Emerald English Teaching: Practice and Critique

Classroom based action research with secondary school students of English Literature: a teacher-researcher's reflection.

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English Teaching: Practice & Critique

Classroom based action research with secondary school students of English Literature: a teacher-researcher's reflection.

Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to reflect on some of the professional and practical challenges which emerged during the process of carrying out a small scale action research project into different approaches to teaching English Literature in a Year 9 secondary classroom, completed in part fulfilment of the requirements for a higher degree.

Design/methodology/approach

– The author narrates an account of some of the difficulties faced by one emergent researcher whilst carrying out educational research in a comprehensive school in England.

Findings

– The author suggests that even within a research supportive environment where 'research' is encouraged or expected, there is often limited effort from management to articulate the practicalities or evaluate its effectiveness. Despite this, the author emphasises the benefits to teachers and students of undertaking small scale action research projects into issues of contemporary professional concern in the classroom. The author argues for the involvement of school administrators and universities in supporting teacher-researchers.

Originality/value

– The value of this research lies in acknowledging some of the challenges that emergent researchers might face in conducting research in the context of the classroom, which might enable other teacher researchers to anticipate and avoid similar problems in their own research and circumvent criticism from those who believe that educational research should not be carried out by teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

The desire for evidence based practice in the classroom has long been articulated (for example, see Hargreaves, 1996) and has recently become the subject of renewed attention. Internationally there is much evidence that teachers are becoming increasingly involved in classroom based research (see Borg & Sanchez, 2015) and in the UK a government white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (March 2016) emphasized the centrality of evidence based teaching. In response, some schools have appointed school based 'Research Leads' whose role includes supporting teachers in accessing relevant educational research and engaging in research of their own. This growing interest in educational research by teachers throughout the UK is evidenced by twitter feeds such as @researchEd1, which had 15,000 followers at the time of writing. However, whilst there is an increased appetite for teachers to become research active, as yet there is no standardized way for teachers to learn how to become researchers within school, unless they are studying for a higher degree. What compounds the difficulty is the dearth of research about the practicalities of becoming a teacher-researcher and the lack of published accounts of the processes that teacher-researchers go through to guide novices as they negotiate the unforeseen challenges to their own research projects.

This paper makes a self-reflexive evaluation of the professional and practical challenges which emerged during the process of carrying out a classroom based action research project in part fulfilment of a higher degree. The notion of the reflective practitioner is generally accepted as a crucial component of the action research process and the importance of critical reflection on the process of teaching *per se* is emphasised by the fact that it is required evidence for successful completion of most initial teacher training courses in the UK and 'has become a byword for good practice' (Harrison, 2011, p.10). If teachers are to engage in classroom based research then the practice of self-reflection becomes doubly important as they reflect not only on student responses to their teaching but also upon their research design.

Why action research?

Philpott (2016) asserts that educational research cannot be compared with medical or technological research because of the very nature of the subject, the students and teachers. Teaching is not open to the engineering model of research and practice; as Pring has stated, educational research is focussed on complicated transactions with the teacher managing situations which are 'fluid, unpredictable, dynamic' (Pring, 2004, p. 121). What works in one classroom with one set of students may not be appropriate for another context, which is precisely why small scale action research projects are valuable to classroom based practitioners who may recognise elements of what other people have done and be able to use those indicators to predict what might happen in their own settings.

Stenhouse's contribution to the field of action research has been well documented, and his view of the importance of teachers in schools engaging with and carrying out educational research as an integral part of their role, rather than educational research being 'an activity carried out on schools by outsiders' (Hammersley, 1993, p. 211) has been widely advocated in recent years. At a time in the UK when centralised government education policies are planned in offices far removed from the modern classroom, and academics and

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educationalists were referred to as 'the Blob' by then Minister of State for Education Michael Gove (2014)[1], (a reference to an amorphous, jelly-like alien from the 1958 film of the same name), many classroom teachers are left feeling more disenfranchised than ever before. One response to this sense of disempowerment is for teachers to engage in classroom based research, which Elliott suggests can be seen as a form of 'creative resistance' (Elliott, 1991, p. 56) as it encourages teachers to critically assess the specification of a curriculum or particular teaching strategies (as recommended by Stenhouse, 1983), and systematically reflect on their practice to improve it. As policy-makers attempt to make educational outcomes 'more predictable' there is a danger of teachers becoming de-professionalised and 'cast in the role of technical functionaries' (Elliott, 2015, p.19). Pike expresses a similar viewpoint, arguing that 'the values of collegiality and shared responsibility', which are a feature of much teacher-research, can 'enable the profession to fight against hierarchical line management structures that characterise most secondary schools' (Pike, 2002, p.38).

Pike has argued that English teachers, as a distinct group of practitioners, are positioned 'ideologically, culturally and politically to be receptive to and benefit from action research' (Pike, 2002, p. 27). He identified similarities between action research and reader response theory, which he asserted had 'taught us to base the acts of teaching upon the act of reading' (Benton, 1995, p. 336, cited in Pike 2002). In Pike's view, action research is comparable to reader response theory because 'teaching is only valid when it takes account of the experience of the learner' (Pike, 2002, p. 30), in a similar way that reader response theory posits that making sense of the text should always take into account the experience of the reader. Pike named this approach 'responsive teaching' (Pike, 2002, p. 20) and it supports Stenhouse's conception of teaching 'as a process in which the teacher learns how to improve his or her teaching' (cited in Hammersley, 1993, p. 213).

In the same way that reader response theory demands a dynamic engagement with the text in order to create meaning (for example, see Iser, 1978) so action research demands a dynamic engagement with the case study in order to better understand the data produced. This position aligns with my beliefs and it was on this basis that I selected action research as the method for my project, firstly because my principle focus was 'to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge' (Elliott 1991, p. 49) and secondly because as both a reader and a writer, I am sympathetic to a constructionist epistemological stance which underpins my conceptual position that 'the world and what we know of it do not reflect an 'out there' true nature of the world…but what we know of the world is constructed through various discourses and systems of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 30), and further, 'all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Although not without its critics, (for example, see Hammersley, 2004) action research enables individual classroom teachers to generate classroom specific research knowledge whilst retaining intellectual control in the process. Although it would be unwise to generalize from such specific research, '… action research in one classroom or school can *illuminate* or be suggestive of practice elsewhere' and thus enable the development of a body of professional knowledge (Pring, 2004, p. 133, emphasis original). In a similar way, I suggest that reflections on the process of carrying out classroom based research can contribute to the development of a body of knowledge about its practice.

[1] Michael Gove, UK Secretary of State for Education (2010 – 2014).

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THE CASE STUDY

Action research seeks to influence the practitioner- researcher's own teaching and is ultimately concerned with providing 'authentic insights, rather than universal truths' (Carr & Kemmis, 1993, p. 239). My students had reacted negatively to the requirement that they should study Shakespeare every year in secondary school; further probing revealed that problems with understanding the language were largely at the root of their unenthusiastic responses. Therefore, in order to improve my teaching practice and provide a more positive experience for my students, following Pike's conception of responsive teaching I designed a research project with the aim of ascertaining which teaching methodologies students reported as leading to the greatest improvements in their understanding of *Macbeth,* and aimed to answer the overarching research question: What do I observe, and what do my students say about different approaches to teaching *Macbeth*?

Whilst the focus of this article is to illuminate some of the issues that might be faced by teachers carrying out classroom based research, there follows a brief overview of the case study to aid the reader in understanding the project and the challenges I encountered whilst completing it. The first complication I faced was in having to alter my research design due to unexpected changes in the sequence of the curriculum. This meant that much of the literature review was carried out subsequent to the data gathering as I found myself asking new questions in response to my data analysis; this was the first of several frustrating experiences I encountered as I attempted my enquiry, which illuminated some of the difficulties faced by teachers in carrying out classroom based research.

