

How to Bring Educational Research Closer to Teachers and other Educators in the Globalized World: A Case Study from Slovenia

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Anotácia: *Ako priblížiť pedagogický výskum k učiteľom a iným pedagógom v globalizovanom svete: Prípadová štúdia zo Slovinska.* Článok opisuje projekt kolaboratívneho partnerstva medzi pedagogickou fakultou a školami. Projekt niesol názov „Partnersstvo fakúlt a škôl, Model IV (2006 – 2007): Výskumy pedagogickej praxe a priamej implementácie výsledkov pedagogickej činnosti“. Zahŕňoval Pedagogickú fakultu Univerzity v Primorsku, v Koperi (Slovinsko) a rôzne školy. V rámci projektu sa vypracovali tri rôzne formy spolupráce: spolupráca medzi fakultou a školami, kooperácia medzi školami samotnými a kooperácie v rámci každej školy. Islo o siete, ktoré spojili školu, fakultu, učiteľov, iných pedagógov a vysokoškolských učiteľov. Výsledky projektu boli včlenené do dvoch kníh, jednu napísali učitelia a druhú vysokoškolskí pedagógovia. Učitelia tiež vytvorili postery, na ktorých prezentovali výsledky svojej práce. Na základe reflexie projektu bol vytvorený model, ktorý približuje pedagogický výskum učiteľom. Model má formu vstup/výstup a môže sa použiť aj modifikovane podľa konkrétneho edukačného prostredia.

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Kľúčové slová: pedagogický výskum, učitelia, pedagógovia, model partnerstva

How to Bring Educational Research Closer to Teachers and other Educators in the Globalized World: A Case Study from Slovenia. The article describes a collaborative partnership project between the Faculty of Education and schools. The project was entitled “Partnership of Faculties and Schools, Model IV (2006 – 2007): Studies of Pedagogical Practice and Direct Implementation of the Results in Educational Work,” and involved the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education, Koper, Slovenia, and a variety of schools. Within the project three different networks were developed. The first was the collaboration between the faculty and schools, the second the cooperation amongst schools and the last the cooperation within each school. Each network linked schools, the faculty, classroom teachers, other educators, and university staff thus creating one large network of partnerships. The results of this project are presented in two books; one with articles written by teacher participants and the other written by the faculty staff. Posters to display the research work done were also created by the teachers. On the basis of project reflection a model was constructed to bring research in educational settings closer to education workers. The model has an input/output form and could be modified for different educational settings.

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Key words: educational research, teachers, educators, model of partnership

Introduction

In modern times globalisation has become a concept used extensively in different areas and in all parts of the world. It seems to be a new and fashionable concept, appearing equally in everyday speech and in professional literature. Historically, we could talk about globalisation already at the time of ancient Greece, for ex. in connection with the conquests of Alexander the Great, who brought together the East and the West and triggered intercultural exchange. In Europe we could talk about globalisation in the context of Renaissance and the great geographical discoveries. There are some scholars who see globalisation in colonialism, in the establishment of the world market and in the development of world economy, or in the period of technological and informational revolution (Kodelja, 2008).

Globalisation takes place at the political, social, economic, technological, cultural and scientific levels. If, on the one hand, we consider globalisation to be a world phenomenon, then there is, on the other hand, the concept of partnership or collaborative partnership (Couture, DeLong and Wideman, 1999), which is a connective element within a national context, for example bringing together different institutions (Franks and Hookey, 1999).

The article focuses on some of the key concepts, such as globalisation, partnership, research, teachers and other educationalists. On the basis of an example of collaborative partnership bringing research closer to teachers as part of professional learning, we have designed a model that, with some minor changes, could well be placed within a wider, world or global framework.

Educational Research in the Globalized World

A lot has been written about the different roles of research. This article attempts to emphasise only some of its features. We focus, for example, on the importance of research for the educational setting, on research as a communicative process, as a lifelong learning process, as a teaching strategy and on the role of the teacher researcher.

Research work is intrinsic to human history and is concomitantly a key to the advancement of humanity. Metaphorically, it could be represented as a wheel turning in the direction of human development. Research affects the development of society and the individual, but innately also includes the integration of previous research (Wilkins, 1997). One of the answers to the question of why research is necessary is also the fact that in our post-modern society we are witnessing constant changes in various fields such as economic, social, and political ones, as well as changes in production and information technology. This means that society has to build a new education structure (Niemi, 1999). Research is especially necessary in three fields: society, culture

and personality. The task of educational research is then to connect these three fields (ibid.)

