Practitioner researchers: Can an innovative approach to professional development boost pedagogical engagement across the entire teaching body?

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation begins by considering the role of a headteacher in school improvement through the lens of educational literature and determines that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teaching staff is considered as an effective method for improving outcomes for young people across the educational spectrum. In the context of a selective, London independent school, a project enabling teachers to collaborate in small groups which cut across traditional subject divides and which extend across the entire academic year is devised. The ethics of a headteacher both leading and researching a school-improvement initiative are considered and key research questions are drawn up including whether seven "Collaborative Enquiry Groups" can promote innovation in the classroom, encourage engagement with academic literature and support even the 'hard-to-reach' teachers. Quantitative and qualitative data sources are deployed in order to assess the impact of the "Collaborative Enquiry Groups" which are ultimately judged to have been successful and well-received. Teachers appreciated especially the opportunity to work together and to discuss their pedagogy and a majority of staff finished the year by describing themselves as "practitioner-researchers", although the required workload was considered burdensome by some participants. This paper adds to the field of educational research by offering a rare insight into pedagogy within an independent school and by developing a model of teacher CPD which could be extended to other schools.

INTRODUCTION

In modern times, it is often considered to be the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, who first paved the way for decades of school improvement studies and school improvement initiatives either led by or championed by central government. Callaghan's now famous speech to Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1976, called for a critical eye to be cast over unaccountable teachers and a loose curriculum (Millar 2016), for a renewed focus on skills which enhance employability and for schools to prepare children for their future (Callaghan 1976, Phillips and Harper-Jones 2002).

Prior to the 1970s, many educationalists and academics believed that schooling had no more than marginal effects on the development of children (Rutter and Maughan 2002). Whilst some credit Callaghan with unlocking a "secret garden" (Lowe 2007), others can see that he was capturing an already established zeitgeist (Kelvin 2011, Hopkins 2012). Indeed, at about the same time as the Ruskin College speech, a longitudinal study of the impact of secondary schools on the pupils in their care by a team from King's College, London, was bringing evidence to bear that the curriculum and instruction offered by individual schools had a significant impact on the outcomes for children, even children from similar backgrounds: the 15,000 hours which a young person spends in school have "an important influence on the children's behaviour and scholastic progress" (Rutter et al 1979).

More than forty years earlier, American academics were already considering the sociology of teaching (Waller 1932) and it was deemed desirable to have a professionalised and "vigorous" teaching body, rather than "dabblers" (Waller 1932). Other in-depth, longitudinal investigations were also underway at Yale University in the 1940s and we can read about how the perceived prestige of a teacher influences

his students (Hollingshead 1949). These early studies, however, had a greater focus on student cultures rather than teacher cultures (Hargreaves 1995). Later, academics came to understand that pupil progress was being held back in schools, where "the way we do things round here" was an accepted norm; such an attitude or approach had become a "fundamental problem" (Hargreaves 1995).

As a serving teacher since 1996 and having worked in both state-maintained and independent schools, I have witnessed first-hand the influence and proliferation of school improvement initiatives, most notably perhaps during the successive Blair governments from 1997 to 2010. During this period in particular, substantial investments were made in terms of school funding. New Labour swept to power after 18 years in the political wilderness on a much-repeated slogan of "Education, education, education". Budgets increased, but the quid pro quo was an increasingly interventionist Department for Education accompanied by a strengthened accountability regime for teachers (Campbell and Stott 2008). Some commentators have described this as a period of innovation overload (Green 2010, Robinson et al 2017).

Over the 25 years of my career so far, I have spent half of it in three London comprehensive schools and the other half in two London independent schools. I have enjoyed working in each of the schools, of which two have been for boys, two have been for girls and one has been co-educational. My current role is as the headteacher of an academically-selective, private girls' school in Central London. This position as a school leader affords me the opportunity to develop whole-school projects for the benefit of the pupils in my care. It also means that my projects and innovations tend to be delivered via the intermediaries of the teaching and support staff at this 500-pupil school. Whilst I continue to teach both French and German to Year 8 classes, there is greater scope for me to be an agent of change through my role as headteacher (Sammons et al 2010, Day et al 2016), through the vision which I communicate to all stakeholders and through the leadership which I offer to a community of teacher practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the above background in mind, by way of an introduction, I shall consider the relevant literature for school improvement through six lenses. This method reflects the journey from the context in which I find myself as a researcher practitioner, through to a considered response towards implementing a thoughtful and well-planned initiative at the school which I lead. The sub-headings to the literature review are thus:

- Independent schools in the British education system
- School culture and the role of the headteacher
- The status of the teaching profession
- Reflective practice for school improvement
- Leadership, support and challenge for school improvement
- Defining, promoting, encouraging and sustaining successful CPD for school improvement

Following on from a critical review of the literature, I will explain both the nature of the intervention that has been undertaken and the design of the research strategies which I have employed to investigate the outcomes of the intervention. Next, I will progress to a discussion of the findings and finally, an attempt to draw conclusions from the work.

Independent schools in the British education system

Perhaps it may appear that a school, such as the one which I lead, has little need to engage with improvement initiatives at all. Ours is a high-performing school with around 80% of all A level passes graded at A* to B and GCSE results which place the school amongst the top fifty in the country. Our intake of pupils is selective on the basis of a competitive entry test and also on the ability of the parents to pay the fees which are in excess of £20,000 per annum. Clearly, the school falls outside of the mainstream.

Many commentators are lining up to deplore the perceived advantage already enjoyed by pupils at British independent schools. For example, independent education has long been viewed as a vehicle to pass on privilege from one generation to the next (Halsey et al 1980, Sullivan et al 2018, Green et al 2017, Green and Kynaston 2019). This view is repeated by other writers who see the very existence of independent schools a "key factor" when accounting for segregation across the British education system. There is a so-called "private schools effect" which is considered to create more pronounced inequality (Alegre and Ferrer 2010). What is more, this is far from being only a modern opinion, since independent schools were pronounced as "educationally vicious" due to their lack of social mix back in the 1930s (Tawney 1931, Turner 2016).

The author and playwright, Alan Bennett, denounced independent schools as "unfair" in his "sermon" at King's College, Cambridge (Bennett 2014). The support which is given to Sixth Formers at private schools, he claimed, offered them an unfair advantage in applications to top universities. An example can be found amongst the alumni of some of the best known schools in the country and has its roots steeped in history. In the 1860s, there was a concern that wealthy public schools were becoming unduly influential and that they had strayed from the values of their founders by educating the children of the rich rather than the poor. A parliamentary inquiry, known as the "Clarendon Commission" shone a spotlight on nine schools, but ultimately took little action to mitigate their privilege. Now, over 150 years later, it can be shown that former pupils of these same nine schools are 94 times more likely to attain an "elite social status" than pupils who attended any other school (Reeves et al 2017). Half of all the members of Great Britain's Olympic teams in both 2012 and 2016 were drawn from independent schools and 10% of all undergraduate students at Oxford and Cambridge come from just twelve independent schools within or around the M25 motorway (Verkaik 2018).

During both the 2017 and, more explicitly, the 2019 General Election campaigns independent schools were cast as villains in terms of the social advantage which they confer and, by extension, their role in a "social mobility emergency" in Great Britain (Greening 2017, Adams 2019, Freidman and Laurison 2019). The social exclusivity of independent schools is, in part, due to the high cost of fees. Since the 1980s, fees have increased at a rate well above inflation (Turner 2016, James and Lunnon 2019). It follows that independent schools are full of the children of families with a higher socio-economic status who already understand how to "game the system" and who already have high expectations for their offspring, including places at elite universities and prestigious professions (Siraj and Mayo 2014, Friedman and Laurison 2019).

Politicians from both the left and the right have begun to examine independent schools more closely over recent years. By educating just 7% of the school population these schools are already part of a small minority, however, the academic disciplines which they offer differentiate them further still. The

classics, modern foreign languages, arts education and well-resourced programmes for sport are becoming increasingly rare in the state sector (Vasagar 2012, Johnson 2018, British Council 2018).

On the other hand, Britain's private schools also enjoy a positive reputation for academic excellence, both across the board and especially in subjects which are at risk of extinction elsewhere. For example, over half of all of the A* grades at A level German are obtained at independent schools (Turner 2016). What is more, were the most recent PISA analysis to consider HMC schools, such as the one at which I work, as a country in their own right, this would be the highest-performing constituency in the OECD with their particular contributions to science far outstripping performance in England more widely (Boulton 2019).

In common with all modern schools and despite, or perhaps even because of, these existing macro-level advantages, independent schools, including the one which I lead, work hard to confer opportunity to the pupils in our care. The parent body, the staff and the pupil body at the school share a vision of ambition and aspiration. Our school, whilst undoubtedly high-performing in terms of examination achievement, also values knowledge, compassion, spirit and perseverance. The ethos is of being "academic and kind" and it is not a school which rests on its laurels. This ethos is evidenced by the mission statement and the aims of the school.

School culture and the role of the headteacher

There has been a remarkable educational effort over the last twenty years to raise standards of achievement for students across the board (Day et al 2016). Within the accompanying body of educational research and literature are many studies into the role of headteachers in leading schools within an increasingly-decentralised system (Day et al 2016). Indeed, there is a consensus that "effective school autonomy depends on effective leaders" (OECD 2012).

Leadership is described as making "the second biggest difference" to the quality of outcomes for pupils, after the quality of teaching itself (Buck 2018). Within this context, the ethos or culture which is established at the school is crucial to continued improvement (Harris 2002, Hopkins 2012, Caldwell and Spinks 2013, Buck 2018).

The following diagram (Figure 1) is offered by Hargreaves (1995) to consider school culture. This is a basic model of a typology of school cultures which suggests that an optimal position would be, rather like Goldilocks, not too much one way or another:

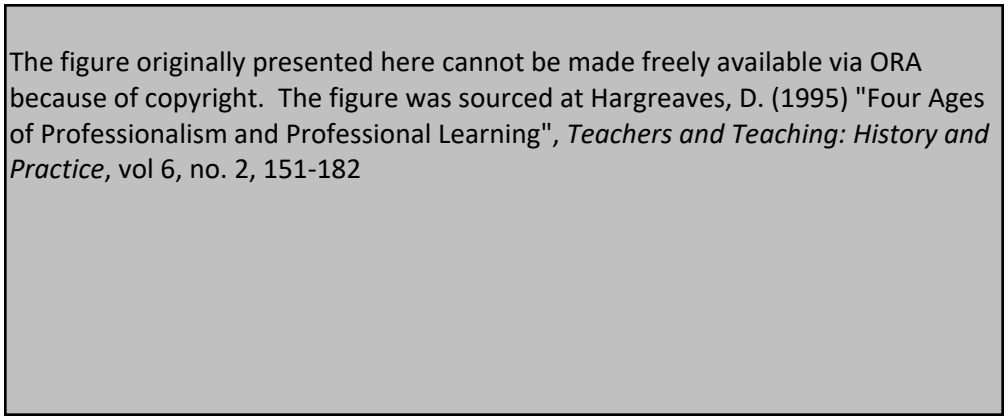


Figure 1: A first typology of school culture

By way of a simple explanation, Hargreaves describes the extreme southwest corner (A) as pushy or pressurised with high expectations and an authoritative leadership. By contrast, the northeast corner (B) is seen as relaxed, carefree and cosy, whilst the northwest corner (C) comes in for a particularly cutting description. This area of the quadrant is home to a frenetic school where teachers and students might experience anxiety about failure to achieve targets; social control is likely to be exerted through emotional blackmail and a high need for control. In some circumstances, this can lead the school to become a hothouse (Hargreaves 1995) or perhaps even a "total institution": full-boarding schools have been likened to lunatic asylums in which both pupils and staff sacrifice personal freedom for community maintenance (Goffman 1961). The final corner (D) is a place where both social cohesion and social control are exceptionally weak – this is a school where teachers struggle to maintain basic routines, where academic work is not prioritised and where "life is lived one day at a time" (Hargreaves 1995).

Clearly, in real life, schools are somewhere along each of the axes and an optimum position might be seen to be in the centre, although schools may feel successful in any position, except the southeast corner (D) where delinquency and truancy are high and considerable staff absenteeism is coupled with low morale.

What is certain, is that in terms of school culture, there is not a straight-line continuum from least successful to most successful, since this "league table" approach to school performance can lead to dangerous oversimplification and a culture of blame (Hargreaves 1995,Tymms and Wiggins 2000, Dearden and Vignoles 2011). Using this first model to diagnose school type leads to a conclusion that an effective school is one which avoids the dangers of excessive formalism, welfarism and survivalism (Hargreaves 1995) and that a successful leader is a pragmatist who steers the ship carefully around icebergs and steadily away from dangerous rocks. As a headteacher with five years of experience, I understand the appeal of such a pragmatism. I can also relate to Figure 2, below, which may be used to "position" a school and to describe its culture:

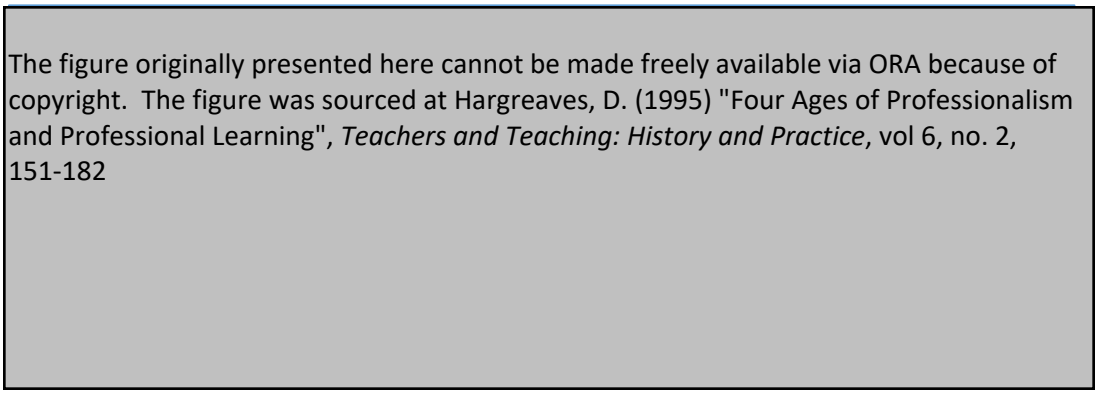


Figure 2: A second typology of school culture

This time, we see a traditional school as a feudal system where the headteacher is a monarch surrounded by barons (Waller 1932). Innovation in such a school is encouraged, but only up to a point and teachers who break the rules are not tolerated, as with Miss Jean Brodie or John Keating, in *Dead Poets Society* (Hargreaves 1995). In this traditional school, management is autocratic and ideas come from the top and are fed down the line – this risks teachers either perverting or undermining the original intent of any innovation. Equally in this model, relations with parents and children may well require

deference towards the school and in the case of intractability they may be invited to seek educational services elsewhere (Hargreaves 1995).