Secondly, I had planned to teach *Macbeth* in a more active way than I eventually did. Following advice in Gibson (2000) that it is in the 'context of dramatic realisation that the plays are most appropriately understood and experienced' (Gibson, 2000, p. xii) I had intended to use drama activities to cement students' understanding of the characters prior to their writing an end of half term assessment. However, the two-day notice period given for lesson observation for the school's performance management cycle meant that I had to cancel some of my planned drama activities, leading to my teaching of *Macbeth* being more staid than I had intended; another example of the difficulties I faced whilst doing research in the school environment, where despite my best efforts I was not completely in control of my sequence of lessons.

The sample

The sample was a mixed gender class of 31 Year 9 students consisting of 11 girls and 20 boys in a large comprehensive school in the rural east midlands of England during the academic year 2015-2016. 30 of these students were White British and none spoke English as an additional language. Using a government produced standardised assessment model students were considered to be of broadly middle ability. None were assessed as having special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Five students, all boys, were deemed to be disadvantaged students for whom the school received pupil premium funding (additional government subsidy to support looked after children or students who are known to be eligible for free school meals).

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A recent inspection report stated that students across the school often lacked independence in lessons and failed to challenge themselves (OFSTED[2] December 2015). This characteristic had been noted in this particular class during a performance management review observation where students were perceived to be "inclined to take the easier option in their learning" (principal's comment, 2015).

The class met four days a week, with me teaching two days and my colleague teaching two also. The organisation of the English Department meant that all teachers were required to follow existing schemes of work, albeit differentiated for their students, and we were expected to be teaching the same lessons at the same time, using the same PowerPoint, leaving little room to go *off piste* to pursue unexpected lines of enquiry during lessons. Pike's notion of 'creative resistance' was therefore highly appealing; I could legitimately disregard 'hierarchical line management structures' (Pike, 2002, p. 38) without fear of censure, as I was doing so in the name of research.

Ethical considerations

The school was part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT, a network of partner schools) that required all teachers to engage in educational research as part of their performance management requirements; welcome evidence that teacher-led research is becoming a priority in some UK schools. Key members of the administration were aware of the details of my project as part of my higher degree and in fulfilment of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements. All students and their parents were requested by letter to consent to participate in the research and through this process gave their permission to quote any utterances or materials they produced.

Ethical considerations which arose over the course of the study were, firstly, that the Head of English left the school at Easter. This meant that the English department was overseen by the assistant principal with responsibility for the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of staff, who was a Physical Education teacher. He knew I was carrying out research, but did not know the details of it. However, because the principal and the deputy principal were already aware, I did not feel the need to discuss my research formally with him, not least because as a non-English specialist I doubted he would appreciate the nuances of the project.

CLASSROOM BASED FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH

The challenges of gathering sufficient data

As a qualitative researcher, I view triangulation as a means of getting a 'richer or fuller story, rather than a more accurate one' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 286) and appreciate Jane Ussher's use of a jigsaw metaphor to describe the triangulation process: 'it is only when we put the

[2] The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. A UK non-ministerial department which inspects and regulates services providing education and skills for learners of all ages.

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different pieces of the jigsaw together that we see a broader picture and gain some insight into the complexity of our research' (Ussher 1999, p. 43). Working within an interpretivist framework this triangulation was intended to bring 'different kinds of evidence into some kind of relationship with each other' (Elliott, 1991, p. 82) in order to present a thicker description of my students' perceptions which would enable the reader of my research project to better judge the veracity of my claims.

Data gathering methods included having students draw visual representations of their previous studies of Shakespeare which provided an overview of earlier experiences and attitudes; a numerical survey which enabled baseline quantitative analysis of the reasons for their initial negative responses to the prospect of studying Shakespeare; open ended questionnaires designed to collect feedback on lessons; documentary analysis of student work, and semi-structured interviews which enabled me to explore more deeply students' experiences of lessons and which I viewed as the most important data source.

Drawing on advice in Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) I interpreted my data inductively by using the three interlinked streams which they term 'data condensation', 'data display' and 'conclusion drawing/verification' (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p14), however, despite the variety of methods described above achieving sufficient data proved to be problematic for the reasons detailed below.

Questionnaires

At the end of the scheme of work I asked students to complete a questionnaire as a ten minute starter activity, which was designed to elicit their views and experiences of each *Macbeth* lesson, with a focus on which teaching approaches had contributed to their greater understanding of the text or added to their overall enjoyment of learning Shakespeare. In the spirit of ethical acceptability I informed students that completion was optional, and that I would assume those who completed it had given me consent to add their views to my data analysis. An alternative use of the time was to improve work in exercise books with my individual assistance. On reflection, this approach meant that students did not feel any urgency to complete the questionnaire and took longer than I had anticipated. I did not consider it an appropriate use of lesson time to go beyond the allocated ten minutes, so when I collected the questionnaires for analysis it was clear that many students had not had time to answer all the questions. The result was that question 6, which I viewed as the most important; 'Have we done anything in lessons that has helped you to understand the language better?' was left unanswered by most of the class, many of whom had reached only as far as question 4. I learnt from this to position the most important question at or near the beginning of questionnaires in the future.

The data collected from the questionnaires revealed contradictions to comments students had made previously in class; evidence of the 'messy complexity' of case study research carried out in the classroom (Elliott 1991, p. 52). In order to probe this further I produced a second questionnaire which was designed to clarify the answers given to the first one and was more balanced, in that it also gave the opportunity for students to comment on anything they had not enjoyed or any activities they had found to be unhelpful. This time I made it clear that I expected all students to answer all questions, and that if they wrote their names on the papers I would take that as their informed consent for me to analyse responses for the research project. I repeated question 6 (above) and this time put it at number 3, to ensure that all students had a chance to answer it before the time was up. However, having students write

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their names on the papers might have led to them not being entirely honest in their responses for a variety of reasons, perhaps for fear of censure or maybe even not wanting to upset me with negative responses.

Semi-structured interviews

In order to ensure I had fully understood students' responses to the questionnaires, I carried out semi-structured interviews as a means of triangulation. Because of the unpredictable behaviour of some individuals in the class it was not possible to carry out recorded interviews in lesson time whilst the rest of the students carried on quietly with their work, so I asked students to come back at lunch time for an audio-recorded discussion about their experiences of lessons. Asking students to volunteer to give up their free time was a risky strategy and I was disappointed that despite most students agreeing to come, only five actually turned up.

Two girls and two boys came at the beginning of lunch, and one girl came on her own later. Because they had volunteered to come I could be sure of their informed consent, however, these students cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the class for a number of reasons. Firstly, the fact that they volunteered to give up part of their lunch time indicates that they were interested in discussing their experiences of lessons, and by extension keen to have a voice in the content of subsequent classes. Secondly, the two girls in the first group were high achieving students who were confidently able to articulate their views on any given subject, were highly motivated, and not only completed work in all lessons and did good quality homework, they also fell naturally into the role of helping other students around them, thus demonstrating an intrinsic valuing of education both for themselves and others. Further, I had taught them both in Year 7 so they were confident in being frank with me.

Of the two boys, one was another hard working, highly motivated student, although deemed less academically able than the two girls as evidenced by his half-termly assessment scores, and the second was a student considered to be disadvantaged and for whom the school received pupil premium funding. I was both surprised and pleased that he came to the interview as I felt this demonstrated a hitherto hidden interest in his education that he masked with a lackadaisical approach to lessons, and revealed a quality that I probably would not have seen had I not been engaged in the research process. However, it could also be that he only came because he was encouraged to by his more committed friends. The girl who came on her own at the end of lunch was a very quiet and shy student who was also highly motivated and hard working. I had taught her in both Years 7 and 8 which was probably why she felt able to speak to me with candour, although she was not confident in speaking up in class. Although she was not confident in speaking up in class, she was candid in her responses to me in a one-to-one situation.

