

EMPOWERING TEACHERS! ... THROUGH PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

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On 16 May this year, The College of Teachers held its annual Awards Ceremony in the Jeffery Hall at the Institute of Education, University of London. This is an event where The College makes awards of the Honorary Fellowship to senior figures who have made a distinguished contribution to education nationally or internationally and also presents certificates to its own students who have successfully completed an accredited course.

Following the presentations, Professor Graham Handscomb, recently appointed as one of The College of Teachers' four Professors of Education, spoke about the development of school-based practitioner enquiry, to which he has made a considerable contribution. Professor Handscomb pioneered the concept of the Research Engaged School.



Thank you very much for the invitation to speak at this prestigious awards evening. I have attended many awards evenings over the years but really feel that this one is special. There is always a deep feeling of valuing teachers and their contribution in a genuinely personal way, and it is great to be a part of this.

Appropriately then, my talk today is on empowering teachers through practitioner research. I will explore a range of reflection that I and others have had about teacher enquiry and its value. I aim to be comprehensive but succinct, and am conscious of one of the many homilies that Abraham Lincoln was often prone to use, which featured in the recent great Oscar-winning film, Lincoln: "As the preacher says – I could write short sermons but once I start I am too lazy to stop". Well don't worry, in my enthusiasm for this subject I will make sure I don't overstay my welcome!

In the spirit of a good three-part lesson I will begin with an overview of what we might cover in my talk. I intend to explore first why teachers should engage in practitioner research; then look at the significant heritage of the teacher researcher movement. I will face up to some stark questions, including what counts as research and whether practitioner research is credible anyway. We will look at what

happens when we get a critical mass of research to nurture the development of the Research Engaged School. Then on to look further at the whole issue of collaboration and enquiry, professional development, the context of new forms of school organisation, and the current development of Research-Engaged Alliances. I will conclude with posing some fundamental questions about what the policy environment is doing to foster a culture of teacher enquiry.

Along the way I will pause to share the occasional poem with you because I quite like poetry and the power it has to illuminate, inspire and provide a different, stage-left perspective; but also because pausing to take stock, to reflect is also at the heart of the enquiry process, and so in a way it will provide a bit of modelling of practitioner research reflection.

Why should teachers engage in practitioner research?

So, to cut to the chase: Why should teachers (and indeed other staff) engage in practitioner research activity? With all the pressures and demands on teachers, is such involvement an indulgence they can ill afford?; laudable though reflection, enquiry and research are, is there not a danger that teachers will take their eye off the ball of the

main job of improving teaching and learning and raising standards?

Well, setting my banner out from the start, I want to claim that there is an increasing body of literature and school practice which indicates quite the contrary. Rather than being an effete activity which diverts energies from the school's core business, school-based enquiry and research are now being seen to make an important contribution to self-evaluation, improvement and the professional learning of staff. Engagement in and with research encourages practitioners to question, explore and develop their practice, making a significant contribution to improved teaching and learning. In fostering a school culture where teachers examine and critique their own practice, research activity can be an important and integral element of continuing professional development.

This last point is important. There is a great deal of evidence that teacher reflection and enquiry are a vital ingredient in professional learning. In a recent review of the literature on professional development that I conducted with Louise Stoll and Alma Harris, this was found to be one of the none strong claims we can make about great professional development which produces great pedagogy:

Claim 6: Effective professional development uses action research and enquiry as key tools

Commitment to research engagement is an important feature of professional learning because it fosters a proper regard for evidence which can be used to change practice and improve pupil outcomes. It also establishes research communities within and beyond the school that sustain professional learning over time. (Stoll, Harris and Handscomb, 2012)

In one sense the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The answer to the question why teachers should engage in research is to be found in schools and classrooms where teachers, singly or collaboratively, have engaged in some form of research and found it to be a highly satisfying and energising professional learning activity. For teachers who have participated in researching their own school and classrooms, it has not only brought new insights, new levels of understanding and new challenges, but it has enhanced the quality of teaching and learning at the same time (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003). This engagement also stems from the sense of a school as a learning organisation, where all members of the community are learners, and the headteacher is a leader of learning. I guess this is in contrast with what I recall a character in a John Updike novel saying: "I like to teach: it's easier than learning"!

