How do I/we help the students in Key Stage 4 improve their learning if they are in danger of underperforming?

How do I/we help the students in Key Stage 4 improve their learning if they are in danger of underperforming?

Introduction

On completion of Year 10, the cycle of analysis of examination results and prediction of performance in the GCSE papers for the cohort can begin. This enables the comparison of performance in these against national criteria[1]. The "average" performance at Bishop Wordsworth's, which is a Church of England Voluntary Aided Boys Grammar School, in this present cohort is 6.2[2]. In real terms this is just above a B grade[3] and, in comparison to previous cohorts at the same stage, this performance is marginally better[4]. Identified by this analysis are boys at risk of underperforming? The following outlines the methods used to enquire into the issues related to this underperformance and hopes to make some comment on their effectiveness in aiding improvement. The rationale behind this process is clearly illustrated by Simpson & Tuson (1995, p.3)[5],

> 'At the end of your investigation you will still not have demonstrated beyond all doubt what exactly is going on, but if you have provided some systematically collected information on what may be going on, and have advanced your own thinking and thinking of others, then your researches will have succeeded.'

This approach is based on action research as a method of enquiry to improve upon current practice. The process and rationale of action research for professional development is outlined by McNiff (2002, p.6)[6],

> 'Action research is a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. …… because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work,'

The research and reflection in this instance will be on the way in which I work and how I may improve what I or we as a school do, in order to raise the performance of the boys concerned. The research techniques used should have the aim of informing our practice to help strengthen the learning that is taking or is to take place in the boys' examination year.

---

[1] Based on the national points system A*=8, A=7, B=6, C=5 etc.
[2] The average points score nationally for boys is 3.6 & for all pupils 3.9. (See Appendix A, p.29)
[3] This compares favourably with the average GCSE points per pupil. (See Appendix A, p.13)
[4] The previous two year groups had averages of 6.1. (See Appendix B)
[5] Simpson M. & Tuson J. (1995). *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education.
[6] McNiff J. (2002). *Action Research for Professional Development - Concise Advice for New Action Researchers.* www.jeanmcniff.com

Context

I had to establish some criteria for analysis of the data on the rank order sheets for the Year 10 Summer Examinations 2002. (See Appendix C) A performance measure for GCSE's is the number of passes at grade C or above, five passes at this level being a recognised standard of achievement[7]. Basing my initial criterion for the boy's performance on an average points score of five, equivalent to achieving a C grade in all subjects, I identified those falling below this level. One had been a long term absentee and did not sit the examinations so was discounted[8]. To those remaining I applied a second criterion of the number of passes above and below grade C. One boy had only one grade below a C and on discussion with him it was decided he was not at risk but had performed badly in that particular examination paper. The other four boys achieved below grade C in three or more subjects and were therefore deemed at risk.

Having established the boys who were in danger of underperforming I decided to contact their parents and invite them into school to discuss the situation. The aim of the meeting was to agree strategies to help their sons to improve and raise their academic standards. (See Appendix D) The use of a letter to initiate contact with the boy's parents was in the hope of eliciting their support and starting a dialog in order to help their sons. Gaining the consent of the parties concerned, with the aim of having the boys present when meeting the parents, was essential for the process to have a chance of success. As Cohen and Manion (1994, p.349)[9] state,

> 'Much social research necessitates obtaining the consent and co-operation of subjects who are to assist in investigations …'

These meetings were to prove beneficial in three of the instances with the parents and their sons discussing the relative issues and agreeing on a course of action in conjunction with the school. The fourth eventually took place but very briefly at the end of a parent meeting without the son present. There had been a reluctance to come in and discuss the situation on the parent's part due to the situation at that time, which had improved to a degree. They felt the meeting might have a detrimental affect on the perceived progress.

