

CAN PRACTITIONER RESEARCH DELIVER EDUCATIONAL QUALITY? OPPORTUNITIES AND DILEMMAS IN TEACHER EDUCATION FROM ACROSS THE POND

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To be presented at the AERA Annual Meeting, Chicago, as part of the Action Research SIG programme session Action Research with Pre-service and Practicing Teachers, 10th April, 2007.

Abstract

Government policy in England to involve partner schools in the training of pre-service teachers and to give qualified teachers responsibility for their continuing professional development has redefined those involved in teacher education. These policy shifts have been accompanied by explicit and implicit support for practitioner research as a means to improve educational quality in a climate of continuing central control, externally set professional standards and accountability. This paper explores these policies at work and the dilemmas which have emerged in defining and judging standards of quality. It also considers the epistemological and political implications of recognising the knowledge-creating capacities of teacher- researchers.

Introduction

In keeping with the title of this year's AERA Annual Meeting and the organisers' recognition of the importance of looking at education systems outside the United States, this paper aims to provide some insights from across the pond, specifically from England. In particular it sets out to address questions of quality within practitioner research and its use by teacher educators, a group which has over the last 15 years become more amorphous.

The paper begins by looking at different theoretical approaches to practitioner research and different ways in which the teacher education community is being configured. Drawing on examples of government policy and of teachers' practices, it discusses claims to quality in practitioner research and the dilemmas which exist in defining, meeting and judging standards of quality. In so doing it draws on textual analysis of policy statements from government and its agencies and also examples of practitioner research which use action research cycles. It concludes by suggesting that recent policy initiatives, namely revised professional standards (Training and Development Agency (TDA, 2007a) and changes in the national qualifications descriptors (QAA, 2005) offer new opportunities for teacher educators to use practitioner research to achieve, demonstrate and represent educational quality in their professional practice and to contribute to an epistemological shift in the production of professional knowledge.

Defining practitioner research and teacher educators

Practitioner research in this paper refers to all forms of action research which make a contribution to the public/ professional knowledge base and meet criteria of systematic investigation through the use of rigorous methods of enquiry and analysis.

Such research is also likely to contribute to the individuals' personal and professional development.

Within this descriptor there are different approaches to action/ practitioner research which serve different interests. Groundwater- Smith and Mockler (2005) for example draw the distinction between those that serve technical rational interests (Habermas 1972) of the kind 'How do we solve this problem?', those that relate to interpretive/ hermeneutic interests e.g. 'How do we understand this practical problem?' and those having an emancipatory interest, e.g. 'How can we locate this problem in a wider social discourse and address it such that we enhance the opportunity for participative engagement with it?'

Added to these is the approach of self study as living theory developed by Whitehead and McNiff (2006). This approach relates to interests of an individual's development in relation to others through questions such as: 'How do I improve what I am doing in terms of morally committed practice?' and seeks to contribute to a different epistemology of practice.

This formulation also seeks to be emancipatory in that it takes account of the social/ cultural conditions which produce the problem for improvement as well as the personal and social transformations that are generated by engagement in practical action. It raises questions about impact on the person in terms of their personal/ professional development and about possible influences on policy directly or indirectly at an organisational, local, national or international level. Practitioner research therefore embraces a wide spectrum.

Policy developments in England, over the past 15 years, have also widened the spectrum of those who can be regarded as 'teacher educators', extending this beyond those based in higher education institutions. It was the government's review of the respective contributions of higher education institutions (HEIs) and schools to the pre-service training of teacher and the requirement for partnership agreements with schools (DfE, 1992) which began this redefinition. Over the past fifteen years, government requirements for and inspection of pre-service training have meant that staff in schools, working individually or as school- based mentors , have become increasingly established as 'teacher educators' complementing, in different sites of practice, the work of HEIs and contributing to an increase in the quality of newly qualified teachers.

This policy shift has resulted in an increase at the pre-service stage in the numbers of those who can be deemed to be 'teacher educators' not withstanding the differences in the roles and responsibilities they fulfil.

