TEACHER RESEARCH AS TESOL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY

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MARGARET KITCHEN AND MAREE JEURISSEN
University of Auckland

ABSTRACT: *This article outlines a case study of a group of teacher-researchers who carried out individual research projects investigating aspects of second language acquisition with students in mainstream primary and secondary schools. The teachers were undertaking professional development in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). The teacher-researchers all successfully completed their projects but overcame many hurdles in order to do so. The constraints of carrying out teacher research are discussed and implications and recommendations for the provision of a healthy research culture in New Zealand schools are suggested.*

> *It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it.*
>
> (Stenhouse, as cited in Rudduck, 1995: 3)

BACKGROUND

In 2003 we activated two teacher research papers that had been written for the Graduate Diploma in TESSOL (Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages) at the Faculty of Education, Epsom Campus, Auckland University (formerly the Auckland College of Education). The first paper involved investigating research methods, defining a topic, writing a literature review and then a research proposal. In the second paper, teachers had to implement the research, submit a written report and present the findings at a research symposium at the end of the year. Pre-requisites for the papers were the successful completion of the four core papers of the Diploma. This meant the teachers enrolling in the course had good background knowledge of second language acquisition theory and pedagogy and had begun to think about a topic they would like to investigate in depth. Eleven teachers began the papers and nine completed them. This was a relatively small number but nevertheless we were excited to have begun and the teachers were extremely committed to and motivated by their research projects. We looked forward to having larger numbers the following year, hoping that the successes and excitement of the 2003 students would encourage more teachers to enrol in 2004.

We were disappointed then, when in January 2004, the papers were cancelled due to insufficient enrolments. This disappointment provided the motivation to investigate why teachers were reluctant to embark on a classroom-based research project. Our experiences had shown us that teacher research had been a powerful and effective method of professional

development. We decided to carry out a research project with the 2003 group of teacher-researchers in an effort to identify barriers and enablers for planning and implementing classroom based research.

TEACHER RESEARCH IN NEW ZEALAND

While teacher research as a driver of teacher professional identity and better quality teaching and learning has long been recognised internationally (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Lewin, 1946; Stenhouse, 1975), it is a concept and practice that is relatively new for New Zealand primary and secondary school teachers. New Zealand is racing to catch up and the focus is on small-scale research to improve students' literacy and numeracy levels. Provision of funding and supportive conditions are in the emergent stage here, especially in the school context of language learning through mainstream content for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, a group who often miss out when the focus is on 'literacy' (Hammond, 1999).

Collection and analysis of baseline data informing classroom interventions have in recent years been the focus of Ministry of Education initiatives aiming to raise student literacy levels. These research initiatives may enable New Zealand teachers to join the mainstream movement focusing on instructional effectiveness and improvement in student literacy outcomes. In primary schools the *Literacy Leadership* initiative began in 2000 and a research component was added in 2004; in secondary schools the *Effective Literacy Strategies* professional development and the *Pasifika Literacy* contracts both have research components. In secondary schools, for example, the *Effective Literacy Strategies* professional development programme seeks to raise students' literacy levels through teacher research: '…the action research model is fundamental to this professional learning programme because it focuses on improving classroom practice.' (Ministry of Education 2004: 32). Supporting these initiatives is the Best Evidence Synthesis research commissioned by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2003).

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

In New Zealand we need to provide the conditions whereby our teachers become the 'high risk-takers we need to develop innovative practice' (Loughran, Mitchell & Mitchell 2002: 253). Even where there has been a tradition of teacher research, enabling conditions are difficult to put in place (Richards, 2003).