By contrast, a collegial school is described as one where the headteacher is *primus inter pares* who enables her colleagues to participate in discussion and decision-making. One advantage of such a model is that this kind of school has empowered its staff to be better able to handle rapid change. Conversely, a disadvantage of this approach is that decisions which fail to command a clear majority tend to be postponed and, by extension, standards may not actually be driven up and progress may not be made (Hargreaves 1995).

Naturally enough, the drift since Waller's investigations of the 1930s or perhaps for even longer than that has been away from the more traditional, old-fashioned model and towards the more collegial school. This evolution in school culture reflects wider changes across society since the 1960s and the 1980s in particular (Hargreaves 1995). Most schools, including the one in which I serve, are to a certain extent traditional and to a certain extent collegial.

Within the body of more recent modern school improvement literature, the voice, the words and the model of the headteacher are seen as vital in raising attainment and achievement (Harris 2002, Sammons et al 2011, Hopkins 2012, Day et al 2016, Buck 2018). From my point of view, this is a welcome improvement over the situation some seventy years ago:

> "The remarks of the principal will be thought the pointless maunderings of toothless senility, to be laughed off and forgotten in the next moment." (Hollingshead 1949)

These days, there is a body of evidence which shows that school leadership is an important factor in educational good practice and this is heartening to a headteacher such as me who works hard to be an engine of opportunity for the pupils:

> "Not only does the quality of school leadership make a difference to student outcomes but evidence also identifies how that relationship varies for different types of leadership practice… School leaders provide the dynamism to make all the components of school improvement function." (Sinnema et al 2015)

Similarly, the impact of school improvement innovations have been seen to be greatest where the headteacher herself takes a personal interest in the project (Soulsby and Swain 2003, Arthur et al 2004). Elsewhere, we see that headteacher management practices are on a continuum from compliance to subversion and that they can treat national policy with ambivalence or selectivity (MacBeath et al 2007). A case study is cited where one headteacher complains of a bombardment of new policies from the centre; the result of which is that he has learned a passive "obedience" to the latest government edict. This meant that a visible lack of intellectual inquiry was being modelled at the top of the school to colleagues and pupils alike. Clearly, this pragmatic approach to avoiding conflict with the powers above, falls short of a spirit of intellectual curiosity which many headteachers may hope to display (Carney-Dalton 2001). In fact, there are cases quoted where the headteachers interviewed were conflating teaching with learning (MacBeath et al 2007) resulting in an awkward direction of travel for their schools.

An imperative to be good role models motivates many headteachers and it is a cause which was championed to a significant degree by David Blunkett whilst he served as Secretary of State for

Education in the first four years of the Blair administration (Arthur et al 2004, Hagger et al 2008). One initial method was to establish in 2000 the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) which was described at the time as the "Sandhurst" for headteachers and which met with initial success as a visible demonstration of a commitment to leadership and as a method of delivering radical change to the school system (Bolam 2004, Gunter and Forrester 2009). In common with many political initiatives, this idea did not survive a change of government. The NCSL was merged into the Teaching Agency and the Department for Education in 2013 and was closed altogether in 2018 (DfE 2018).

The status of the teaching profession

The question of the status of teachers has been live for many years (Hoyle 1983, Hargreaves 2000). Pedagogical expertise has not been held in the same esteem as other professions because it is hard to measure, because it overlaps with the knowledge of childcare, a skill which is held mostly by women and because it has been thought to resemble common sense and was therefore open to be acquired by anyone (Berliner 1991). Against this background, both Blunkett and Blair were keen advocates of lifelong learning and of teachers as learners who modelled the process of continual learning. The former having asserted that, "the fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential to our future success" (Hagger et al 2008). To this end in the early part of this century, the status of the teaching profession became a topic of discussion and teaching certificates began to be awarded, largely successfully, with credits towards master's level qualifications (Thomas 2018). This innovation was probably long-overdue and has been in place in other countries, such as high-performing Finland, for many years (Menter and Clarke 2016).

A leading architect of Blairite education reforms was David Hopkins who believed in 2007 that the education system nationally was at a tipping point towards every school becoming a great school (Hopkins 2007). He challenges the established orthodoxy by quoting the American management guru Jim Collins:

> "Good is the enemy of great … we don't have great schools because we have good schools." (Collins 2001)

Hopkins is known as a keen protagonist of a teaching and learning culture within schools. He has also written describing the need for our teaching workforce to become "informed professionals" (Hopkins 2007) and this is achieved by putting Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at the heart of every school as it strives to become a great school. Unfortunately, many "top-down" interventions associated with the zeal of the Blairite education reforms were not judged to have been wholly-successful, one commentator referring to them as "dismal failures" (Caldwell and Spinks 2013). Nowadays, local projects are increasingly finding favour.

In order to create teacher professionals, two key factors are required: an improvement of skills and an improvement of status (Menter and Clarke 2016). What is more, all children should be taught by high-status teachers who are committed to a career-long journey of CPD (Hoyle 2008, Menter and Clarke 2016). Interestingly, in countries where the public perceive teachers to be well-paid, they are held in higher esteem and the student outcomes are also better (Dolton et al 2011). Furthermore, international research confirms that the quality of teaching is one of the most critical factors in student achievement (O'Brien 2012).

Reflective practice for school improvement

A call to align pedagogical practice more closely with teacher status is advocated as a way to encourage "extended professionals" (Hoyle 1975, Hoyle 2008). The characteristics of "extended professionality" reflect a wide vision of what education involves, such as: valuing theories of pedagogy; and adopting an intellectual, rationally-based approach to the job (Evans 2008). A teaching workforce which can locate its own classroom practice within a bigger picture, which is happily collegial and which seeks to improve its skills through reading and engagement with research is the gold standard which all schools might seek to achieve (Hopkins 2007, Menter and Clarke 2016). This can be achieved when teachers are encouraged to be reflective practitioners (Schön 1983, Richert 1991, McIntyre 1993, Hopkins 2007, Opfer and Pedder 2010) – that is to say, professionals who are given time, space and guidance to consider the intended impact of their own knowledge and learning. Naturally enough, commentators are in agreement that this is not an easy circle to square:

> "The teacher's isolation in her classroom works against reflection-in-action. She needs to communicate her private puzzles and insights, to test them against the views of her peers. She must expand the scope of her interests in students. What they know how to do in the world outside the school becomes deeply interesting to her, for it suggests the intuitive competences on which she can build." (Schön 1983)

Schön's call to arms is echoed by others who describe a school as a learning community for teachers as well as students (Joyce et al 1999) which certainly chimes with the prevailing mood in Blairite politics at the turn of the century. Indeed, Michael Barber who moved from being the Chief Advisor to David Blunkett at the DfEE to leading the newly-established Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in 2001, is quoted as having written:

> "In an era of change, unless all staff are learning there is considerable risk that an organisation will stagnate or slide." (O'Brien 2012)

Reflective practice has been associated with notions of growth through critical enquiry, analysis and self-directed evaluation (Calderhead 1989). However, it has been both adopted widely and adapted considerably to suit a number of circumstances. The "slogan" of reflective teaching (Calderhead 1989) offers various idealised models for how we train teachers. Novice teachers, however, may be the least successful reflective practitioners (Carter et al 1987) since the task of evaluating one's own lessons is not easy – experience, understanding and knowledge of children are all essential components (Calderhead 1989).

Much has been written about how to develop the teaching workforce and thereby to enhance the status of teachers more generally. All are in agreement that collaboration amongst teachers is one of the vital ingredients to successful school improvement policies (Christie et al 2007, Hagger et al 2008, Hopkins 2008, Pedder and Opfer 2010, McArdle and Coutts 2010, Hopkins 2012) and many are in favour of a school-led approach to school improvement rather than policies and practices imposed by central government (Carter et al 1987, Muijs and Harris 2006, Opfer and Pedder 2010, Hopkins 2012). Naturally, this is also more easily said than done and there are numerous obstacles to school improvement initiatives, one of which is the act of leading the staff through the process (Bubb and Earley 2009).

Experienced teachers tend to be a self-confident group who are considered more difficult to engage than colleagues towards the beginning of their careers (Carter 1991, Munby and Russell1991, Brock and Grady 2009, Whitaker 2014). Expert and experienced teachers need "ownership" of information in order to engage with it and to accept it (Carter et al 1987). An expert is identified as a person who knows "a great many things the novice does not know and can rapidly evoke the particular items relevant to the problem at hand" (Carter et al 1987). This, by extension, could lead to what is sometimes perceived as resistance by experienced teachers who quickly revert back to the "what works here" model identified earlier (Hargreaves 1995). Quite simply, they feel that they have heard it all before – the nature of classroom life is cyclical and it is easy for teachers to repeat the same approaches year on year (Harris 2002). Experienced stakeholders who may well be best placed to become high-functioning reflective practitioners (Calderhead 1989) and who may find reflection a much more important way of learning than their novice colleagues (McIntyre 1993) are, therefore, the hardest to reach. As a type, they may first need to be convinced by the rationale for any given school improvement initiative before they are prepared to engage with any new programme (Thrupp 2005, Pedder and McIntyre 2006).

Leadership, support and challenge for school improvement

Within months of the coming to power of New Labour in 1997, the Department for Education and Employment had published a paper called "Excellence in Schools" which underlined both the requirement for strong leadership at school level in order to change behaviours across thousands of schools catering for millions of children and that national policy is the driving force behind rising performance (McMahon 2001). The explicit messages was that "good" schools have a distinctive culture and that the culture of schools can be changed:

> "At school level the implicit strategy seems to be that leaders should create a climate that is supportive and gives people a belief that they can improve and yet challenges them by highlighting weaknesses. This is a difficult balance to strike." (McMahon 2001)

Managing and changing an established culture within any workplace is no mean feat (McMahon 2001). The values of an institution may be difficult for an outsider or a newcomer to identify. What is more, it may very well be that the values espoused are not the same as those which are practised by the members of the community (Schein 1985). The early stages of headship operate as a two-way street, where headteachers are "socialised" into the knowledge, values and behaviours which make up the culture of their particular school (Earley and Weindling 2007) whilst at the same time offering the new incumbent the opportunity to establish her own style of leadership within the school community. Once the postholder is established, he can use his understanding of how the institution works and learns in order to manage it or change it (Alvesson 1993) and this can be achieved by clear leadership, by building a shared vision, by setting goals and through collaborative relationships (Hargreaves 1995, Robinson et al 2017) as seen here:

> "School improvement involves two key leadership tasks – improving the technical core of teaching, learning and teacher learning while simultaneously building the relational trust that provides the social resource for the hard work of improvement. "(Sinnema et al 2015).

The role of the headteacher is seen as crucial (Roberts 2009, Sammons et al 2010, Hopkins 2012, Robinson et al 2017) and when this individual is over-confident in his or her own abilities it may create an interpersonal climate where the open flow of ideas is stifled, perhaps because the "feudal" style of

management described above has led to relationships built on power dynamics rather than trust (Sinnema et al 2015). This may mean that teaching staff revert back to the familiar, for whilst they generally acknowledge that it is good to share resources and share ideas, they do not tend to do it as a matter of course (MacBeath et al 2007). Male headteachers, older headteachers and those who work in larger schools all tend to overrate their own effectiveness in terms of being a successful leader of school improvement (Sinnema et al 2015). In a school which sets out to be a learning community for all, there is certainly scope for leadership support around the headteacher who is both a product of her own school as well as the architect for its future development (Alvesson 1993, Robinson et al 2017).

Mentoring of headteachers in order to enable them to fulfil their role is proposed (Roberts 2009) and one of the keys to success as regards school improvement measures is that headteachers should role model lifelong learning to their staff:

> "Principals must be leaders of learning in their schools. Principals … probably can't teach other how to be learners if they do not acknowledge their own need for ongoing learning" (Mohr 1998)

The leadership of successful school improvement is considered to correlate strongly with a belief in Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and lifelong learning. Where leaders establish visible outworkings of a commitment to adult learning, such as a teaching and learning noticeboard or a bookshelf for educational publication, this is seen as valuable and worthwhile (Bubb and Earley 2009). Indeed, such managerial items as application forms for in-service training courses and evaluation forms to be completed after a day of training carry subliminal messages that CPD is important and that it has an impact on pupils (Bubb and Earley 2009). In contrast to and in support of such small scale initiatives, the most recent Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reports that collaborative working amongst teachers is both impactful and popular. Teachers who participate in CPD based on peer-learning and networking benefit from higher job satisfaction and also tend to display higher levels of self-efficacy (OECD 2019). Unfortunately, the same survey reveals that only 44% of the teaching workforce enjoy opportunities to undertake collaborative CPD. It is beholden upon headteachers and school leaders to build CPD as a "collective endeavour" (Hofman et al 2001, Robinson et al 2017) where discussion amongst colleagues about classroom issues is prioritised (Gray et al 1999).

