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Practice and performance: changing perspectives of teachers through collaborative enquiry

Volha Arkhipenka, Susan Dawson, Siti Fitriyah, Susan Goldrick, Andrew Howes  and Nahielly Palacios

Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Background: This paper considers the role of collaborative enquiry as a means of developing equity in education. The context was a collaborative project in which a university was supporting local schools in carrying out enquiry into their practice, with the purpose of moving the practice towards greater equity.

Purpose: The research question addressed is as follows: What characterises and explains teachers' different and changing perspectives in a process of enquiry directed towards more equitable schooling?

Sample: Participants were teachers involved in a systematic process of collaborative action research in the north-west of England.

Design and methods: During an 11-month period, spanning a school year, the authors engaged with teachers, supporting enquiry processes. Teachers' perspectives were explored as they participated in this enquiry network. The study design was ethnographic, with tools introduced to generate systematic data within the process. In particular, five months into the process, 16 of the teachers were invited to participate in an activity based on Q-sort methodology. They were asked to rank, and comment on, statements which described how they might be thinking about, and responding to, the enquiry process.

Results: Analysis of the ways that teachers sorted the cards led to identification of four groups of participants: (1) those focused on practice, (2) research, (3) collaboration and (4) those feeling themselves to be outsiders to the process. As the two dominant perspectives were 'practice' and 'research' (groups 1 and 2), two contrasting case studies were then developed in order to explore the perspectives in more detail. While the initial questions generated by the participants arose out of their existing development plans, and both aimed to contribute to equity in the school, analysis showed that the processes in the two schools differed and suggested that teachers' experience of enquiry in the two case studies was also different, both in terms of the ways they were empowered to consider their own work critically, and the contexts in which they worked.

Conclusions: Enquiry can work as a tool, offering teachers a way of tackling a problem. But, in addition, enquiry can change the way teachers see themselves, overall leading to a deepening of teacher professional identity.

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Introduction: a collaborative research process focused on the development of equity in schools

The context of this paper is a network of enquiry schools (henceforth NES): a collaborative project between a university in the north of England and schools located within the region. Through the project, the university supports the local schools in carrying out enquiry into their practice, with the purpose of moving the practice towards greater equity.

It is well known that there are many different definitions of 'equity' in relation to education and there are many debates and discussions in the literature about its conceptualisation and application (Jordan 2010; Unterhalter 2009). A wider conceptual and theoretical discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper; however, in order to contextualise our study, it is important to present the working definition of equity that we used. Our operational understanding is that equity comprises two elements: 'inclusion' and 'fairness' (Deppeler and Ainscow 2016). Inclusion is indicated by the proportion of young people who gain the minimum skills necessary to function in today's society (Field, Kuczera, and Pont 2007), while fairness is evident where individual and social situations (beliefs, personal background, socio-economic status, migratory status, etc.) in no way determine access to any particular type of education (Deppeler and Ainscow 2016).

The project is based on the understanding that, for greater equity to be achieved, it is important to ask questions about current practices, and explore the possibility of empowerment towards internal change. The project promotes an ongoing search for increased understanding which is stimulated by evidence gathered about pupils' experiences of learning, open dialogue and reflection. The aspiration was that, over time, this ongoing search would become part of both the school culture and teachers' way of thinking.

NES was established six years ago, but can trace its origins to a research-informed school improvement collaboration called Improving the Quality of Education for all (IQEA) which was first implemented in 1989 (Hopkins, West, and Ainscow 1996). Since 2011, the project has involved 25 local primary and secondary schools – the majority of which serve disadvantaged communities – in over 40 enquiries, each lasting a year. Many schools extend their involvement beyond a year, progressively making more substantial changes to their practices and cultures. The enquiry activities in the schools vary greatly depending on their student demographic, their school cultures and the pressures they are under to meet performance targets.

In terms of procedure, a school participating in NES sets up a team of school staff comprising people with diverse roles and perspectives. This group will lead the enquiry developments in their schools. The university researchers visit the school teams in their schools to give them direct support, help them identify a focus in relation to pupils who are disadvantaged in some way and develop approaches to gathering and making sense of evidence arising from their practice. Several cross-school workshops are also held throughout the year. The enquiry teams come together to share and learn from each other about their enquiry experiences, and are facilitated by the university researchers, who act as critical friends.