So, some are advocating this holistic view that the critical enquiring approach to learning, which we foster in children, needs also to be reflected in the professional growth of teachers. What's good for children as learners is good for teachers too!

Far from being a distraction then, practitioner research can be seen as critical to a school's success. Seeking answers to basic practitioner questions that bubble up in the classroom has always concerned teachers, but never

before has it become so critical to a school's survival, growth and success. The third millennium school is required to be self-evaluating, open to scrutiny, evidenced-based, data-rich. But, as many commentators have suggested, schools are at the same time often 'information-poor' (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001; Wilkins, 2013). This is, in part, because teachers can feel little ownership of data they are expected to use, questioning both its value and validity. It is, nonetheless, high stakes, requiring 'delivery' rather than creation, 'implementation' rather than enquiry. Being kept busy undermines teachers' confidence to convert what they know or believe into a form that provides robust counter-evidence. It weakens their ability to speak with conviction that is grounded in their own professional context and experience. The value of CPD, which fosters research engagement, contains the potential for an 'enquiry' outlook which empowers and re-professionalises teachers. I will return to say more about this later.

But, to summarise thus far, in response to 'why engage in practitioner research', we can include the following:

Why engage in research?

Teachers researching their own schools and classroom have found it:

- encourages practitioners to question, explore and develop their practice.
- to be a highly satisfying and energising professional activity.
- has become an integral part of continuing professional development.
- has brought new insights, new levels of understanding and new challenges.
- has enhanced the quality of learning and teaching.
- has contributed to school improvement and success.

The heritage of teacher enquiry

The call for teachers to be researching their schools and the belief that they are the best people to be enquiring into their classroom practice has a significant pedigree.

Dewey (1929) described teachers' contributions to educational research as an 'unworked mine' and this is echoed later by Lawrence Stenhouse who coined the term 'teacher-as-researcher' in 1975 and proclaimed at the beginning of the 80s: "It is teachers who in the end will change the world of the school by understanding it" (Stenhouse, 1981, p125). In the 1990s Hargreaves began his long standing call "to treat practitioners themselves as the main (but not the only) source for creation of professional knowledge' (Hargreaves, 1999, p125). He said education should learn from industry and medicine in creating knowledge and called for a more central role for practitioner research in such knowledge creation, linking it directly to the agenda for school improvement (Hargreaves, 1999, p12). Others similarly argued for teachers to be more than the subjects or consumers of educational research and for practitioner research and enquiry to have a particular role in the generation of educational knowledge (Elliott, 1991; Rudduck & McIntyre, 1998; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

Philippa Cordingley and colleagues (Bell *et al.*, 2010) completed a comprehensive review of professional practitioner use of research in 2010. (I was privileged to be part of its Advisory Group). It began by charting the policy and practice background, starting with the then Teacher Training Agency's promotion of teaching as a research- and evidence-informed profession in 1996, followed by a range of tailored initiatives by central government departments and national government agencies to either improve teachers' access to research, or to encourage their engagement with it. The General Teaching Council produced its Research for Teachers Resource Bank, teachers' research was championed by the National Teacher Research Panel (made up of practising teachers) and the use of research was also embedded in CPD policies such as the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (to which I contributed) and the research lesson study of the Primary National Strategy.

Local authorities encouraged schools to use and engage in research for school improvement (Hemsley Brown and Sharp, 2003; Handscomb and Snelling, 2003; Myers, Handscomb and Prince, 2004; Sharp *et al.*, 2005; Handscomb and Sharp, 2007; Handscomb, Frost and Prince, 2009). Examples included Kirklees action research development and the range of initiatives and publications of the Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE) that I founded in Essex. In the learning and skills sector, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service promoted programmes in which practitioners systematically linked their evidence with others through peer benchmarking and coaching. Other agencies, including subject associations and the National Science Learning Centres, also promoted practitioner engagement in research. Research Consortia, which I helped to evaluate, were established in the late 1990s and you may remember the flourishing of Best Practice Research Scholarships (DfES, 2000); I recall the sad day when I was told of the abandonment of BPRS by the Schools Minister, one David Milliband!

