TEACHER RESEARCH:
Are the outcomes worth the struggle?

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Professional development in schools is shadowed by the call for more research that includes the teachers' perspectives (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Professional development is expensive and time consuming and so we need to know what has the most effective outcomes in New Zealand classrooms, where there is increasing pressure for teachers to base their planning and teaching decisions on evidence-based student outcomes. Stakeholders want to know what works well in classrooms and why it works well. It seems logical, then, to identify and implement the conditions which will support and sustain teachers in looking closely at what is happening in their classrooms.

Aware of the call for a re-examination of teacher training for teachers of English language learners to ensure that it includes more classroom-based evidence, we introduced a teacher research paper to our university-based postgraduate course on teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The research paper aimed to develop teachers' understanding of how to observe classroom practice closely, by having them focus on a chosen aspect of second language learning in the classroom. We hoped the teachers would learn both about and from the research process, as well as from their findings. Their study would draw them into Tarone and Allwright's (2005) three areas of teacher education—teacher training (developing skills), teacher education (developing knowledge), and especially teacher development (developing understanding so that skills and knowledge can be applied appropriately).

The research paper was first offered in 2003, with teachers successfully designing, implementing, and reporting on their research projects. All seemed extremely positive about the value of carrying out a research project. When reflecting on the teachers' experiences two years later, we realised that Allwright's call to "prioritize the 'quality of life' in the language classroom, by working to understand that life" (2005, p. 353) was a priority they all shared.

It was disappointing, therefore, that the research paper had to be cancelled the following year because of insufficient numbers. It seemed to us, anecdotally, that although many teachers were keen and indeed excited about the prospect of carrying out their own research projects, they were reluctant to "take the plunge" and enrol in the paper.

We decided, therefore, to carry out our own research in an effort to find out what it was that made the research process so valuable for the 2003 cohort, what conditions supported their development, and what (if any) the barriers were. Teacher research is an emerging method of teacher education and we could see a need for more systematic investigation to identify its strengths, its characteristics and limitations, and the sorts of conditions that are needed to support and sustain it (Loughran, Mitchell, & Mitchell, 2002). After all, as Burns asserts, "to be educationally valuable as well as relevant to teachers, research needs to be undertaken hand in hand with classroom practice" (1995, p. 4).

Our interest in the relationship between classroom-based teacher research and professional development aligns with findings from other recent Ministry of Education professional development initiatives that have incorporated teacher research outputs (for example, Effective Literacy Strategies in Years 9 to 13, 2004; Information and Communications Technologies Professional Development (ICTPD) School Clusters Programme 2001–3; and the Pasifika Literacy Secondary Professional Development contract 2004–2005). Evaluative research reports of such contracts argue for the power of the teacher research to change practice. An evaluation of the ICTPD School Clusters Programme (Ham, Moeau, Williamson-Leadley, Toubat, & Winter, 2006) reported that the teachers carrying out classroom research moved to a preoccupation with the more fundamental aspects of what makes for quality teaching and learning.

Renewed interest in teacher research as professional development in New Zealand also follows trends internationally. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1998) supported the new status of teacher research as an educational movement while worrying about its lack of objectivity and its use to further the existing educational agendas. They argue for rigorous research by teachers to play a more dynamic role in school change, through systematic teacher research into how teaching practice provides different kinds of learning opportunities for students.

The study

Our small-scale study investigated how a group of eight teachers who had completed the postgraduate research paper in 2003 perceived the value of the teacher research they conducted, as well as the preconditions they considered necessary for supporting teacher research.

Their teacher research projects had a common focus of enhancing an aspect of second language learning in the classroom; in our case study, the teachers talked about their experiences of working to understand a chosen aspect of classroom second language acquisition, about research as a productive context for professional learning, and also about the difficulties they faced.

In this article, we draw on the teachers' words to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this emerging teacher development model, and offer some suggestions for how it can continue. We use Tarone and Allwright's term "teacher development" (2005, p. 7) because our research suggests the teachers' experiences contributed to an understanding of how to use tools to investigate, and so begin to understand, ongoing areas of concern in their classrooms.

