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Title: The context in which teachers exercise agency and autonomy in directing and completing their own research: A teacher-led, academic-facilitated research group.

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Abstract

This paper explores the contexts of the decision-making of seven Teacher Researchers in an informal practitioner research group which we facilitated. The group was established to support teachers in undertaking small-scale professional research studies within their own settings. This paper focuses on the contexts of the decisions about research questions undertaken by the teachers, each of which were given one stipulation of working to the demands of educational research ethics throughout their study, in the hope that teachers would therefore be able to exercise high levels of agency in making these decisions. Although agency is often perceived as something individual teachers possess, we suggest that this conception of agency is limited. Data collection took the form of a focus group which was analysed through a coding approach to identify emerging themes. These are discussed using the work of Ball *et al.* (2012) and Priestley *et al.* (2015). Focus group interviews were thematically coded. We found that teachers' decision making about practitioner research is heavily framed by their contexts and their professional histories, as well as the access to time and resource to carry out research that is afforded to them. However, even within these constraints they are active agents, who have embraced the tools of accountability rather than submitted to them.

Keywords: autonomy; agency; accountability;

Introduction

This paper explores the decision making of seven Teacher Researchers in English Schools, in an informal practitioner research group which we facilitated. This Teacher-Led Research Group was established to support teachers in undertaking small-scale professional research studies within their own settings. The project ran from September 2018-May 2019 culminating in a poster presentation conference showcasing the work of the teachers. The teachers were offered a free choice of the focus of their research and given basic research methods training. The only stipulation was around the need to work within ethics guidelines and so the overall the culture of the group was very informal, with no assessment, obligation to report findings or ‘prove’ a difference or improvement. The research was undertaken within different curriculum subject areas, across range of Primary, Secondary, State and Independent schools and yet the focus for each ultimately related to improving progress and attainment within their own (or others’) classrooms.

As the group began to formulate ideas around their foci and methodologies we became increasingly interested in the decisions they were making and their reasons for doing so. Our research evolved from an interest in the factors influencing and constraining the teachers’ choices. Whilst the group was initially established to give teachers the opportunity to engage with small-scale research, it also led to an additional opportunity for us to explore the way that teachers were exercising their agency and autonomy in directing and completing their own research. Therefore this research is framed by the policy and regulatory environment in English schools, though similar pressures may exist in other countries.

Literature around teacher agency (Priestley *et al.* 2015) and policy enactment (Ball *et al.* 2012) analyses the impact of regimes of accountability, discourses of

performativity in the education system, and personal, professional and institutional contexts. These elements shape and, to an extent, determine teachers' emerging reactions to developments, policies, and opportunities whether those come from inside or outside their institutions. One of the suggestions to emerge from us as the facilitators of the Teacher-Led Research Group is that despite being offered freedom of choice, teachers default to thinking about the need to demonstrate performance and meet the demands of accountability. Although agency is often perceived as something an individual teacher possesses, we suggest, with Priestly *et al.* (2015), that this conception of Agency is limited. Their analysis is that teacher agency is an ecological entity, which is enhanced, developed or restricted by the institutional, systemic, resource, and personal contexts in which teachers work. This seems to be borne out by responses of the research group in this study.

Since the 1980s, research or 'evidence' informed practice has been encouraged through a reforming narrative of technicist and instrumental professionalism. This encouragement has been picking up steam in the years since 1997 (Beck 2009) but has accelerated since 2010, with grassroots movements such as ResearchEd and a growing policy focus on what works. Given the highly variable and contextual nature of professional decision making that is teaching, the search for silver bullets, techniques that will work anywhere, is problematic (Biesta 2007, Davis 2017). Priestly *et al.*'s (2015) ecological metaphor suggests that teachers need more than a toolkit of techniques. However, recent reforms to the Ofsted inspection frameworks, which include key indicators of what good teaching and learning is composed of are shifting further towards notions in which teachers implement the intent of their leaders, or their school (Spielman 2019). There is a question to be asked about what it will take to move

the agency and sense of accountability of the teacher, so they feel enabled to explore areas of practice beyond those which directly support attainment.