Internationally, there is a very powerful tradition of practitioner research. McLaughlin (2004) charts participatory research as taking place most fully in Latin America, Africa and Asia (e.g. Freire, 1970).

Here it differed in that it was rooted in liberation pedagogy and aimed to “produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research, adult education and socio-political action. The second aim is to empower people through a second and deeper level through the process of constructing their own knowledge.” (Reason, 1994, p328) According to McLaughlin, its cause was to “engage the people in every stage of the research process and to alter the normal power relations between researchers and researched. The outsider is usually more in the role of facilitator” (McLaughlin, 2004, p11). Throughout the 1980s in the United States there was a groundswell of attention to teacher research (Bell *et al.*, 2010) and of “systematic intentional enquiry carried out by teachers”

(Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p23). Moving on, in 2003, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) claimed that:

Major knowledge and cultural changes [are] needed in the practice of teachers, researchers and policy makers... Teachers need to look beyond their schools for evidence and think rigorously about their practice. Policy makers need to ‘value’ and apply research evidence in the development of policy and implementation. Researchers must work more closely with teachers to improve the knowledge base on education practices. These changes are beginning to take place in a number of OECD countries (OECD, 2003, p3).

In 2007 the OECD explored the challenge of empowering teachers posed for policy makers and researchers (OECD, 2007) and the scene was later characterised as:

Engaging in research (teacher-as-researcher) and with research (using the public knowledge base to inform practice) are, in 2010, the subjects of considerable investment by OECD countries... (Bell *et al.*, 2010).

In terms of where we are now in this country compared with elsewhere, I will return to this in my closing remarks.

What counts as teacher research?

So there is a strong international driving force behind practitioner research, but are we clear as to what counts as teacher enquiry or research? How is it different from what a good teacher does in her classroom from day to day? The term ‘research’ can have unfortunate connotations – of white-coated boffins in laboratories, and unread impenetrable articles in esoteric journals. The experience of teachers working in schools that are committed to research is in sharp contrast to this stereotype. In these schools, research covers a wide gamut of activities, rooted in the day-to-day life of the classroom and the ongoing business of the school and its relationships with its community.

Perhaps for some, the notion of being a teacher-researcher is unhelpful and may be off-putting. A more useful term, which indicates the skills that are part of good teaching, is the teacher as enquirer, who is keen to reflect upon and critique his or her own practice. Such teachers make good use of research and evidence to stimulate new ways of thinking, trying out new ideas; then systematically evaluating the impact of any subsequent change in practice. In essence the unfortunate mystique of research can be debunked by seeing it as teachers asking some fundamental questions:

- What do we want to find out? (the research problem and research questions)
- What information do we need?
- How will we obtain the information?
- How will we check that the information gathered is sound and the methods for gathering it effective?
- How will we make sense of, and use, the information?
- How do we draw secure conclusions?
- Making judgements about recommendations for changed practice

In the debate within the British educational research community, there has been much questioning about whether school-based enquiry counts as ‘research’ and whether it has value. Teachers have long been involved in examining their practice in order to make further improvements, but when may such activity be described as ‘research’? What is the relationship between large-scale research conducted by a university department and a piece of evidence-informed practice carried out by a teacher within her classroom? And how is such evidence-informed practice different from what good teachers do anyway in refining and honing their craft in day-to-day lesson preparation and evaluation?

I am uncomfortable with too sharp a distinction between teacher enquiry/ reflection and research. Accepting Stenhouse’s (1981) definition of research as ‘systematic enquiry, made

public' allows us to encompass both the individual teacher focusing on one feature of her craft, as well as large-scale projects involving many schools. The important common element to both is an investigative process undertaken with rigour, concern for evidence and communicated to others.