When I later questioned students in class about why they had not come to see me at lunch time, many said they had intended to but had simply forgotten or that the lunch queue was too long so they ran out of time. This neatly illustrates another issue with classroom based research; as well as the time required of the teacher to plan and carry it out, it also demands time of students to participate and contribute to the data collection. Because they expressed their willingness to be interviewed, I overcame this problem by taking small groups of students out of my colleague's lesson with his consent, to interview privately. This was ethically acceptable as the teacher had planned a lesson that would allow for groups of students being removed for fifteen minutes at a time, so that their progress in the lesson would not be compromised.

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All students were allocated to sub-groups of five or six and given a time slot of fifteen minutes. I wanted to hear all students' views, as it was important to me that they realised I valued their opinions, irrespective of whether or not I was analysing their responses as research data. Each group had the option to choose whether their interviews were sound-recorded, thus ensuring I had their informed consent. I asked pre-prepared, non-directional questions (drawing on advice in Creswell, 2009) and interviewed students in the familiar surroundings of our usual classroom which enabled the 'relative normality' that is important to make interviewees feel relaxed and able to respond fully (Buckler and Walliman 2016, p. 191). Further, I interviewed them in friendship groups, as I anticipated this would allow greater confidence in responding openly about their experiences, however this approach led to issues of its own as there was the risk that students would respond in ways to please their friends. This was illustrated when the girl who had come on her own to the aforementioned lunch time interview gave a completely contradictory answer to a similar question when she was with her friends.

Of the eight groups interviewed, four groups agreed to have their interviews sound-recorded; however the quality of the sound recording, which had been very good for the first round of interviews, was inexplicably poor for the second round and on replaying it was sometimes impossible to hear clearly what students had said. I learnt from this to sound test audio equipment before every interview. This technical failure coupled with some students being unwilling to be recorded at all meant that I could not use all the comments that were uttered in writing up my findings, although there were enough similarities in the data collected for me to be confident that my interpretations were representative of the overall views of the class.

I transcribed the interviews and manually coded for patterns and general themes relating to greater understanding of the play by using a spread sheet. Similar to Blakemore's assessment I found the process to be drawn out and wondered whether having access to coding programmes might have made my analysis of the data 'more meaningful' (Blakemore, 2012, p. 68). Learning how to analyse qualitative data was time consuming and required much reading around the subject, and raises questions about reliability when data analysis is carried out by novice teacher-researchers who may have had limited training and support and who might therefore privilege some data that fits with the research questions at the expense of less dramatic or more conflicted responses.

A further ethical consideration arose from the interviews when some students used my question about how to improve English lessons as an opportunity to criticise other teachers. Because I had guaranteed anonymity and confidentially, they felt able to speak freely, however I did not encourage their comments and prompted them to reflect instead on the positive aspects of those lessons. However, it did make me feel uneasy as I was worried that by allowing students to speak without restrictions I might be undermining the professional status of other teachers. As Elliott states, a teacher-researcher's response to such a dilemma might be to 'suppress, restrict or structure the critiques of pupils' to avoid hearing criticism ('negative or otherwise') of particular teachers (Elliott, 1991, pp. 58-59). Elliott does not view this as a helpful approach, and I believed such a stance would undermine the validity of student feedback, as they would not be able to be entirely honest. Such restriction 'communicates a protectionist and conservative message' (Elliott, 1991, p. 59) which is at odds with the spirit of openness I was trying to facilitate.

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The importance of critical reflection

I based my evolving teaching sequence on my students' reports of their experiences of lessons using Pike's 'responsive teaching' as a model, which is a similar concept to the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' posited by Schön who referred to a 'reflective conversation with the situation' (Schön, 1983, p.42) and which is described by Wilson as teachers 'retrospectively analysing their own actions and attempting to determine how these actions influence classroom events' (Wilson, 2009, p. 7). However, despite critical reflection being a crucial component of my study, one of the main challenges I faced was in finding time for it immediately after lessons in order to react to students' responses and plan activities which enabled them to make progress. No sooner had the case study class left, then my next class would be lining up noisily in the corridor. I partially overcame this by jotting down quick notes at the end of each lesson, but having more time for deeper reflection immediately, when impressions and perceptions were fresh, would have enabled a more complete reflective cycle. As Day reminds us, reflection is 'an essential part of the learning process' (Day, 1993, p. 83), however, I experienced Handal's observation that normal conditions in school mean that school-based action research could result in an incomplete 'self-reflective' spiral (cited in Day, 1993). In Day's view, 'the normal sequence of events is that teachers spend most of their time on planning and acting (constructing practice) and less on observation and reflection (deconstructing practice)' (Day,1993, p. 85). My reflections were often hurried and therefore unsatisfactory; as a result the following research cycle did not always follow logically from the one preceding it, leading to a faulty emergent research design, despite my having the support and advice of a university tutor. This raises important questions about whether it is possible for a teacher-researcher to create a cohesive research design without the guidance of a more experienced other.

The key findings from the study

Whilst interviews are invaluable in allowing the teacher-researcher the opportunity to access students' perceptions of their learning in a way that is otherwise not possible during the normal course of a lesson, it is important to recognise that students themselves were reconstructing events from a distance as they reflected on lessons they had experienced some weeks back, and the analysis of the interviews was my own interpretation of what they said, and therefore cannot be deemed to be an authoritative explanation. Nevertheless, the clear message that came from my students was that many of them appreciated and benefitted from teacher-led instruction in language analysis, and only once they felt confident with their understanding of the play were they willing to engage in the creative activities that followed.

Conversely, when students did not have a clear understanding of the language, they viewed creative activities as purposeless and were unwilling to participate in them. Whilst I had noted in my reflections that students had not engaged with some tasks, it was not until I had carried out interviews and data analysis that I was able to recognize the importance of students feeling confident in their understanding of the text before they wanted to engage in the more challenging imaginative responses which would lead to deeper learning. This was at odds with the way I had conceptualized the lessons, where creative activities were to be used as a means of initial exploration and engagement.

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This finding coheres with Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision of Bloom's taxonomy, where creativity is positioned at the top of the pyramid, and the implications for my future teaching are clear. In order for students to be willing to engage with more challenging creative activities they must first have had adequate teacher input to enable them to feel confident in their understanding of the text. Asking students to explore the text through creative activities prior to giving them a firm grounding in the understanding of it is, in their view, akin to setting them up for failure, and as a result they will be unwilling to participate.

SCHOOL WIDE FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH

One of the main challenges to achieving the aim of getting all classroom practitioners to engage with educational research lies in altering the mind-set of some teachers. Martin's exploration of teachers' use of learning styles exposed a disconnect between educational research and professional practice in the UK (Martin, 2010). His study revealed that assigning learning styles randomly to students would give teachers as much information as they had from using the Kolb test (Martin, 2010, p. 1586). When confronted with the research evidence, almost all teachers involved in the study confirmed they were unaware of the large body of research critiquing learning styles. Crucially, since undergoing teacher training 'they had had relatively little (in most cases no) contact with research literature' (Martin, 2010, p.1589), which endorses my experience of colleagues in the English department in school and is precisely why the role of the Research Lead is such an important one.

