

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Department of Education

‘Living myself through others. How can I account for my claims and understanding of a teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas School?’

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Abstract

This Action Research dissertation explores, through an autobiographical account, the influence of an in-house teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas School in Salisbury, Wiltshire. It considers the potential impact of using a teacher-research group within a school and explores the potential benefits of the existence of such a group on a school. It considers how the writer has worked with the members of this group to explore the educational value of living through others. It accounts for the professional growth of the writer as he matures through his active interactions both dialogical and relational with other teacher-researchers. It also provides a brief account of how this group has developed and moved forward over the three years of its existence.

AUTHOR DECLARATION

1. The author has not been registered for any other academic award during the period of registration for this study.
2. The material included in this dissertation has not been submitted wholly or in part for any other academic award.
3. The programme of advanced study of which this dissertation is part has included completion of the following units:
Introduction to Educational Management
Portfolio
Portfolio
Management of Innovation
Educational Enquiry
Methods of Educational Enquiry
4. Where any material has been previously submitted as part of an assignment within any of these units, it is clearly identified.

S.A. Riding

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Prologue

'Living myself through others.' As I listen to those words there is an echo of them that reverberates around my head. I have tried to come to some understanding of what these four words mean: the sum of them together, I believe, is greater than the individual words themselves. I believe that these four words are the educative value by which I have been working over the last three years. I am establishing that through my own experiences as a teacher-researcher working within the Westwood St Thomas teacher-research group, I have been able to try and come to a greater understanding of my own practice. Fundamentally, I am trying to establish that the interactions between people have the potential to improve educational practice. It is these interactions that have the power to move educators forward as they are able to provide the circumstances required for meaningful reflection. 'Living' implies that the work is taken from something that is still in the process of developing. 'Myself' implies the nature of the autobiographical account that I wish to contribute to educational knowledge. 'Through' implies that I am interacting with others to try and aid my own professional growth and understanding of the work that I am undertaking, and consequently as a by-product, improving theirs. The 'others' is the sense of sharing and collegiality that encourages a growing of epistemology to aid professional improvement. Within the narrative framework of this dissertation, I want to explore my belief that the future I can create is embedded within the narrative past that I have come from: it is the sharing of these narratives, through working with others that will allow me to understand my present and future. I believe that through taking stock of these

past narratives, my own future may well be better. I believe that this sharing is crucial as it will help me to avoid distorting the views that I may have of my own self-importance. As you read through this account, 'Living myself through others' is the value that you should try and judge the effectiveness of the writing. Through my exploration of my part in trying to understand how a group of teacher-researchers is working I have tried to explore what I have gained from being a part of this group. My own strength and honour, I hope, will allow me to account accurately the pictures I have seen.

And so I wondered

'...Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p.8)

On Saturday 14th December 2002 a number of teacher-researchers huddled together in the winter sun at the University of Bath, along with Jack Whitehead and Sarah Fletcher, to finish off the fourth unit to be delivered through the in-house M.A. programme developed through the innovative links between Westwood St Thomas School and the University of Bath. The following is my story of how I came to try and understand the development and impact of enabling a teacher-research group to exist within a school environment and consequently watching it emerge within the heart of the school development process. It is the story of how I came to understand my own growth as a teacher-researcher. It is the story of my attempt to appreciate the moment in

time. Ultimately, as is the case with Gatsby, things turned out all right at the end. However, before we reach the end, I want to tell you what happened in between.

In order to help you, the reader, understand the importance and significance of what I have experienced, I need to tell you a story. This story will consist of not only my own thoughts and words, but also those of others who have contributed to my own understanding of what has happened. This story will emerge as a result of my own personal and professional development. As I start writing this I am at an interesting moment within my own career. The two things seem to co-exist; the role of my dissertation and my career progression. I am now ready, I believe, to take my next step forward, in to a Senior Management position. This story seems like the summary of what has happened so far: if you like, my own personalised grand narrative, or if you prefer, my last love letter before I move predominantly away from the classroom. Perhaps the words I commit now will echo in eternity and follow me into the future. The desire to write this account, to give a voice to it, is also because I am not the organiser of this group. My usual role, as Head of Faculty, is one of leading and managing. In this group I can exist and can have the opportunity to live through others: through their experiences and events in a way that isn't always open to me in my everyday role.

The use of story seems logical for me as a teacher of English. As I have progressed through my career I have been in the very fortunate position of being able to feel comfortable in the classroom: I have become very

comfortable with who I am and how I construct my own values of teaching and learning in the classroom. I have been able to establish a vision of what I deem to be good teaching. For me this is significant. As a younger learner and student, I was never able to relax and feel at ease with myself in school: my own experience of learning as a child was one of solitary learning: it was not an enjoyable process, as learning was done for learning's sake. However, I now feel, as I have moved through the early few years of my teaching career, that I am comfortable and relaxed in the classroom: I want learning to be an enjoyable experience for my students, which is something I could never really say as a child learner I had myself.

Alongside this, the learning that I undertake myself now, is an experience that I also want to be enjoyable: this I hope is a value that I am able to bring to the experiences I and others undertake: to put the fun back into learning: to re-discover what it felt like to play in the garden and actually get dirty and not worry about the consequences of it: so many decisions that teachers face deal with the bigger picture by necessity. In terms of the story that I will tell, perhaps it is simply my way of trying to make this experience a little more fun.

Westwood St Thomas School is a 13-19 Upper School on the west side of Salisbury. Salisbury has a number of different types of schools within it, and Westwood is truly a comprehensive school, drawing students from all backgrounds and abilities. The most recent Ofsted report for Westwood St Thomas School for 1998 comments:

‘Both the key stage 2 performance of the contributory middle schools and the school’s own standardised test data indicates that the student cohort, though having a full range of ability, is significantly biased to the less able band. Far more students than usual, in a comprehensive school, are significantly behind their age expectation in attainment at entry and many have a range of literacy and numeracy difficulties. The overall capability of the student cohort is well below that of a typical comprehensive school. Whilst all students are well cared for, many experience a variety of social and economic disadvantage in their backgrounds...’ (Westwood St Thomas’ OFSTED Report, 1998)

I joined Westwood St Thomas Upper School in September 1998 as a Newly Qualified Teacher just as the previous Head announced her retirement after many years of service to the school. I attached little significance to the timing of the two events, although some would argue that greatness must follow! However, the arrival of a new Headteacher from Bristol at the start of my second year was of such significance and direct influence over my career that I would only fully realise this three years later.

With this new Head came change. Even from my own inexperienced outlook on education at that time it was clear to see that staff seemed to have been crying out for a change of leadership that would be strong and creative: somebody who could take the school into the 21st century. With the new Headteacher came that required change: a focus on teaching and learning; a coherent School Development Plan; a fresh approach to placing faith in staff

to do their jobs; and ultimately, a desire to try things out. Indeed the first School Improvement Plan to be written under the new Headteacher included direct references to improving the 'Quality of Teaching' that took place and also the 'Learning Structure'. At the same time the Plan incorporated a 'Staff Conference' and 'Training Plans' to support the development of the school. It also commented:

'Part of the plan for improvement is for the identified management responsibilities for school middle managers to reflect a greater emphasis on monitoring and evaluation including classroom observation. These managers are being helped in this process through a programme of training and support.' (School Improvement Plan for Westwood St Thomas School, 2000)

The significance of this is that the Headteacher clearly was trying to establish and foster a culture of collaboration within the school, although at this stage of the development it seemed to only be perceived in terms of being a 'top-down' initiative, where middle management would monitor the work of those under their control, as identified above.

However, by the time the third School Improvement Plan had been written in 2002 the implication of teacher-research seemed to be reflected much more coherently and strongly. The Headteacher commented:

'All staff are asked to examine their own professional practice and to fully utilise the performance management system to bring about improvement. They are also asked to continue to set and achieve high

personal standards.’ (School Improvement Plan, Westwood St Thomas School, 2002)

Significantly the shift was more direct, asking practitioners to move towards being reflective on their own practice and being responsible for this reflection. A sense of self development seemed to be implied through this with staff asked to initiate a process of change.

The 2003 School Improvement Plan, although still in its draft form, comments:

‘The school aims to develop two closely related issues within their improvement procedures. It aims to be a ‘learning school’ and a ‘self evaluating’ school.’ (School Improvement Plan, Westwood St Thomas School, 2003)

This is significant in terms of understanding that the school at this stage of development has the potential to learn from within: that there is sufficient information internally held and developed in order to understand the position of the school at that moment in time. Over time, the school has realised that through staff effectively reflecting on their own practice in a coherent way, there is the potential to harness this and use the results of this reflection to inform the overall performance of the school. Mark Potts, Deputy Head and member of the teacher-research community at Westwood St Thomas articulated this idea in one of his own action research projects commenting:

‘Two examples serve to illustrate this democratic culture. Firstly, the School’s approach to the development of a code of conduct for

behaviour illustrates the democratic nature of decision making.’ (Potts, M., 2002, p. 6)

He further comments:

‘Secondly, in September 2000 I was promoted to Deputy Head with responsibility for the Quality of Learning. One of my first tasks was to develop a “Guidelines for Effective Learning” document. I was drawn to this task by the opportunities that it would give students to influence teaching and learning in the school, so making the democratic values more transparent and embedding in the school culture the student voice.’ (Potts, M., 2003)

I had a real intention to quickly move up the ranks and progress as far and as quickly as I could: I had always had built in to me the desire to be the best, whatever that was: this was something built from within. This was something that went right back to childhood. Prior to training to be a teacher, my first career had been in banking, on a graduate training scheme. This initially had fuelled my fascination with targets and progress and this was something that I still bring with me in to teaching today.

At the end of my first year of teaching I was promoted to KS3 Coordinator of English. I also applied for funding from the DfES to support a project that I had developed based on allowing students to take more control over their assessment. However, this was not successful as I really, looking back, had no idea at all what I was doing. In many respects, I had no approach or

structure in terms of working through my ideas. Also, this was completed in isolation. I learned that I needed help from others if I was to move forward.

Later that year, I was again promoted to 2nd in English so felt that my career progression was moving in the direction I wanted it to as quickly as I wanted it to. At the end of my second year of teaching, one of the Deputy Heads approached me to let me know that the school was willing to part-fund a week's tuition at the Bath University Summer School to take a module of my own choice. This reminded me of a brief yet poignant conversation that I had had with him when I was applying for DfES funding the previous year, when he'd offered to help go through the form with me, stating that he had some experience of research through his own M.A. I accepted the Bath Summer School offer, deciding that I wanted to complete the 'Introduction to Educational Management' unit. This I felt was crucial at this moment in my career as I was, as always, looking ahead and thinking of the next step that I would need to take and how I could get to it. The interaction here moved me into teacher-research.

It was at the start of my third year of teaching that the Deputy Head (Teaching) announced that the school would be able to deliver 'in-house' M.A. units in conjunction with the University of Bath. I remember an informal conversation that I'd had with the Deputy Head where he talked about delivering two units in the first year: one on 'Teaching and Learning' and another on 'Management'. This it seemed, fitted into the direction that the school itself was heading in: the direction of focusing on the improvement in

the Quality of Teaching that was taking place and the development of 'Management skills' within the school. Indeed the Westwood St Thomas' School Improvement Plan for 2000 refers to the importance of developing the skills of middle management in order to try and effectively influence those who they manage.

It was perhaps no coincidence that a new Headteacher had arrived and the school itself seemed to be changing. The first M.A. unit started in November 2000 with 14 members of staff, mainly from Westwood School, but some from surrounding local schools, getting involved. This first unit really stands out in memory as it was delivered very differently to other units that have been delivered since. This was confirmed in interview with the Deputy Headteacher responsible for originally setting up the group, who commented:

'...we were there with our note-pads and we waited and we listened to a degree we engaged and then we had to try and make sense of it and see what we could really take away and there was this sort of loose expectation that different people would be interested in different things to different degrees and one way or another over the period of those sessions having had some guidance on action research methodology that they would then be able to pick up the interesting research articles and search out some more research articles themselves and using this introductory session to action research then develop their enquiry...'

