

Action research, school improvement and teacher leadership¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between practitioner research and school improvement. It offers a framework to support the critique of the positivistic thinking that still persists in the practice of practitioner research. It proposes the cultivation of teacher leadership and the primacy of development rather than research as a way of realising the principles of action research. Case studies of schools with high levels of leadership density are used to illustrate.

¹ Some of the material in this paper appears in a chapter in Coleman, M. and Briggs, A. (eds) (forthcoming) *Research methods in educational leadership and management* (second edition), London: Paul Chapman

I begin with the assumption that those of us working within the field of education are morally obliged to concern ourselves with the search for continuous improvement in the quality of educational provision in schools. As a novice teacher I embraced action research as a means of improving my own practice and later as a head of department I used it as a way of drawing others into curriculum development processes. Having worked in university departments of education for the past twenty years supporting teacher and school development, I want now to reflect on the extent to which action research is supporting school improvement.

Practitioner research of one sort or another seems to be flourishing. In the 1970s it was a marginal activity as Lawrence Stenhouse observed.

... it remains an enterprise for enthusiasts, people who tinker in their classrooms as motor cycle enthusiasts tinker in their backyards: prepared to give a lot of time to increasing performance.

(Stenhouse, 1980a: 251)

However, since then it has grown in popularity. It has been championed enthusiastically by the university schools of education through their award-bearing CPD programmes for teachers. Accounts of these activities indicate a flourishing of a variety of academic programmes which seek to support teacher and school development (see for example: Dadds, 1995; Frost, Durrant, Holden & Head, 2000; Handscomb and MacBeath, 2004; Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby, 1999). More recently practitioner research has been promoted by the DfEs under the Best Practice Research Scholarships scheme and subsequently the National College for School Leadership through its Networked Learning Communities initiative (Dadds, 2004; Street & Temperley, 2005). Presumably practitioner research is encouraged by these national agencies because of its potential to contribute to school improvement, but I want to express some doubt about the extent to which this happens and explore some of the reasons.

Practitioner research and 'knowledge creep'

From my own experience as an examiner of teachers' masters dissertations it is clear that many practitioner research projects are not based on the idea of action research at all. In such projects the goal is to gain knowledge rather than change practice. In such projects the teacher tries to cast themselves in the role of researcher drawing upon models

developed by academic researchers in which objectivity and critical distance are sought. In their discussion of quality in 'applied and practice-based educational research' Furlong and Oancea (2005) cite Weiss' argument that most research does not have immediate impact but contributes to what she calls 'knowledge creep' over a period of many years. I have no difficulty with the idea that practitioner research can, over time, make valid contributions to the shared knowledge base, but we cannot afford to rely on this for several reasons. One reason is that, for practitioners, the needs of their pupils must come first and it is arguably unethical to carry out research that has no direct and immediate benefit to the subjects of that research. Another reason is that, in spite of advances made in the development of networks and outlets for publication, practitioners still face obstacles in contributing to public knowledge. A third reason is concerned with the kind of knowledge generated by practitioner researcher and the way such knowledge is validated; this I discuss later in this paper.

When we look at the large number of masters dissertations lodged in the university education departments' libraries it is immediately clear that these studies have had a significant impact on the individuals who have undertaken them. The following comments made by a graduate of a practitioner research based MEd are not untypical.

It's completely changed the way I think about my teaching, the way I approach my teaching, the way I look at the kids, the way I look at their learning... I realise now that I don't think the same about anything. I don't even think the same about the way I think about things. And I think that the change has been that radical, very very fundamental, ...I don't think about anything at school the same any more. I think about things in a totally different way.

(quoted in Frost and Durrant, 2002: 152)

The opportunity to engage in research as part of a masters degree is highly valued because, as illustrated above, it involves intense reflection which is something that is normally squeezed out by the relentless pressure of teaching and managing schools. Engaging in research can also enable individuals to become more confident and articulate in discussing educational issues. This tends to give them a stronger voice in the running of their schools and an enhanced sense of professionalism. These are all positive benefits of course, but they are not necessarily accompanied by evident changes in practice or the growth of organisational capacity.

