

ARR 7: Embedding teacher research into school culture: a case study

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Introduction

This case study focuses on the use of teacher research as a model for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) within a mainstream high school setting. It investigates:

- the potential of teacher research;
- teachers' perceptions of the nature and value of teacher research;
- some of the issues that teacher research presents.

It concludes with some recommendations about the use of teacher research as a form of CPD.

Setting

Alder Grange School is a smaller than average high school in East Lancashire. It caters for pupils of all abilities between the ages of 11-18. Although there is a selective state grammar school in the catchment area, the school is almost fully comprehensive. The leadership and management was judged to be outstanding by Ofsted (2013) and teaching was considered to be at least good but often outstanding (2013). In addition, the school leadership has been praised for the quality of professional development provided to teachers at all stages in their career. Teachers are often recognised as experts through roles such as Specialist Leaders and Specialist Practitioners of Education and master teachers and are often asked to speak at national conferences such as the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT) Achievement Show.

In the academic year 2014-15, all teachers at Alder Grange chose a research-based teaching and learning objective as part of the formal professional development/appraisal (PPD) process. In June 2015, the school dedicated an INSET session to sharing these research projects which led, in turn, to presentations at the East Lancashire Schools Support Alliance (ELSSA) and East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership (ELIP) teacher research conference. In the current academic year (2015-6), the process was repeated in order to embed teacher research into the PPD system.

Research Questions

The following questions consequently emerged:

1. Is teacher research a viable form of CPD for teachers?
2. Do teachers have the skills to conduct research into their own practice?
3. Can teacher research be used to enhance teachers' professional practice?

Existing research

The role of teachers in educational research is an on-going debate and one which is currently the focus of much interest due to the present educational climate and changes at system level. In his lecture to The Teacher Training Agency in 1996 Hargreaves argued categorically that *“Teaching is not at present a research-based profession”*. Comparing the teaching and medical professions, Hargreaves notes the centrality of practitioner research in teaching compared with medicine. His criticism of academic education research as irrelevant and esoteric led him to suggest the establishment of a national forum to enable, fund and evaluate teacher research in order to transform education into an evidence-led profession. In response to this lecture, Goldstein (1996) argues that some, very large scale, research projects have produced convincing findings.

Martyn Hammersley (2001) takes issue with the evidence-led practice movement suggesting that a practitioner may value the contribution that research evidence makes to practice whilst simultaneously rejecting much of what is categorised as evidence-based practice. Hammersley does however acknowledge that research evidence should not be unduly privileged but should contribute along with other types of evidence such as professional experience. Moreover, Hammersley asserts that, especially in the field of education, research cannot usually provide the *“specific and highly reliable answers”* that are sought.

Sue Brindley’s (2015) study into the role of teacher research and how this relates to professionalism, knowledge and teacher identity discovered that teachers struggled to articulate their perspectives as there was no agreed vocabulary. However, Brindley also shows that the lack of vocabulary does not reflect a lack of engagement by teachers with their own professionalism and knowledge.

Teacher research as a method of teacher professional development has fluctuated in popularity in response to issues at policy level and in academic education research. There is the potential for creating a new form of professional identity through the vehicle of teacher research as a dynamic and personalised form of teacher education and development. It could be argued that in an era of fluctuating systems, it is particularly important for each teacher *“to be able to act as an active knowledge builder in society”* (Murtonen et al., 2008 p. 609).

Methods

This is a single site case study of teacher research at Alder Grange. Like all case studies it does not assume to be generalisable beyond the specific case (Taber 2007). Although not an action-research project, a case study can, as suggested by Adelman, Jenkins & Kemmis, (1976) be a step to action in that it offers the teacher, or the school, useful insights into their specific context which can be subsequently used to guide policy and practice.

This investigation was conducted using an anonymous online questionnaire to gather initial reflections on the first round of teacher research. Although the questionnaire was anonymous, teachers were offered the opportunity to participate in the interview process and to identify themselves as a volunteer for this purpose. 42 teachers responded to the questionnaire, and 12 teachers offered to be interviewed.

