

# A Case Study on the impact of a teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas School on professional knowledge and development.

## Abstract

The task of Continuous Professional Development within schools is taking an ever greater role. Schools need to demonstrate that they support staff and very often need to provide professional support that caters more on an individual basis. There is a growing need for teachers to take responsibility for managing their own professional growth as educators and subsequently to enhance their own professional knowledge. The potential to cater for this by developing and supporting a community of teacher-researchers could well bring with it a number of benefits.

## Background

Over the past two years I have been working my way through my M.A. in Education with the University of Bath. Half of this has been completed through being part of a teacher-research group sited at Westwood St Thomas School. The school has developed innovative links with the University of Bath which has enabled modules to be delivered in-house at the school. Over the past two years twenty four teachers have dipped into this scheme, both from Westwood and surrounding schools.

The main focus of the work carried out by this teacher-research group has been to develop Action Research approaches to aid classroom practice, under the guidance of Jack Whitehead and Sarah Fletcher. The unique nature of this group is that each member carries out research into areas that they personally want to improve: research projects have truly been developed from within individuals, rather than being 'imposed' by management within the school. Recently, Westwood has attempted to utilise these links in order to aid school improvement processes, through for instance utilising Action Research to aid the implementation of Whole School literacy initiatives.

Over the last three years Westwood St Thomas has placed the quality of Teaching and Learning that takes place high on the agenda of each teacher within the school. The aim has been to improve the practices that take place within classrooms, through really promoting reflective practice as a way of improving teaching and learning. The development of 'Guidelines for Effective Teaching' (Jones, 1999) and 'Guidelines for Effective Learning' (Potts, 2001) documents has really focused staff attention of these issues. This move has been in-line with the clear placing of staff development at the heart of the school's strategy for improvement. This position is echoed by the Headteacher's comments in his forward to the School Improvement Plan where he comments about the placing of staff development at the centre of the drive for school improvement.

On a personal level, I have been involved in the Westwood St Thomas teacher-research group from the start. I have supplemented these in-house units by attending Summer Schools at the University of Bath. This unit is the planning and preparation for my dissertation, which I have both Wiltshire LEA Research and Development Group funding and *Best Practice Research Scholarship* funding for.

My main desire to study the teacher-research group that exists at Westwood St Thomas is because I have a firm belief that for professionals to continue to improve their practice, it is essential that they continue to reflect upon the practice that they do. I firmly believe that through working as part of a community, that teacher-researchers are granted access to others who can support and aid their professional development. For too long it seems that professional development has been something that was completed very often off site and in isolation. I believe that by having access to an established community there is a great deal of professional knowledge that can aid improvements within schools. Over the past two years I have personally learned how to reflect and also how to help others reflect on what they do, in order to improve practice. I learned the value of developing an internal reflective cycle that can be used as a way of planning through areas of concern. I am interested in these interactions between professionals and how they can aid the development of professional knowledge, the development of a framework for improving practice and the impact of this on a school.

Additionally to this, Wiltshire LEA is intending to establish a number of *Wiltshire Research and Support Centres (WRASC's)* around the county to try and promote and support classroom-based action research projects. I believe that there are a number of lessons to be learned from the way that the Westwood St Thomas teacher-research group operates and that by studying it, this information could be useful to others who may intend to develop similar groups.

## Methodology

The approach that I will take to complete this research is through a Case Study.<sup>1</sup> This is quite an important change in terms of my own research as I have predominantly worked through Action Research over the last two years.<sup>2</sup> However it has become clear to me that the focus of my dissertation is clearly about focusing on a particular instance and group of individuals. I am not looking to cause a change at the end of it, but rather felt that the work I conduct would be useful for others to use before they also begin work on

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<sup>1</sup> Yin defines a case study 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) 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.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins defines Action Research as, '...action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform.' (Hopkins, 2002, p.42)

similar projects. I therefore felt that a case study would provide me with the most valid conclusions. Additionally to this I was quite satisfied that approaching this work as a case study would still allow me to identify with the work that I was doing: I would still be able to engage with my own personal values and locate myself as the 'I' within the narrative account that I provide of the instance.<sup>3</sup>

The first thing that I need to do is to ensure that I have the support and authorisation of the Chair of governors and the Headteacher of my school to carry out the proposed research activity.<sup>4</sup> I intend to send a letter to seek permission. I will also need to ensure that others who are involved within the study are also informed of the activity, for instance the members of the research group and the tutors involved in delivering the course.<sup>5</sup>

I intend to triangulate the work that I am doing by utilising various methods within my research. It is essential, once permission for the research has been gained, for me to consider how I can build in validity and reliability and utilise triangulation in order to help achieve this.