<u>Defining, Promoting, encouraging and sustaining successful CPD for school improvement</u>

CPD is a tool with great potential and one that must be "unlocked" (O'Brien 2012). In order to begin to understand how we might achieve this goal, a helpful starting point is to define CPD as it may be understood by educationalists:

> "It encompasses the first-hand experience learned at the chalk-face, courses and in-service training attended by the individual, professional reading, good practice in teaching and management learnt from other colleagues both consciously and unconsciously, as well as individual and team staff development gained in meetings with other teachers to discuss matters of common concern." (Shaw 1995)

Successful CPD can be seen as a double loop of reflection where the teacher acknowledges herself as a learner in the process and where she, once again, takes time to reflect upon her experiences, as shown in Figure 3, below (Mitchell 2013):

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The figure was sourced at Mitchell, Rafael (2013), "What is professional development, how does it occur and how may it be used by educational leaders and managers for the purpose of school improvement?", Professional Development in Education, vol. 39: no. 2, 387-400

Figure 3: Double loop reflection

Three necessary types of learning are seen in the process of teacher development: implicit or informal learning which takes place in the space around workplace activities; reactive learning which takes place in actions or in response to a situation; and deliberative learning which is goal-oriented and takes a certain amount of time (Eraut 2004).

For CPD to flourish, individual teachers need to "buy-in" to it (Bubb and Earley 2009). Teachers need to feel that their needs are being met and that their views are being heard:

> "It was clear from our research that hearts and minds had to be won if all – students and staff alike – were to work towards their own and collective goals leading to school improvement. Time and money were precious resources and so, one school leader said, "Staff need to see the point of any training." (Bubb and Earley 2009).

Teachers need to see the relevance of training courses which are offered to them (Luneta 2012) and they need to see how in-service training or additional study can energise them "out of a rut" of pragmatism (the cult of what works here) into a greater self-confidence and towards making use of evidence-based study (Seaborne 2010). This presents a particular challenge for more-experienced or older colleagues who are typically less engaged with innovations than younger teachers (Opfer and Pedder 2010). Nevertheless, engagement can be achieved through the creation of collaborative learning communities within our schools (Roberts 2009) rather than the traditional model of CPD as "externally-designed, stand-and-deliver, non-participatory learning" which does little to assist teachers in their day-to-day teaching and learning practices (Brooks and Gibson 2012).

A collaborative encounter with academic research (Christie et al 2008) is seen as a step towards teachers becoming "collegial professionals" (Hargreaves 2000) and hence motivational. Similarly, a discussion-based working group within schools is also a motivating factor (Roberts 2009, McArdle and Coutts 2010, Stevenson et al 2016). Many benefits can be derived from participation in a collegial group, such as: reduced teacher isolation, increased encouragement and support, a shared vision for the good of the school, and a flattened leadership structure (Murphy and Lick 2005). In establishing such communities of learning, careful planning is required and school leaders should consider numerous questions before embarking upon new CPD ventures (Roberts 2009).

Unfortunately, school systems for the design and then evaluation of CPD tend not to be well-planned nor, often, do they tend to have the desired outcomes (Pedder and Opfer 2010, Stevenson et al 2016). One criticism of school structures for CPD is that the people charged with organising it are rarely those

who deliver it which leads to a disconnect between vision and practice (Roberts and Pruitt 2003). Moreover, CPD in schools is seldom linked to performance management processes and this is also seen as undesirable (Pedder and Opfer 2010, Buck 2018).

Schools need to build capacity for improvement into their systems and structures (Harris 2002) and in order to develop CPD which leads to enhanced levels of student achievement there will need to be transformation of learning (Caldwell and Spinks 2013) . Schools where school leaders take the following steps in the preparation of CPD programmes are most likely to increase pupil motivation and to have a positive effect on teacher engagement:

- Make space and time for teacher enquiry
- Utilise evidence from academic research and practice
- Study the impact of models on student learning and use data effectively
- Link the classroom focus with whole-school and departmental development plans
- Create opportunities for networking and capacity building (Hopkins 2007)

Of the factors above, the first critical key to success of any potential CPD initiative is that time is made available to staff (Arthur et al 2004, Hopkins 2007, Christie et al 2008, Bubb and Earley 2009). Teachers at the chalk-face, who are perhaps preparing their students for the rigours of external examinations or hurrying to cover all aspects of the curriculum, understand time as a rare and valuable commodity:

> "Time is like water in the desert. It is a teacher's most precious resource—it is to be husbanded, guarded, and conserved. Yet … we risk letting the minutes slip by … we fritter away the seconds without putting them to good use." (Lemov 2015)

So, also for teachers themselves their levels of engagement with CPD will be diminished if they do not have the time to devote to it (Mitchell 2013).

Quite apart from time and workload constraints, many have suggested that the traditional "stand-and-deliver" method of in-service training day instruction is little appreciated by staff (Roberts and Pruitt 2003). By contrast, an ability to give teachers some element of choice has been found to be beneficial to schools (Bubb and Earley 2009, Stevenson et al 2016). In fact, one headteacher is quoted as saying that his staff needed to "feel that they can influence what is provided and take responsibility for it having an impact – it's not something that's 'done to you'" (Bubb and Earley 2009). This element of teacher agency through well-designed CPD is picked up by a number of commentators. Where CPD can create and empower "teacher-experts" they will, in turn, be the fuel in the engine of school improvement strategies (McArdle and Coutts 2010) and they may unlock their pre-existing abilities where effective practitioners already "know more than they can say" (Schön 1983).

From a teacher's point of view, it is considered attractive that engagement with CPD enables them to realise their full potential (Mutton et al 2008). Therefore, one little-stated aim of a stimulating CPD programme from a school improvement point of view is that fewer teachers might fall into the trap of "staffroom cynicism". Some teachers, who may at one time have been accomplished practitioners, have had a long journey and may now have given up (Menter and Clarke 2016). Success for colleagues such as these, can be achieved through opportunities for self-evaluation, reflection and perhaps also by recapturing the vision and seeing the bigger picture – that their service is part of a larger whole. This ideal interpretation has been likened to two stonemasons each shaping a block: each is asked what he is

doing, the first replies that he is carving a block with straight edges and the second that he is building a cathedral (Hopkins 2007).

Teachers, like professionals in many walks of life, enjoy the thought that they are part of something bigger than themselves and this has been an influential premise supporting the growth in popularity of practitioner research both in the United Kingdom and overseas in recent years which has seen teachers reframing CPD as shared sense-making (Koshy 2010, McArdle and Coutts 2010, Robinson 2017). From an historical perspective, this can be seen as the coming to fruition of concepts which other commentators have been foretelling for many years: that schools are finally becoming research communities which are involved in "knowledge-building" (Schön 1983, Bereiter 1993, Hargreaves 1999). If schools are, indeed, to transform themselves into communities of practice where teachers engage in a shared endeavour as a form of developmental activity, this requires work, careful thought and much planning – the "oxygen of reflection" is needed, as are opportunities for reflection (McArdle and Coutts 2010).

Simultaneously, an edge of realism in our expectations of the impact of CPD is advised. For whilst school leaders may very well wish to empower or develop all of their staff for the benefit of the pupils in their care, academics acknowledge that it will only ever be the case that some teachers move along all five stages on a continuum from novice to advanced beginner via competent and proficient practitioners to becoming expert (Berliner 1991). This scepticism at first appears to be echoed by Dylan William who describes teaching as "an unusual job" where there is no shared knowledge base and where there is very little that all practitioners might agree upon. He claims that classrooms are just too complicated for researchers to be able to tell teachers what to do (William 2019), but in doing so, he exhorts teachers to focus themselves upon their own need for development and to take ownership of their own learning – a school improvement mindset after all. For, if CPD is to be used as a valuable tool of school improvement, then teachers must first and foremost understand that it is in no way capable of, nor is it designed to transform them into the best teachers that they can be – this they must do for themselves (Menter and Clarke 2016).

RESEARCH INTENTIONS AND KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The critical review of literature concludes by highlighting one of the over-arching tensions in school improvement initiatives: namely, that teacher autonomy conflicts with management-driven change. Teaching is an intensely personal skill (Richert 1987) and the teaching body is not at all homogeneous. This means that *one-size-fits-all* models of in-service training are not equal to the task of supporting teachers in their "infinitely complex, changing and uncertain" work (Richert 1990). An attempt to square this circle in order to maximise its acceptance was therefore at the heart of the planning for a bespoke, new form of CPD at the school where I serve. From the outset, I was determined to build and element of choice into the design of the programme.

A linked tension in school improvement literature which is revealed by the literature review above is how an individual teacher's pedagogical outlook may either complement or contradict the prevailing culture of the school. Again, an element of choice was desirable in order to accommodate a range of different teaching styles and approaches. Moreover, it seemed at the outset that a project which drew heavily on a discursive and supportive framework might be more inclusive.

In common with most schools, we have many teachers who are innovative, popular and highly-motivated to deliver great lessons time after time. Equally, there are many who are "easy-to-reach", in

that they are only too keen to broaden their horizons through educational reading and keeping up with pedagogical trends. These members of staff are well-serviced by the Teaching and Learning bookshelf in the staff room and by the Teaching and Learning Working Party which has been meeting monthly over the last two years. Naturally, there are also some teachers who might not voluntarily choose to take part in initiatives designed to encourage best classroom practice. This project needed to have all teachers in mind and had to be intended to have general appeal and to develop reflective practitioners leading them to invent, question and initiate their own standards of excellence (Schön 1983).

The literature review, therefore, led me towards the following over-arching question for this practitioner research:

Practitioner-researchers: Can an innovative approach to professional development boost pedagogical engagement across the entire teaching body?

This principal question was shared with the teaching staff at the school and therefore it, intentionally, makes use of inclusive, positive and emotive language. The project is described as "innovative" which makes teachers feel that they are at the cutting-edge of education and that they are pioneering new advances in their chosen field. The word "professional" is also loaded with affirmative connotations for teachers who may have, in the past, felt that their work has been derided as craftsman-like or below the status of other well-established professions, such as medicine or the law. To describe the teaching staff of a school as a "body" emphasises an inclusive collegiality which already exists at the school where I serve, but which I have chosen to re-affirm in the title in order to further encourage a collaborative working environment and this will be seen again in the design of the intervention and the nomenclature of the project groups. It is not by chance that "entire" features in the title – for whilst this may be the most stretching of the ambitions contained in this key question, it is also inclusive of all members of staff and that is intentional. Finally, the term "boost" is another deliberate choice which offers a dynamism to the project which might have been lacking in more commonly-used words such as "increase" or "enhance". A headteacher is, at times, also a salesman and I was not going to miss the opportunity to sell the project to the staff. The ethics of my leadership of this intervention are considered below.

Beyond the headline title to the project, there are four aspects of the investigation which are especially linked to the literature review and which offer insights into the impact of CPD in schools more widely than just the one in which I serve.

<u>Four key research questions</u>

1. Can the intervention enable the teaching staff to define themselves as practitioner-researchers?

This question speaks to the status of the teaching profession and draws on the work of well-established commentators such as Schön (1983) and more recent contributors which I have drawn on heavily in the literature review above including McArdle and Coutts (2010) and Mitchell (2013) who describe how teachers can reflect upon their own practice.

2. Can a CPD-led intervention grow innovation at the school?

Here it is Caldwell and Spinks (2013) who have prompted a desire to determine whether or not the work involved with this project will lead the teachers to try new things – to move beyond the familiar and experiment with new styles of teaching for the benefit of their classes.

3. Can the project measurably boost pedagogical engagement?

This one is linked to and similar to the previous question, but subtly different in that I want to be able to discern whether serving teachers can be prompted to engage with academic research and reading as suggested by Hopkins (2007) and Seaborne (2010).

4. Can this project be judged to be effective across all members of teaching staff?

To reiterate, this is perhaps the most challenging of the ambitions of the intervention. I hope to be able to establish whether or not a new CPD initiative at the school where I work will reach the hard-to-reach as mentioned by Bubb and Earley (2009) and Menter and Clarke (2016).

Finally, and on a positive note, this intervention can be seen as a welcome addition to the national research base regarding independent schools. There is less research into contemporary educational practice and pedagogy in independent schools in Great Britain (Walford 2012), most commentators preferring to discuss the privileges of the private school system (Blanden 2007, Verkaik 2018, Green and Kynasten 2019). Thus, an innovative, new CPD programme may offer an opportunity to celebrate some of the successes of independent sector and perhaps even to develop a model which could be implemented across the educational spectrum.

ETHICS

The design and methodology of this practitioner research needed to pay due attention to ethical considerations. The aim of the intervention, informed by the literature review, has been to launch, establish and monitor a new style of in-service training at the school in which I serve as the headteacher. In the past, in common with many schools, staff training has been imposed on teachers; delivered to teachers; "done" to teachers. The ambition is to carry out training with teachers and thereby both engaging and empowering them. The methodology below explains in full the processes towards bringing this project to life.

It was important to me that participants in the study, all of them teachers at the same school, were able to give informed consent for collaborative action research (Locke et al 2013). Naturally, the Chair of Governors gave consent for both the intervention and the investigation of its findings as did the University of Oxford via its Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). One aspect of informed consent required me, as the headteacher, to make it clear to the staff that no advantage, nor any disadvantage would come from choosing to participate either more or less actively in the research. Therefore, the teacher-participants were invited to complete questionnaires or to engage with interviews and recordings, but never compelled. Thought was also given to the ethics of the time-requirements and potential increased workload associated with the study (Locke et al 2013) and this is outlined in the sections which cover the design and the methodology for both the intervention itself as well as for the data-collection element of the project.