(Jones, S, 2003, Interview)

Each session was delivered by a different lecturer from the University of Bath under the umbrella of a different aspect of teaching or learning each week. Six sessions took place overall. The Deputy Head responsible for organising the group attended every session but did not engage in an enquiry of his own. This unit initially caused some real confusion for participants due to the number of tutors and diverse nature of content. Each member of the group didn't have anyone to turn to to help understand the concepts: there was a lack of a critical friend and peer mentor who could help individuals through and explain the methodologies and approaches to the projects. In many respects, people weren't allowed to live through others by telling their reflective accounts as they happened. When I reflect upon my work for this early unit, I do however note that I had a number of varied reading materials and a very broad set of clearly defined references to aid my understanding of the work I was doing: both in terms of the content of teaching and learning and the process of researching itself. Within this unit, the knowledge was imparted from University staff to teacher-researchers, and then those teacher-researchers went off to begin their real research work. This model of understanding and making explicit the knowledge that teachers have did not seem to work effectively as it meant that many projects were begun after the final session happened. Members of the group didn't really internalise and embed an approach to improving their practice; rather, they saw the portfolio as a way of gaining a qualification: they weren't living through others, more working alongside. The essence of 'living through' is that you are able to engage during a process, rather than simply existing alongside. Indeed at this point it is important to reflect on the work of Ogilvie, who will be looked at in

more detail in a later section. However, his work on cohort learning is similar to the work of the Westwood teacher-research group and he commented on his own teacher-research cohort:

‘First, the cohort must have a purpose and focus. Second, the group must be able to reflect critically on its own collective practice as well as on that of the individuals in it. Finally, the cohort must go beyond reflection to a compassionate caring for its members.’ (Ogilvie, 2001, p. 42)

These three conditions as described for successful cohort learning seemed to be missing from within the consciousness of the Westwood group. Essentially though, the dialogue that was created about this situation was the beginning of the development of a real strength of the group, something Ogilvie comments on:

‘This experience of talking things out, however, quickly became the hallmark of our relationship and the single greatest benefit, as reported by most members, of belonging to the group.’ (Ogilvie, 2001, p.42)

In comparison, later units were delivered in such a way as to focus on getting teacher-researchers to engage within the process of researching whilst the module was taking place requiring them to bring their work to the research group to share and aid the validation process of their claims: essentially, getting them to live their narrative accounts through others. As an example of this interconnectivity that was emerging through the group, Mark Potts commented in one of his assignments:

‘An English teacher colleague of mine, Simon, had seen the video at Bath and suggested that we might use it to give his Year 11 GCSE students an insight in to the culture of South Africa.’ (Potts, 2003)

Due to this lack of real clarity amongst members of the group the Deputy Head responsible for the group chaired a meeting mid-way through the first unit to try and summarise what an assignment would look like. Significantly, this meeting was also attended by the Headteacher who was not actively engaging in the process of researching within the group. The school offered support packages to help those involved: time to write up their projects off school site and the offer of proof-reading assignments to aid the structure of work. In one way, this was the beginnings of the collegial approach to the work of the teacher-research group: the sense that there was not a culture of individuality but rather one of sharing of ideas.

This was an important element early on: a Deputy Head that could respond to teacher enquiries and help to move people forward with their enquiries, working in many respects in the role of critical friend to the group. More recently, this is work that is done by the group itself as knowledge and understanding has grown within. However, the first unit was completed and the group moved on to its second in-house unit.

This second in-house unit in 2001, focusing on the ‘Management of Staff Development’, was when the real work began with Jack Whitehead and Sarah Fletcher, working through an Action Research model of researching. This built

on the work of the first unit but was solely delivered by Jack and Sarah. Again participants were researching into an area of their own choice. The choice of research question was open to individual teachers to develop, based on their own interests and perspectives. An interim meeting took place, chaired by the Deputy Head organising the unit and the evaluation comments were far more positive about this style and approach to the group. Comments included:

‘The sessions have been more focused and inter-related than in Unit 1, providing a more coherent basis for the development of individual research enquiries.’

And:

‘Tutor-participant relationships were felt to be strong, the style of tutoring being supportive and wholly positive.’

And:

‘Everyone was fully involved in the sessions; it was not an option to adopt a passive attitude.’ (Record of Interim Evaluation and Support Meeting for Unit 2, June 2001)

From these comments it is easy to chart through the beginnings here of the style of work and approaches that the teacher-research group built over the following units to establish a real democratic culture of learning and working within the group.

I completed another Bath Summer School module, titled ‘Management of Innovation’ in July 2001, to continue to accelerate through my own M.A. The style of delivery for this was very different: a greater intensity as it was delivered over a week and not the same level of support as the assignment

was written very much in isolation. In many respects, there was little opportunity to live my work through others. At the same time the style of the assignment that I completed was very much different: it was more about reflecting on a management issue as opposed to trying to improve something that I was in the process of doing. This felt very different. It felt, in many ways, pointless, researching into something that has already happened and finished. It is significant that at that moment I was still intent on focusing on a named degree of 'Educational Management' as I believed that this would help me to further progress and advance my own career.

In 2002, the second year of the in-house M.A. only one unit, 'Researching the Classroom', took place for staff, mainly due to the difficulty in finding financial backing to support the scheme. GWIST funding had dried up and the school could only afford to support one unit out of its budget.

Interestingly though, when the unit did take place there seemed to be significant differences within the group. For instance, as I read over my own notes from the sessions there is a greater sense in the participants sharing their work within the group; holding up their claims for public scrutiny and living their narrative accounts through others. At the same time there is a greater sense of each member of the group drawing on other members of the group to help develop their enquiries: references were being made in reports about the influence that the group has had on individuals to drive forward their enquiries in particular ways and how interaction and dialogue had moved forward their thinking and practice. For instance, Karen Collins refers to:

‘During a research meeting, in which students led the discussions upon assessment and evaluation, Mark Potts (Deputy Headteacher at Westwood St Thomas) commented “tonight has really made me think..and I mean reflect on what I *thought* was valid in relation to the students’ thoughts within the class” Simon Riding, a colleague within the research group commented that “tonight the group reached a new level..it has grown outside of previous expectations” (Collins, 2003)

At this point it seemed like a sense of collegiality and community was developing and beginning to be established. At the same time, a knowledge base was being developed within the group to draw on and refer to.

However, coincidentally, as a researcher it was helpful to have had this break in units to try and catch up with the number of units that I had completed. At this point in time I had gained further promotion and was now Head of English. The demands of this job were starting to make it difficult to balance researching and functioning effectively within my own position. I was becoming aware of how I felt, on reflection, that I was not fully prepared for this promoted role also. During the early period of this position I felt I was being too authoritarian with my leadership style: I wanted to become more democratic, sensing that this would be more me. However, I realise that I had few direct models or experiences to follow, of what democracy in education meant. Perhaps this was more so with working through Action Research as it is about reflecting on your own practice. Kincheloe provides an interesting perspective on this, commenting:

‘From the teachers-as-researchers’ perspective teaching itself is thought of as a form of research which attempts to understand the process of translating larger educational values into modes of daily practice and knowledge production about such practice.’ (Kincheloe, 2003, p.107)

To do this requires time and space which is something that you get little of in teaching. How far you allow the researcher part of ‘teacher-researcher’ relationship to infiltrate is a difficult issue. Action Research tends to open your eyes to the possibilities of your own practice: when you see the improvements and nature of your influence, it’s hard to withdraw the researcher within you.

Perhaps with other research methodologies it would be easier to wait for holidays to complete an amount of work, but Action Research requires an immediate response to, and thought about, the events and ideas taking place. Alongside this, in order to fully live through others requires the ability engage in dialogue and discussion, rather than isolation. However, interestingly at this point was that as the newly appointed Head of English I had taken over a department that had three Newly Qualified Teachers in it and a teacher on the Graduate Trainee Programme training. All three Newly Qualified Teachers registered for the M.A. via the in-house approach that we had at the school. I personally feel that this aided the department to really move forward as it had members working on Action Research projects who were really concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning that took place through reflecting on their own practice. It seemed important that in order for these members of staff to develop I believed that the route through the M.A. could

be useful for them: that it could bring something to their careers that perhaps no other aspect of school life could: I wasn't clear what, but something, I believed, could make things better, even if only in the sense of bonding or helping to develop the sense of collegiality or collaboration. Crucially, as I reflect, I believed it allowed us to live through each other, our dialogues and work, the experiences we had. Perhaps it could help alleviate the sense of helplessness that all Newly Qualified Teachers at some point feel. I used the work of Evans (1996) with my team, asking them to write their own narratives to share with each other, attempting to capture on paper the feelings and emotions that Newly Qualified Teachers were feeling. The results were cathartic and eye-opening. I believed at the time that I needed to bond and bring my team together, and I felt that the role of the in-house M.A. had a part to play in this. Indeed, in terms of Professional Development, this approach has been highly documented. Hargreaves comments, when discussing the role school-based groups of teacher-researchers have to play when promoting knowledge-creating schools:

'TTA-supported research will typically lead to internal and external networking; and such collective tinkering promotes knowledge creation and its effective transposition and transfer.' (Moon, Butcher, Bird, 2000, p.232)

Significantly, this echoes the Headteacher's comments in the School Improvement Plan of 2003 where he explains the desire to create a school that has the potential to take stock of its own position and create its own knowledge in order to understand itself better.

Towards the end of the academic year 2001 the school became aware of the potential funding that could be accessed from *Best Practice Research Scholarship* funding to support the following year's work on the in-house M.A. Funding, or lack of it, was increasingly starting to become a serious issue, as the school was desperately trying to maintain the premise that started the group where the enrolment on the in-house M.A. was free in monetary terms, to Westwood staff. *Best Practice Research Scholarships* were introduced in March 2001 as part of the DfES programme to address and support Continuous Professional Development in schools. Individuals or communities of teacher-researchers can bid for up to £2500 each to support small scale classroom based research in to issues surrounding teaching and learning within their schools. The individual members of the teacher-research group collectively worked on submission bids and all who applied managed to secure full funding to support further enquiries. The plan was to use this funding, in partnership with the University of Bath, to pay for two further in-house units to be delivered at the school. The funding secured the continued survival of the research group.

At the same time Wiltshire L.E.A. was really pushing the potential of teacher-researchers within the county and solidly supporting the work of teachers enquiring into their own practice with a view to improving the quality of teaching and learning that takes place. The L.E.A. had already financially supported small scale Action Research projects from teachers for four years but was now looking to create something more significant on a greater scale,

by developing *Wiltshire Research and Support Centres (WRASCS)* using the emergence of *Networked Learning Communities*, promoted by the 'National College of School Leadership'. The L.E.A. intended to create centres of excellence that could be real hubs of teacher-research activity where teacher-researchers could go for advice and support to aid their own development work. The L.E.A. Adviser commented about WRASCS, when launching the idea to recipients of research grants in 2002:

'...[they are] school based central point for a local community of teachers in all phases of education to promote and support classroom-based action research. The school at the centre of each "hub" is one that is already actively engaged in this work.' (John Croft, 2002, handout at LEA funding session)

The emergence of this strategy and approach supported in principle the work that was going on in the teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas. It seemed to be providing the visible support at L.E.A. level and also be providing a possible future direction for the teacher-research group to emerge and grow into, in terms of extending its span of influence.