As Elliott rightly points out, finding the time to conduct classroom based research is one of the main barriers to teachers engaging in it. In his view, this situation has come about because many teachers see research as 'a mode of knowledge production that is external to their practice as teachers… their role is to apply the findings of research to their practice' (Elliott, 2015, p. 18). However, if Martin's experience is anything to go by, this application is currently not happening. Elliott suggests that 'teachers will be resistant to research if they see it as an additional burden on them at a time when performance management measurements mean teachers are being held more publicly accountable for their teaching'. I witnessed this attitude first hand from colleagues in school when it was announced during a staff briefing in October 2015 that one of the compulsory performance management indicators for that academic year was to be that all teachers should conduct classroom based research. Some teachers were resistant to the idea on the basis that this would add to their already (in their opinion) unmanageable workload. In Elliott's view, ''No time to do research' implies 'no time to develop my teaching in any fundamental sense'' (Elliott, 2015, p.19). However, at a time when teachers in the UK report average working hours of 59 per week (primary) and 55 per week (secondary) (DfE 2013 teacher workload diary survey) and teaching has been described as 'incompatible with normal life' (Bousted, 2015), it would be unwise to underestimate the impact of adding tasks to a work force already at breaking point, especially if the value of those tasks is not immediately obvious to the beleaguered classroom teacher.

Fueyo and Koorland (1997) listed other frequently cited reasons for teachers not conducting research:

1) I don't know enough to conduct research.
2) Research is something the university faculty should do.
3) I can't do research with my fellow teachers because they're too disorganized.
4) I don't want to rock the boat with new ideas.

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(Fueyo & Koorland, 1997, p. 341).

Point 3) above was commented on by my colleagues a source of irritation, however, in Fueyo and Koorland's opinion, 'when teachers view their enquiry as the expected norm for asking questions and finding answers, the preceding real and imagined barriers disappear' (Fueyo & Koorland, p.34). Echoing Elliott (1991) and reinforced by Pike (2002), Fueyo and Koorland view engaging in research is a prerequisite for teachers to be viewed as professionals. Because this engagement became the expected norm within the school in which I was teaching it is to be expected that a change in mind-set will occur fairly rapidly within this setting, as teachers accept it as another part of their professional role. However, the school based performance management research diktat did not require an explicit research plan or informed consent from students and their parents, and as such, teachers were not forced to 'clarify their goals' (Ryan, 2004, p. 114) leading to some teachers expressing the view that the research was an unsatisfactory, box-ticking exercise. Having a mandate to carry out class room based research is not the same as being supported or trained in how to do it. Being supported and trained in how to carry out class room based research might have made this a more positive experience for those teachers.

The importance of the critical community

Another challenge I faced was not having the opportunity to share my research experiences with my colleagues at the school. Teachers were required to develop new skills to conduct research but without being given the time or training in how to do it. I was confident that sharing my experiences and knowledge about the research process gained on the higher degree course I was pursuing would have been useful to at least some of them. In Day's words:

> The success of professional development within this context [of classroom based research] will depend in part on an existing managerial climate of collaboration and consultation in which staff are actively involved in decision-making and in which they feel valued.
>
> (Day, 1993, p. 88).

Whilst I discussed my work with colleagues in the English Department, not being able to share it with all the teaching staff had a limiting effect on its impact. Dialogue about issues of validity and generalizability could potentially have been fruitful as it is possible that the conclusions I had drawn might have informed the work of other teachers in other classrooms around the school, especially as teachers would have been teaching some of the same students that I had used as my case study. Dymoke points out that 'the wider research outcomes of such practitioner research do reside largely within the target school' (Dymoke, 2011, p. 33) whilst Pring argues for the existence of a 'critical community' in which to openly share the results of research and the methods used to reach them, and suggests that others should 'become part of the reflective process' in order to scrutinize and question the practice of which it is part (Pring, 2004, p. 134).

For action research projects to have any significant impact on student learning, it is necessary for findings to be shared, and this was eventually done in the school through a 'market stall' approach, where teachers produced a poster and described their research to other teachers, although this was done towards the end of the summer term and whether the results will be implemented in the long term remains to be seen. Gould (2008) argues for the importance of

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the findings of action research projects to be written up and shared, thus making them more accessible and useful to other teachers in the school, if not in the wider community. The MAT has demonstrated commitment to getting teachers to engage with the research process, and it is to be hoped that any gains made will be built upon in the future. However Gould also emphasizes the importance of conditions being created to support teachers in their research, such as by providing time for teachers to meet, discuss and write. In his words, 'Administrators must be … careful about overburdening those people most entrusted with the care of our children' (*ibid*., p. 7).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of training and collaboration

In the school in which I worked, CPD was traditionally seen as a 'one-size fits all approach' with no differentiation made between the needs of long serving teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers. Anecdotally, my colleagues reported remembering very little of what they have heard on these training days, and viewed them largely as a waste of time. They are by no means alone in this view; Tomsett's recent polemic asks:

> Think about it: when did you last receive training which changed your classroom practice and improved your students' outcomes? In twenty-eight years of teaching I can think of no more than three moments when I have changed my teaching as a consequence of my training.
>
> (Tomsett blog, posted 24/07/16).

If the frequent re-tweeting of this quotation is anything to go by, this depressing state of affairs is widely replicated nationally and the need for good quality CPD across the UK is an issue of current concern. By engaging in their own action research projects, my colleagues were able to choose to research a topic they found 'relevant and engaging' (Gould, 2008, p. 5) and despite initial reluctance to engage with it and problems with organisation, conversations indicate that many of them have felt 'empowered by working collaboratively alongside colleagues to evaluate their practice and try out new strategies' (Elliot, 1991, p. 56). This experience could have been greatly improved for teachers by having access to relevant literature to support their research and some training in research processes, which is potentially an opportunity for university collaboration.

Some university faculties have long been seats of excellence for research, and now that university roles in Initial Teacher Education in the UK are being eroded due to the many school-based and provider routes available, there is an opportunity for university personnel to share their expertise in research by providing CPD in how to carry out action research in schools and support the needs of teacher-researchers in class. Ryan (2004) describes a classroom based action research project carried out by a university lecturer and a secondary English teacher which demonstrates exactly the sort of gains in understanding of students' experiences that can be made through this type of collaboration, and which might provide a solution to some of the objections raised by teachers. However, Bennett (1993) points out that most teachers do not view the role of teacher-researcher as permanent and argues for the importance of administrative as well as university support in order to encourage teachers to grow into the role of researchers.

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Personal benefits

Participation in classroom based research is empowering as one is challenged to investigate and improve one's own classroom practice in response to student feedback. It has been suggested that routine can have a deadening effect on teaching practice as 'the classroom tends to be continually reconstructed in its own image' (Bennett, 1993, p.69). Despite some of the difficulties that I have reflected on above, I have found conducting action research to be hugely rewarding, not least because it did have the effect of reinvigorating my classroom practice of some fifteen years. In exploring my students' responses to a variety of teaching approaches I was able to gain valuable insights that have caused me to reflect on and reconsider long held assumptions, and to explore ways in which to improve my practice. As Pike says, 'teaching is de-professionalised when it is reduced to the following of routine technical procedures where independence of judgement is denied' (Pike, 2011, p. 227).

Most valuable for me was the discovery that my students would only engage enthusiastically with creative approaches to texts once they felt confident with the subject matter, which was at odds with my view that creative activities should be used to provoke initial interest and enthusiasm. This fresh understanding of my students' views definitely had an impact on my own teaching, and may, in the future, prove useful for other teachers. The process of carrying out the action research project and seeking students' opinions about the value of the teaching activities I had employed deepened my professional learning and my findings were similar to those of Ryan (2004); carrying out the research 'strengthened [my] teaching decisions as well as informing [my] reflections as [a]researcher[s]' (Ryan, 2004, p. 115).