Research work represents the answer to determinate questions. Not only does it provide answers to queries, it is constantly asking questions of itself. In other words, it is like a reflection of perpetual doubt.

Research is always a process the results of which are presented to the critical public. It is thus in a way also a communicative process. The communication (written or oral) varies according to the subject to whom the research findings are going to be presented, with research reports being adjusted to suit the various addressees – scientists, teachers and other education professionals, parents or education policy makers (Cencič, 2007, p. 14).

In the article (ibid.) I focus on three different roles of research in educational settings. These roles, all of which are interconnected, are: (1) the role of research as a lifelong learning strategy, (2) as a teaching strategy and (3) the new role of education workers.

Research as a lifelong learning strategy represents more formal (Wilkins, 1997), professional learning and has been emphasised by a number of experts (e.g., Wallace, 1998; Day, 1999; Wilkins, 1997; Edward and Talbot, 1994, to mention but a few). It is “one of the most effective ways not only for solving professional problems, but also for continuing to improve and develop as teachers” (Wallace, 1998, p. 1). As a lifelong learning strategy, it affects education workers not only in terms of their professional, but also in terms of their personal development (Cencič, 2004). And although research as a lifelong learning strategy is not very widespread among our education workers (ibid.), it is part of modern society, which demands from its members development of their research competencies (e.g., Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe, 2001).

Research as a teaching strategy (some authors, for instance, Joyce and Well, 1986, prefer speaking of models rather than strategies, and use the term inquiry teaching) “is designed to bring students into the scientific process through exercises that compress the scientific process into small periods of time.” (ibid, p. 56) It is used more frequently in the framework of various projects that pupils and students conduct at home, and of course later on, in their graduate and especially post-graduate studies. Although inquiry does require specific conditions, the most prominent of which is the teacher’s qualification for research, and objective conditions, such as the possibility for field work, a certain amount of time and adequate teaching means, it is an interesting and active form of learning characterised by longer duration and a greater transfer of knowledge.

Besides inquiry teaching, **reflective teaching** is also related to research (e.g., Schön, 1983; Pollard, 1998). The levels of reflective teaching are often

presented similarly to those of inquiry teaching, since reflective teaching also expects teachers to gather and analyse information, and based on the results improve their teaching and thereby students' learning.

With regard to the **new tasks of teachers** and all education workers, our globalized knowledge-based society and the society of changes have also witnessed modifications in the roles that education workers play. Instead of just transferring knowledge, teachers must organise suitable learning situations, motivate their students for learning and for various tasks, prepare and direct lessons, etc. The teacher is said to be a moderator, animator, organiser of a stimulating learning environment, and a counsellor in autonomous knowledge acquisition (e.g., Jalongo, 1991; Richards and Lockhart, 1994).

Despite the variety of roles that the teacher nowadays performs, we will only focus on the role of the **teacher as a researcher** (aside from the mentioned teacher researcher collocation, there also appear other terms connected with research in teaching practice, such as: innovative researcher, action researcher, collaborating researcher, cooperating researcher, participatory researcher, partner researcher, etc.) and expand the definition found in the European Charter for Researchers (2005), according to which a researcher is a professional engaged in the conception or creation of new knowledge, to include all those who use research as part of their lifelong learning, professional development or as a teaching strategy. According to our definition, a researcher is not only an individual who is employed in research full-time or is in an employment relationship with a research organisation, nor does s/he has to be a PhD or has published scientific works recently, as required in official contexts (Research and Development, Science and Technology, 2004).

The common understanding is that research work forms the basis of professional practice and that it should help practitioners in their work (Brown and Dowling, 1998, s. 162). The aforementioned authors also claim that educational practitioners need to move outside their professional practice and into the distinct activity of educational research. They think that this is essential if they are to generate a dialogue between research and practice, which is a precondition for their mutual development.

In our project we tried to bring together all these new roles of research and put them into practice.

Developing Partnership for Bringing Research in Educational Settings Closer to Teachers and Other Education Workers

Project description

The project "Partnership of Faculties and Schools, Model IV (2006 – 2007): Studies of Pedagogical Practice and Direct Implementation of the Results in

Educational Work,” conducted at the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education, Koper, Slovenia, was made possible and was co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Slovenia.