I again attended a University of Bath Summer School to complete my sixth and final M.A. unit, based on 'Methods of Educational Enquiry' in the summer of 2002. I had also begun to formulate my dissertation plan. I knew that I wanted to look in some way at the in-house M.A. group itself and to consider the impact that such a group could have on a school and its staff. This seemed to link in with my own career aspirations as I was at this point

preparing myself for the next career step, which was into senior management. I was building a real interest in understanding staff development and the teaching and learning that takes place within a school environment. I wanted to understand what it was that made people want to take part within this M.A. group and how this type of teacher-research work could impact on a school. Significantly though, after attending this summer school I intended to adopt a case study approach to this work and completed my 'Methods of Educational Enquiry' report using this approach. Case study in this context I understood from reading Yin, and noted in my report as,

'...the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.' (Yin, 1994, p.1)

I justified this approach by commenting:

'Within this enquiry I feel I am fulfilling these criteria by clearly wanting to know how and why this teacher-research group works, I have little control over what happens and am rather observing the events and this issue of teacher-research communities within schools on such a large and sustained scale is relatively contemporary.' (Riding, Methods of Educational Enquiry unit, 2002)

Consequently, I decided once I had begun my research itself that I wanted a greater involvement within the work that I was doing. I realised my misreading of the teacher-research group at Westwood. In many respects I did have a

degree of control over the events that took place because I had taken on a role of being a more experienced member of the group and was being actively engaged by others within the group to help move their projects forward. Karen Collins, a member of the group refers to discussions she has had with me:

‘I have tested the validity of my own work by bringing my ideas to a more open forum, and by checking the rationality of this thought in discussion with my colleague, Simon Riding’ (Collins, 2003)

The sense of community that had been established within the group was created because members engaged, not because members sat on the sidelines watching. Ultimately, the value of living through others was explored: of actively engaging in understanding other people’s motivations to aid my own understanding of myself. This led me to consider the role of Action Research and Case Study as a technique for researching. The sense of Action Research and Case Study that I was attempting to embrace was emerging from my understanding of Cohen et al., commenting:

‘It provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles.’ (Cohen et al., 2001, p.181)

Indeed the meta-narrative of these comments will suggest to the reader the level of openness surrounding these issues. Cohen et al. further comment:

‘It is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events...chronological narrative...blends a description of events with analysis...focuses on individual actors or groups...researcher is integrally involved...attempt is made to portray the richness of the case in the writing up the report.’ (Cohen et al., 2001, p.182)

The judgment of the degree of success of meeting these criteria will be decided by the reader. Through reflecting on this the links between the self as teacher-researcher and writer and the role of the method chosen to investigate this issue are clear. The emergence within this project of wanting to try and understand the issues surrounding this case and at the same time to explore the role of myself within this process is driving the emergence of Action Research and Case Study as I seek to find the answer to the question I have posed: how can I account for my claims that I make? How can I understand others until I can understand and account for myself?

Indeed the Government itself through the DfES is intending to pour money in to initiatives to encourage teachers to look at and reflect on their own practice. Recent literature from the DfES suggests the strategy for improving Professional Development is partly based on:

‘We want to encourage teachers, as reflective practitioners, to think about what they do well, to reflect on what they could share with colleagues, as well as identifying their own learning needs. We would also like to encourage more schools to explore initiatives such as the TTA-funded School Based Research Consortia, ‘professional learning teams’, or something which is a key part of Japan’s approach to long-term school improvement - ‘lesson study’. In different ways these all involve teachers together examining specific lessons and their own approaches to teaching and learning, analysing pupils’ work, deepening their understanding of pupil performance and the learning process, and refining their teaching methods as a result.’ (Learning and

Teaching, 2001 DfES Publication, Paragraph 22)

There is a growing awareness and understanding that there could potentially be great benefits to the teaching profession if a body of knowledge could be built up from existing practitioners about relevant teaching and learning issues: more PGCE students are being encouraged to use their professional learning over the time of their course and to accredit this within a Masters' degree; professional bursaries exist for teachers in their 4th and 5th years of teaching to be used to enhance their professional knowledge; *Best Practice Research Scholarships* are open to any teacher to apply for to again enhance their professional knowledge; schools are increasingly becoming aware of the benefits of placing staff development at the heart of the planning processes; the DfES has implemented a 'Training School' initiative aimed at allowing schools who really do believe that they provide exceptional training to apply to be recognised as so; more and more schools are applying and successfully achieving *Investors in People* status, recognising their desire to develop their people and sense of organisation. This number of initiatives seems to be indicating a direction for schools and teachers: a sense that the responsibility for improving and developing professional knowledge is lying firmly within the practising profession itself.

through the pages of time...

'Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been at the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished,

and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p. 25)

As Nick looks out, across the vast ocean and sees one small thing to focus on, I hope I too can follow in his footsteps. As a reader, we engage in the life of Gatsby, living through him for a time, perhaps trying to understand and make sense of our own lives through this. Within the context of this dissertation it is necessary for me to explain the thinking surrounding a number of key terms and concepts relating to the area of my research. The following is the result of my searching into the relevant literature to try and inform my own understanding of the work that was taking place within the teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas.

My first reading into this subject began with reflecting on the writings of Plato in *The Republic* (1987). I wanted to consider what his notions of social organisation were and how these could possibly inform the work and understanding that I was beginning to develop. In his 'Preliminaries' section he discusses the 'First Principles of Social Organization': how societies become into existence. I was interested in his comments on communities and how these grow from within individuals. He comments:

'I accordingly propose that we start our inquiry with the community, and then proceed to the individual to see if we can find in the conformation of the smaller entity anything similar to what we have found in the larger.' (Plato, 1987, Preliminaries, Part Two, p.58)

This notion seems highly applicable to the way that I was conducting my own lines of enquiry due to his sense that it is important to consider the whole before looking at the specific individual elements. In many respects this was the focus and methodology of my own approach: looking at the group before trying to understand myself. This links further with the DfES approach to Continuous Professional Development, where it wants to consider the successful school models of CPD and to then try and replicate this further within individuals within other schools. (Learning and Teaching, 2001, DfES publication) Plato further comments:

‘And when we have got hold of enough people to satisfy our many and varied needs, we have assembled quite a large number of partners and helpers together to live in one place; and we give the resultant settlement the name of a community or state?’ (Plato, 1987, Preliminaries, p.58)

And further:

‘There are two kinds [of stories], true stories and fiction. Our education must use both, and start with fiction.’ (Plato, 1987, Preliminaries, P.71)

In terms of trying to establish an understanding of some historical context to the development of community within society, these comments interested me with respect to the applicability of them to the process of educational communities and the building of them through the use of storytelling. In essence it seems that Plato is arguing for a community that emerges once roles have been cast and developmental tasks been completed. This reflects well in terms of the Westwood group as the sense of community was only really established through the delivery of the third in-house unit as this was

the point at which the group began to service its own needs by sharing and collaborating ideas together: by living and engaging through each other's accounts of our developments as teacher-researchers. To take this one stage further it could be a result of this sense of community emerging at that point because the group then had these stories to tell: stories of past research enquiries to draw on and feed into the group discussion. Up to this point, past history didn't really exist. For instance, Karen Collins comments in one of her action research projects:

'This is a value that has been highlighted by myself in previous research relating to awareness and autonomy within learning.' (Collins, 2003)

My second line of enquiry led me to consider in more detail the more up to date thinking surrounding the notions of community and the development and understanding of it. I wanted to explore the ways that communities had been used within education specifically in order to try and maximise and proliferate a sense of collegiality and togetherness. I wanted to find out what it was that seemed to specifically keep communities together and how they tend to come to rely on each other as I felt that this would lead me to understanding what it was that kept this teacher-research group together as a collective. Stoll et al. comment:

'Learning communities know how to deal with and creatively take charge of change because they have a collective understanding of where they are going and what is important. They are open to new ideas and create new ways of learning and working to deal with

complex situations. Their cultures are learning-friendly, promoting and supporting new practices and creating new knowledge and understanding.’ (Stoll et al., 2003, p.132)

Perhaps this would indicate something about the nature of community present within the group: the sense that this community was able to provide a way of actually engaging in learning and using an Action Research framework as a way of solving educational enquiry questions. For instance, I, as Head of English, was faced with the task of implementing the *National Literacy Strategy* within the school two years ago. This Strategy demanded that English Faculties changed, responding to new teaching and learning methodologies. Under the context of the teacher-research group, I followed an Action Research based methodology for implementing it, testing out my claims and incorporating others into this work. This approach, I felt, would enable me to engage the rest of my Faculty in the introduction of a new way of working, thus aiding their support. This resulted in my Faculty being recognised as a ‘Leading English Department’ two years running on the basis of the successful implementation and embedding of the Strategy. My value of living through others became apparent: it was not enough for me to complete this unit in isolation, as I needed to engage others in the process and take them through the work I was doing.

As a further point of enquiry, due to my growing interest in working with other staff to improve their practice, I began to consider the role of Professional Development within education. I wanted to explore the definition of Professional Development to see how far the notions of the teacher-research

group fitted into the current thinking about how teachers improve their practice. In 2001 the DfES defined Professional Development as:

‘...any activity that increases the skills, knowledge or understanding of teachers, and their effectiveness in schools.’ (Learning and Teaching, 2001, DfES)

This very much provides an open approach to what actually constitutes Professional Development. However, perhaps more crucially it is important to narrow down the types of activity that could take place. Hiebert et al. comment:

‘There is a growing consensus that professional development yields the best results when it is long-term, school based, collaborative, focused on students’ learning, and linked to curricula...’ (Hiebert et al., 2002, p.3)

This sense of Professional Development clearly fits in with the model adopted through the teacher-research group at Westwood. The impact of such a model is that it allows teachers to engage in dialogue with others with the aim of gaining constructive feedback to improve practice. (Hiebert et al., 2002)

Further to this Sandholtz (2001) explores the traditional model of Professional Development as being usually distanced from the practice that it actually intends to improve and rooted in established knowledge rather than involving drawing out the professional knowledge that each teacher individually embodies. She concludes with:

‘...teachers appreciate opportunities to explore, reflect, collaborate with peers, work on authentic learning tasks, and engage in hands-on, active learning.’ (Sandholtz, 2001, p.828)

This seems to be supporting the claims being made about the teacher-research group approach at Westwood. Further to this, Sandholtz’s cautionary note that:

‘Schools may claim to support school/university partnership activities while they continue to emphasize traditional inservice sessions.’

(Sandholtz, 2001, p.828)

must be revised in the light of the Westwood experience. It must be argued that if the teaching profession is to value all members it must acknowledge that diversity can exist within it, so that for those members who do learn best from means other than school/university partnerships, they will still have the opportunity to seek these out. Ultimately, I am arguing for a choice to exist that teachers can dip into. The key elements are that it is driven from within the individual, it is focused on improving practice and it allows people to work alongside and engage with others.

As a natural progression from this I began to consider the role of teachers as researchers and the way that this role has been viewed by others.

Interestingly this led me to a paper called ‘Spectator and Actor.’ (Coulter, D and Wiens, J.R, 2002) In this paper, Coulter and Wiens argue that the understanding of what constitutes educational knowledge is not as important as trying to appreciate exactly what it means to be in a position of being a good judge of education. Interestingly there are comparisons between the

points made in this paper and the perception that I have of the teacher-research group at Westwood. This paper seemed to draw together a great deal of understanding of this teacher-research group. Within this paper the reference to Socrates being part of what he was philosophising about links crucially to the idea of the teacher-research group at Westwood being very driven from within by those who are in the position to aid its progression. The sense of judgement made is explored further in relation to the group:

‘Good judgement for Arendt is not a matter of objective knowledge or of subjective opinion, but a result of intersubjectivity; becoming a good judge depends largely on one’s capacity to consider other viewpoints of the same experience...’ (Coulter & Wiens, 2002, p.17)

In many respects this is defining the approaches being taken within the teacher-research group at Westwood: the meeting of the group allows the development of good judgement through the critical engagement of the individual members of the group with specific concerns and enquiries that others bring to the meetings. This is what allows the group to consider other teacher’s experiences, very often from other subject areas, and critically respond to it to move forward the thinking. For instance, the way the group helped Karen develop her understanding of how to bring the use of the student voice into her enquiries during a session on 23rd October 2002. This reflected in her comments:

‘My viewpoint within the research is now centralised upon the use of the students’ voice as critical to the validity of the entire research.’
(Collins, 2003)

In many respects the group is moving forward to the point of attempting to understand the nature of knowledge they are collectively producing, and how this knowledge can be accounted for within a relatively rigid academic tradition.

