

Engaging teachers in research: inspiration versus the daily grind

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Abstract

What factors influence teachers' decisions as to whether to involve themselves in school-based research?

Both the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) have launched initiatives to promote the idea of teaching as an evidence based profession. In the case of the TTA, this has been in the form of financial support for four consortia of schools and Higher Education institutions, to carry out school based educational research, and also, small scale grants to support research by individual teachers. The DfEE has also provided £3 million to support teacher-researchers in carrying out small-scale studies into classroom practice. (Times Educational Supplement 19 May 2000)

This paper looks at the factors which have influenced teachers' and schools decisions on whether to engage in research into classroom practice, from the perspective of one of the four consortia which was funded by the TTA, the Norwich Area Schools Consortium (NASC). Each of the schools involved appointed a Research Coordinator for the project, and the schools worked with the support of several 'research mentors', from the linked Higher Education Institution.

The first section of the paper provides a brief biographical account of one teacher-researcher's involvement with the project. In the second section, the teacher presents findings from his enquiry into why some teachers at his school chose to get involved in school-based research, and why others declined.

Just as there were differences within the school over attitudes to practitioner research, there were also differences *between* schools, in terms of the extent to which the NASC project influenced school culture over the three years of its time span. The third section of the paper looks at the explanations for these differences from the perspectives of the schools' Research Coordinators, and the research mentors from the university.

In the last section, some conclusions are drawn as to the factors which influenced the extent of teachers' and schools' engagement with practitioner research, and the response of teachers who had become involved with the project, which might inform future developments and initiatives in practitioner research.

Teachers' perceptions of practitioner research and factors influencing teachers' engagement with research: the context of the enquiry

In recent years, both the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) have launched initiatives to promote the idea of teaching as an evidence based profession. In the case of the TTA, this has been in the form of financial support for four consortia of schools and Higher Education institutions, to carry out school based educational research, and also, small scale grants to support research by individual teachers. The DfEE has also provided £3 million to support teacher-researchers in carrying out small-scale studies into classroom practice. (Times Educational Supplement 19 May 2000)

This is not to suggest that there is universal support for the model of 'the reflective practitioner', or for investment in evidence based practice in education in the United Kingdom.

Given that the idea of evidence based practice is a contested area of education policy, this paper attempts to provide insight into teachers' views about their involvement in classroom research. The paper also looks at the factors which have influenced teachers' and schools decisions on whether to engage in research into classroom practice, from the perspective of one of the four consortia which was funded by the TTA, the Norwich Area Schools Consortium (NASC). Each of the schools involved appointed a Research Coordinator for the project, and the schools worked with the support of several 'research mentors', from the linked Higher Education Institution.

The first section of the paper provides a brief biographical account of one teacher-researcher's involvement with the project. In the second section, the teacher presents findings from his enquiry into why some teachers at his school chose to get involved with NASC, and why others declined.

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In the last section, some conclusions are drawn as to the factors which influenced the extent of teachers' and schools' engagement with practitioner research, and the response of teachers who had become involved with the project, which might inform future developments and initiatives in practitioner research.

To research or not to research? A teacher's story

As a teacher who eventually became involved in the NASC project, in a school where some teachers engaged with school-based research, and others chose not to get involved, I have detailed a brief history of my involvement in the project. As the following summary 'biography' indicates, it was a decision which, at several points could have gone either way. When the project was initially introduced to the staff as a whole, I was neither firmly committed to the idea of teacher research, nor definitely opposed to it. The account is written

in a way that attempts to provide some insight into the factors which seemed to me to influence the decision as to whether to get involved in research or not.

In 1997 I attended a meeting that was to provide an opportunity for teachers to become involved in research into their professional practice. The meeting was co-ordinated by the school's Research Coordinator, and a Professor from the nearby University of East Anglia. The meeting was well attended, with staff from all curriculum areas and posts of responsibility present. Although the total number of those present was under half of the staff complement, there was a sufficient critical mass of colleagues not to make one feel 'out on a limb'. The focus of the meeting was to look at various aspects of pupil disaffection. Staff were encouraged to become involved in any of the areas which were outlined, or to explore any other facets of disaffection and disengagement, which occurred to them. I was specifically interested in discipline and had worked the previous year on a school based task group looking at issues related to discipline.

I worked closely with a colleague for a term on a specific task linked to mentoring in schools. When this was completed we submitted our findings and I left the so called 'disaffection group' with a feeling of 'job done – so what?'. I did not feel that what I had done was of much value either to myself or anyone else.

It was about a year later that I was asked to attend a meeting at UEA as a representative of the school where all schools in the NASC/UEA project would be reporting back on what was being done and how much progress was made. I agreed to go to this meeting mainly out of curiosity. I wanted to see what was going on since I was last involved. It was only subsequently that I became aware that the idea behind the meeting was to initiate cross-school research into aspects of disaffection.

