D E V E L O P M E N T   A N D   E N Q U I R Y   P R O G R A M M E S

T E A C H E R   R E S E A R C H E R S

Partnerships and Participation in Teacher Research
David Leat

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other   learning with each other   learning on behalf of each other

Most professionals have a natural desire to improve. In the case of teachers this has been described as 'tinkering', small scale and gradual attempts to improve teaching through, for example, trying new activities or materials, changing assessment practices or altering pupil groupings. Research by Michael Huberman in Switzerland has shown that teachers who tinker are more satisfied than those who are not. It is clearly a healthy process.

However, teachers' natural tinkering has been substantially interrupted since the late 1980s. In the intervening years there has been an avalanche of reform from government in an attempt to address perceived weaknesses in education. These reforms have had a variety of effects, one of which has been to make teachers feel that their autonomy and professionalism have been reduced. This has lead to the conclusion that teachers in England are the most accountable in the world as they are subject to Ofsted inspections, performance management and league tables constructed on the basis of public tests and examinations. In such circumstances teachers play safe, get tired, conform and lose some of their capacity to undertake their own innovations.

Management in schools has changed in this climate. There is a new language of accountability and targets are an ominous presence for some teachers. Value added data analysis has created a situation in which it is not uncommon for teachers to be given a set list of their year 10 pupils along with the predicted grades for those pupils – and the list is more of an expectation than a prediction. After the publication of public examination results most schools enter a period of analysis, reflection and occasionally recrimination.

As a result, many teachers have left the profession. Some older teachers have been reluctant or unable to respond to new demands and taken early retirement. However, more significantly for the education system, there have been record numbers of young teachers fleeing the profession and a common reason given is oppressive management regimes demanding reports of progress and results. There has been no shortage of stories of schools on a four-day week or dependent on staff from the European Union or Commonwealth countries.

A new landscape

Gradually there have been shifts and changes in the policy landscape, even if every individual has not felt the shift. There remain, of course, many demands made by central government on schools and teachers.

An early sign of change was the Teacher Training Agency's Teacher Research Grants which encouraged teachers to use action research and other modes of research to improve their practice and disseminate it. Another significant landmark was the publication of the DfEE 2001 document *Learning and teaching – a strategy for professional development*, which highlighted that learning with and from other teachers in their own and other schools had an impact on practice.

Three examples were given:

1. observing and discussing what had been observed
2. through collaborative enquiry into real school improvement problems
3. using coaching or mentoring

In parallel, evaluations of the national strategies were pointing towards the need for schools to take ownership of such improvement processes. For example, the final report of the evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies commented;

'The challenge now is to go beyond, to develop internal commitment and local capacity for implementation and management of the Strategies… The shift is necessary to sustain the energy – people continue because getting the job done is intrinsically rewarding.'

The evaluation of the Key Stage 3 (KS3) Strategy pilot pointed to the need for time for teachers and schools to plan out new strategies supported by colleagues and more widespread networking to share success and solve problems and had much to say about building capacity for sustainability and team learning.

Partly as a result of such feedback the KS3 Strategy has published a folder of training materials to aid whole school improvement process. The *Sustaining Improvement* folder contains modules on coaching, running networks and building capacity. Coaching will soon become a feature of Primary Strategy processes and the white paper for primary education, *Excellence and Enjoyment*, offered the opportunity to all primaries to be part of a network. The creation of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), Leading Edge Schools and Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) collaboratives are all further indications of a shift towards teachers and schools being given greater responsibility for transforming education.

One of the key points to recognise in partnership and participation in teacher research is that there is an accumulating infrastructure that is supportive and can be drawn upon.

Key resource one

For a broader review of the change process in schools a good source is:

Michael Fullan, 2003, *Change Forces with a Vengeance,* RoutledgeFalmer.

Stages in engaging with research and change

Teachers who were involved in a school-based research consortium in the late 1990s kept diaries for a year where they wrote some of their reflections on their experiences. They were engaged in a project to study the impact of thinking skills on teachers, classroom processes and pupil responses. There was a network of six schools, a university and three LEAs involved.

