To teach or to research – is that the question?
A case study from the Schools of Ambition

Moira Hulme and Ian Menter

University of Glasgow

Synopsis

The 52 Schools of Ambition across Scotland are supported by a research team drawn from three universities. The purpose of this involvement is to facilitate an action research approach to each school's evaluation of their Transformational Plan. This paper considers the extent to which it is possible simultaneously to achieve institutional development goals as well as personal professional development for teachers within a scheme such as this. This topic is explored through consideration of one particular case, a school where an action research orientation is well established and involves a number of staff. Analysis of interview data drawn from teacher researchers and senior managers in the school indicates that even within such a positive setting there are significant tensions relating to teacher identity, management of change and sustainability.

Background

During the period 2005-2009, a total of 52 secondary schools in Scotland have been awarded School of Ambition (SoA) status. Each school has had to put forward a 'Transformational Plan' outlining significant developments to be pursued over a three-year period. Each school that was awarded School of Ambition status has been in receipt of additional funding of £100k per year over three years. As set out in *Education in the North* Issue 15 (Hulme and Menter, 2007), the Scottish Executive (as it then was) commissioned *Research to support Schools of Ambition*. The successful tender for this work came from a consortium of three universities, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Strathclyde. The initial plan for this work was based on a budget of £250k spread over three years and involved establishing a team of research 'mentors'[1] to provide direct support to each of the schools and the utilisation of a dedicated Virtual Research Environment (VRE)[2] hosted by the University of Strathclyde as part of the VRE for the Applied Educational Research Scheme.

This work commenced in August 2006 and two annual reports are available from Scottish Government Publications[3] or the Learning and Teaching Scotland website[4]. Two conferences for the teacher researchers in the schools have been held (May 2007, June 2008), at which participants made presentations reporting their research and evaluation activity. The research

element of this scheme is very different from other work commissioned by the Scottish Executive/Scottish Government in recent times. It does appear to represent a quite radical departure from the dominant mode of research commissioning that had prevailed for the years before (see Munn and Baron, 2008).

Interest in action research and teacher enquiry as a form of professional development linked with school improvement is evident elsewhere in the UK and beyond. Such developments have marked a move away from conceptions of research and enquiry as the pursuit of a minority of individual scholar practitioners and represent concerted efforts to align more closely personal professional interests with whole school (and national) development priorities and the development of the profession as a whole (Sachs, 2003). Teacher education programmes are increasingly incorporating action research within the curriculum (see Cochran-Smith (1994) for a North American perspective; Ax, Ponte and Brouwer (2008) for Dutch examples and Livingston and Colucci-Gray (2006) on STNE in Scotland). Examples of school improvement strategies that combine action research with some degree of de-centralised decision making (devolved budget and curriculum flexibility) notably include the 'Schools of Promise' programmes established in Ohio in 2003 and more recently New York State in 2007.

Methods

In the following sections we consider how the dual aims of teacher development and whole school development have been approached through the experiences of teachers within one of the first tranche of Schools of Ambition. In order to contextualise the work reported later in this paper it is necessary to describe some aspects of the wider scheme.

The role of the Research Support Team is to stream formative feedback to the schools throughout the 'transformation period'. The mentoring strategy is demand-led, responding to the range of foci expressed in each school's Transformational Plan. Mentors are developing a flexible and responsive approach to meet the diverse and changing needs of the range of schools participating in the programme. The detail of the programme of support in each school is negotiated on a case-by-case basis (Hulme and Menter, 2007). The following support is available to all the schools:

- Support in refining teacher-initiated proposals
- Advice on issues of manageability, scope, stages and timelines

- Advice on ethical practice in practitioner research
- Advice on collaborative use of the Virtual Research Environment (VRE)
- Advice on accessing research summaries and resources to support enquiry
- Support for data collection and analysis
- Support for self-monitoring and evaluation
- Support for dissemination of work in progress and writing enquiry summaries