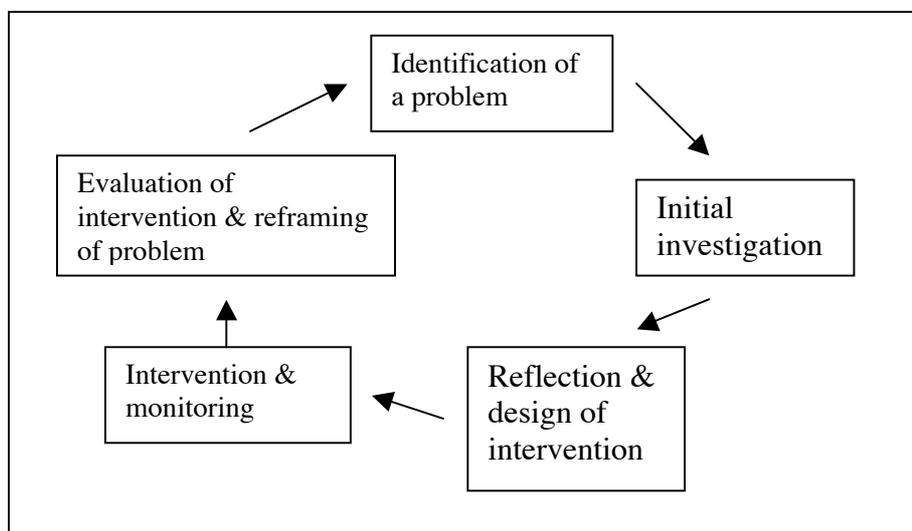
For the reasons outlined above I want to concentrate on action research rather than the broader category of practitioner research in which there is not necessarily an explicit commitment to immediate change or improvement. The defining characteristic of the action research tradition is the commitment to improving practice.

The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilisation of knowledge is subordinate to and conditioned by this fundamental aim.

(Elliott, 1991: 49)

The action research literature almost uniformly puts forward a model in which there is a cycle such as the one below:

Action Research model



In this model we might expect incremental improvement in practice as each new intervention is tried.

Academic imperialism

The action research model clearly has the potential to support change and improvement; however, it is my observation that, in practice, a great deal of practitioner research, while making a token nod towards the action research literature, proceeds along quite different lines. Arguably, an underlying reason for the lack of impact may be what Elliott called ‘academic imperialism’.

Action research and the ‘teachers as researchers’ movement are enthusiastically promoted in academia. But the question is: are the academics transforming the methodology of teacher-based educational inquiry into a form which enables them to manipulate and control teachers’ thinking in order to reproduce the central assumptions which have underpinned a contemplative academic culture detached from the practices of everyday life?

(Elliot, 1991: 14)

The argument hinges on the question of who is the audience for the research. In her important review of action research for the British Educational Research Association, Bridget Somekh drew attention to the problem that arises when the audience for teachers’ case studies is the university rather than the school (Somekh, 1995). This can have a distorting effect because the discourse that the practitioners are enticed into is heavily influenced by academics who are not themselves practitioner researchers.

In academic research, judgements about validity tend to be derived from models of research that are not concerned primarily with immediate improvement, but with generalisations. In spite of the broadening of methodological approaches in the social sciences, so called ‘positivistic’ ways of thinking about research tend to permeate the literature. Positivism is influenced by the world of the physical sciences where it is assumed that the world has an objective reality in which patterns, trends and causal relationships that can be observed or otherwise discovered (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986 for a detailed account). Such revelations can allow us to predict the effect of this or that action. This view of research has some relevance where the research is carried out by professional researchers with the aim of producing generalisable claims that contribute to our publicly accessible knowledge base (Bassegy, 1999), but it is unhelpful for practitioner researchers. In contrast, the action research literature emphasises the complexity and uniqueness of the contexts in which educational practice takes place. It promotes the ethical commitment to the improvement of that practice which is immediate, direct and integrated into the process of inquiry (Somekh, 1995).