So, just as teachers encourage their pupils to engage in enquiry, systematically and with a developing understanding of what constitutes 'evidence', so teachers observe the same principles. It is about turning intuitive and spontaneous judgments into more systematic investigations, and it starts with the everyday questions that teachers ask themselves:

- Why do children behave the way they do?
- Why do some children seem unable to learn?
- Why is my teaching sometimes effective and at other times not?
- What would make for a happier, more productive classroom?

I always think we rather lightly accept the challenge that such questions pose in terms of exploring the world as seen from the child's mind's eye. I remember the shock that teachers felt when Ruddock's research into the Years 3 and 8 gap revealed that children were seeing the classroom experience entirely differently from their teachers. The child's world is special and different from our adult ways of seeing things. With our adult preoccupations we struggle to enter this world and perhaps our only handle is that we have a vestigial memory from when we were once children. This is marvellously conveyed in the poem *Children's Song* by R.S. Thomas whose centenary it is this year:

We live in our own world
A world that is too small
For you to stoop and enter
Even on hands and knees,
The adult subterfuge.
And though you probe and pry
With analytic eye,
And eavesdrop all our talk
With an amused look,

You cannot find the centre
Where we dance, where we play,
Where life is still asleep
Under the closed flower,
Under the smooth shell
Of eggs in the cupped nest
That mock the faded blue
Of your remoter heaven.

Is practitioner research credible?

Now for the second of the hard questions: is practitioner research credible? McLaughlin rightly reflected: "There has been much debate about the quality, status and type of engagement of practitioners" (2004, p6) and goes on to identify a long tradition of tension between two contrasting aspirations for practitioner research and enquiry – its role, nature and purposes. One is that teachers should investigate their own practice to improve it. The other is for practitioner research to contribute to public knowledge about teaching and learning. I recall the debate that raged when the Centre for Action Research (CARN) advocated strongly that the evidence of teacher enquirers from their own classrooms was more important than that of other external researchers, whilst in contrast researchers like Foster and Gorrard "contested the validity of all teacher research in informing the practice of others" (Bell *et al.*, 2010).

At the heart of this often vitriolic debate about the value of practitioner research is the issue of the criteria by which it should be evaluated and whether this should be the same as that by which academic research is judged. I rather like the helpful contribution of McIntyre (2004) here. He suggested that we view educational research as a continuum of possibilities. He argues that there are three general criteria for judging educational research: its usefulness, its contribution to knowledge, and its methodological rigour; and the application of these criteria would be different depending on the type of research being undertaken (cited in McLaughlin, 2004). So different demands would be made of, for example, reflective teaching, action research and researching teaching and learning. For some this will not

be sufficient and will in their eyes leave practitioner research wanting; for others, myself included, we will be happy to go with McIntyre's compelling notion of 'good enough research':

There is a term known as 'good enough research' which means generating research designs that are valid and reliable to their purpose and their context., rather than to the purity of knowledge or its generalisability. School-based enquiry is often 'good enough research' (McIntyre, 2004).

The Research Engaged school

But what are the conditions in which such practitioner research and school-based enquiry might flourish? Some of the key issues relate to the potential lack of infrastructure or enquiry culture in a school that might be taken for granted in an academic institution. How can we avoid the situation of a loan researcher achieving limited gains because of lack of support or the small cadre of enthusiasts who fuel momentum for enquiry-based change, only for this to peter out when key members leave the school? One way forward has been to look at fostering practitioner research within a supportive Research Engaged School environment. Building on what we know about teachers-as-researchers and practitioner enquirers, John MacBeath and I explored the features that can typically be found in a school that was "research-engaged". If you were to walk into such a school how would you know; what would be its basic philosophy and would its commitment to practitioner research be reflected in the varied dimensions of school life? In overall terms we found that:

The Research Engaged School is one in which teachers believe it is in their interest, and in the interest of their pupils, to be critical of received wisdom, to be sceptical of easy answers, to have a desire for evidence and to foster 'aggressive curiosity'. It recognises that, at every level, there is research of some kind already ongoing, and finds ways of supporting this endeavour and making it more rigorous, transparent and of value,

not only to the school itself but to a wider constituency.” (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003)

Taking evidence from teachers engaged in research, higher education institutions and national organisations, a range of specific features were identified and grouped under the following headings:

- The Research Engaged School has a ‘research-rich’ pedagogy.
- The Research Engaged School has a research orientation.
- The Research Engaged School promotes research communities.
- The Research Engaged School puts research at the heart of school policy and practice. (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003)

Others have built upon this initial thinking about the Research Engaged School to explore the concept further (McIntyre, 2004; Sharp *et al.*, 2005; Handscomb and Sharp, 2007; Handscomb, 2009 and 2013; Wilkins, 2011 and 2013).