Methodology

We used a case study approach because we wanted to investigate "a unique example of real people in real situations" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 181). We hoped to gain an insight into teachers' beliefs, understandings, and experiences of teacher research. Six secondary subject teachers, and two mainstream primary school teachers were invited to participate (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 **TEACHER RESEARCHERS, LEVELS, AND TOPICS**

Teacher	Teaching level 2003	Research topic
Carol	Secondary	A comparison of two Year 11 ESOL classes with the purpose of identifying common success factors.
Chloe	Secondary	An investigation of the use of Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment programme with Year 9 students in a multicultural urban secondary school.
Rachel	Primary	Research tracking the changes in attitudes and practices of teacher aides working with English language learners in primary school classrooms, during a professional development programme.
Amy	Primary	An investigation of the link between the oral language proficiency of three six-year-olds and the progress they make in reading recovery.
Marion	Secondary	An investigation into the nature of scaffolding required to help English language learners achieve at university.
Paul	Secondary	An investigation of whether or not it is possible to change perceptions of native and nonnative speakers of English towards pairwork as a learning tool in a senior mainstream mathematics classroom.
David	Secondary	An investigation into the question—"Should science concepts be introduced through experimental tasks and then consolidated with language-focused tasks, or vice-versa?"
Jane	Secondary	A study into using literacy strategies to support students in the "pre-search" phase of the information literacy process.

All accepted the invitation and agreed that this was a worthwhile project to be involved in. The teachers were keen to support any initiatives that could assist others to undertake classroom research.

Initially, participants were sent a questionnaire which aimed to establish an overview of their attitudes and beliefs surrounding teacher research as well as to provide a starting point for framing focus group questions. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements such as "Teacher research is worthwhile for the teacher" on a 5-point Likert scale. The teachers also had the opportunity to give some detailed responses with open-ended questions such as "What sorts of things made the research more manageable?"

The second method of data collection was through focus group interviews. We decided to use focus groups rather than individual interviews as we hoped that interaction between participants would yield insights that might not otherwise have been available in individual interviews (Cohen et al., 2000).

Two groups, with four teachers in each, were randomly selected (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 **COMPOSITION OF FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus group one	Focus group two
Rachel (primary teacher)	Carol (secondary teacher)
Amy (primary teacher)	Chloe (secondary teacher)
Jane (secondary teacher)	Marion (secondary teacher)
David (secondary teacher)	Paul (secondary teacher)

We devised guiding questions for the interviews that were designed to further investigate the responses to the questionnaires. We both participated in the interviews, which each took about one hour. We were particularly interested in talking more about reasons for particular responses as well as areas where there were varied responses. For example, six teachers responded that teacher research was the most worthwhile professional development they had done, and we wanted to know the reasons behind this. We also wanted to know why the remaining two teachers gave only the second highest response to this statement. We wanted to encourage reflection and interaction between participants and so devised open-ended questions such as "Looking back on your research project, how would you describe your experience?"

Findings

Overall, participants were positive in their support for teacher research as professional development, while also agreeing that it was easy to feel this way as they had completed their projects several months ago. Despite the benefits, discussions revealed that carrying out research was extremely time consuming, at times lonely, and often daunting. Each teacher's experience was unique, and differentiating factors included aspects such as support from senior management, interest from colleagues, and release from teaching. The teachers' perceptions will be reported here in three sections: teacher research as teacher development; barriers in the research process; and enablers in the research process.

Teacher research as teacher development

All the teachers felt strongly that being able to set their own research topic was what made the professional development so valuable. Investigating an issue to do with second language acquisition which was concerning or puzzling gave them ownership of the research and this was extremely motivating. As Jane said, "if it is something you do care about … it probably informs your practice more … you wanted answers for yourself in your own practice" (focus group one).

This finding concurs with that of Burns (1995), who found that teachers were much more likely to be enthusiastic about implementing changes which they felt they had directly contributed towards. More recently, Atay (2007) found that teacher research profoundly affected teacher development.

The teachers' research projects were ongoing for one year. Teachers viewed the extended time period as extremely positive because it gave them time to really think in depth about an issue and try interventions which they could then systematically observe and analyse. Marion said that "carrying out an intervention and seeing an improvement" gave her confidence (focus group two). This was in sharp contrast with much of the other professional development the teachers had been involved in such as one-day or after-school workshops. As Atay (2007) explains, such professional development is often far removed from the contexts of the teachers and consequently the aim of furthering teacher development is rarely achieved.

The teacher researchers in our study were clear in their recognition of the long-term benefits—that ideas about effective teaching and learning would continue to be created from close observation within the classroom well beyond their current research.

Teachers in both focus groups felt strongly that the very *process* of carrying out research made them more conscious of observing, reflecting, and acting upon teaching and learning situations. The research seemed to help them to structure self-reflection, which is typically a more incidental part of teaching practice (Burns, 1993, cited in Burns, 1995), in a more explicit way. The teacher researchers in our study were clear in their recognition of the long-term benefits—that ideas about effective teaching and learning would continue to be created from close observation within the classroom well beyond their current research. Jane commented:

> The experience has probably made me more conscious of trying things out in the classroom and looking at them in a more objective way and saying if I do it this way what are the results and if I tweak this now what happens? (Focus group one)

Similarly, in focus group two, Paul said that the research "changed what I did in the classroom for good". Marion continued this theme by saying that her whole attitude to coping with teaching and learning hurdles in the classroom had changed:

> Instead of 'These kids can't do it' it was 'How can we do it?' The students still aspire to do things, we have to help them.