The QIFI mindset

I suggest that the obstacle to school improvement in practitioner research is the prevalence of a way of thinking about research that has survived and still holds sway in spite of

numerous attempts in the action research literature to debunk it. In my own teaching I have used the idea of ‘the QIFI mindset’ as a framework for discussion about a way of thinking that, in my view, stands in the way of immediate and direct school improvement.

QIFI stands for Questions, Inquiry, Findings and Implementation. In this way of thinking the practitioner identifies an interesting *question*, carries out *inquiry*, produces *findings*, and then reports these to the school’s leadership team with expectation that the Headteacher (or some other senior person) will take responsibility for *implementation*. I now discuss each of my four elements to try to explore the problem.

The problem with questions

In the QIFI mindset research questions come first. For example, researchers at the Scottish Council for Educational Research are very clear about this.

Research questions are the vital first step in any research. They guide you towards the kinds of information you need and the ways you should collect the information. They also help you to analyse the information you have collected.

(Lewis and Munn, 1997: 7)

While this may make good sense to an academic researcher, it is quite misleading for the practitioner researcher who is likely to be more interested in school improvement. Rather than posing questions out of academic curiosity the practitioner researcher begins with a purpose or concern that arises in the normal flow of professional reflection, deliberation and discussion. This is most likely to be a pragmatic one that centres on the effectiveness of a practice/strategy or the fairness / justice of a situation. It may be for example a concern to:

- develop a particular aspect of practice,
- build a culture conducive to learning,
- raise standards of attainment for students currently performing below predicted levels.

The title of Lewis and Munn’s pamphlet: “So You Want to Do Research?” - suggests the idea of research as something undertaken merely out of interest or for the purposes of

achieving a masters degree, but, if we are truly seeking to improve practice we need to focus on priorities for improvement and these are a matter of institutional deliberation rather than personal curiosity. Pursuing a part-time masters degree carries with it a pressure to identify a topic or question that makes sense to the academic supervisor. Understandably, the desire to succeed in the degree may mean that the teacher concerned seeks first to satisfy the supervisor by identifying what seems to them to be an interesting question. This is perhaps following the line of least resistance; more challenging perhaps is the identification of a professional concern or purpose. This almost certainly demands that we engage with the rather tricky business of consultation and negotiation with colleagues and other interested parties. Like most organisations, schools are full of complicated relationships, power struggles and patterns of vested interest (Hoyle, 1999, 1986) so anyone wishing to initiate a process of inquiry and development will have to exercise skilful leadership.

The first task then is to work with the structures and processes of the school as an organisation to secure sufficient support for taking action to examine an aspect of practice or a problem. Having achieved a mandate for addressing a concern, there comes the challenge of working with colleagues to clarify the issues and questions; these are bound to be contentious. For example, let us suppose that there is sufficient agreement that there is scope for developing the transition from primary to secondary school. For one colleague the question might be “how can we ensure that the primary teachers are preparing the pupils for entry into Year 7?”. This question implies that the root of the problem is in the practice of colleagues in the primary schools. If those colleagues were to be consulted they may well want to pose an alternative question such as: “how can we enable Year 7 form tutors to play a more effective role in supporting new entrants?”. For any Year 7 tutor involved in framing this agenda, the most important question might be: “how can subject teachers personalise learning so as to reflect the different levels of attainment of new entrants?”. These are all interesting questions but they are closely related to vested interests of the parties concerned and it is the exploration of the tensions between these questions that is necessary to clarify how best to address the concern. The key task here therefore is not to decide on the best question, but to manage the discussion between interested parties so that light can be shed on as many aspects of the concern as possible.

The problem with *inquiry*

When approaching systematic inquiry for the first time practitioners often assume that some kind of questionnaire-based survey is a sound inquiry strategy. For novices the strategy offers the false promise of objectivity. Of course, if done well, it does have the potential to provide fairly reliable data that can reveal patterns of frequency and prevalence. There is no doubt that sometimes this can be useful for school improvement purposes – for example if we want to know students’ perceptions about the school as a safe environment for learning or how much time members of staff devote to their various professional duties and tasks. The problem is that the questionnaire is often used inappropriately when what is really needed is deeper understanding and a rich portrayal of what is happening in the classroom rather than superficial data about a whole population. So while it may be helpful for example for the senior leadership team to know that 37% of students in the school have felt unsafe at school during the past year, what is really needed is a sense of what a lack of safety feels like, what makes students feel unsafe and what seems to help to combat this feeling. This sort of insight is more likely to be achieved through interviews, focus group discussions and students’ logs.