The project started in April 2006 and lasted until September 2007, which is one and a half years. It consisted of four seminars for education workers¹ followed by teacher research. Each of these seminars was evaluated by participants so that we were able to correct any errors as we went along. For the ongoing and more effective type of evaluation (Conture, Delongo and Wideman, 1999), we applied a variety of research methods (a questionnaire, a structured interview with some of the participants, an essay form questionnaire, a numerical rating scale, and a focus group interview).

In the project 18 teaching institutions² took part. At the first seminar in May 2006 we introduced the project. One of the schools cancelled its participation due to »lack of staff«. At this occasion, research groups of 3 to 5 education workers were formed at each school. Each group then chose a research topic, which was either from the area of reading, mathematics, ICT or professional development. The last option was possible because faculty staff also participated in the study. Initially, there was a great deal of insecurity among the participants. Educational workers asked about benefits – number of credits they would be getting for participating in the project. The credit system make it possible for teachers to be promoted and to receive a higher salary.

The research areas of greatest interest for the participants proved to be mathematics and mother tongue, the reason being that new knowledge in these areas can be best transferred to their immediate environment.

The second seminar was in September 2006. Here we introduced the aim of research, the stages of the research process, kinds of research and the different ways of collecting data.

In December 2006, the third seminar took place. We introduced those research types which were especially suitable for partner institutions and the research theory. This was followed by a workshop about the SPSS data processing computer program.

After completion of the third seminar, the actual research in schools began, which was organized by each group.

In February 2007, the fourth seminar was held, the purpose of which was to write about and present research report. The participants also received some instructions about making a poster.

¹ Education workers included preschool teachers, classroom teachers, subject teachers, educationalists, psychologists, social workers, and special education teachers.

² Teaching institutions were kindergartens, primary schools and special schools.

The project was concluded in September 2007, when we published two monographs with the same title *Research Views of the Development of Pedagogical Practice*. The subtitle of the first book was *Some Pedagogical Fields*, and of the second book *Some Examples of Research of Education Workers*. The participants also presented their research results graphically on posters at the »Research Fair« at the Faculty of Education, Koper, which was also intended for the exchange of opinions and for the critical evaluation of the process and of the project results.

Project characteristics

With regard to its aims, the project did not represent a completely new idea (wiz., Conture, Delongo and Wideman, 1999; Franks and Hookey, 1999), but it did bring together different teaching institutions: kindergartens, primary schools, special schools and the university. (Secondary schools were not involved.). The project also brought together the various education workers from these institutions: preschool teachers, teachers, i.e. classroom teachers, subject teachers, educationalists, a psychologist, social workers, special education teachers and university teachers. School management staff and other administrative workers also took part, i.e. deputy head teachers and a principal.

On the university side there participated four university teachers and a technical specialist (an ICT expert), a research design professional and a small number of university students. The inclusion of students in the project was welcomed by the teachers. They were not only critical observers of the events but active participants as well. They were also involved in project evaluations after the project completion since they were collecting information (interviews with the participants), processing the data and participating in their interpretation. One of the students participating at the second seminar (September 10, 2006) said: *»During group work the participants allowed me to make a comment or two, which gave me a pleasant feeling that I was an active member and not only an outside observer of the meeting.«*

The project focused on the research of teaching practice. At the seminars and in the workshops, the participating teachers had the opportunity to acquire methodological knowledge and the knowledge about the research topic.

The project also provided concrete mentorship of university teachers in the research of a specific problem. Practitioners had the support of experts from the area they were researching, for example, there was an expert for the didactics of mathematics, for the didactics of mother tongue, etc.

All the activities were supported by ICT. We tried to encourage participative learning, promote research as a learning strategy and we helped to develop teachers' scientific communication.

Project effects

The project yielded results in the form of products. Here we want to concentrate on those, which we designed **to encourage, guide and motivate our participants for doing research**. Among the materials for encouraging research work, a brochure was developed presenting, in a simple and concise way, the research process and its stages. It was entitled: "Research Challenges in Teaching Practice" (Cencič et al, 2006b). We also published a poster promoting research, with the title "Research for participation".

After the project was finished, two publications were published. The first one was scientific, advocating the importance of research and introducing some examples of research in the educational area, while the second one presented research done by the teachers themselves. This publication includes 29 articles, 15 of them written by individual teachers because the majority of the participants wanted to present their work individually. Seven articles are the result of pair work, while 7 are the result of team work. Although the participants evaluated team work the highest (the average rate being 4.69 on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 – poor to 5 – very good), they nevertheless wished to present their research work individually.