From embarking upon their research projects through to completion and dissemination, we are unpicking the teachers' perception of their agency, and the interwoven influencing factors in the choice and enactment of their project focus. A qualitative theme analysis and axial coding of focus group interviews found that, despite having free rein to undertake research of any aspect of their teaching, their decisions were influenced by concerns about governance, accountability and the need to improve attainment. This paper will draw upon individual teachers' perceptions of their decision-making processes, in proposing, planning, carrying out and completing their research, in order for us to better understand the contexts and constraints they worked within. The paper also carries with it an element of our journeys as researchers through this project, which was borne out of opportune observations that something interesting was happening in respect of the decision making and agency of these teachers.

Context

The Teacher Led Research Project

We are both teacher educators closely working alongside colleagues in school who, in the process of mentoring and partnership collaborations, are encouraged to make explicit to our trainee teachers their tacit understanding and knowledge of their practice. In an effort to learn more about how teachers talk about their practice and about how to enable this process we convened a Teacher-Led Research Group (TLRG). The group was given basic training in research methods and ethics, and support over choosing a focus for their investigation over 6 voluntary twilight sessions. Out of an initial group of

25 teachers 6 teachers completed their projects by giving poster presentations of their findings at the Business of Science Conference in Leeds in the summer of 2019.

We started by encouraging the participants to conduct investigations that were close to their own practice. We did this because we wanted to learn more about close to practice discussions, to inform our work as teacher-educators, but also for reasons of ethics and the viability of the teachers' projects, particularly due to the relatively short timescale they would have for data collection. Despite this we realised over the months of the project that many of the teachers were either unwilling to choose projects related to their practice, or conceptualised close to practice problems in ways that differed from our own ideas. We began to think about the reasons for this, and to read literature relating to the professional choices made by teachers. The research on which this paper is based emerged out of this reading and our realisation that we could gather data about the process from the teachers' point of view and use this to seek to understand the factors behind their choices, and the implications for us in our future work.

Participants and Projects

Six of the seven teachers who completed their projects were established and experienced with responsibilities across their schools and one was an NQT. The NQT's project was concerned with practical work in science and how this affected behaviour in her classes. This was significantly different focus than the other projects, which seemed to be linked to the wider responsibilities that each individual had across the school, with an underpinning theme of attainment. We are not suggesting these are not important or worthwhile issues wanted to understand why these teachers made such choices when offered free rein.

Participant 1	cultural capital Spanish attainment
Participant 2	assessment linked with student satisfaction
Participant 3	interleaving
Participant 4	structured feedback
Participant 5	science capital through headlines
Participant 6	transition

Table 1: participant choices of areas for study

Agency and Autonomy in the literature

So far, this section has outlined our contextual position, as professionals and researchers, and the intended underpinning ideologies of the TLRG at the point when it was established, as well as offering an outline of the foci of the participants' projects. It is also important at this stage to consider the literature which was most influential in shaping our research, in the light of which we will discuss our findings.

We had several different literatures that we could have drawn upon in order to understand the factors that impacted on the decisions teachers were making in relation to their research projects. However, many of these literatures focus on the ways that teachers make decisions in action, or reflect on those decisions once taken (Lloyd 2019, p. 20), rather than their planning or implementation of projects such as a research project. We decided that the most closely aligned literature was that relating to policy enactment in schools, and that this would be a valuable source of insight into the ways that our participants were taking decisions relating to their projects.

We felt that there may be connections between the choices that were being made by our teachers and the kinds of discourse outlined by Ball *et al.* (2012), who have devised a typology of contextual factors which have an impact on the kinds of agency demonstrated in schools in the UK. These are the historic, material, professional and regulatory frames within which policy works, and is worked on, in school (*ibid*). They emphasise that the weight of this impact falls on schools in different ways, depending