It may be that one of the reasons that questionnaires are popular is that they do not involve any interpersonal challenges; the researcher in this case is removed from the situation. They can be distributed, completed anonymously and analysed in a mechanical way (Durrant and Holden, 2006). Whereas, interviews and group discussions make personal demands on the person conducting the inquiry. Most of us will find it much easier to drop copies of a questionnaire in our colleagues’ pigeon holes than arrange to sit down with one or more of them to discuss what might turn out to be complex and difficult issues. So, as all the research literature emphasises, it is really important to choose a data gathering technique that matches the sort of evidence we need, and to think in advance about how the data might be analysed. However, to emphasise these two points can lead to overlooking the aspect of the process that is of crucial importance for school improvement. This is the strategic dimension.

Strategic inquiry

In order to illustrate the nature of strategic inquiry I want now to contrast two alternative approaches to practitioner research. Both approaches may well be seen as valid, but one is more likely to lead to school improvement.

A. Inquiry for research purposes

Harminder has a school wide role supporting literacy. She was pursuing a part-time M.Ed degree and chose for the focus of her research the technique of teachers modelling writing for students. She wanted to know what teachers were currently doing, how effective this is and what understanding they had of the issues and techniques.

She arranged a series of lesson observations in which teachers intended to model the writing they expected. Her observation focussed on a couple of key questions. How did the teacher model the writing task? How did the students respond?

After each lesson, Harminder briefly interviewed a small group of pupils to ask them how helpful they found the teachers' modelling techniques. This data enabled Harminder to categorise the various techniques used by teachers. She also drew out of the data a number of issues such as the variance in teachers' ability to talk to the pupils about their own uncertainty and their own thought processes when they write themselves. The data from the small groups of pupils were used to evaluate the various techniques observed. Harminder had tape recorded the interviews – she listened to the tapes and made a list of positive and negative points.

Harminder then wrote a summary of what good modelling of writing practice looks like and included this in a report to the Headteacher. The report included recommendations for whole school implementation.

In Vignette A, Harminder has evaluated a range of practice and has informed herself about the issues, but she has left the business of implementing change to the Headteacher. An alternative approach is characterised in Vignette B below.

B. Inquiry for development purposes

In order to support the development of literacy in the school Harminder wanted to help colleagues develop techniques for modelling writing in their subject areas. She started by consulting the Deputy Head to identify an opportunity to seek the collaboration of colleagues. She made a presentation in 'staff briefing' about the value of teachers modelling writing tasks and invited all staff to let her know if they would like to collaborate with her in a small scale project to share and develop practice.

Several colleagues volunteered to participate so Harminder spoke to the Deputy Head about arranging for these teachers to be available for an hour and a half session during the day. This is involved using some supply cover and asking a few teachers to give up a free period. At the meeting, Harminder presented a demonstration of how a writing task could be modelled by the teacher. This involved actually writing on the overhead transparency and verbalising the decisions and thought processes involved. Colleagues were asked to share any good techniques they were already using and Harminder made notes. She proposed that they write brief descriptions of a range of techniques and then arrange to try out some of these. Members of the group would observe each other doing this in order to evaluate them in use.

After the meeting Harminder typed up her notes – she described 4 different techniques and then listed the issues that were mentioned in the meeting. She also suggested a pairing for the classroom observations and produced an observation schedule which indicated how colleagues would record what they saw. Again she consulted the Deputy Head to get his help in arranging the observations.

The group agreed to meet again after having carried out one observation. The observation records had been typed up and were copied for everyone in the group. There was a very

animated discussion which led to more techniques being identified and the ones used already being refined. A range of 'dos and don'ts' were also agreed.

