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## **THE MEDIUM TERM IMPACT OF AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT ON TEACHER ADOPTION OF ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: Exploring the teachers' sense of themselves as researchers.**

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### **Background**

The author is the 'principle investigator' - a university tutor - leading a programme of research alongside six teachers in a selective state secondary school in the north of England. The aim of the programme of research is to develop responses to the needs of induction in the sixth form using Action Research methodology. This paper seeks to address the impact of this programme upon the teachers' sense of themselves as researchers.

Postholm (2009), in a Norwegian study, argues that teachers can become researchers through involvement in an Action Research project, but that this takes time and must have proven benefits to the teacher. Gewirtz et. al. (2009), in analyzing the purposes, processes and experiences of teacher research in a case study, found that developing a culture of research amongst teachers requires the rethinking of assumptions about what it means to be a teacher. They argue that part of this rethinking involved teacher perceptions of the intrinsic and instrumental value of research related activities. Day et al (2006) in an exploration of the complex, fragmented and multiple nature of secondary teacher identity argue that the values associated with a positive identity can be negatively affected by situation specific events (p614). Beijaard throws some light on these by drawing on the work of Sikes (Day et al pp 605-606) to distinguish three important aspects of a secondary teacher's identity: the subject that they teach, their relationship with pupils, and how they see their role as teachers. This small-scale research focuses on the first of these. Visscher and Witzers (2004) assert that research into subject departments is scarce, whilst arguing that subject departments may become powerful agents influencing teacher development (p787), suggesting that the relationship between subject departments, and teacher development can offer insight into the development of teachers as Action Researchers.

### **Research Questions**

This paper aims to evaluate, the contribution of an Action Research project to the practice of six teachers in the subject areas of Science, History, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and Psychology and explores factors influencing their relationship to Action Research.

### **Methods**

Data collection draws on the experiences of Postholm (2009: p556). Data is collected from teacher written submissions for the transition project, the principle investigator's research diary, a series of semi-structured interviews, written teacher reflections, a presentation to school colleagues, and respondent validity of the principle investigator's findings.

### **Frame**

Nias (1989) recognises the dichotomy of the substantial and situational self, which has implications for researchers analyzing interviews, documents or teacher talk. Dewey's (1966) conceptions of instrumental and intrinsic value, along with respondent feedback will be used in data collection and analysis to explore validity. These concepts of the situational and substantial self, along with instrumental and intrinsic values are used as the analytical framework, whilst dilemma analysis (Winter 1982), allied to Mason's (1996) procedure of identifying a puzzle, working backwards and forwards from the dilemma, are used to explore for further evidence and explanation.

The nature of the teacher's sense of themselves as Action Researchers will be explored through the lens of Visscher and Witzers (2004) five indicators of departments as professional communities:

- Teaching policy and evaluation – common formative assessments
- Consultation and cooperation – adjustment in practice through mutual consultation and informal exchange
- Consensus – shared values
- Departmental leadership – directive/facilitative
- School leadership – directive/facilitative

### **Research findings**

It is possible at this stage to anticipate three findings from preliminary analysis of early data that will be more fully explored in the final paper.

Firstly, the paper will describe uneven journeys of development, heavily influenced by the role of subject cultures. For example, the positivistic, instrumental characteristics of the two science participants, contrast markedly with the intrinsic, exploratory characteristics of the two MFL participants. As would be expected, in this instance, the MFL participants embraced the philosophy of Action Research more readily. However, the pragmatic, practice based nature of AR, although initially creating barriers to participation, did not prevent the Science participants from embracing the dynamics of the Action Research Cycle (Baumfield. et. al. 2008) once the possibilities for improvement to practice had become apparent, although at a slower pace than with the MFL, Psychology and History participants.

Secondly, balkanization and isolation (Hargreaves, 1994) are concepts familiar to students of school culture, and this characteristic appears to be a significant barrier to collaboration and dissemination, particularly with regard to smaller departments and new entrants to the profession.

Thirdly, the successful collaboration of the MFL participants indicates a significant role for intrinsic values embedded in the substantial self. These teachers share more than a love of school subject, but a love of curiosity leading to aspects of subject study that cannot easily find a place in within a high pressure curriculum geared to outstanding examination success. This project allowed the MFL participants to raise the issue of thinking 'beyond Assessment for Learning' (MFL participant no.2).

An issue that will be addressed with analysis of later data is the medium term impact of this Action Research project on the teachers' practice as researchers.