My position as the headteacher of the school creates a considerable power asymmetry (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014, Cohen et al 2018) which affects, in particular, the responses given in interview situations, but extends even to anonymous questionnaires. Teachers who complete online surveys may not fully trust the confidentiality of the system and can therefore respond as if they are being monitored by their boss (Cohen et al 2018) and this has been borne in mind in the discussion of the findings.

Data from interview transcripts has been kept securely in electronic files which are backed up daily and are not shared. Statistical data from questionnaires has, similarly, been analysed electronically and is saved on secure, private servers. There were no participants from potentially vulnerable groups.

METHODOLOGY

The introduction of a whole-school CPD initiative is not a single-handed intervention, especially not when one wishes to use the project as a tool for increasing collegiality within the staff room and for increasing collaboration across academic departments. One of the first steps on the path to implementing this initiative was to secure buy-in from the Senior Leadership Team, in particular the Deputy Head with oversight of in-service training and professional development, as well as the Deputy Head (Academic) and the Assistant Head (Teaching and Learning). The support of the SLT is crucial to the success of any research project (Childs and Fancourt 2018).

The proposal which I presented to the senior team and which they have subsequently helped to shape and refine, began as a type of *mise-en-abyme* of the MSc Learning and Teaching (MLT) offered by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford in so far as it is a practitioner research project which is investigating practitioner research projects. The model of the Oxford MLT course itself is being replicated in a school context in order to raise aspirations as regards teaching and to strengthen participation in positive measures which will support pupils' learning. Great teaching comes in many shapes and sizes, but so does mediocrity and my role as headteacher is to encourage the former whilst simultaneously discouraging the latter.

It is not a new ambition for teachers to engage in, and with, research (Childs and Fancourt 2018). Indeed, over forty years have passed since it was suggested that a generation would be required before a majority of the teaching profession engaged in research (Stenhouse 1975). Nevertheless, such engagement remains patchy at best.

We have already seen that research-based practice is considered to be more effective and satisfying to practitioners (Hargreaves 1996). Moreover, we know that teachers gain knowledge and experiences through participating in action research as a method for improving educational practice (Koshy 2010). It has been proposed that educational change can follow the cycle from plan, to implementation via action steps and reconnaissance (Elliot 1999) – the project has therefore sought to implement such a practice across the entire staff body in a school and across a wide range of areas of interest.

Structure of the intervention

The final project arose from discussions at Senior Leadership Team (SLT) level and from academic reading shared from me with the other key stakeholders. Of particular usefulness were some of the more practical publications intended for a readership based in schools rather than universities. These included: Roberts and Pruitt (2003), Murphy and Lick (2005), Koshy (2010) and Menter et al (2011). Copies of these books were bought by the school and shared amongst those teachers who would be leading the initiative.

The planning phase took place over a series of months in the Summer Term of 2019 and the implementation was scheduled to begin on the first day of the new academic year in the Autumn Term of that same year. The structure for the project was designed around seven "Collaborative Enquiry Groups" (CEGs) as a sort of hybrid between what is described as collaborative research project in

Menter et al (2011) and as a study group in Roberts and Pruitt (2003). These CEGs were to be led by volunteer teachers drawn from the SLT, from middle-managers and from the body of rank and file teachers, as shown below. Willing leaders came forwards in early June 2019 and the titles for their CEGs were agreed, as follows:

- Engaging with the most able (led by the Headmaster)
- Developing independent learners (led by the Academic Deputy Head)
- Creativity in the classroom (led collaboratively by the Heads of Drama and Art)
- Developing thinking skills through questioning (led by a Teacher of Classics)
- Social media and its influence on school life (led by the Pastoral Deputy Head)
- Student talk (led by the Assistant Head (Teaching and Learning))
- Cognitive load theory (led by a Teacher of Mathematics)

All members of teaching staff signed up for one of the groups at the end of June 2019. Choice was deliberately built into the structure in order to encourage engagement as described in the literature review (Bubb and Earley 2009, Stevenson et al 2016).

In contrast to the format for the rest of the year, the official launch for the new CPD-programme began with a lecture from a visiting academic. The rationale for bringing in an outsider at the very outset was that she might add academic gravitas to the proceedings through a link to Higher Education (Murphy and Lick 2005, Laroes et al 2018). Our guest met with the group leaders first and shared an outline of how each CEG meeting might look and how they might build upon each other over the course of the year. Later in the morning, in a two-hour lecture, she introduced the staff body to the programme beginning on that very day and continuing throughout the academic year. Her talk was very much of the traditional “stand-and-deliver” format which is critiqued above and which was then thrown into sharp relief by the first meeting of the CEG later that day.

A structure of one-hour CEG meetings was presented for the year ahead, as follows:

- Sept 2019: CEGs first meeting, discussions and reading begin
- Oct 2019: CEGs second meeting, reading and reflection
- Nov 2019: members of CEGs use “lesson observation fortnight” to see each other teach
- Dec 2019: CEGs third meeting, reading continues and interventions in classrooms
- Jan 2020: CEGs fourth meeting, reading continues, progress and interventions discussed
- March 2020: CEGs fifth meeting, planning for the poster conference plenary
- April 2020: INSET day, attendance not required
- June 2020: poster conference and feedback

Hidden within this list above is one crucial element which stood as the incentive for all staff to buy-in to the project (Mitchell 2013, Lemov 2015). It is the gift of time in the form of an extra day of holiday in April 2020. For, as Ron Brandt writes in his foreword to Murphy and Lick (2005):

> "The problem for many teachers is they are already overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs, so they are unlikely to want to attend more meetings, no matter how apt. An eager few may voluntarily form study groups on their own. Most will need encouragement."

In addition to the timetable above, the CEG leaders, who might very well fall into the category of being the "eager few" mentioned above had occasional, short, preparatory meetings with the Deputy Head who oversees CPD in order to support them and keep them on track (Roberts and Pruitt 2003). Their brief was to source manageable, academic reading materials which could be read during the allotted CEG meeting time or, on a voluntary basis, outside of the meetings themselves. Staff workload was a concern and I was keen that there should appear to be a "fair-exchange" in offering one full day off work in return for six relatively long meetings, usually at the end of a school day.

During the CEG meetings themselves, discussion was encouraged (Roberts and Pruitt 2003) as a means of tapping into and sharing what was already known within the wealth of experience in the room (Schön 1983). Teachers were encouraged to see themselves as sense-makers (McArdle and Coutts 2010, Robinson 2017). The ambition was to create opportunity for reflection upon the nature of the classroom, an activity for which there is often little scope (Calderhead 1987).

In addition, teachers and CEG leaders aimed to challenge each other to action in between the meetings and to report back next time. In particular, the school's existing "lesson observation fortnight" was repurposed as an opportunity for teachers within each CEG to observe each other – mutual lesson observation is valuable in teacher research (Koshy 2010, Zwart et al 2015, Laroes et al 2018).

The final element of the programme was to be a poster conference in June 2020. This format was to begin with an early finish to the school day for the pupils, followed by a brief launch meeting in the hall and then the group CEG leaders were to stay in their own room, whilst all other participants circulated to see what else has been going on. After an hour, two teachers who had recently completed educational master's courses were invited to speak to a plenary session in the hall and then there were to be drinks. The purpose of this event was threefold: firstly, to boost staff morale by congratulating them on their hard work and excellent participation; secondly, to share learning and good practice beyond the individual CEGs; and thirdly, to re-engage the staff towards a modified and improved programme for the following academic year.

The plenary, poster conference has been postponed to September due to school closures caused by the coronavirus.

<u>Design of the research strategies to investigate the outcomes of the intervention</u>

Much educational research uses quantitative methods to buttress qualitative findings (Koshy 2010) and the CEG project followed this established pattern. This is the mixed methods approach (Sammons 2012) which incorporates both the positivist and the naturalistic paradigms (Cohen et al 2018) by gathering large amounts of data in order to make generalisations and also attempting to really "get inside" individuals and to understand both situations and people (Koshy 2010).

Two separate surveys of the staff body offer quantitative data regarding the experiences and opinions of teachers engaged in the CEGs. The first survey was conducted at the very beginning of the project when the teachers had just met for the first time in their groups. In this way, its results can be interpreted as a near-baseline measurement (Koshy 2010, Buck 2018). The second questionnaire was carried out in May

2020 when the groups had already met for the final time and the last element of the programme, the poster conference, was still planned for the following month. This design, with complementary pre- and post-intervention surveys, offered strong comparisons of the impact of the CEG programme which is an established practice in educational research (Cohen et al 2018, Menter and Thompson 2018). Both questionnaires were conducted online and preceded by an email by way of introduction (Cohen et al 2018). In both cases Microsoft Forms was used and the survey was only available to teaching staff within the school. An online questionnaire offers benefits of speed, anonymity, generally higher response rates, lower environmental impact and ease (Cohen et al 2018). Naturally, it is an impersonal medium with no interviewer and it does not therefore allow for in-depth probes (Cohen et al 2018), however the fact that the contacts remained within the school meant that the internet servers did not delete the requests to participate, nor relegate them to spam folders.

Research suggests that "experts" and "postulants" display different concerns about their approach to new pupils and to pupils' prior progress (Berliner 1987). So, one of the aims of this project has been to establish whether such a phenomenon is replicated in small group discussions and action research by comparing responses from established teachers versus relative novices and the surveys were constructed in such a way as to enable comparisons by length of service. They also allow for comparison by gender (Koshy 2010, Menter et al 2011) thus facilitating two of the key research questions.

In addition to the two surveys, I recorded three of the CEGs in action – two in December 2019 and one in January 2020. Consent of the participants in each group was sought and granted before recording began. This data source may be described as naturalistic or as participant observation (Cohen et al 2018). The advantage of this approach is that it is considered "the most subtly intrusive" (Simpson and Tuson 2003) – the very existence of an audio recording device in the room can alter the discussion, but arguably to a lesser extent than would be the case in a structured or semi-structured interview (Cohen et al 2018). This source can be considered as qualitative data.

Finally, I conducted a number of semi-structured interviews over the course of the year and especially in the Spring Term. This second qualitative source is intended to offer conversation as research (Brinkman and Kvale 2015) as well as powerful evidence of the impact of the intervention and to act as a supplement to the questionnaires (Koshy 2010). I interviewed five CEG leaders and nine CEG participants – making a total of 14 interviews. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face and some were over the telephone. In each case ethical considerations were of the utmost importance: the conversation began with a simple question, the purpose was explained at the beginning, it was not allowed to go on too long and I tried not to convey my own opinions during the interview (Koshy 2010, Cohen et al 2018). For the telephone interviews, I attempted to remain conscious that this method of data collection deprives both parties of several channels of communication in the naturalistic sense (Cohen et al 2018). Moreover, in both the telephone and the face-to-face interviews, I was aware of the prevailing power asymmetry mentioned in the ethics section above which exists in all interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) and which is all the more relevant bearing in mind my position as headteacher of the school and that all of the subjects of these interviews report to me either directly or indirectly. This power dynamic does not enhance the reliability of the data and should be borne in mind when considering the findings (Brinkman and Kvale 2015, Cohen et al 2018).

Beyond the interviews, there are other barriers to interpreting the data from this intervention. All of the participants know that I am the headteacher the school at which they work. What is more they know

that the CEG project is the most significant plank in this year's School Development Plan and that it will therefore be important to me that it will be judged to have gone well. Beyond the asymmetry of power, the question of reciprocity (Cohen et al 2018) is called to mind, since the participants know that I will report on the progress of this initiative to governors, that I will want to evaluate its success and that I will develop or revise it for the following year. Whilst there is a healthy degree of collegiality at the school in which I work, it is to be acknowledged that the teachers have given me their opinions whilst I have given nothing in return (Laing 1967).

FINDINGS

One of the clear benefits of mixed-methods research is that one can collect and then compare statistical data from the findings of a survey with the findings of the, potentially, richer, deeper and longer interviews (Koshy 2010, Sammons 2012, Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, Cohen et al 2018). For the purposes of clarity I have chosen to present the findings in the order in which they took place chronologically. Since the first evidences came early in the project this ordering also facilitates a cumulative insight into the findings as participants became more and more involved with their own Collaborative Enquiry Group (CEG). Both the quantitative and the qualitative findings offer views towards the key research question: namely whether this innovative style of professional development has enabled a boost in pedagogical engagement across an entire teaching body. Both also reveal glimpses of the two tensions outlined above. Firstly, that of teacher independence versus management-driven change and, secondly, whether a teacher's educational viewpoint aligns with the ethos of the school.