We were much surprised at the posters, all of which were the result of teamwork and were produced by all of the groups. Some of them were quite interesting, colourful, printed, with photos and graphs. The participants stated that by making posters they not only learned how to produce them but also how to present the results on posters in different ways, which was done at the final meeting, at the »Research Fair«. They also mentioned that through its form, content and space each poster reflected among other things the degree of their engagement.

For one month, all the posters were exhibited in the hall of the Faculty of Education in Koper, where they not only served as a lively decoration but also gave a concrete picture of research work, which offered an insight into the variety of research approaches as well as into a small part of teacher's work. CD recordings of the posters were made, which were sent to the participants' schools. The local and professional media also reported about the project (Cencič, 2006a, Cencič 2007b).

Beside these concrete project results there are also those implicit, connected with the variety of the participants that came from different educational institutions. Such a setting enabled participants to become acquainted with other institutions while a prolific exchange of information took place between them. As already mentioned, the project included different schools and kindergartens, as well as all their staff. For this reason, the participants stated that the project contributed to closer cooperation between the kindergartens and both levels of primary school, i.e. the classroom as well as the subject level.

We also want to stress the importance of the team work of the participants, supervised by mentors from the faculty. This was described by one of the former in the following way: *»In terms of team work, the seminar is a positive experience for a young teacher. It enables him/her to gain valuable experience.* « (from the interview, Sept. 20, 2006.)

The proof that the seminar was successful is the number of the participants which kept increasing from one seminar to the next. From the initial 20 participants, the number increased to 39 at the third seminar and 49 at the final meeting at the »Research Fair«.

The interest for participation also grew from one seminar to the next. Student Andreja wrote (Dec. 15, 2006): *»If I were to summarise today's seminar, I would have to say that the participants showed great interest for such projects and a great deal of cooperation was observed: there was interaction, there were questions asked of the heads of the groups, proposals made for improvement, notes taken and most important of all – there was a lot of good will and optimism.* «

What was also observed, was *»personal gain, proving oneself, challenge and testing oneself, in spite of the many years since they had finished their studies, they were successfully participating in the project* (written by a student, Sept. 12, 2007) or as one participant put it: *»The theoretical sphere (faculty) and the practical sphere (schools and kindergartens) came together.* « (ibid.)

We must not forget the general satisfaction about the participation and project results, which was mentioned in the monograph. There was also a common wish for the project to continue and to organise another, similar one. The participants mentioned *»that research in an authentic environment is the only really genuine way of providing valid data for practical work.* « (ibid.)

Problems and solutions

Next to these benefits, we should not avoid mentioning the problems that occurred and how we managed to solve them. Since at the end of each seminar we carried out an evaluation, we had the possibility to eliminate the observed weaknesses at the next seminar, or add some new contents which were not originally planned. This was noted by a participant of the third seminar: *»All open questions are resolved effectively and without any unnecessary complications as we go along. We are tolerant and understanding. That is good.* «

Initially, certain insecurity and doubt was noticed. The participants asked a lot of questions and wanted very concrete information. Many of them had difficulties because of their insufficient professional knowledge, or when trying to find the relevant literature. They wanted more theoretical knowledge, and we

tried to meet this need by printing a brochure and by offering them individual consultations. At the end of the third seminar (Dec. 12, 2006), the following opinion was expressed: *»Today I noticed a light at the end of the tunnel. I believe that a good product can be made. The atmosphere and mutual relations are very good so that the good work can continue.«*

At the beginning, external motivation for participating in the project was present: the participants wanted to know how many credits they would be getting for their participation, which would in turn influence their active engagement in the project. Later on, a different kind of motivation developed: *»If I were to summarize today's, i.e. fourth seminar, I must say that the participants were extremely motivated, which can be attributed to the approaching publication of their article in a professional monograph and to the presentation of their research tasks.«*

Since there are different types of research, the participants had the opportunity to choose one specific type, whereby the focus was on the quantitative and non-experimental research. Those who chose action research felt that information about that type of research was insufficient, the reason being that we had not planned a special seminar about action research, nor did we publish anything about it, which, however, was expected by them. We therefore gave them brief information about it and suggested some literature. Because of this experience we decided that for the future it would make sense to focus on only one type of research. (The participants were mostly interested in action research, claiming that it met the needs of practice.)

