EMBEDDING RESEARCH AS CORE PRACTICE FOR TEACHERS: A MODEL FOR WHOLE SCHOOL TEACHER LEARNING

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material that has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma of a university or institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

Signed _____   Date _____

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This thesis is dedicated to my sisters: Irene, who did not live to see its completion, and, Elaine.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of teacher professional development at the school level using teacher research as a strategy for both teacher professional learning and school change. A qualitative study was conducted to determine the conditions that would develop and sustain teachers researching their own practice in a culture of inquiry. Participant observation in one school over a two year period was used to investigate the issue of how to embed teacher research as a central feature of teachers' work.

As a result of working with teachers as they researched their practice I have developed a model to explain and understand the complexities of schools and their cultures. Teachers researching their practice provided the driving force in the interplay of the elements of the model and had the potential to change school culture.

Relationships, structures and processes are central to this model. Social and professional relationships between the teachers and the university partner developed and were supported by structures and processes. As the research continued these relationships changed and evolved. These relationships help develop a culture of inquiry in schools.

The school/university partnership in this study evolved from an initial symbiotic–cooperative partnership (in which I shared my expertise and supported the work of teachers) into a later organic–collaborative partnership (one based on mutual and shared goals and benefits). The existing team of four teachers and the allocation of time for them to meet provided the essential structures for the teachers to research their practice. The collective leadership style instigated by the school Principal provided important human and financial support for the development of inquiry cultures.

Collaboration and collegiality as forms of association enabled teachers to conduct research which challenged their individual and collective beliefs and assumptions about students' learning and their classroom practice. The content and form of teacher culture mediated the effects of teachers researching their practice. There are critical and transformational effects when teachers research their practice as part of their core work.

Introducing these teachers to research was not without its difficulties. There were events and factors in the school relating to relationships, structures and processes which hindered the development of teacher research in a culture of inquiry.

Because of the time frame of this study there is no evidence that school culture change is permanent. This could be the subject of future research.

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Introduction

The research problem

This thesis is about teacher professional development using teacher research as a strategy for teacher professional learning and school change. In particular, I focus on the conditions in schools that will develop and sustain teachers researching their own practice to embed teacher research as a central feature of teachers' work.

Teacher professional development is important for a number of reasons. The first is that continuing professional development is necessary for individual growth and for the improvement of classroom practice and, therefore, student learning. The second reason relates to the importance of teachers in reforming, improving and changing schools. There is a well-established body of literature indicating that teachers (and their professional development) are essential to school improvement and change (Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Guskey, 1994; Sarason, 1990, 1995; Wideen, 1989) and to the successful continuation of change (McLaughin & Marsh, 1979; McLaughlin, 1993).

Teacher research is an effective strategy for teacher professional development because teachers researching their practice is about teacher–designed, teacher–owned and teacher–controlled research and emanates from a belief in the autonomy of teachers as professionals. Viewing teaching as a profession not only creates responsibilities and expectations for teachers to maintain standards within the profession but also to have input into those standards. Teachers researching their practice is about individual teachers determining their own research problem or concern, then collecting and analysing data to improve their classroom practice. As teachers gain new insights about their work, there are important benefits for schools in the form of school change, reform and improvement. The school context is important for teacher professional development

(Lieberman, 1995) and teacher research is a site-based professional development strategy.

There are important benefits when teacher research, as a professional development strategy, is embedded in teachers' core work. However, teacher research which is central to the work of teachers across whole schools is absent from the literature. To develop a culture of inquiry in schools the complexities and nuances of schools have to be understood. A model for whole school teacher learning was created, therefore, to examine and explain the conditions in schools, which would develop and sustain teachers researching their practice. A model for whole school teacher learning also provided the link to understand the complexities and tensions of teacher professional development and school change, reform and improvement. Teacher research as a strategy for teacher professional development is central for the development of whole school learning.

To explain further the research problem and how it might be addressed, this chapter outlines the rationale for the study. The study aim and research questions are introduced, and the relevance and importance of this study are examined through related literature, including possible limitations of the study. Finally, an overview of the thesis structure is given to explain the framework of the study.

Rationale for the study

The focus of this study is teacher research as a professional development activity and the conditions in schools that will develop and sustain teachers researching their own practices as a central feature of their work. Teacher research is an effective professional development strategy with benefits for teachers, individually and collectively, and for schools.