At this meeting I was introduced to a group of teachers from other schools in the Norwich area– some of whom I already knew professionally, and others who I was meeting for the first time - as well as members of the School of Education at the university. At that particular moment I was feeling a little apprehensive and somewhat out of my depth. It also appeared to me that everybody knew each other except me as I scoured the lecture theatre for a friendly face, (I spotted my Headmaster). I felt like a stranger in a strange land. When the group split into smaller working parties I joined a group looking at why students become disaffected. The rest of the day was spent in an open forum deciding how best to conduct research into this topic and planning a sort of time scale for completion. I was removed from this group half way through the morning for a taped interview with a researcher who wanted to know why I was getting involved in this project.

The interview probably lasted no more than 10 minutes and I can recall very little of it. I do remember using the word *cynical* on several occasions. I returned to the group and the rest of the morning passed in general discussion, a lot of which I found lacking direction. There was a certain element of frustration building up in me as I felt a lot of time was being wasted in open discussion but no decisions were being made. Somebody would suggest something, this would be discussed by the group and just when I thought a final decision was going to be made somebody else would suggest something else.

As we broke for lunch I was beginning to have second thoughts about being involved with this project. On the way to lunch a teacher in the group asked me if I was the cynical type. This took me a little by surprise as I cannot remember saying much of value or importance in

the session we had just concluded. Perhaps my frustration was showing. At this moment in time I would not have been unhappy if I had never returned to the afternoon session but instead headed back to school to get on with some real work – teaching.

However, I did return, and the afternoon session continued where the morning left off. I had decided over lunch, for better or worse that I would continue working with this group as long as they wanted me to. Why? It was an opportunity to actually do something. This was really important to me. I had come from a school with a record of involving staff in active research, where an open collegiate approach to problem solving was well established. I had been a Head of Department and Curriculum Area Manager. I had recently gained a NVQ Level 4 in Management – I was used to working with and co-ordinating the work of teachers on a specific task. I wanted to do something that would have some value, firstly at a personal level for me in my school but secondly perhaps for other teachers in other schools. The focus on pupil disaffection was a crucial point here; how many teachers work in contexts where pupil disaffection has no relevance to the quality of their working lives? I started thinking about it as an opportunity to get involved in active research on a topic most teachers could relate to and it was this that helped me to decide to stay involved with the NASC project. I could see a relevance and importance, in my eyes at least, in the task ahead, and I felt I could make a contribution.

If, as part of my involvement in NASC, I could understand better what it was that turned students off in the classroom I thought it would help me to be a more effective teacher. I am sure all teachers, if asked, could give several reasons why students are disaffected and I thought there was an opportunity here to see if those views are accurate. More importantly for me though was the appeal of gaining a greater insight to what motivates students today and how this could be used to create a more positive learning environment in the classroom. Like most teachers, I wanted to inspire the students I taught not just go through the daily grind of teaching and surviving. The discussions made me feel that other colleagues could relate to this.

As a starting point It was initially agreed by the group to seek some answers on disaffection from the students themselves based on the two statements, ‘What makes a good teacher?’, and ‘What makes a good lesson?’

There were concerns expressed about the value of the responses but at last there was a task to do and despite some reservations I was looking forward to it. Several colleagues also expressed concerns about which students they would ask and how they would be selected. Some colleagues were worried about their teaching commitments and how much time they would need to find on top of their daily workload to carry out the task – this is a serious concern for many teachers who are already overburdened with national curriculum, Key Stage testing, the threats of performance related pay etc. Generally, though, the mood was optimistic, that deadlines would be met and that as a group we would be able to go on and refine our research. There were a couple of follow-up twilight meetings at the university, although it was surprisingly difficult to arrange these– part of the problem of trying to co-ordinate staff from several institutions.

As a result of this initial activity there was a tentative exchange of experiences. I was not aware that there were any jealousies or negative feelings amongst members of the group, but there was an initial hesitancy, uncertainty and self-consciousness. There was one incident when a colleague made little contribution to the seminar and left rather abruptly saying his

colleague, also present, would fill him in on anything we decided. Sadly that colleague left soon after and I wondered about the longevity of the project at that time if these two colleagues disassociated themselves, for whatever reason. Things seemed quite fragile at this stage, and it took some time for people to become 'at ease' and comfortable talking about research in front of a mixed audience. There was a marked difference in the atmosphere and tenor of later meetings, once people had got to know each other. One began to realise that research was not a purely cerebral activity- it had a social and interpersonal side to it.

On several occasions some colleagues failed to meet their deadlines or provide the information they said they would. This led to delays and sometimes going over old ground; perhaps to be expected when trying to co-ordinate colleagues from several schools, and given the other pressures on teachers' working lives. The saddest event for me was the apparent withdrawal of some colleagues whose school failed a special measures inspection at Easter. I had admired their contribution to the project when also having to deal with constant OFSTED monitoring. Only those of us who worked with these colleagues know and appreciate the contribution they made to this research (including the title for this paper). The opportunity to talk to and work with colleagues from other schools was one of the unequivocally positive aspects of involvement in research.