Wilkins considers that essentially the Research Engaged School has three characteristics:

- It undertakes its own research through a significant incidence of good quality internal practitioner research
- It accesses research findings from external sources and takes these into account in its work, and
- It is willing to be the subject of research undertaken by others (Wilkins, 2011, p2)

McIntyre outlined a number of tentative hypotheses about what facilitates the corporate engagement of teachers in research:

- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research depends on this being merely one element of an integrated strategy
- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research depends on the overall commitment to this strategy of the senior management.
- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research

depends on effective co-ordination of overall school development plans, with research projects voluntarily undertaken by individuals or groups of teachers.

- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research depends on active, informed and sensitive support for their research activities from a university department of education.
- An unresolved dilemma in relation to the value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research concerns the rigour and quality of the research that is necessary for school improvement purposes.
- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research depends on senior management’s reliable provision of significant resources, especially resources of time, to facilitate both the research and its effective use.
- The value for school improvement of teachers engaging in research depends on a long-term commitment by the school, including its governors. (McIntyre, 2004)

Returning to some schools which had been actively involved in research in an exercise sponsored by the DCSF, Caroline Sharp and I (Handscomb and Sharp, 2007) found that key ingredients to sustaining research engagement over time were:

- Action research focused on impact;
- Schools devoted resources to research;
- School leaders endorsed research;
- Research activity was recognised as professional development;
- Teacher researchers had mentoring support;
- The schools developed their capacity for research engagement.

This report also recommended the following for schools wishing to maximise the impact of teacher action research:

- Establish a school culture that is supportive of collaboration, enquiry and calculated risk-taking;

- Build action research into staff development activities, seeking opportunities for groups of staff to work collaboratively;
- Link action research explicitly with developments in learning and teaching;
- Find a way of aligning individual, departmental and whole school interests;
- Seek out opportunities to foster pupil/teacher dialogue through action research;
- Ensure teacher researchers have access to mentoring and expert advice;
- Consider how best to share the process, capture the learning and use the outcomes of the research within the school and the wider community;
- Plan for the long-term development of research engagement within schools and in the wider community;
- Be ambitious and confident about using action research to secure gains in pupil achievement. (Handscomb and Sharp, 2007)

Most reflections on the Research Engaged School emphasise the importance of school leadership – in providing support and legitimising practitioner enquiry but also in terms of recognising that enquiry is an important element of effective leadership and that good leaders themselves model the practice of practitioner research. This was recently illustrated in the findings of major research into highly effective leadership in Children’s Centres and the Foundation Stage, to which I contributed. (Sharp *et al.*, 2012)

The enquiry dimension was found to be one of seven core behaviours of successful system leadership, comprising knowledge, skills and attributes. (*See top of next page*).

So if we were to step into a Research Engaged School, what would it look like? The following gives some glimpses of a secondary school that has put research engagement at the heart of the school so that it has had impact on student

As a system leader I seek to embed evidence-based and innovative approaches to child development, parenting and early intervention across the system.		
Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
<p>Knowledge of research and evidence-based practice to identify effective programmes and approaches</p> <p>Knowledge and understanding of child development, parenting and community development</p> <p>Knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum development</p> <p>Knowledge of early intervention</p>	<p>Ability to interpret evidence and data</p> <p>Monitoring, evaluation and assessment skills, including gathering, interpreting and applying evidence</p> <p>Ability to help others develop evidence-based practice and evaluation skills</p> <p>Ability to establish a level playing field and cut through unhelpful hierarchies</p>	<p>Disposition to be enquiry minded, reflective, questioning and analytical</p> <p>Having a respect for evidence</p> <p>Solutions orientated</p> <p>Openness to new approaches and thinking outside the box</p>
<i>(Sharp, Lord, Handscomb, Macleod, Southcott, George and Jeffes, 2012, page 40)</i>		

outcomes as well as being the driving force for staff and school development.