What conditions enable teacher research? In the conclusion to a book detailing eleven teacher research projects carried out by Australian teachers, Ian Mitchell establishes the need for more research into this question. He argues that it is vital to investigate further the nature of teacher research and poses the following questions: How should it proceed? What are its strengths? What are its unique characteristics and limitations? What sorts of conditions are needed to support and sustain it? (Loughran et al., 2002). The benefits of teacher research may be critical to school success, as Richards (2003) suggests, but the creation of a climate and structure that will allow more such contributions to the research literature, continue to be problematic. In Australia

Burns, likewise, suggests we know little about how teachers of English language learners view and carry out research. We don't know '*What kinds of support structures or information are needed … and what conditions promote or hinder the doing of action research'* (Burns, 1999: 1*)* Although Burns is focusing on the collaborative nature of action research, her claims are appropriate for second language acquisition research in New Zealand.

This small-scale study examined these questions in the New Zealand primary and secondary school context.

WHAT WE DID

Two primary and six secondary school teachers who carried out research in 2003 as part of research papers in the Diploma of TESSOL (Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages) and/or a Ministry of Education Research Contract, were invited and agreed to participate in the study. All teachers investigated an issue involving second language acquisition but each decided on their own specific topic.

As the purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of this specific group of teachers, case study – defined by Brown and Rodgers (2001: 21) as 'an intensive study of the background, current status and environmental interactions of a social unit: an individual, a group, an institution, or a community' – was the chosen methodology. The group of teachers involved in the project each had information to contribute to the research which was based on real lived experiences and their willingness to share these openly and honestly provided valuable insights into the realities and possibilities of teacher research.

A questionnaire, including 28 Likert scale questions and two open-ended questions, was sent to the teachers to establish an overview of their attitudes and beliefs surrounding teacher research. The responses to the questionnaire were collated and analysed for marginal frequency distributions using the SPSS software package. Cross tabulation to examine relationships between certain variables was also carried out.

Focus group interviews were also carried out in order to investigate in more depth teachers' responses to the questionnaire. Teachers were interviewed in two groups of four and discussion was encouraged. The interviews, which were audio-taped, were transcribed by both writers and each separately identified the key themes which that emerged.

WHAT WE FOUND

There was considerable variation in responses to both the questionnaire and the interview questions to do with level of interest and support from the schools. Clearly some teachers felt very supported whilst others did not. Other factors emerged that were either constraining or enabling for the teacher-researchers. So what was it that made a difference?

The school

It became clear that some schools had an environment that fostered teacher research and others did not. The type of environment directly influenced teachers' willingness to contemplate another research project or encourage

other colleagues to do so. Schools with a positive attitude had senior management and others who were also involved in study. They also had systems in place for regular feedback from staff who had undertaken PD (professional development).

Those teachers with the closest links to management tended to have the most support. For example, one of the secondary school teachers, Chloe, chose to investigate the effectiveness of a thinking skills programme in her school. Chloe was in a senior position in her school and her topic was aligned with, and specifically written into, the school strategic plan. The following interview extract illustrates the level of support she had from the school:

> *Anything I wanted to do … I was given time to work with teachers … given freedom to do it …*

Sadly, however, the majority of teachers involved in the study did not have experiences like Chloe's. They felt that their schools did not value their research. In these cases, teachers talked about how busy and overwhelmed staff were in just dealing with day to day demands of their jobs. Also mentioned was the fact that some teachers were cynical about research because they had had negative experiences with academic researchers in the past where they felt they had been 'used'. In some cases the teacher-researchers explained that there was resentment from some staff who believed that release time and/or school funds had been used to support the research. David, a secondary school science teacher, made the following comment referring to the Teacher Release Days [TRDs] which had been allocated to him as part of a Ministry of Education Contract:

> *Management were not going to be happy with me taking all that (TRDs). So, I said, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to take them'. I felt I had to [say this].*

Neither of the two primary school teachers felt well supported in their research beyond the syndicate level. These teachers believed that teacher research was undervalued in primary schools, more so than in secondary schools. This comment from Amy, a primary school teacher, is indicative of their beliefs:

> *Management people who have been there for a long time and haven't done study themselves don't realise the value study can bring to the school and the staff as a whole.*

David and Amy's comments exemplify McNiff and Whitehead's (2002) contention that it is extremely difficult for teachers to be researchers wanting to change their own situations in the face of sometimes entrenched hostile attitudes. Nunan (1992: 8) illuminates these difficulties further saying, 'Even in those projects where limited time out was provided by the administration, the lack of recognition given to the additional efforts which teachers put into their projects led to a feeling of demoralisation'.