While simple to describe, this approach is a complex social process anchored in diverse school contexts and communities. It involves a variety of people coming from wide-ranging professional backgrounds and framed by a policy context which is arguably at odds with the spirit of teacher-led collaborative enquiry. The perceptions that teachers have of this

process have an important influence on the way the process is enacted and becomes meaningful in each individual school. For example, the balance between enquiry and development in any one school reflects to a large extent the priorities that are expressed and understood by those who participated in the school. It is this aspect that we want to explore in this paper, by attending to teachers' talk, and reflections on the process, and by building on the understandings generated in previous research in this area (Frankham and Howes 2006; Howes et al. 2005).

Collaborative enquiry

Studies about collaborative enquiry suggest that teachers who engage in collaborative research develop a greater awareness of their own educational practice and research participation (Galligan 2011; Sinnema, Sewell, and Milligan 2011). For example, Galligan's (2011) qualitative study, whose purpose was to examine the effect of collaborative enquiry on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and competence to improve student learning, indicated that when involved in such inquiry, teachers became more conscious of their own teaching practice and seemed to have learned new ways of teaching.

The studies also suggest that collaborative enquiry can be a means to encourage teachers to widen their networks and discover ways to learn from one another. Collaborative inquiry encourages teachers who would typically work on their own to enter unfamiliar territory and experiment together willingly. This can provide a powerful experience of working with others, getting input and learning from others (Bray 2002). Establishing such networks is an advantage for teachers, as it may break down isolation, enable collaborative professional learning to find joint solutions to shared problems, encourage exchanges of practice, knowledge and expertise and foster school improvement (Hopkins 2010, cited in Butler and Schnellert 2012).

When the scope of the endeavour is extended into inter-school collaboration, the benefits yielded may intensify. Atkinson et al. (2007), in their review of the literature on inter-school collaboration, observe that such 'combined effort' was seen to yield better outcomes than a single school effort, as 'collaboration helps bring schools together to strengthen their efforts and in doing so, empowers schools that otherwise would be struggling to achieve their aspirations' (57–58).

Meanwhile, other studies (such as Darling-Hammond 2011; Zeichner 2012) suggest that an immensely important outcome of collaborative research is the shift by teachers towards higher levels of teaching self-efficacy, whereby teachers' self-perception of themselves as influential individuals who can help their students in their school achievements develops throughout their educational practice. These findings reflect Joyce and Showers' (2002) claim that researching collaboratively can support teacher efficacy, especially when it is rooted in teachers' own curiosity and queries. Further, Rudd et al. (2003, 3), in their report on inter-school partnership in Leeds, observe that one of the benefits of such collaborative work was improving 'teacher confidence, due to the support received from colleagues'.

Collaborative enquiry may encourage teachers to think reflectively. In studies conducted by Zeichner and Caro-Bruce (1998) and Zeichner and Klehr (1999), teachers stated that they learned to 'step back' and analyse what they were trying to explore. Throughout the research process, they became more concerned with the need for information that would allow them to see and understand the problem or situation they were focusing on. Other teachers



emphasised the importance of dialogue with colleagues about concerns with their own research project and commented that the research process became a powerful tool to promote reflective thinking.

In this paper, we present two case studies that explore and illustrate the use of collaborative enquiry as a means of achieving greater equity in schools. Ainscow et al. (2016) argue that in order for schools to achieve greater equity through collaborative inquiry, national policy-makers should promote 'greater flexibility at the local level so that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular situations and determine priorities accordingly' (17).

Regarding this flexibility, Ainscow and Southworth (1996) emphasise the importance of 'working with, rather than working on' teachers. It is crucial, when working with external agencies such as research centres, that a school is allowed 'considerable autonomy to determine its own priorities for development and, indeed, its methods for achieving these priorities' (Ainscow et al. 2016). With such autonomy, schools can be the owners of their own research and pursue their own objectives. However, external pressures may pose a threat to this approach to collaborative research because it is increasingly at odds with the centralisation of educational policy (Ainscow et al. 2016). Contradictions emerge between processes that emphasise teachers' ownership of changes in their practice, and processes driven by teachers' accountability to external authority. Focusing attention on the concepts of practice and performance can help frame these contradictions.