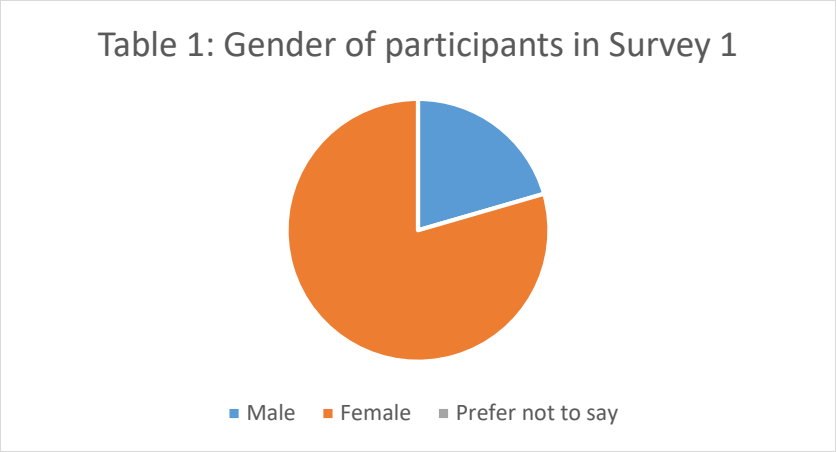
The chronology of the elements of the findings is as follows:

- Survey 1 (Autumn Term 2019)
- Tape-recorded CEGs (Autumn Term 2019 and Spring Term 2020)
- Interviews with CEG leaders (Spring Term 2020)
- Interviews with CEG participants (Spring Term 2020 and Summer Term 2020)
- Survey 2 (Summer Term 2020)

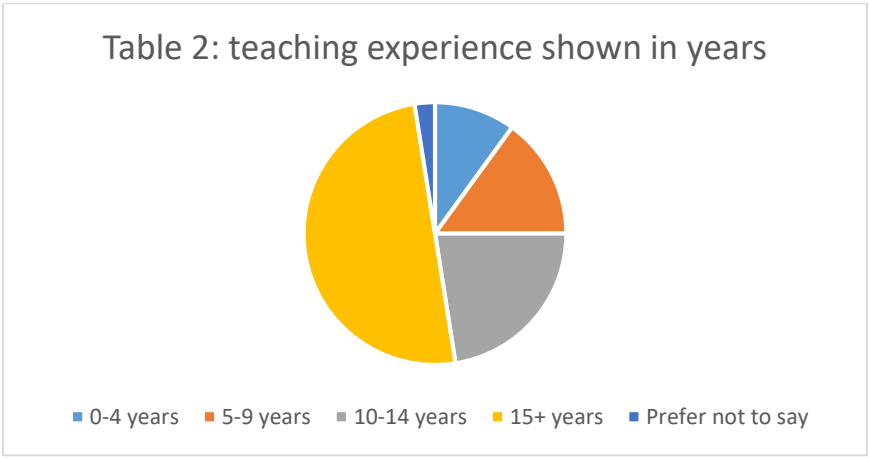
The findings are therefore divided into five sections.

Survey 1 (Autumn Term 2019)

This initial questionnaire was intended to offer baseline data, coming as it did very shortly after participants had selected their CEG for the year and after just one initial meeting with their study-peers. The school has around 70 members of teaching staff, all of which were invited by email to take part in the survey. The school's teaching staff body is 80% female. In this regards, therefore the balance of respondents may be seen to be relatively representative (Table 1):



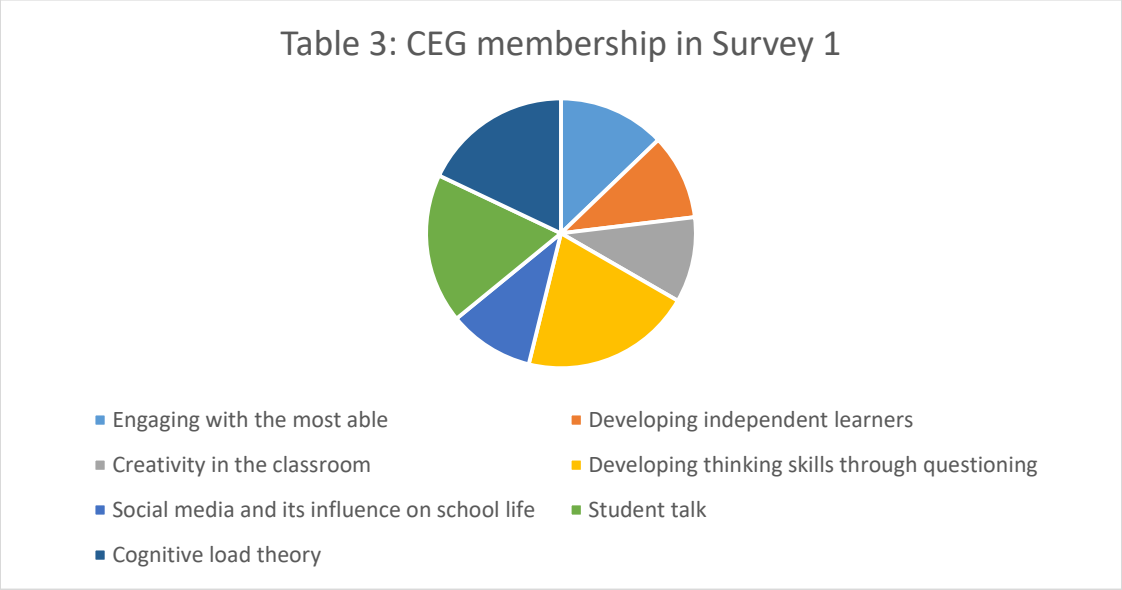
The school has a cross-section of educational experience across the teaching staff. Although the majority of the teachers could be described as more-experienced rather than less-experienced. The representation of participants in the first survey also reflects this balance fairly well (Table 2) but is skewed more towards those with long service than the exact figures in the staff room would suggest. This may well be due to the established norms that older people are prepared to adopt a deeper approach to learning, including e-learning (Jelfs and Richardson 2013) and hence spend longer on questionnaires. Moreover, someone who is of a highly committed nature, as exemplified by teachers who have already given over a decade of service to schools, may be prepared to devote more time to such an activity (Smith 2012).



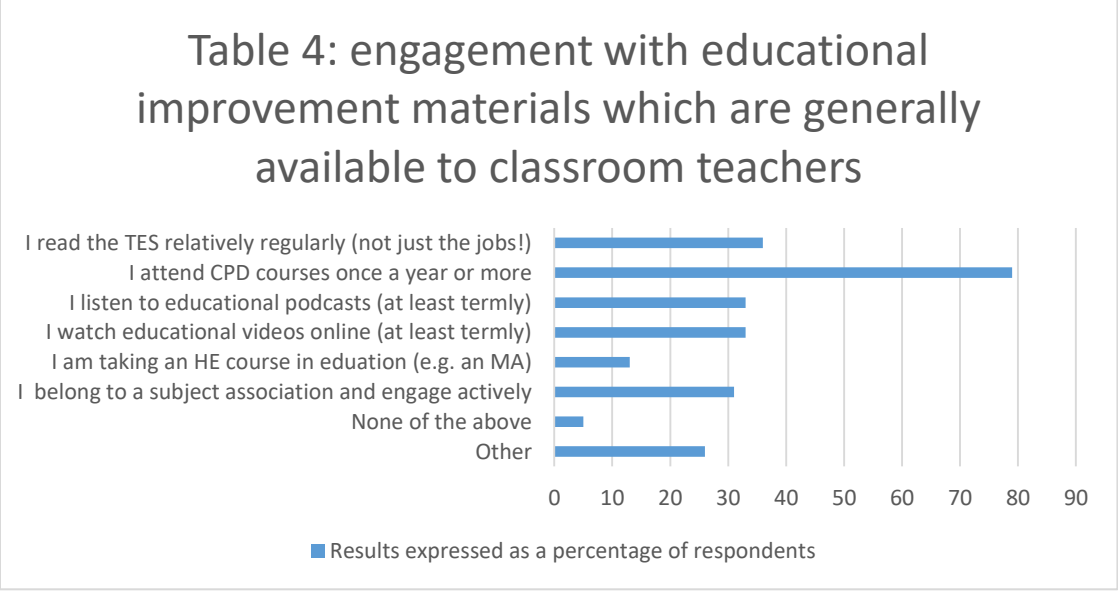
For the purposes of drawing contrasts from the data sets within the findings of each of the questionnaires, I have set the line between a comparative novice and their more-established colleagues at 10+ years. In this first survey that distinction places three quarters of the respondents within the latter, more-experienced category. All eight men who took part in Survey 1 are in the 10+ years of experience category. Consequently, the survey does not offer a statistical view on novice, male teachers.

The respondents to Survey 1 were drawn from across the seven Collaborative Enquiry Groups (CEGs) as shown in Table 3. I would consider this to be a good cross-section of the groups which did themselves vary in size. The two largest groups were “Student talk” and “Developing thinking skills through questioning” and this membership is reflected in the numbers of respondents from those groups, the smallest CEG in terms of number of members was “Engaging with the most able” led by the

Headmaster. That every member of this group has completed the questionnaire, may be indicative of a perceived self-interest by CEG members to be seen to complete the survey and may call into question the validity of their evidence (Cohen et al 2018). In part for this very reason, I have not broken down the results by membership of CEG, preferring the two comparators of gender and experience, outlined above.



The fourth question in Survey 1 was designed to elicit baseline data regarding engagement in pedagogical research and CPD in a way which serving school teachers might find relatable. This question was working towards providing data for the research question regarding engagement with pedagogical research. It asked them about their interactions with various media which, at times, operate as vehicles for school improvement information or as enablers for pedagogical deepening, such as reading educational research or attending in-service training.

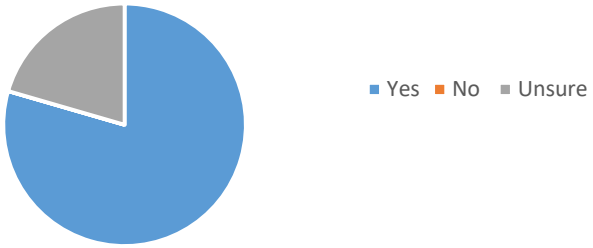


The clearest finding of Table 4 is that CPD courses are the most common method by which teachers keep their educational knowledge up-do-date in this school, with 78% self-reporting as attending a course at least annually. No other method is shared by more than 35% of respondents.

Of note perhaps is that 13% of teachers at this school self-declare as being underway with a further qualification in education, such as this MSc or an MA. Reflecting the dataset as a whole, this is a figure where four women and one man are following such a course. Conversely, 80% of these same people are in their first ten years of teaching suggesting that comparative novice teachers at this school are the ones who engage most deeply with educational theory. Equally worthy of note is that digital technologies such as podcasts and online videos are each employed by a third of respondents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since less-experienced colleagues tend to be younger, there is a stark difference here in that 60% of the novice group declare themselves to make use of educational podcasts at least termly, compared with 24% of the more-experienced teachers who took part in this first questionnaire. Furthermore, the percentages which engage with a subject association, such as the Royal Geographical Society or ISMLA, the Independent Schools' Modern Languages Association, stood at 80% amongst the comparative novice teachers and just 7% amongst their more-experienced colleagues. These three findings taken together, suggest that a measure of success for this project might be found if it were possible to demonstrate that active engagement with pedagogical matters could be provoked amongst more-experienced teachers.

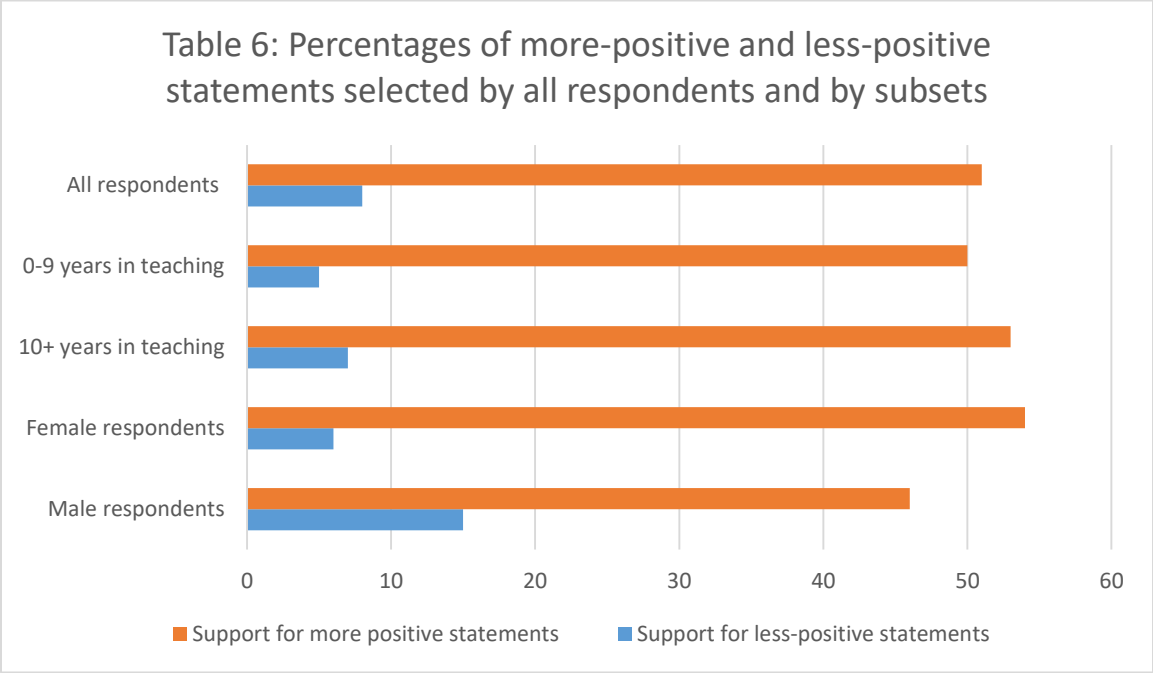
A further measure of the impact of the Collaborative Research Groups project was set up in the question posed in Table 5. This question provided data for the first of the key research questions above. Here the double-use of the Survey 1 is laid bare as are the contradictions of being a practitioner-researcher and educational leader in the same school context. The phrasing of this fifth question is not objective. Indeed, the wording is carefully chosen and intended to indicate that the ambitions for the project are both lofty and worthwhile. This lack of objectivity comes as a result of my role in encouraging the staff to value their work and to rally behind a new initiative for the school. The overwhelmingly positive feeling at the start of the project could equally have its root in members of staff, despite the anonymity of an online survey, wishing to register their support for their employer's "pet project".

Table 5: This year's CPD programme is a new departure for the school and it seeks to encourage teachers to see themselves as "practitioner researchers". At this stage of the academic year, do you think that this is a worthy ambition?