---

[7] Performance criteria used in national reporting exercises. (See Appendix A, p.13)
[8] This is an on going situation being dealt with as a separate issue.
[9] Cohen L. & Manion L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge.
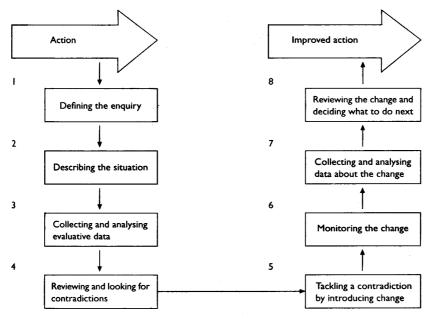
Methodology

Bassey (1998, p.93-95)[10] describes action research in terms of education as follows,

> 'Educational action research is an inquiry which is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate and then to change, in order to improve some educational practice.' (p.93)

He outlines the following eight stage framework for the research process ;

Stage 1	Define the inquiry;
Stage 2	Describe the educational situation;
Stage 3	Collect evaluative data and analyse it;
Stage 4	Review the data and look for contradictions;
Stage 5	Tackle a contradiction by introducing change;
Stage 6	Monitor the change;
Stage 7	Analyse evaluative data about the change;
Stage 8	Review the change and decide what to do next;

this is further illustrated by the following diagram. (p.95)

Eight steps in action research

An eight stage process is also advocated by Cohen and Manion (1994, p.198)[11] and McNiff (2002, p.14) [12], the latter follows on from the action plan developed by Whitehead.

---

[10] Bassey M. (1998). *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice*, In: Halsall R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, Open University Press. pp.167-178.
[11] Cohen L. & Manion L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge.
[12] McNiff J. (2002). *Action Research for Professional Development - Concise Advice for New Action Researchers.* www.jeanmcniff.com

Cohen and Manion:

First stage	- identification
Second stage	- preliminary discussion
Third stage	- review of literature
Fourth stage	- modification of identified area
Fifth stage	- selection of research procedures
Sixth stage	- evaluation procedures
Seventh stage	- implementation of the project
Eighth stage	- interpretation of data & conclusions

McNiff adapted from Whitehead:

What issue am I interested in researching?

Why do I want to research this issue?

What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?

What can I do? What will I do?

What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?

How can I explain that influence?

How can I ensure that any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?

How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

All three share the same basic enquiry and reflection process to promote change and strengthen learning.

I intend to base my study on these action research models in order to inquire into and develop strategies to aid improvement in the learning of the boys concerned. In my enquiry the introduction and context fit the pattern shown in stage one and two of Bassey's and McNiff's[13] models and this provides the starting point for the collection of data.

---

[13] Adapted from Whitehead.

Data Collection

Cohen and Manion (1994, p.197) [14] quote Winter[15];

> 'The action research/case study tradition does have a methodology for the *creation* of data, ... We are shown how the descriptive journal, the observer's field notes, ... are utilized to create accounts of events which will *confront* the practitioner's current pragmatic assumptions and definitions;'

Bassey (1998, p.107)[16] states:

> 'The essential tool is an 'inquiry journal', that is a note book. This is where you keep notes stage-by-stage as the research unfolds. It includes accounts of what you did, what data you collected, what thoughts you had, what conclusions you came to. It is a working document which provides the source for subsequent reflective thinking and report writing.'

A journal will provide me with a permanent record of the enquiry process; my initial feelings as events unfold can be put down and will give a reference point as I transcribe the notes into the final report. The instinctive reaction can be captured rather than the time altered view that may change as your memory of the events diminishes and your reflections alter to match what you feel should have happened.[17]

Target setting will take place in tutorial time at the start of Year 11. This will be based on the performance data from the end of the previous year's examinations. The boys will set their individual targets from the information supplied about their respective papers and then have comparative statistics for all of the boys across the cohort or from specific subjects.[18] Having identified in my context the idea of informed consent, Cohen and Manion (1994, p.349)[19], the target setting is strengthening the initial consent by co-operating with the boys in allowing them to identify the areas required for improvement to aid their learning. During the target setting process I will work alongside the tutor in the tutorial sessions in order to help the boys with the identification of their key areas for improvement. As the four boys who have been identified have specific needs I can concentrate on these, leaving the tutor more time for the remaining members of the group.