The participants would like to have had more meetings than only the four planned seminars – workshops and a final meeting. An opinion about this was: *»We would have to meet more often in order to discuss concrete questions that came up during the project itself.«* We tried to make up for this by organising individual or group meetings at schools or at the Faculty of Education and also via e-mail. One participant wrote: *»I was satisfied with the feedback and with very useful instructions for further work.«* Another participant wrote (March 23, 2007): *»I and my colleague are trying to create something that would reflect a professional approach and would have a suitable content but we are not experienced in research work. /.../ We are going to produce something and send the product to you. If it proves to be bad or even useless, we will need to discuss the matter with you personally...«* Although we did publish a brochure and all the presentations were on the website, the participants lacked concrete tasks and consolidation exercises.

The greatest difficulties were encountered in the writing of the articles. There was a special seminar dedicated to it, but it proved insufficient for some of them. The problem was perceived by one of the students who wrote the following comment about the fourth seminar: *»It is actually understandable*

that the teachers are not skilled in writing scientific or professional articles since they are professionals in teaching and not in writing such articles. In between, the comments were heard that teachers were practitioners and not theoreticians, which is the reason why writing is such a burden for them. The citing of authors and writing abstracts proved to be most difficult and unclear.» She also wrote: *»The participants were very motivated and ready for the challenge they had to meet by writing the article. This might be for them their only, hopefully not the last, opportunity to prove themselves as authors, whose articles will be published in the monograph in September, at the final presentation of the seminar.«*

Individual support was given at this task, we tried to give them some guidance and we also edited their work. Support was offered to them when they came to the faculty members with problems like (participant, March 26, 2007): *»I do not know how and where to proceed. I never imagined how difficult it would be to write an article.«*

At the seminar, the participants received detailed instructions about the structure of a research article, about referencing and citing, as well as about all the basic information an article should include. In spite of all these preparations, we received articles that were not correctly written, were without abstract or key words, without correct citing of literature. Although research and writing are considered creative activities allowing authors a great deal of creative freedom, the practitioners felt that concrete explanations were lacking about the general title, about the titles of tables and graphs, or about the interpretation of results as to what it should include, etc.

The problem was even more acute because the majority wanted to have their own, individual article published so that the positive impact of team work for joint writing and editing of articles was not present.

The teachers frequently complained that they were too burdened, not so much with teaching as with administration and paperwork, and thus lacked the time for any additional professional education and training. In spite of this fact, the last meeting was quite successful and they expressed satisfaction with the project: *»Cooperation with you meant that I was expected to do things I was not used to and thus I was convinced that I did not have time for it. The truth is that it is all about how one plans time and not about the quantity of time one has available. Today I know that the reading of texts for the theoretical part of the project provided me with new insights into my profession. / .../ Now I use research and data processing in my work with the pupils. They enjoy doing it and external motivation is usually unnecessary, especially if they can participate in the selection of the topic.«* (a participant, April 30, 2007.) This opinion shows not only satisfaction with the work done but also the transfer of acquired knowledge into their work, the use of research as a teaching strategy,

which confirms the initial expectations of one of the participants, who said that she expected the pupils to profit from her work in the project.

The project was wound up with the well-known thought that teaching is hard work which is never finished. One does, however, gain a great deal and so did the teachers from the Faculty of Education in Koper.

Model of Bringing Research in Educational Settings Closer to Teachers and Other Education Workers

On the basis of the project we designed a partnership model to bring research in educational settings closer to education workers, which:

- is based on mentorship in terms of topic as well as in terms of research area,
- is of longer duration, for example a year and a half,
- provides theoretical knowledge on the research topic and on research methodology,
- is supported by printed and on-line materials,
- includes direct and individual work of the mentor and teachers,
- focuses on one paradigm of research in educational settings (e.g.: action research).

The partnership for professional learning of education workers in form of an input/output model can be presented in a scheme, where input represents the connection among the teachers from the faculty, school teachers and students.

The factors that could obstruct this process such as insufficient team work, especially in connection with article writing, lack of intrinsic motivation for professional learning, or focus on different kinds of research (e.g., action research, survey etc.).

Output, on the other hand, is the result of learning, which does not only imply improved practical work or professional and personality growth but results also in a product – an article published in a book or journal, a poster or presentation of research results to a wider public, for example at a conference.