The 12 volunteer teachers were divided into those with and without management responsibilities; they were then coded by subject and randomly selected to ensure teachers from a range of subjects and responsibilities were interviewed. The three teachers selected were all male. The sampling process hadn't differentiated for gender and, as a consequence, this wasn't taken in to account at this stage. Given the dominance of females in the profession and the dominance of males in school management positions, this is a potential limitation in the research design and could perhaps form the basis of a subsequent investigation into different attitudes and opportunities afforded to male and female teacher.

In total three teachers were interviewed: one a deputy headteacher (pseudonym Andrew) and two classroom teachers (pseudonyms Pete and James). The main method of data-collection was semi-structured interviews. Less structured interviews were chosen because they offer the flexibility to follow unanticipated areas of importance that arise during the discussion (Mentor, et al., 2011). The initial framework and interview schedule ensured that the interview topics remained relevant (Drever, 2003). Following informed consent, interviews were recorded and then transcribed using a constant comparative method to generate a number of themes that are discussed in the findings section.

INSIDER RESEARCH

As the researcher conducting face-to-face interviews with my colleagues, I was aware of the possible tensions between my school role (whole school and alliance lead for research and development) and my role as interviewing researcher (Mentor, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin & Lowden, 2011). However, given the supportive ethos of the school which positively encourages professional reflection and constructive discussions, it is likely that participants in this project felt able to discuss their opinions with candour (Mentor, et al., 2011). Indeed, that some teachers raised criticisms of the research process in school suggests colleagues felt comfortable sharing their opinions.

Findings

RQ1: Is teacher research a viable form of CPD for teachers?

The findings of this case study suggest that teacher research is indeed a viable and often highly successful form of CPD for teachers. Teacher research encompasses a broad range of experiences as illustrated in the 'Teacher-research ramp' figure 1 below. As the nature of the research becomes more complex (from numbers 1-5 in the diagram), the amount of internal school support and external Higher Education (HE) support increases. This investigation focuses on a case of school-supported reflective practice (number 2 in the diagram). The ramp represents the increasing amount of support required in order to sustain different levels of research.

One of the benefits of conducting research at levels 1 and 2 on the diagram is that it is a relatively inexpensive form of CPD. This potentially allows schools to divert funds from traditional forms of CPD to the types of research at levels 3 and 4 on the diagram. Indeed, some HE institutions are

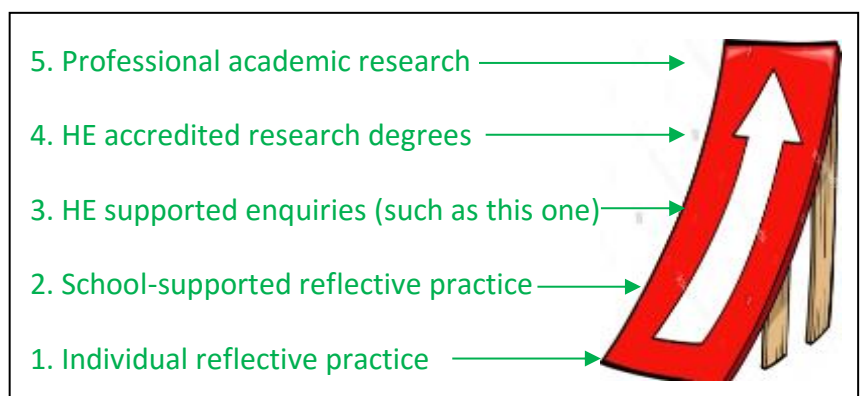


Figure 1: Progression from reflective practice to academic research on the Teacher-research ramp

now providing bespoke school support programmes that provide practising teachers the opportunity to complete research-based higher degrees in school as part of the schools' staff development offer (Daly, 2016).

Therefore, this investigation suggests that teacher research is a viable form of CPD and that in contrast to traditional forms of CPD it offers different opportunities and challenges to schools. Despite the opportunities it is unlikely that research can fulfil all the requirements of a teacher's professional development. Consequently, this report suggests that the teacher research model is complementary to, and not a replacement for other forms of staff development.

RQ2: Do teachers have the skills to conduct research into their own practice?