Some forty years ago Stenhouse argued that 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher' (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 142) and it is only now that teachers are being actively encouraged to engage in their own research projects. However, teachers alone cannot achieve the desired change and the support of school administrators and university academics must be enlisted if the momentum is to continue to grow.

Stenhouse himself argued, 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher… I concede that it will take a generation of work, and if the majority of teachers – rather than only the enthusiastic few – are to possess this field of research, that the teacher's professional self-image and conditions of work will have to change' (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 142). Some forty years have passed since Stenhouse made this statement and it is only recently that teachers who talk about research in public are no longer regarded as show offs. However, teachers alone cannot achieve the desired change and the support of school administrators and university academics must be enlisted if the momentum is to continue to grow.

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Classroom based action research with secondary school students of English Literature: a teacher-researcher's reflection.

Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to reflect on some of the professional and practical challenges which emerged during the process of carrying out a small scale action research project into different approaches to teaching English Literature in a Year 9 secondary classroom, completed in part fulfilment of the requirements for a higher degree.

Design/methodology/approach

– The author narrates an account of some of the difficulties faced by one emergent researcher whilst carrying out educational research in a comprehensive school in England.

Findings

– The author suggests that even within a research supportive environment where ‘research’ is encouraged or expected, there is often limited effort from management to articulate the practicalities or evaluate its effectiveness. Despite this, the author emphasises the benefits to teachers and students of undertaking small scale action research projects into issues of contemporary professional concern in the classroom. The author argues for the involvement of school administrators and universities in supporting teacher-researchers.

Originality/value

– The value of this research lies in acknowledging some of the challenges that emergent researchers might face in conducting research in the context of the classroom, which might enable other teacher researchers to anticipate and avoid similar problems in their own research and circumvent criticism from those who believe that educational research should not be carried out by teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

The desire for evidence based practice in the classroom has long been articulated (for example, see Hargreaves, 1996) and has recently become the subject of renewed attention. Internationally there is much evidence that teachers are becoming increasingly involved in classroom based research (see Borg & Sanchez, 2015) and in the UK a government white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (March 2016) emphasized the centrality of evidence based teaching. In response, some schools have appointed school based 'Research Leads' whose role includes supporting teachers in accessing relevant educational research and engaging in research of their own. This growing interest in educational research by teachers throughout the UK is evidenced by twitter feeds such as @researchEd1, which had 15,000 followers at the time of writing. However, whilst there is an increased appetite for teachers to become research active, as yet there is no standardized way for teachers to learn how to become researchers within school, unless they are studying for a higher degree. What compounds the difficulty is the dearth of research about the practicalities of becoming a teacher-researcher and the lack of published accounts of the processes that teacher-researchers go through to guide novices as they negotiate the unforeseen challenges to their own research projects.

This paper makes a self-reflexive evaluation of the professional and practical challenges which emerged during the process of carrying out a classroom based action research project in part fulfilment of a higher degree. The notion of the reflective practitioner is generally accepted as a crucial component of the action research process and the importance of critical reflection on the process of teaching *per se* is emphasised by the fact that it is required evidence for successful completion of most initial teacher training courses in the UK and 'has become a byword for good practice' (Harrison, 2011, p.10). If teachers are to engage in classroom based research then the practice of self-reflection becomes doubly important as they reflect not only on student responses to their teaching but also upon their research design.

Why action research?

Philpott (2016) asserts that educational research cannot be compared with medical or technological research because of the very nature of the subject, the students and teachers. Teaching is not open to the engineering model of research and practice; as Pring has stated, educational research is focussed on complicated transactions with the teacher managing situations which are 'fluid, unpredictable, dynamic' (Pring, 2004, p. 121). What works in one classroom with one set of students may not be appropriate for another context, which is precisely why small scale action research projects are valuable to classroom based practitioners who may recognise elements of what other people have done and be able to use those indicators to predict what might happen in their own settings.

Stenhouse's contribution to the field of action research has been well documented, and his view of the importance of teachers in schools engaging with and carrying out educational research as an integral part of their role, rather than educational research being 'an activity carried out on schools by outsiders' (Hammersley, 1993, p. 211) has been widely advocated in recent years. At a time in the UK when centralised government education policies are planned in offices far removed from the modern classroom, and academics and

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educationalists were referred to as 'the Blob' by then Minister of State for Education Michael Gove (2014)[1], (a reference to an amorphous, jelly-like alien from the 1958 film of the same name), many classroom teachers are left feeling more disenfranchised than ever before. One response to this sense of disempowerment is for teachers to engage in classroom based research, which Elliott suggests can be seen as a form of 'creative resistance' (Elliott, 1991, p. 56) as it encourages teachers to critically assess the specification of a curriculum or particular teaching strategies (as recommended by Stenhouse, 1983), and systematically reflect on their practice to improve it. As policy-makers attempt to make educational outcomes 'more predictable' there is a danger of teachers becoming de-professionalised and 'cast in the role of technical functionaries' (Elliott, 2015, p.19). Pike expresses a similar viewpoint, arguing that 'the values of collegiality and shared responsibility', which are a feature of much teacher-research, can 'enable the profession to fight against hierarchical line management structures that characterise most secondary schools' (Pike, 2002, p.38).

Pike has argued that English teachers, as a distinct group of practitioners, are positioned 'ideologically, culturally and politically to be receptive to and benefit from action research' (Pike, 2002, p. 27). He identified similarities between action research and reader response theory, which he asserted had 'taught us to base the acts of teaching upon the act of reading' (Benton, 1995, p. 336, cited in Pike 2002). In Pike's view, action research is comparable to reader response theory because 'teaching is only valid when it takes account of the experience of the learner' (Pike, 2002, p. 30), in a similar way that reader response theory posits that making sense of the text should always take into account the experience of the reader. Pike named this approach 'responsive teaching' (Pike, 2002, p. 20) and it supports Stenhouse's conception of teaching 'as a process in which the teacher learns how to improve his or her teaching' (cited in Hammersley, 1993, p. 213).

In the same way that reader response theory demands a dynamic engagement with the text in order to create meaning (for example, see Iser, 1978) so action research demands a dynamic engagement with the case study in order to better understand the data produced. This position aligns with my beliefs and it was on this basis that I selected action research as the method for my project, firstly because my principle focus was 'to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge' (Elliott 1991, p. 49) and secondly because as both a reader and a writer, I am sympathetic to a constructionist epistemological stance which underpins my conceptual position that 'the world and what we know of it do not reflect an 'out there' true nature of the world…but what we know of the world is constructed through various discourses and systems of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 30), and further, 'all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

Although not without its critics, (for example, see Hammersley, 2004) action research enables individual classroom teachers to generate classroom specific research knowledge whilst retaining intellectual control in the process. Although it would be unwise to generalize from such specific research, '… action research in one classroom or school can *illuminate* or be suggestive of practice elsewhere' and thus enable the development of a body of professional knowledge (Pring, 2004, p. 133, emphasis original). In a similar way, I suggest that reflections on the process of carrying out classroom based research can contribute to the development of a body of knowledge about its practice.

[1] Michael Gove, UK Secretary of State for Education (2010 – 2014).

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THE CASE STUDY

Action research seeks to influence the practitioner- researcher's own teaching and is ultimately concerned with providing 'authentic insights, rather than universal truths' (Carr & Kemmis, 1993, p. 239). My students had reacted negatively to the requirement that they should study Shakespeare every year in secondary school; further probing revealed that problems with understanding the language were largely at the root of their unenthusiastic responses. Therefore, in order to improve my teaching practice and provide a more positive experience for my students, following Pike's conception of responsive teaching I designed a research project with the aim of ascertaining which teaching methodologies students reported as leading to the greatest improvements in their understanding of *Macbeth,* and aimed to answer the overarching research question: What do I observe, and what do my students say about different approaches to teaching *Macbeth*?

