
1 Teacher learning in the contemporary landscape: Vignettes of practice

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Teachers are at the heart of education systems. It has been claimed that the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (OECD 2013), and although this has been contested by some who note that only a relatively modest percentage of the variation in student outcomes is attributable to teacher characteristics (Sahlberg 2014), this does not negate the importance of examining teacher professional development and learning. The well-cited McKinsey report ‘How the world’s best performing school systems come out on top’ (2007) notes that the best education systems in the world not only select the right people to become teachers, but also improve instruction through continuous professional development, and create systems and targeted support to ensure every child benefits from excellent instruction. Thus, teacher professional development is an important factor in creating a world-class school system and should therefore be of concern to practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders in the education system alike, and indeed to the public at large.

The influential McKinsey & Company (2010) follow-up study ‘How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better’ distils a number of highlights in understanding how a school system with poor performance becomes good, and how one with a good performance becomes excellent; but a key point is the importance of considering not only school structures and resources (although these are important), but also *processes* to improve the learning experience of students in classrooms. While it is claimed that policy-makers and public debate tend to focus on structures and resources, the McKinsey report found evidence in recent UK policy-making around the creation of free schools that interventions in place in improving school

systems tended to be *process*- rather than structural- or resource-related. Furthermore, process interventions focused more on how instruction was delivered rather than on its content; in other words, they were concerned with pedagogy. Thus, school improvement is contingent on teacher development to improve pedagogy, which in turn is premised on teacher learning.

Teacher professional development and learning, then, are of crucial importance in improving educational systems and student outcomes. However, as will be demonstrated in this book, teacher learning is a highly contested and politicised topic and policy initiatives do not always sit easily with what we know about teacher learning from the educational research literature. Indeed, Bangs, MacBeath and Galton (2011) trace successive UK governments' failure to implement a cohesive CPD strategy for English and Welsh teachers, a theme that Bangs (2013) elaborated upon in his keynote on the policy implications of teacher learning at the Cambridge seminar of the 'Understanding Teacher Learning Seminar Series', the series that provided the starting point for this book.

In order to understand some of the complexity and controversies around teacher learning, and appreciate the difficulties in reconciling the research literature with the practicalities of introducing change and political agendas, it is necessary to examine what is actually happening on the ground in relation to professional learning. To set the scene, this chapter will illustrate teacher learning in the contemporary educational landscape with some carefully chosen vignettes. These represent case studies of teacher learning in different policy arenas and are written by invited authors who are working in the relevant context and in some cases represent collaborations between different stakeholders such as academics and teacher practitioners. The particular cases have been chosen to illuminate different issues that will be explored in more detail in later chapters.

The vignettes will be presented in four sections. The first section, containing a pair of vignettes, will focus on the English context and will illustrate teacher learning in different phases of education. The second section provides an example illustrating another UK context to highlight if different policy contexts lead to different issues arising. The third section gives two examples from other national contexts. The (2010) McKinsey report notes important differences between school systems at different stages of development; hence, the international examples provide a contrast to the English and UK context not only because they are different national contexts but also because they represent school systems at different stages of development and describe interventions taking place to promote teacher learning. The final

section will provide a complete contrast in considering professional learning in another discipline to provide an opportunity to learn from an alternative disciplinary context.

TEACHER LEARNING IN ENGLAND

As will be discussed in the next chapter, an important facet of teacher learning relates to the development of research skills including not only reading and being able to apply research findings to inform teaching and learning, but also conducting small-scale enquiry in classrooms and school contexts. Teaching Schools, which are ‘part of the current (UK) government’s plan to give schools a central role in raising standards by developing a self-improving and sustainable school-led system and a key policy initiative’ (UK Government 2014), have six core areas of responsibility and one of these is research and development. This initiative will be discussed further in the chapters that follow; however, the point to make here is that Teaching Schools are expected to engage in research activities that not only include ensuring new approaches are research-informed but also engaging in research work, which means that research is being legitimised as part of the teachers’ professional role. Perhaps because of this policy initiative, there is a growing interest in developing teachers’ research skills with the emergence of grassroots initiatives drawing on the power of social media, such as ResearchED (CfBT Education Trust 2013), which has run a series of events and maintains an active presence on Twitter. Recognition of the need to develop research skills in turn has led schools to look towards university departments of education and other institutions with research expertise, and these are specifically identified as potential strategic partners who might lead some aspects of training and development in the guidance for teaching school applicants.