Other policy initiatives, both those initiated by government and those at a grass roots level for example, by the General Teaching Council, have led to teachers at subsequent stages of their careers also being conceived as 'teacher educators' with a contribution to make to the education of their peers. These initiatives and reports from OfSTED, the body that inspects the quality of pre- and in-service education, have recognised the importance of continuing professional development (OfSTED, 2006) for the achievement of teaching quality. They have endorsed teachers acting as educators for other teachers through the sharing and dissemination of good practice

and there has been an acknowledgement that teachers can contribute to their own development and learning through self study of their own practice often leading to accredited awards at Masters and doctoral level supported by HEI tutors.

Such policy shifts enable the identification of a range of those whose professional practices involve the education of pre service and practising teachers as well as those who, in a world in which the notion of life long learning is becoming a professional requirement, engage in their own self/ teacher education. The list below, whilst not exhaustive, gives a flavour of those who have a central or more peripheral role as ‘teacher educators’ and who, through engaging in practitioner research, variously share a commitment to enhancing educational quality through evidence informed practice.

1. HEI based teacher educators using action research to understand/ improve their own practice with pre-service students or with school –based mentors.
2. HEI based teacher educators in collaboration with school- based mentors researching their practices with pre-service students
3. HEI based teacher educators researching own practice with CPD, MA, EdD, PhD students
4. School -based mentors and staff development tutors researching own practice with pre-service students and school staff to influence pre-service and CPD policy and practice
5. Teachers researching their practice with pupils possibly facilitated by HEI tutor/ researcher for self improvement but with an indirect link to the education of other teachers
6. Teachers in schools in networked learning communities using action research to improve/ solve / understand their practice.

This list signifies that practitioner research by teacher educators in their diverse manifestations has, over the past 10-15years, grown in scale and scope. Its greater presence is partly linked to the legitimating of practitioner research by policy makers and professional bodies as well as its greater acceptance within academia as evidenced by the inclusion of applied research in the forthcoming UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). However, the jury is out as to the extent and nature of its acceptance within academia and how practitioner research will fare when assessment panels seek to balance judgements of ‘relevance’ with grading criteria which look for world leading, internationally excellent, international or national recognition ‘in terms of originality, significance and rigour’. The weighting of these criteria towards world leading outputs gaining the highest score, is likely to work against practitioner research, conducted in response to individual or locally identified need, even if the research has contributed to practical improvements in educational quality. As Ball (1997 p.265) reminds us with regard to the existence of ‘uncoordinated or contradictory policies’, ‘ the enactment of one may inhibit or influence the possibility of enactment of others.’

Dilemmas are therefore present between these different forms of legitimation i.e the academic and the political, with the political rather than academic appearing to provide a more encouraging steer for practice oriented research. By way of illustration, in contrast to the implications of the RAE with its emphasis on global reach, statements in the policy discourse of the government and its advisers signify a move towards greater recognition of the profession's role in producing research based evidence to secure education quality. 'Evidence-based' (DfEE, 1998) and evidence-informed practice' (Hargreaves, 1998); the language of 'what works' and the inclusion of 'frontline workers' (Blair, 2002) have become part of the government's view of quality improvement by the profession and can be seen as indicative of greater autonomy within a continuing framework of external accountability.

Legitimation of practitioner research and issues of quality

Whilst practitioner research by those engaged in teacher education has grown and gained a measure of legitimacy, what of its quality? In this section some examples of government sponsored practitioner research by teachers / teacher educators are considered and issues of quality explored.

An early example can be traced back to 1996 when the then Teacher Training Agency, the funding and accreditation body for teacher training, launched the Teacher Research Grant Pilot Scheme inviting teachers to bid for grants for small scale enquiries into classroom practice. The aim was to encourage 'high quality research' which would 'add to the existing stock of knowledge available to teachers and the research community.' The intention therefore was that teachers would be educating both their peers and also those in higher education, with a view to the improvement of practice.