Perhaps one of the most heartening comments for us as lecturers came from Chloe (focus group two), who said: "Now when I see a problem in my classroom I can take control of it and fix it."

These teachers, then, were developing the confidence to develop theory from their own practice—in the words of Allwright and Bailey, they were "alive to what goes on in the classroom, alive to the problems of sorting out what matters, moment by moment, from what does not" which, as Allwright and Bailey state, is the quality that makes a good classroom teacher (cited in Nunan, 1991, p. 3).

Increased feelings of self-worth as a teacher were evident. Paul talked about "the feeling of your own worth as a teacher … this is my research". He also said that it changed the talk with colleagues: "Good to talk about research otherwise you're bogged down talking about behaviour of kids or who's not handing in homework" (focus group two).

All six secondary school teachers reported that students who were involved as participants in their research projects benefited in more ways than expected. Carol said:

> They grew two inches and thought they were the bees' knees. The students in the focus groups became more focused, more reflective. The process made them feel quite special and got them starting to think in a different way. (Focus group two)

Paul said "the kids were valued … and liked [that] they were listened to, [that I] worried enough to change what they do to make them learn better" (focus group two). Chloe said the students liked being consulted about the value of new interventions:

> They took the question about whether the next year's students should do this programme extremely seriously. (Focus group two)

So the students appeared to learn from their teachers sharing the purpose of the interventions, becoming more reflective, noticing what they were learning and how, and growing in self-esteem and confidence as their teachers sought their ideas and opinions. Although this aspect was not commented on by the primary teachers, this may have been because of the nature of their specific research projects (Rachel was investigating classroom practices of teacher aides and Jane carried out a case study of one reading recovery student). It cannot not be assumed that primary-aged students would not benefit from research in ways described here by the secondary teachers.

Three of the teachers commented that the opportunity to carry out in-depth reading was valuable. Because the topic had been chosen by the teachers, they were motivated to read. Chloe said that the most valuable thing for her was that "it gave you a focus to doing a lot of background reading that when you're teaching you just don't get around to doing" (focus group two).

Barriers

Not surprisingly, lack of time was the most difficult aspect for the teachers to deal with. Without exception, the teachers agreed that it was extremely difficult to carry out research without release time, and flexible working hours. Rachel, one of the two primary school teachers in the study, was fortunate to have some release time built into her job. She said:

> If you were in a classroom full-time I don't think you could do it. Young children, they don't leave you alone. You get interrupted. You can't observe, do tally marks, and teach! (Focus group one)

Although all the teachers agreed that research was worthwhile, they said they would not recommend it to everyone. They explained that teachers needed to possess certain qualities and attributes to be able to carry out this sort of professional development. These included the ability to work intensively at night and at weekends, being self-motivated, being able to manage time effectively, and being prepared to make sacrifices. It was also important that teachers had done some study before doing the research, in order to give them background knowledge in the discipline area and at least some preliminary experiences in developing research skills. In the case of these participants, all but one had completed several papers towards a postgraduate qualification.

Two teachers talked about a feeling of loneliness while carrying out their research and said that if they did another research project, they would like to have a partner. All teachers doing the postgraduate research paper found the support of the group extremely valuable. Others have also found that teachers need support at all stages of the research process (for example, Atay, 2007; Burns, 1995; Loughran et al., 2002).

The part of the research process all teachers found most difficult was narrowing down their topic at the beginning. The teachers were having to become familiar with the whole research process at the same time as having to decide on a focused and manageable research topic. It was typical for teachers to begin the course wanting to "change the world" with research questions which, while significant and important, were not feasible in a project spanning just one year. Carol's comment encapsulates the teachers' feelings: "I loved the autonomy but I needed to be pinned down" (focus group two).

Enablers

Some of the teachers' schools seemed to have an environment which encouraged and fostered teacher research, and some did not. There was considerable difference between schools' attitudes toward teacher research. Although the sample size is too small to make generalised claims, it is interesting to note that in this study the secondary teachers felt more supported than the primary teachers. The primary teachers felt that there was little support from their schools for any tertiary study that included research. They also talked about a perception among primary teachers that they had been "used" by university researchers without hearing about the outcomes and benefits of work carried out in their schools. These two things, they believed, contributed to an overall negative perception of research by primary school teachers.

Some teachers worked in schools in which senior management encouraged professional development, including research. In these schools, there were other staff, including management, who were also studying and who understood the value of research and reflective practice. In two schools, feedback from teachers who had undertaken professional development was included as a regular part of staff or team meetings. Teachers who worked in these schools felt their research was valued and acknowledged.