During the previous unit delivered at Westwood between January and March 2002 I videotaped a number of sessions as preliminary groundwork for this case study. I was participating in that particular unit so was simply pointing the video camera and recording what took place.<sup>6</sup> This was the first and only unit that took place during that academic year. I intend to review this footage and utilise it as a pilot study of the nature of the research group to see if there appears to be any generalisations that I can make about what was taking place during the sessions themselves.<sup>7</sup> I am also hoping that this would reduce the impact of the 'Hawthorne Effect' within this study as the group has

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<sup>3</sup> In many respects I was drawing upon Cohen et al. when commenting, 'The second approach [to case study] seeks to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors and consequently may be described as interpretative and subjective.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.181) this caught my attention in respect of the creative flexibility that it seemed to allow the researcher when attempting to create the narrative of the research undertaken.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen et al. comment, 'The first stage thus involves the gaining of official permission to undertake one's research in the target community.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.53)

<sup>5</sup> In many respects I am advocating that colleagues have the opportunity to give their 'informed consent'. (Cohen et al., 2001) I believe that the integrity of the research requires for those involved within the research to be fully aware of what is going on. I think this is particularly important in respect of the fact that I am researching into a group that is made up of individuals who have volunteered or chosen to take part: they have a right to object to the possible intrusion and documenting of the work that takes place. Objections, if they arise, will have to be dealt with by ensuring that I have fully explained the nature and process of the work and that the report will be written in such a way as not to identify any individuals within the group.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead (1993) comments about the use of the video camera commenting, 'Through the use of video-tape the teachers can engage in dialogues with colleagues about their practice. They can show the places where their values are negated.' (Whitehead, 1993, p.71) This was clearly my intention, although initially, I wanted to analyse the footage on my own rather than engaging immediately in dialogue with those represented on the camera.

<sup>7</sup> Yin comments about a pilot case that it, '...is used more formatively, assisting an investigator to develop relevant lines of questions – possibly even providing some conceptual clarification for the research design as well.' (Yin, 1994, p.74)

already experienced having a video camera present within the sessions.<sup>8</sup> I will also be able compare how the group would have changed over time.

To develop this, there have been three in-house units delivered at Westwood so far. There are a number of past assignments that teachers have completed. I intend to seek permission to look over these in order to gain a greater understanding of the types of work that has been undertaken and then to try and classify this work into forms of knowledge that may have been created for the school.<sup>9</sup> I will also be able to use this to help me consider the impact that this type of work has had on the school itself. During interview schedules I could also make references to individuals past work.

Over the two years that the teacher-research group has been together some members of Westwood staff have left as they have moved schools. Other teachers who weren't members of Westwood staff have also left the group. I intend to send out questionnaires to these members of staff to find out what their reflections on the group and their experiences of it are.<sup>10</sup> I would also want them to consider their present situations and to see if they are still researching and the impact that this may have on their practice or the culture of the school they are in at present. The reason for selecting a questionnaire is because of the geographical difficulties of visiting them personally as they have moved away from the area.

It is important to build in a pilot group for the purposes of this type of research in order to try out the research tools that I am intending to use.<sup>11</sup> I am aware that there is a group of Primary schools in Wiltshire that have grouped together in order to create a small group of teacher-researchers, that seems to be very similar to the approaches that we have at Westwood. I intend to use this group as a pilot group, visiting them to try out my questionnaires and interview schedules and building in time to get their response and feedback to them as well as answering the questions. I am hoping that this will help me to build Criterion-related validity and Concurrent Validity into my work as I am clearly linking my work to an external source to aid the validity of it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen et al. refer to the Hawthorne effect as, '...[threatening] to contaminate experimental treatments in educational research when subjects realize their role as guinea pigs.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.127)

<sup>9</sup> This is very much based on the approaches that Hargreaves takes (1999) when considering the importance of knowledge creation within the school. Crucially to this aspect of my research is Hargreaves' comments on auditing professional knowledge that, 'A knowledge audit exposes the social distribution of knowledge so that planned and co-ordinated action on the sharing of existing professional knowledge, and the creation of new knowledge, may be undertaken.' (Hargreaves, 1999, p.225)

<sup>10</sup> Oppenheim (2001) identifies a number of disadvantages in the use of postal questionnaires. It is the intention that the prior association with these group members and personal knowledge of them will help improve response rates and also that I intend to fully develop an accurate list of the variables that I intend to research which would aid the clarity of the questionnaire.