During the first eighteen months of this three-year programme a number of key themes have emerged from the data as well as directly from our interactions with colleagues in the schools. The scale of the changes that were proposed in the transformational plans, often involving a number of strands at a number of levels, presented significant strategic and operational challenges. The schools have developed a range of models for developing the capacity of teachers to initiate change and engage in self-evaluation. These differences reflect: (1) the history, context and culture of the school; (2) dominant perceptions of what constitutes appropriate 'research' in this context; and (3) the available resource that it is judged appropriate to deploy to school-based enquiry. The complex array of objectives expressed in the transformational plans requires the selection of appropriate tools that have the capacity to reliably measure impact *and* illuminate processes of change. Whilst there is evidence of a willingness to take a team approach in the research, in many of the schools this is proving challenging at an organisational and interpersonal level. Within this scheme, in supporting the Schools of Ambition, encouraging dialogue has presented challenges to hierarchical relations between senior management, classteachers, and other professionals in school, as well as challenging traditional demarcations between school professionals and pupils, parents and partners in the local community.

The particular purpose of this paper is to examine some of the tensions that arise within a scheme that is designed both to support whole school development and to introduce an enquiry orientation approach to evaluation, which involves individual teacher development. In order to do this in as succinct a manner as possible, we have selected a particular case, a school where, in our estimation, some of the greatest progress has been made. This is a school that had already adopted elements of the SoA approach, prior to receiving that status. It is a school where one member of the research support team had already been working with colleagues to introduce an enquiry focus to school development. The school is thus to a

significant extent, a case of best practice, and yet, even here, it emerged that some of the tensions that are actually more problematic in some other schools, were still surfacing.

This small six-year school has a record of attainment that is consistently well above national averages (based on SQA data over a three-year period) and the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals is below the national average. Standards of teaching and learning are judged to be high by HMIE and effective management and leadership is judged to be a key strength. The school serves a rural community and a significant proportion of the school roll is drawn from outside the catchment area through parental placement requests. The school has a stable senior management team and has adopted a faculty structure. Faculty heads (principal teachers) are rotated on a three-yearly basis. The priorities in the Transformational Plan included restructuring the curriculum, raising achievement and attainment, ICT and e-learning.

The paper draws on transcriptions of five interviews carried out between 2006 and 2008. The first interview was conducted with the depute rector (deputy head) with responsibility for coordinating the range of activities associated with the School of Ambition in the early stages of the evaluation process in October 2006. Three interviews were carried out in June 2007 with teacher researchers in the school. A further joint interview was conducted with the Rector (headteacher) and depute in February 2008. The leadership interviews were of one hour and fifteen minutes duration. Each of the teacher researcher interviews was around twenty-five minutes duration to accommodate completion within scheduled school-based support sessions. All the interviews were audio recorded and full verbatim transcripts produced.

In the analysis below, we firstly discuss some of the issues around management and organisation, before then moving to review the experiences of some of the teachers who were most fully involved in the research activity.

Management and leadership
Within this school, the research support team witnessed the direct engagement in research activity of at least three unpromoted teachers. This was a more distributed approach than was observed in the majority of other schools. Nevertheless the way in which teachers became

involved was not without some difficulties. Research engagement was certainly supported from the senior management team. A depute appointed in about 2000, who would later lead much of the research work, said that she soon became aware that she was working in a school where the Rector would encourage risk-taking and experimentation. Schools of Ambition provided a good opportunity for the school to encourage innovation. The approach was driven by a concern to do well by all pupils:

> … the main aims were we wanted to create a curriculum that would meet the needs of the child, rather than the child having to fit the needs of the curriculum. (Depute)

The depute described the process of influence that seeks to draw in a wider group of staff. The nature of leadership is perceived to be 'a battle for hearts and minds' that involves a range of approaches:

> It's fair to say that you will never get everybody who believes the way you are moving is the correct way to move. You have to convince the majority that it is. You have to help and support the group that still aren't convinced or try to bring them round to your way of thinking. In a school situation all of them have to still be prepared to deliver the decision that has been taken because it impacts on young people's lives. …. You will get times when your staff will come back and say you are just trying to get us to do too much and we can't do all this. (Depute)

The most important lead, she says, comes from the headteacher:

> The strategic leader has to be the headteacher. If their vision is very different all of a sudden from what a vision had been, you know that's quite a difficult thing for a school to deal with. (Depute)

The move towards a more research-oriented approach should be seen as part of a wider cultural change that managers in the school have consciously been seeking to bring about.