---

[14] Cohen L. & Manion L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge.
[15] Winter R. - Dilemma Analysis : A contribution to methodology for action research. Cambridge Journal of Education, 12(3) (1982) 161-74
[16] Bassey M. (1998). *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice*, In: Halsall R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, Open University Press. pp.167-178.
[17] Appendix E shows the enquiry journal at the time of writing up the enquiry plan for submission.
[18] Appendix F shows the target setting sheet.
[19] Cohen L. & Manion L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge.

So far I have looked at the situation and suggested a way forward based on the schools performance data and my interpretation of this information. The consent and co-operation of the boys and their parents has been gained based on this information but I feel to justify my opinion additional evidence would help. This brings in the idea of validity, Simpson & Tuson (1995, p.65)[20] illustrate this principle by saying,

> 'the claims that you make are more likely to stand up if you have evidence from a variety of sources to back them up;'

which they draw from the idea of 'triangulation' put forward by Cohen & Manion.[21] Validity links with reliability, Simpson & Tuson (1995, p.63) illustrate this principle by saying,

> 'with respect to the kind of data generated by observation, it is helpful to think of this term as referring to objectivity and dependability; that is to say, the extent to which any event would always be classified or described in the same way by the same person or by different observers.'

I will ask the schools Independent Careers Advisor to interview the four boys so she can evaluate their situation from an external view point to help bring validity and reliability to my investigation. During the year the boys will have to make choices regarding their post - 16 options, which will be partially informed by these interviews. The aim will be to help the boys identify and link the areas required for improvement in their learning to their future education.

After the boys have been interviewed I will meet with the Careers Advisor for a debriefing to compare our views on them. I will record the information in two ways. Firstly by videoing the meeting using a web cam, so I have immediate access to the information on my laptop for reference purposes, which will provide me with my reaction to the discussion on the boys. The Careers Advisor's views may conflict with my own and reveal possible tensions in our feelings on the boys. Simpson & Tuson (1995, p.52/3) show how well video helps to do this when they say,

> 'If your main interest is in observing your own practice, clearly video-recording is the only method you can employ. Many people who experience such viewing of their professional performance suffer a 'reality shock'.'

My views could be focused solely on the academic achievements of the boys where as the Careers Advisor should have a broader view based on her knowledge of the requirements for progression after this year.

---

[20] Simpson M. & Tuson J. (1995). *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education.
[21] See Cohen & Manion, 1994, Chapter 11.

The second method of recording information will be by taking notes on agreed areas of discussion prior to the debriefing. The schedule of questions will have common points of concern, which should help identify the best way forward for the boys. This should enable the feelings expressed in the debriefing to be recorded and can be used to counterbalance the video of the actual discussion, so nuances felt at the time are not lost by solely relying on the factual record.

Four kinds of interview are identified by Cohen and Manion (1994, p.273), structured, unstructured, non-directive and focused. The debriefing falls into the focused interview category, as I will be looking at a situation that I have knowledge of and accessing the Careers Advisors views from a subjective standpoint. It will be focused because we will have chosen the relevant areas to discuss but this will not be a rigid format, allowing for discussion of other relevant aspects to be investigated. Thus it will contribute to the validation of the research.

As a follow up to the debriefing I will meet with the school's Head of Sixth Form to inform them of the situation with regards to the boys' possible options for progression at the end of the year. If there is specific concern over the boys in terms of progress in their subjects a survey could be carried out using a questionnaire to gauge the current situation. McNiff (1992, p.78) outlines the appropriateness of this technique in action research when she says;

> 'In an action research enquiry, questionnaires will probably be used in an exploratory fashion to get an idea of trends.'