The first vignette was written by a recently retired secondary practitioner who has been involved in a long-standing school–university partnership, the School–University Partnership for Educational Research (SUPER), which has from its inception been centrally concerned with schools and the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge conducting research together, and currently includes a number of secondary Teaching Schools. Following discussion with the Faculty Partnership Coordinator (one of the editors, and the author of this chapter), she reflects on her experience of being part of SUPER and highlights some of the issues the partnership has faced over the last ten years, which are directly connected to teacher learning.

The second vignette is written by the Chief Executive of the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE), who has been working with a primary-school trust to help them build effective professional learning through their Skein service, and is another of the editors of this book. Again, the importance of research through enquiry-based approaches in continuing professional development and learning are emphasised. Issues about cross-school working in a trust are raised and some areas for development are identified.

Vignette 1: Reflecting on being a Teacher Research Coordinator in the SUPER network

Jennie Richards (Sharnbrook Upper School)

I am currently the longest serving member of the SUPER partnership,¹ and therefore I have been witness to some identifiably key points in the development of the partnership and its impact on teacher learning, which I will attempt to highlight here.

After having qualified as a teacher with the Institute of Education, University of London, the next 30 years of my teaching career in secondary schools involved no contact with university departments whatsoever. Whatever university educational research was being conducted had no impact on me as a classroom teacher, or my colleagues. My next association with universities came with being involved in teacher training, particularly with the development of school-based teaching courses, such as School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) and Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) schemes. This led to me taking the opportunity to participate in a government-funded teacher practitioner research scheme called the Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS), which gave teachers the chance to bid for scholarships to research an area of interest, supported in my case by the University of Cambridge. Sadly, funding for this ended, despite its popularity.

As I joined SUPER as a new Teacher Research Coordinator (TRC), I initially found the partnership very absorbed with funding and structural issues, as it struggled to become sustainable. The focus was on what we were learning about the development of a school–university research partnership and the challenges and opportunities it afforded. In 2002, an opportunity arose for SUPER to become a Networked Learning Community (NLC), funded for a three-year period through the National College for School Leadership. The aim of the government project was worthy – to promote research and development across groups of schools, which could be nationally shared. However, as an already established network, SUPER found the overly bureaucratic nature of the progress audits, the uncritical agenda of the initiative,

and its short-lived existence to be stultifying and restrictive. Schools had been more involved in a national agenda than fulfilling their own teacher learning needs and as a result a few schools decided to leave the partnership.

To address ongoing funding issues, the first significant initiative post-NLC was to introduce, from September 2005, a new part-time MED for teachers in the SUPER schools, with a particular focus on collaborative practitioner research and its development in schools. Partnership schools were each expected to fund at least two teachers on the two-year course. Thus, SUPER gained sustainable funding, created more research expertise and capacity within the schools, and the commitment of head teachers to building a collaborative research culture in the schools was ensured. So far, 53 students have successfully completed the course, several of whom have become TRCs or senior leaders in their schools. A government PPD (Postgraduate Professional Development) fund, designed to support more teachers to gain Master's-level qualifications, enabled SUPER schools to significantly increase the number of Master's-trained teachers with interest and commitment to collaborative practitioner research in their schools. The research completed during their studies has also been influential in schools meeting their school development plans, while also building a research culture in our schools. Sadly, the PPD government funding has now ceased, and schools are finding it much harder to fund teachers wishing to study for a Master's qualification, particularly within the current economic climate.

A second significant change was when the partnership moved in terms of the direction of its research focus. Since the establishment of SUPER, most of the time had been spent in schools, researching small-scale projects on topics of interest to individuals or groups within the schools. The partnership recognised that a common issue for all schools was one of pupil engagement, so a decision was made to move away from learning *about* how research partnerships work, to learning, as a partnership, *from* research. Initially, a common research tool was used as a baseline for developing the research questions, which would then be individualised to each school, while still under the umbrella of pupil-engagement research. This initiative was enthusiastically embraced by all involved in the partnership, with the opportunities to involve large samples of students across the schools, utilise the Faculty's expertise of data analysis to collate the results, and yet give each school valuable data that it could investigate further as it wished. The project fitted well with increasing interest in student voice at the time, and this proved a catalyst for renewed interest in the work of SUPER, with new schools joining at this time.

Since then, there have been a number of annual research foci agreed, and these have generally allowed schools to work on topics of particular interest to the individual school agenda, while usefully contributing to the more generic focus. The use of student voice in a variety of forms, and lesson study in particular, has proved popular as a vehicle for teacher learning. What has proved an essential feature of the research partnership is its collaborative and non-competitive nature. The inevitable tensions and challenges have been overcome successfully due to the underlying shared values regarding the importance of teacher research, and a positive collective belief that the partnership is worthwhile. The desire for high-quality, robust and useful research, which at the same time shows up the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of collaborative classroom practitioner enquiry, has been embraced by the partnership.

