher education for pedagogical qualification, has a leading role in the development of the scientific and research work in Macedonia. The course named Methodology of Pedagogy was introduced in the curricula for teacher training since its beginning in the 1962/63 academic year.

In order to enrich and expand the research work, more courses on quantitative and qualitative research methods are offered to students at master and doctoral level.

However, there is a worryingly high number of study programs at teacher training faculties in Macedonia that have been noticed to have unsatisfactory or a total lack of coverage of methodological subjects. Doing research on the foundations of methodology and practical training for research work during the first cycle is the basis for quality and in-depth scientific works of research during the MA and PhD studies. It is especially useful that students, even at the graduate level, are encouraged to do applicative and comparative research. In addition, the University, Faculties and Institutes should work on continuous creation of electronic databases for research in separate scientific fields, as well as databases for MA and PhD works.

Most used techniques in educational research of candidates in their master and PhD thesis are: survey, observation, content analyses, scaling and testing. Qualitative methods such as participant observation, in depth interview, life story method and focus groups become more and more popular among researchers as well.

## **Classroom research – history, characteristics and importance**

Classroom research nowadays is considered as an integrative part of teachers' role and essential factor for improving teacher practice. Pioneers in promoting this idea are Lawrence Stenhouse<sup>1</sup>, John Elliot<sup>2</sup>, Clem Adelman and others. Since 1970s they have promoted the active role of teachers in classroom and made international influence in developing the theory and practice of action research in the context of teacher development and curriculum. They have engaged teachers as reflective practitioners, generated the idea for collaborative action research and traced new directions in research theory and practice.

Stenhouse's visions and demands that 'each classroom should not be an island' and that 'teachers should communicate with one another' sharing their experience as members of scientific community are still very popular today. (Stenhouse, 1975, p.142)

Using similar methodology each teacher can explore and reflect on their work, evaluate the curriculum and their findings should be synthesised producing overall knowledge base. Curriculum development should be based on their findings. Hence, very often teachers' case studies in individual classroom remain small scale studies not connected to each other. Even then, this kind of research is useful, not in producing theoretical knowledge but in improving teaching practice.

Classroom research could be much more used in curricula development. According to the recent developments, school curricula are centrally developed and delivered to teachers for their implementation apart from 20% left as free curriculum that each teacher can plan by their own decision. Classroom research can gather teachers, students, parents and local community together to evaluate, plan and develop model of curricula that can ensure quality of schooling.

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1 Lawrence Stenhouse (1926-1982) founded the well-known Centre for Applied Research in Education -CARE at the University of East Anglia and run the Schools Council Humanities Project. His text *An introduction to curriculum research and development (1975)* strongly influenced educational research practice

2 Elliott book *Action Research for Educational Change* is one of the first and most famous works in this field . The book was published by Open University Press in 1991 and reprinted many times



As Stenhouse stated: “The idea is that the curricular [research] should feed a teacher’s personal research and development programme through which he is progressively increasing his understanding of his own work and hence bettering his teaching” (1975, p.143)

So, if we ask the question “Why should teachers do research?’, we can give several answers: through research they improve school practice, reflect on it and become more responsible; research stimulate professional development of teachers, enable social control of teachers’ work and contribute to research practice in general.

### **Teacher as researcher in inclusive classroom**

Education of teachers as researchers can enable them to be more efficient in guidance, assessment and evaluation of pupils. Using different methods for formative and summative assessment can result with more objective grade of student achievement. This is especially important for teachers who work in inclusive classrooms. The Law on Primary Education in Macedonia enable children with special education needs to attend regular classroom. Each school year, the process of inclusion brings more and more children with special needs in regular classrooms. These children study according to individual educational plans made by professional teams and their achievements during the year are assessed according to that. The paradox is that at the end of the year they should pass the same tests as other children and they should also pass external and other national assessments. This is in contradiction to the fact that they learn according to the reduced educational plan that contains around 70% of the regular.

Research competencies of teachers are necessary for using various instruments for monitoring and evaluation of achievements of children with special needs. With such practice, children can develop their capacities and can be treated equally as their peers in the same time taking into account that they are different and special.

Teachers more and more face challenges to provide support and guidance for diversified classes that include students from different social and economic background, different culture and religion, migrants, etc. Research competencies can help teachers to deal with such complex

and diverse learning situations, to induce changes and to ensure high-quality learning outcomes for all. Doing classroom research makes them more responsible about their work in school and create more dynamic learning environment.

Growing popularity of qualitative approach in the last two decades has resulted in significant number of research reports where qualitative methodology is used for exploration of inclusive education. Teachers and special educators, social workers, clinical psychologists and therapists use qualitative methods to describe and share good practice related to the students with special needs.

The case study has become also popular among researchers, especially for classroom research. The analyses of research reports show that interpretative paradigm and symbolic interactionism have been used for investigation of the status of children with special needs in regular classes and to research the cases of students with special needs during their employment. The phenomenological approach and life-history method have been used for researching the experience of parents who have children with special needs, describing trauma they went through. The document analysis has also been frequently used technique in the research work of special educators.

## **Conclusion**

Teacher training faculties should pay more importance on developing research competencies of teachers. Strengthening the role of the teacher in the organisation, preparation and implementation of classroom research in primary and secondary education can result in qualitative progress of schooling. By doing research, teachers can test assumptions of theory in practice, improve pedagogy, make overall evaluation and self-evaluation of school work and objectively assess students achievements in regular and inclusive classrooms. Extending the role of teachers to teachers-researchers means that they can critically reflect on school practice and that by understanding they are able to change and improve it.

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**Abstract**

Gaining skills and knowledge about research is an essential and imperative part of the set of the competencies that each teacher has to possess. This paper focuses on research competencies of teachers as a precondition for planning and implementing of classroom research. In the first part, we try to clarify why and how can teachers become researchers during their initial education. Second part focuses on the role of teachers as researchers of the school practice. Teachers can use classroom research for student progress monitoring, measuring of their achievements and self evaluation. Extending the role of teachers to teachers-researchers also means that they can critically reflect on school practice and that by understanding they are able to change and improve it.

Research competencies can also help teachers to deal with complex and diverse learning situations and to use various instruments for monitoring and evaluation of achievements of children with special needs within the inclusive classrooms.

Growing popularity of research approach in teaching has resulted in significant number of research reports where qualitative and quantitative methodology is used for exploration of regular and inclusive classrooms.

**Key words:** research competences, classroom research, inclusive classroom