Outcomes

In terms of my own personal involvement in NASC, I felt that I had learnt a lot through being involved in the project. It had made me analyse and rethink my teaching style and approach. This in itself I consider a major benefit of my participation. I do not feel I have found all the answers to being a successful teacher and if totally honest I'm not sure there actually is one. If there is one thing I have learnt while being involved with the NASC project it is that research itself is the most important aspect of any activity – not necessarily the discovery of a 'truth' about teaching. It may be that the group's conclusions when finally analysed will not reveal any ground breaking discovery on pedagogy but I do know I feel a better teacher for being actively involved with research. I am aware of the existence of other, more munificently funded research projects in this area, but I don't feel that it detracts from what we did in our research. I still have a list of unanswered questions but the idea of teachers 'researching their practice' somehow doesn't feel as threatening as it did. I am not as frustrated as I thought I might be at the beginning of my involvement, despite not finding 'the holy grail'. The truth may still be out there but looking for it can be just as rewarding as finding it. I think I enjoy some aspects of my work more now, and I look at some facets of my work as a teacher in a different way.

Tensions

When involving oneself in research there are areas of tension. One of the main ones for me was trying to juggle what I wanted to do with the research, the time and effort, planning etc. it required, with what I was being paid to do, i.e. teach. The conflict here cannot be over emphasised. There was another tension I experienced concerning *loyalties*. On one occasion I had to attend a meeting of NASC at UEA but I also had to attend an important management meeting at school. School came first but I still felt I was letting someone down. The understanding shown by the NASC members helped but didn't remove this guilty feeling totally.

Over the last 4 months, the NASC group I have been working with has not met as a whole group once. Pressures of OFSTED inspections, exam requirements, INSET, illness etc have all contributed to this. Many teachers of my generation fondly reflect how the end of the summer term used to be relatively less demanding than the rest of the year. Those of us who taught Year 11 or Upper Sixth looked upon this time almost as a reward for our efforts. This is not the case any more; there are fewer periods of the school year where what some might term the 'luxury' of school based research can be fitted in without compromising other teaching and administrative commitments. This added a tension to involvement in NASC. At one meeting in July it was relatively easy for me to take a day of school and spend it at UEA with members of the group trawling through our questionnaires. My tutor group had left and so too had many of my classes (I teach predominantly Y11 and Sixth Form). Nevertheless there was a double period with a difficult Y10 class that colleagues had to cover for me. One hopes that colleagues were understanding but it has been a difficult year at the school. Many staff have lost non teaching periods almost weekly to cover internally and I was aware I was adding to this by increasing their workload – especially as one of my jobs is to arrange cover for absent staff on a daily basis. This is another area of tension. There was funding for supply cover which sounds fine but in reality it is almost meaningless- we found that most teachers involved in NASC were reluctant to miss teaching their classes, so the funds were not made use of.

Time management was another major tension. I remember spending one whole weekend processing information obtained from my research and feeling quite satisfied with the effort I put in even though most of the work was tediously recording the response of over 400 students in 5 schools. It was late Sunday afternoon that I remembered I had promised to take an assembly the next day and saw a pile of marking that had miraculously not marked itself. This was one of those times when I questioned the wisdom of my decision to get involved with NASC. I also had to take an hour off in the morning to take the papers and my findings to UEA.

One part of the research involved interviewing colleagues and this was another area I realised which was potentially problematic. Fortunately most of the colleagues I asked to interview were co-operative and did so willingly, giving up their own time. This was not always the case. One or two colleagues were very brusque in their refusal to be interviewed and one even suggested that there must be something more worthwhile I could be involved in. A sociology teacher did not hesitate to tell me he thought all school-based research was of little value as it was not conducted by professional researchers. Other colleagues retain a firmly instrumental view of research; I was cornered one day by a science teacher who asked me what I had discovered about disaffected students and how this would help him teach them. I'm not sure that this particular colleague views me in the same way as they did prior to my involvement in research. Other colleagues now look upon me as some sort of expert in the field of teaching disaffected students; which also evinces uncomfortable feelings. Having said that, there is also perhaps a modest amount of kudos accredited to me by *some* of my colleagues because of my involvement in NASC.

Another type of tension was that of a more personal nature. I began to realise that perhaps I did not know students and their needs as well as I thought. While processing students' information, a recurring theme appeared: their repeated reference to feeling safe with some teachers. I began to consider that I might not be one of those teachers. My colleagues consider me to be a strict disciplinarian. I teach difficult students willingly, and feel fairly confident that I can work effectively with them, and a recent Ofsted inspection reinforced this

confidence. In spite of this feeling of confidence, I began to reappraise my teaching shortly after involvement with NASC. I am convinced that my involvement has made me a better teacher. I was concerned nevertheless that some students may not feel safe with me. This was quite disconcerting, having previously believed that I had a good relationship with students. I am disturbed to think that some students I have taught may have been afraid of me. I am still struggling to come to terms with this.