The analysis of those diaries showed most of the teachers going through a series of phases as they engaged in innovation and classroom research. The teachers also noted what had helped them through their enquiry process. These descriptions are important because in other circumstances the teachers may well have given up.

Whilst there will always be variations depending on local circumstances this outline has been validated as containing some general truths by other network participants. If this is the case, what does it tell us about how teachers learn as they research and develop their practice?

- Teachers experience anxiety as they question and change their practice and during this phase they may need emotional support.

- Collective enquiry is absolutely critical to sustaining most individuals work.

- Teachers develop a thirst for finding out more from formal research as they begin to question their own practice.

- Teachers need different resources and opportunities to support their learning as their enquiry develops.

Stages in teachers' engagement with action research and innovation

Stage	Support
Initiation – where they first met a major new idea	The innovation needed to come from a credible source and meet a felt need. Credible sources might include a trusted colleague or adviser, a university tutor or a book that 'makes sense'. In most cases the idea needs to address an issue that they recognise either in terms of a specific teaching problem, eg poor writing, or perhaps a problem of education in general, such as a lack of pupil autonomy.
Novice – where they tried out the innovation in the classroom	The critical support needed at this stage was a 'friend down the corridor'. This reflects the need for someone close at hand who can provide very practical answers to questions about planning and managing lessons and help solve problems that crop up. This could be either a formal or informal process.
Concerns – where after initial success they hit some choppy water, commonly either a lesson that went badly or thinking about how to scale up their innovation, getting colleagues to try it, fitting it into schemes of work, or proving that it 'worked'.	The friend close by was still important but two other types of support now came into their own. Firstly, very specific support such as coaching or watching videos of relevant lessons with like-minded peers. Secondly, more generalised support in their environment such as senior managers who encourage, networks, and being on a higher degree course all seemed to help – there need to be other 'mad' people.
Consolidation – where those concerns were largely answered or overcome as the support provides some answers but also reinforces motivation to continue.	More of the above but with an increasing emphasis on analysis and finding patterns as well as being able to concentrate on research questions more as practice settled down.
Expansion – where they began to make connections to other research, issues and focuses as their horizons expanded.	Whilst all of the above still had significance, now they needed more inputs such as focused and tailored INSET, courses, conferences, reading and discussion. The analysis seemed to provoke a thirst to know more and a new relationship with research.
Commitment – where they became significant advocates in helping and trying to persuade others.	They needed a platform or a pen; an opportunity to tell others about their work through workshops and writing or as coaches themselves. However, they also needed access to school decision making as they were developing principles that were sometimes at odds with school norms. This can be seen as the stage when they turned from being consumers of support and knowledge to being producers.

Pause for thought…

If teachers go through stages as they engage in action research:

1. how does an Enquiry Advocate access the support that seems to be necessary?

2. what roles should other partners play?

Some building block concepts

The following terms should prove valuable in building models and understanding about collaborative teacher learning through research:

- **Intellectual capital** is the sum of the knowledge and experience of the school's stakeholders (mainly, but not only, teachers) that can be deployed to achieve the school's or the network's goals.

- **Social capital** has two parts. The first is the level of trust between people and the tendency for people to collaborate and do favours for one another. The second part is the networks in which people operate. A high level of social capital strengthens intellectual capital because people interact and co-operate more and, in effect, share their thinking.

- **Implicit knowledge** is built through experience and is hard to put into words. It is usually in the form of knowing how to do things and, as it is not articulated, is difficult to share.

- **Explicit knowledge** is often derived from more formal learning, such as reading books, attending lectures, training sessions and the internet. The chief characteristic is that it can be put into words, often in the form of models, theories, lists and explanations. One of the aims of teacher research is that through reflection and analysis, implicit knowledge can become explicit and thus shared more easily.

- **Individual and collective knowledge** are, therefore, importantly highlighted in the above points as being different. Although it is widely held that all knowledge is uniquely constructed by the individual, nonetheless it is possible for collaborative practitioners to share a body of knowledge, and this process is eased if the knowledge is explicit.