Crucially the notion of the story is emphasized in relation to the progression of knowledge and understanding:

‘Respecting diverse standpoints requires dialogue with other people, listening to their stories, and relating to their uniqueness without collapsing these divergent views into a generalised amalgam. A new kind of actor [teacher] with the requisite communicative virtues is needed.’ (Coulter & Wiens, 2002, p.18) (My brackets)

This point is further emphasized with a reference to Arendt, an influential writer on the impact of the Holocaust who commented:

“- how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told.” (Coulter & Wiens, 2002, p.22)

The influence and nature of stories and their potential to change and impact upon life and the events that take place within it are crucial when trying to understand the motivations and ideas of others. Within the teacher-research group the use of stories to explain, to justify, to celebrate, to exasperate, to confront and to engage with other teachers is essential: it is one of the major ways in which teachers use the time they gain away from crowded, yet isolated rooms filled with noisy children where they spend their day, to try and

make sense of the world they inhabit. For instance, Simon sharing his experiences with his Year 11 groups of how he has learned to understand what education means to them; or Toni, who was able to share insights into her own classroom experiences. The sheer demand to be heard is demonstrated in a crowded Wednesday night meeting, with teacher-researchers engaged in listening and recounting stories that have driven them to a greater understanding of their own self.

Connelly & Clandinin (1999) explore the use of narrative in great detail. They consider the role that narratives have to play within education and consider the impact of 'Stories to live by' existing within education. I believe that the narrative you are reading is able to fuse elements of Connelly & Clandinin's work. Essentially my narrative is attempting to be a story of teacher and a story of school. It is emphasising the fact that the stories told within this group of teacher-researchers are not marginalized stories, but rather stories that are central to the understating of the School itself: the stories told within this teacher-research group become the current stories of the School. For instance, one of my own earlier units, produced through this group lead the way for the implementation of an approach to whole school literacy; Karen's projects on 'Gifted and Talented' lead to the School becoming a forerunner in provision for these students. Essentially I believe that the M.A. teacher-research group falls between the Connelly & Clandinin's narrative landscape of 'in-classroom place' and 'out-of-classroom place'. I believe the teacher-research group is able to bridge this gap and bring together the positive features of in-classroom safety along with the developmental out-of-classroom

experiences. I believe that this teacher-research group has established a 'within-classroom place': a place where knowledge is creatively created about teaching and learning and has an impact on it coupled with a freedom to explore and tell stories that account for individual identities in a setting of safety and security.

Indeed, in order to effectively tell this story of self learning and discovery I needed to understand the notions of narrative and theory of story to try and understand how the tale I was telling fitted into the potential narrative of the educative framework and understanding of teacher-research communities. This led me to consider the work of Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in Organizations Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies* (2000). This text explores the use of narratives within organizations and how stories can potentially enhance the understanding of the functions and effectiveness of an organization. In many respects there are many narratives at work within the teacher-researcher work at Westwood St Thomas. There are narratives of:

- _ each member of the group during each session;
- _ within each assignment that is written;
- _ within my own research upon the group;
- _ within the school itself.

The layering of these complex narratives indicates perhaps the nature of the beast that is being researched: perhaps the sense of telling others of your experiences is coupled to a sense of wanting to validate your experiences. It doesn't seem enough to just tell; you need to feel you are really heard. You need to feel that your experience is being lived through by others in the room.

Perhaps the members of the teacher-research group are looking for that story they can tell, and others can listen to in the naïve and innocent way that a child might listen to a story from an adult, and members of the group can tune in to this as it fits in with their own value of appreciating others and their experiences. This in itself may also reflect in each member of this research community in their approach to teaching within the classroom: the sense of the democratic value of teaching and learning, which values the ideas and comments of others on their own work. Gabriel indeed supports this indicating about researchers approaching the use of narratives:

‘The stance advocated here is that of *fellow-traveller* on the narrative, someone keen to engage with it emotionally, displaying interest, empathy, and pleasure in the storytelling process.’ (Gabriel, 2000, p.136)

He further supports the sense of democratic values commenting:

‘Contradictions and ambiguities in the narrative are accepted with no embarrassment. While the researcher may ask for clarification of particular aspects of the story, the story-teller must feel that such clarification is asked in the interest of increased understanding, pleasure, and empathy rather than in the form of pedantic enquiry.’ (Gabriel, 2000, p. 136-137)

Indeed, this approach supports the view that the process of teachers as researchers has the potential to bring together learning communities within schools and the potential of valuing the beauty of the stories encapsulated within individuals within a school and classroom. Furthermore, the sense of the democratic value being explicit within the work of a teacher-research

group is paramount in understanding the importance of the sharing of the living educational theories that are embodied within the individual members of the group and that come together to understand a premise for the group's living educational theory itself. This is very much based on the influence of Jack Whitehead upon the work of the group, striving to secure a real sense of collaboration and community within a group of teacher-researchers that helps them to explore their own living contradictions between what they value and how these values differ from their own daily practice. In one sense the members of the group have their own unique and well conceived values that they attempt to live out and illustrate through their accounts, but on the other, the group as a whole has a set of collected values and I would argue that this is the tendency to lean towards the sense of the democratic educative value which is demonstrated by the ability to live this out through others.

As this was a story of learning I wanted to explore the links between schools and learning communities, to try and really draw together my understanding of what it means to be engaged in the process of 'professional learning'. The notion of a 'learning community' is explored by Moonen and Voogt (2000). They identify the characteristics of successful networks, some of which are used within the Westwood research community and some of which are not. They comment:

- '1. A teacher network should not be too big or too small...
2. Teachers in the network should be teaching the same subject.
3. Start a network with a narrow topic that is important to participants...

4. Make sure that the participants not only get information, but also bring some.
5. Teachers in the network must learn to believe that they can learn from each other.
6. An open environment must be created during the network workshops, so that the participants are willing to take risks.
7. Accept differences between participants in experience, knowledge and learning methods and make these differences productive.
8. Do not just start organising in-service activities, but develop them based on questions that arise.
9. Teachers in the network should have a lot to say about the topics, working-method, location, time and frequency of the network meetings.' (Moonen and Voogt, 2000, p. 298)

Point one of these recommendations fits into the framing of the teacher-research group; however the Westwood network has grown out of teachers coming together who teach very different subjects. In many respects it is not the subjects that bind the group but the sense of improving each participant's practice that guides individuals through. This rejects the second point of the recommendations but does address the third point: the narrow topic was the improvement of practice. The way the group has worked is that members have been encouraged to bring examples of their own research to the group for validation and engagement purposes so the process of learning has worked in two ways: learning from the input from the University lecturers and

also learning from each other who each embody professional knowledge. This encompasses point five of the recommendations. Crucially to point six is the idea of safety within the community network, where individuals feel that they can make comments and share ideas without the fear of being judged by the school Senior Management on this. When I asked the teacher-research group why it was they wanted to turn up to the weekly meetings many of the group had comments to make:

‘...it’s also a slight luxury I think having the time or the incentive to question what you’re doing...’ (Jayne, 21st November 2002)

‘...I think also ultimately we all want to improve our practice or we wouldn’t be here and you feel safer because you know other people empathise or sympathise because they want to do the same thing...’ (Kate, 21st November 2002)

‘...it’s been useful to have the group as a sounding board when you are developing a whole school policy or something ...to actually have a group that you can discuss it openly with and validate it with and get a response from people again in a fairly safe environment you can get some really good ideas from it again it’s so important to find time to reflect on these things and try and take the school forward and without this two and half hours on a Wednesday I find it very difficult to do that...’ (Mark, 21st November 2002)

‘...and I think another reason why I come is because I feel my opinions and views are valued...and that is what makes it safer...’ (Kate, 21st November 2002)

This group perhaps provides the stability and security that other groups within a school cannot provide. This finding seemed to be similar to Ogilvie's finding into cohort learning in Canada (2001). As the group has evolved it has developed to incorporate members that are at different levels of research, as indicated in recommendation seven: some members that are working on their first modules and others who, like me, are working on their dissertations. The evolution of the group has ensured that a potential future exists for it and that the community is beginning to service itself: newer members of the community are beginning to be able to learn from the more experienced members and the diversity of research interests is providing continual stimulus for the group to consider and evaluate. For instance Sally, Toni and Simon all approached me to help them structure their 'Methods of Educational Enquiry' unit. This dissertation has been read by Simon, Mark and Karen to help me gain a better understanding of it. The school's use of the teacher-research projects that have been completed, within the School Improvement Planning cycle that is taking place, is central to trying to establish a coherent and progressive approach to school improvement. This coincides with recommendation eight, which embraces the idea that a school has the potential to improve if it places the knowledge that it can create from within at the heart of what it is trying to do to improve. In terms of the ninth recommendation, this hasn't really been developed. In many ways the group has progressed to a less centrally run group from within the management structure of the school, to a more self evolving democratic form of leadership. However, the group still takes little control itself of the actual structure of the running programme.

Indeed the development of the safe learning environment encountered by the group address points made by Senge (1990) in terms of what team learning constitutes within organisations and how, unless team learning is seen as an important factor for the organisation, the organisation will not be able to function effectively. Senge uses the notion of 'colleagueship' as the way in which organisations can effectively communicate ideas and develop itself: this creates the parallel between this and the safety and security expressed by members of the group to explore ideas with colleagues in a constructive, safe and productive way.

It was essential for me to consider the role played in this story by other learning teacher-research communities and for this I turned to the recent work of Robert Ogilvie (2001). The reading of this work fascinated me for a number of reasons. I could empathise with the notions of and search for a 'we-ness' within the context of a continually bruised and battered teaching profession: I could appreciate the desire to be a part of something bigger in the hope that this would make everything better; I could touch the sense of hope that he wanted to be evolved from the humbling value of working within a community. There seemed a number of similarities between the reasons for evolving a teacher-research community within his context and the context that surrounded the teacher-research group at Westwood. However, in terms of methodological approaches to the research, whereas Ogilvie clearly was not as interested in:

‘...my influence and improvement of my own practice as I am in examining the merits of the cohort arrangement as possibly being helpful to educative practice generally.’ (Ogilvie, R., 2000, p. 36)

I am more concerned with continuing to improve my own practice alongside the examination of the merits of the teacher-research group at Westwood. I do not see how I could fail to come to a better understanding of my own practice through considering the influence I have had on the teacher-research group and that it has had on me.

Furthermore, the working of the research group Ogilvie describes is very different to the way the Westwood group works. There was a greater intensity to the group he worked with: units being completed over a shorter and more intense period of time, very often with the group working for whole days together. However, he does describe the impact of members of the group taking their work out into the community for public consumption. Within the Westwood group this has also happened: members have presented to trainee teachers; to other research groups; to Local Education Authority representatives, to name but a few. Certainly this took members outside the sense of community feeling that the group provides, but allowed the group to expand and develop.