However, restrictions imposed by the Agency on the grant recipients demonstrated lack of appreciation about the time scale and processes involved for teachers to engage in high quality research. Peter Foster (1999, p.393), in his review of the reports in the initial phase of the scheme, raised a number of serious concerns including issues of validity claiming 'the weak evidential base undercuts the evaluative claims and prescriptions made by some of the teacher-researchers on the basis of their factual claims.'

Whilst he saw considerable potential in the topics studied because of their importance to a teacher's own institutional context and these were often also linked to wider education debates and concerns of policy makers, the reports rarely engaged with previous research in the area, thereby losing the opportunity to consider findings in relation to existing knowledge.

In addition to the endorsement of practitioner research by the TTA was a similar, though better funded scheme, from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) i.e. the award of Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS). These scholarships were given to classroom teachers to engage in school focused research supported by experienced mentors, often from higher education institutions.

This initiative can be seen as part of a wider policy shift by the government for schools to become learning organisations, a move signalled in the Green Paper, *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* (DfEE, 1998) and for practitioner research to contribute to professional learning, to organisational and systemic change and to the realisation of government policy. Teachers, who were scholarship recipients were, however, steered towards focussing their research on one of the government's priorities and hence a centrally determined agenda for improving quality and raising standards.

As with Foster's review of the TTA's Teacher Research Grants, Furlong and Salisbury's evaluation of BPRS raised similar issues regarding the limited use made by the teacher –researchers of existing literature and hence the contribution of these projects to what they describe as 'research-based knowledge –at least as it is conventionally understood' (Furlong and Salisbury, 2005 p.58).

Furlong and Salisbury, however, questioned the appropriateness for an evaluation of BPRS of the criteria conventionally used to evaluate research. Their own choice of criteria became influenced by arguments put forward by Michael Gibbons and his colleagues about new and different forms of knowledge production and the distinction between between Mode 1 and Mode 2. In Mode 1 Gibbons et al argued

'problems are set and solved in a context governed by the largely academic interests of a specific community. By contrast, Mode 2 knowledge is carried out in a context of application. Mode 1 is hierarchical and tends to preserve its form, while Mode 2 is more heterarchical and transient. In comparison with Mode 1, Mode 2 is more socially accountable and reflexive. It includes wider, more temporary and heterogeneous sets of practitioners, collaborating on a problem defined in a specific and localised context' (Gibbons et al, 1994, p.3).

This suggests the necessity for different standards of judgment to be applied to judging the quality of practitioner research and that these should take into account the context of application, social accountability and reflexivity. Influenced by this, Furlong and Salisbury concluded that using 'contribution to research- based knowledge' as the sole criterion to evaluate BPRS was inadequate and that other contextually specific criteria needed to be deployed, namely the contribution individual projects had made to 'teachers' own learning (their continuing professional development)' and to 'the development of teachers' practice in the specific contexts in which they work.'

Using these standards of judgment they found evidence of impact on teachers in terms of increased confidence, improvements in their teaching, and in some cases on colleagues and on pupils. In other words practitioner research was contributing to educational quality and, in some cases, could itself be seen as quality research.

The steer by the government towards their priorities to improve quality nevertheless posed a dilemma for some HEI teacher educators acting as research mentors for teachers. Pointing to such constraints, Bartlett and Burton (2003) describe the research approach often adopted in BPRS as 'overtly utilitarian/ instrumentalist' with little time either to explore underlying philosophies of research and knowledge or to

question the standards which were the focus of improvement by teachers. For some teachers these remained unquestioned and unproblematic.

A similar point was raised by Ken Zeichner as discussant at the Action Research, Shifting Identities and Social Transformations session at the AERA Conference (2006) when he described the possible domestication of action research in the United States in serving the policy agenda of No Child Left Behind.

Such critiques and concerns are not new. In 1999 for example, John Elliott (1999) warned that support by the government for teacher research may be a vehicle 'to legitimate its interventive policies to drive up standards' rather than be there to empower teachers to seek their own solutions to their own professional issues.