To research or not to research? One school's story

Before my involvement in cross-school research activity with the NASC Project, one aspect of my involvement in the NASC project had been to ascertain the views of colleagues within my own school on school based research activity. Being aware that not all my colleagues necessarily shared the same perceptions and experiences of NASC, I tried to find out what others felt about the project, why colleagues either did, or did not get involved, and for those that like myself, who had chosen to get involved, what they felt they had got out of their involvement in NASC.

Twelve staff were asked why they became involved or didn't become involved with the NASC project. Six had been involved in various degrees and six had not. The interviews were semi-structured and took place in the staff-room at breaks or mutually free periods. The sample attempted to represent all levels of the staff hierarchy. There was a member of the Senior Management Team, two Heads of Curriculum Area, three Heads of Department and six classroom teachers. Four of the teachers were female (one of whom was a Curriculum Area Manager, and one a Head of Department).

Summary extracts from the responses are listed in the tables below.

Table 1: Teachers who had chosen to be involved in the NASC project:

- Interested in extending knowledge about students' behaviour.
- Expedient way to sneak in curriculum development I wanted to make – a non-threatening way of introducing change.
- Part of the school culture- the history of research work in the school is well established.
- I was asked.
- An opportunity not to be missed/ a chance to do something!
- Relationship with co-ordinator – mutual respect for each other.
- Interested in improving the department.
- Had a shitty Y10 group – wanted to know how to cope.
- Previous experience of working with one of the UEA mentors.
- By association – NETS project and Cambridge Institute.
- A progression – I believe you learn a lot more from your own research than any other.
- To benefit students.

Table 2: Teachers who had chosen not to involve themselves in the project:

- Interests are elsewhere – e.g. A levels.
- Went to first session, felt I wasn't listened to so didn't bother returning.
- Uncertain about outcomes.
- Cynical about educational research of this kind.
- Sociological research in Education is good but my impression was that NASC was non sociological & therefore I question the validity of any findings.
- No time – taking on something extra was difficult to justify.
- Already committed to too many meetings – need others like a hole in the head.
- Don't know what NASC is.
- Don't need to improve my C.V.

Finally the staff were asked about the ‘school effect’ on their decision, i.e. the ways in which the climate, culture and personnel within the school might have impacted on their decision as to whether to commit to the project. There were several staff who appeared uncomfortable in answering this question – I do not know why.

Table 3: Institutional factors influencing attitude to involvement in NASC

- Supported by the school’s NASC co-ordinator.
- Somebody here with nothing much else to do and therefore the matter is pushed.
- Some staff are responsive to new initiatives – difficult to say why.
- Staff enthusiasm to meet new challenges.
- Time available to become involved.
- Interest in certain topics/areas.
- Can’t really say.
- Lots of committed teachers at this school & this shows itself in many ways, NASC being one of them.
- Good exams results and a spur for self analysis & the desire to improve.
- Discipline is not good in this school.
- Staff are prepared to try and find answers themselves to matters that concern them in this school.
- Some schools can’t cope with the expression of ideas about misbehaviour publicly (even amongst our own staff).
- SMT involvement lends credibility which in turn gives enthusiasm and momentum.
- Regular meetings with full and frank discussion where all are equal.
- Self perpetuating – lots of overlap.
- School has a good reputation within the community, knows it has some problems and wants to do something to address the issues.
- Large school with a large number of staff.
- All staff are involved in something – very few opt out and this is how I feel it should be.
- We are a staff that care.
- Teachers involved in research should have time off teaching to do the job properly and report back to rest of staff on their findings.
- Open management style of the SMT encourages all staff to become involved.
- A sense of being involved in something useful – possibly even with a little kudos.
- The Headmaster has always extended boundaries to be innovative.
- Particularly caring and stable staff who are loyal to the school.
- Selfish issues where staff select, therefore lots of vested interest and ownership
- The structure and management of the school lets us become involved if we want to.

Involvement in the cross-school dimensions of the NASC project, (both in terms of meetings and cross-school research initiatives), brought about an awareness that just as there were different attitudes to teacher research within the school, there were also significant differences between the various schools involved in the NASC project, particularly with regard to the extent to which teachers engaged with NASC research.

The next phase of our research was to consider the ‘school effect’ of engagement in practitioner research, by looking at the response to the NASC Project across all the schools in the consortium.

To research or not to research? The consortium as a whole

Data on the extent to which teachers in the various schools engaged with the NASC project, and the views of those who did get involved with research was gained through interviews with 47 participants in the summer of 1999. Further interviews with seven school research coordinators, and six university based research mentors were conducted in the summer of 2000. Respondents were asked about the breadth and depth of engagement with NASC in their school, about their explanation for the varied response to NASC between Norwich

schools, about why they felt staff had chosen to become involved (or not involved) in their own school, and about teachers' attitudes to engagement with NASC- what did they feel they had got out of engagement in classroom research on disaffection, if anything?