on their circumstances but also say that these factors combine to produce a primary discourse of policy that has the effect of producing particular forms of 'teacher and student subjects' against which teachers measure themselves, and which they use as models of 'good' teaching (Ball *et al.* 2012, p. 138). These models form part of the technologies through which the 'management of coherence' is achieved in schools, that is, the ways that teachers are helped to respond to policies in ways that cohere with the school's narrative of itself, and of the policies concerned (*ibid.*, p.139). One of the important pieces of these technologies, particularly in England, is 'deliverology' – a tool which establishes direct connections between macro policies related to standards, attainment and attainment gaps on the one-hand, and classroom practice on the other, through a discourse of performance against targets (*ibid.*). Crucially for us, Englund and Gerdin (2019) argue that these technologies are not only technologies of domination but also technologies of the self in that they 'allow [teachers] to secure particular resources, or realise themselves as individuals' (*ibid.* p.503). During this project and in our reflection afterwards, we have come to consider this aspect of our participants' agency more closely.

Whilst Ball *et al.*(2012) take the school or subject department, the context and systems within which teachers work, as their unit of study, Priestley *et al.* (2015) focus instead on the achievement of agency by individual teachers, within an ecology of attitude, action and resource. This work is a development of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) analytical framework of a dynamic interplay between three dimensions which vary within different structural contexts of action:

- The historical or 'Iterational' dimension (habit, repertoires of experience, knowledge, values, beliefs)
- The future oriented 'Projective' dimension (imagination, motivation, projections of the future); and

- Practical-evaluative dimension (judgement, acted out in the present) (Priestley *et al.* 2015, p. 23).

The framework is an ecological one – it assumes that, rather than agency being a quality which an individual possesses, it is instead something that individuals achieve in the contexts of their professional and personal lives. The extension of this is that the achievement of agency in relation to a policy or innovation is ever changing and perhaps even fleeting in some contexts. In turn this led us to the understanding that whilst we might find some commonalities in the ways that our participants were enacting their projects each context, and therefore each response to our research, would be an individual one.

We hoped that Emirbayer and Mische's framework had the potential to help us structure an investigation into 4 key areas for around the participants' *motivation*, how they *felt* through the process, their *reasoning* behind decisions and the subsequent *impact* of their activity, in ways that were amenable to data collection and analysis in the context of a small study.

Methodology

This broadest term applicable to this project is that of it being qualitative in nature which Cohen *et al.* (2017, p. 545) describe as having 'several purposes ... for example, description, explanation, reporting, creating of key concepts, theory generating and testing'. This work was firmly rooted in determining perspectives and interpretation of actions by participations in relation to this context and so must be approached with the following positions assumed as accepted within this work:

- Meaning making comes from individual participants which arises from 'social situations, interactions and negotiations'

- ‘History and biography intersect – we create our own futures but not necessarily in the situations of our own choosing’
- Although there are overlapping elements of the participants’ views their realities are ‘multiple, constructed and holistic, capable of sustaining multiple interpretations, including those of all parties involved’ (*ibid* 2017, p547)

We are aware the nature of data collected and subsequent data analysis is therefore based upon subjective accounts and interpreted through the lens of our own positions. Peshkin (1988, p. 17) suggests that researchers’ personal qualities have the capacity to ‘filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe and misconstrue’. He does not suggest that subjectivity is something which the researcher can be freed from but something that should be acknowledged as it is ‘like garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearched aspects of our lives’ (*ibid*).

Research design

A focus group interview was used to elicit the views of the participants in relation to the research they did and their decision making behind their choices. Atkins and Wallace (2012, p. 86) describe interviews as providing a flexible ‘opportunity for dialogue ... [and] allows the interviewer to probe and clarify and to check they have understood correctly what is being said’ and this was broadly the aim of the focus group. The first question sought to gain some context of the participant’s *motivation* for participating in the group, followed by an exploration of how the participants *felt* throughout the year. The third set of questions surveyed the *reasons* behind the choices the participants had made prior to establishing what the overall *impact* for the future was as a result of completing (and reflecting on through the focus group) their work. The focus group interview questions took a semi-structured form allowing a compromise between having predetermined questions to explore key areas yet maintaining the flexibility necessary for

the evolution of ideas which Robson (2011) and Mertens (Mertens 2010) identify as characteristic of this type of research.