The nature of the questions will be specific to the work completed and level of attainment achieved.[22] In addition to these possible random samples the school reporting process will provide information at fixed times in the year. There will be a termly grade report[23] at the end of the first term and the GCSE preliminary examination report[24] in the second term. They will give information on coursework and examination performance respectively.

As a follow up to the preliminary examinations and report I will produce a more focused target setting sheet[25] based on performance across the year to help the boys identify key areas for improvement in comparison to their peers. This will be completed prior to the parents meeting in the second term, so areas for improvement can be linked by the boys to the report targets. This will give the parents information on how we are working with the boys, to help improve their performance for the GCSE's in the summer.

---

[22] Appendix G shows the questionnaire used for this task.
[23] Appendix H shows the termly grade report form.
[24] Appendix I shows the preliminary examination report form
[25] Appendix J shows the target setting sheet.

In order to help further with the validation process I intend to recruit two critical friends. McNiff (2002, p.22)[26] describes critical friends as,

> '…. someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light.'

The Headmaster and Learning Support Co-ordinator fit these criteria as they are involved with different aspects of the boys' education and know their situation. So they will be able to critique my approach to improving their learning and provide fresh insight from a position of knowing the boys concerned.

---

[26] McNiff J. (2002). *Action Research for Professional Development - Concise Advice for New Action Researchers.* www.jeanmcniff.com

Data Presentation

Simpson & Tuson (1995, p.68),[27] quote Anderson & Burns;[28]

> 'The purpose of data analysis is to translate the evidence into a form which allows the researcher to make clear and concise statements of discretion and/or association.'

To do this I will write the enquiry up in report form which will allow easy access to information. The data produced will be qualitative and quantitative.[29] The former will come from the written reports, the discussions held and web cam recording. The latter from the examination analysis and PANDA report. The format will be similar to the one used for this methods of educational enquiry submission but with the following sections;

Introduction	- reason for study
Context	- outline of situation
Methodology	- collection of data through action research
Data Analysis	- identification of trends seen in data collected
Initial Proposals	- from analysis a way forward suggested and tried
Review	- progress and improvements evaluated
Conclusion	- recommendations made based on research

Although this process is shown as a linear model, the methodology to review stages will form a cycle of research, analysis, and reflection as the enquiry unfolds.

I will support the enquiry with a series of appendices which will illustrate the data collected and analysed and also a CD with the interview recorded by the web cam. These should help to validate my enquiry research.

---

[27] Simpson M. & Tuson J. (1995). *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education. Simpson M. & Tuson J. (1995). *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education.
[28] Anderson L. W. & Burns R. B. (1989, p.200). *Research in Classrooms: the study of teachers, teaching and instruction*. Pergamon Press.
[29] Martyn H., Gomm R. & Woods P. (1994). *Educational Research Methods - Study Guide*. The Open University. (p.25)

Ethics

Hopkins (1994, p.221),[30] reproduces a list of ethics for classroom research from Kemmis and McTaggart[31] from this I have identified the following areas of major concern for my study.

> Involve participants:
> Negotiate with those affected:
> Report progress:
> Accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality:

The first two points helped initiate my research cycle for which this enquiry plan has been written. Having involved the parties concerned, I will continue to do so, in order to aid the enquiry, by reporting back to allow analysis and reflection of the process. Due to the nature of the enquiry which involves boys and their parents I will have to observe confidentiality with the information. This will include the final enquiry report of the process and use of materials created during the research period.

My wish to use video to allow reflection on my reactions over the boys posed an initial problem due to their age and having to deal with them individually at times. I had concerns over parental consent for the process to be carried out and their reaction as to why I was using video. Thus the idea of videoing the interview with the careers advisor, who was happy to consent to the process, seemed a good solution to the conflict in my mind. This will enable me to see how I reacted to the boys under discussion without compromising my position.