From the inception of the project, two high schools declined involvement in the project, not responding to invitations to attend initial NASC meetings. Another high school was involved in initial pilot research into disaffection, but subsequently decided to pursue their research agenda through an alternative research project with another higher education institution, 'Alternatives to Exclusion.' Another high school which was initially involved dropped out of the project after going into 'special measures', feeling that action to get out of special measures had to be the school's immediate priority. Another school which went into, and emerged from, special measures during the course of the project, stayed with the NASC project throughout.

In the view of the research coordinators and the research mentors from the university, there were at least four schools where the profile of the NASC project was sufficiently high for all staff to be aware of the project. The university research mentor for one school felt that 'even the caretaker would know what the NASC project was.' At another school, one respondent felt that 'Individuals are interested in it, but I would say that you could speak to 70% of the staff in this school, and say 'What does NASC mean to you?', and they would say, 'What is NASC?', which is a shame.'

In one school, over 20 teachers were actively involved with research activities over the span of the project, with 'about 18/19' teachers attending a meeting with a view to pursuing research fellowships stemming from the DfEE practitioner research initiative. In five other schools, there was a small but committed number of teachers (ranging from 3 to about a dozen) who were actively involved in classroom research, and who produced research reports for the project. In all, 6 schools were to at least some extent involved in cross-school projects. One of the high points of the project was a well attended one day conference in May 2000, sponsored by the Local Education Authority, where approximately 20 research reports were disseminated to Norfolk teachers, from schools within and outside NASC.

The impact of NASC on Norwich Area schools was therefore very variable. In one school in particular, a substantial proportion of the staff were actively engaged with classroom research, both within the school itself, and in several cross-school projects related to disaffection. At the other end of the spectrum, there were five schools where there was little or no engagement with the project, either because schools did not choose to become involved, or because changes in key school personnel, and external pressures such as Ofsted inspection diverted school priorities elsewhere. In between were five schools where NASC became part of the culture of the school, but where active participation in classroom research was limited to a comparatively small proportion of the teaching force.

Factors influencing engagement with the NASC project

- **Choice of research focus**

The choice of 'Disaffection' as the focus for school based research was seen as a key factor in teacher interest in the project. As one teacher noted in a NASC meeting, 'There isn't any teacher, or any school, where disaffection and disengagement from learning isn't an important part of a teacher's quality of life.' The focus also provided sufficient latitude for schools to pursue their interest in different facets of disaffection, from the problem of 'RHINOs' ('Really here in name only'), to parental attitudes to Modern languages, to the use

of the exclusion room, and pupils' perceptions of 'what makes a good lesson?' One teacher commented:

I was very attracted by the fact that (the project was) dealing with disaffection and underachievement, and I said to J. at the time, particularly dealing with disaffection and underachievement in quite able children, not those who one immediately thinks of as disaffected, but those who simply seem to be drifting through and not achieving what they are really capable of, was something that was worth doing a bit of research into.

This direct relevance of the area to be researched was mentioned by several teachers as a factor which influenced their commitment to NASC; 'It needs to address directly issues that can provide a benefit. Some research can be somewhat self-serving.', 'It has to be able to help us move forward.' (Respondents from 1999 interviews).

- **External pressures- 'Special Measures' and Ofsted/HMI inspection**

A tentative hypothesis advanced by more than one of the university based research mentors was that if the school was in a strong or at least 'comfortable' position with regard to previous Ofsted inspection, conditions were more propitious for teacher involvement in classroom research, with teachers being considered less likely to be preoccupied with 'looking over their shoulders' for the next Ofsted inspection.

The data on NASC involvement obtained through the research coordinators indicated that although there may have been some truth in this hypothesis, in that 'Ofsted' was widely cited by teachers as a reason for deferring or eschewing research activity, there was not a straightforward relationship; one school which was in difficult circumstances maintained a widespread staff interest in NASC, with whole school meetings focusing on the project, others in 'the comfort zone', had only tangential involvement throughout the three years of the project.

At the school which went into, and emerged from, special measures during the course of the project, the research coordinator at the school noted that the onerous administrative requirements of being in special measures meant that practitioner research had to 'go on the backburner', during the period when the school was subject to a succession of HMI and Ofsted inspections: 'You just couldn't ask staff to do any more.' During the period in special measures, HMI questioned the school's commitment to the project, and the research coordinator's part-time secondment to work at the university was abruptly revoked by the headteacher in response to this feedback. The school's initial involvement in NASC, as a school 'with serious weaknesses' was also initially called into question by the TTA, but strong support for the school's involvement, from the other schools involved, and from the university, was enough to persuade the TTA that the school should retain its place in the consortium.

- **The commitment of the head and senior management team**

This was mentioned as a major factor by almost all respondents. This was not just in terms of initial involvement, but in nurturing and sustaining the project in the face of competing initiatives, and continuing to give it priority over the period of the project. Some respondents felt that in one school, the decision to pursue specialist school status diverted attention away from the NASC project, and focused energies elsewhere, in spite of general staff interest in some of the findings of early research initiatives in the school.