The structure of the focus group broadly aligned with the hierarchical approach Tomlinson (1989) which allowed exploration of our ideas identified from the literature our observations which led to this study, as well as having the opportunity to respond to areas raised by the participants. The focus group was digitally recorded for data analysis.

There are many perceived flaws in the interview process taking this form relating to terms such as credibility, validity, rigour resonance (Tracy 2010, p. 842) When adopting the position, we have ontologically and epistemologically is it impossible to escape that the only way to collect such data is by talking to the participants and accepting that their and our subjectivity forms part of the project.

Data analysis

The data analysis for this project aligns broadly with a grounded theory approach, however in part due to the emerging nature of the project itself is it not easy, nor necessarily essential, to immerse this in further theoretical context. Cohen *et al.* (2017, p. 1147) outlines a sequence of an approach to handling data which we generally followed and is further elaborated upon within this section. He suggests that analysing data involves:

Exploring and making meaning of the data, for example, organizing and categorizing data into key concepts; identification of the units of analysis, coding, inductive processes; identifying and refining key concepts and key points; identifying linkages and relationships between data, summarizing thematic analysis ...in other words it involves data assembly and re-assembly, recombining them in new ways, synthesizing and integrating data in order to create a meaningful account and analysis

Upon completion of the focus group there was a parallel, two-fold approach adopted for the handling of the data which can be seen in figure 1. The rationale for this

was to ensure as thorough coverage of the data as possible within a time frame as well as drawing upon the specific expertise of us as researchers.

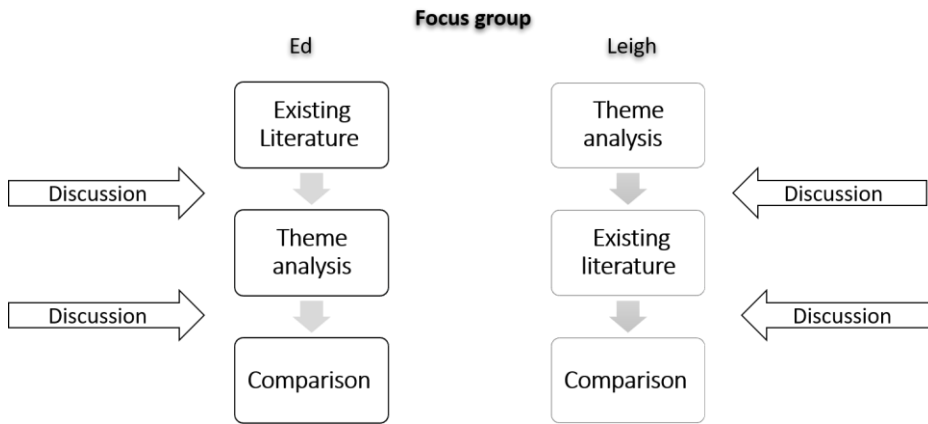


Figure 1: Our 'non-traditional' approach to data analysis

The initial thematic analysis was carried out to identify and exhaust the range of themes within the focus group pertaining to each of the 4 main areas of discussion (motivation, feelings, reasoning and impact). Coding was used to identify themes and group these, beginning to demonstrate how they weaved together. We then met to discuss how these themes compared with the literature. The focus group recording was then explored by the other researcher (Ed) in order to determine a) if there were other themes which had not previously been identified and b) to consider if the identified themes aligned with those within the literature. Simultaneously, the literature which had been identified as relevant was considered in the context of the themes that were identified in the initial theme analysis was considered and evaluated by a second researcher (Leigh). Although we recognise that this may not be a particularly traditional approach, we consider that it allowed a depth of engagement by us as researchers which was ultimately of benefit to the discussions which shaped how we have gone on to apply and use the findings from our work.

Ethics

Ethics approval was sought from the University and followed their and BERA's guidelines. The participants gave consent to the focus group interview, its recording, use of their comments as data for future publication and dissemination. The outcomes of this work were shared openly with them. The themes identified and specific comments substantiating these were sent back to the participants in order to check for accuracy, thus enhancing the validity of the instrument. A further layer of integrity was three of the participants being present at the point where the findings of this work were shared with the next cohort for the TLRG, ensuring that they were in agreement with what and how information was shared.