Tensions between Practice and Performance

Practice stands out in these studies as a central focus of enquiry. Practice here is understood as concerned not only with what people do; rather, it is inherently associated with their developing understanding, identity and value. A useful reference point here is MacIntyre's (1985) definition of practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions to the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (187)

Practice, in this sense, can be seen as practitioners having a growing understanding and conception of what is good in that activity, and also in the development of their capacity to achieve that good. To practise is to 'extend' the powers of those practising and their conceptions of what is good while developing their practice at the same time: a view which resonates with the emergence of the notion of 'efficacy' in the literature on teacher development (Kleinsasser 2014). The practice of education, in this view, involves reflection on young people's experiences in and outside school, and involves teachers in considering what is of most value in this process, and their own part in it. This perspective situates collaborative enquiry as part of teachers' practice, rather than as something that they engage in to develop that practice. It is in line with the construct of 'inquiry as stance' (Cochran-Smith and Lyle 1999, 18), which

permits a closer understanding of what kind of knowledge is produced through inquiry, how inquiry relates to practice, and what teachers learn from inquiry across the professional life span and within widely varying contexts.

However, as has been suggested, this is a perspective on education that fits uneasily with a system focusing on particular externally mandated outcomes, described by Ball (2003) as a 'regime of performativity':

A technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. (216)

In this conceptualisation, schools and teachers in the English context may be described as situated within such a performance and accountability culture as they experience significant external pressure to perform. This performance, which is generally measured through the publicised outcome of national tests in league tables and official school inspections on teaching and learning practice and school organisation, has consequences for the way teachers perceive their role and come to judgements about what is valuable. There is a possibility, therefore, that teacher enquiry in this situation can easily become focused on display, or outcomes. It is against this backdrop that NES provides a critical context for further investigation of the place and value of collaborative enquiry – due in part to the tensions created for teachers by this system-wide accountability, and because of the expressed intention of NES towards greater equity.

A starting point for this investigation was with the teachers themselves, positioned within the system, participating in enquiry as part of NES, and making sense of their own practice in this context. Their perspectives, therefore, offer contributions to our understanding of: how engaging in a process of collaborative enquiry focused on enhancing equity in practice might be embraced by those working within an increasingly performance-orientated context.

The research question was thereby identified as follows: What characterises and explains teachers' different and changing perspectives in a process of enquiry directed towards more equitable schooling?

Methodology

Ethical considerations

The project gained approval from the university ethics committee. The active engagement of participants within a collaborative inquiry project meant that they were well informed in relation to research ethics, and in a relatively strong position to consent to participating in research themselves, from that informed position. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the collaborative process at the beginning of the school year, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality both for individual teachers and for the schools involved. Details of schools and participants have been disguised in order to maintain confidentiality, through the use of pseudonyms throughout, and through the introduction of fictional elements of the settings where necessary.

Procedure

Two main approaches were taken to the generation of data for this paper. The first was ethnographic in approach, with researchers engaging in conversations and observations in



seminars in the university and on visits to schools to support the enquiry process. There was no intention to record discussions at this stage, but this collaborative work alerted researchers to the types of changes that were happening in schools, and to ways that these may have resulted from teachers' participation. It also informed the second approach, which was based on a structured process called Q-sort (McKeown and Thomas 1988) which is a way of investigating people's perceptions using statements on cards instead of a questionnaire. In this process, participants consider and rank the statements in accordance with their responses. Q-sort leads to a holistic analysis based on groups of participants who respond to the statements in similar ways, and it was selected here as an approach that facilitates comparisons across a small population of teachers, at the same time as creating rich textual data by stimulating focused conversation between those teachers.

A set of 24 Q-sort statements was constructed by the university team (see Appendix A). These were based on the first stage of paying attention to the ways that participants seemed to be thinking about and responding to the enquiry process. For example, there was the question of participation: being or feeling included in, or excluded from, the enquiry group in which teachers saw themselves. This distinction was built into the statements, along with others relating to the level of significance that the process had, and its perceived impact. Each participant in the research was invited to arrange the statements along a scale of 1 to 7, from strong disagreement to strong agreement. As each statement was placed, participants compared it with those they have already placed. They were offered a 'free sort' (McKeown and Thomas 1988) with no restrictions on the number of statements that could be placed under each of the seven points. This sorting of the statements became the central spine on which this exploration of participants' perspectives was constructed, together with the explanations that participants gave as to why they were placing individual statements as they were.