Direct personal involvement of the head, in terms of presence at NASC meetings, reporting back to staff on NASC developments, and the enthusiasm with which they referred to NASC, was also seen as a factor which had an influence on teachers' attitude to involvement in classroom research. One respondent from a school where staff 'take-up' of involvement in NASC was limited noted 'It's not a priority. It's noticeable that several of the reports and possibly in a sense some of the more informed research comes from a school where the head can be perceived to have a big investment in this system working, and I think that that is reflected in the quality of the research that is being done in the school. One research mentor noted that 'where responsibility was just passed over to the research coordinator, the project did not take hold as successfully in the school.' As well as the motivational and promotional role of the head and senior management team, at a purely practical level, several respondents mentioned that commitment from the top meant that at crucial points, time might be provided in the form of a protected non-contact period to write up reports, or an afternoon to attend a meeting or conference.

The secondment of a head involved in the NASC project to take temporary responsibility for another school was also felt to have had a negative impact on the momentum of the NASC project, and a change in headship at two other schools resulted in withdrawal from the project in one instance, and a six to nine month 'moratorium' at another. Stability of 'key school personnel' was deemed by some research mentors to be a factor influencing sustained momentum for the project.

A point which was made by more than one respondent was that management 'skill' in introducing and nurturing NASC was as important as commitment. Enthusiasm, collegiality, and the creation of what Elliott (2000) terms, 'an open and equal forum' for the discussion of issues emerging from classroom research on disaffection, were seen as qualifying caveats for positive management commitment to the NASC project. A university based research mentors who worked on projects from several schools felt that:

NASC had to fit in with the school's development plan and general priorities for it to take off successfully, and in addition to senior management team commitment, it needed motivational and organisational skills to sustain momentum- clout, charisma and management skills. Otherwise it was fragmented; a few individuals, using NASC to pursue their continuing professional development interests- doing their own thing.

Several respondents remarked on the positive effect of being offered a choice in terms of areas of disaffection to focus on, whether it be subject specific, or involving able, coasting or disruptive pupils, rather than being 'allocated' to a particular facet of disaffection.

- **The role of the school research coordinator**

This was mentioned by only one of the research coordinators when they were interviewed. This is perhaps unsurprising, since in most cases, there was only one coordinator per school for the length of the project, and thus, limited awareness of the different *modus operandi* which research coordinators might adapt. The role of the school coordinator did figure prominently however, in the responses of research mentors from the university, where the choice of coordinator was seen to be almost as important as the commitment of the headteacher. In the case of the research coordinator, commitment and forcefulness were regarded as less important than interpersonal skills, supportiveness and a willingness to let

those interested pursue their own lines of enquiry. 'Likeability, and general professional respect' were thought to be more significant qualities by one research mentor. Another attributed the success of NASC in one school to the fact that the research coordinator at the school was 'very open, gets on well with everyone.' Another felt that the 'involvement of strong, charismatic personalities could be double-edged.' Several teachers attributed their involvement in the project to the fact that they enjoyed working with the research coordinator at a personal level.

Personal relationships were also important in terms of links between schools and the university. Two of the heads had PhDs from the university, and several of the research mentors knew many of the teachers involved through their work in initial teacher education. One research mentor stated, 'X. was a former student of mine, it was a continuing relationship, he was unphased about having me in the classroom observing him.' Two research mentors also felt that in general terms, the project gained momentum, and evinced positive feelings amongst participants as the various groups got to know each other over the course of the project, and that the general tenor of meetings became more purposeful and relaxed over time. One research coordinator stated that the report writing element of involvement in NASC was off-putting for many teachers, but that help and support from the university personnel involved helped to overcome these reservations. The research coordinators also had a part to play in encouragement and support in the face of early reticence and lack of confidence. As one research coordinator remarked, 'It's a very brave person who will stand up and say to the staff that they are going to embark on a programme of action research.'

Tensions over involvement in the NASC project: time and teacher professionalism

Two overlapping factors in particular made involvement in NASC activity problematic for the teachers involved. Although the 1999 survey did elicit negative attitudes to educational research, (for example, 'waste of time, too much theory, not real life'), these were in a minority. The majority of respondents did see acquaintance with educational research as part of their professional responsibility. Of the 47 interviews which were carried out in 1999, there are explicitly positive comments about the value and/or relevance of educational research in over twenty of the transcripts. In only 2 of the transcripts is there a patently negative or dismissive attitude to educational research.