Following this second meeting, Harminder produced a guidance leaflet for the whole staff. It was called 'Techniques for modelling writing in your subject'. She sent a draft to members of her group and asked for critical comments. A corrected version was presented to the whole staff in the monthly 'Learning Forum'.

In Vignette B, Harminder has achieved a lot more than she did in Vignette A. She was clear about her school improvement goals, sought support from the senior leadership team, and had a clear mandate to act. Her project began to have impact from the very start because the issue was brought to the attention of the whole staff. Subsequent collaboration ensured that several teachers' practice would be developed in the course of the project. In addition, it is far more likely that the outcomes of the project would be regarded as valid by colleagues because they had arisen from the work of a team rather than a single individual. The impact of the project was widened further through the presentation of a guidance leaflet.

In Vignette A, we could say that Harminder carried out a research project whereas, in Vignette B, we could say that Harminder led a developmental process. If we were drawing up an action plan for mere inquiry we would want to specify such things as questions, data, and gathering techniques, but in a *development process* we would be thinking more strategically about ways to involve colleagues in the enterprise. Below is a list of some of the possible elements in such an action plan.

Elements in the Process of Development

Consulting colleagues

Sounding out, asking advice, seeking permission, reassuring colleagues, testing out ideas, finding out what has happened before, establishing trust etc

Having discussions with colleagues

Clarification of the problem, identifying the issues, reviewing practice, joint planning, agreeing priorities, exploring other's understandings, interpreting data together etc

Engaging in systematic reflection

Keeping a diary, thinking it through, reflecting with a mentor (see consulting colleagues) etc

Reading

Searching for accounts of similar projects, exploring the research literature, looking up government advice (DfES, QCA, BECTA websites for example), reading relevant internal documents etc

Data gathering

Observing, interviewing, multiple diaries, focus groups, listening to group activities, analysing pupils' work, reviewing documentation, auditing, surveying etc

Networking

Visiting other departments, visiting other schools, emailing network members, emailing individuals discovered through reading etc

Training colleagues

Running a workshop, providing coaching, arranging mutual observation, making presentations to staff, distributing guidelines etc

Joint planning

Planning in a team, making materials together, designing a data gathering exercise etc

Trialling / experimenting

Trying out new classroom activities, experimenting with a new teaching technique, focusing on a particular aspect of classroom activity etc

I suggest that it is the optimum combination of such activities together with sensitive and skilful leadership that is most likely to have the maximum beneficial impact on professional practice. This means that, rather than ask teachers and school leaders to become practitioner researchers we might do better to enable them to develop the skills of project management. I suggest that this is likely to be more faithful to the principles of the action research tradition even though the language may be different.

The problem with *findings*

In the QIFI mindset, the posing of questions is followed by a process of inquiry which in turn reveals *findings*. This is a curious word. It suggests that there are truths that are somehow just lying there waiting to be revealed. This is a fallacy that has crept into the world of practitioner research on the back of scientific thinking (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). It assumes that the researcher's purpose is to reveal predictable patterns – if we do this sort of thing, that sort of thing will be the result. This way of thinking simply does not apply when we are investigating cases such as classrooms and schools. Patterns might be reliably revealed if we were looking at many classrooms in many schools, taking full account of variables such as the context of the schools and the social and economic background of the pupils, but the practitioner researcher is invariably looking at just one school, one year group or one classroom. The reality is that the outcomes of practitioner research are context specific and subject to continuous interpretation. The evidence we generate can help us to justify our next steps but such choices have to be provisional.

In any case, if school improvement is our goal, the outcomes of the research need to be a report of actual changes to professional practice together with an account of the development process employed to bring such changes about. In addition, insights about obstacles and issues faced along the way will help colleagues to learn from such accounts and wisdom about innovation can be accumulated.

Another problem with *findings* is that any insights or evaluations that arise from school-based inquiry are inevitably someone's interpretations and, because the inquiry is conducted within an institution with its particular social relationships and structures, such interpretations are bound to be contentious. Some will recognise them as corresponding with their own professional perspective and judgment and some will remain sceptical. So it is pointless to try to claim an overarching validity that sets aside the social relationships of the institution and the multifarious judgements of the professionals within it. It is far better, I suggest, to embrace this institutional reality and draw colleagues into debate about the implications of the evidence. Once again this involves facing up to the challenge of leadership.