The teachers in this project have a range of experience and skills and therefore some of them are more equipped to conduct research than others. As this project is studying the types of research at levels 1 and 2 on the diagram, the amount of research expertise required is minimal. Teachers found the support structure offered by the school adequate for their needs. Comments such as:

I was supported but I wasn't monitored. Personally, I work much better when I'm supported like that. (James)

I found it interesting when we all shared. (Pete)

I think it's the word "research" that makes people think of a scientist in a white coat and it's not like that...its just thinking about what you're doing, it's what you would be doing anyway... reflecting, in a more focused, organised way. (Andrew)

However, some teachers who participated in the interviews also expressed that they had some concerns during the first round of research projects (2014-15) that they had not expressed at the time and which they subsequently reported as being misplaced concerns. These concerns were:

- i) that the teacher's successful PPD would be dependent upon a successful research project. One teacher said that in order to successfully meet PPD targets that the headteacher would have to 'adopt my idea – launch it across the school' (Pete)
- ii) that teachers were being asked to do something additional:
'it's just another thing' (James) 'I don't really have time' (Pete)
- iii) that they did not have the expertise to conduct research:
...I've never done anything like this before...but anything is research, thinking about what I could do better, doing a bit of reading up, asking what other people do... it's thinking about it for yourself. (James)

This evidence would suggest that teachers believe they have the necessary skills and that schools are able to support them to conduct individual and school supported reflection (Levels 1 and 2). Although external support is required for more formal types of research, such as collaboration with university researchers, it is clear that teachers can improve their practice and share this with increasing confidence. Although not within the scope of this project, it would be interesting to review the impact that teacher research has on teachers' professional development and classroom practice over a more extended period.

RQ 3. Can teacher research be used to enhance teachers' professional practice?

Of the three research questions, this is the one which this investigation can answer most confidently. The evidence from the interviews indicates that teachers were motivated by a number of features of teacher research. In the teacher interviews, research was linked to the themes highlighted in the 'thumbs up' word cloud.

BENEFITS OF TEACHER RESEARCH PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE



The most common theme to emerge from the interviews was the element of choice. Interestingly, this theme occurred in interviews with teachers without additional management responsibility. This is possibly because typically this group of teachers tend to feel that they have less control over the content of their CPD as they are normally directed to attend courses which reflect the needs and/or aspirations of the school or department without necessarily sharing these aspirations for their personal professional development.

Secondly, teachers commented on how involved they felt with their own development through the

research process. As Pete noted: *'If you choose a topic that you're interested in, then really you'll go for it anyway'*. This sentiment is supported by the amount of paperwork that teachers voluntarily submitted as part of their projects.

In the summer of 2015, teachers' shared their findings using an A4 feedback sheet with the option to provide additional evidence. Several teachers submitted complete A4 ring binders with additional information, notes and evidence. As this was not a requirement to successfully meet the PPD objective, it suggests that these teachers were highly engaged by the process and were indeed motivated to *'go for it'*. Pete noted that because he is interested in the topic of his research that meant that he *'puts a lot into it'* and gets *'a lot out'*. Whereas Andrew commented that the quality and detail of each project *'was much greater and showed much more engagement'* than is usual. When we discussed the process at the INSET some teachers felt that the A4 feedback sheet they were required to submit did not allow them to express the depth and quality of their learning.

However, not all teachers wanted to add additional information. This links with the point noted above: namely that the range of teachers' development needs is varied. One of the benefits of teacher research is that it is flexible and can be personalised to the development needs of the individual teacher. However, in an attempt to offer support and provide a consistent method of reporting back, the school may have unintentionally imposed a structure onto teachers which has potentially limited the ability for the process to meet teachers' diverse range of needs. It is therefore important for the school to consider the most effective ways in which schools can support and challenge teachers without constricting them. Therefore, it could be argued that the approach to the research process needs to be differentiated just as much as the content.

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Another point raised during the interviews was that teachers felt that engaging in research enabled them to be creative.

James: For me personally, I do enjoy the creativity of a research project.