This process was piloted in one school with two teachers. As a result of the piloting, the need for small clarifications in the statements was identified. The 24 statements were finalised and then, five months into the study, 16 participating teachers from six of the seven schools involved that year agreed to participate in the Q-sort. The teachers sorted these statements individually, with their own set of cards, but did so in a room all together, in the context of one of the seminars incorporated into the NES enquiry process. Participants were then invited to discuss their decisions in pairs, looking for similarities and differences, with researchers encouraging clarification of meaning and prompting for examples where appropriate. These discussions were audio recorded. Discussion thus contributed to the reflective nature of the exercise, and also gave it greater value for participants as part of their own enquiry. These recorded discussions were subsequently transcribed, providing data for the case studies below.

Results

The Q-sort analysis revealed significant similarities and differences in the way that participants in NES were thinking about enquiry in relation to their role, identity and activity. According to the method used, factor analysis was undertaken in order to identify groups of participants who sorted the statements in ways that were similar to each other, and substantially different from other groups. This analysis led to four such groups of teachers, briefly characterised here by the Q-sort statements and associated participant quotations that most distinguished them from the other groups:

1. 'Practice' focus: 'This project is raising questions about our practice'; 'focusing on what we don't have answers to is useful'; 'finding time for this is challenging', but 'there have been no disappointments' (7 teachers).
2. 'Research' focus: 'This is a research process'; 'we don't know the answers'; 'the project is contributing to school development'; 'we have time for this' (5 teachers).
3. 'Collaborative' focus: 'The project helps bring groups of people together'; 'I value the collaborative nature of the project'; 'working with other staff is of mutual benefit'; 'there have been some disappointments' (2 teachers).
4. 'Outsider' focus: 'The project involves people not usually involved in this way'; 'it doesn't increase my motivation'; 'it isn't really about understanding what's going on'; 'there have been some challenges in this project' (2 teachers).

Presenting these groups to teachers two months later, we found that they identified themselves readily with the group that they had been assigned through the analysis. All four groups are important; for example, the third group (Collaborative focus) highlights the significance of working together, and we particularly note the way the application of the Q-sort method allowed the fourth group (Outsider focus) to emerge clearly, as a group of teachers feeling themselves to be largely outside the process, and unclear about its value.

Our attention in the remainder of this paper is, however, on the two dominant perspectives (groups 1 and 2) into which most participating teachers identified themselves by their sorting of the statements. In order to explore these perspectives further, we selected two contrasting case studies: two schools in which participating teachers sorted the statements in a way that was similar to each other, but different from the teachers in the other school. Exploration of these case studies will show how the identification of these different groups of participants, arising from the Q-sort, leads into a deeper investigation of the enquiry process in relation to the ideas of practice and performance.

Two case studies of teachers' changing perceptions

These two case studies capture the perceptions and thoughts of some of the participants about five months into the process, set in two different school contexts and with different initial conditions and constraints. As described in the methodology, the case studies draw on recorded and transcribed discussions between participants that happened five months into the process of enquiry – discussions which were prompted by the statements that the participants were ranking in the Q-sort. Researchers then drew on the knowledge of the project and participants in the case study schools in which they had been working throughout the year to make sense of this recorded data, and to construct the case studies. The sections below describe and discuss the case studies, using illustrative quotations from the transcribed data. In accordance with the study protocol, data have been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used.

Group 1 case study – 'practice' focus

This case study looks at the different and changing perceptions of two of the staff in Blackmore School. This school was part of an academy chain (a publicly funded group of schools run by an academy trust). The head teacher was keen to establish links with NES



which might support their school development, and be part of a wider policy of development within the chain as a whole. The school was located in an area of significant deprivation, in the middle of a large area of social housing. Historically, parental involvement in the school was low and pupil attendance rates were poor.

On joining NES, the school wanted the enquiry project to have a focus on raising attendance and addressing issues of persistent absence because the school had attendance targets to meet. Thus, the enquiry process began as a results-driven enterprise. In order to start to address attendance, the school employed an attendance officer who had the specific remit of developing practices which would improve the situation. Over a period of time which included changes in school personnel, the enquiry project remained constant and became a vehicle through which the development of practice could be considered and shaped by a small team. This case study focuses primarily on the individual and shared experiences of Mark, the attendance officer, and Ellie, the deputy head, and their perceptions of the enquiry project within this school.