Conclusion

We tried to illustrate the importance of global connection, i.e. between countries as well as within one country, with regard to partnership as an element encouraging teachers for research. With the partnership model designed at the national level we wished to contribute to globalisation in the area of education.

The article describes a project based on partnership for research and for professional development of education workers. The project proved to be very successful, which is revealed in the question from one of the participants (June 12, 2007) who asked about the follow up: *»My colleague from the*

neighbouring school is interested in research work in her area but her school did not know that the partnership project existed. Will something similar be organised next year?«

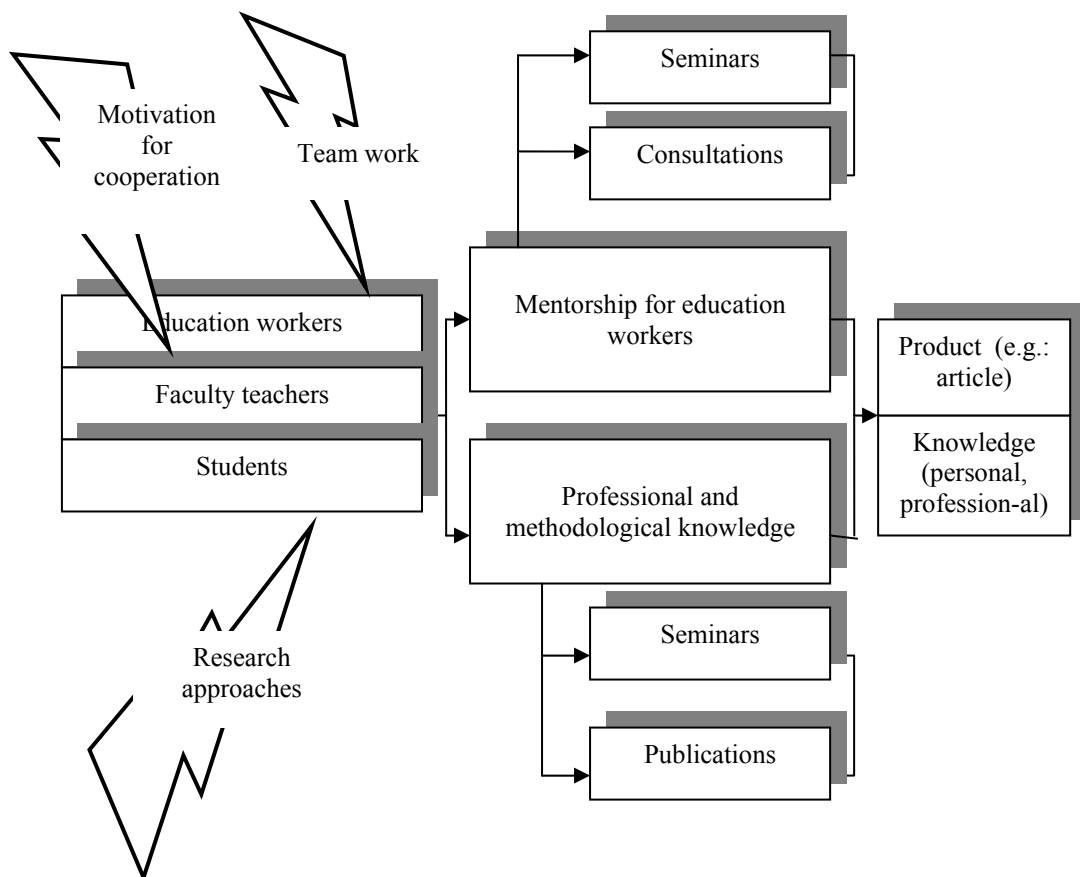


Figure 1: Input/output model of partnership for research in educational settings

A similar opinion was expressed by the editor of the articles (June 26, 2007): *»I do not wish to sound conceited, but if I am allowed to express my opinion, which is based on 25 years of teaching experience in secondary school, I believe that these articles represent something new, which points to the right moves in education.«*

And here is the opinion of a teacher, which confirms the above statement: *»It is the right thing that people strive to work better. The teacher must also follow this principle. I believe that one of the teacher's obligations is also that he possesses the desire and the will to work better. One of the possibilities to*

achieve this is exactly this kind of research, which either confirms or refutes one's expectations and understanding.«

If at the end we return to the global level, we have to admit that it is essential to enable such participation to teachers and other education workers who are already involved in research work as well as to those who have not yet encountered it.

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