As a further point on which to disagree with Ogilvie, is his view that:

‘In its published form, an action research report can be useful to other educators who are seeking assistance for a particular problem, but the

logistical difficulties of putting these people in touch with one another is daunting.' (Ogilvie, 2001, p. 52)

I believe that the real value of action research reports is vital in terms of understanding the knowledge that is inherent within a school community: the value of them is not in deepening the wider community knowledge, although that is to be welcomed, but rather the value is in the knowledge that they can give individuals and individual schools about their own positions. In many respects, these action research reports need to be a great source of self-evaluation and used to inform and direct the School Improvement Plans that are written within individual schools. This directly takes on Ogilvie's view that:

'The effort to create action research networks and communities to share others' work and provide both a research validation forum and a support group for members is a commendable step along the path to collegial professional involvement, but these collegial groups do tend to focus purely on the self-study of its members.' (Ogilvie, 2001, p.52)

The focus within the Westwood teacher-research group, whilst maximising the development of individual knowledge and self understanding, is also partly to allow the school a greater sense of self-reflection and evaluation: the nature of the individual projects undertaken demonstrate the areas of greatest concern for the individuals engaged within them and this feeds into the construction of the School Improvement Plan itself. Thus the community is not purely focusing on self-study, but rather on the use of this study to inform greater community structures and understanding.

I further began to consider that the role of a democratic value was central to the development of this teacher-research group: that a democratic value was what kept this group together and focused. I believed that through the role of democratic values, true collegiality was possible between professionals. I came across the Teacher Training Agency's leadership styles and characteristics work, based on research completed by Hay McBer. The use of the democratic style within this work is defined as:

'Building commitment among staff and generating new ideas.'

(Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers, 1998, p.80)

This seemed to fit in well to the ideas of the teacher-research group, as the group was showing commitment to the work and was able to generate new ways of thinking about School Improvement issues. Furthermore, this style of leadership reflects the following:

'trusts that staff have the capability to develop the appropriate direction for themselves and the school;

invites staff to make decisions affecting their work;

reaches decisions by consensus;

holds many meetings and listens to staff's concerns; and

rewards adequate performance and rarely gives negative feedback or punishes.' (Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers, 1998, p.80))

This style of leadership I believe is evident within the members of the group that participate in the teacher-research sessions. I believe that there is a democratic value present in those that participate and that the characteristics present within democratic leadership styles are present within the teacher-

research group. For instance, observing Simon teaching brings his sense of democracy and passion within the classroom alive: how he attempts to engage all yet establishes a real expectation and accountability with individual students for their actions. Mark's growing awareness and need to explore, through his M.A. units, his own sense of democratic values in his practice and leadership. I believe that staff are trusted, through action research processes, to develop their own ideas and solutions to problems: each member of the group initiates their own research project and works through it. I believe that the group does communicate ideas and listen to others, to help them through their own projects. I also believe that performance is rewarded through the successful completion of the M.A. units and that negative feedback is rarely given: only constructive feedback through various coaching and mentoring approaches.

Finally, I believe the journey has taken me to the point of considering the role of the Buddhist self in terms of the teacher-researcher to aid my understanding of my own sense of spirituality: my own sense of living through others. Through discussions with Jack Whitehead, I came across Winter's (2003) writing on this issue. Crucial to my understanding of the dissertation work I was engaging with were Winter's comments on the collaborative potential of action research:

'Firstly, the ethic of action research is not that of scientific detachment but of responsible engagement.' (Winter, 2003, p. 2)

He also comments:

‘This means that the relationship of the inquiry process must enact and model the values of the organisation where the inquiry is taking place.’

(Winter, 2003, p.2)

This I felt I could see reflected within my own organisation: the value of individual selves taking responsibility for their own growth is a value that is present within my own school. Also, a sense that the organisation, the school that I work at, is one that is looking to improve and move forward through responsible engagement with ways of improving and that improvement will mainly come from the knowledge created within the organisation itself.

Winter further comments:

‘But action research also insists on ‘empowering’ ‘democratic’, collaborative/co-operative relationships for moral and political reasons, i.e. to overcome a widespread sense of alienation, fragmentation and powerlessness...’ (Winter, 2003, p. 2)

I agree with this and the purpose within my own organisation could well be seen as a strength as the collaborative element of action research can aid a school to collectively improve itself: people working together and moving in the same direction as opposed to individuals working separately behind closed classroom doors. He further comments about the role of collaboration:

‘One of the key dimensions of action research is the attempt to establish collaborative, co-operative patterns of communication, in order to heal the distorted or inadequate communication processes that so often limit the effectiveness of professional situations and roles.’

(Winter, 2003, p.3)

and:

‘The source of the potential creativity of collaborative inquiry lies in the differences between individuals.’ (Winter, 2003, p.4)

This I feel is the true impact and benefit of teacher-research groups that are established within schools: the impact that they can have on constructive dialogue between staff. Crucially, teacher-research aids collaboration and co-operation and through this schools are in the position to maximise the potential of creating their own future through clear and informed inquiry into the past and present. Centrally, to pick up on the above quote, the value of living through others can establish the framework for understanding these differences between individuals.

to think of what I could...

‘He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life.’ (The Great Gatsby, 1990, p. 49)

Perhaps reassurance is one of the things we all yearn for: the reassurance that others accept us and our unique ontology’s. As I was researching within an educational institution it was essential that I gained the permission of the Chair of Governors and the Headteacher of my school prior to starting my research. I gained this through sending both an outline of my research intentions and research design, including a copy of my ‘Methods of

Educational Enquiry' unit which broadly outlined the justification as to why I wanted to undertake the research. It was essential that others who were involved within the research were also informed of it so that that they were in a position of knowledge about what was happening. I wanted the participants to be in a position to give informed consent (Cohen et al., 2001) regarding their involvement within the research. This required me to be clear on the nature of my research and sharing my intentions accurately with the participants.

I fully consulted with the participants prior to the interviews I conducted agreeing with them convenient locations and also indicating the nature of the research that I was undertaking. This was particularly important with regards to the interview I conducted with the Deputy Headteacher, when I intended to use parts of the interview with the teacher-research group. Before using this material with the group I ensured that I had permission from the Deputy Headteacher to use it: he allowed me to use it without requiring a transcript of the interview for verification purposes. However, the issue of confidentiality arose with this and I needed to be clear about the approach that I was taking. The comments that a Deputy Headteacher could potentially make needed to be checked with him to ensure that he was happy with this material to be shared. Cohen et al. (2001) identify the difficulty of researching within a school setting, particularly when staff are involved, as it is usually difficult to maintain confidentiality because it is generally easy to link responses made to individuals. The issue of informed consent is highlighted here as staff needed to be made aware of this issue at the start.

The design of my research meant that I looked at past portfolio projects from the Westwood teacher-research group. I also looked at the videos of sessions that took place during the M.A. unit, in an attempt to triangulate my understanding. I wanted to see through others' eyes: to read and listen to their accounts as a way of helping me understand my own account that I was putting together. By nature I was looking into the very things that are personal to people which presented me with a real dilemma. With the nature of Action Research enquiries they very often contain journal and/or personal accounts or responses to events or situations. In some respects I felt as though I was mischievously fumbling my way through a personal diary that I shouldn't be looking at. Great respect was paid to the information contained within the enquiries as they had not been placed in the public domain.

Arguably, it could be considered that the nature of research intends work to be published as this is the way that it can be validated or criticised. (McNiff, et al., 2000) However, the nature of the teacher-research group indicated that there was a safety felt amongst its members that they could say what they wanted during the sessions and really engage in dialogue with each other without fear of any management reprisals. I needed to ensure that I didn't interrupt this flow of dialogue by putting a camera in front of it. I feel that it was clearly important that I was a part of what was being researched: I feel that this helped ensure that others within the group trusted me to represent their views honestly, rather than being someone on the outside who was not part of what

was being researched. Cohen et al. support this view referring to Baumrind (1964):

‘...of the possible failure on the researchers’ part to perceive a positive indebtedness to their subjects for their services, perhaps, she suggests, because the detachment which investigators bring to their task prevents appreciation of the subjects as individuals.’ (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 59)

and the story of how we did...

The continuation of the teacher-research group seemed to be secured due to the fact that the sessions, over time, seemed to take on a narrative soap-opera frame. I refer to soap opera here, to bring this work to the present: to move away from Gatsby for the moment. The nature of the ‘must watch’ feel and safe familiarity of this I believe contributed to this. This can be identified in retrospect.

The Group of characters

The teacher-research group consisted of a number of participants at differing levels of their research programmes. Initially all members were at similar levels as the process of learning began. However, as the group moved forward in time a healthy fluidity was created as members left to take up other posts, some members left as they realised that this line of study was not for them, and some new members joined the group. Therefore, as the story

progressed it created a group of characters that were all functioning on different levels of learning: members who had different needs. If this group was to succeed it needed in some way to ensure that this fluidity within it did not create a weak structure that would cave the entire programme in on itself through becoming too diverse.

This is the story of a very unusual type of soap opera. It is a production team that doesn't have a leader as such: nobody is really in charge. People assume roles at different times, but nobody really directs. At the same time there isn't really a script writer: ideas seem to emerge from within the group and individuals are allowed to discuss these and take them forward to the production stage. The characters seem to remain pretty static, although at times there is the need for change to try and re-fresh the group. The set remains constant, as does the catering! The quality of the production is judged, initially, internally within the group and at a later stage by outside forces. This is the record, over the production of nine episodes, of that soap in action.

The plot synopsis

A group of characters have some concerns so meet to discuss these every Wednesday night in the hope that this meeting of minds will provide the creative stimulus to understand where the soap is going. By the end of the ninth episode, the characters have been through trials and tribulations, but still remain together: they have laughed and argued their way through potential

storylines and certainly discovered something about the nature of working together, collegially, to try and make things better. At the end, when all is said and done, there is no real conclusion, merely the beginning of the next collection of storylines.

Episode 1 (16-10-02)

Simon was having some trouble. He wasn't really sure about the type of soap opera that he was writing about. Was it the type of soap opera that you could get involved in personally: where you could really be a part of the characters? Or was it more one of those that you looked at from a distance? The plot – that was also causing concerns. What direction was the storyline aiming in? It seemed quite ironic to Simon that as the writer, he really didn't have a clue where the story would go. You imagine a writer having a real degree of control over events, able to create and control the narrative. Yet it seemed as though this narrative was simply moving along at its own pace. Jack and Sarah, the advisers to the script-writer, tried to let Simon know that this was expected: that the story should be allowed to emerge and let it tell itself. This lack of control didn't seem to go too well. Perhaps, Simon thought to himself, he needed to try and put himself in other people's shoes and understand where they were coming from. This required opening up. If he was really to understand the characters involved in the plot then he would really need to appreciate their feelings and emotions. Simon very often seemed to be the type of person that needed to live through others: he needed the outlet of helping others to allow him to move towards a self-fulfilling principle. An email

from a mentor to the soap confirmed this, exploring the potential role she could have:

'I am very much looking forward to the research mentoring this year too I wrote to Mark this weekend saying i intend to put BUTRN on the road to visit different schools and thus be hosted by our different enquiry groups. Phew - long message - just look at your inspirational influence on me! Thanks so much for making my working life so enjoyable!'

Perhaps by nature, during these early episodes, characters are left with far too many questions that couldn't possibly be answered by Simon. Indeed, Simon himself had too many questions that couldn't be answered. Perhaps, though, if it could be summarised, it is that in this episode the characters are brought into the setting and allowed to explore it: allowed to have some lines in order to explain the reasons for being there and provide a justification of their own ideas for existence: after all, all characters should really be justified! Perhaps characters have the chance to begin to develop early bonds and have social interactions that ultimately lay the foundations of longer relationships that will follow. Perhaps the 'courage to be', as a friend indicated, is a state to experience within these early parts, as the audience waits for something to happen.