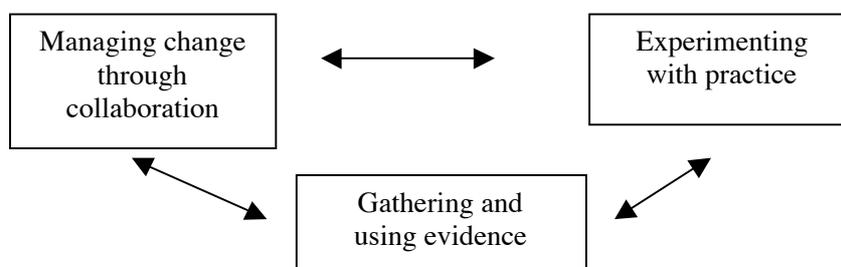
The problem with *implementation*

The word *implementation* suggests that a practice is predetermined, designed and fully formed so that all that remains is the faithful performance which can be evaluated against standards. It is a word that sits comfortably alongside 'delivery' and 'roll-out' as part of the McProfessionalism school of thought.

In Vignette A above, Harminder had completely ducked the responsibility of leadership. She had presented her conclusions and expected other people to implement change, which is to say that she believed that it was not her responsibility to provide leadership – that is what the senior leadership team would do. I suspect that this is a commonly held expectation and it is quite unrealistic of course. In spite of all the talk about 'super-heads' and the like, real headteachers know that practice is not improved by senior leadership diktats based on the findings of a teacher's research project. Rather change comes about via carefully orchestrated deliberation and working with the organisational structures of the school (Gronn, 2003)

In Vignette B, Harminster has embraced the challenge of teacher leadership. This does not depend on a formal position of responsibility within the hierarchy of the school, but is based on the conviction of the individual and their willingness to work collaboratively to move practice forward. Of course it also depends on the sensitivity of senior leadership to be able to facilitate and encourage such distributed leadership (Spillane *et al.*, 2001, 2006). The view of distributed leadership that is operational here is not limited to ‘middle leadership’ or ‘emergent leadership’; it assumes a more inclusive type of teacher leadership. I have argued elsewhere that all teachers can participate in the leadership of learning-centred development work which has three essentially inter-related dimensions as in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
The leadership of learning-centred development work



Source: (Frost and Durrant, 2003)

If it is school improvement that we are seeking, we have to create organisational cultures within which all members of the school community can contribute to the sort of process represented in the diagram above. Inquiry (evidence gathering etc) goes hand-in-hand with practical, classroom-based innovation within a framework of collaboration. In this model, the concept of implementation is redundant. Rather, we see practice being developed through a continuous process of review, evaluation and collaborative development and this requires that leadership is exercised at all levels. It requires both teacher leadership (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Frost and Harris, 2003) and an invitational style of senior leadership. This is what Frank Crowther and his colleagues in Australia refer to as parallel leadership which:

...encourages relatedness between teacher leaders and administrator leaders that activates and sustains the knowledge generating capacity of schools; parallel leadership is a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity.

(Crowther *et al.*, 2002: 38).

Cultivating teacher leadership

Enabling teachers to exercise is not a discrete activity but part of the wider business of building a particular kind of professional community (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993) in which there is a high degree of what Thomas Sergiovanni has called *leadership density*. He argues that a successful school is one in which the maximum degree of leadership is exercised by the maximum number of people including teachers, pupils, parents, support staff and so on (Sergiovanni, 1992). This clearly relates to the way Mitchell and Sackney talk about schools as learning communities.

..in a learning community, individuals feel a deep sense of empowerment and autonomy and a deep personal commitment to the work of the school. This implies that people in the school form not just a community of learners but also a community of leaders.