> It's the same with all these things. If you spoke to staff they would have varying views on how they feel that's been done. The people who are reluctant to change would still

probably say they feel it's been imposed on them, and the people who are with you would say they feel they have been involved. (Depute)

Another significant development in the school is that many of the staff themselves are now leading CPD. Externally provided CPD, including that offered by the local authority is not always seen as very valuable, whereas offerings developed within the school have a higher degree of relevance, as well as indicating growing confidence among those teachers that are providing it.

The paradox of distributed leadership is captured in the views of one of the teacher-researchers:

> INT: Have you experienced any difficulties in moving your plans forward?
> T: Not having an overall picture. It's like a jigsaw. Different people are doing different things in different places. The senior management have one idea of what is going on and certain expectations and then the primary colleagues may have other ideas about what is going on. It's very difficult trying to get everybody thinking in the same way or knowing exactly what is going on and sharing the same goal. (Teacher 2)

This view gives a clear sense of ambivalence and uncertainty about the extent to which full 'ownership' has been taken or accepted by more junior members of staff, in spite of the Depute's strong conviction that 'it's no longer coming from us'.

So, our first point is that different perspectives on the process of change within the school indicate different levels of acceptance of those changes. Our second point is that the school itself is not 'an island', removed from external influences. However committed a significant number of the staff may be to the changes that management is trying to bring in, external influences, such as the local authority or the Inspectorate, may have a significant impact. These influences can be supportive of the changes or otherwise.

Thus, although there was a significant 'buy-in', not only to the SoA plan itself but also to the research strand to its evaluation, there were also significant signs of resistance, if not obstruction. One of the sources for some resistance was *A Teaching Profession for the*

Century (TP21), the so-called McCrone settlement of 2001 (SEED, 2001), that had been designed to support increased teacher autonomy and collegiality.

The Depute suggested that the restructuring of the school into Faculties, that followed from TP21, has helped to create more effective communication. However the problem of time is ever present, and TP21 had not always helped, with its use of particular figures for particular activities, such as the 35-hour working week (Menter *et al*., 2006) and the 35 hours annually for CPD:

> Also, McCrone in a lot of ways has caused issues for us as well, because a lot of the teachers' agreement was about everything being negotiated. I came into teaching seven years ago, so I come from a business background. I find it very difficult that I can't just put something out and say we'll meet at five o'clock tomorrow night or four o'clock tomorrow night. In business if your manager said you were to be in a meeting at four o'clock you would be in a meeting at four o'clock. Everything has to be agreed by the unions and the teachers have to agree on what the structure of meetings for the year will be.

> So although the project needs to be flexible there isn't as much flexibility in the school day for staff. That's when it gets difficult because your management team tends to be the people who will stay until six o'clock and discuss that, so they work something out in their head and then present it to staff and then its, 'We've never been consulted'. That's where you get the barrier. … (Depute)

We see again through these insights how attempts to bring in a more research-oriented approach cannot be separated from wider challenges of leadership and change that are familiar issues in research on school leadership both internationally and in Scotland (Gronn, 2003; O'Brien *et al.*, 2003).

As the end of the funded programme for SoA approached, there was increasing concern within the school about how the gains would be consolidated and built upon. Indeed the Depute said:

There is that slight anxiety on everybody. … You know that you are being watched very closely. The only thing I can say with confidence is that as a school, the reason people feel that about us [i.e. being watched very closely] is because we are successful and we do deliver what we say we will deliver. (Depute)

In summary, from the perspective of the senior managers in the school, the key theme of the work is not teacher research activity, it is about curriculum reform and pupil achievement (as ell as parental satisfaction and engagement with partner bodies such as employers and local colleges). Teacher research is seen – almost functionally - as a means of bringing about improvements in these areas and as a means of providing teachers themselves with an enhanced experience of their own professionalism. Teacher research is therefore part of a wider set of questions about distributed leadership, the management of change and external influences (positive or negative), all of which need to be seen in the particular context of the school, its location, size, demography and history.

We turn now to consider the perspectives and experiences of some of the teachers who are in the process of becoming teacher researchers.