Episode 2 (23-10-02)

As with any good piece of television, it all comes back to finance. This episode was clearly characterised by this as the opening credits rolled and the theme

music blurred out. Usually in this genre, kitchens are used for settings to discuss the lack of money and how then next bill will be paid. Finance always seemed to be one of those subjects that nobody wanted to talk about yet it was absolutely crucial to do so: without money, we wouldn't be there. Discussions, however, no longer needed to be about where the money would come from, but rather about how the characters would spend the buckets (slight exaggeration) that they had. How refreshing to be able to write about characters in a soap that have enough money, rather than basing it on characters that have nothing! So as they moved into the rehearsal stages he felt it vital to start gaining some footage of the scenes in action: almost like a piece of improvised drama, except the characters seemed to know their lines. However Andrew, a new member of the cast, did directly ask where he fitted into the cast. An interesting question: coming into an established cast cannot be easy for any actor. Perhaps the interesting aspect will be watching how the established members of this cast work to try and involve this new person into the series. Will hierarchy and tradition prevail, or will something more open and welcoming come in to play? However, an interesting twist did come out of the improvisations: Karen's introduction and discussion about the role of ethics within the soap. It seemed that some small 'paparazzi', some rivals with a vested interest in the topics that the group discuss, had been able to infiltrate previous scripts and look at the work that we were doing. Potentially, this raised issues of secrecy and ethics of what we were doing: did we have a mole in our midst? However, potentially in order to try and solve this issue we considered inviting the 'paparazzi', these little vermin, into the set, to find out exactly what they wanted from us and also to try and offer them some

suggestions about what they were trying to do themselves: we wanted them to understand us and vice versa. Ironic really, that we had taken so long to think of doing this. Ultimately, we were able to live through this experience from one member of the cast and reflect on it in terms of our own experiences. Instead of maintaining the 'us' and 'them', we would try and create positive working partnerships. This required additional planning and liaison and fortunately Karen had links with them, so she went off to investigate.

Episode 3 (06-11-02)

As the soap opera is progressing it is becoming a little more frustrating not taking part in the events that are taking place: it is almost like I can't decide on the role that I want to take: is it script writer; actor; director; or perhaps some combination of all three? I have been an actor, and find it difficult to switch off from this role. As Sally and Jayne improvised a scene for me, I was able to capture this on camera. Their ability, in a clear way, to parody the content of the soap was outstanding and in many ways a great form of flattery. In one sense this captured the feeling of the cast as a whole: their ability to interact and deeply understand the principles of what they are doing perhaps identifies their ability to be able to be in-role and switch to themselves with great ease. In many ways, the difficult nature of the job that we undertake needs to be littered with a sense of light relief: perhaps the beauty of the cast that I work with in this particular context provides this potential to let off steam? Yet within this parody, there exists this clear meta-narrative: Sally and Jayne themselves draw reference to the fact that I have a camera and am using it to record their

improvised scene: that I am trying to live through their accounts. Yet, I have not been absolutely clear in articulating what and why I am doing what I am doing. Perhaps I need to consider this: to let them know exactly what I am filming and why. Maybe this will interrupt the improvised nature of the scene? However, as other characters in the soap struggle to work through their lines, the rest of the cast is available to offer advice and solutions: this in itself does make me wonder as to whether or not this group is now self-sufficient. It certainly seems to be pulling together to ensure that work is completed. Perhaps I now need to be more open with them: be clearer as to why I point the camera every week.

Episode 4 (13-11-02)

Jayne this week had been encouraged to share some thoughts on the types of things that had influenced her to be the person that she is. In a sense, to try and explain the motivation inside that drives the values that she holds and consequently puts in to practice within her own classroom. In many ways this was asking the actress to really consider the motivations that drives the character to be as they are. This made me think: to what extent do I understand the motivations that I have that drive me to be the person and teacher that I am in the classroom? I tried to think....and think...but nothing really came to mind: nothing seemed to passionately drive me on. I needed to consult others with this thought. Perhaps, as I began to think through this discussion, what actually drove me on was the desire to live through others: to realise the impact and influence that I can have on others to help improve

what they do? Perhaps I needed to create characters and look at other actors and actresses to try and develop them to be better at what they do?

However, equally as important this week was the fact that 'new' characters may be introduced in to the series very shortly. Some discussion took place about the possibility of perhaps introducing younger characters in to the soap to perhaps bring in a new audience: to really try and connect with the younger ones. Within a very short space of time this idea had been passed round and a clear brief was put forward to Karen who originally motioned the idea, to go away and consider how these characters could be written in to the soap.

Considering the thoughts at the end of the last episode I wanted to share with these characters some ideas that I had of my own that I had explored with Stuart, an ex-cast member. I hoped that this may help to shed light on what it was that made this particular soap opera run and run.

Episode 5 (20-11-02)

Sometimes it is difficult to judge an episode solely by the end product: sometimes it is necessary to consider all the events that are taking place surrounding the episode in order to try and understand the actual events that take place on the set. Prior to this episode a great deal of work had gone on behind the scenes. I had prepared and completed an interview with Stuart, the original founder of the series who had since moved on to bigger and better things. I wanted to find out and then be able to put to the present cast the way that the soap had originally been conceived. I felt that there was something

missing from the understanding of this cast: a real missing piece in terms of the historical and social context that surrounded the importance of what was happening. I was hoping that getting in touch with the original founder may help the cast tune into the sentimentality that I was starting to feel about the work that was going on. Interestingly enough, the process of talking with the founder of the soap also helped me to clarify the point that I had reached in terms of my own learning journey: I felt that I could now walk alongside such people and engage at their level. This was a far cry from the early script writer, trying to find his way in a business that he really didn't understand. However, the discussion was had. Interestingly though, Stuart was in on this meeting with the cast and for some reason it felt different: perhaps there is some truth in the notion that once you move on, you should not return as things change. The freshness of this cast seemed different when placed next to the founder member: perhaps somewhere bordering on 'uneasy'. Something strange seems to happen when a group of people create bonds and security within and between each other.

Episode 6 (20-11-02)

New characters were finally introduced into this episode in the form of the young 'paparazzi' that had come across us early in the series. It's weird how characters are always slowly introduced: they may quietly pop up early on and then later be fully introduced as they are blended in. It was being planned for the last couple of weeks and they finally arrived: permission sought and granted from their agents. It was clear that in this episode the cast responded

very differently than they had done before: they seemed vibrant and alive and seemed to spark into life. The 'paparazzi' were introduced to the cast. It was interesting to note the reactions of the cast members to this particular event: some seemed a little guarded, as though they didn't really trust and fully want to be in this situation. Others, however, opened up warmly and engaged with them: first name terms were used, unusually. Certainly a test of any good script writer's ability is the way that they are able to smoothly introduce new cast members into a soap, so that the audience feels at one with them and they too feel at ease with their audience.

Episode 7 (27-11-02)

Whenever things seem to be going smoothly within a soap, something always seems to come along and upset the apple cart! Money, as the root of all evils, was the particular upsetting factor during this episode. This provided a marked contrast to earlier episode discussions about money, when the mood was jubilant and extravagant. Until this point the production elements of working within this soap have always 'been taken care of' by somebody else, hence not having to worry about it. However, in true new Labourite style, funding has now become the responsibility of each individual production company, therefore financially making each character responsible for their own funding. Because of this the episode was dominated by the fact that new systems were in place to pay for the use of characters within this soap, however they weren't as air-tight as they could have been, and consequently caused a great deal of friction within and beyond the group. The sense of emotional stress and

turmoil that such a situation can place on the cast is unaccountable: when other work should be being engaged in, money becomes the top of the agenda. Ironically, this time it wasn't through the lack of it, but through not being clear what the funding could be spent on. Interestingly enough, at this stage I was, as script writer, considering a change in the name of the script: moving more from an observational soap to a soap in which I could really engage in and perhaps play a role of my own.

Episode 8 (04-12-02)

Every now and then in the life of a soap there needs to be a little time for the team to get together and take stock of where the series is going: this was one of those meetings. It gave the characters the chance to air views and ideas that perhaps get missed during the hustle and bustle of the series production. It does seem that as the series progresses the characters become much better at articulating their ideas in front of others. They seem to have a really good idea about how they want to improve their own characters and the ways in which they think they could go about it. What perhaps was really surprising about this meeting was the fact that the 'big boss', Alan, came to it, yet engaged at the same level as everybody else. It seemed to show others the level of support that this soap has from the top: how people really want it to succeed and believe in it. Perhaps as important to me was the fact that I was able to articulate my own ideas: was given the chance to recount why I had become interested in producing a soap. This sense of reflection really gives

people the opportunity to create a greater understanding of where they are coming from and where they are going.

Episode 9 (14-12-02)

A small cast meeting took place today to try and understand how the narrative has developed over the last few weeks. Interestingly, this soap is coming to an end for this particular run and it is time to start to bring things to a close. Interestingly, at this late stage, it is still impressive how two members of the cast, Jack and Sarah, have the ability to still engage and draw out of members their own stories and narratives about the things that motivate their characters. Alongside this, Mark further demonstrated his ability to work alongside others and demonstrate his own humanity and democracy. Mark was having some concerns about his work and wanted to share them with the other cast members so that we could work together to try and understand the situation better. This seemed refreshing to those present and ensured that others took the same approach.

and the ways that I could...

It is difficult to actually understand when the starting point for this work was. It seemed to happen: to emerge through dialogues and sessions, both formally and informally. Certainly it has been influenced by a number of events and people: Jack, Sarah, the Deputy Head at Westwood, the Headteacher at

Westwood, the teacher-research group and of course, my own sense of and desire to understand my own self.

The solidifying of the idea to research in to the teacher-research group certainly happened some time during early 2002. The idea began to emerge as I began planning for the *Best Practice Research Scholarship* application. Over the following months I began to consider it further. During the Bath Summer School, whilst undertaking the 'Methods of Educational Enquiry' unit, I really began to put time into formulating questions and approaches to this work.

I initially decided that I wanted to consider the previous work that had been completed by participants of the teacher-research group. I wanted to read over the work that had been written to see if I could read in to it the types of learning that had taken place and to then see if I could chart this learning through the workings of the school and ultimately in to the practice of individual teachers. This I hoped would allow me to access the influence that this research group had had on practice within the classroom.

Early on I also wanted to focus on my own learning that had taken place over the previous two years to consider what the impact of being a teacher-researcher had had on my own practice and career development. I wanted to find out my own motivations and to see the types of influences that there had been on me as a researcher and also the types of influence that I could claim to have on others. Indeed, Kincheloe (2003) supports this view of teacher-

researchers trying to come to some understanding of their own stories of self prior to attempting to understand the impact of their own practice on others:

‘Thus, humans must understand what came before in order to comprehend the here and now. To understand themselves, men and women must grasp their own biographies. To change, to educate themselves and/or the world, humans must connect past injustice to present suffering.’ (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 243)

I began collecting my evidence by writing a journal as I progressed through the project. I used my journal in a number of ways. I wanted to be able to record the events that took place and also to record my ideas and responses to what was happening within my research. I felt this would be a valuable source of information as I came to the writing up stage. At times, however, it also just allowed me to pour out my emotions: for instance, my sheer frustration at the University of Bath regarding the difficulties of the funding of this dissertation. My journal also allowed me to reflect on the learning that was taking place and was indeed the record of my own methodology.

Crucially, as I began to undertake my literature review of this area, I have indicated how I was drawn towards the work of Gabriel (2000). He comments about researchers’ use of stories:

‘...that researchers who want to use stories as a research instrument must be prepared to sacrifice at least temporarily some of the core values of their craft and adopt instead a rather alien attitude towards their subjects and their texts. They must rid themselves of the assumption that quality data must be objective, reliable, accurate, etc.

and must be prepared to engage personally with the emotions and the meanings that reside in the text.' (Gabriel, Y., 2000, p.135)

In many respects this was the value and importance placed upon the use of the journal: that it was a research instrument used by the researcher to engage with his own emotions and feelings in response to the events that were taking place.

