Practitioner Research in Teacher Education

Theory and Best Practices

Bearbeitet von
Myint Swe Khine, Issa M. Saleh

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CHAPTER 1
Creating a Place for Research in Schools: Flowing with the Tide or Swimming Upstream?

Colleen McLaughlin

Abstract: The first part of this chapter is a review of the research and scholarship on teachers undertaking research in collaborative settings, as opposed to in settings where the work is more private, such as Masters Courses, and the developments in that area. Lawrence Stenhouse argued that the main barriers to the development of collaborative teacher research were the psychological and social conditions of schools and these aspects are examined in depth in a substantial section on collaboration and collaborative research. The final section explores the school conditions and processes necessary to support researching schools. The whole chapter is informed by research on a ten-year partnership between the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge and a group of eight secondary schools which focuses on the use and generation of useful educational research.

Introduction

I have used the metaphor of flow and swimming in the title of this chapter about the place of research in schools as this notion of flow as a way of experiencing the fullness of life as well as the notion of struggling against the odds are both apposite. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) argues that flow is about optimal experience and involvement, that it can lead to satisfaction in living and working and that it has ‘to be prepared for, cultivated and defended’ (p.2). I argue that these criteria apply to teachers engaging in research in schools: that it can bring great rewards for school systems, teachers and other professionals; that it needs to be developed and defended; that it cannot be easily undertaken; and that it should lead to improved and principled educational outcomes for young people. It is also often to do with struggle. Going beyond individual teacher research projects, as part of a personal programme of self study or a higher education course, is a very different and particular endeavour. There has been much promotion of schools’ involvement in research at a whole school level or as part of a network or collaborative endeavour. Some have argued it is potentially ‘transformational’ (Hargreaves, 2003). So there are many hopes and claims for the work of practitioners undertaking research and they have become scaled up in the last decade or so. The metaphor also has a political association and this too applies to the world of teacher research at a whole school level and will be explored further later.

Developments in thinking about teacher research

Teacher research, or practitioner enquiry as it is also known, has a long tradition and the notion of teachers engaging in research is not a new one. Key thinkers...
and practitioners in teacher research in the UK, USA, Australia and Brazil, those such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Kurt Lewin and Lawrence Stenhouse, were arguing many years ago that teachers should engage in research and that this was the only way that radical or far-reaching reform of the curriculum could occur. Dewey argued that teachers' contribution to educational research was an ‘unworked mine’ and Stenhouse that ‘effective curriculum development of the highest quality depends upon the capacity of teachers to take a research stance to their own teaching’ (1975: 156). These traditions have their roots in different aspirations and arose in very different contexts. The influences and value bases are important and worth exploring.

The early American traditions based on the work of Kurt Lewin, Stephen Corey and John Dewey had a base in social reform and were all part of a push for the democratisation of schools and society. They can be credited with the development of ‘action research’. They were all concerned with teachers as problem solvers or agents in the improvement of practice (cf. Zeichner and Nofke, 2001). Dewey and Corey in particular were very concerned that teacher research should be seen as legitimate knowledge creation. Lewin, along with other researchers of his time, had viewed the Second World War with horror and this had lead to a desire to change society and notions of responsibility. He saw research as a process that had to lead to social action. If this were to be the case then all the actors had to engage, the research had to be in their discourse, relevant to them, born of them and not just the product of universities. Freire (1972) shared many of these aspirations. He shared the criticism of education that it was irrelevant to participants in schools and classrooms. His participatory research was a process where the agenda for and the conduct of research were decided by professionals in the community of practice. So notions of the relevance of knowledge and democratisation were all central to Friere’s thinking. Later work in the USA has built on this foundation. Susan Nofke and Ken Zeichner (2001) have continued the emphasis on democratisation and developed the work with and on marginalised groups. Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller (2004) have studied, advocated and facilitated the teacher leadership movement. Key ideas then in the North and South American traditions are first, democratisation; second, the engagement of professionals in reflecting upon practice in their own contexts and improving it or solving problems; and third, the notion of engaging with the participants in education to produce the knowledge or solve the problems.