The reality may well not be an either /or i.e. domestication or empowerment. Rather evidence from Bartlett and Burton (2003) indicates that whereas some teachers may have felt constrained to select an aspect of their practice which focused on national priorities, for some teachers the actual process of engaging in research lead them to adopt a more questioning approach to their practice in general. Involvement in research helped expand their understanding from a narrow technicist approach and a more restricted form of professionalism to one where they became more questioning professionals with the potential to ask the 'big' questions about purposes, definitions and conceptions of quality. Some were no longer just engaged **in doing** but also **in being** in the sense of raising questions about values. This brings us closer to the transformatory potential of practitioner research and closer to engaging with the moral purpose of practice which Whitehead and McNiff (2006) urge be made overt.

These examples enable us to see some of the possibilities as well as the tensions in the way teachers alone or supported by HEI teacher educators have been involved in practitioner research to help improve quality through government funded grants.

This emphasis on quality improvement by the government has recently gained even more prominence in the current Training and Development Agency's (TDA) funding of Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) provision leading to higher degree awards. A key criterion in obtaining funding was that teacher education providers must be able to show that the programme had 'as its main objective the improvement of pupils' performance through the embedded improvement of teachers' knowledge, understanding and practice.' Reporting on the first year of the programme, the Agency (TDA, 2007b) described how many providers have built in 'research/ enquiry projects tailored to the specific needs and priorities of the participant's school.' The evaluation report indicated that the impact on teachers to participate in change to the benefit of pupils was greatest when PPD provision had 'included substantial school-based projects or research that addressed the professional needs of both the participant and the school.'

This initial evaluation, which is arguably premature after just one year and in danger of repeating the problems Foster raised over the Teacher Research Grants, nevertheless points to much that is positive within a very limited timescale. It also and importantly refers to the dilemma many teacher educators raised about 'the problematic nature of judging the impact of PPD in schools and the difficulty of establishing a causal link between provision and impact on pupil learning experiences,

including attainment, particularly because there are many other initiatives aimed at school improvement.’

What emerges from this early evaluation is a more indirect link to enhancing pupils’ learning experiences through a growth in teachers’ self esteem and professional confidence and willingness to explore and change aspects of their practice. We are reminded that drawing conclusions about quality is complex and frequently non linear.

In the concluding section, reference will be made to recent changes in the policy context for the teaching profession and for teacher educators which provide new opportunities for practitioner research to become more rigorous and to become more integral to the achievement of educational quality for pre-service as well as serving teachers. These changes, it will be argued, have the potential for the knowledge – creating capacities of teachers as researchers to be more fully recognised with important epistemological and political implications for the profession and its contribution to educational quality.

New opportunities

A major policy initiative which affords the opportunity for practitioner research to contribute to quality is the introduction in 2007 of revised and new standards for the teaching profession (TDA, 2007a). These standards, whilst not explicitly naming practitioner research as a vehicle for quality, nevertheless make practitioner research more possible and probable as new and experienced teachers seek an evidence base to illustrate how they meet the standards.

Of significance is the fact that for the first time in England, there will be a suite of standards which are progressive in demand and include revised standards for entry to the profession, as well as standards for subsequent phases of teachers’ careers i.e. induction/main, post threshold, advanced skills and excellent teacher. This standards framework defines the professional attributes, knowledge, understanding and skills for teachers at each stage of their career. Issued by the government following consultations with stakeholder groups, i.e. professional associations, local authority representatives and organisations representing teacher educators in higher education such as UCET, it makes explicit the expectation that teachers will continue to engage in professional development throughout their careers. Furthermore the standards will for the first time be used as a backdrop to new performance management arrangements and pay.

Amongst the 41 revised standards for pre-service teachers are two which have a specific reference to the improvement of practice. These are standards relating to professional attributes and personal professional development. They require those that are recommended for the award of qualified teacher status (QTS) to have demonstrated that they are able to

‘Reflect on and improve their practice and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their professional development needs’
(TDA, 200a, Standard Q7a)

And

'Have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified' (TDA, 200a, Standard Q8).