Key resource two

A recent research review of the importance of collaborative professional development, which can be found on the web, is:

Cordingley P, Bell M, Rundell B, Evans D & Curtis A, 2003, *How does collaborative Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers of the 5-16 age range affect teaching and learning?*

This can be found at: eppi.ioe.ac.uk/EPPIWeb/home.aspx?page=/reel/review_groups/CPD/review_one.htm

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Pause for thought…

Can you identify occasions when:

1. collaborative work between teachers raised the level of trust and communication between them so that the social capital increased and they were more likely to ask and be granted favours by other group members?

2. the process of reflection, analysis or enquiry between teachers helped make the implicit knowledge of individuals explicit and shared?

3. increased social capital made you feel that more intellectual capital was available to you?

Recurring issues

For those with the responsibility for others' professional learning through collective enquiry there a number of recurring issues. By articulating and discussing them they are more readily managed.

Recognising cycles – All groups, networks, partnerships or cadres go through cycles. If they are successful initially it is usually because there has been a strong focus to their efforts (a publication to produce, an INSET to deliver, a policy or programme to produce) based on their research. Having a focus is to be recommended. This comes to an end and there is inevitably a lull, even an anticlimax. The job is done. It feels like the group should carry on because it has developed momentum but there is a tendency to drift. This is often exacerbated if the end of the cycle coincides with a school year or if key players are leaving. One answer is to introduce the next project or focus which is generally a good step, but on occasions there is real value in allowing some breathing space and a chance to reflect.

Introducing new members – This issue is associated with the last one. When a group enters a new cycle you lose people to new jobs or just through wastage. You want to maintain open membership, thus you want new recruits. However, there is a real problem in introducing new members, especially if they are new to the institution. The group will have shared experiences from which they have derived:

- some shared language and understandings

- some shared practices or ways of doing things

- some shared jokes

- relationships

It is hard to bring new people into this bonded group. They feel like sore thumbs and the dynamics can feel awkward. Existing members readily fall into conversation whilst new ones either sit awkwardly wondering what to do or engage with the polite enquiries of a welcoming old hand. It takes deliberate work on the part of the group to engage and hang onto new recruits. They need to be given a role and responsibility fairly quickly to help them become part of the group.

Connecting to the outside – Generally, one of the intentions of school improvement is to make a school more autonomous and less dependent on the outside to address its concerns and problems. It needs to develop internal capacity. This can become over zealous and a perverse pride can develop on the grounds of being self-sufficient. However, one needs to keep a balance between autonomy and being isolated.

This can be achieved partly through getting colleagues to bring back their experiences and learning from courses, conferences and reading, but also by occasionally inviting outside inputs which bring new knowledge as well as another perspective. It allows the outside party to respond to the group and thus provide feedback that should stimulate thought and avoid 'groupthink'. One of the dangers of teacher research is that it can be superficial and unquestioning and embrace the latest attractive bandwagon.

Alignment – It is useful to think of education systems as a series of scales or levels which interconnect:

- The personal or individual level where teachers plan, research, resource, think, teach, feel and evaluate.

- The collective level where one works with others in the same department, in special interest groups, with friends informally or in subject networks.

- The institutional level in the school and within its official structures (heads of department, senior managers, heads of year).

- The local or regional level where the LEA (including LIG collaboratives), the National College for School Leadership, university or groups of LEAs may run special interest networks.

- The national level where the DfES, QCA, Ofsted and the National Strategies create a policy climate.

If the knowledge or ideas generated by collaborative teacher research are to make maximum impact then it really helps if all the levels are in alignment – the ducks are in a row. Perhaps the critical level currently is the school or institution, so it is particularly important that the first three levels are aligned. An example of misalignment will make the point.

Suppose that teachers in a school start to research formative assessment. The teachers produce some interesting ideas and practice about peer and self-assessment and these spread, thus influencing the collective level. However, their new ideas run counter to the school's assessment policy of teacher-marked half-termly tests. The senior management team resists pressure to change the school policy, citing demands made by the LEA on the basis of the need to meet targets. It could be said that there is a lack of alignment between the individual and the collective level, and the rest of the system.