Time

It was no surprise to learn that time and workload were major constraints for the teacher-researchers. As Richards (2003: 7) states, 'The time required to do even the most limited research project is immense'. Teachers who were on the Ministry Contract were given some TRDs to support them in their research, but as David's comments above illustrated, they didn't always feel they could use these days. As well as feeling other staff would resent the taking of leave, there were also concerns about 'falling behind' in other areas if time was taken to do research. Because of these concerns, teachers suggested that ongoing release time over a term or two terms [e.g., one period/class a week] would be more useful than TRDs.

Primary school teachers tended to feel more constrained by time than secondary teachers. They had less flexibility than secondary teachers and often no 'non-contact' time. The two primary teachers in the study were not full-time classroom teachers. One was part-time in the classroom and part-time doing reading recovery and the other had some release time to work with teacher aides. Both said it would have been impossible to do their research if they had been full-time in the classroom. Rachel said:

> *If you are in a classroom full time I don't think you could do it. Young children – they don't leave you alone. You get interrupted. You can't observe, do tally marks, and teach!*

All the teachers in the study said that the demanding nature of teacher research meant that they would encourage others to carry out research only if they possessed particular qualities. These were, first and foremost, the ability to manage time effectively, and also the ability to be highly organised, motivated and passionate about the chosen research topic.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Another significant factor which impacted on the teachers' research experiences was the ability to understand and manage the research process itself. For all of the teachers the project they undertook in 2003 was their first experience of carrying out a systematic and conscious piece of research. As they were involved in course work and/or contracts, support and guidance were provided. Specific help for each stage of the research process was given in the form of lectures, workshops, and exemplars for those involved in the Grad Dip TESSOL papers. All teachers had an assigned supervisor with whom they kept in regular contact via email, phone, or face-to-face meetings. Whilst the teachers all found this support invaluable, several aspects of the research process emerged as being particularly challenging or constraining.

It became clear that the task of learning about the research process itself at the same time as learning about their particular research topic was almost overwhelming for the teachers. Amy described how she felt when she first began the research:

> *We came in quite cold. It was overwhelming … daunting …*

Some suggested that aspects of the research process could be introduced earlier on in the qualification [i.e., the Grad Dip TESSOL]. This way teachers would be familiar with the research process before embarking on their own particular project.

Narrowing and defining a research topic was the most difficult part of the research process for all the teachers. Even though they had completed the process at the time of the interviews it was clear that some still thought they could have done smaller and simpler projects. The following quotes from Marion and Carol respectively, illustrate the teachers' thoughts.

I needed to have much cleaner lines.

I loved the autonomy but I needed to be pinned down.

Teachers found the autonomous nature of carrying out their own research project extremely motivating and empowering, but as Carol's comment above indicated, this needed to be carefully balanced with appropriate guidance in the form of supervision from lecturers. Some suggested that more regular feedback of a formal nature from lecturers would have been helpful. For example, teachers could submit a draft research proposal which could be commented on before submitting a final proposal. This would then enable teachers to refine and rethink their ideas again before final submission.

Some teachers talked about a feeling of loneliness while carrying out their research and said if they did another research project they would like to have a partner. It was clear that being part of a group helped the teachers to manage the research process and persevere when problems seemed insurmountable. They talked about how important it was to be able to come to lectures and share their problems and concerns and find out that others were having similar experiences. The one teacher in the study who was involved in the Ministry Contract only and not able to come to lectures, would have liked to have had the supportive group involvement that the others had. However, she was working in the same school as one of the other teacher-researchers and so was able to share ideas and concerns with her, which was very valuable. It was suggested that teacher-researchers in future could work collaboratively on one project, rather than on individual projects.