Findings and Discussion

The following summarises the main points from the focus group interview. The main focus for the discussion draws upon these and considers in greater depth the Historical Iterative and Future Projective Dimensions.

- Most of the teachers tried to fit their enquiries in with whole-school wider agendas, rather than issues in their own practice, informed by:
 - Post-inspection recommendations
 - Results from GCSE examinations
 - The need to conform to a 'school style' of developing ideas
 - The need to produce something tangible for SLT
 - Trying to fait with and manage personal annual review targets
 - The need to mediate between SLT policies and Department priorities.
- Nonetheless they did see their participation in the TLRG as part of their own career development, and in most cases as part of the development of their classroom practice, albeit in terms of learning new pedagogical techniques rather than answering specific dilemmas that they faced as practitioners or in promoting the difference in their work role from that of a normal classroom teacher.
- Only the least experienced teacher expressed aims for their research in terms of their own classroom. This was expressed in a need to 'show progress'.

- Participants with more years of experience and with more responsibility in school seemed to have more room for manoeuvre over their activities in connection with their research projects, but perhaps less freedom to choose the particular focus of their research.
- This activity was seen as being different from the normal CPD activities in school, which were mainly focused on the implementation of particular pedagogic techniques, though there was an apparent desire for some schools to be seen as being involved in research informed practice and in research processes.
- The university was seen as a valuable source of new ideas and procedures, but also a place in which they felt, at first, that their lack of expertise might be exposed.

The participants also described a number of elements that they benefitted from, and which helped them completed their projects through the TLRG.

- Collegiality within the group was of key importance in helping them see the process through
- The poster outcome was really important
 - This was something to show other stakeholders in school – demonstration of value
 - Justified their time and resources (to others)
- Most felt their work could have more impact in school if they had been more confident in drawing others' attention to their enquiries – they had been very modest about the undertaking and completion of their projects
- They described themselves as having read more and feeling more informed
- They had also developed new ways of thinking about the way that external ideas such as cultural capital might impact on their practice and in their classrooms.

Historical Iterational Dimension

We were keen to understand how the participants saw their activities in the TLRG in relation to professional development in school more generally, as we hoped this might give us insight into how they saw their decision making as part of their own

development. We suggest there were several links. For all our participants thinking about CPD led them to describe formal sessions which focused on whole school priorities and which in most case was organised and ‘delivered’ in that way. In their description of the activity and focus of such CPD there was little that could be said to raise problems of practice, and instead CPD focused on implementing externally sourced prescriptions or priorities. Perhaps problems of practice are read through this lens of external ideas or requirements, and this partially explains the way that whole school priorities predominated in our participant’s decisions.

Indeed, throughout the discussion of the factors that led to their choice of project we can detect the influence of the various forms of accountability that are impacting on each teachers’ role and practice in school. Some have roles that directly involve monitoring the work of others – the genesis of one project was in the under achievement of pupils in Year 11 (the final year in compulsory schooling, in which national examinations are taken) in a department that this person had been assigned to work with. Another teacher was charged with improving an element of pedagogy across the school in which they worked, which had been criticised in an inspection report.

Only our least experienced teacher (an NQT), gave justifications that were most aligned with her classroom practice and the problems she was facing. Whilst on the one hand she explained her aims as understanding why pupils’ behaviour seemed to be harder to manage, and why they struggled to achieve success during science practical activities, even here however these problems were articulated in terms of ‘showing’ that the pupils were ‘making progress’, and implementing ideas that ‘worked’. This participant was also keen to place her project in a longer narrative of her professional development and as part of her NQT struggle to show effectiveness as a new teacher. She saw this as a continuation of her PGCE experiences, and that doing academic work

was compatible with the development of her practice in the face of scepticism from her line managers and SLT.