It may be very difficult to change certain levels of the system if you are near the bottom, but sometimes the key lies in aligning the research activity with important initiatives at a higher level.

Dissemination – Enquiry activity deepens the knowledge of a group or individual but the value is multiplied if that knowledge can be disseminated to other colleagues. Ideally every individual in the institution would be able to learn from the enquiry. It is important to think hard about how to spread the value from 'the core' and 'the rest'. Will it be optional, expected or compulsory? There is considerable evidence of school research groups who have struggled to reach the rest of their colleagues with their new knowledge, as the gap between the two groups was allowed to grow too wide.

Progression – Progression is a difficult issue. A group of teachers work together and produce some powerful ideas and practice. However, other teachers and perhaps new teachers in the school or network are interested in joining the work and learning. In this circumstance there are sub-groups at different levels of knowledge. The new group cannot easily jump to the same point as the initial group. The initial group cannot stand still, they need to move on, at least to some extent. How does one marry the needs of both groups?

Key resource three

A detailed account of a long-running school action research group, warts and all, can be read in:

Haggarty L & Postlethwaite K, 2003, *Action research: a strategy for teacher and school development?,* Oxford Review of Education, Vol. 29, pp. 423-448.

Key resource four

For a variety of chapters with broader themes read:

Soler J, Craft A & Burgess H, 2001, *Teacher Development – Exploring our own practice,* Paul Chapman Publishing in association with the Open University.

Key resource five

An article which asks some fundamental questions about professional development and teacher learning is:

Knight P, 2002, *A systematic approach to professional development: learning as practice*, Teaching and Teacher Education, Vol. 18, pp. 229-241.

Pause for thought…

Consider your current context (or last job if newly in post).

Identify two of the 'recurring issues' described previously that have presented or could present you with significant challenges.

How did you deal with them and how could this process be improved or how could you deal with them in the future?

Some powerful tools

There are many books on research methods that are invaluable in supporting teacher research. This section however, concentrates on three tools for teacher collaboration through research which share two characteristics. Firstly, they are not especially well documented and, secondly, they contribute particularly to dealing with some of the issues raised earlier. Teacher learning is assisted on most occasions by focusing on the artefacts of the classroom and learning and these tools bring that reality.

Video

Video has been described as the most underused tool in professional development for teachers. There has been massive reluctance to allow cameras into the classroom. One can point to a number of obvious reasons. Firstly, it is thought that pupils will play up and that poor behaviour will be caught on film. Secondly, most of us have a form of shyness which makes it excruciating to see ourselves as we think others see us. It is extraordinary how commonly teachers will cite strong regional accents, grey hair, fat behinds and quirky body language as reasons why they don't want to see themselves on a screen. Video is a form of feedback and we are all very sensitive to feedback as it threatens our view of ourselves.

The advantages:

- Video provides an (almost) unbiased account of lessons. It allows one to reflect on and analyse the events in detail. A recording captures aspects of the lesson that are missed by observation alone, particularly providing verbatim recording of some talk episodes, body language and the richness of a whole lesson where lots of things may be happening at once.

- Video can dispel the whiff of power that comes with someone more senior observing one's lesson, or the sense of being on show to more junior observers. In the case of a more senior person observing a lesson without video, the analysis of the lesson is dependent on their notes and recall and all the baggage that they bring. The video means that the filmed teacher can watch the lesson and bring some of their own analysis and questions to the review.

- A video can be used with a wider audience of school or network staff as the basis of building up a shared vocabulary around teaching and learning. This can be done by focusing on certain concepts or processes and trying to identify their occurrence in the lesson. Further, the video can show pupils in our school or region getting to grips with an innovation and showing what is possible. It can avoid the reaction, that sometimes occurs with national videos, of "our pupils couldn't do that". Video is a tremendous resource and home-grown video has some big advantages to balance out its lack of production sophistication.

Practical tips:

- It is not necessary to have someone actively filming a lesson, the camera can be left in the corner of the room pointing to the front. If 'active' filming is OK then many schools are thinking flexibly about the operator, and popular solutions are technicians, trainee teachers and even sixth formers, as well as colleagues. Whoever does the filming it is advisable to brief them on confidentiality.