Enquiry Time Plan

---

[30] Hopkins D. (1994). *A Teacher's Guide To Classroom Research*, Open University Press.
[31] *Action Research Planner* (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981; p.43-44)

Tasks	Sept 02	Oct 02	Nov 02	Dec 02	Jan 03	Feb 03	Mar 03	April 03	May 03
Analysis of Year 10 performance data.	▓	▓							
Identification of the enquiry question.		▓	▓						
Enquiry Journal compiled.		▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Target Setting based on Year 10 results.	▓								
Tutorial Sessions taken with boys		▓		▓		▓			
Careers Interviews arranged for boys.		▓	▓						
Debriefing with Careers Advisor.[32]			▓						
Meeting with Head of Sixth Form.[33]			▓						
Subject Questionnaire on boys, if required.[34]			▓	▓		▓	▓		
Termly Grade Reports.				▓					
GCSE Preliminary Examinations.					▓				
Full Reports on Prelim Examinations.						▓			
Target Setting based on Prelim Results.						▓	▓		
Parents Meeting to discuss Prelim's.							▓		
Preparation of boys for GCSE's.						▓	▓	▓	
GCSE Examinations Start.									▓

Conclusion

---

[32] This debriefing is to be videoed to assess my reaction to the boys concerned.

[33] The meeting is to discuss progression of boys into Sixth Form.

[34] To check on the boys progress with their subject teachers and identify areas for attention.

Hymer (2000, p.62),[35] quotes Ralph et al. [36] for a definition of a gifted underachiever stating that:

> 'The intellectually gifted underachiever is a ubiquitous phenomenon, identifiable in all schools at all academic levels, but he appears a most significant challenge at secondary school level. He may appear in many guises – lazy, disinterested in school, bored, rebellious, unable to relate to teachers, or having difficulty with one or more subjects. Nonetheless, no matter what the appearance, he is generally a youngster who is not using his intellectual potential in meeting the academic demands of the school. As generally defined, the high ability underachiever not only fails to reach the academic excellence which his outstanding ability suggests he is able to attain, but also is found lagging behind the achievement level of students of average ability, or, at best, only managing to hold his own with them.'

This is the situation with which I am faced and the enquiry plan is an attempt to find out how, through an action research cycle, what if anything I/we can do to improve the situation and their learning in Key Stage 4.

Hanks (1998, p168)[37] states;

> 'One may be quite clear about one's values and intentions as a professional, but when attempts are made to articulate them and prove that one lives out these beliefs in practice, then tensions arise.'

I am sure this process will give rise to tensions, as the way forward one imagines to be the best route may not succeed as one hopes. In turn, it could result in alienating some or all parties concerned. I may find I have to compromise my beliefs in order to move forward with the process. This parallels Whitehead's[38] living theory in which he puts forward the idea that we live life as a contradiction when we do not act in accordance with our values and beliefs on issues.

Hopefully through this process I/we can put into practice the rationale for action research advocated by McNiff (1992, p.3)[39] where she says;

---

[35] Hymer B. (2000). *Understanding and Overcoming Underachievement in Boys*, in: Montgomery D. (ed), *Able Underachievers*, Whurr Publishers, pp.62-75.
[36] Ralph JB, Goldberg MI, Passow AH (1966) Bright Underachievers. New York: Teachers College Press.
[37] Hanks K. (1998). *Monitoring Students' Work to Raise Attainment and Investigate the Problem of Underachievement*, In: Halsall R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, Open University Press. pp.167-178.
[38] The theory was outlined in MEE sessions taken by Dr. J. Whitehaed - 02/03
[39] McNiff J. (1992). *Action Research – Principles and Practice*, Routledge

> 'The social basis of action research is involvement; the educational basis is improvement. Its operations demand changes. Action research means *action*, both of the systems under consideration, and of the people involved in that system.'