<sup>11</sup> Yin supports this method, commenting, 'The Pilot case is used more formatively, assisting an investigator to develop relevant lines of questions – possibly even providing some conceptual clarification for the research design as well.' (Yin, 1994, p.74)

<sup>12</sup> Criterion-related validity in this sense takes the form of, '...[relating] the results of one particular instrument to another external criterion.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.111) This type of

The next module for the teacher-research group will be delivered between October 2002 and January 2003. I intend to observe and video these sessions with the aim being to reflect on the knowledge that is created within this group and also to consider how each member of the group develops this knowledge as an aid to improving their professional practice. I want to consider exactly what is happening within these sessions and consider the impact that these sessions have on the practice of teachers. This I feel will allow me to consider in more detail the potential usefulness of a teacher-research group for a school.

Throughout the research period I intend to maintain a research journal in which I want to record my own personal thoughts and feelings as I respond to events and circumstances that arise. I feel that this will be a great source of information as the time comes to reflect on the work that I have done and need to write up my account. I feel that being a Head of English that this will allow me access to my own creative narrative that I am looking to create of the circumstances that I encounter. It is important for me to acknowledge that this will be a subjective account of the events and possibly only during the process of evaluation at the end of the period of research will I be able to look more objectively on what I have written.

I intend to find out the thoughts of the members of the teacher-research group at Westwood. Initially I want to survey the group to find out the make up of it. I want to find out the statistical make up of the group: for instance, the number of years in teaching; the subjects taught; the management position within school and so on.<sup>13</sup> I then want to carry out a stratified sampling on the group before interviewing this sample, to find out in more detail what this sample of the group thinks the impact of being a part of the group is having on their professional knowledge and understanding and the impact they feel it is having on their classroom practice. I intend to build in content validity at this point by using a matrix checking system which ensures that the content of the interview schedule covers all appropriate areas of the project. The role of the 'critical friend' will be crucial at this point to ensure that this matrix process is regulated. Prior to the interview I would want to provide the interviewees with an extract of my own journal to consider: I would want them to give me feedback and response to something that I have written in order for me to gauge how in-tune with the group of researchers my own subjective views are. Within the interview itself I would want the interviewees to perhaps respond to some footage from an M.A. session, again to help me gauge this. Reliability will be built in at this point as I will be asking questions within the same area to each person I interview. However, I intend these interviews to

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validity will allow me to utilise and compare the workings of the Westwood teacher-research group with other research groups. Concurrent Validity refers to validity when, '...the data gathered from using one instrument must correlate highly with data gathered from using another instrument.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.112) The usefulness of this type of validity is that it can be demonstrated simultaneously with another instrument used so I can continue research with the Westwood teacher-research group as well as researching into other research groups.

<sup>13</sup> Oppenheim (2001) identifies the possible pitfalls that could accompany such a research technique. It is essential that the focus of the survey is tight and well conceptualised.

be semi-structured as I personally believe that this will allow the interviewee to feel less threatened by intimidating questions and it will also allow me, as interviewer, to be more comfortable and allow the conversation to flow.<sup>14</sup> The semi-structured nature of these interviews could make it problematic to build in reliability.

Each week I will be taking part within the M.A. sessions at Westwood. Although I will not be taking the Master's unit I will still be engaging in the discussions about practice and responding to research assignments. This will place me in a 'participant-as-observer' role within the group.<sup>15</sup> In itself this will grant me the opportunity to both critically engage with the group whilst also distancing myself to allow me to take notes on the events taking place.

I intend to conduct a semi-structured interview with the Headteacher, the deputy head responsible for establishing the research community and also a Governor with responsibility for teaching and learning within the school in order to try and ascertain what their different impressions are of the workings of an on-site teacher-research group and the potential impact that they feel the school could benefit from. This triangulation of interviews I feel may also allow me to ascertain any potential criticisms of the research community.

One of the major strengths of the teacher-research group at Westwood St Thomas is that it encourages staff to present their research findings to the group on a regular basis as a way of offering opportunities to validate the work that is underway. I intend to utilise this by presenting my own work as my research develops, showing video footage and journal entries so that I too can test my own hypotheses out. The group in this respect will be working as a validating group for my work.<sup>16</sup>

## Ethics

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen et al. comment, '...the more one wishes to acquire unique, non-standardized, personalized information about how individuals view the world, the more one veers towards qualitative, open-ended, unstructured interviewing.' (Cohen et al., 2001, p.270) My aim is to gain these personalised insights into people's views of the impact of the teacher-researcher group.