There have been several debates within the partnership about the idea of the Faculty providing a ‘third space’ for teachers,² head teachers and the Faculty staff to meet, discuss, plan, disseminate and share our learning. Regular TRC meetings, the VLE, head teacher meetings, the annual conference, ‘Teachmeets’ and seminars by leading educationalists have all provided space and opportunities for joint reflection and mutual learning. While critical friends from the Faculty do regularly visit schools to provide support for researchers in a variety of ways, the Faculty buildings provide the time and space that school members of the partnership require to focus fully on their partnership and research agendas. This is highly valued by heads and teachers alike.

SUPER has continued to expand, with 16 school members now, across primary (a new development) and secondary phases of education. A new international dimension is evolving, as SUPER is visited by teachers and lecturers from other countries. Its action research model has also been used to develop teacher education in Kazakhstan, and several of the schools associated with SUPER have been involved in this work.

Personally, after ten years working with the partnership, I remain as enthusiastic as ever in promoting a research culture among teachers in schools for the benefit of teacher learning, and value maintaining the equal-partners relationship with the university. Teachers and the Faculty learn from and with each other. Despite the many challenges facing education at the moment, I remain of the conviction that this partnership model is worthwhile, sustainable, important and valuable for all its members.

Vignette 2: Supporting continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) across an inner-city, primary, multi-academy trust*Philippa Cordingley (CUREE)*

This trust encompasses four primary schools and serves very vulnerable communities within one of the most deprived boroughs in the UK, in East London. The majority of pupils have English as an additional language. Barclay School, whose head teacher is also the Chief Executive of the trust, is a successful and exceptionally large primary school, serving over 1200 pupils on two separate sites. The other schools are one- to three-form entry primary schools and serve similar communities. Ofsted gradings for the schools range from special measures, for the most recent arrival, to good with outstanding features.

The trust has an explicit commitment to supporting continuing professional learning and development for *all* staff and backs this up with vision, leadership, investment and systems. The trust leadership team see continuing professional development (CPD) as a priority and are very directly involved in its planning and ensuring that continuing professional development and learning (CPDL), which flows from CPD, is linked to their very concrete vision of teaching and learning and helps to reinforce it. For example, one leadership team member has full-time responsibility for supporting and encouraging CPDL across and within the schools. In previous years, he offered direct CPDL facilitation to each school and is now moving towards a capacity-building model. There is a carefully worked-out three-weekly rhythm for CPDL, with 180 minutes of collective CPDL activities, ensuring that professional learning is strongly present and sustained over time. In addition to whole-school and cross-trust formal and collective CPDL, the trust offers targeted one-to-one support to colleagues encountering difficulties, which involves the targeted use of mentors and the development of ‘Teaching Improvement Plans’.

The trust leadership team collectively identify and clarify priorities for collective CPDL; the priority, for example, for the first full CPDL wave (after an initial period of consolidation) for the current year is a focus on developing ‘assessment proficient pupils’ through professional learning triads. The aim is for each triad to develop to the point where they can use coaching, research lesson study (RLS) or collaborative action research strategies and tools, selected depending upon local capacity and their stage of development, to embed learning from CPDL sessions in classrooms using reserved CPDL time. CPD leaders within each school lead in-school development work, having themselves worked through the priorities and plans set by the executive

leadership team as a group with the overall CPD leader. They negotiate plans with the overall CPD leader and may work in partnership with him or use him as a coach, depending on the issue and circumstances.

The trust sets high expectations of what the schools, leaders and teachers will be able to achieve as a result of CPDL, and what it will contribute to pupils' learning. This is reflected in the care taken to work through approaches to CPDL, linked with evidence about the impact for pupils and staff, such as coaching, RLS and collaborative action research and the considerable time allocated to it. The trust draws in specialist expertise to ensure CPDL has depth and rigour, especially where it is not already available within the group. There is a very tight focus threaded through all CPDL activities on teaching and learning and pupil progress.

Teachers, support staff and leaders share a willingness to learn together and share their practices. Collaboration and open classrooms are the hallmarks of the more established schools and are also evident, albeit to a lesser extent, in schools whose confidence is at an earlier stage of development. A consequence of this openness, and a contributor to it, is the use of a wide range of different types of evidence for planning, delivering and evaluating the impact of professional development.