If this proves to be true then the implementation of the above plan, with the aim of helping the students in Key Stage 4 improve their learning and prevent underperformance, could be successful.

Looking to the Future

The enquiry report and this method of enquiry plan will be made available to colleagues in school as well as other educators, who may find the research

and method of research useful for their own practice. The nature of the enquiry will help support the schools pastoral care programme by asking and then clarifying how we improve learning in KS4. The techniques may be transferable to other Key Stages in the school and could provide a basis or standard for action in areas of similar concern. The reason for this comes from Dr. J. Whitehead's comments on my final draft;[40] he stated that,

> '….you are a knowledge-creator as you transform your embodied knowledge as a professional educator, into public knowledge in the course of your enquiry. So, in exploring your 'I' enquiry, you are bringing your embodied knowledge as a professional educator into the public knowledge of the Academy.'

He justified this comment by referring to Catherine Snow's presidential address to AERA in Seattle 2001.[41] These comments outline a process to rationalise and legitimise teacher research by asking for validation from the profession through circulation and publication of work, so its value can be assessed and credence given to the author's knowledge. When enquiries or enquiry plans such as this are written, they must be put forward for scrutiny therefore allowing the knowledge to inform and drive forward education.

References:

Books:

---

[40] Appendix K contains the e-mail Dr. Jack Whitehead sent regarding my final draft.

[41] "Good teachers possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching that cannot currently be drawn upon effectively in the preparation of novice teachers or in debates about practice. The challenge here is not to ignore or downplay this personal knowledge, but to elevate it. The knowledge resources of excellent teachers constitute a rich resource, but one that is largely untapped because we have no procedures for systematizing it. Systematizing would require procedures for accumulating such knowledge and making it public, for connecting it to bodies of knowledge established through other methods, and for vetting it for correctness and consistency. If we had agreed-upon procedures for transforming knowledge based on personal experiences of practice into 'public' knowledge, analogous to the way a researcher's private knowledge is made public through peer-review and publication, the advantages would be great. For one, such knowledge might help us avoid drawing far-reaching conclusions about instructional practices from experimental studies carried out in rarified settings. Such systematized knowledge would certainly enrich the research-based knowledge being increasingly introduced into teacher preparation programs. And having standards for the systematization of personal knowledge would provide a basis for rejecting personal anecdotes as a basis for either policy or practice." (p.9)

Snow, C. E. (2001) Knowing What We Know: Children, Teachers, Researchers. Presidential Address to AERA, 2001, in Seattle, in Educational Researcher, Vol. 30, No.7, pp.3-9.

Cohen L. & Manion L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge. ISBN – 0-415-10235-9

Hopkins D. (1994). *A Teacher's Guide To Classroom Research*, Open University Press. ISBN – 0-335-19065-0

McNiff J. (1992). *Action Research – Principles and Practice*, Routledge. ISBN – 0-415-09096-2

Simpson M. & Tuson J. (1995). *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education. ISBN – 1 86003 0112 2

Articles in Books:

Bassey M. (1998). *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice*, In: Halsall R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, Open University Press. pp.167-178. ISBN – 0335-19952-6

Hanks K. (1998). *Monitoring Students' Work to Raise Attainment and Investigate the Problem of Underachievement*, In: Halsall R. (ed), *Teacher Research and School Improvement*, Open University Press. pp.167-178. ISBN – 0335-19952-6

Hymer B. (2000). *Understanding and Overcoming Underachievement in Boys*, in: Montgomery D. (ed), *Able Underachievers*, Whurr Publishers, pp.62-75. ISBN – 1-86156-193-8

Articles:

Martyn H., Gomm R. & Woods P. (1994).   *Educational Research Methods - Study Guide.* The Open University. ISBN – 0 7492 3149 1

McNiff J. (2002). *Action Research for Professional Development - Concise Advice for New Action Researchers.* www.jeanmcniff.com