In the UK Lawrence Stenhouse is credited with being the leader of the teacher research tradition. Stenhouse (1983) was also concerned with emancipation and the democratisation of research and educational change. He wanted teachers to be the drivers of curriculum change and he famously argued that there could be no change without teacher development. He wanted teachers to ‘to study their work’ themselves and he saw three elements as key:
The commitment to systematic questioning of one’s own teaching as a basis for development. 
The commitment and skills to study one’s own teaching, and 
The concern to question and to test theory in practice (p. 143)

Stenhouse wanted teachers and university based researchers to work together to test and generate new theory and new practice. Collaboration was a central element in this conception of teacher research: collaboration between colleagues in school and between those in and outside of schools. Stenhouse made strong arguments for the legitimacy of teacher research as a form of knowledge. Nofke (1997) sees Stenhouse’s work as a shift to an emphasis on teacher professional development rather than social reform, however, the emphasis on emancipation is there in his work, albeit it has not received so much attention. Stenhouse’s work was developed by those who worked directly with him at CARE¹, most notably John Elliott (1991) in the UK and Wilf Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986) in Australia. Elliott strengthened the emancipation theme arguing, as do Carr and Kemmis, that teacher research must necessarily have social justice and democratic concerns and must be undertaken in a collaborative mode. Rudduck (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004) extended the notion of collaboration and research to include working with pupils. She too had worked alongside Stenhouse. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler sum up the differences thus,

In practice, the American version of teacher research seeks to place the control and direction of teacher inquiry into the hands of teachers themselves, where the research process and practice can be an intensely personal and individual enterprise… The UK and Australian versions .. emphasise participatory and collaborative workings. (2009: 20)

Apart from the difference between the purposes of teacher research, there are also debates about the methodological rigour and the political significance of teacher research within these traditions (McIntyre, 2008). Somekh (1994) has argued strongly that teacher research must be taken seriously as a research methodology but this has not been easily accepted in academic circles. The debate continues (Furlong and Onacea, 2005) and is still an important one.

The political debates were about the ‘colonisation’ of teacher research agendas. Elliott et al (1997) had argued that teacher research should not lose its power and be colonised by policy makers or managers in the educational system or those in higher education. Up until then teacher research had been conducted largely by individuals or groups of interested teachers, often supported by or working in conjunction with teachers and researchers in higher education. In some universities teacher research had been integrated into masters and profes-

¹ CARE is the Centre For Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England where Lawrence Stenhouse was Professor of Education.
sional development courses. It had been a mainly individual activity, although there was widespread agreement that if it was conducted in collaborative groups it was more effective in bringing about change and supporting colleagues to work within the school.

The benefits had clearly been demonstrated for individual teachers or groups of teachers. Dadds (1995) and Elliott (1991) showed how powerful engaging in research could be as a motivator of intellectual enquiry, of professional refreshment, of regaining professional pride and of reducing a sense of isolation. However, it was patchy and was not seen to be making a big contribution to public knowledge of teaching and learning. Nor was it easy for individual teachers to engage in research or in some cases implement the results of their research. The conditions to support teacher research were not present in many schools. The aspirations had been there for a long time but the reality was rather different. It would be untrue and unjust to say that the vision of researching schools was not there in the early history of teacher research, for it was and Elliott (1991) demonstrates that in the 1960s there was a strong tradition of whole school, bottom up research but it was largely driven by the passion and interest of individual teachers. In the late 1990s new discourses were heard and they began to emphasise the researching school.

The new landscape of teacher research

There was by the 1990s an acceptance of the importance of teachers being continuous learners and also of the difficulties of this. Many had been nurturing and arguing for schools as self-improving institutions (Bradley et al, 1994) and for continuous professional development to be a right and a central feature of schooling. This thinking coincided with other ideas and critiques of that time. In the UK Hargreaves captured the zeitgeist in 1999 in his advocacy of the ‘knowledge creating school.’ He drew on analogies with the creation and use of knowledge in other domains, such as medicine (the notion of evidence based practice) and industrial settings, to argue for schools to become knowledge creating institutions. In this paper he also argued that educational research itself needed to undergo radical changes: that it was not useful to practitioners or policy makers. This was part of a national debate on the usefulness of educational research in the UK (Hillage et al, 1998). Hargreaves envisioned a radical scaling up of teacher research so that it could generate knowledge for the educational system, not just for the local community of a school or a group of teachers. This would be achieved by groups of schools working together and with those in those in higher education. Teacher research was becoming politically acceptable. There were other key ideas influencing educational thinking. Wenger’s (1998) research on communities of practice and Engstrom et al’s (1998) activity
theory were all arguing for a new sort of knowledge and for the use of knowledge to inform school and teacher development.