<sup>15</sup> Yin (1994) reflects upon the potential opportunities for adopting this role and also the potential problems. Adopting this role will allow me access to the inner workings of the teacher-researcher group and will also allow me to maintain my direct contact with it: I have been part of it from the beginning and this association is something that I'd like to maintain. However, I am aware of the difficulties that may arise because of the potential that I may become submerged within the group and find it difficult to stand back from it in order to objectively look at it. These are issues that I will constantly need to remind myself of, and I hope the use of triangulation techniques would aid this.

<sup>16</sup> 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 is based on the fact that they are researchers and part of my own research thus hopefully able to critically engage with what I am trying to do. However I am also aware of the possibility that because I know these people in the group their responses may be deliberately unchallenging.

As I will be researching within an educational institution it is essential that I gain the permission of the Chair of Governors and the Headteacher of my school prior to starting my research. It is essential that others who will be involved within the research are also informed of it so that they are in a position of knowledge about what is happening.<sup>17</sup>

I will need to ensure that with any questionnaires that I send out or any interview that I conduct that I prepare a full statement that I can read or send out at the beginning so that all those who will be involved with them will be informed about what they are responding to and how their responses will be used.<sup>18</sup>

For any interview that I conduct I intend to send a copy of the transcript to the person I have interviewed and will ask them to verify that the transcript is a true reflection of their thoughts and ideas. I will want to ensure that my subjective views are not being imposed on others, and this is one way that I hope to create more objectivity within my research.

The design of my research has indicated that I want to look at past portfolio projects from the Westwood teacher-research group. I will also be looking at the sessions that take place for the next unit. By nature I will be looking into the very things that are personal to people. With the nature of Action Research enquiries they very often contain journal and personal accounts or responses to events or situations. In some respects I will feel as though I am mischievously fumbling my way through a personal diary that I shouldn't be looking at. Perhaps this will ensure that this material, once permission is granted to look through it, is treated in a very sensitive way. Great respect will have to be paid to the information contained within the enquiries as they have 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, I do want to be mindful of the fact that journals, for instance, are personalised documents and need to be treated with respect.

### Analysis

I intend that the data will be presented in three ways. Firstly I will write up the report in full for my dissertation. Then I will summarise the report for Wiltshire L.E.A. to satisfy the project that I am working on for them. I will then produce a shorter summary to satisfy my Best Practice Research Scholarship funding. Within this I will also be contributing to the Wiltshire research journal and research websites. It is intended that the report for this will be expressed in

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<sup>17</sup> I want the participants to be in a position to give informed consent (Cohen et al., 2001) regarding their involvement within the research. This will require me being clear on the nature of my research and sharing this accurately with the participants.

<sup>18</sup> The issue of confidentiality arise with this issue. 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 will need to be made aware of this issue at the start.

such a way as to engage the reader and allow them to fully understand my own personal values as an educator: I want the report to reflect my own creativity as well as the findings of the research.

The analysis of the data will be completed in a number of ways. Firstly, I intend to analyse the responses from the questionnaire that surveys the make up of the teacher-research group. I then intend that the remainder of the data will be analysed by transcribing taped interviews, some fully and some partially, analysing video footage and writing an analysis of the assignments I review. I am concerned that because of the nature of this enquiry and the fact that I am deeply involved in it because it is something that I passionately believe is the way for schools to improve and move forward, that I could have a great deal of data to collate. It is essential that the data I do receive is analysed as it is collected rather than being allowed to build up. Initially, because there are a number of background sources of data, such as the past portfolios that I want to sift through, I believe that when this is complete that this may well focus on my other data collection techniques.

### Conclusions

There will be a number of strengths that this project has to it. Firstly, it will allow Westwood St Thomas School to have a study of its existing teacher-research group, which will provide some evaluation of its impact on the school.

Secondly, it will provide Wiltshire L.E.A. with an evaluation of one possible model that schools could adopt, based on the Westwood model, to inform the basis of the WRASC's provision within the county.

Thirdly, it will allow me to try and account for the journey of my own professional learning that I have undertaken over the last eighteen months and to consider the potential of this for others to possibly gain some understanding of.

However there may also be some weaknesses associated with this study. Firstly, the fact that I am part of the institution that I am researching may well influence my interpretation of the research in a prejudiced way. Whilst I will have insight and understanding of the working of the institution that I am researching, I may also be dogged by the events and history that I have experienced there.

Secondly, the presence of a researcher within the unit sessions delivered at Westwood could impact negatively on the usually frank and vibrant discussions that take place. Perhaps this will require me to fully engage in the process of the unit in order that the focus is not on my role as researcher, but rather my role as potential facilitator.

Thirdly, the scope of the enquiry could easily become unmanageable due to the potential emergent focuses as the study begins to deliver data to be analysed.