(Mitchell and Sackney, 2000: 93)

In a study of the impact of teachers' development work, teachers who claimed to have led learning-centred development processes talked about the conditions that enabled them to do this (Frost and Durant, 2002). The teachers interviewed emphasised the importance of creating the right conditions within schools to enable them to exercise leadership and maximise the impact of their work. They were in no doubt as to the crucial role that headteachers have in this respect, offering a range of both positive and negative experiences to illustrate their views. Teachers suggested that internal support is needed in the following areas:

Cultural and structural support
Support for planning and research
Extending internal and external networks
Recognition and celebration of leadership and voice

(Frost, 2004)

Since that small scale study was completed, the schools involved have continued to build the conditions that enable practitioners to lead processes of development. I now feature two of them to illustrate.

The case of Barnwell School

Barnwell School at the beginning of the decade had been, by its own admission, a struggling school (Johnson, 2006). Attainment levels were low and, in 2001, the numbers of children achieving five or more A*-C grades in their GCSE examinations dipped below 25% fell into the DfES category of 'Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances Initiative' (SFCC) which brought with it additional resources but also the challenge of frequent HMI inspections. Raising standards in teaching and learning became an urgent priority. Prior to the first post-SFCC inspection, the senior leadership team had already begun to build a professional culture in which reflection, inquiry and, most importantly, risk taking were prominent features. The 'Teaching and Learning Forum' for example was one strategy that provided a space for teachers to hear presentations from their colleagues about innovative practice. This was a voluntary, collective activity taking place at the end of the teaching day. All members of staff were invited and nobody was coerced or pressured into attending. The sessions were organised and chaired by the Deputy Head, Paul Barnett. Another capacity building initiative already established at Barnwell encouraged teachers to engage in action research and drew them into a knowledge building process through the 'Research and Development Group' which met on a half-termly basis to support their school-based research dedicated to raising achievement by providing guidance and strategies for the whole school. In an interview Paul explained:

....we'd created a tradition of staff looking at small scale enquiry... but impacting on whole school policy. So we'd looked at the attitudes to learning of students, and we'd looked at the role of assessment for learning and comment only marking. We'd looked at our rewards and sanctions policy over the period of 3 years. And we take a project for a year, and we involve all members of the school community, in the sense of teaching staff, non-teaching staff, the parents, the students, the governors, are all involved somewhere in an enquiry, and their views are sought as to how they feel about a particular element. And then all of that's drawn together and we share it with governors and staff, and out of that will become an amended policy, or a new direction..the research and development group can typically be 20 members of staff... a range of responsibilities, a range of experience....

(Interview with Deputy Headteacher)

Paul Barnett had responsibility for developing the teaching and learning at that time and, whilst he was pleased with the way these initiatives were contributing to a more reflective culture, he was constantly looking beyond the school for ideas and structures of support.

The school had brought in all the usual itinerant gurus but this was not sufficient as Paul explains in his own account.

I had experienced a sense of frustration at the lack of impact I felt I was able to make in developing sustained improvements in student learning. I had been responsible for many successful ‘training day’ presentations and activities ... these had reinforced in me the view that INSET is an event whereas school improvement is a more organic process to be engaged with over time (Stoll and Myers, 1998). The HMI inspection also awakened in me an awareness of a synergy in my role between leadership, school improvement, professional development and learning. The central thread for me became the link between leadership and learning.

(Barnett, 2004: 2)

Paul operated on the belief that “ideas are out there” (Fullan, 1993: 85) but this needed to be more than the acquisition of bought-in experts. The Headteacher, Richard, was also aware of the need to reach out and make use of a range of external structures of support. He had been one of the few Headteachers to attend a presentation at the LEA professional development centre to examine the potential of the ‘Herts. M.Ed in Teaching and Learning’ to contribute to development activities in schools. This programme had been created through a partnership between the local educational authority and the University of Cambridge specifically to support school improvement (Frost *et al.*, 2003). Paul Barnett, (Deputy Head) had also enrolled as a student on the programme and had committed himself to an investigation focussed on ‘leadership for learning’ (MacBeath *et al.*, 2003; 2005). This was just the beginning of a trend that saw the signing up of a further 9 teachers on the masters programme and even more than that on the linked Teaching and Learning Certificate programme. The number of teachers engaged in professionally focussed inquiry was rapidly approaching a critical mass.