When we first met Mark and the head teacher at an early workshop, they appeared to have clear ideas about the causes of persistent absence in their school. They planned to interview the parents of some of their worst attenders to test their assumptions. However, as the process progressed, these assumptions were shown to be ill-founded. During the Q-Sort, Mark confirmed that, at the start of the project, he was committed to the idea on one of the Q-Sort cards that 'we think we know the answers, and we just need to find the evidence'. He commented:

So that is where I started off, when the project started that's exactly what I thought, which became, I don't know any of the answers.

As the project evolved, and as they engaged in dialogue with parents, Mark and Ellie realised that they did not necessarily know the answers. As they discovered, or perceived, a new and unforeseen reason for absence, they devised various activities and strategies to address it, involving both parents and children. One of these activities was a 'walking bus', in which children walk to school together in an organised group, thus offering a safe and structured way for children to get to school on time. Mark initially took the lead on this issue, and, although it could be counted as a success in terms of raising attendance, Mark also perceived other benefits arising from it, particularly in terms of his own role. In the data quotation below, he reflects on that process:

Yeah, so basically, it's completely up to [parents] ... I speak to them on several occasions ... what's working? what isn't working? what would you change? so I'm kind of giving them ownership, so for instance the walking bus ... it's down to them how its evolving, and I'm taking a kind of back seat on the bus ...

From taking a key leadership role at the beginning, through an ongoing process of consultation and collaboration, he at this point saw his role as facilitator. Although the main goal of the walking bus was originally envisaged as a technical solution to the problem of attendance, it was the development of relationships and the building of community that had grown through the endeavour that Mark really valued. The enquiry process had extended beyond the original small team, bringing people together in a way that did not happen before. As Mark observed:

Where it's talking about people who are involved who are not usually involved, I put that as really important ... we've got people who we were saying before ... people who I wouldn't normally speak to, that sounds horrible doesn't it ... I really value that.

The growth in the collaborative nature of the project, and the perceived benefits derived from it seem to have expanded Mark's understanding of the enquiry process. Rather than being purely focused on improvement, he then saw it to be something that 'reduces barriers', and where 'ownership [needs to be] shared widely'. Success for him was no longer measured only by statistics, but whether:

Parents and children are happy to come to school and feel it's their school and the school is seen as a major part of the community.

The definition of the community was also extended: 'So, it's not just staff, parents and children who need to be involved, but also [local] residents'. This widened perception of who their community included, together with the role and visibility of the school in the local area also surprised Ellie:

And I think it had a bigger impact than I thought in terms of community, which I was not really expecting ... We have a real buzz with the walking bus in the morning. There are loads of people in the area now who every morning pass the same points and we see them ... We are a visible part of community. Very visible.

Although not the original intention of the project, which had been entirely focused on improving attendance, the ongoing enquiry had in fact provided space for reflection within the practice setting, enabling Ellie and Mark to examine critically some of the wider issues about school policy and culture that were being raised by the process. Ellie highlighted one of these areas, concerning how the school involves parents and communicates with them:

I think it really looks at our culture: how we tackle parental involvement, how we tackle ... how we communicate with parents, like by text, by Facebook, by Twitter. And I think that's the thing that we don't normally have time to do.

In the quotation above, Ellie hints at a subtle shift in attitudes and approaches to the original issue that the enquiry was designed to solve. However, it was the undisputed success of some of the changes introduced in practice that appeared to give both Mark and Ellie an underpinning confidence. As Ellie testified, the project had achieved its goal:

This project is contributing to our school development. Yes, it is. But it is also across the academy chain. Because at the moment our school has the best attendance across the academy chain. So that's been quite positive.

Thus, the school was nearer to its performance targets with regard to attendance, and their collective practice as a school has also been challenged. However, and perhaps in contrast to the case study that follows, much of the understanding and insight that Ellie and Mark developed seem to result from some of the different practical interventions they have tried, rather than a more personal and introspective reflective look at their own practices. Mark noted that these practical solutions seem to be carried out on the basis of what may be called trial and error: i.e. the idea of 'do[ing] something to change it and see[ing] what happens' (Mark). He assessed these interventions through the feedback he received and his own intuition about what was happening:

It's kind of a feeling, when you start doing something, you kind of get feedback and you think, that's not working so I'll go somewhere else.