- Confidentiality and ownership are issues. In the first instance the video must be seen as belonging to the teacher on film. They have control over who sees it and it should not be shown to audiences without their consent. To encourage an openness and confidence in the use of video it is good practice if senior teachers or enquiry leaders take the lead and set the tone by getting in front of the camera first.

- Consider whether the school might want to get parental permission for pupils to be on film and, if the answer is yes, specify the audiences. This has become an increasingly sensitive issue in recent years.

- Digital cameras and other changes in technology make filming increasingly cheap and unobtrusive. However, sound quality is a critical issue, especially if you want to capture pupils talking in group settings, and you may want to consider tape recorders.

Analysing pupils' work and thinking

Looking closely at pupils' work is one of the keys to becoming explicit about teaching and learning. It is a process that is suitable for later cycles in action research and can be very important in tracing the impact, or lack of it, with new teaching initiatives. It can also be important during the early stages of identifying issues.

There are a number of ways in which it might be approached:

1. **Analysing written work** – Assessing and grading pupils' work is common practice in the profession, but rarely is time taken to look more carefully at written outcomes. The important question to ask is which work is the best, the average and the poorest and, more importantly, why? This is particularly powerful if teachers work together to do this and one can focus on two levels:

   1. the craft of the writing, which will relate strongly to literacy agendas

   2. the thought processes underpinning the writing

Many pupils write poorly because they cannot co-ordinate the dual processes of thinking and writing, both of which make heavy demands on their working memory.

2. **Interviews** – The key to good interviews with pupils is to ask open questions, probe the answers with supplementary questions and encourage a relaxed atmosphere. It is usually better to interview a small group as they can respond to each other, feel more comfortable and get think time while others talk. The insights they provide on the impact of particular teachers, styles, skills, forms of classroom organisation and teaching strategies are almost endless.

3. **Stimulated recall interviews** – There is a link here to the use of video. If pupils are video recorded or observed, the recording can be played back or the observation fed back. They can be asked what they were thinking or doing at specific points, which may be chosen by the interviewer or the pupils. This process can be conducted with small groups or whole classes.

4. **Think aloud** – This process has some similarity with stimulated recall, but here pupils are asked to write down or talk about what they are thinking during steps in their problem solving processes. This can be organised by having pupils working in pairs, one tackling a question or problem and talking about how they are tackling it (being metacognitive) and the other taking notes. The process can then be reversed.

The advantage for teachers working in partnerships is that they can develop a clearer language about teaching and learning which has strong validity as it comes from pupils. They can make comparisons and they can communicate to their peers through the rich pictures of learning they evolve.

Coaching

Coaching is a powerful form of professional development that is based on trust between the coaching pair rather than power.

It is a three stage process:

1. pre-lesson discussion and collaborative planning

2. an observed (and video recorded) lesson

3. a reflective and analytical coaching conversation using the video and lesson observations

The thinking that is embedded in the analytical conversation becomes internalised by the coached teacher. This means that if the teacher is beginning to reflect on what happened in their lesson, why it happened (short and long term reasons) and then hypothesises how it could be done differently or even better, they carry on doing this for themselves outside of the coaching sessions. Coaching can be very instrumental for teachers who are trying to implement changes in their teaching as part of their action research. It can also be a way in which teacher researchers, acting as coaches, can make their new knowledge explicit.

Key resource six

An article which describes the interview process mentioned above and the results obtained is:

Leat D & Lin M, 2003, *Developing a Pedagogy for Metacognition and Transfer: some signposts for the generation and use of knowledge and the creation of research partnerships*, British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 29, pp. 383-416.

Key resource seven

Excellent further guidance on interviews as a research process can be found in:

Edwards, A & Talbot, R, 1994, *The Hard-pressed researcher – A research handbook for the caring professions,* Addison Wesley Longman. The book also provides concise guidance on many other research topics.