An attempt at qualifying the findings of the question in Table 5 was also built into Survey 1. A series of ten separate statements were put to the participants. The intention was to probe the teachers' expectations of the five meetings of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups during the main part of the project. A similar series of eight statements relating to the final plenary session planned for June 2020 were also put to teachers. These two sets of statements were put in such an order as to disguise that they fell into two basic groups which revealed either a positive/optimistic attitude towards the initiative or a more negative/pessimistic feeling.

A breakdown of the viewpoints both positive and negative towards the eighteen statements combined can be seen below in Table 6:



By way of analysis of these results, there is general consistency across all constituencies of the teachers who took part in Survey 1 that the CEG initiative is a positive one. From the data above it can be seen that the men who responded have overall a less-positive view, although this is coloured by the comparatively small sample size of men – just 8 completed the survey. What is more, a closer inspection of the statements about the five sessions across the year versus the plenary session at the end, showed that the men were noticeably keener on the final, larger session than were their female colleagues. This information is feeding into the fourth key research question about whether the project reaches all teachers.

Finally, there were opportunities within the questionnaire for teachers to expand upon their answers by adding their own thoughts in bullet points or prose. These also added colour to the overwhelmingly positive responses shown in Table 5. Whilst the majority of these were similarly positive/optimistic for the project as a whole, those which were less positive revealed concerns about workload and that momentum might be lost in a project which tracked across the whole year. However, for each opinion which offered one point of view, its equal and opposite was consistently given. Here is a "pair" of comments from two different female teachers:

> "It is refreshing to have dedicated time set aside to work with and discuss good practice with colleagues. Often, one-off inset sessions raise useful ideas that unfortunately are not developed or pursued due to workload/time constraints"

> "I am not sure the amount of time being put into the sessions and what you are getting out of it are worthwhile. For me as a teacher only looking at one topic for development over a year is not enough to move the school forwards. I would have preferred to have had 5 different sessions covering different topics, this would have enhanced my knowledge as a teacher."

There were also insights into tensions between a management-led initiative and a teacher's own pedagogical stance. In the quotation below, for example, none of the titles for the seven Collaborative Enquiry Groups chimes with the priority that this older, male teacher would have selected for the school. This response at such an early stage of the project indicates that this colleague may find it difficult to buy into the initiative. This comment could potentially be located within the category of staffroom cynicism (Menter and Clarke 2016).

> "The value, benefits and impact of research to educators have not been embedded from the start. The first premise should be to identify a problem worth investigation and these need to be identified by the school leaders. So if lateness is perceived as a problem how can research led enquiry lead to a measurable impact. So the ambition is worthy but the implementation is not likely to lead to meaningful research or impact."

There are other such views also expressed in Survey 1 and it seems natural enough at the launch of a brand new initiative that members of staff, perhaps especially the more-experienced teachers (Opfer and Pedder 2010) should reserve judgement regarding the likely outcome of a year-long project.

<u>Tape-recorded CEGs (Autumn Term 2019 and Spring Term 2020)</u>

Of the five sources of evidence available to the practitioner-researcher, these sound recordings offered potentially a rich seam of naturalistic data (Cohen et al 2018) By creating a type of "silent interview" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) if was hoped to elicit significant information towards an evaluation of the research title to uncover whether this innovative form of CPD actually boosts pedagogical engagement. For, whilst all members of the three different groups were aware of the audio recording device, the intention was to discover qualitative insights into the impact and the progress of the Collaborative Enquiry Group project and to do so in a relatively unobtrusive way (Simpson and Tuson 2003). A total of 185 minutes of audio was recorded. However, fortunately or unfortunately, only some seven minutes of the total recording time could be interpreted as evaluative of the project itself.

I will offer evidence from this small section of the investigation second. Let us first, however, consider the major part of the audio files. In two of the three recorded sessions there was no discussion of the nature of learning being experienced by the teachers themselves; no discussion of the merits of a year-long approach to CPD; nor any evaluation of the impact of this training on teacher engagement. This finding in itself can be interpreted as an endorsement of the pedagogical advances being made across the whole staff body in so far as there are 178 minutes of teacher-talk focussed on the impact of their work, their reading and their research in the classrooms of the school. Here is an older, male teacher talking about the implementation of a science project arising from the CEG to which he belonged, "Engaging with the most able":

> "I have tried to stretch the top set Year 10; last week, I gave them some A level questions from Year 12 and I told them that they were hard and they got some pretty good answers. It's made me think again about how to motivate my classes – they like having to really think and struggle with work. It does them good and the reading that we did last time backs that up."

The tape carries on with a response from a more-experienced, female teacher of Classics who echoes the comment above and builds on it:

> "Yes, that's right, in my Gratin group (*Greek and Latin*) in Year 9 we have really tried to do the same thing. In one of the lessons last week or the week before we tried one of the strategies that we'd read about here, you know the one where the pupils challenge each other. They're an able group and that really works for them. It's not the same with the ClassCiv (*Classical Civilisation*) group in Year 9."

The findings from this part of the practitioner research were not at all what had been expected. I was anticipating that the teachers would be discussing their own experience and commenting on the relative merits of the CEG as a vehicle for in-service training, but the fact that less than 4% of the talk was of such a nature can be seen as positive. Elsewhere, a less-experienced female colleague who chose to join the "Creativity in the classroom" CEG is recorded talking about what she has taken from the teacher-discussion into her Latin lesson:

> "I've tried a couple of things. With my Year 7s last week we made a script in groups of four. They acted out the story and they performed it with a peer review just like we spoke about here. For us the peer review was a sheet on pronunciation and acting. It was good to try to be more creative, but not just for the sake of it, because there was a learning point – a GCSE skill at an earlier stage. They really enjoyed it too."

By way of a commentary on the 185 minutes of teacher talk taken together, it is worth noting that there is a total of 12 minutes of silence, 9 minutes of laughter, 6 minutes of mutual question-asking and most of the rest is active discourse. To the extent that active participation can be interpreted as a measure of success, the following data is also pertinent: in two of the three groups, every one of the teachers spoke and in one group there were two teachers who were silent. This silence can be seen as representing a certain constituency within the teaching profession and would correspond with the following written response given to Survey 1:

> "I am an extreme introvert. I understand that, in principle, this kind of CPD is very beneficial and I think that general consensus across the staff is positive – it has been well-received. However, for me, this is quite a traumatic experience! I actively avoid attending external CPD for this very reason."

The seven minutes of discussion of the method of study and the type of learning built into the CEGs themselves came towards the end of one session from the "Student talk" group led by the Assistant Head (Teaching and Learning). There was a wholly-positive exchange where two teachers spoke in response to a question from the group leader about whether or not the CEG structure allowed them to reflect on a topic. The first speaker is a more-experienced, female teacher from the Learning Support Department and the second is also a more-experienced, female teacher from, this time from the French Department:

> "I think that often with INSET you do (*reflect on a topic*) and then it evaporates as the academic year goes on, you never look at it again so with this type of study at least you have the chance to instigate something, it definitely makes you think more. So I think it's good, I prefer it. It's great sharing ideas with other colleagues."
>
> "Definitely, I agree, it is positive, because we are revisiting it, we can go over it again and put it into place. It is good."

General assent can be gauged from other noises in the room. However, once again, these comments arose from an intervention by the leader of the group, although she is not the headteacher, she does exercise a position of authority which brings into question the reliability and validity of the evidence (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). Moreover, silence from some participants should not be taken as assent (Furman 2018). Both of these quotations feed into the second key research question about teacher innovation in the classroom.

<u>Interviews with CEG leaders (Spring Term 2020)</u>

As outlined in the methodology, above, I interviewed five of the seven leaders of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups. These teachers had all volunteered for their roles and had all chosen the titles of their own CEGs. It was anticipated, therefore, that these would form a series of positive interviews and so it proved to be, although this group of interviewees also had numerous tweaks and suggestions and comments about how to run the programme differently and better. These are practitioner-researchers who are fully-engaged with the project, who are right down amongst the weeds of the project and who see the project "warts and all". The findings of these interviews offer considerable insights into the second and third key research questions about teacher innovation and teacher engagement with pedagogical theory.

Their comments fall into three broad categories each of which I shall address in turn. Change management and leadership literature often employs a so-called SWOT model – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (Harvard Business School 2005). The conversations in these semi-structured interviews fell into the first three elements of this construction of their own accord. The categories are:

i. the strengths of the innovative approach to professional development
ii. the weaknesses of the CEG model at the school
iii. the opportunities to improve the initiative in order to further raise pedagogical engagement across the staff body

i) Strengths

The interviews with CEG leaders revealed a certain degree on unanimity as regards strengths of the project. The aspect of this innovative form of CPD mentioned by all five of the seven CEG leaders who were interviewed was the benefit of conversation. Space to discuss teaching and learning with colleagues who might not ordinarily find the time to do this. One leader spoke of how she enjoyed the collaboration of "bouncing ideas off others" and she also described the CEG which she led as "so refreshing". Another leader used similar language to make a similar point:

> "Having the time to sit with colleagues and to talk about teaching and learning has been one of the most refreshing experiences that I have known in education in recent years. On the first day

> in September we spent two whole hours talking about how we teach and about the children – what a delight!"

The leaders also expressed appreciation for access to materials which they had enjoyed through membership of the Chartered College of Teaching – the subscription was provided by the school for all seven leaders in order to support their work with the CEGs. As a linked matter, most of the leaders agreed that they had engaged with academic literature themselves more than they had done in the recent past and more than they would have done without the responsibility of leading a group. Some appreciated the regularity of the meetings and each of them was able to give examples of colleagues who had shared "light bulb" moments and of others who had implemented into their classroom practice some of the topics discussed. The facilitator of the "Student talk" CEG went on to say how three of the members of her group had signed up for in-service training in oracy and that she was certain that none of them would have done so without having participated in her CEG. This could be interpreted as evidence of increased engagement with pedagogy.

ii) Weaknesses

Whilst there was no unanimity as regards the weaknesses of the project, there were a number of recurring themes in the findings and which speak towards an evaluation of the success of the initiative. Three leaders bemoaned the fact that their groups had not really engaged with the academic literature, although one shared a counter example. Similarly three leaders questioned the frequency of the meetings and their placement across the school year:

> "If anything, I would say that we didn't meet often enough. I wish the meetings had been more frequent."

> "It's one of those projects that's great at the beginning. It was hard to keep the pace by the end of the second term – this project has a saggy middle; a year is too long."

> "I feel like the autumn was the wrong time to start, there is so much to do at that time of the year, maybe we should have begun in the summer."

The contrasting opinion of one leader who thought that the regularity of the meetings, being half-termly, was a strength, was a minority view. What is more, the weakness hinted at by the third of the quotations above was picked up developed elsewhere by three leaders who highlighted the contradictions of the project – teachers are busy and have to prioritise their valuable time (Lemov 2015) and they feel pressure from management to prioritise the subject content, particularly with their examination classes. Here we see a tension between school management and teacher autonomy. The leader of the CEG entitled "Developing thinking skills through questioning" summed up the conflict felt by members of her group:

> "The teachers *always* come back to say the same two things. One, I don't have time because I have to cover the syllabus, or two, I did it and it went well, but I didn't get through the syllabus. It felt like we were trying to achieve contradictory aims; when push came to shove, it's the GCSEs and A levels that count. These would be the priorities of the school and the teachers' heads are on the line for that not for the CEG."

On a different tack, four of the five group leaders indicated that the leadership of them, as a cohort was weak. They understood that their role as facilitators for the CEGs was important, but they needed more direction. They would have appreciated more guidance at the beginning and before the CEGs began as well as throughout the programme. Indeed, one explained that her own understanding of what was required of her was not strong. It seemed from some of their comments that the leaders themselves craved an opportunity for collaboration as a unit to counteract what some of them saw as the loneliness of CEG leadership.

iii) Opportunities

As a researcher-practitioner, it was enjoyable for me to hear so very many sentences from the CEG facilitators which began with the expressions “next year” or “next time”. That this initiative might continue was taken by the leaders as a given and there were multiple suggestions for how to improve the project. One leader saw real value in membership of the Chartered College of Teaching and would like it extended to all members of staff. Another, quite separately, built upon this proposal by saying that all teachers should be required to write a literature review, “They won’t like it,” she said, “But they should be made to do it anyway.” Another still said that it had inspired her to do more research the following year.

The leader of one of the groups recommended that the school could be more ambitious for itself, perhaps by adopting the CEG model into the ethos of the institution. This could be done, she suggested by re-ordering the curriculum for Years 7 and 8 in order to develop an enquiry-based learning programme. This might mean working through less content, but it might also be for the long-term good of the learners. Another of the leaders developed this idea by proposing an idea which operates in one or two other London schools: lessons would finish an hour early on one day of the week every week in order to devote more time to staff training. This would also, she suggested overcome the issue of time since the trade-off for an INSET day in April was not considered a fair-exchange by her or by the members of her group, she said.

It was clear from the interviews with the group leaders, which all took place in the Spring Term of 2020, that they had enjoyed and were still enjoying the project. Their frustrations and wished-for improvements arose out of a commitment to the growth of the project rather than a wish to see it diminished.