Whilst the focus of this article is to illuminate some of the issues that might be faced by teachers carrying out classroom based research, there follows a brief overview of the case study to aid the reader in understanding the project and the challenges I encountered whilst completing it. The first complication I faced was in having to alter my research design due to unexpected changes in the sequence of the curriculum. This meant that much of the literature review was carried out subsequent to the data gathering as I found myself asking new questions in response to my data analysis; this was the first of several frustrating experiences I encountered as I attempted my enquiry, which illuminated some of the difficulties faced by teachers in carrying out classroom based research.

Secondly, I had planned to teach *Macbeth* in a more active way than I eventually did. Following advice in Gibson (2000) that it is in the 'context of dramatic realisation that the plays are most appropriately understood and experienced' (Gibson, 2000, p. xii) I had intended to use drama activities to cement students' understanding of the characters prior to their writing an end of half term assessment. However, the two-day notice period given for lesson observation for the school's performance management cycle meant that I had to cancel some of my planned drama activities, leading to my teaching of *Macbeth* being more staid than I had intended; another example of the difficulties I faced whilst doing research in the school environment, where despite my best efforts I was not completely in control of my sequence of lessons.

The sample

The sample was a mixed gender class of 31 Year 9 students consisting of 11 girls and 20 boys in a large comprehensive school in the rural east midlands of England during the academic year 2015-2016. 30 of these students were White British and none spoke English as an additional language. Using a government produced standardised assessment model students were considered to be of broadly middle ability. None were assessed as having special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Five students, all boys, were deemed to be disadvantaged students for whom the school received pupil premium funding (additional government subsidy to support looked after children or students who are known to be eligible for free school meals).

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A recent inspection report stated that students across the school often lacked independence in lessons and failed to challenge themselves (OFSTED[2] December 2015). This characteristic had been noted in this particular class during a performance management review observation where students were perceived to be "inclined to take the easier option in their learning" (principal's comment, 2015).

The class met four days a week, with me teaching two days and my colleague teaching two also. The organisation of the English Department meant that all teachers were required to follow existing schemes of work, albeit differentiated for their students, and we were expected to be teaching the same lessons at the same time, using the same PowerPoint, leaving little room to go *off piste* to pursue unexpected lines of enquiry during lessons. Pike's notion of 'creative resistance' was therefore highly appealing; I could legitimately disregard 'hierarchical line management structures' (Pike, 2002, p. 38) without fear of censure, as I was doing so in the name of research.

Ethical considerations

The school was part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT, a network of partner schools) that required all teachers to engage in educational research as part of their performance management requirements; welcome evidence that teacher-led research is becoming a priority in some UK schools. Key members of the administration were aware of the details of my project as part of my higher degree and in fulfilment of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements. All students and their parents were requested by letter to consent to participate in the research and through this process gave their permission to quote any utterances or materials they produced.

CLASSROOM BASED FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH

The challenges of gathering sufficient data

As a qualitative researcher, I view triangulation as a means of getting a 'richer or fuller story, rather than a more accurate one' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 286) and appreciate Jane Ussher's use of a jigsaw metaphor to describe the triangulation process: 'it is only when we put the different pieces of the jigsaw together that we see a broader picture and gain some insight into the complexity of our research' (Ussher 1999, p. 43). Working within an interpretivist framework this triangulation was intended to bring 'different kinds of evidence into some kind of relationship with each other' (Elliott, 1991, p. 82) in order to present a thicker description of my students' perceptions which would enable the reader of my research project to better judge the veracity of my claims.

Data gathering methods included having students draw visual representations of their previous studies of Shakespeare which provided an overview of earlier experiences and

[2] The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. A UK non-ministerial department which inspects and regulates services providing education and skills for learners of all ages.

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attitudes; a numerical survey which enabled baseline quantitative analysis of the reasons for their initial negative responses to the prospect of studying Shakespeare; open ended questionnaires designed to collect feedback on lessons; documentary analysis of student work, and semi-structured interviews which enabled me to explore more deeply students' experiences of lessons and which I viewed as the most important data source.

Drawing on advice in Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) I interpreted my data inductively by using the three interlinked streams which they term 'data condensation', 'data display' and 'conclusion drawing/verification' (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p14), however, despite the variety of methods described above achieving sufficient data proved to be problematic for the reasons detailed below.

Questionnaires

At the end of the scheme of work I asked students to complete a questionnaire as a ten minute starter activity, which was designed to elicit their views and experiences of each *Macbeth* lesson, with a focus on which teaching approaches had contributed to their greater understanding of the text or added to their overall enjoyment of learning Shakespeare. In the spirit of ethical acceptability I informed students that completion was optional, and that I would assume those who completed it had given me consent to add their views to my data analysis. An alternative use of the time was to improve work in exercise books with my individual assistance. On reflection, this approach meant that students did not feel any urgency to complete the questionnaire and took longer than I had anticipated. I did not consider it an appropriate use of lesson time to go beyond the allocated ten minutes, so when I collected the questionnaires for analysis it was clear that many students had not had time to answer all the questions. The result was that question 6, which I viewed as the most important; 'Have we done anything in lessons that has helped you to understand the language better?' was left unanswered by most of the class, many of whom had reached only as far as question 4. I learnt from this to position the most important question at or near the beginning of questionnaires in the future.

The data collected from the questionnaires revealed contradictions to comments students had made previously in class; evidence of the 'messy complexity' of case study research carried out in the classroom (Elliott 1991, p. 52). In order to probe this further I produced a second questionnaire which was designed to clarify the answers given to the first one and was more balanced, in that it also gave the opportunity for students to comment on anything they had not enjoyed or any activities they had found to be unhelpful. This time I made it clear that I expected all students to answer all questions, and that if they wrote their names on the papers I would take that as their informed consent for me to analyse responses for the research project. I repeated question 6 (above) and this time put it at number 3, to ensure that all students had a chance to answer it before the time was up. However, having students write their names on the papers might have led to them not being entirely honest in their responses for a variety of reasons, perhaps for fear of censure or maybe even not wanting to upset me with negative responses.

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Semi-structured interviews

In order to ensure I had fully understood students' responses to the questionnaires, I carried out semi-structured interviews as a means of triangulation. Because of the unpredictable behaviour of some individuals in the class it was not possible to carry out recorded interviews in lesson time whilst the rest of the students carried on quietly with their work, so I asked students to come back at lunch time for an audio-recorded discussion about their experiences of lessons. Asking students to volunteer to give up their free time was a risky strategy and I was disappointed that despite most students agreeing to come, only five actually turned up.

Two girls and two boys came at the beginning of lunch, and one girl came on her own later. Because they had volunteered to come I could be sure of their informed consent, however, these students cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the class for a number of reasons. Firstly, the fact that they volunteered to give up part of their lunch time indicates that they were interested in discussing their experiences of lessons, and by extension keen to have a voice in the content of subsequent classes. Secondly, the two girls in the first group were high achieving students who were confidently able to articulate their views on any given subject, were highly motivated, and not only completed work in all lessons and did good quality homework, they also fell naturally into the role of helping other students around them, thus demonstrating an intrinsic valuing of education both for themselves and others.

Of the two boys, one was another hard working, highly motivated student, although deemed less academically able than the two girls as evidenced by his half-termly assessment scores, and the second was a student considered to be disadvantaged and for whom the school received pupil premium funding. I was both surprised and pleased that he came to the interview as I felt this demonstrated a hitherto hidden interest in his education that he masked with a lackadaisical approach to lessons, and revealed a quality that I probably would not have seen had I not been engaged in the research process. However, it could also be that he only came because he was encouraged to by his more committed friends. The girl who came on her own at the end of lunch was a very quiet and shy student who was also highly motivated and hard working. Although she was not confident in speaking up in class, she was candid in her responses to me in a one-to-one situation.