The transition from direct support and facilitation of CPD centrally that took place in previous years to the capacity-building model currently being developed has been framed in the light of formal research, carried out by CUREE, into how CPD is working within and across the trust schools. This research highlighted the importance, during the next stage of development, of:

- Further modelling of the strategies that the trust hopes to see being offered to pupils (such as much more refined differentiation and an emphasis on increasingly independent learning) within formal CPD sessions, including the explicit modelling of learning by leaders at all levels across the trust.
- Developing staff ownership of and responsibility for their own professional learning through, for example, a greater emphasis on enquiry-oriented learning and evidence-rich peer support, working with subgroups of pupils to enable colleagues to consider links between their own and their pupils' learning in greater depth.
- Providing training and tools to enable staff to better understand their own learning and needs and draw on appropriate support.

TEACHER LEARNING ELSEWHERE IN THE UK: SCOTLAND

The education system in Scotland historically has evolved to be quite different from that in England. Legislation for education is the responsibility of the Scottish government rather than Westminster, thus totally different policies relating to CPDL exist in Scotland compared to England. Career-long professional learning for teachers in Scotland, for instance, comes under the Teaching Scotland's Future Programme (see Scottish Government 2014), while professional development in England, as noted previously, is not as coherently identified in policy initiatives. Despite this different policy context however, some of the same themes of teacher enquiry and partnership with HE institutions are evident in the vignette that follows. This has been written by a professor at Glasgow University (another editor of this volume), who has been working in partnership with local authorities and schools and is particularly interested in the role of university teacher educators in the creation and translation of knowledge about teaching and learning, and the relationship between theory and practice.

Vignette 3: Developing teacher learning communities through partnership in Glasgow

Vivienne Baumfield (University of Exeter)

The Glasgow West Teacher Education Initiative (GWTEI) began in 2010 as a partnership between the university, local authority and schools working together to develop a continuum of professional learning to improve the interconnection of theory with practice from initial to continuing teacher education. GWTEI was a response to 'Teaching Scotland's Future',³ a major review of teacher education by the Scottish government, drawing upon research into professional learning from around the world.⁴ The outcomes of the review provided sufficient weight of evidence of the benefits of working in partnership for the teaching profession to justify funding a project in the West End of Glasgow, involving university- and school-based teachers in the co-construction of the practicum experience for Initial Teacher Education students.

Schools in Glasgow are grouped into learning communities composed of clusters of secondary and primary schools. Students from the one-year postgraduate teacher education course (PGDE) at the University of Glasgow were placed in a learning community with two teacher educators allocated to work alongside mentors in the school throughout the practicum. Students were placed in the learning community in pairs or triads, including those

specialising in the primary phase and those with different subject specialisms in the secondary phase. GWTEI introduced three new elements into the practicum: learning rounds, school-based seminars and the joint evaluation of students. Learning rounds involve joint observation of a student teaching a class by their fellow students, the class teacher and one of the university teacher educators, followed by a group discussion. The seminar programme was designed to create a forum for debate on generic issues such as group work or formative assessment among all the participants, regardless of phase, subject specialism or whether they were student teachers, school staff or university teacher educators. Joint evaluation of students on practicum was designed to give more scope for assessment over the entire period of the practicum rather than the university teacher educator coming into the school on a pre-arranged visit to see the student teach a 'crit lesson'. All concerned felt that reliance on these isolated instances disadvantaged students and more consistency would be achieved through an approach that took account of the context and of changes over time.

The aspiration of GWTEI was to achieve an integrated approach to the formation of new teachers and improve the permeability of the boundaries between the school, the local authority and the university. Anticipated benefits for university-based teachers included insight into how schools were implementing recent educational developments and the opportunity to engage in classroom-based research and scholarship. For the school-based teachers, it was hoped that working more intensively with colleagues from the university would facilitate access to recent research, offering more scope for collaborative activity to enhance distributed leadership in schools and improving the quality of continuing professional development. During the initial planning stage of GWTEI, interviews with participants from the schools and the local authority indicated a high level of commitment to the overall vision of a collaborative approach to teacher education, which they considered to be underpinned by sound research. Given that the people involved at this stage had elected to join GWTEI, the positive tone of the responses is perhaps to be expected but reservations were expressed, with equity and sustainability being two areas of concern. Matching the rhythm of activity within and between schools and with the university was seen as problematic as this could restrict participation given the limited time and resources available. For example, the logistics of activities such as the learning rounds and seminars requiring movement of people between schools, the alignment of timetables and protected time away from the classroom were challenging. Sustaining the model beyond the pilot stage would require more than goodwill, as