<u>Interviews with CEG participants (Spring Term 2020 and Summer Term 2020)</u>

The nine semi-structured interviews with members, but not leaders, of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups took place towards the end of the Spring Term and at the beginning of the Summer Term. The intention of these interviews was to offer evidence and insights into the first, second and third key research questions about teachers as practitioner-researchers, teachers’ innovation and teachers’ engagement with pedagogical research. The timing of these interviews meant that all of the scheduled meetings of their groups had already taken place, save the Poster Conference which was in the diary for June 2020. This choice of timing offered an opportunity for the interviewees to reflect on a nearly-completed cycle of CPD at the school. Their responses to me during our interviews were largely-positive and they seemed to enjoy sharing the aspects of the programme which had gone well. The sampling (Cohen et al 2018) of participants was carefully made to map as closely as possible to the staff population – around 80% female and 75% longer-established teachers. What is more, the interviewees were drawn from five

different CEGs and from a cross-section of the hierarchy of the school: from Senior Management Team, from Heads of Department and from mainscale teachers. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the power asymmetry present in all interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015), was to the fore in these 1:1 conversations which took place either over the telephone or in my office at school. Some commentators on conducting educational research would call into question the validity of the findings due to the potentially uncomfortable surroundings (Koshy 2010), the lack of anonymity (Koshy 2010) and the perceived bias of the interviewer (Lee 1993, Cohen et al 2018). As a result, the findings of this set of interviews informed the construction of Survey 2 in order to offer some triangulation of data (Cohen et al 2018).

From these nine interviews, there were four repeated themes in support of the CEG programme: collaboration, classroom innovation, academic reading and choice. In contrast, there were three main criticisms: pace across the year, leadership of groups and time. One participant from the group called "Social media and its influence on school life", led by the Pastoral Deputy Head, spoke of her experiences at this school compared with a previous job:

> "At my last school, we had a similar twilight programme, but the collaborative groups are new to me and they really appealed to me. It has definitely lived up to its billing as regards being collaborative, we are all interested in the same theme because most of the members of our group are involved with pastoral care in some way."

Another teacher referred to the collaboration as "the best bit" and it was clear from a third and a fourth interviewee that working across departments held real appeal for the teachers. The theme of collaboration also fed into examples given by teachers of how they had innovated in their classrooms as a result of the discussions in the groups. Eight of the nine teachers were able to describe a change which they had introduced into their teaching following their CEG meetings. Here, a less-experienced, female teacher who belonged to the "Creativity in the classroom" group describes one example:

> "We spoke about using the space on the classroom and now we sit in a square and it helps with discussion and dialogue. It has been a real benefit to the girls and I'll definitely carry on with that next year. It helps the quiet ones become more confident."

A more-experienced, male teacher explained how "Developing thinking skills through questioning" influenced his classroom practice:

> "We started off with a question and we tried to put one straight in at the start or maybe at the end of the lesson. For example, with the Year 11, I asked why does ice float on water when we think that solids are heavier than liquids. That really got them thinking and we had a view to asking a better quality of question with a view to engaging pupils more."

As regards academic reading, eight of the nine interviewees said that they had read academic, educational literature during the year as a direct result of joining a Collaborative Enquiry Group. Some were relatively unenthusiastic, one member of the Senior Leadership Team saying that she did not normally read academic literature and that she did not plan to change her habits, but adding, "If you put it in front of me, I will read it." Others were more motivated by the reading, one experienced, female, middle manager relaying that the group leader had bought each of them in her CEG a book from which they read some chapters together and adding, "It has raised questions for me. It has made me want to

do more education research." Finally, in terms of the benefits of the CEG programme, two thirds of the participants mentioned that they had been able to choose which group to join. This was considered a plus because it was "less passive" as well as being "a luxury", "appealing" and "a good concept", in particular because it led to a diverse membership in terms of the variety of academic departments represented in each group. A question about this characteristic of the project was put into Survey 2 in order to triangulate the apparent positivity around choice.

Amongst the aspects of the CEG programme which appealed to the participants less, the most frequently named issue was the spacing of meetings across a whole year. Excitement for a new initiative was felt to have tailed off as the Autumn Term ran into the Spring Term and the pace slowed. Here a male teacher explains his view:

> "At the beginning we were all motivated by trying to implement something theoretical in the classroom, but the after-school meetings became a bit dry. As the year went on the level of positivity and enthusiasm dropped off. It got to the stage where I wondered if having time on each of the three training days would have been better – the momentum was difficult and running it across the year was a bit slow."

All of the interviewees praised their CEG leaders during their conversations with me. However, they were also prepared to share staff room gossip about the leadership of other groups without sharing names or details. One female teacher offered this observation:

> "I'd like to carry on with the same group next year; my leader has been really organised, but some of them have been a joke. The leadership of the groups is so important and in some groups it has been a waste of time, if the group has been badly-led."

These comments chime with and magnify how some of the CEG facilitators themselves felt about the responsibility and the dynamic of leadership within the groups. Lastly, an issue arose regarding the time required to be an active member of a Collaborative Enquiry Group compared with the time offered by the school – an additional day's holiday in place of an INSET day in April. This trade-off was raised by four teachers during the interviews and it was generally considered that the day off work after Easter was insufficient recompense for the meetings and the readings over the course of the year. A question was added to Survey 2 to probe this issue again.

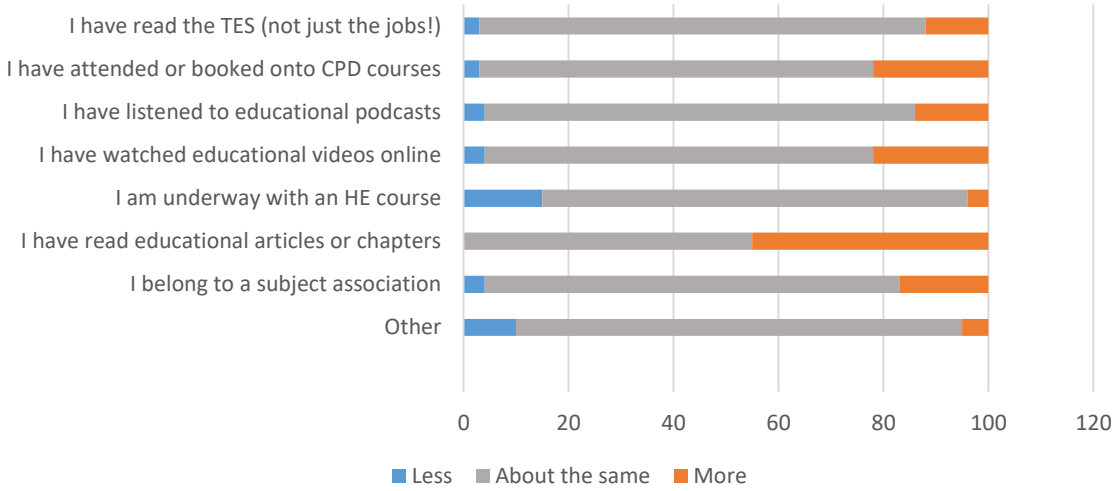
The negative comments which arose were all, of themselves and taken individually, perfectly reasonable. However, they did reveal what may be considered as a tension between a new drive towards becoming a research-led and forward looking institution on the part of the management of the school and the autonomy of established teachers. One female colleague who has served at the school for most of the new century explained, "I don't think that it will have had a real impact and I don't think I'll change my habits."

Survey 2 (Summer Term 2020)

The participation rate in Survey 2 was higher than for the first survey some eight months earlier in the year. This time 45 teachers completed the questionnaire. Once again, the participation rates reflected the school's staff community relatively well in terms of gender and length of service. Moreover, relatively equal sampling across the range of Collaborative Enquiry Groups was retained.

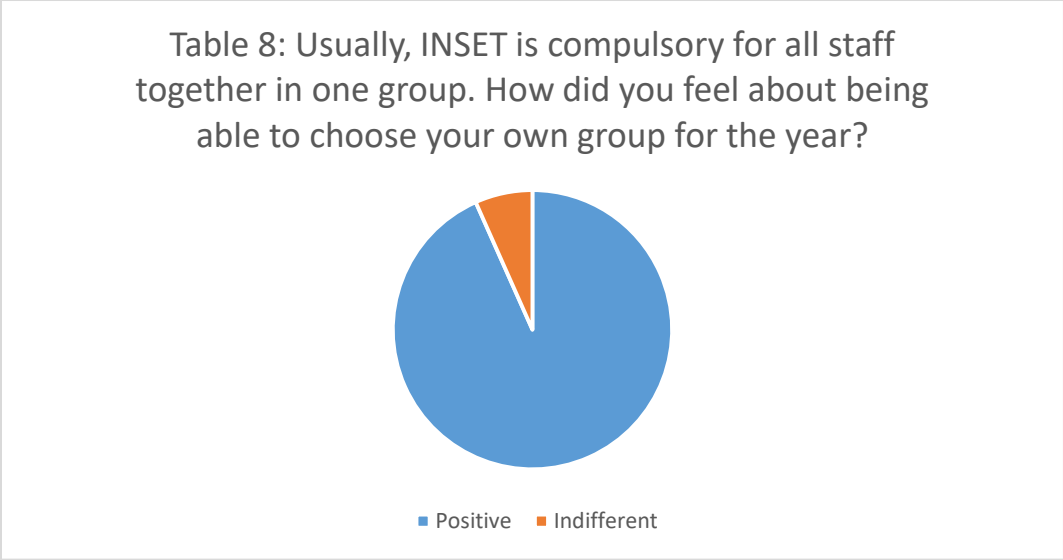
Building on the results of Survey 1, the extent to which teachers self-declared as engaging with educational materials and was recorded as evidence towards the third of the four key research questions. In this second questionnaire, a similar question to the one represented in Table 4 was put to the staff and this time it was nuanced to allow teachers to identify whether they had "more", "less" or "about the same" levels of engagement with educational improvement materials which are generally available to classroom practitioners. The results shown in Table 7, below, suggest that the CEG programme contributed to an increased interaction with resources supporting pedagogy.

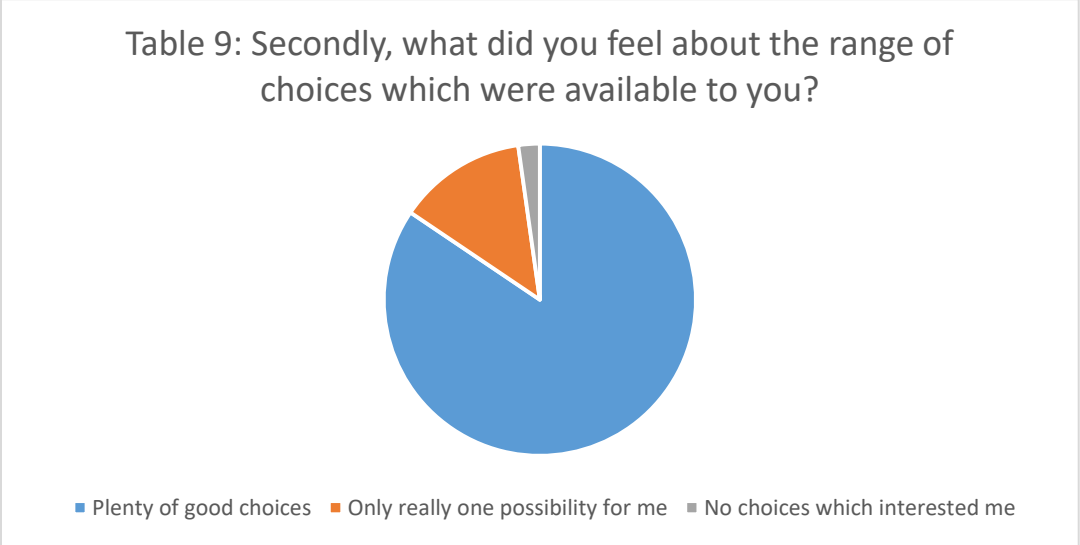
Table 7: Looking at the list of methods for keeping abreast of educational thinking. As a result of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups this year, how would you describe you engagment with each item?



The most significant area of increased engagement relates to academic literature where 45% of respondents self-declared as having read more than in previous years. Significant proportions had also joined subject associations, picked up the Times Educational Supplement and watched online videos, such as TED talks on educational topics. A closer analysis of the statistics by length of service also reveals that it is the more-experienced teachers who had turned to podcasts and online videos in greater proportions than their less-experienced, and generally younger, colleagues.

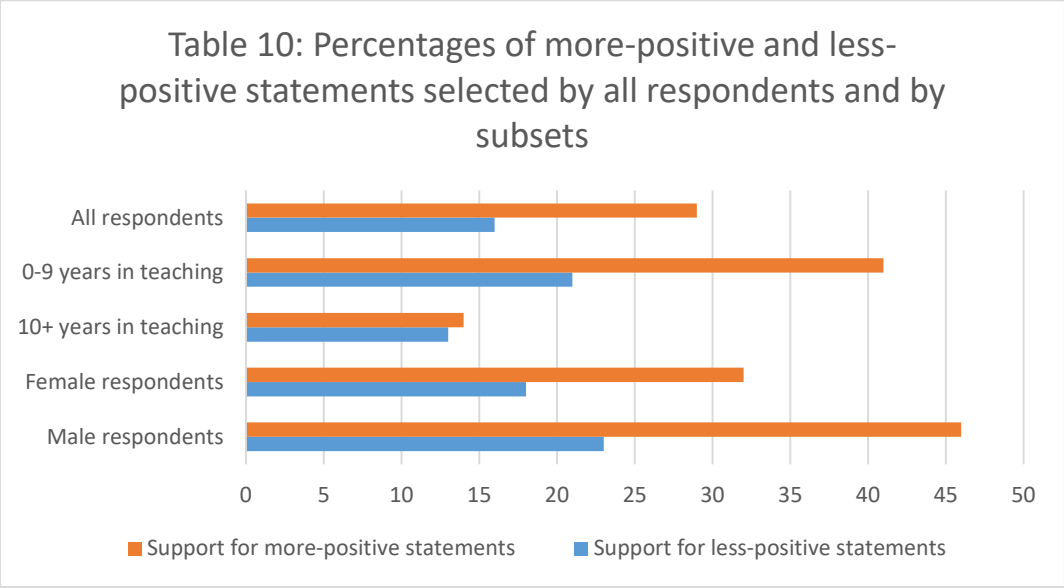
This second questionnaire explored the availability of choice within the programme, to test whether this aspect had increased buy-in to the initiative (Bubb and Earley 2009, Stevenson et al 2016). Two straightforward questions, one dichotomous and one multiple choice were posed and these are represented in Tables 8 and 9, below. They were followed by an open-ended, word-based question which sought to uncover "gems" of information which might not otherwise be caught (Cohen et al 2018).