Once qualified and a member of the profession, those in their induction year and subsequently will be required to continue to

'Evaluate their performance and be committed to improving their practice through appropriate professional development' (TDA, 200a, Induction/main and post threshold, Standard I 7).

There are therefore opportunities for teacher educators both HEI and school –based mentors/ staff development tutors to introduce trainees and existing teachers to the use of action research as an appropriate methodology to help meet these standards and to systematically gather evidence to support their claims. Not only will trainees be required on a national scale to be reflective in order to improve their practice but for the first time trainees are being encouraged to be creative and critical and to produce knowledge from within their own contexts of practice. Hence there appears to be a recognition of contextually specific problems in relation to innovation which may necessitate local solutions and modifications if improvements are to accrue. This seems a far cry from seeing pre-service and established teachers as mere implementers of government policy to one of acknowledging the profession as capable of acting, researching, engaging in practical theorising and constructing a knowledge base about and for the profession.

To make this a reality Hagger and McIntyre (2006, p.69) point to the need for pre-service teachers to be in schools or departments which are themselves committed to exploring the merits of innovations in terms of the improvements they offer. This can of course not be guaranteed and given that the revised standards for 2007 are the fourth in a series of revisions introduced by the government over the past 15 years, there is a danger that the potential they afford is not fully recognised and opportunities are lost. There are those within the profession who have become habituated to implementing the government's prescribed national strategies rather than going beyond these to also question and seek alternatives. Established members of staff, because of their own former teacher training, may well perceive professional knowledge as derived from abstract theoretical knowledge residing in universities rather than recognising themselves as also able to construct such knowledge through inquiring critically and systematically into their own professional practice and the values informing it and learning from it. These are therefore dilemmas to be addressed if the profession is to have a greater responsibility for generating professional knowledge, and for owning, shaping and judging educational quality. In schools where teachers are engaged in the Postgraduate Professional Development previously described, such dilemmas are less likely as there is more likely to be a burgeoning culture of practitioner research and a recognition of its potential.

A further lever towards the involvement of more of the profession in practitioner research is the requirement from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) that institutions include credit at Masters Level in their Postgraduate

Certificate of Education if they are to continue using the nomenclature Postgraduate in their Qualified Teacher Status Awards (QTS). Otherwise the award needs to be renamed the Professional Certificate of Education.

One way in which such credit can be gained, as some institutions have already shown, is through pre-service trainees carrying out action research projects on their classroom practice (UCET, 2006). Not only will this lead to many more trainees being introduced to practitioner research as a methodology to demonstrate and improve quality, but will also mean that practice-based research will be given greater emphasis in the development of both university-based tutors and school-based mentors in order for them to support trainees undertaking these small scale research projects. Furthermore as pre-service teachers will be in partner schools where experienced teachers also need to meet the standards as part of performance management, it is reasonable to believe that a growing number of trainees will, in the future, find themselves in schools where action research to promote improvement may come to be regarded as integral to professional activity and school culture.

It is, however, only within the standards for excellent and advanced skills teachers, which are likely to apply to a smaller proportion of the teaching profession, that there is a standard which actually requires teachers to engage in research to inform their practice and that of others namely:

'Research and evaluate innovative curricular practices and draw on research outcomes and other sources of external evidence to inform their own practices and that of colleagues' (TDA, 2007a, Standard E2).

The restriction of this standard to these two categories is arguably a missed opportunity if the profession is fully to realise its evidence-informed aspiration discussed earlier and to embed practitioner research as a cultural practice for the profession. The fact that this opportunity has been lost may well relate to the role played by the Rewards and Incentives Group, a powerful group of government, professional and employer associations who have played a key role in agreeing and signing off the standards. In seeking to fulfil their commitment to tackling workload issues in the profession and the use of the standards in future performance management and pay progression, they may well have seen a standard requiring research for all members of the profession as a step too far for many teachers already in the profession.