In her comment below, Ellie expresses her excitement at seeing results and the personal benefit she gained from the opportunity to step back from the routine and take a creative and collaborative approach to the issues at hand:



I feel like we are really getting somewhere ... I feel like it's using my brain in a different way to everyday you know ... like repetition of things like children being sent [to me] and behaviour. These are kind of things that I know are going to happen in my day whereas this is a chance when we stop and we go 'Uhh! Yeah! Okay! Brilliant! Let's try this! Let's go that way!'

Mark suggested that their tendency was to take little time to step back and reflect on what is going on and pointed to what he perceived as the crucial contribution of the university researcher in this respect:

I mean talking about how you do things, all of a sudden, makes it real to you, so Ellie said before about when [university researcher] comes to see us, to sit there and actually talk about it, it gives you time to actually reflect on what you're doing rather than you are constantly doing it so you don't actually realise what you're doing.

This opportunity to step back appeared to be crucial to Mark's developing understanding of the project and the process. The pressure to 'do' and 'achieve' was momentarily suspended, giving him much needed time and space to reflect. Overall, for both Ellie and Mark, the need to perform in relation to key indicators was what drove them in the project, but importantly the chance to make a difference to school practice, their positive working relationship and the obvious success of their endeavours were what enthused them.

Group 2 case study – 'research' focus

Moreton School had been a member of NES for several years. During the first two years, a small number of teachers within Moreton carried out two enquiries each year, investigating their own and a small group of their colleagues' developing practice in relation to pupils' learning experiences and outcomes. Although these teachers found this process extremely stimulating in terms of their professional development, they found it difficult to share their experiences with the entire staff because they were conducting these enquiries largely alone. Through a series of conversations with a university researcher, they discussed the potential benefits for themselves and their pupils of making their enquiries more collaborative, systematically addressing aspects of their practice and of their pupils' learning.

During the third year, the head teacher decided to make the enquiry process integral to the school's continuing professional development programme. Every member of staff chose an enquiry team to join, each team having a particular focus of investigation. At that time, the whole school was involved in the project, with six research groups running concurrently, and all staff affiliated to one of those groups. There is the expectation that all groups present their findings and recommendations to the staff at the end of the year. This case study focuses on one of those groups, and in particular the teacher leading the group. The group's initial focus was on growing pupil behavioural issues in the school and the perception that the Emotional Intelligence (EI) sessions (designed to help children deal with and use their emotions more effectively in interaction with their peers and with staff) that were delivered everyday were no longer having a significant impact. Embryonic ideas revolved around examining the possible impact of different approaches to the EI sessions including, among others, restorative justice, role-play and team teaching. However, as the group (with the help of the university researchers) began to explore their own understandings and interpretations of what constituted 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, question the effect of some of the systems in place and identify the times, sites and expressions of challenging behaviour they

recognised the need to pause and reflect. One of the teachers, Naomi, identified this as a turning point for her in the process:

I think something that I have learnt personally is that, at the moment our project is about understanding the problem rather than trying to solve it, and that's been a big turning point for me, cos I came in with the attitude of, so what's going on, we need to fix it, and that's what I've learnt so far, at the moment its about stepping back, ... and trying to understand what's happening.

This shift – from a problem-solving mindset to a more ambivalent and open-ended one of seeking primarily to understand – produced different emotions for Naomi, as illustrated in the quotation below:

I think initially, ... I found it a little bit disappointing ... because, ... I want to have impact, and so it was a bit disappointing to go ohh, I'm not actually going to make a difference, at the moment, but it was also very reassuring, to know that actually we don't need to have all the answers, so it put my mind at ease at the same time, I'm not responsible for fixing everything.

Part of the process for Naomi was managing her own expectations of the research project, the direction she thought it would take and her desire to produce a specific end result that she could share and that would make a difference to the children she was teaching and to the school community; in other words, the need to perform and achieve. This desire was part of her identity as a teacher and when that identity was challenged, there was a resulting disappointment as she readjusted her expectations. However, at the same time, she expressed a sense of relief, as the pressure to find a solution, and the responsibility that goes with that, was (temporarily) removed.

The group decision to devote time at this point to working out what was happening, through observing individual children with challenging behaviour and noting down not only what was happening with the child, and also how as teachers they dealt with it, gave Naomi a new insight into her own reactions and interactions with certain children:

Just by observing behaviour, and how I interact with them, it's hit a few home truths back to me ... I would have said I'm very positive and that behaviour management was a strong point, but there's certain children that I'm realising that actually, my behaviour management is not what I would have hoped it would be.