At this 11-18 school a decision was taken that being a Research Engaged School would be at the core of its identity. This meant that everyone – headteacher, staff and pupils – would be active enquirers. As well as using its own resources for research, the school has secured additional funding to support the school’s wide range of research-engaged activity. The school thinking and development was also informed by the local authority’s pioneering framework on how to become a Research Engaged School.

The headteacher feels that the number of staff with research experience has reached a ‘tipping point’, with approximately 45 of the 60 teaching staff having completed a piece of action research. The school arranged for a professor from Cambridge University to meet with each of ten teacher-researchers for half an hour every term. She encourages teachers to relate their work to the wider evidence base. School staff can visit the university library to find research related to their field of study.

When completed, each piece of research is reported in a short written account in the school’s *Learning Lessons* research publication. These are made

available to staff, parents and governors. A fee of £200 is given to any member of staff willing to write up a colleague’s research where the writer interviews the teacher-researcher and then produces a draft report of up to 1,000 words, focusing on the applications of the research to practice.

The school also exemplifies the Research Engaged School dimension of promoting research communities within and beyond the school. It spends a third of its Specialist Schools budget on working with other schools and this has involved several research investigations, including a junior school project on the impact of parents continuing to read to their children and another investigating the use of diagnostic tests in maths. The school also arranges joint meetings with other Research Engaged Schools locally and further afield to share the findings of their action research.

All action research projects are designed with impact in mind. Staff work on an issue of their own choosing and implement new approaches to bring about improvements. Each research project is designed to have an impact on the lives and life chances of young people. The school is actively involving students as co-researchers such as in a

development where teachers ask students to help evaluate new teaching approaches by recording their reactions in learning logs. Teachers’ research engagement has a positive effect on students in general and the headteacher concludes that “students benefit from enthusiastic teachers who engage in active dialogue with them”. (Adapted from Handscomb and Sharp, 2007)

It is interesting how this account picks up and illustrates each of the four dimensions of a Research Engaged School mentioned earlier. One of these is the important feature of developing collaborative research partnerships.

Collaboration, enquiry and the Research Engaged Alliance!

There is extensive literature on the fundamental relationship between collaboration and professional learning, and on how enquiry can act as the cathartic yeast in this relationship:

Thinking interdependently, being able to work and learn well with other people and learning from and with others is a habit of an intelligent mind. Learning with and from others isn’t just enjoyable; it’s a natural way to learn. (Stoll, 2012, p7)

As a profession we have come to understand that bringing about this culture of continuous improvement

is a joint enterprise. We need to learn from each other, within and between schools, to tap into the professional expertise that lies latent in the system, and to learn from what works!"
(Handscomb, 2012, p3)

... Improvements in teaching are most likely to occur where there are opportunities to work together and learn from each other... ,For teacher development ... to occur commitment to certain kinds of collaboration is centrally important. However, collaboration without reflection and enquiry is little more than collegiality. For collaboration to influence personal growth and development has to be premised upon mutual enquiry and sharing.
(Harris, 2002, pp102-3)

The pattern of education in England is shifting. Schools that once were islands are becoming connected. Indeed, it is increasingly rare to find outstanding schools that do not have a web of links with other schools. Competition remains, but now co-exists with collaboration and the creation of formal alliances through federations and chains.
(Matthews *et al.*, 2011, p5)

As the last quote indicates, in an era of new forms of school organisation and the forging of new ways of schools connecting, there is an even greater premium on schools learning and sharing together. But the sharing of knowledge and practitioner expertise and insight between classrooms, let alone between schools, is a considerable challenge that is often overlooked in the rhetoric about collaboration:

If one teacher tells another about a practice that he (she) find effective, the second teacher has merely acquired information, not personal knowledge. Transfer occurs only when the knowledge of the first becomes information for the second, who then works on the information in such a way that it becomes part of his or her context of meaning and purpose and pre-existing knowledge want the is applied in action...