When I later questioned students in class about why they had not come to see me at lunch time, many said they had intended to but had simply forgotten or that the lunch queue was too long so they ran out of time. This neatly illustrates another issue with classroom based research; as well as the time required of the teacher to plan and carry it out, it also demands time of students to participate and contribute to the data collection. Because they expressed their willingness to be interviewed, I overcame this problem by taking small groups of students out of my colleague's lesson with his consent, to interview privately. This was ethically acceptable as the teacher had planned a lesson that would allow for groups of students being removed for fifteen minutes at a time, so that their progress in the lesson would not be compromised.

All students were allocated to sub-groups of five or six and given a time slot of fifteen minutes. I wanted to hear all students' views, as it was important to me that they realised I valued their opinions, irrespective of whether or not I was analysing their responses as research data. Each group had the option to choose whether their interviews were sound-recorded, thus ensuring I had their informed consent. I asked pre-prepared, non-directional questions (drawing on advice in Creswell, 2009) and interviewed students in the familiar surroundings of our usual classroom which enabled the 'relative normality' that is important

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to make interviewees feel relaxed and able to respond fully (Buckler and Walliman 2016, p. 191). Further, I interviewed them in friendship groups, as I anticipated this would allow greater confidence in responding openly about their experiences, however this approach led to issues of its own as there was the risk that students would respond in ways to please their friends. This was illustrated when the girl who had come on her own to the aforementioned lunch time interview gave a completely contradictory answer to a similar question when she was with her friends.

Of the eight groups interviewed, four groups agreed to have their interviews sound-recorded; however the quality of the sound recording, which had been very good for the first round of interviews, was inexplicably poor for the second round and on replaying it was sometimes impossible to hear clearly what students had said. I learnt from this to sound test audio equipment before every interview. This technical failure coupled with some students being unwilling to be recorded at all meant that I could not use all the comments that were uttered in writing up my findings, although there were enough similarities in the data collected for me to be confident that my interpretations were representative of the overall views of the class.

I transcribed the interviews and manually coded for patterns and general themes relating to greater understanding of the play by using a spread sheet. Similar to Blakemore's assessment I found the process to be drawn out and wondered whether having access to coding programmes might have made my analysis of the data 'more meaningful' (Blakemore, 2012, p. 68). Learning how to analyse qualitative data was time consuming and required much reading around the subject, and raises questions about reliability when data analysis is carried out by novice teacher-researchers who may have had limited training and support and who might therefore privilege some data that fits with the research questions at the expense of less dramatic or more conflicted responses.

A further ethical consideration arose from the interviews when some students used my question about how to improve English lessons as an opportunity to criticise other teachers. Because I had guaranteed anonymity and confidentially, they felt able to speak freely, however I did not encourage their comments and prompted them to reflect instead on the positive aspects of those lessons. However, it did make me feel uneasy as I was worried that by allowing students to speak without restrictions I might be undermining the professional status of other teachers. As Elliott states, a teacher-researcher's response to such a dilemma might be to 'suppress, restrict or structure the critiques of pupils' to avoid hearing criticism ('negative or otherwise') of particular teachers (Elliott, 1991, pp. 58-59). Elliott does not view this as a helpful approach, and I believed such a stance would undermine the validity of student feedback, as they would not be able to be entirely honest. Such restriction 'communicates a protectionist and conservative message' (Elliott, 1991, p. 59) which is at odds with the spirit of openness I was trying to facilitate.

The importance of critical reflection

I based my evolving teaching sequence on my students' reports of their experiences of lessons using Pike's 'responsive teaching' as a model, which is a similar concept to the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' posited by Schön who referred to a 'reflective conversation with the situation' (Schön, 1983, p.42) and which is described by Wilson as teachers 'retrospectively analysing their own actions and attempting to determine how these actions influence classroom events' (Wilson, 2009, p. 7). However, despite critical reflection

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being a crucial component of my study, one of the main challenges I faced was in finding time for it immediately after lessons in order to react to students' responses and plan activities which enabled them to make progress. No sooner had the case study class left, then my next class would be lining up noisily in the corridor. I partially overcame this by jotting down quick notes at the end of each lesson, but having more time for deeper reflection immediately, when impressions and perceptions were fresh, would have enabled a more complete reflective cycle. As Day reminds us, reflection is 'an essential part of the learning process' (Day, 1993, p. 83), however, I experienced Handal's observation that normal conditions in school mean that school-based action research could result in an incomplete 'self-reflective' spiral (cited in Day, 1993). In Day's view, 'the normal sequence of events is that teachers spend most of their time on planning and acting (constructing practice) and less on observation and reflection (deconstructing practice)' (Day,1993, p. 85). My reflections were often hurried and therefore unsatisfactory; as a result the following research cycle did not always follow logically from the one preceding it, leading to a faulty emergent research design, despite my having the support and advice of a university tutor. This raises important questions about whether it is possible for a teacher-researcher to create a cohesive research design without the guidance of a more experienced other.

The key findings from the study

Whilst interviews are invaluable in allowing the teacher-researcher the opportunity to access students' perceptions of their learning in a way that is otherwise not possible during the normal course of a lesson, it is important to recognise that students themselves were reconstructing events from a distance as they reflected on lessons they had experienced some weeks back, and the analysis of the interviews was my own interpretation of what they said, and therefore cannot be deemed to be an authoritative explanation. Nevertheless, the clear message that came from my students was that many of them appreciated and benefitted from teacher-led instruction in language analysis, and only once they felt confident with their understanding of the play were they willing to engage in the creative activities that followed.

Conversely, when students did not have a clear understanding of the language, they viewed creative activities as purposeless and were unwilling to participate in them. Whilst I had noted in my reflections that students had not engaged with some tasks, it was not until I had carried out interviews and data analysis that I was able to recognize the importance of students feeling confident in their understanding of the text before they wanted to engage in the more challenging imaginative responses which would lead to deeper learning. This was at odds with the way I had conceptualized the lessons, where creative activities were to be used as a means of initial exploration and engagement.

This finding coheres with Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision of Bloom's taxonomy, where creativity is positioned at the top of the pyramid, and the implications for my future teaching are clear. In order for students to be willing to engage with more challenging creative activities they must first have had adequate teacher input to enable them to feel confident in their understanding of the text. Asking students to explore the text through creative activities prior to giving them a firm grounding in the understanding of it is, in their view, akin to setting them up for failure, and as a result they will be unwilling to participate.

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SCHOOL WIDE FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH

One of the main challenges to achieving the aim of getting all classroom practitioners to engage with educational research lies in altering the mind-set of some teachers. Martin's exploration of teachers' use of learning styles exposed a disconnect between educational research and professional practice in the UK (Martin, 2010). His study revealed that assigning learning styles randomly to students would give teachers as much information as they had from using the Kolb test (Martin, 2010, p. 1586). When confronted with the research evidence, almost all teachers involved in the study confirmed they were unaware of the large body of research critiquing learning styles. Crucially, since undergoing teacher training 'they had had relatively little (in most cases no) contact with research literature' (Martin, 2010, p.1589), which endorses my experience of colleagues in the English department in school and is precisely why the role of the Research Lead is such an important one.