Through observing her own behaviour and reflecting on the evidence resulting from that process, she began to question the efficacy of her relationship with these children and implemented changes to her practice. This process of self-discovery through the reflective process, which was afforded by the research project, was not unique to Naomi. Indeed, it became evident that one of the benefits of working with participants from different year groups had been the realisation that, as teachers, they shared 'the same problems in the classes, and the same successes'. As a group, they discovered an apparent contradiction between what they 'know' as professional teachers and what they 'do': in other words, between beliefs and action:

They're things that I'm sure as practitioners we all know, that positivity works better, you need to give the child time to calm down, and it's things that seem really obvious, but we're seeing that actually, it's not always happening and I think that's been quite surprising.

This growing awareness of a discrepancy between what is known and what is acted upon opened up a new line of puzzlement about behaviour management. The participants also began to realise the impact of the way the school systems operated, and the need for the school management to be aware of it.



The inquiry process had, at that point, not yet yielded the specific solutions that Naomi initially wanted, but it had enabled those in her group to grow as reflective practitioners, to examine their own practice as well as that of the school, to step back from the demands and expectations of performativity, giving them the time and space to explore, seek understanding and be involved in the ongoing development of the school.

Further discussion – analysis across the two case studies

Changes in participants' perspectives

In both cases, the initial questions that the participants generated (i.e. how to reduce pupil absence; how to better address pupil behaviour) arose out of their existing development plans, and both aimed to contribute to inclusion and fairness in the school. However, in Blackmore, the question was motivated by an external accountability measure (attendance), whereas in Moreton, it was a question arising from doubts about an element of practice, the limited effects of which had become a puzzle to teachers. In Blackmore, the initial response was to engage in a creative 'trial and error' process, trying to solve the problem with approaches based on assumptions and commonly held understandings and knowledge. This contrasted with the generation of data and reflection on it at Moreton, through observation and the recording of practice. Both approaches led to teachers questioning assumptions: in Blackmore these were assumptions about the community and about the children, to some extent, whereas, in Moreton, they were about teachers' own practice. There is perhaps an issue here of how far teachers' everyday practice was influenced by the enquiry process, and of the consequences of this.

Practice and performativity

Further consideration of practice in relation to this enquiry process shows that in Blackmore, teachers took stock when initial approaches were shown to partially solve the problem. However, the temptation was to 'get on' with inventing and testing alternative solutions, rather than develop further understanding of the problem. Although equity became something that was sought after, the urgent need for a solution led away from increasing understanding: it led to changes in practice, but more through taking on other roles to respond to a problem defined largely externally. There is, in such a context, little time to see what works over time, or to persist with a strategy and to learn through that approach. This time pressure is dictated by external accountability, and it is hard to resist. To us, this exemplifies the working of the 'regime of performativity' discussed earlier (Ball 2003). There is a process which leads to reflection ('it gives you time to actually reflect on what you're doing') as discussed earlier (Zeichner and Caro-Bruce 1998), and it is achieved by working with teachers, rather than on them (Ainscow and Southworth 1996). But in the context of performativity in this school, it is not yet developed into inquiry-as-stance (Cochran-Smith and Lyle 1999).

In Moreton, by contrast, there was a readiness to move away from a problem-oriented question to a more reflective question, asked by each participant of themselves, in order to discuss and compare with each other an aspect of their practice. In particular, this question led to the inherently ethical activity of analysing contradictions between assumptions about teacher practice on the one hand and actual teacher practice on the other. It led, further, to

questions about the organisation of school timetables, the exercise of decision-making in the school and how it could work better to avoid periods of intense stress on teachers. It is evident from the analysis of the discussions that teachers included *themselves* in the community as deserving of fairness and inclusion. The need for performance led to some doubts as to whether this process of developing practice could be justified in the context of external expectations, but it has been justified, drawing strength from, and further contributing to, a culture of professional development through critical review of practice, in this way exemplifying the development in culture which is entailed in inquiry-as-stance (Cochran-Smith and Lyle 1999).

To a large extent, the processes of enquiry in each of these schools can be seen as successful. In each case study, a problem was addressed and changes made by teachers to solve that problem. Equally, in both situations, there was a strengthening of confidence in the capacity of participating teachers to contribute directly to solutions out of their own professional knowledge and understanding, as discussed earlier in relation to Rudd et al. (2003) and Joyce and Showers (2002).