Just under a quarter of those who completed the questionnaire commented on their answers to the two questions above. This is a lower response rate than for other open-ended questions, perhaps reflecting a prevailing opinion that choice was welcome. Two respondents suggested that teachers themselves should be able to propose topics for next year – this was already the case and could indicate that communication at and before the launch of the CEG programme was not clear. Half of the written responses were from teachers who said that they would now be interested to hear about other groups or to switch to a different group next year and there seemed to be a curiosity to see what had been going on in other meetings around the school. This appetite for information had been anticipated and the poster conference planned for June 2020 was intended to meet that need. The poster conference itself was also the subject of another set of questions which, together with a list of statements about the five meetings of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups were designed to assess the overall mood towards this year's programme in a similar way to the results displayed in Table 6, above.

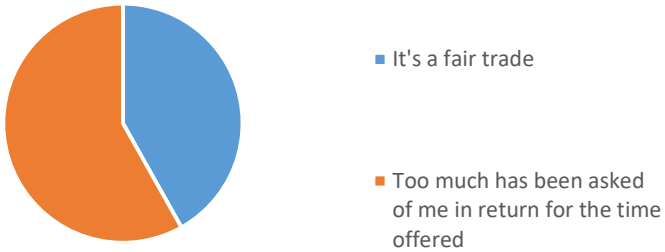
The following breakdown provides evidence for the fourth of the key research questions regarding engagement with the programme across the entire staffroom. Overall there is great positivity towards the CEG programme (Table 10):



In contrast to the earlier survey, it is this time the male teachers who are proportionately more positive towards the CEG initiative than their female colleagues. Once again, we see that less-experienced teachers have also embraced the project more than those with more service to the profession. A closer probing into the statistics reveals that over 50% of all respondents and in all subsets found it hard to maintain momentum across the year. This then is a commonly-held view. In addition, there is greater positivity towards the five CEG working meetings than appetite for the plenary poster conference. This could, of course, be as a result of a familiarity with the former and of a lack of knowledge of the latter. However, it is noteworthy that less than half of all respondents were looking forward to the event, less than half considered that it would be convivial and there was particular apprehensiveness of having to speak in public in front of peers. A lack of enthusiasm for the poster conference was especially pronounced amongst women and longer-serving colleagues.

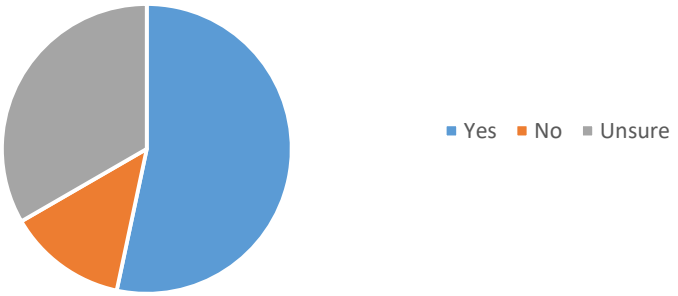
At its inception, a key element of the project, was that teacher buy-in might be achieved by the presentation of fair-trade off in terms of time offered compared to time required. The five meetings were equated to one full INSET day which was granted as additional holiday. Questions were raised in the semi-structured interviews with group members and their feelings were backed-up by a question in the anonymous survey. Table 11, shows that a majority of staff think that they have had to put in more than they have got out of the project:

Table 11: The school has "offset" the time spent in the group sessions against the INSET day in April. How do you consider that transaction?



To conclude the findings and discussion from this second questionnaire, I return to first of the key research questions, this one concerning the status of teachers as "practitioner-researchers". Table 5 confirmed that nearly 80% of the members of staff who took part in the first survey considered this to be a worthy ambition. Table 12, below, shows that by the start of the Summer Term 2020, 53% of respondents thought that this was an appropriate moniker for the work that they had undertaken through their CEGs.

Table 12: This year's CPD programme has sought to encourage teachers to see themselves as "practitioner researchers". Now that the programme is coming towards a close, would you consider this a good description for the part that you have played at school



An open-ended question followed and it elicited more written responses than any other question in the survey: 21 out of the 45 participants. In the main, these answers were positive towards the project and bore out the positive thoughts from the 1:1 interviews. Whilst a number highlight individual circumstances which made it difficult for them to consider themselves as practitioner-researchers, such as: working part-time; having childcare responsibilities at home; having too many classes to teach; having too few classes to teach; having chosen the "wrong" CEG for them; and having too little time

generally. The mood overall was that teachers appreciated the discussion time afforded to them, they enjoyed being able "to try out ideas" without fear of censure if they did not go to plan. Here, a more-experienced, female teacher explains her view:

> "The CEGs are a great way to share best practice especially with teachers who you may not normally talk to. Allows (sic) for ongoing reflection and discussion throughout the academic year. Opportunity to engage with interesting literature and discuss findings with colleagues."

This perhaps, is a fair summary of the entire ambition of the project in three lines of prose. Survey 2 shows that opinions are mixed, but that the intention to boost pedagogical engagement has certainly penetrated in places.

DISCUSSION

This *mise-en-abîme* of the MSc Learning and Teaching with the Department of Education at the University of Oxford has taken over a year in the development, implementation, operation, fruition and now evaluation stages of its life. An assessment of the impact of the project begins by holding it up to the light of its four key research questions:

1. Can the intervention enable the teaching staff to define themselves as practitioner-researchers?
2. Can a CPD-led intervention grow innovation at the school?
3. Can the project measurably boost pedagogical engagement?
4. Can this project be judged to be effective across all members of teaching staff?

Best modern practice in education dictates that every new initiative should be weighed on a balance scales of rigorous analysis to determine whether it has met, exceeded or fallen short of its original targets. At work, I use a traffic light system (Black et al 2011, Carpenter and Pease 2012) to measure progress against the annual development plan (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1994, Buck 2018) which illuminates well the strengths and weaknesses of this intervention.

1. Has the Collaborative Enquiry Group project at school empowered the teaching staff to define themselves as practitioner-researchers? ● Amber

The ambition was for widespread acceptance of the concept that teachers can also be researchers. The starting point was with the SLT (Childs and Fancourt 2018) and here there was a high level of very active participation and engagement in the plan. Beyond the leadership, others volunteered to lead groups and others again described how much they enjoyed academic reading, discussion and collaboration. What is more, there are numerous examples from the findings of teachers who have experimented with micro-initiatives in their classrooms. One teacher even said that she had turned the school into "an experimental laboratory" which would support claims that she was both developing as a reflective-practitioner and engaged in knowledge-building (Schön 1983, McArdle and Coutts 2010). The collaborative nature of the groups was much praised and the discussion of professional practice which is so much a part of becoming a teaching practitioner-researcher (McArdle and Coutts 2010) was evident in many interviews. What is more, the structure of meetings which built and reflected upon each other models the double-loop of learning of Mitchell (2013). It is clear, however, that whilst there is almost

universal support for the intention to become practitioner-researchers, a certain proportion of the staff are yet to be convinced they have achieved this goal.

2. Has the Collaborative Enquiry Group project been innovative? ● Green

For the school in which I serve as headteacher, any new approach to professional development would by its very existence be innovative, since no major change to the delivery of in-service training has been attempted since, at the most recent, the turn of the new millennium. The Collaborative Enquiry Groups have been locally-led (Caldwell and Spinks 2013) and there is evidence from all three types of data source that teachers have moved beyond their comfort-zone with the intention of transforming learning and developing a culture of innovation (Caldwell and Spinks 2013). Staff have appreciated the time spent together for discussion (Hopkins 2007) and every interviewee was able to give examples of changes to their classroom practice. There is a divergence of views as to whether or not the management of the school has been right to reorder the working week and year with regular meetings after school on Tuesday and half-termly twilight INSETs instead of a full training day in April. What is not in doubt, however, and what the findings show clearly is that everyone has known about the CEGs and they are acknowledged as a new departure for the school.

3. Has the Collaborative Enquiry Group project boosted pedagogical engagement? ● Green

The evidence to support this traffic lighting comes from both quantitative and qualitative data. The increase in academic reading and other readily-available educational tools (Table 7) is a measurable indicator which would satisfy the recommendations from the literature review (Hopkins 2007, Seaborne 2010). More than that, the findings reveal that even reluctant readers have been prepared to go along with the project when a book is put in front of them. What is more, the emphasis on collaboration from interviews and the examples of classroom interventions from the tape-recorded sessions also support this judgement. All across the school, teachers have been trying out pedagogical initiatives with their classes which they freely admit they would not have attempted without the input from the CEGs.

4. Has the Collaborative Enquiry Group project shown itself to be effective across the entire teaching body? ● Amber

Clearly, the initiative has helped some teachers on their journey towards becoming reflective practitioners; there is evidence that some have been led to invent, to question and to initiate their own standard of excellence (Schön 1983). By the standard set 45 years ago that the majority of the teacher workforce should be engaged in research (Stenhouse 1975), this project could be rated as green, since 53% declared themselves to be practitioner-researchers (Table 12). The question remains, however, as to whether the "eager few" (Murphy and Lick 2005) have been engaged and moved forwards, but the "harder-to-reach" have been left where they were? By way of evidence to support a claim that some of the "floating voters" have been brought on-board (Menter and Clarke 2011, Day et al 2016), I would indicate that a comparison of Survey 1 and Survey 2 suggests that the male teachers become increasingly engaged with the project over the course of the year (Tables 7 and 10) and that underneath the headline data about educational learning habits (Table 7) there are also hints of more-experienced teachers have made increasing use of electronic resources to further their own pedagogy. This question comes to the essence of school improvement efforts, namely that there is a job to be done in winning over hearts and minds – the element of choice was popular, the trade-off of time put in versus benefit out through an extra day's holiday was only partially accepted (Bubb and Earley 2011). It may be that

the CEG project has come up against deep-seated tensions which exist in many schools, including this one. As an already-successful, academic school, a school improvement narrative clashes with teacher autonomy and the project becomes a hard sell.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

My interpretation of this innovative professional development project is that is deserves the status of a qualified success and it will be repeated in the coming academic year. There was a considerable appetite amongst some participants to go deeper with the learning of their current group and amongst others to try something new over the next twelve months. Moreover, the interruption in schooling which has arisen from the coronavirus will lend itself to beginning the new school year with a system which has already become familiar – no one will want to reinvent the wheel of CPD this year, because there are other more pressing concerns, such as health, the mental well-being of children who have spent six months at home and expectations for public exams in 2021.

There are learning points for me before the cycle is begun again and they are chiefly around communication with all of the stakeholders and momentum. Survey 2 showed that some teachers wanted more information before choosing their topic for the year and the interviews with members of groups backed this up. Meanwhile, the leaders of the groups require more guidance at the planning stage and support throughout the process in order to give them the confidence to make a success of their meetings, the evidence for this was confirmed by using comparing both sets of interviews.

Everyone wants more time to devote to a project such as this and it is incumbent upon me to reflect on the suggestions again from across the datasets as to whether what is now curriculum time could be given over teacher training and research. Time, of course, is the most precious resource to teachers (Earley and Bubb 2009, Lemov 2015) and the messaging that the school leadership, myself in particular, offers to teachers sometimes exposes contradictory priorities – classroom teachers want to support new initiatives, but fear opprobrium if exam results suffer.

Wider implications of this research

This research locates itself firmly within the existing body of educational literature. The design of the Collaborative Enquiry Groups can be seen as an amalgam of models seen elsewhere such as the collaborative research projects in Menter et al (2011) and the study groups of Roberts and Pruitt (2003). The key innovation here and its key success can be seen in how so many elements which mitigate for success have been included: elements of choice, opportunities for discussion, an emphasis on shared endeavour and collegiality in knowledge-building.

As the headteacher of a leading school, I am able to participate and contribute to the educational debate nationally. I consider it essential that schools collaborate for the good of children in all settings. The findings of this research have already been presented, of course, at the Oxford University, Department of Education poster conference, which this year took place online. They have also be shared with the Education Committee of the governing body at the school and with our sister school which is also located in Central London. The Senior Leadership Team have been monitoring the progress of the project over the course of the year and will assist me in re-imagining the project for the coming academic year. Beyond this in-house sharing, I am writing an article for the HMC magazine, I have

written for the online collaboration forum EdGE (Education for Greater Equality) and I have submitted an article for the Times Educational Supplement (TES).

This innovative project offers a model which can be replicated elsewhere and I have arranged to present a workshop at both the HMC and the GSA conferences this autumn – providing a platform to introduce the CEGs to nearly 1,000 headteachers.

Avenues of future research

Next year, when the CEG initiative embeds itself into the school, the Deputy Headteacher who is aspiring to headship will lead on the continuing project. The interviews and tape-recording of sessions will be foregone, but the surveys both at the outset and towards the conclusion of the year will be repeated. Although less in-depth, the information yielded is almost certainly more candid than the interviews. What is more, the datasets will be usefully compared year on year in order to discern better still what aspects of the project are working well and which not so well. This innovative approach to professional development remains in its infancy at the school and needs continued time and attention. Research spanning several years would merit further investigation.

A deeper, future research ambition could stem from a project such as this replicated in a number of schools. The next step would be to attempt to identify a link from teacher engagement to pupil engagement and ultimately to pupil attainment. Such a major undertaking could form the basis of a doctoral study and could open up this creative approach to CPD to a wider audience. This will not be an urgent initiative for the author of this dissertation, certainly not next academic year when I may be more focussed on social distancing, online education and exam success in a new coronavirus school system.

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