Against this, emerges a widespread concern that the time involved in researching one's practice, or keeping abreast of recent research in education, is less essential than other aspects of professional responsibility, particularly that which involves direct work in teaching pupils. Also, the time required to discharge these elements of professional practice is seen to necessarily limit the time available to either become involved in research, or to keep abreast of the research of others, although there is a tacit acknowledgement in some responses that researching one's practice is an intuitive and integral part of classroom practice, (for example, 'I suppose the great advantage of NASC was that what NASC did was to support us in doing the things we wanted to do anyway. It wasn't an imposition.') Comments such as the ones given below were representative of the attitudes of many respondents:

Table 4: Interview responses on the value of practitioner research

- ‘Necessarily, research must always take second place to the bread and butter of daily teaching, preparation, school working practices etc.’
- (Research is) ‘Highly desirable, but when do we have time to engage in it, or the resources to implement it?’
- (Educational research) ‘has value, but the time consuming nature of research makes me question how effectively teachers can become involved.’
- ‘I wish I had the time to take part.’
- ‘This (teaching as a research based profession) is an ideal. Actually, most teachers perform on experience. Theory has little place in the modern classroom, where growing bureaucracy and increasing pressures mean we have little energy for examining what theories may have practical effects on classroom practice.’
- ‘Teachers are under pressure to plan courses and deliver lessons on a daily basis. There is little time to reflect more broadly on educational issues and practice, but my guess is that most teachers try when they can.’
- ‘I think the difficult part is making it a priority. Because we are doing it (research) in school time, other school priorities sometimes take precedence.’
- ‘Basically, it’s extra so it has not been a priority in terms of.... there are other things that have to come first. The main constraint has had to be have been time.’
- ‘We have lost 11 staff in four years, teachers’ work rota is increasing. Next year we will all be teaching one more period per week. What is the incentive for people to engage in this kind of research?’

Of all the factors involved, time to undertake research activity emerged as the most prevalently mentioned problem, both at NASC meetings and conferences, and in interviews with teachers, research coordinators and research mentors. Many transcripts revealed a real dilemma in teacher responses to involvement in classroom research. Many of those involved felt that teachers ought to be involved in researching their own practice, and collaborating with colleagues both within their own schools, and within the consortium as a whole, but this was often felt to be at some personal cost in terms of fitting it into an already overloaded work schedule. There was a tension between their belief that the research might increase their insight into disaffection and disengagement in a way which could help them to teach more effectively and successfully in the longer term, and the reluctance to take any time away from their short-term commitment to the pupils currently in their care. Research coordinators reported that there was an almost universal reluctance by teachers to use NASC funding for supply cover for their classes, to free them to conduct their research, because teaching their class was viewed as a ‘bottom line’ element of their professional responsibility. The answer to this tension for many teachers was to use their own time, and what limited non-contact time they had, for their research, but this sometimes led to a sense of frustration that they could not get more done.

What did teachers feel that they gained from involvement in NASC?

Of the teachers who did become involved in some way with the NASC project, there was very little feedback which suggested that participants regretted their involvement. Almost without exception, those interviewed felt that they had got something out of the project, although there were criticisms and reservations; the conferences elicited more positive comments than the ‘business’ meetings of NASC; some teachers would have liked earlier, and more direct guidance from the university staff involved, and several respondents regretted that they had not got ‘further on’ with their enquiries. Although there were reservations and criticisms of aspects of NASC’s working and administrative mechanisms, the belief that ‘a systematic collection of data is fundamental to the... development of a

theory of pedagogy', (Gore, 1997) seemed to be reinforced by involvement in cross-school project, according to the responses of several interviewees.

There were outcomes which teachers had not anticipated; several felt that rapport with pupils, and in one case, between teachers and parents, was improved as a part of the process. Several teachers felt that they had gained in professional expertise and insight through involvement in research. One participant reflected that 'I'd never written a report before, I'd never conducted a survey, I'd never presented to a large audience.' Gaining insight into the process of learning, and factors influencing pupils' attitude to learning was mentioned as a key benefit by several researchers, in a way that was felt to be enjoyable as well as useful: 'It was really nice to be part of a group of people who were saying 'let's look at how children learn, and how we can help them to achieve.' Several cited contact with colleagues from other schools, and sharing ideas about common problems, as benefits of participation in NASC.

The most common positive strands in the responses however, was the interest, enjoyment and fulfilment that teachers had derived from the *process* of engagement in classroom research, rather than instrumental gains in the classroom as a product of the research. Two of the head teachers involved noted that teachers were much more interested in their own research, than that generated externally, and that the process of engagement in research had been what had made teachers feel positive about their involvement. One head remarked:

Some smart academic may well say that is rubbish isn't it? That they have done the same thing and much better. My answer to that is 'so what?' I think process is arguably more important than the product, and I think we should not underestimate the value of the process. (Quoted in Elliott, 2000)

Conclusions

- **The extent to which teachers engaged in classroom research through the NASC project varied substantially across schools**

Major factors influencing the extent of engagement with research were felt to be the commitment of the head and senior management team, the choice of school research coordinator, and enthusiasm and interpersonal skills of the coordinator, stability of key personnel, and freedom from 'external pressures', such as Ofsted inspection, and 'Special Measures.' The project bore out Macdonald's caution that 'no two schools are sufficiently alike in their circumstances that prescriptions of curricular action can adequately supplant the judgement of people in them. Historical/evolutionary differences alone make the innovation gap a variable which has significance for decision making.' (quoted in Stenhouse, 1975: 111)