As Elliott rightly points out, finding the time to conduct classroom based research is one of the main barriers to teachers engaging in it. In his view, this situation has come about because many teachers see research as 'a mode of knowledge production that is external to their practice as teachers… their role is to apply the findings of research to their practice' (Elliott, 2015, p. 18). However, if Martin's experience is anything to go by, this application is currently not happening. Elliott suggests that 'teachers will be resistant to research if they see it as an additional burden on them at a time when performance management measurements mean teachers are being held more publicly accountable for their teaching'. I witnessed this attitude first hand from colleagues in school when it was announced during a staff briefing in October 2015 that one of the compulsory performance management indicators for that academic year was to be that all teachers should conduct classroom based research. Some teachers were resistant to the idea on the basis that this would add to their already (in their opinion) unmanageable workload. In Elliott's view, ''No time to do research' implies 'no time to develop my teaching in any fundamental sense'' (Elliott, 2015, p.19). However, at a time when teachers in the UK report average working hours of 59 per week (primary) and 55 per week (secondary) (DfE 2013 teacher workload diary survey) and teaching has been described as 'incompatible with normal life' (Bousted, 2015), it would be unwise to underestimate the impact of adding tasks to a work force already at breaking point, especially if the value of those tasks is not immediately obvious to the beleaguered classroom teacher.

Fueyo and Koorland (1997) listed other frequently cited reasons for teachers not conducting research:

1) I don't know enough to conduct research.
2) Research is something the university faculty should do.
3) I can't do research with my fellow teachers because they're too disorganized.
4) I don't want to rock the boat with new ideas.

(Fueyo & Koorland, 1997, p. 341).

Point 3) above was commented on by my colleagues a source of irritation, however, in Fueyo and Koorland's opinion, 'when teachers view their enquiry as the expected norm for asking questions and finding answers, the preceding real and imagined barriers disappear' (Fueyo & Koorland, p.34). Echoing Elliott (1991) and reinforced by Pike (2002), Fueyo and Koorland view engaging in research is a prerequisite for teachers to be viewed as professionals. Because this engagement became the expected norm within the school in which I was teaching it is to be expected that a change in mind-set will occur fairly rapidly within this

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setting, as teachers accept it as another part of their professional role. However, the school based performance management research diktat did not require an explicit research plan or informed consent from students and their parents, and as such, teachers were not forced to 'clarify their goals' (Ryan, 2004, p. 114) leading to some teachers expressing the view that the research was an unsatisfactory, box-ticking exercise. Being supported and trained in how to carry out class room based research might have made this a more positive experience for those teachers.

The importance of the critical community

Another challenge I faced was not having the opportunity to share my research experiences with my colleagues at the school. Teachers were required to develop new skills to conduct research but without being given the time or training in how to do it. I was confident that sharing my experiences and knowledge about the research process gained on the higher degree course I was pursuing would have been useful to at least some of them. In Day's words:

> The success of professional development within this context [of classroom based research] will depend in part on an existing managerial climate of collaboration and consultation in which staff are actively involved in decision-making and in which they feel valued.
>
> (Day, 1993, p. 88).

Whilst I discussed my work with colleagues in the English Department, not being able to share it with all the teaching staff had a limiting effect on its impact. Dialogue about issues of validity and generalizability could potentially have been fruitful as it is possible that the conclusions I had drawn might have informed the work of other teachers in other classrooms around the school, especially as teachers would have been teaching some of the same students that I had used as my case study. Dymoke points out that 'the wider research outcomes of such practitioner research do reside largely within the target school' (Dymoke, 2011, p. 33) whilst Pring argues for the existence of a 'critical community' in which to openly share the results of research and the methods used to reach them, and suggests that others should 'become part of the reflective process' in order to scrutinize and question the practice of which it is part (Pring, 2004, p. 134).

For action research projects to have any significant impact on student learning, it is necessary for findings to be shared, and this was eventually done in the school through a 'market stall' approach, where teachers produced a poster and described their research to other teachers, although this was done towards the end of the summer term and whether the results will be implemented in the long term remains to be seen. Gould (2008) argues for the importance of the findings of action research projects to be written up and shared, thus making them more accessible and useful to other teachers in the school, if not in the wider community. The MAT has demonstrated commitment to getting teachers to engage with the research process, and it is to be hoped that any gains made will be built upon in the future. However Gould also emphasizes the importance of conditions being created to support teachers in their research, such as by providing time for teachers to meet, discuss and write.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of training and collaboration

In the school in which I worked, CPD was traditionally seen as a 'one-size fits all approach' with no differentiation made between the needs of long serving teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers. Anecdotally, my colleagues reported remembering very little of what they have heard on these training days, and viewed them largely as a waste of time. They are by no means alone in this view; Tomsett's recent polemic asks:

> Think about it: when did you last receive training which changed your classroom practice and improved your students' outcomes? In twenty-eight years of teaching I can think of no more than three moments when I have changed my teaching as a consequence of my training.
>
> (Tomsett blog, posted 24/07/16).

If the frequent re-tweeting of this quotation is anything to go by, this depressing state of affairs is widely replicated nationally and the need for good quality CPD across the UK is an issue of current concern. By engaging in their own action research projects, my colleagues were able to choose to research a topic they found 'relevant and engaging' (Gould, 2008, p. 5) and despite initial reluctance to engage with it and problems with organisation, conversations indicate that many of them have felt 'empowered by working collaboratively alongside colleagues to evaluate their practice and try out new strategies' (Elliot, 1991, p. 56). This experience could have been greatly improved for teachers by having access to relevant literature to support their research and some training in research processes, which is potentially an opportunity for university collaboration.

Some university faculties have long been seats of excellence for research, and now that university roles in Initial Teacher Education in the UK are being eroded due to the many school-based and provider routes available, there is an opportunity for university personnel to share their expertise in research by providing CPD in how to carry out action research in schools and support the needs of teacher-researchers in class. Ryan (2004) describes a classroom based action research project carried out by a university lecturer and a secondary English teacher which demonstrates exactly the sort of gains in understanding of students' experiences that can be made through this type of collaboration, and which might provide a solution to some of the objections raised by teachers. However, Bennett (1993) points out that most teachers do not view the role of teacher-researcher as permanent and argues for the importance of administrative as well as university support in order to encourage teachers to grow into the role of researchers.

Personal benefits

Participation in classroom based research is empowering as one is challenged to investigate and improve one's own classroom practice in response to student feedback. It has been suggested that routine can have a deadening effect on teaching practice as 'the classroom tends to be continually reconstructed in its own image' (Bennett, 1993, p.69). Despite some of the difficulties that I have reflected on above, I have found conducting action research to be hugely rewarding, not least because it did have the effect of reinvigorating my classroom practice of some fifteen years. In exploring my students' responses to a variety of teaching

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approaches I was able to gain valuable insights that have caused me to reflect on and reconsider long held assumptions, and to explore ways in which to improve my practice. As Pike says, 'teaching is de-professionalised when it is reduced to the following of routine technical procedures where independence of judgement is denied' (Pike, 2011, p. 227).

Most valuable for me was the discovery that my students would only engage enthusiastically with creative approaches to texts once they felt confident with the subject matter, which was at odds with my view that creative activities should be used to provoke initial interest and enthusiasm. This fresh understanding of my students' views definitely had an impact on my own teaching, and may, in the future, prove useful for other teachers. The process of carrying out the action research project and seeking students' opinions about the value of the teaching activities I had employed deepened my professional learning and my findings were similar to those of Ryan (2004); carrying out the research 'strengthened [my] teaching decisions as well as informing [my] reflections as [a]researcher[s]' (Ryan, 2004, p. 115).

Some forty years ago Stenhouse argued that 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher' (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 142) and it is only now that teachers are being actively encouraged to engage in their own research projects. However, teachers alone cannot achieve the desired change and the support of school administrators and university academics must be enlisted if the momentum is to continue to grow.

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