The two teachers who aligned their research with school initiatives and goals had the most support in terms of release time, flexible working hours, and opportunities to share findings with staff. Chloe's research was aligned to and written into the school strategic plan. The other teachers listened almost enviously when she said:

> Anything I wanted to do … I was given time to work with teachers … given freedom to do it… . (Focus group two)

Other teachers said that aligning research with appraisal goals also ensured more support.

In contrast, some teachers felt generally unsupported in their research beyond their immediate colleagues. Amy said:

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

These teachers said they were still waiting for slots in professional development schedules to share their research. It would appear that these teachers' experiences reflect the situation in some Australian schools—Loughran et al., in their discussion of the Perspective and Voice of the Teacher (PAVOT) project in Australia, state that:

> arguments that the teaching role should include a research responsibility have been long and persistent, but the rhetoric has rarely been translated in such a way that the conditions of teachers' work encourage their development as researchers. (2002, p. 34)

All the researchers rated collegial support from other teacher researchers on the postgraduate research paper or from lecturers as very important. It was clear that when the "going got tough", coming to class and hearing that others were experiencing similar setbacks was really helpful.

Not surprisingly, lack of time was the most difficult aspect for the teachers to deal with. Without exception, the teachers agreed that it was extremely difficult to carry out research without release time, and flexible working hours.

The teacher researchers in our study were clear in their recognition of the long-term benefits—that ideas about effective teaching and learning would continue to be created from close observation within the classroom well beyond their current research.

Not surprisingly, the teachers found that being given time to carry out research and write it up was extremely helpful. However, not all teachers found it useful to have whole days released from the classroom. Sometimes it was so time consuming and difficult to arrange relief (and, in two instances, cope with the resentment of colleagues), that teachers chose not to use these days. Teachers reported that it would be more useful to have regular release from a whole class (secondary subject teachers) or even blocks of time for particular aspects of the research such as data analysis or report writing. One teacher had a Ministry of Education study award for the first six months of the year, and she felt that she would have been unable to carry out the research without this.

Conclusion

The teachers in this study found the process of carrying out classroom research extremely worthwhile on various levels. It enhanced feelings of self-worth as professionals, enabled ongoing systematic reflection of their own teaching, and added to their pedagogic knowledge about their specific area of investigation. As Atay (2007) found, teacher research, although complex and demanding, can have positive effects on the professional competence of teachers.

Writing about action research, Burns (1999) suggests we still know little about how teachers of English language learners view and carry out research. We do not know "what kinds of support structures or information are needed … and what conditions promote or hinder the doing of action research" (Burns, 1999, p. 1). Although Burns is focusing on collaborative action research, her claims reflect our findings for second language acquisition research in New Zealand. Our small-scale study has challenged our own practice as lecturers supporting teachers undertaking research. We can now begin to offer some practical suggestions for fostering a research culture among primary and secondary school teachers.

Implications for teacher research papers

Our first recommendation would be to encourage collaborative work in schools; for example, have two teachers working on similar studies in their own, different classroom contexts.

In 2006 we put this into action—two English teachers in one secondary school worked closely together reflecting on student reading. The teachers felt that their support for each other was significant in enabling them to keep to deadlines and complete the research.

Secondly, we recommend that lecturers supervising the teacher research write a letter to the principal and board of trustees of each school outlining the research being undertaken by the teacher, the benefits for student learning, and possible ways the school could support the teacher researcher.

Implications for schools

We recommend that schools engage in a dialogue with teacher researchers to ensure alignment of the research with school plans and school aims. The teacher in our study who aligned her research question with the school strategic plan received whatever support she needed because the school saw the relevance of her findings.

We also recommend that schools provide targeted release time—for example, for the teachers to write up their research for journal publication or dissemination at conferences.

Suggestions for the wider educational community

Teacher researchers need to be given avenues to disseminate their findings (e.g., regular research publications written by and for teachers, and regular presentation opportunities by and for teachers). *Many Voices* has been a useful outlet for teacher writing and research in New Zealand, but it has been reduced to an annual publication, which limits the opportunities for teachers to publish their work.

McNiff and Whitehead argue that educational research carried out by practitioners is effective in changing practice: "generating theories about work has to begin within the work" (2002, p. 4). Paul summed up what the teachers in this study were saying: "I want to know what my teaching is and how to make it better." The teacher researchers in the study were clear in their recognition of the long-term benefits. They believed that effective teaching and learning would continue to be created from close observation within the classroom well beyond their current research.

All eight teacher researchers demonstrated that change can be generated when teachers take responsibility for their own work, try out interventions, and monitor these closely in order to improve teaching and learning. However, all participants had to overcome significant constraints in order to achieve such positive results for themselves and their students. If teacher research is to become a real option for teacher development in New Zealand schools,

and we believe that it should be, then it needs to be well supported at all levels.

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