But the difference between the two case studies is also revealing, and provides further understanding of the way that enquiry can contribute to teacher self-efficacy, as discussed earlier (Darling-Hammond 2011). In the first case, the participating teachers were faced with a pressing, externally defined issue, about which they knew, but did not understand. The urgent need in this context was to find a solution, and a 'trial-and-error' strategy was a sensible way forward. Along the way, some assumptions were challenged, but through additional practices in school, rather than in the teachers' own practice. The process has less of an inward dimension; it is less about changes in the person of the teacher, and more about teachers realising their influence in areas not previously imagined.

In the second case study, teachers stepped back from the problem in order to spend time looking at their own practice. In doing so, they came across significant contradictions between their practice and their espoused practice. Since that contradiction had been made visible by the participants themselves, they were then in a comfortable and motivated position to go ahead and introduce changes in their joint practice, and to suggest wider changes in their school practice, in order to address that contradiction. The 'power' of this case study is expressed in this: the extent to which an articulate, professional teacher is able to acknowledge, through this process, that she or he has not been practising as she or he would want to. This discovery, made in collaboration with colleagues empowers teachers towards greater fairness in the classroom, and also other benefits, including learning about practice, the acknowledgement of existing barriers and enablers to the collaborative process, contributing to thinking and engaging with cultural change in school. Entailed in this change are deeper levels of the benefits of collaborative enquiry discussed earlier: reflection (Zeichner and Caro-Bruce 1998), awareness of practice (Galligan 2011) and a critical engagement with equity (Deppeler and Ainscow 2016). Both practice and practitioners were, in MacIntyre's (1985) terms, systematically extended in this process.

Conclusions – one process, many processes

Any social process is complex. To introduce the possibilities of teacher enquiry into a school is to open up complex possibilities. Not surprisingly, the results are dependent upon individuals, the position they occupy within their institutions, with their colleagues, in relation

to the community and the children they teach. Enquiry comes to have different purposes: characterised as being about moving towards greater equity, in this case, but in practice influenced considerably by the extent to which external agenda dominates each institution and the minds of each of the teachers within it.

Clearly, this study is limited to a relatively narrow range of contexts: further research is needed and generalisation is not possible. However, these case studies, and the Q-sort more generally, offer insights into the potential of enquiry as a valuable tool. This study suggests that enquiry is experienced in very different ways, even in schools which make successful use of this process. Enquiry can work as a tool, offering teachers a way of tackling a problem, developing solutions and leading to developments of practice in a school. But, in addition, enquiry can change the way teachers see themselves, in a process which connects with their values, and which raises powerful contradictions regarding their practice. Through enquiry, equity emerges as a value that teachers can come to realise is more under their influence than they might imagine, as they move from doing what is expected as well as possible to enquiring actively into, and, where necessary, aiming to mitigate the negative effects of what they are doing – on themselves as well as on their pupils. This is enquiry as part of practice, and these case studies suggest that it can lead to a stronger voice for teachers, a voice which can collaboratively challenge the *status quo* – and, ultimately, deepen teacher professional identity.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Andrew Howes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5490-8677>

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Appendix A.

The 24 Q-sort statements

1. The project is a research process.
2. The university researchers provide support when we need it.
3. The project is a process of developing my practice.
4. This project is part of my professional development.
5. This process is raising questions about school policies and culture.
6. Working with other staff in this project is of mutual benefit.
7. We think we know the answers; we just need to find the evidence.
8. This project involves people who are not usually involved in this way.
9. I see this project as an interesting part of my work.
10. The project helps to bring different groups of people together.
11. Being involved in this project increases my motivation at work.
12. My students are likely to benefit from my involvement in this project.
13. Focusing on the things we don't have answers to is useful.
14. This project will contribute to raising attainment.
15. Our project is about understanding what is going on.
16. I value the collaborative nature of this project.
17. Our project is about finding the solution to a problem.
18. This project is contributing to our school development.



19. Reading academic articles helps our research project.
20. There have been some challenges in this project.
21. Finding the time to develop this project is challenging.
22. There have been some surprises in this project.
23. The research focus we have chosen is a major issue for our school.
24. There have been some disappointments in this project.