Key resource eight

Further guidance on implementing coaching as a quality process can be found in the KS3 Strategy folder *Sustaining Improvement,* which contains modules on Coaching, Running Networks and Building Capacity (Reference: DfES 0565-2003 G).

Pause for thought…

How can the whole process of enquiry and transfer of knowledge be supported by:

• video

• analysing pupils' work

• coaching

Where does research fit in?

One of the criticisms made of educational research is that it is inaccessible and too generalised to inform teachers' actions. Thus it is argued that teachers need very practical examples of how research connects with classroom practice.

It is generally unrealistic for teachers to read a lot of research as they are too busy. However, as indicated, there is evidence that teachers get interested in research as a consequence of generating their own questions and enquiry. The explanation for this is that they develop an appetite for learning more that will help explain their own emerging theories about their practice and to provide signposts for how they might develop further.

Research summaries are being produced more commonly. A very productive source of summaries is the EPPI-Centre (Evidence for Policy & Practice Information and Coordinating Centre). Below are listed 10 of the growing number of reviews currently available on the website www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk

1. Impact of summative assessment and tests on students' motivation for learning

2. How does collaborative Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers of the 5-16 age range affect teaching and learning

3. Meta-analysis of the effectiveness of ICT on literacy learning in English 5-16

4. A systematic review of classroom strategies for reducing stereotypical gender constructions among girls and boys in UK mixed-sex primary schools

5. The impact of paid adult support on the participation and learning of pupils in mainstream schools

6. A systematic review of the effectiveness of school-level actions for promoting participation by all students

7. A systematic review of the impact of school headteachers and principals on student outcomes

8. Supporting pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in mainstream primary schools: a systematic review of recent research on strategy effectiveness (1999 to 2002)

9. A systematic review of effective literacy teaching in the 4 -14 age range of mainstream schooling

10. Support for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in mainstream primary school classrooms: a systematic review of the effectiveness of interventions

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is now also active in producing research summaries, some aimed at academic audiences and others at users where the style is intended to be more accessible. These latter reviews, Professional User Reviews (PURs), can be downloaded from the publications section of BERA's website (www.bera.ac.uk). The list currently includes:

- How do we teach children to be numerate? (Mike Askew and Margaret Brown)

- How do we learn to become good citizens? (Liam Gearon)

- How is music learning celebrated and developed? (Graham Welch and Pauline Adams)

- What do we know about learning and teaching young children? (Tricia David)

- Does ICT improve learning and teaching in schools? (Steve Higgins)

- Connecting Research and Practice: Education for Sustainable Development (Mark Rickinson and colleagues)

- Connecting Policy and Practice (Eleanor Rawling)

However, a number of other organisations are producing research newsletters and summaries:

- The General Teaching Council (GTC) www.gtce.org.uk/research

- The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) www.dfes.gov.uk/research/prospectus

- National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) www.nfer.ac.uk/research

- National College for School Leadership (NCSL) www.ncsl.org.uk/index.cfm?pageID=randd-activities-review

Clearly research publications have never been so widely available.

End note

Using teacher research as part of an interlinked process of professional development, school improvement and networked learning requires knowledge, skills and probably some luck as well. It is a balancing act and the key is to get the balance roughly right. Some examples of the balances required are between:

- top down leadership and bottom up generation of questions and knowledge

- managing the process and letting it happen naturally

- challenging colleagues to think deeper and harder and supporting them as they struggle with the anxieties of the change process

- resisting externally imposed change as a distraction and embracing such change as a source of energy, ideas and resources

- taking risks (with all its dangers) and playing safe (for a breather)

There is no formula that will tell you what to do and where the balance lies. Such decisions have to be guided by the context in which they are set. What is certain however, is that the process has to be managed and it is vital that those responsible are conscious of their duties, talk about them with others with the same responsibilities, and develop a language and knowledge base to inform their discussions. It is the metacognition of managing the enquiry process.

Pause for thought…

- Which two research summaries appear to be most relevant to your enquiry focus or that of your network?

- Would you be inclined to read the summary before or after your own initial enquiry into the issue?

Reflective notes

Pause for thought...

Reflective notes

Pause for thought...