This prompted a range of initiatives and projects that focused on the development of teacher research and the use of teacher research. In the UK there was a scheme called Best Practice Research Scholarships and also the establishment of Research Consortia sponsored by the Teacher Training Agency (Simons et al, 2003). All of these were attempts to develop the scale of teacher research and to bring it into the realm of developing practice and creating knowledge about practice. However, there were other influences at this time and they were often contradictory. The context and the conceptions of education had changed a great deal in the late 1990s and in the first decade of the twenty first century. Many have now depicted the domination of education by a standards agenda and a drive to improve education through accountability processes, many of which relied on using data. (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009; Power, 1999). Teacher research was being asked to play a very different role and with very different values at its base. Notions of teachers identifying best practice and then transferring it were critiqued as over simplified (Fielding et al, 2005).

So the new landscape of schooling was dominated by discourses of best practice and outcomes as well as a more centralised and prescriptive curriculum framework. Other changes within teaching have been the intensification of the work, changing patterns of employment and a reduction in the professional autonomy of teachers (Brook et al, 2007). At the same time there were significant moves to bring groups of schools together to collaborate and teacher research was a part of that. The biggest initiative of this kind in the UK was the Networked Learning Communities programme of the National College of School Leadership. This was a good example of an initiative which had to deal with contradictory and at times opposing tensions. It placed a great value on teacher research which was a central requirement of the funding and at the same time schools had to show an improvement in impact on students within two years (McLaughlin et al, 2008).

This rather lengthy discussion of the shift in emphasis from individual teachers researching their own practice to researching schools is to show the complexity of the endeavour and the basic processes and assumptions that underpin it. First, the world of education is more political in most countries and more complex. There are multiple and competing agendas which teachers and school leaders must address. The social settings of schools are also more complex (Posch, 2002) and the cultures of certainty and inspection contrast with the culture of researching i.e. the ability to tolerate complexity and explore contradictions. Posch talks about the difficult features of
Those who engage in creating a space in school for research must be able to deal with the psychological and social processes which arise from this complexity and must be able to defend and protect research in a complex setting. These will be explored in more detail later on. This leads to the second implication from this discussion. There are competing purposes for teacher research and there is a need to be very clear about why the research is being undertaken and what is expected from it. In our study of ten secondary schools engaged in research in partnership we found that this was a key element (McLaughlin et al, 2006). Participants in our study held very different views and hopes of and for research and their purposes changed over time. This variety was tolerable but the key factor was consistency and clarity. Other implications also flowed from this and will be considered in other following sections. The third implication from this review is that there is a connection between research and school improvement. However, the lessons of history are that it is a very difficult task and that therefore there have to be clear lines of support, connections to school improvement processes and channels of decision-making. This will be addressed in detail in a later section. The fourth feature of the traditions of teacher research is that the measure of the research should be that the lives of pupils are improved. How this is evaluated will vary but it is a key assumption of the tradition of teacher research. How far the motivation for and process of research should be emancipatory varies within the traditions previously described, but it has been a feature of all work in all traditions to some degree so far. Finally this outline of history raises the question of knowledge generation. Who is the intended audience for the research and what warrants follow from that? Is the audience the ‘village of the school’ (Stenhouse, 1981:17 and is it local knowledge that researching schools are aiming to produce, or is it the audience a wider one? A central feature of the exploration of the history of teacher research and has been the emphasis on collaboration. It has been one of the key reasons for advocating research in schools and a cornerstone of the practice of research in schools. In 1994 Hargreaves wrote that collaboration had become ‘an articulating and integrating principle of action, planning culture, development, organisation and research’ (p.245). I will now go on to explore further what we have learned about collaboration and other conditions for research in schools. I will in the remainder of this chapter draw heavily on our ten-year study of the SUPER project (McLaughlin et al, 2006), as well as wider work undertaken by others.