Becoming and being a teacher researcher
One the early challenges for participating teachers was an acceptance of research as a legitimate and valuable use of limited non-contact time available to them in school. With the agreement of the headteacher, part of the time committed to individual research projects was counted towards each teacher's 35 hours annual CPD requirement. In addition, each teacher leading a research project was awarded a modest honorarium in recognition of the additional time commitment involved. Although this recognition from the senior management team signalled the value attached to this work, the participating teachers experienced tensions between a deeply felt sense of a teacher's core role and responsibilities and the competing demands of research engagement. Each of the teacher researchers interviewed identified the issue of finding time to undertake research as an elective activity, which they positioned as different from, and additional to, their principal activities (and responsibilities) as classteachers. At pressure points in the school year when they struggled to maintain progress, the research projects were viewed as 'burden', contributing to the intensification of a workload largely borne alone.

> I'm in here to teach and of course my priorities will always go with that…I see the value in it for my personal development so that when I go off elsewhere I have something to take with me. I've done something...I see value in that, but there are times when I almost see it as a burden. I've got this to do and I know I need to do it, but I also need to do all the other things that are involved with my job. (Teacher 1)

The teachers interviewed were also quick to identify implications arising from the nature of teachers' work, such as difficulties in identifying opportunities for teachers to work together within the timetable constraints and busyness of a school day. The three teachers worked in different subject departments distributed across the school site and did not manage to meet as a group as regularly as they had hoped. Opportunities to meet were further restricted by the use of department 'base rooms' in shared non-contact time. The fragmentation of the school day and the isolation of the teacher's role are well documented barriers to the promotion of shared planning and joint work (Little, 1990). Sharing of work in progress with the wider school community has largely taken place through formal CPD sessions held after school at a relatively late stage in the development of this work. The focus of these events has been towards 'dissemination' rather than a stage within a cycle of reflection, deliberation and further action. Practical difficulties have worked against efforts to sustain high levels of communication and interactivity between participants. Although all teachers were working towards implementation of the transformational plan, there were limited opportunities for the kinds of routine, in-depth and sustained conversations about teaching and learning that are important in supporting professional learning (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Little and Horn, 2007).

> The biggest thing that we have been finding is that people need to talk to each other and spend time with each other and that is really difficult as a teacher because your job is to teach pupils in a classroom and you are on your own in that. …. Particularly with the project that I'm doing because it's about collaborative teaching. You can't have two teachers together. Time is the biggest thing. (Teacher 2)

Each of the teachers who elected to undertake a research project under the auspices of the School of Ambition were in the early stages of their teaching careers (less than five years experience) and had been supported through the Teacher Induction Scheme. The accounts offered by these teachers show how attention afforded to research engagement in initial teacher preparation and induction is mediated by school-based experiences. The Standard for

Initial Teacher Education (SITE) expects that by the end of a programme of initial teacher education beginning teachers will 'know how to access and apply relevant findings from educational research' and 'know how to engage appropriately in the systematic investigation of practice' (GTC/QAA, 2006:11). The journey from 'knowing how to' to valuing and finding the space and energy for practitioner enquiry as an integral aspect of career-long professional learning is not inconsiderable and is influenced by immersion in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that tend to emphasise 'delivery' rather than enquiry.

In the context of day-to-day school work, it was difficult to sustain a commitment to collective and collaborative professional learning even where there was a publicly espoused commitment to this goal. Whilst senior management figures held high expectations of these individuals as 'champions' of teacher research in school, there was a sense that they were constantly swimming against the tide and forced back into the shallows. These novice teacher researchers, at a relatively early stage in their careers, often lacked confidence in approaching more experienced colleagues and were unsure of how colleagues would respond to requests for cooperation, such as providing access to records and planning documents or requests for participation in surveys or peer observation. Several teachers were uncomfortable with the exposure and scrutiny suggested by the proposed enquiries and withheld consent for audio recording or observation of classes. In making sense of this new initiative in school, some teachers were suspicious of the intrusion of the research agenda and boundaries became blurred between 'research' (encouraged and supported by senior management) and data gathering for the purposes of performance management. Whilst comfortable with the notion of 'self-study', teachers were wary when the focus of investigations extended beyond the initiator's classroom.