Disseminating findings

All teachers were expected to present their research at least once at a research symposium specifically organised for this purpose. Most were able to also present their work to members of their own school communities such as Staff and Board of Trustees. Some took the opportunity to present at larger education conferences and write for publication such as *Many Voices* and *ESOL [English for speakers of Other Languages] Online*. Interestingly, when the teachers first began their research projects, the thought of having to present their findings to an audience was daunting to say the least – they certainly would have considered this a constraint! However, when talking about this aspect of the research having completed the work, they told a very different story. Being able to share their stories, journeys, and findings with others was extremely rewarding, empowering, and motivating. Sadly, one of

the teachers had been unable to disseminate her findings beyond her own school and it was clear that not having access to a wider audience of some kind was constraining and frustrating for her. It is important that if we are to take seriously the business of creating an environment which will nurture teacher research then there must be places where the voices of teacher-researchers can be seen and heard, beyond their own school gates. As Stenhouse (1975, as cited in Loughran & Northfield, 1996: 1) states, 'A research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved'.

WHAT WE THINK SHOULD HAPPEN NOW

Richards (2003: 16) explains succinctly what needs to happen if research is to be a reality for more teachers in New Zealand:

> We really need to get more systematic support for teacher researchers at the district level. We would need to have many supervisors getting involved to support the teachers and make the conditions right in the schools for those who want to tackle classroom research … Without someone in this middle management level to support the teachers, they will not have that much success … Without this systematic commitment, most teachers in most schools will not become involved despite the importance of teacher research to school success.

The eight teacher-researchers in this study demonstrated that change can be generated for good when teachers take responsibility for their own work, try out interventions, and monitor these closely in order to improve teaching and learning. However, they all managed to overcome significant constraints in order to achieve such positive results for themselves and their students. If teacher research is to become a real option for professional development in New Zealand schools, and we believe that it should be, then certain conditions need to be put in place. This emerging and worthwhile field of teacher research needs to be supported by:

1. Continued opportunities for teacher research that involve professional support because learning how to carry out research takes time and energy;
2. School management (a factor especially for the primary school teachers);
3. Professional development funding;
4. Funding structures that allow meaningful release time – release from one class for a length of time rather than TRDs;
5. Collegial support, perhaps from a cluster of teachers in one school researching the same question; and
6. Teacher-researchers being given avenues to disseminate their findings (*Many Voice*s will need more than one edition per year if this publication outlet is to be used).

CONCLUSION

Teacher research is in the emergent stages in New Zealand schools and needs to be well disseminated and actively supported from the top. Ellis (1997: 22) contends that 'Teachers should become more than consumers of theories and research; they should become researchers and theorists in their own right'. Our investigation of teacher-researchers has shown that teachers can become researchers; and indeed, our teachers found the process empowering, rewarding, and successful in improving classroom practice. Many described the experience as the most valuable professional development they had ever done. However, there were many stumbling blocks along the way and many times when the teachers felt like giving up – but they didn't.

These teachers are to be applauded as they are pioneers in an exciting era of education in New Zealand. However, we must not allow our applause to drown out their pleas for help in creating more favourable conditions for teacher research so that those teachers who began but did not finish their research, and those who have wanted to begin but have been too afraid, will have the courage to embark on a journey of learning with their students. We are confident that many more teachers will take this journey, if they know they will be helped along the way.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Margaret Kitchen has a background in secondary school English and ESOL teaching and currently lectures in the Graduate Diploma of TESSOL (Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages) at the Faculty of Education, Epsom Campus, University of Auckland (formerly Auckland College of Education). She is also project leader for *ESOL Online* at Unitec in Auckland.

Maree Jeurissen has a background in primary teaching as a mainstream and ESOL teacher. She currently lectures in the Graduate Diploma of TESSOL at the Faculty of Education, Epsom Campus, University of Auckland (formerly Auckland College of Education).