NASC was one of dozens of initiatives (see for instance, Aldrich, 1999, Guardian, 5 April 2000) which confronted schools, and unlike some, an optional one. It seems inevitable that different schools will give priority to different initiatives according to their circumstances. The (understandably) varied response of Norwich Area schools to the NASC project is at odds with the idea that comprehensives are a 'one size fits all.... uniform provision for all', (Blair, 2000), and that in looking at what happens in comprehensive schools, we are 'comparing like with like'. (Marks, 1993)

- **The vast majority of teachers who did become involved in classroom and cross-school research through NASC had positive attitudes to their involvement**

Some teachers felt that the process of research had helped them to improve their teaching, their insight into factors influencing engagement with learning, and their working relationship with pupils, and that it had helped them to refine and redefine their research questions. (No respondents felt that it had harmed their teaching, or been completely without value or interest). Several respondents said that they valued contact with colleagues from other schools, and guidance and support in data collection and processing. As one teacher remarked, ‘One has not failed in one’s research just because one did not find the answer to the question one was asking. If as a result of research, a teacher reflects on his or her approach to, or style of, teaching, and can see areas where there might be improvements, then the research has value.’

- **Time pressure and teachers’ work overload emerged as the most commonly cited factor in non-engagement, or limited progress in research**

Both the 1999 and 2000 interviews appeared to bear out Stenhouse’s assertion that ‘the most serious impediment to the development of teachers as researchers - and indeed as artists in teaching - is quite simply shortage of time.’ (Stenhouse, 1980: 111).

Whether the DfEE, the TTA, or Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector for schools would consider the development of ‘artists in teaching’ as a major objective is questionable, but at almost every meeting and conference, and in many of the interview transcripts, lack of time to ‘fit in’ research, on top of other teaching and administrative duties, emerged as the single most important factor which limited engagement in the NASC project. More than one respondent felt that the timing of the initiative was unfortunate, given the many other demands on teachers’ time arising out of unrelated but ‘competing’ initiatives. In a sense, the initiative to develop evidence based practice in schools runs ‘against the grain’ of the centralising tendencies of recent years. This suggests that there is not universal support for the model of ‘the reflective practitioner’ in education, or for investment in evidence based practice in schools. A succession of highly prescriptive teaching schemes such as the Literacy and Numeracy Hours, and the Key Stage 3 Strategy indicate that there is a powerful view in the DfES and Cabinet Office that it is not teachers’ business to be engineers or designers of educational systems, and that it is their job to implement policies designed elsewhere. The NASC project was not, therefore, operating in particularly propitious circumstances.

- **Personal relationships and ‘goodwill’ between the various participants was an important factor in moving the project forward; more important than the reservoir of research experience that a school possessed.**

More than one research coordinator remarked that a positive and collaborative climate within the school generally, and between the school and the university, were helpful in enabling research to take place. There were times when teachers who were not involved in NASC had to give support or cooperation to those who were. Also, in some cases, it took time for relationships between school and university personnel to become easy and relaxed. It was felt that there was a marked improvement in the general ‘climate’ of working meetings as the project progressed.

- **Many of the teachers who participated in the NASC project reported that they found the activities they were involved with interesting, enjoyable and fulfilling**

There is very little evidence in the interview transcripts of teachers regretting their commitment to NASC, or describing it as boring, pointless etc. One of the research coordinators expressed surprise at the extent to which those involved expressed enthusiasm for the project to external evaluators. Several transcripts spoke of both the intrinsic enjoyment derived from undertaking classroom research, and the extent to which it had renewed their interest and enthusiasm for their teaching in general.

Given the current concern over teacher morale and teacher recruitment (see, for example, Spear *et. al.*, 2000, Smithers and Robinson, 2000, Times Educational Supplement, June 30, 11 August, 8 September 2000), it is possible that one of the most significant outcomes of the NASC project is the potential which engagement in this sort of activity might have for re-engaging teachers with teaching, and attracting high calibre graduates into the profession.

The provision of some time and space to engage in research more widely might serve to counteract what Lawton terms the ‘hothousing’ trends of recent years, where there is increased surveillance and control, with high anxiety, and reduced independence, autonomy and individuality. (Lawton, 1997) One aspect of the project was that it was entirely voluntary, and there was also (within the framework of disaffection in general), the latitude for teachers to choose their area of interest.

Graham (1997: 173) also claims that recent reforms and initiatives have reduced the potential creativeness and individuality of the teacher:

Teachers are being asked to become cyborgs, part person and part machine, with the systems thinking of technical rationality over-riding their essential humanity. Inspiration? No. Charisma? No. Enthusiasm? No. Belief in their subjects, curiosity, intuition, creativity, humour, playfulness? No. Humanity not needed by order of the TTA.

The recently appointed chief executive of the General Teaching Council has urged that ‘Education policy should be shaped in the classroom. We need to give teachers back their creativity and autonomy’ (Adams, 2000)

There is some evidence to suggest that the development of initiatives such as NASC, and the provision of time and resources for teachers to engage in classroom and cross-school research, might go some way to achieving these aims. This in turn might help to create the high calibre and highly motivated teaching force which is the stated aim of the DfEE and the TTA.

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