The issue of 'ownership' was a recurring theme across the transcripts. Sustaining teachers' commitment to practitioner enquiry is complicated by the need to demonstrate clear links with a plan authored by others (senior managers inside school and approved outside school by the Local Authority (LA) and the Schools of Ambition advisory team) and supported by external mentors (at the university). Plans that appear to cascade from the top downwards may not necessarily connect closely or immediately with teachers' own concerns about their professional practice. The need for self-determination and the significance of retaining high levels of 'professional discretion' within officially sponsored programmes of school reform/development is well documented (McLaughlin and Tarbert, 2001; Campbell, 2003;

Hargreaves, 2007). The teacher researchers in this school expressed a desire to be involved at an early stage in the identification of relevant 'problems', rather than act as implementers of plans drawn up by their more senior colleagues. Teachers described a sense of loss of control over problem definition and reporting.

> The most important thing for me would be being able to choose what the focus of my research was within the school improvement plan. Teachers are professionals, we're all intelligent people. We can make our own decisions and we can read the school improvement plan and decide on an area in relation to senior managers. (Teacher 2)

> I thought I would look at [an area] and I would see was it being used correctly? Was it having an impact? I thought it would be how I make it better for us as teachers in the classroom day-to-day. That's what I rather hoped it would be, so that it would have an impact on our day to day lives. When I start reading through all this I start to think, oh it's quite remote from teaching. That's the panicky side of it. I feel like it's getting quite remote and it's about writing up a document. (Teacher 3)

The headteacher wanted to establish a sustainable teacher research group in this school. Probationer teachers securing a permanent post have been encouraged to join the research group to support targeted activities relevant to their development plans and senior teachers recruited to contribute to the identification of future research priorities. Consideration has been given to supporting the continuing development of the first group of teacher researchers on submission of their first reports and recommendations in the summer of 2007.

Whilst any formal accreditation of their developing skills (*e.g.,* through the Chartered Teacher programme) or plans for the future development of their careers as researching teachers remains unclear, there was some acknowledgment that the process of becoming and being a teacher researcher might support openness to change in the longer term. Whilst teachers in this school found it difficult to sustain group support and to develop a strong sense of collective participation and ownership, research engagement did seem to offer opportunities for 'a reflexive pause', the postponing of judgment. The development of an enquiry orientation was seen as potentially useful in making sense of the systematic and sustained processes of change that were a feature of this school's development.

> Hopefully by doing this piece of action research I will become more of a reflective practitioner and more able to look at a problem and analyse it. Maybe not to just jump

on the negative bandwagon but maybe to give it chance. To take a step back and be a bit more reflective. A bit more open minded… Not to say no to an initiative straight off, which teachers can do… (Teacher 3)

In summary, the teachers who elected to lead research projects aligned with the School of Ambition Transformational Plan encountered a number of problems and dilemmas. These included reconciling a 'researcher' and 'teacher' identity, finding space to engage in reflective dialogue and to share plans and progress, extending the focus of enquiries beyond individual teacher 'self-study', negotiating with colleagues suspicious of an 'evaluation' agenda and fundamental issues around ownership of the research questions.

Conclusions

The Schools of Ambition programme was part of a modernisation agenda for Scotland's schools that sought to encourage flexible, creative and innovative approaches to school improvement (LT Scotland, 2003; SEED, 2004). In authoring Transformational Plans to meet specific local needs, supported by a devolved budget, *Schools of Ambition* opened up possibilities for increased autonomy for some schools and some teachers. At the same time the inclusion of an explicit evaluation strand, supported by external research mentors and the services of an Advisory Team strengthened public professional accountability.

The purpose of this article has been to consider the possibilities for the simultaneous achievement of whole school development and teacher development within this scheme. Drawing on the accounts of senior managers and teacher researchers within one school it would seem that even in a school that has actively promoted teacher enquiry involving a number teachers, and that is working towards evidence-informed curricular change supported through previous school-university partnership work, significant issues arise.