This study is important for a number of reasons. First, in promoting teacher research as central to the teachers' work in schools challenges models of professional development which focus on the individual teacher. Many teacher professional development activities

relate to the individual teacher's concern for professional growth and to improve their own classroom practice. These professional development activities are usually self-initiated, self-funded and cover a variety of activities including professional reading, membership of professional associations, attendance at conferences and workshops, and undertaking postgraduate study. In some situations, the school in which the teacher works contributes funds for these activities. These activities are; 'one-offs' and based on 'expert-client' transmission models of delivery. Huberman & Guskey (1995: 270) describe these as 'deficit' models of professional development:

> [a deficit model] is based on the idea that something is lacking and needs to be corrected. Typically, these deficits are determined by others … Teachers are, in turn, seen as the objects, rather than the subjects, of their professional growth.

Further, neither deficit nor individual models accrue long-term benefits for schools because learning is individual and teachers leave or transfer from schools. Although teachers might take their learning to their new workplace, there is no evidence that learning is transferred. 'Growth' models of professional development (Huberman & Guskey, 1995) offer potential benefits for schools. Growth models include activities which focus on group activities, such as teacher study groups, curriculum writing groups, program evaluations and teachers conducting research into their own practice.

Second, teachers conducting research into their own practice has been promoted extensively as an important, individual professional development activity because it occurs at the school level and because it requires teachers to work together in a collective activity. Reflection is inherent in teachers conducting research as teachers examine their beliefs, values and assumptions about students, teachers, learning and teaching and engage with other teachers in dialogic and critical reflection.

Finally, teachers collectively researching their practice across a whole school has benefits for schools and for reform and improvement as teachers make explicit their beliefs, values and assumptions about their practice and work together to improve learning for themselves and their students.

There is a plethora of studies in the literature about teachers conducting research into their own practice: for example, in the United States (Anderson et al., 1994, 1996;

Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1993, 1998; Gitlin et, al., 1992; Hollingsworth, 1997; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; and Lieberman & Miller, 1994). In the United Kingdom (Elliott, 1991, 1998; Carter & Halsall, 1998; Dadds, 1995; Dadds & Hart, 2001 and Stenhouse, 1975) have worked in the field. Altrichter, 1997; Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993 in Austria were influential, and, in Australia, (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Atweh & Kemmis, 1998; Baird & Northfield, 1992; Baird & Mitchell, 997; Grundy, 1987, 1994, 1999; and Groundwater-Smith, 1996, 1998). All of these have made significant contributions to teachers researching their practice. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1998) even referred to the 'teacher research movement' as 'a new paradigm' although Huberman disputed this in his trenchant criticism 'I don't think the evidence is there' (1996: 124). However, studies where teachers across a whole school research their practice as teacher professional learning and school change is absent from the literature.

The 'collective' in teacher professional development appealed to me. Teacher research could improve individual classroom practice but, when viewed as a collective activity, it had the potential to change schools and improve learning for all students. During my own work, I had conducted research with my students in education courses at university using web-based discussion rooms to encourage reflective practice. Student teachers, collectively discussing with in excess of 100 critical friends in cyber space, demonstrated engagement in both dialogic and critical reflection (Merritt et al., 2001).

Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and his work on the teacher as researcher had been highly influential in my own professional development in the early 1980s when I was teaching in schools. Stenhouse defined teacher research as 'systematic questioning of one's own teaching as a basis for development' (1975: 144). Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1990, 1993, 1998) had defined teacher research as 'systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers in their own schools and classrooms'. I wanted to strengthen this definition to also include reflection and the idea that it was a collective activity. If teacher research was to be embedded in teachers' core work, then the definition also needed to include the idea that it was ongoing. My definition of teacher research, therefore, is teacher

research is deliberate, systematic, conscious, continuous, collaborative, reflective inquiry.

In 1998 I became involved with a research project[1] where I acted as a university critical friend for a school. This project was designed to implement an innovation and then involve teachers in research processes to evaluate the outcomes of the innovation. This project benefited the individual teacher and small groups of teachers who were conducting research. It is debatable, however if there had been long-term benefits for other teachers in the school or for the school itself.