All the participants were glad of formal reasons and mechanisms for publicising their work, such as the final stage of creating a poster and presenting this. However, there was a tension between collegiality and expressing the new insights that their projects had given them. This was especially the case for those whose aims were to improve practice across their schools, or in departments that were not their own. All expressed reluctance to draw attention to their new perspectives and interestingly felt they should have been more confident in school in getting these recognised by their professional peers. They found it difficult to explain why this was the case, but one expressed it in terms that we might describe as professional solidarity - in not wanting to point out others' deficiencies. In discussing this inhibition within the historical-iterational dimension we suggest that it arises as part of the knowledge and experience of our teachers, perhaps because of their awareness, either of the impact that being seen as deficient has had on their or their colleagues, or the resistance to or perception of threat in experiences, ideas or perspectives outside their immediate context.

Future – Projective Dimension

Interestingly, there was a desire on the part of two of our participants to be *seen* by parents as working in an institution engaging in research as an activity, and in using practices that are evidence informed or evidence based. They spoke of a need to put the project in parent-newsheets and how one head teacher wanted to make a display of their research in the entrance lobby of the school. This desire to be seen in a particular way in the future was also sometimes part of an individual participants' motivation for taking part. This image management aspect was part of why some decided to take part,

but did not affect any of our participants choice of focus. One participant (the NQT) spoke of her satisfaction in having finished the project despite the initial scepticism of others in school.

We were asking the participants to think about past versions of their decision making and planning, and of their vision for the future. This proved quite a difficult thing for them to do. Where they did talk about how the future impinged on their thinking, there was a striking lack of talk about values or beliefs. With the exception of the NQT participant, who spoke briefly about her frustration about the lack of women in STEM education and the lack of female pupils in GCSE STEM classes, ideas about the future were sometimes couched in terms of career, but much more often in terms of institutions or accountability. When talking about the impact of their projects for instance they discussed rolling out of techniques, about improving outcomes in difficult departments, improving their standing with Ofsted, or proving that a technique works in their context.

This is not to suggest that our participants do not have, or work through, personal and professional values. There was a clear demonstration from each participant of a strong desire for professional collaboration and discussion - to share ideas and to learn from their peers, for instance. Underlying the discussions about progress and results was an interest in the way that pupils achieved or did not achieve in their schools. Such values are there, but are subsumed, not clearly expressed. We are tentatively suggesting that such values are expressed through and identified with powerful concepts and experiences that dominate their professional lives, such as results, performance management, observations, their annual review, NQT induction, the standing of the school in the community and through Ofsted. The way that accountability measures are being taken up in the professional identity of teachers

(Englund and Gerdin 2019) is perhaps an example of the way that the Historical Iterative dimension forms a foundation for the other two dimensions (Priestley *et al.* 2015) and how the framing of policy and pedagogy in terms of effectiveness has inhibited the discussion of more fundamental values (Biesta 2020).

In some of our participants' responses there was evidence of a desire to grow outside of, or perhaps break away from some of the weight of the past. This was particularly apparent when two of them talked about the way that the university was at the same time a source of external ideas and a neutral source of support, but which also provided a space without requirements in terms of what was the focus of their work, not its results or outcomes. Though their project focuses, and our findings, suggest that this was very difficult to achieve in practice, some independence from institutional aims or from the impact of the paradigm of accountability can be seen. For instance, some participants did report that, by the end of their work with the TLRG they felt connected to academia, that their projects had given them permission to read more widely, and to become more informed.

Practical Evaluative

This was the most difficult dimension for us to analyse, because we were asking participants to reflect back on things they had done, rather than what they were doing. Where it did come out was in the way that our participants negotiated any difficulties in completing their projects.

There was a noticeable difference between the more experienced teachers with more extra-classroom responsibilities than those with more classroom focused roles. The former group had less difficulty in negotiating access to the resources they needed, in terms of time and approaches to data or to data collection opportunities. As we have

already noted, the NQT had to work harder in persuading those people higher in the chain of responsibility that the investment in time and effort was appropriate and would have some value. We suggest the more experienced teachers found it easier to devise projects that were aligned with institutional aims and for them it was more straightforward to obtain permission to attend meetings and take time to present at the final event. Perhaps such teachers find this negotiation less problematic because they have already established their credentials in terms of results and the trust of their peers. Importantly these practical questions of carrying out the research project and taking part in the sessions at University had to be balanced with the need to meet the obligations of their work, and the culture of their school. The teacher who reported the most generous support – in terms of time on her timetable away from teaching, support from and time with SLT to aid ‘rollout’ - was also the most experienced teacher and was seeking to improve practice that had been critiqued in an inspection report. Whilst others reported a squeeze on curriculum time, and a sense that they could only do what they needed to once their other work was completed, or when the class were at the right place in the curriculum, without risk of falling behind this was not the case for this participant.