James conducted research into improving boys' attitudes to English. As a part of his research, James read journal articles on the topic. In his interview he discussed and challenged some of these. He confidently identified possible limitations in established research and explained how he found the findings to be 'stereotypical'. His own classroom practice supported some of the findings from his reading whereas some of his findings contradicted what he was expecting.



Figure 2: Action Research Cycle

This illustrates a number of important points. Firstly, that James was conducting genuine small-scale research rather than merely collecting evidence to support a conclusion that he had already reached. Secondly, James was demonstrating the unique social situation of each classroom experience. The findings in his context were unique due to the unique combination of factors. Moreover, James' experience supports Hammersley's assertion that academic research is often irrelevant. Most importantly, James has demonstrated how teacher research can develop the theoretical findings of some academic research and focus on the classroom practice.

What I've found is that it's [research] all very theoretical. The research that I read says that boys like English lessons with a competitive element. But it doesn't say what that could be. No suggestions about how to make it competitive. And I don't want it to be forced. So I think that in English it's difficult to make it competitive and that's what I need to do next. Work with the boys to see how we can make it competitive. How they want to do it without detracting from the lesson. James

Here James is suggesting the next stage in his action-research which implies that he has internalised the process of reflection as demonstrated in the action research cycle Figure 2.

The findings of this study suggest then that teacher research can be used to enhance teachers' professional practice in a number of ways, for example:

- making teachers experts within their own small field of pedagogical interest;
- giving them the responsibility and authority to lead their own professional development;
- encouraging them to critically engage with academic research;
- sharing their research findings with colleagues, including writing up their research for publication in the Alder Grange Journal of Teacher Research.



Figure 3: Alder Grange Teacher Research Journal

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Teachers were also asked to describe the traditional forms of CPD that they experienced. Many of the terms associated with this in the interviews were negative. Words such as *'forced'*, *'restrictive'*, *'tedious'* and *'prescriptive'* indicate how strongly teachers felt about some of their previous CPD experiences.

On a more positive note, teachers felt that CPD offered opportunities for liaising with colleagues and that traditional INSET was highly respected. This latter point again suggests that some teachers may feel they do not have the skills necessary to take their own research beyond levels 1 (individual reflective practice) and 2

(school supported reflective practice) – See Figure 1: Progression from reflective practice to academic research on the Teacher-research ramp.

An expert in a particular pedagogical approach who delivers 'best practice' INSET on behalf of a local authority, teaching school alliance or private company is respected for their expertise. This is a role that could be replaced by university academics when teacher research reaches level 3 (**HE supported enquiries (such as this one)**) of the Teacher-research ramp. If research methods are incorporated more fully into initial teacher training courses and become a routine part of CPD, this could result in teachers developing their own expertise and feeling that this is valued and respected.

Additionally, in the interviews, some traditional CPD was criticised for being too theoretical, whilst acknowledging there is a place for theory, it seems important for those providing CPD to recognise the importance of enabling teachers to make connections with their practice. In contrast, teacher research was valued because it was relevant and appears to be a very useful mechanism for engaging teachers with other research. The need for CPD to be of immediate relevance and value is one which chimes with my own experiences. If teacher research is to go beyond superficial levels and be of value to practitioners in different contexts, then there must be some engagement with theory. That teachers seem to have little patience for studying the theory could be due to the busy nature of a teacher's working day. As the relevance of theoretical study is often not immediately apparent it may feel to some teachers that this a luxury which they do not have the time to afford. This would suggest that in order for research to be of value, time must be made available for teachers to work on their projects.

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Recommendations

1. Consider ways in which teacher research can be differentiated to encompass the broad scope of teacher experience. This includes developing flexible systems within and beyond schools so that teachers can work on suitable content *and* at a suitable level for their own professional development.
2. Investigate ways in which schools and HE institutions can work together to develop teacher expertise and models that teachers to progress beyond levels 1 and 2 of the teacher-research ramp in figure 1.
3. Incorporate research methods for teachers into ITT and CPD so that teachers become increasingly competent in developing their research as well as pedagogical practice.
4. Find time within the INSET budget of the school to dedicate to teacher research projects, to sharing findings and to providing teacher-to-teacher feedback.

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