Teachers as researchers: the changing role of teachers

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Abstract: *Ray Tarleton shares his enthusiasm for teachers becoming researchers and illustrates how research can contribute to school improvement. He emphasises the importance of continuous learning throughout teachers' careers and describes how universities and the National College for School Leadership can support this. He reports on how a group of local schools have put this into practice by forming a Learning Institute.*

What teachers and support staff learn each day is as important as learning by children because it helps secure improvement in teaching. Every adult should have regular opportunities to carry out research, extending professional knowledge, based on what happens in their own classrooms and those of colleagues.

It's autumn in the primary school and auditions are taking place for the pantomime, *Cinderella*. Wayne is desperate to play the part of the pig. "Hold on, Wayne," says harassed teacher, "there is no pig in Cinderella!" Wayne is persistent. "Miss, miss what about if there was a pig…?" Miss gives in. At the first rehearsal Wayne supplies a fine rendition of a pig, apart from the fact that Wayne's pig can only bark like a most ferocious dog. Teacher looks bemused and tactfully points this out. "But what about if there was a barking pig, Miss…?"

For those of you who are expecting the punch line, I am going to disappoint, having long since forgotten it. The illustration is simply a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek example of the teacher as researcher, interested in

discovering the answer to the what if question. If there were barking pigs in traditional pantomime, what might happen next? Punch line suggestions on a postcard, please.

For the essence of research is the willingness to suspend disbelief and ask questions about what we do. Outside the classroom we do this all the time, for example enquiring about colleagues' health, holidays, social life and views. We do the same with children. We are all natural researchers. It just needs to be built into the processes of teaching.

Some teachers already do this because of the inspiration and methodology provided by study for an academic qualification. For others, it may be the result of their contribution to a research project in the school. However, it should not be left to chance. Teaching, as Stenhouse observed, is not like riding a bicycle, once mastered, never forgotten. It is a complex, multi-disciplined activity, a continuous learning process.

First steps

As a young teacher, I was fortunate to be invited to join a classroom research project with the Centre for Applied Research at the University of East Anglia. I can still remember vividly the liberating, although at first confusing, moments as we were encouraged to pose critical questions to which the academic staff had no answers.

Using six tape recorders in my classroom and drilling the children in groups into the use of strict protocols for speaking, I was able to gain insights into children's thinking which would have been undiscovered in a formal context. It taught me how much of a barrier writing can be in assessing the contribution some (apparently less able) children have to offer. It energized my teaching, gave me insights into the minds of the children and helped me to experiment to find new ways of working. I have been an advocate of teacher research ever since.

Could all schools become research-engaged organisations with an equal commitment to learning on the part of every adult and every child? Some models are developing in training schools, schools working with the National College for School Leadership on commissioned research, in NCSL's networked learning communities, and in Leading Edge partnerships.

As the DfES seeks solutions to school improvement from within schools themselves, we are being encouraged to provide evidence-based, practitioner-developed research to support the next phase of school improvement. Everyone, it seems, recognizes the value of the process as well as the insights it provides.

Teacher researchers

What might a re-defined teacher-researcher role look like? How could it be build it into existing practice? Leadership teams can now create research opportunities for their colleagues. The National College for School Leadership

is already making a significant contribution to this work in some schools. For the first time, there are opportunities for in-depth research by school leaders and their staff for the purpose of school improvement rather than academic qualifications.

NCSL's Leadership Network, for example, consists of over 250 heads from primary and secondary phases, including special schools. They are committed to evidence-based, practitioner-supported enquiry, seeking solutions to school improvement from within. The challenge for the Leadership Network is to demonstrate practice which can be translated into tools and policies for other schools. The process begins, not with a research hypothesis to be tested, but with refining and defining the elements of practice which are already working. Often these are based on teachers' gut feelings rather than genuine assertions

A career-long vision

Teaching could become a research-based profession, beginning on the day that a new trainee embarks on a programme of initial teacher training – initial teacher education would become a more appropriate discription.

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During this important stage, the research methodology would be established – a process of discovery as the trainee was taught how to observe others, listen to children's thinking, evaluate episodes, and share approaches with experienced mentors and peers. At this stage, school-based practice would provide fascinating data for discussion. Experienced teachers would have a valuable role to play in acting as mentors, consultants and trainers; given, of course, the necessary time allocation to carry out a role which would stimulate and challenge their own practice.

Universities and higher education departments, which have traditionally played a major role in teacher training, could review their contribution in the light of each school's needs for support. In this way the existing process would be turned on its head so that the vital engagement of the university tutor would be provided at the time of greatest value. The on-going process of research would require tutor interaction at regular intervals during teachers' careers as they moved from being newly qualified through to threshold and beyond. The university partner would be a regular visitor to the school to work with career professionals rather than teachers in training.

This would be a seamless process with training or teacher education

developing into teacher learning initially upon qualification and then as the professional was ready to take more control and ownership. Funding saved during the early stages of training could be used to provide a dowry for each teacher to use for his/her future learning. Professional development would, of course, be continuous, most importantly a continuation of the knowledge gained during those first years. External courses would become less essential. The professionals would be in control of their own learning and their development would be an integral part of school improvement itself.

The professional needs of each teacher would be met in more personalised ways, with each colleague focusing on individual areas of development throughout their careers. And, because schools are essentially collegiate organisations, the potential sharing of ideas could have a transformational impact on performance as well as on levels of satisfaction and enjoyment.