However for pre-service trainees and in advance of the implementation of the revised standards and of the more widespread introduction of Masters level credit, some insight into the potential of these policy shifts can be found in Cain's work with postgraduate trainees (Cain et al 2007). Drawing on action research Master's level assignments, they illustrate how these trainees were able to engage in 'literature-informed, one-turn action research' involving the use of literature in relation to their chosen area for improvement and to undertake a single cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation. Within the time constraints of the one year PGCE programme the trainees' accounts were 'mostly autobiographical and classroom-based' and confined to a single cycle of research. Nevertheless from the research each trainee was able to situate their own account within a known body of knowledge, record improvements in their practice and see benefits for their personal and

professional growth. Cain's work has similarities with that undertaken by Price in the United States with pre-service teachers on a Master's certification programme. Both point to the influence of the experiences gained through the processes of action research on how trainees saw their role as teachers and what 'they hoped to promote on becoming fully fledged members of a school' (Price, 2001 p7).

The identification by these pre-service teachers of their areas for personal/professional improvement is reflected in recommendations made in the Gilbert Report (2006) in relation to experienced teachers and their further development again affording an opportunity for practitioner research. The Review Group's report to the Secretary of State recommends a move away from government prescription and more latitude for teachers to determine priorities for improvement

'Teachers need to be able to choose the practices they change and the techniques they use as they are more likely to take responsibility for them.. .'

Recommendations to the Secretary of State from the Review Group led by Gilbert, who subsequently became the Chief HMI, suggest greater trust in the profession and an appreciation that 'improving learning and teaching is often slow and hard. This signals a move away from a quick fix, technicist approach to the improvement of educational quality even though examples of the latter continue to co-exist alongside this forward looking and responsive agenda.

Of significance too in the revised professional standards is a different emphasis on subject pedagogic knowledge rather than subject knowledge as disciplinary knowledge. This opens up new opportunities for teachers, through their research, to contribute to its construction heralding an epistemological shift in those that define knowledge for the profession.

This change of emphasis goes beyond knowledge of the subject and the school curriculum. It 'also depends on knowledge of the learners, of the context which shapes their attitudes, assumptions and interests as well as their prior knowledge, and knowledge of the ways in which they learn' (Hagger and Burns, 2006).

Given the 'dynamic interaction of these components' from within practice, Hagger and Burns suggest subject pedagogical knowledge is constantly open to renewal. A crucial role for teacher educators will be to help trainees understand that

'—they will be constantly engaged in constructing and reconstructing their subject pedagogic knowledge as they, for example, encounter new pupils, in different contexts, implement new initiatives and deepen their disciplinary understanding' (Hagger and Burns, 2006).

In other words they are recognising the construction of knowledge from within practice for teacher educators and trainees.

Whilst Hagger and Burns usefully move us onto think more holistically and appreciate the dynamic at work here, a reframing of our discourse to better reflect this dynamic seems appropriate. In her writings on relational epistemologies Thayer Bacon (2003) indicates her preference for the term 'knowing' rather than knowledge

as it acknowledges transactional qualities, avoids being seen ‘as a finalized object or product’, recognises fallibility and is essentially developmental (p.272)’. My preference would be that we interpret the standards not just as outcome statements but as developmental opportunities for trainees as well as established teachers to use practitioner research to explore and document their own ways of knowing in relation to their professional values and judgements of effective practice. As they progress from the status of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), to induction, threshold to Advanced Skills and Excellent Teacher, a key criterion in those journeys will be their own learning about their professional practice and how this contributes to the development of educational quality in the learning and development of their pupils.

Whilst these new opportunities exist across the pond, it is important to recognise the dilemmas and challenges involved. One of the biggest difficulties relates to the Mode 1 form of knowledge described earlier and the way in which a content laden national curriculum for schools supported by packaged programmes can stifle both how teacher educators work with pre-service and existing teachers as well as how these groups work with pupils to construct meaning and develop understanding. Curriculum coverage, a reproductive tendency and often conservative environments in both higher education institutions and schools bedevilled by league tables and accountability regimes can act as counter weights to innovation and produce risk aversion.