After the first Wednesday night session of the teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas I recorded an entry into my journal regarding the session and the events of it. However, I realised that it may be more useful to video these sessions as it would then mean that I could reflect on the events at a later date, rather than trying to write and record on paper what was happening as it happened. Hopkins supports this use of video to collect information, commenting:

'It allows the teacher to observe many facets of his or her teaching quickly, and provides heuristic and accurate information for diagnosis.'
(Hopkins, 2002, p. 115)

I feel that this was crucial as it then allowed me to engage within the sessions and take part in the discussions that were taking place, rather than having to not engage because I was recording my impressions of discussions as I went along. Perhaps this was significant as it then moved me away from being an observer of the group to being more of a participant-observer. (Cohen et al. 2001) The use of video allowed me to see the things that I would ordinarily have missed.

The use of video and the success of it meant that I wanted to try and get access to other earlier sessions from the Wednesday night M.A. group. I collaborated with Sarah Fletcher, who had videoed some of these very early sessions, to get hold of these tapes to try and review the work that was taking place within the session and to consider the ways in which the teacher-research group was different now to what it had been then.

I interviewed the Deputy Head from Westwood St Thomas who had been responsible for setting up and running the M.A. group from within the school. He agreed to have this video taped. I conducted a semi-structured interview with him. My decision to use this method was supported by Cohen et al., who comment on the use of semi-structured interviews in research:

‘...where a schedule is prepared but it is sufficiently open-ended to enable the contents to be re-ordered, digressions and expansions made, new avenues to be included, and further probing to be undertaken.’ (Cohen et al., 2001, p.146)

The aim of the interview was to try and find out his views on the teacher-research group and to try and get him to fill in the parts of the setting up of the teacher-research group that I wasn't so clear on. This method, I felt, fitted in with the approach that my research was taking: to try and engage others to tell their stories and to encourage them to contribute to the on-going narrative.

This interview also coincided with my first collaborative sharing and validation of my work with the teacher-research group at Westwood. McNiff et al. comment about the use of a validating group that it:

‘...needs to be made up of persons who are sympathetic to research, but who are able to give critical feedback.’ (McNiff et al, 2000, p.109)

My choice of the teacher-research group as validation for my work was based on the fact that they were researchers and part of my own research thus hopefully able to critically engage with what I was trying to do: I felt they would be sympathetic to my ideas and understand the implications of the ideas that I was putting forward. However I was also aware of the possibility that because I knew these people in the group their responses may be deliberately unchallenging.

I intended to use this interview with the Wednesday night research group, to see how they would respond to the comments made by the interviewee. I asked the teacher-research group to form small groups and to consider a couple of questions that I felt would help me to understand the motivations behind the continued success of this teacher-research group. I then took feedback from the groups and then played the group a couple of extracts from the Deputy Head interview, particularly focusing on the reasons why the Deputy felt that people voluntarily turned up every week. This I hoped would stimulate some interesting comparisons.

What had been crucial throughout this methodology was the opportunity of working alongside Sarah Fletcher who was willing to capture ideas on video from the sessions as they emerged: footage of discussions that took place within individual groups during the sessions that I was not part of. For instance, in the previously mentioned session involving the feedback to the

Deputy Head interview Sarah was able to get video footage of discussions as they happened. I felt that if I'd interrupted these discussions by videoing them that the dialogue may have been interrupted because people needed the space to consider ideas rather than having me, who may have been seen as a threat to the exploration of the ideas, intervening. Also, she was able to interview me on the spot, giving me the opportunity to speak openly on issues in an unprepared manner and to capture this on video. I feel that this use of video allowed me to become closer to the inner motivations of those in the group: to be involved in dialogues I was not part of. In many respects I was allowed to live through their discussions because of this.

The development of this role for Sarah was when she continued her research-mentoring role, working with members of the teacher-research group individually to try and forward their projects. These one-to-one interviews ensured the group had access to individualised tuition as well as the group learning that took place during the teacher-research group meetings. This element of the programme supported the view that:

‘Mentoring can provide a sense of being professionally at ease in a context of professional integrity and credibility, but such strategies need grafting on to a notion of professional support that advances both knowledge and practice.’ (Butcher, 2000, p. 101)

In essence this crucially returns to the idea that teacher-researchers have the capacity to further what is constituted by educational knowledge and practice by enquiring, with the support of their mentors, their own practice. Essentially this mentoring role and the use made of it by staff was continually adding the

proliferation of knowledge within the school and maintaining the focus on reflective practice.

Further to this, there has been a great importance within this methodology placed on the communication via email between the group. Predominantly, communication has been through this medium as it has allowed the group to easily access each other despite working in different institutions. Crucially it has also allowed the group to work with Jack and Sarah, exchanging discussions and ideas with them and receiving responses. This view is supported by Marx et al., commenting:

‘If networking is to help develop communities of practice, teachers need guidance and support to engage in the kinds of conversations we have described...Mentors...can initiate and sustain the conversation when the network first starts and provide information and resources, raise questions or offer ideas...’ (Marx et al., 1998, p.289)

Perhaps, within the Westwood community there needed to be more of a development of the skills of community interaction with the technology: the sense of the electronic communication was not really developed within the group and became very personalised between tutor and student.

The role of the Deputy Heads within this methodology was crucial. Westwood has two Deputy Heads, one responsible for the Quality of Teaching and one responsible for the Quality of Learning, and at the start of this research collection period, the two Deputies swapped roles. The Deputy who had been responsible for setting up the in-house M.A. programme was no longer

responsible for it and this responsibility passed to the other Deputy Head, who was part of the research group and had been from the beginning, as an enquirer. This change of roles was interesting as the school leader of the group and link person was now part of the research group itself: the previous Deputy Head had not been researching in to his practice using this group, although he had been working on his own doctorate via the Open University. The school link person was now somebody who clearly worked from within, pushing the group within the school whilst sharing in the research process itself. In many ways this aided the collaborative nature of the group, as the Deputy in charge now was in the same position as other members of the group of not having an M.A. and working alongside others.

to see how others are part of this...

On the 4th December 2002 the group met together to talk about their projects. Significantly for this meeting the Headteacher joined the group, although he was not engaged in research linked to the work of the group directly. One of the most significant examples of how the sense of community is being built through the use of this teacher-research group at Westwood is the way that at this meeting, the Headteacher was sitting next a member of the group, who is in her 2nd year of teaching. When watching this video of this meeting, the Headteacher is working alongside this member of the group openly trying to help her through her understanding of her research project in a very non-confrontational or judgemental way. There is no sense that things cannot be talked about for fear of being judged: no sense of a blame or failing culture

being embedded. However, what is evident is that there is a culture of staff sharing their interests and research projects with others who are willing to listen and aid the learning that is taking place.

how they are within or without...

'...just as my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p. 51)

How Gatsby is viewed, as a solitary figure perpetually on the outside, yet trying to be accepted on his own terms, is poignant. I feel that the discussion of the notions of 'within' and 'without' is crucial in terms of understanding the impact of the teacher-researcher community within Westwood St Thomas School. It seems that over the period of this project, that the role of 'within' and 'without' has dominated my understanding and way of thinking about this group.

In one case, I have considered the impact of my role as researcher in this group. My decision to research from within: to actually take part within the sessions, rather than standing on the sideline and pointing the camera at the events that were happening. My developing sense of equality has moved me to feel more comfortable within this group. I feel this group allows me to work alongside others as an equal: to rid myself of my robes of office. Essentially,

this is one of my reasons for writing this: my sense of expressing my views on the importance of non-hierarchical structures within education.

The impact of the change of Deputy Heads running the group, from a Deputy that was not engaging in research within the group, to a Deputy who was engaging in research within the group and clearly sharing his research with others, was significant. Whilst interviewing the Deputy who had not engaged within research within the group he commented:

‘...what I did want to do was attend every session and what I wanted I think in my mind a kind of quality assurance mechanism I wanted to be able to represent the group if the group were saying look we like this we don’t like this and so on I wanted to be able to represent and I wanted to make judgements on my own terms...’ (Jones, S., 2003)

This initial role of getting the group off the ground eventually shifted to one of how to sustain and move forward the work that was being completed: how to extend the work, rather than initiate it. He further commented:

‘..and I thought if I engaged myself the focus would switch to what I was getting from the programme which isn’t what it was originally designed to be it wasn’t for me I think that is what it must be...’ (Jones, S., 2003)

This change was able to influence the sense of autonomy and independence within the group, giving it the feel of being run from within, rather than being run from the outside. However, in its beginning, it is clear that the group was conceptualised in terms of being able to aid staff: being set up for staff in

order to aid them, in improving their practice, rather than being an initiative that may have been set up for publicity purposes.

I feel that this links in to the approach that is being developed within Westwood St Thomas itself. Every teacher, I believe, has the ability to learn from within themselves: to take from within the essence of their own years of learning and to move themselves forward. However, each individual has also a need to learn from without: to engage with others in a way that is able to move forward their own learning. For instance, this could be working with L.E.A. Advisers. Alongside this, a school itself has the ability to learn from within: from its staff and their imbedded knowledge. It can also learn from without: from inspections and so on. Centrally though, the impact that the M.A. has on the school, through utilising the action research approach to teacher research, is that it has the ability to merge and serve both the notions of within and without together. The teacher-research group has the potential to allow individuals to enquire into their own practice, exploring what is within them, whilst at the same time bringing together individuals who have the ability to work alongside others, catering for the notions of 'without' learning. In many respects it allows individuals the chance to understand themselves whilst also providing them with the opportunity to discuss their own practice with others: ultimately, it provides a ready-made human library and validation group for each member to draw upon and use as they need to.

and understand what it means...

My understanding of the work that I have carried out has been deepened through the opportunity presented to me to be able to bring to the Westwood teacher-researcher group the initial claims that I had made, based on my early thoughts. Initially I presented my claims to one member of the group and consequently then asked others to consider these claims. I wanted to test them out with one member in order to try and get closer to the understanding I was trying to gain of the work that I was doing. These discussions were of central importance to me as they were able to really guide my thinking and claims.

As this enquiry has developed it has become clearer to me what the notion of community learning actually means. I have begun to understand the nature of professional learning within a teacher-research community and as a result of this been able to understand myself as a teacher-researcher. Importantly, this has already informed my approaches to professional development and my understanding of how a school can benefit from learning from the imbedded professional knowledge that exists within it. Consequently, I feel in the position to make the following claims in relation to the work that I have done.

The teacher-research group that developed through Westwood St Thomas School seemed to develop organically. It seemed to develop as a result of strong strategic leadership at the start clearly centralising professional development and learning at the heart of the school's drive for improvement before then withdrawing the 'top-down' vision and allowing the group to become more self-managing. This seems to embrace Law's (1997, p. 64)

views regarding approaches to 'delegating leadership'. Laws argues the importance of developing the role of the Professional Development Co-ordinator within the school and ensuring that this role is thought-through in enough detail to ensure that the ethos of professional learning is supported. The approach by Westwood St Thomas School was to ensure that the Professional Development Co-ordinator realised when to withdraw 'top-down' instruction and allow staff to develop their own professional knowledge from within: to allow the knowledge to emerge. This placed Professional Learning at the heart of the school's strategy for improvement and valued the individual contributions that could be made to the improvement of the school.

As a result of this emerging organic approach, a fine balance has been struck between 'flexibility' and 'firm support' from within the school, when attempting to move this group forward. Harris (2003) explores the notions of 'distributed leadership' in a recent article in *Management in Education*. She questions the merits of it and considers the need for greater research into its potential:

'...distributed leadership is characterised as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively...' (Harris, 2003, p. 11)

I believe that within the context of this teacher-research group, distributed leadership has occurred and significantly contributed to its success. The impact of the Westwood St Thomas' Headteacher allowing this group to work autonomously alongside other school improvement initiatives, along with providing, in times of need varying examples of support, has ensured that the

skills of the teachers in the school have been placed high on the agenda and that meaningful collaboration has been able to happen between professionals.