Reflecting on the process of helping these teachers approach the issues of research, the question of practicality seemed to us, at first, to be relatively low on the list of factors affecting their choice of focus and initial research design. Several of the participants reported at the end of the groups’ activities that one of the most important sessions was on research ethics, because this helped them understand how important it was to choose a project that it was possible to complete. This may also be an illustration of the way that expressions of values and ethics are subsumed into other discussions, reflecting a stronger orientation towards action. Perhaps it is more natural for practitioners to think about ethics in the context of planning to act? In common with

many first time researchers, their initial plans for data collection were very ambitious, for instance. Their practical reasoning did not really kick in until they began to implement their project plans, and until that point they were keen to interview many more participants or make determined efforts to ‘prove’ the efficacy of particular interventions. One interesting feedback loop between the practical and future oriented dimensions was the problematising of notions of ‘proof’ and a more nuanced awareness of what the outcomes of research activity in school might be.

Conclusions

This paper has offered an honest account of how the research evolved and very much recognises that this developed from opportunistic rather than planned means and that the sample size is small. We need to acknowledge that the reflections of the participants were truly that – they were asked to think about decisions they had made without knowing at the time of making them that this would be part of a later discussion. The result of this is that the thoughts and feelings described by the participants were not those from the time of decision making but rather the last time they *thought* about those decisions. This does not mean the discussions had are not valid, but acknowledge the real reflective nature of this study. In particular it made it difficult for us to gain access to the way that our participants made decisions in action – in future we might consider other methods of capturing these insights, such as reflective journals (Bashan and Holsblat 2017). This project, and preparing for teaching of a new module on Action Research, has led to re-reading and reconsidering literature about the purposes of and tensions within Action Research. We now question our original desire for the teachers taking part in the group to choose a research focus on immediate dilemmas and problems in the classroom and are more aware that teachers might have a number of

interests, professional and intellectual in deciding to pursue particular research projects (Stenhouse 1981, Hammersley 2004). We are also much more conscious of the perils of frameworks, which unless used with discretion and by researchers listening carefully to their participants can have the effect of imposing a reality on the situation as seen by researchers. A new appreciation of how our tendency to try to uncover the ‘real’ reasons why participants choose particular courses of action might be less helpful than an attempt to understand their choices comes with the realisation that such understanding might ‘provide us [all] with a wider range of possibilities for action’ (Biesta 2020, p. 21).

However, we need to be more aware of the pressures and limitations that teachers face when attempting to take part in our group or on this type of practitioner research. For instance, we might need to make our participants reflect on the impact of the three dimensions on their decision making, not so that we can effect any change or to enable them to make ‘correct’ decisions, but so that such decision making is better informed – not only about the orientation of their goals and aims with those of their employing schools, but also about the practical issues that they face or implications that their decisions might entail.

Notes on Contributors:

Dr Leigh Hoath is a Senior Lecturer and leads on Science Education at Leeds Trinity University. She is a former classroom teacher, experienced across the primary and secondary age phases. As well as being heavily involved with the Association for Science Education and editor of *Primary Science*, Leigh also has a strong interest in teaching beyond the classroom and her doctorate created a framework for effective pedagogy in the outdoors.

Ed Podesta is a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Trinity University. He leads the Secondary Education ITE team and teaches undergraduate and post-graduate modules on Philosophy of Education and Action Research. He worked as a Secondary History Teacher for 14 years, and during that time wrote or contributed to several textbooks for

secondary pupils studying History. Ed is starting a PhD focused on autonomy and agency in curriculum in October at the University of Leeds.

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