However there are in advance of the legitimacy afforded by the new standards, examples of teacher educators already bucking the coverage/ reproductive tendency and working differently with trainees. An example is offered by Elaine Wilson (2005) of her work as a PGCE Science tutor, with school based mentors and science trainees as she describes how trainees changed their pre existing beliefs about learning and effective practice and developed their own subject pedagogic ways of knowing. My own work at the University of the West of England with Fitzgerald, an English PGCE tutor and school-based mentors (Whitehead and Fitzgerald 2006 and 2007) recognised the professional knowledge mentors were able to generate with trainees and pupils with reciprocal benefits in enhancing understanding and improving practice.

In this example trainees and experienced members of the profession, through adopting action research cycles, were both prepared to take risks video- recording and analysing their practices. Both saw themselves as learners enquiring into aspects of their practice in collaboration with others. They were also willing to disseminate that learning collegially through the use of the web <http://edu.projects.uwe.ac.uk/trainingschool/> enabling them to connect with the ideas and practices of others with shared or different professional concerns in similar and different contexts. In this example situated ‘practitioner knowledge’ (Hiebert et al, 2002) became professional knowledge, open to public examination through different modes of representation and with the potential to generate insights for others engaged in improving professional practice. In Eisner’s (2005) words, it enabled ‘empathetic participation’ in the life worlds of other teacher educators and served as a heuristic with potential to generate insights in others engaged in teacher education partnerships. Making public their knowing opened up possibilities for “reflective transfer” (Schon, 1995, p.31) and for practices to be tested, adopted or adapted by others.

These examples illustrate the relationship between learning, action and values becoming more visible and better understood by trainees and teachers/ teacher educators as they research their own practice and seek to improve it. The introduction of the revised and new standards, the extension of Masters level credit and the Postgraduate Professional Development programme could provide teacher educators at both pre service and in-service with the means to make the instances described more commonplace, even systemic and embedded in professional practice nationally. This might then enable the profession to contribute to an epistemological shift in who are seen as the producers as well as users of professional knowledge about teaching and learning and as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993: 61-62) suggest enable inquiries by teachers to be recognised as

‘ ---a way to build knowledge locally and more publicly- for the individual teacher, for communities of teachers , and for the larger field of university-based researchers and teacher educators, policy makers, and school administrators.’

Were this to occur it might be that the educational knowledge being created by practitioner–researchers who are researching processes of improving their practice would require the new epistemology advocated by Schon (1995). This would involve an appreciation not solely of knowledge generated in the academy but of teachers’ own capacities to be generators of knowledge of value to other teachers and teacher educators across different sites of practice.

Conclusion

Despite some of the contradictions and dilemmas described, it would seem that the processes of practitioner research are gaining greater acceptance by the profession, academia and the research community. Not only are these trends observable but there are new ways in which practitioner research could expand still further through the revised professional standards, the new qualifications framework and Postgraduate Professional Development programme. A task for teacher educators would be to ensure that these opportunities are taken in ways that avoid earlier criticisms and that appropriate standards of judgment are used. In other words an extension of practitioner research should not lead to a dumbing down but to an extension of high quality research which adds to the professional development and growth of teacher educators, of pre-service and experienced teachers and realises and recognises their different contribution to the generation of professional knowledge.

The time seems right for practitioner research to come in from the cold, no longer be at the margins and lead to what Dadds and Hart (2001, p.166) have described as ‘methodological inventiveness’. This may well lead to new and different ways of representing our knowing including narrative inquiries and multimedia representations advocated by Whitehead and McNiff (2006) and to different standards of judgement in relation to how we live out our values in relation to professional action and the achievement of educational quality. Whilst the policy climate is becoming warmer, there is still much to be done for such knowledge to be counted within the academy as ‘authorised knowledge’(McNiff, 2007) as the debates continue about the status of those who theorise mirroring the deep divisions in education in England between the academic and vocational. We therefore continue to face dilemmas but also new opportunities.

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