In practice

In case you imagine this to be a futuristic fantasy, a move towards this way of working has already been embarked on by three schools in the South West of England, all members of the National College Leadership Network. Callington, Ivybridge and South Dartmoor Community Colleges have formed *The Learning Institute (TLI)*. This has TTA approval for QTS awards and validation from Exeter University. In this brave new world, some teachers, in the role of lead tutors, are now working across the three schools, observing and coaching trainees. Teams of mentors and subject tutors meet from across the TLI. The gains in professional development for teachers have been immense.

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For the trainees, there is an immediate link between theory and practice, with lectures and tutorials integrated directly into the practical experience and monitored observation of trainees. They gain experience in schools which are committed to a culture of teacher education. All three are training schools with leading edge status, actively looking at the role of new technology in changing classroom practice and developing trainees' expertise.

An interactive DVD of teaching exemplars, for example, has been professionally created by the teachers at one of the schools. It includes readily accessible clips of starters, common organisational tasks, questioning techniques and plenaries. Each clip is accompanied by a teacher deconstruction (talking head to camera) enabling teachers or trainees see good

practice in easily viewable formats. These can be viewed as a group – an NQT induction seminar for example – or individually.

Behaviour

Behaviour management forms an integral part of this work. Again the modelling of good practice is an essential entitlement in the development of the teacher's craft. A DVD of behavioural scenarios shows teachers and trainees how to avoid confrontation, motivate reluctant learners and use praise effectively. These have also been filmed professionally in classrooms, based on real situations experienced by teachers.

Teacher deconstructions are supplemented by the views of the students. So, a simple strategy of asking a child to offer reasons why his behaviour was unacceptable rather than shouting or lecturing is seen to be effective. We are witnesses to the event. Using the DVD, I have picked up some excellent strategies from teachers, at all levels of experience; for example on how to deal with a class in which a child had sworn, or how a teacher can use non-verbal signals to prevent pencil tapping. This new technology allows teachers to see other teachers at work with easy repeat viewing to increase understanding.

In these ways trainees develop high levels of expertise and self-esteem. Trainees set out as reflective practitioners with a commitment to career-long development, secure in their capacity to evaluate their own practice and improve it. Teachers act as professional role models. They derive enormous benefit as they plan and lead training. This process is central to enriching the intellectual life of the profession, leading to renewed excitement within the classroom.

For children there are gains from additional adults in the room deployed creatively to support learning. There are also leadership opportunities for them as they are encouraged to articulate their own learning needs and processes. Children are provided with frequent opportunities to talk about their learning and understand themselves as learners.

New roles

In the schools within the Learning Institute teachers are already adopting new roles and being given timetabled periods to carry out their work. Alongside their roles as mentors and tutors is the research dimension. Each of the schools has a strongly focused research programme with an annual conference to share and disseminate practice and findings.

This year, at one of the schools, all 120 teachers have signed up to a post-graduate certificate. The first stage of this is a 2,000 word description of a pilot study, demonstrating actual or potential school improvement. This will result in a certificate to be "banked" against the completion of stage 2, a 4,000 word assignment which evaluates the impact of theory and research upon current practice. Six of the teaching staff who already have Masters Degrees

volunteered to be trained as University Approved Tutors.

The process of engaging in the research was calendared in advance throughout the year in meeting slots as part of the natural debate about teaching and learning. Teachers were taken step by step through the process which, to many, appeared daunting. They were invited to choose a research focus, frame a question, read some literature, collect attainment data and analyse students' work. Advice was given on the use of questionnaires, student interviews, invited observation, work analysis and video or tape recording.

The topics are rich and diverse. How can children be encouraged to develop their own extension tasks? How do plenaries help children to articulate their learning? Would frequent, formative questioning sessions during lessons improve learning? Does a male dominated classroom environment have an effect on behaviour? What impact has breakfast on response; or warm up activities on motivation; or exemplar material on raising attainment? There are almost as many research topics as teachers. Some projects are collaborative. Many have elements in common as we found when teachers were invited to listen to questions posed by others and say "snap" if there was a link with their own work.

Early outcomes

Two terms into the project the findings are informing teachers and practice across the school. A Technology colleague has invented a brilliantly original laminated cardboard key fob which has printed vocabulary on each side, colour-coded. Children find them "cool", modern and effective, using them in lessons, at home at even at bus stops! Control groups with the fobs have significantly higher test results than the group left to their own devices or a group given only dictionaries. A History teacher has alerted school management to the need to develop the academic mentoring system which pupils say is not working supportively. They want more clarity about how they can achieve, even greater encouragement, and much more personal mentoring. Interestingly, 85 per cent of them thought that teachers were the key factor in their doing well at GCSE.

How has the school managed to persuade so many colleagues to undertake the work? Incentives were needed, of course, for the level of commitment required. Research time was built into each teacher's timetable- one hour a week of protection from cover. In addition, two new cover supervisors were provided, guaranteeing, for each teacher, a reduction in cover, on average, of 50 per cent. An INSET day was devoted to research and staff had the choice of how to use the time.

Performance management interviews will provide opportunities for teachers to outline their research to team leaders. Alternatively, they can make a presentation to colleagues. A dissemination conference will be held in the next

academic year with an emphasis on: "What is the essential message of my research for other colleagues? How can I offer clear, easily usable strategies for others?"

In ways such as these, the school intends to spread the value of the research internally. Staff have already witnessed the power of 120 teachers conferencing in the library – multiple cross-curricular conversations about teaching and learning. Moreover, the National College has provided opportunities for dissemination of this project in the interests of system leadership. The research-based school is born.

"Miss, miss, what about if every teacher was given the opportunity to be a researcher, and the research was used to improve the way we learn?" Perhaps Wayne has something for us to think about after all…

For information about the NCSL Leadership Network, see www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork

For details of Teaching Exemplars, Managing Learning and Managing Behaviour, email: atapper@southdartmoor.devon.sch.uk