Transfer is the conversion about one person's practice into another's know-how. (Hargreaves, 1998, p46)

The big challenge therefore will be to explore what research engagement across a group schools working within an Alliance looks like and how does an Alliance enhance the capacity of a school to be research-engaged. I am currently facilitating Teaching School Alliances in the Midlands, South and Southwest helping them develop great pedagogy through collaborative enquiry, and am also working with a group of schools in a Trust in Kent to specifically explore the development of a Research Engaged Alliance. It will be interesting to see what new understanding emerges. In the meantime there is a pressing need to do more to support and nurture schools and their teachers to become research-engaged. This partly involves providing resources like Futurelab's *7-step Toolkit* (Mills, 2013), but it also raises crucial questions about policy frameworks and political support.

Filling the policy vacuum: teacher enquiry and professionalism

I am conscious that there are whole significant areas that there has not been space to cover in this talk: such as the contribution that practitioner research can make to school self-evaluation (Handscomb and Ramsey, 2008) or the important development of children researchers and the issues this raises for the relationship with teacher practitioners within the enquiring school community (Handscomb, Frost and Prince, 2009). Another time perhaps. For now I want to finish with a few thoughts about the enquiring teacher and the nature of professionalism.

I mentioned earlier the great tradition of participatory research elsewhere in the world. Recently, our CoT President has valuably charted how reflective practice and enquiry have been built into national expectations of teachers in countries as diverse as Canada, Fiji, China and Chile. He comments that in contrast "the one place in the English system where practitioner research is officially encouraged is in Teaching Schools (Wilkins, 2013, p42). Like

me, he sees teacher enquiry not just as a nice laudable extra for the few enthusiasts but as a vital empowering activity which is at the heart of what it means to be a professional: "Research engagement, especially if combined with active participation in professional bodies and learned societies, gives teachers a supportive professional community which is independent from their employing institution".
(Wilkins, 2013, p47).

Back in 2004 John MacBeath and I set out a list of actions for Government to champion practitioner research, drawn from the recommendations of the National Education Research Form (NERF, 2001; Handscomb and MacBeath, 2004). I think it is timely to revisit and update these for 2013:

Ten ways to support practitioner research

- Hard and fast distinctions between researchers and research-users should no longer be made.
- More research should be undertaken in partnership between policymakers, practitioners and professional researchers and should be funded on this basis.
- Teacher reflection and enquiry should be built into the National Standards for Teaching and for Leadership.
- More should be done to develop user-friendly access to research reports, and the outcomes of research, for practitioners.
- Expectations of research engagement should be built into the criteria for national education initiatives such as Teaching Schools and new forms of school organisation like Academies and Free Schools.
- Collaboration on research initiatives between schools, colleges and higher education institutions and other stakeholders at local and regional level should be made easier.
- Collaborative enquiry and research should be promoted across Alliances, chains and

school families. Alliances should be encouraged to seek ways to support, resource and enhance research engagement as a key feature of their role.

- All teachers should have an entitlement to research and training to develop their role as: critical users of research, as participants in research initiatives, and as teacher-researchers. Schools and Alliances should see this as an important and prioritised responsibility.
- All schools and colleges should have an entitlement, and perhaps a responsibility, to participate in relevant research.
- The profile of practitioner research should be raised and enhanced through further development of national awards for practitioner researchers and research-engaged institutions.
(Handscomb, 2013)

I want to end with a final poem: *Fire* by Judy Brown. W.B. Yeats once reflected that “Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.” I’ve used this Judy Brown poem in a number of contexts including portraying the role of the teacher to fuel the flames of learning in children. However, I think it is also resonates with the nature of teacher enquiry and the spaces we need to create to enable such vibrant enquiry to ignite and spread.

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.
So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.
When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how

it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible.
We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.
A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.

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