The sense of the affiliation to this group creates a context of 'belonging to' which helps to create a greater collegial feel to the group. In many respects this provides the members of the group with the sense of security that other aspects of the teaching profession tend to take away: the security of the meeting time and place provides the stability in an otherwise perpetually changing professional environment.

In many respects the over-riding element of this group is its sense of appreciating and accepting the value of democracy within and across the members. The members of the group seem to collectively and actively seek to democratically teach and learn and this group provides the creative environment for a group of like-minded individuals to meet and democratically engage in discussions about how they can democratically live out this value within their classrooms. The meeting place of the group is a classroom on the school site and this allows the members of the group to try and replicate the work that they do each day: when the group meets it democratically engages and moves, without an elected leader. In many respects this is a model that the members of the group would potentially like to put forward within their own classrooms and I have drawn reference to my observations of teachers within this group. This demonstrates the value of living through others: of engaging alongside others and trying to understand the accounts that are brought to the group. It could be argued that this is what put off a number of the early

members of the group who didn't complete modules: because the democratic nature did not sit so comfortably or centrally within their own sense of educative values. It could be argued that through the notion of Action Research, like-minded people are kept together to ensure that Action Research as a concept is continued.

To take this notion of democracy further, the continuing growth of using students within sessions to aid the exploration of teaching and learning issues must be seen as a movement in the right direction. Kincheloe comments:

'One of the most democratic roles a public educator might play involves sharing critical research skills with the public, especially the disempowered public.' (Kincheloe, 2003, p.43)

This notion of democratic values being embodied within empowering others is crucial and the future direction of the teacher-research group must be to consider how these relatively disempowered groups, who are large stakeholders within the school, can be incorporated into the teacher-research group. For instance, how students or parents could be integrated more into this teacher-research community.

In many respects this element is further established in terms of this group of teacher-researchers valuing the importance of their own ability to create and add to the educational knowledge of the academy. Kincheloe comments:

'The notion that teacher as well as research professors and other 'experts' should engage in critically grounded social inquiry rests on a

democratic social theory which assumes that social research is not the province of a small elite minority.' (Kincheloe, 2003, p.25)

However within the group there exist members who do not hold this general view of being democratic by nature. Within this context, it is interesting to listen and see the struggles that these members come across in trying to live out a value that ultimately they do not hold. In terms of trying to understand the impact of this upon the narrative that is being created, it could be considered, in one sense, as ensuring for these teacher-researchers that they continue their involvement within the group. In terms of the narrative, the disequilibria is created for these members who then continue to attend the sessions with the hope of achieving and reaching the sense of democratic values within their own practice: of reaching a greater sense of equilibrium. This ultimately will ensure the need for the Action Research cycle to be continued within professional practice.

Action Research maintains within it an element of performance: a sense that there is a sharing of ideas and work and feedback is given on this, very much as an actor or actress may engage with an audience. Indeed the notion of a validation group works in a similar fashion to an audience at the theatre. Within this context, it would seem no surprise to find that a number of the participants of the teacher-research group at Westwood were from 'creative' subjects. This very much seems to allow these members a creative outlet in which to explore their own professional values.

to say what I think...

'...I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p. 92-93)

As Gatsby filled his empty heart with illusions of what reality could be, he ultimately had to face the reality that existed, and fell short of his expectations. During this project it has become clear that the notions of successful Professional Development are more than what is indicated by the DfES, who seem to embody this as any activity that improves skills, knowledge and understanding. Professional Development is embodied within notions of togetherness, a sense of being within and an understanding of feelings and emotions. It is my view that Professional Development needs to embrace an ethos and embody the values of individual institutions: it needs to embrace the learning that is embodied within individual teachers. It is too easy to refer to Professional Development as any activity: this de-values the potential and power of it.

Professional Learning communities need to demonstrate that they appreciate individual teachers and the contribution they can make to teaching and learning. Teachers need to be valued and be able to articulate exactly what it is that they need to do within their own practice in order to improve: they need a language of communication that allows them to actively engage in fruitful dialogue that moves them on in their practice. Professional Development has the role of capturing the imagination of teachers and engaging in this process of improvement: this does not come from an external course delivered by some stranger sitting in a hotel conference room miles away from your place of work. It needs to happen within the organisation itself: it needs to happen through discussion between members of an organisation with facilitators who can capture the imagination and provide a stable and structured methodological way of addressing the needs of the individuals. The beauty of taking an Action Research approach is that rather than providing teacher-researchers with bars to jump over to gain qualifications, it provides them with imaginative stimulation to improve their practice. It just so happens that qualifications are gained as a by-product. My emails with Jack have indicated this. His movement between co-enquirer and marker have been subtle and engaging: his desire to focus me not on passing the M.A., but on accounting for my learning in an honest way has been crucial. Indeed, I can refer to the supporting letter that my Headteacher provided me with where he commented:

'I do believe that many start on accredited courses, such as an MA, with a focus on the outcome or ultimate qualification. It is only when

participating that there is an understanding of the difference it makes to your own practice.' (Hinchliffe, A., 2002)

As I have moved through this M.A. I have been acutely aware of the shift in focus from gaining the qualification, to searching within myself to understand what it is that drives me as an educator, and how the teacher-research group supports this. I have become increasingly aware of how I have developed my understanding of others through the interventions I have had.

There has been a growing awareness of the importance that stories and narratives play within education. The more time spent with teacher-researchers the more I have realised that they have and want to tell their stories of learning. They want to live their stories through others. These stories may well describe, explain, reflect, analyse, query or plead for understanding. Whatever the demands, these stories need to be told by the tellers. The question remains: how do those unable to engage in teacher-research or reflection release the stories within them? The work on Professional Development seems to neglect the basic idea that teachers need to share, and share within a community that is able to understand and question in a sympathetic and constructive way. It is through this process that the narrative you are reading has been constructed.

There is a great deal of importance placed upon the notion of listening within the context of the community of teacher-researchers. Arguably, it could be said that this is the most important element of any community: having the ability to listen to those that are present within it. The Westwood group has

strived to do this throughout its time of existence. This, I believe, argues for Professional Development to predominantly take place within its own communities as these communities are best placed to service their own needs.

There is a growing awareness of the importance and potential impact of networking within the wider education community. I have discussed with Karen, the contents of her email in-box to find the extent to which she is able to network with others in her passion to extends her work with Gifted and Talented students. It is essential to try and see how communities can exploit the potential links between them. However, it is crucial to see communities not as being subject specific teachers, but as teacher-researchers discussing the nature of enquiry. The nature of this type of dialogue will grant educators access to a language of mutual understanding that transcends subject terminology, which can very often isolate individuals into closets of subject specific training. The business of teaching and learning is more than content driven: it is about understanding what it means to educate, and it is on this level that teacher-researchers can speak.

Perhaps ultimately, Action Research has had the ability to provide this teacher-research group at Westwood with a language that allows members of it to communicate with each other. Perhaps the concept of Action Research isn't so important in its methodology, as the ability it has to focus teachers on looking engagingly at their own enquiries. The ability to unite teachers from many different subject backgrounds and allow them to converse in one

language, the language of teacher-research, is perhaps the most important unifying aspect of this research community. This in itself is driving collegiality and the ability to live through others forward.

when it all starts again.

It is central to acknowledge the limitations of this study. I see this as part of the preparation work for something that is indeed much larger on scale. I see this as preparation for my PhD, where consideration will be given to the nature of the potential 'sustainability' of learning communities within schools and how transferable the nature of community learning is. The process in itself could well be benefited by being spread over a greater period of time. With time, this project could have incorporated a greater sense of understanding the long term impact that teacher-research was having on individual teachers and the school. At the same time, I could come to a greater understanding of the impact that this mode of working is having on my own understanding of self.

The work that I have completed could have been compared to the work of other local teacher-research groups. Whilst I have looked *through the pages of time* at other studies of such groups, I could have been and observed how other groups run. This may have allowed me to consider in greater detail the potential of transference of approaches to sustaining teacher-research groups within schools.

I could have considered the potential impact of narrative work in much more detail for use within the group. Perhaps, along with this, I could have involved myself 'within' the teacher-research group more from the start. This may have ensured that I was working from within the group and been part of it rather than approaching them early on as documentary animals, to point a camera at and make notes on.

My approach towards the consideration of the learning element that takes place within the teacher-research group could have been utilised to more effect. I could have considered in more detail the use I have made of the final submitted portfolios at the end of each unit. I could have approached these in terms of considering how individuals have moved forward in their professional understanding of learning and how the group has allowed them to express their ideas creatively.

And back to myself...

'Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p. 90)

At the point of putting finger to key it is highly appropriate for me to say that I don't really know what the answer to my question that I posed myself is. I read for inspiration. I watch past video clips of the group. I read over interviews. I talk with people. I read over Jack Whitehead's, '...notes for a workshop on Perspectives on Spirituality in the Graduate School of Education of the University of Bristol...' and I feel inadequate: inadequate in my inability to be really moved. I read about how he is moved from his interaction with one of my colleagues that I mentored, and whilst I can read it, I cannot be moved about it in the same way. I cannot understand what it is that moves me or that I am passionate about. I can perhaps conclude from this something that has been in the back of my mind: this isn't a narrative with a celebratory end. Gatsby doesn't fall in love with Daisy, his childhood sweetheart. If Jack has made me realise one thing, it's that this is important to understand. The beautiful girl will not come running over the green hill on the sunny day in a pretty white dress and fall passionately into my arms, exclaiming how I had been the one she wanted all along and securing my future happiness. Perhaps, as the other famous Jack, Nicholson, said, 'This is just as good as it gets.'

Further to this I have begun to realise I think, the importance of 'love' and 'passion'. Jack's signing his emails, 'love Jack', perhaps has started something. Perhaps Sarah's response to an early email from me asking her to respond to my breadth of literature is significant:

'Hope that helps ... the outline you sent can work but where I read 'bloody dissertation' I want to excite in you a passion and a purpose for writing it!

Let your intuition frame an outline and then decide how it should unfold. I believe you have an outstandingly significant insight into 'community'.

(Fletcher, S., February 2003)

Perhaps this screams to me that there is a need for me to learn to appreciate the moment rather than constantly striving to go beyond the moment and look to the next. My whole career as an educator seems to have been built around this constant moving forward without really stopping to appreciate the present. Perhaps this is my own need for the teacher-research group at Westwood: my need to be able to take stock of the moment is delivered through the ability to engage with others and explore my own sense of educational value. This I feel is my compulsion to try and account for the teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas. I feel I need to try and understand the democratic sense that it places within me: the feeling that I can work alongside, in equal terms, others from within the school.

'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further...And one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.' (*The Great Gatsby*, 1990, p. 171-172)

Epilogue

I feel it essential at this point to include a few brief comments on the abruptness of the ending of the narrative that you have just completed. The end of the writing for the M.A. dissertation has been completed, but, dear

reader, do not feel that the end of the work has also drawn to a close. I see this as the start of the next phase of this work. My intention is to register for my PhD through the University of Bath, to consider the key question which I feel is emerging from the work I have written: how can I explore the sense of the sustainability of teacher-research communities within schools? I want to try and catch that white-dressed girl again. The abrupt ending of my friend, Gatsby, maybe reflects this feeling that I have inside: maybe I will always search without realising the journey that is taking place on the way. Certainly, discussions with other colleagues, who have read this dissertation, have commented on the need to have this a little bit more. However, time and words will now close this chapter for a brief interlude to allow the transition from M.A. to PhD.

The last words are given to Fitzgerald:

'And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night,' (The Great Gatsby, 1990, p. 171)

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