Much has been written of the importance of distributed leadership in bringing about sustainable change in schools (HMIE, 2007a). The limits of mandated 'top-down' change models are now well rehearsed and the language of 'empowerment', 'autonomy', 'collaboration' and 'collegiate' working have come to feature prominently within policy discourse. The Teachers Agreement (SEED, 2001) expressed a commitment to encouraging higher levels of professional collaboration, extending development opportunities for non-promoted teachers through a CPD 'entitlement' and self-nominated routes to Charter Teacher. The Teacher Induction Scheme provides stronger support for beginning teachers than at any

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previous time (Audit Scotland, 2006; HMIE 2007b). These recent policy developments signal significant political attention and allocation of resources to the development of teacher 'professionalism' or processes of 'professionalisation' (Kennedy, 2007); an approach that claims to be distinctive in affording greater attention to consultation and collaboration in the formation of policy and practice than elsewhere in the UK (Hulme and Menter, 2008).

Our case study of the experiences of teachers within one School of Ambition suggests that attention to teacher development premised on aspirational notions of a more 'democratic' or 'extended' professionalism (Sachs, 2003) is subject to considerable re-working as policy initiatives enmesh and are mediated within local sites of practice. By conducting a closer examination of one school's experiences we have sought to identify some of the challenges of integrating whole school and teacher development.

Whilst there is commitment to developing a capacity to generate 'inside-out' evidence (*i.e.*, starting from within the school), schools are all too aware of a conventional hierarchy of evidence that prioritises 'outside-in evidence' (external judgements of performance and quality). There is a tendency to view the monitoring and evaluation procedures coordinated by the senior management team as the core activity directed at an external audience (from the LA and Scottish Government Advisory Team) and the teacher-led micro-level investigations as a subsidiary set of activities, complementary to, but set apart from, the main action (to be consumed by a teacher audience as CPD). Within this school, hierarchies of evidence were re-created and a lower value appears to be attached to teacher-generated enquiry than is afforded to systems monitoring or demonstrating effectiveness to others. One might question whether the approach to change in such circumstances is 'managerialist' rather than 'transformative'. This is not to be dismissive of the genuine efforts of colleagues committed to bringing about improvements for pupils and who are investing a great deal of time and energy in driving forward ambitious plans for change. In making these observations we point to the tensions inherent in working within sponsored programmes of school improvement, and in this we include the significant role and responsibilities of external supporters (discussed elsewhere by Hulme and Lowden, 2008).

If one draws on the four requirements for strong professional learning communities identified by Hargreaves (2007:187) - cultural norms of *collegiality*, a commitment to *continuous improvement*, *inquiry* and *professional dialogue* – then our case study school reveals a mixed

pattern of progress. A commitment to continuous improvement is clearly evident in the detail of the transformational plan and a commitment to various forms of 'inquiry' is evident through the conduct of targeted research by teachers and the implementation of systematic data management and monitoring throughout the school. Opportunities for sustained and meaningful professional dialogue have proved far more challenging, with some evidence of enduring norms of privacy, rather than collegiality. Time and trust emerge as key factors influencing the likelihood of embedding an 'inquiry stance' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001) within school development planning. In deciding whether to teach or to (continue to) research, enquiring teachers will reflect on the purposes and ends of such activity and how teacher-generated knowledge is regarded within the school's evidence base. What we have seen in this school is the emergence of different types and channels of enquiry – a mixed economy of evidence gathering. This is perhaps not surprising as in embarking on innovative and ambitious approaches to school improvement, the Schools of Ambition have frequently found themselves caught between the conventions of 'impact assessment' (Fielding, 2003) and the traditions and cultures of practitioner enquiry. If the model developing in this school is sustainable it will need to be able to support both individual and collective teacher development in the longer term and meet the demands of 'proving' the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions undertaken in the short-term.

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[1]   The mentoring team includes: Kevin Lowden, Dely Elliot, John Hall and Stuart Hall (the SCRE Centre at the University of Glasgow); Fran Payne, Philip Woods, Jenny Spratt, Norman Coutts and Dean Robson (University of Aberdeen); Beth Dickson and Moira Hulme (Curriculum Studies, University of Glasgow).

[2]   The VRE is managed by Donald Christie and Sanna Rimpilainen at Strathclyde University, with support from Alison Devlin, University of Glasgow.

[3]   The first report is available at: http://openscotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/12/18110911/0

[4]   The first report is available at:

http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/SchoolsofAmbitionAnnualReport2007_tcm4-456717.pdf

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