The case of Sir John Lawes School

In contrast to Barnwell, Sir John Lawes School started the decade from a position of strength. An Ofsted inspection graded 85% of lessons as good or better and the quality of support for professional development was significant in securing the specialist *training school* status. Levels of attainment were rising, staff morale was high and the new headteacher was able to adopt a style of leadership which encouraged innovation and risk-taking. Discussion within the senior leadership team focused on the Headteacher’s desire to ‘de-centre’ leadership and develop as a knowledge creating school (Hargreaves, 1999).

Assistant Headteacher Jo Mylles, wrote about the school's decision to establish a Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) group in the school.

At Sir John Lawes, the impetus to establish a teacher-led development programme was also provided by a successful OFSTED inspection in 2003. The report highlighted the excellent leadership provided by the Headteacher, praised the quality of teaching and learning and described the school's programme of leadership and professional development opportunities as excellent. However, given the spotlight on pupil attainment as a measure of a school's success, it was imperative that the school maintain its momentum. Although the school was flush from its success there was uncertainty about how best to move forward. There was a mixture of excitement and trepidation about how to create further capacity for improvement and success. One strategy which emerged was to develop the collegiate and collaborative work at the school as a way of further empowering staff to engage in development activities to innovate and make a difference.

(Mylles, 2006: 5)

The TLDW group was only part of the picture. The school has been developing what they refer to as 'personalised learning for staff' (Mylles and Santos-Richmond, 2006) which involved establishing traditions such as 'the breakfast brain gym' and 'learning lunches' where colleagues are invited to eat together and engage in focussed discussions on pedagogical themes. Annual residential conferences for the whole staff were planned and led by the staff, the most recent one featuring a keynote address, not from one of the well known and expensive speakers that we see so often at such events, but from one of the school's own newly qualified teachers.

The TLDW group scaffolds teacher leadership in which teachers undertake development work that is documented in a portfolio of evidence leading to academic certification up to masters level. The group sessions provide support for group members' inquiry-based development work, helping them to design a range of improvement initiatives that will have direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Group sessions are led jointly by Jo Mylles, Assistant Headteacher, and Maria Santos-Richmond, Head of the Humanities Faculty, in collaboration with myself. These sessions give teachers the opportunity to clarify their vision, values and professional concerns and plan for maximum impact. The process is supported by occasional visits to the University Faculty of Education library, occasional participation in county-wide networking events and online research. According to Jo, "The aim is to help the teachers to build their 'agency' so that they can act strategically to make a real difference to professional practice and to pupils' achievement" (Mylles, 2006).

What these two cases illustrate, I think, is how the power of teacher-led, enquiry-based development activity can be multiplied when the idea of teacher leadership is explicitly recognised and deliberately cultivated.

Conclusion

I am no less doubtful than when I first started teaching, that practitioner research can result in school improvement. I also remain convinced that the principles of action research are vital to the realisation of this aim. However, the popularisation of practitioner research brings with it problems related to the persistence of unhelpful positivistic thinking coinciding with a reluctance to embrace the challenge of leadership. As a result, the moral purpose of educational innovation (Fullan, 1993) can be undermined.

I am proposing that we need to reframe the discussion about practitioner research and focus instead on the idea of teacher-led development work which, in my view, reflects more faithfully the principles of action research. Central to this is the cultivation of teacher leadership as part of a more general building of leadership density in schools. In order to do this we need to be wary of the QIFI mindset and to recognise the fallacy that objective analysis of data will lead to research findings that can be used to justify the implementation of new practices by all-powerful headteachers. Instead we need to build a climate in which practitioners can collaborate to raise questions about practice, experiment with better practice, evaluate practice and develop practice. This is as much about discussion, reflection, review and deliberation as it is about data gathering; data is of marginal use unless colleagues are prepared to engage in the discourse through which we learn to practice differently. The nourishing of this practical discourse requires the skilful exercise of leadership on the part of all members of learning communities.

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