When this project ended, the Principal invited me to continue working at the school. Our discussions centred on how teacher research could be used in the school to improve student and teacher learning, especially if it could be embedded in teachers' work practices. The Principal was keen to develop a culture of inquiry in the school as a reform and improvement initiative.

The complexities and nuances of schools and their cultures have to be understood before they can be changed (Schein, 1986; Lieberman & Miller, 1992b; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Deal, 1985). It was Fullan, (1993: 45) who had said that school culture had proved to be a 'tough customer'. Hargreaves (1997) and Darling-Hammond (1994) have suggested that schools have to be re-cultured if teacher inquiry is to become part of teachers' work.

The discussions with the Principal and my involvement with the school assisted in determining the aim of this study and questions.

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[1] The Innovation and Best Practice Project was a joint project between the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Southern Queensland, and Edith Cowan University in 1998-99. It was funded by the Federal Department of Education and Training and involved 100 schools to identify research-based indicators to improve learning.

Research aim and questions

The aim of this study is to determine the conditions which support and sustain teachers researching their practice as a central feature of teachers' work in schools. To do this, a model for whole school teacher learning was developed to understand the complexities and nuances of schools so that a culture of inquiry could be developed.

To achieve this aim, four questions guided the study:

1. What are the structural and cultural conditions that will embed teacher research as core practice for teachers in schools?
2. What are the relationships that will promote a culture of inquiry?
3. What models of leadership are appropriate to the development of a culture of inquiry?
4. How can partnerships between schools and universities facilitate a culture of inquiry?

The research aim and rationale are based on a number of assumptions about teacher professional development, school change, reform and improvement in current educational contexts. In the following section I explain these educational contexts and their relevance to the aims of this study.

Educational contexts

The social, economic and political changes, which occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century, have generated a new interest in teacher professional development. In countries throughout the world there has been a return to conservative governments, regardless of political affiliations, and schools now reflect the priorities of conservative governments (Hargreaves, 1997). Parents and representatives from the business sector have become highly influential in setting educational priorities and directions for schools. Curriculum development reflects the influence of parents and businesses alike. For example, parents have demanded greater literacy, numeracy and technology skills for their children: employers have demanded that student exit outcomes include skills

and proficiencies for the workforce. Schools are mandated to implement centrally developed curricula.

These developments have put pressure on schools to implement a range of changes that reflect government priorities of choice, free markets and competition (Whitty, et al., 1998). A number of external standards have been imposed by governments, such as, benchmarks to measure student performance, and external testing throughout primary and secondary schooling. The outcomes of students' learning are being made visible and schools are accountable for the results. Governments and parents are using these benchmarks and standards to make comparisons between schools, forcing schools to market themselves to compete for students.

Resources for education and schools have also been reduced, demanding greater efficiency and economy in their use. At the same time, resources were allocated to schools and schools along with the responsibility of determining how these scarcer resources were spent. The language of business and economics permeated discussion about education (Hargreaves, 1997; Helsby, 1999) as governments demanded greater accountability from schools.

A significant aspect of devolution of resources to schools is the added responsibility given to schools for funding the professional development of the teachers. These pose new challenges for schools if teacher professional growth is to continue with fewer funds available.

There have been a number of new and significant initiatives in teacher professional development in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as in other countries. In the United States, for example, in 1986 the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards emphasised the importance of professional development to 'professionalize' teachers' work and to improve teacher education. Rebuilding teacher professionalism has been a common theme in the United States (McLaughlin, 1997). The Holmes Group (1986, 1990) provided for professional development schools to be set up, and the Coalition of Essential Schools (1984) promoted teacher professional

development using teachers as researchers in collaboration with universities and for schools to restructure and reform (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

In the United Kingdom the Education Reform Act 1988 set new targets for national curriculum and assessment procedures which posed new challenges for the teaching profession. The mandated and external educational reforms intensified teachers' work, undermined teacher contributions to schools and were branded 'anti-intellectual' (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997).

There have been a number of projects supporting teacher professional development which were funded by the Australian Federal Government in the 1990s. The National Project for the Quality of Teaching and Learning (1991), the National Professional Development Project (1993) and subsequently the National Schools Project (1992–1993) and the Innovative Links Project (1994), for example, promoted collaborative partnerships between schools and universities for school-based professional development. Other projects included SCOPE (Self-directed collegial on-going personal professional effectiveness, 1996) which supported workplace learning, and the IBPP (Innovative and Best Practice Project, 1998-1999) which was designed to promote collaborative partnerships between schools and universities as teachers conducted research.

Teachers researching their practice is a significant strategy for teacher professional development for a number of reasons. It gives teachers ownership and control of their research, and their research contributes to the development of a pedagogical knowledge-base for teaching. Teacher research as a collective activity has the potential to permanently change schools if research is embedded in the core work of teachers. Teacher research, therefore, has the potential to act as a powerful professional development strategy with transformational and critical possibilities for teachers. When teachers question and challenge each other and make explicit what and why they do the things they do, they collectively have the potential to change schools, influence policy directions and impact on systems.

Limitations of the study

There are potential limitations to this study that I believe could limit the findings of this study. These relate to the choice of a single site, one school, for investigation. Schools are idiosyncratic and generalisations between schools are difficult. Therefore, in investigating the conditions which would develop and sustain teacher research, the findings might relate to this school only.

However, as Stake (1998: 101) argues we select a case from which there are 'opportunities to learn (or) from which we feel we can learn the most'. Implementing change in schools is difficult (Fullan, 1993) and often superficial (Sarason, 1995). As this school had been involved in reform and improvement since the 1990s and had a national and international profile of change and reform, the school had indicated its receptivity to change. The Principal was also interested in introducing the teachers to research and to use teacher research as a strategy for professional learning as a way to develop a culture of inquiry for improvement across the whole school. The enthusiasm of the Principal and the leader of the group of teachers who were to trial research in their classrooms were important considerations in choosing this school. There were increased possibilities for implementing successful change. Therefore, research findings might provide indications of how other schools might be changed to develop a culture of inquiry.

Study overview

This section provides an overview of the study by describing the main goals and directions of chapters. In chapter 2, I examine literature related to teacher professional development and its purposes. I examine how teacher research is an effective and important professional development activity and its use in different contexts and times. Through examining three distinct periods of teacher research waves, I explain the important developments and differences between the concepts of action research, practitioner inquiry and teacher research.

The theoretical orientation of my study is presented in chapter 3, and a model for whole school teacher learning is developed. I argue in this chapter that the model provides the links between the complexities and tensions of teacher professional development and school change, reform and improvement. Teacher research as a strategy for teacher professional development is central to the development of whole school teacher learning. The elements of the model are relationships, processes and structures and I argue that these conditions in schools can hinder or support teacher research. The model assists in understanding how teacher research can be embedded in the work of teachers and how teachers researching their practice is developed and sustained in a model of whole school teacher learning.

A qualitative–ethnographic approach is the chosen methodology for this study. In chapter 4 I justify why I used this methodology. A qualitative–ethnographic approach was appropriate to this study because it was necessary to understand and interpret both the school and the social world of the teachers as teacher research was conducted in the school setting. During a two year period I conducted interviews, focus group interviews and was involved in participant observation. The multiple methods of qualitative research assisted in uncovering the meanings of the teachers and what conditions would support or hinder them to research their practice. The trustworthiness of the study was subsequently established through data collection and data analysis. Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously so that data analysis was both deductive and inductive. The methodology for this study is further elaborated in chapter 4.

The findings in this study are presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7. These chapters examine school culture and the conditions which developed and sustained teachers as researchers to embed research in the core work of teachers. Chapter 5 explains the culture of the school and how this research study evolved from my participation in the school. Chapters 6 and 7 specifically present the successes and failures of developing a culture of inquiry in the school. Chapter 8 discusses the findings through a model of whole school teacher learning, re-visits the questions which framed this study and presents my conclusions of this study.

Summary

In this introductory chapter I have argued that teachers researching their practice can be a significant professional development strategy for teachers both individually and collectively. Importantly, I have argued that teacher research has the potential to change schools when it is central to the work of teachers in a culture of inquiry.

In the next chapter I examine teacher research as professional development activity and its use in different contexts and times. I explore the different conceptions of teacher research through the 'three waves of teacher research' and the aspects in the third wave of teacher research which will assist in developing the conditions to embed a culture of inquiry in schools.