

Foreword

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Teacher professional development has a higher political profile today than for many years, and links with appraisal and performance management may mean that at times professional development is seen as something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Yet as the authors of this book make clear, teacher professional development can take many forms, and a key aspect of successful professional development is the commitment of the participants to the activity. Such commitment is more likely if the focus of the development activity is chosen by the participant rather than imposed from the centre.

Choosing which development activity to pursue imposes pressures of its own. You may feel that you have nothing to say or that the research you want to do is of little significance. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by the different possible lines your research could take. You may feel daunted by the difficulties of juggling all your responsibilities, professional and personal. You may even feel that you are being a little bit selfish, wanting to pursue an area of interest which inevitably is going to involve sacrifices by yourself and others. These at least were some of the thoughts I had when, as a full-time teacher in a comprehensive school, I decided to pursue some research part time. Even now, some years after my official periods of part-time study were successfully completed, reading through this book I am relieved to find that these fears and worries are perfectly normal.

Taking the initial steps of pursuing research once those initial fears have been overcome (or even perhaps when they have not) brings to the forefront a plethora of further questions. Is there anyone who will be willing to supervise the work? What will I have to write? Will my ideas be hopelessly inadequate? How will I be able to cope with all the literature? What research methods would be appropriate? These and many other questions are addressed in this book. It is useful to be reminded of the many opportunities that exist for small-scale research for educational development which can provide not only valuable professional development in themselves but which may also provide a route into larger-scale research. The questions and checklists are helpful in looking at the range of opportunities that already exist, in highlighting areas which can be developed, and in developing

techniques for making explicit aspects of professional identity. These techniques can help us as teachers to resist the view of professional development as something which is done to us by so-called ‘experts’, and promote the view that we can be active in choosing how we want to develop.

Having made the initial decision to pursue your ideas further it then becomes necessary to consider where you can best carry out your research and on what sort of course or activity. Of paramount importance it seems to me is the matter of finding someone to supervise your work with whom you are able to work well and who is able to act as one of the ‘critical friends’. Here time spent at the beginning of your research will be time well spent. You will need to be able to trust your supervisor and accept the criticisms which you hope he or she is going to level at your work in order to help you to develop it. A poor relationship will sap your morale and your enthusiasm, and the quality of your work is likely to be the poorer as a result; on the other hand, a positive relationship should help periodically to reinvigorate your research, help you to focus your ideas (as you know they are going to be subject to close scrutiny) and promote your confidence in arguing your ideas.

In preparing to conduct your research it is worth giving some thought to the reasons which are going to provide you with your motivation. Motivation will be important; you may find yourself (as described in this book) writing late at night or early in the morning (and possibly both), and having to forgo some of the activities which, if it were not for your research, you would be able to enjoy. Motivation is, of course, very individual and may well consist of a number of inter-related factors which will help to give you the determination you will need and help to sustain you when you hit difficulties. Just like the results of educational research, your reasons for wanting to do research, and the factors that are going to help to motivate you, are likely to be complex; clarifying them in your mind will help you to persuade yourself and others that what you are doing has purpose and direction.

Let us assume that you have made a decision to conduct some research and have been able to meet someone who has agreed to supervise your work. Now is the time to start in earnest on the formal part of your work (assuming that you have been thinking informally about the issues hitherto). One point that I came to realise was very important to help me to progress was that it was pointless to wait for inspiration. So I can readily agree with the sentiment expressed in this book that it is important to write. Writing, I find, helps to develop my ideas and to clarify my thinking; drafting and redrafting help me to develop my ideas further. What you write may never make it into the final copy of your work but in working and in thinking through the ideas it is possible to find a line of argument which eventually turns out to be fruitful.

And what sort of writing you do can vary according to the time available and your alertness; note taking and following up references can be done when you are tired, so use quality time when you are alert for taking your arguments further and developing your arguments. But the general rule I had was that I would keep writing (writing notes, writing drafts, revising work) even when I felt I would make little progress; I came to feel that the 'slow times' were an integral part of the work, demanding of me the 99% perspiration which I hoped would eventually give way to the 1% inspiration.

Much of your writing will develop from reading. Access to the Internet and all the electronic resources available today makes the task of accessing resources a lot easier than it once was, but with the drawback that now the sheer quantity of material may be overwhelming. Getting to know the main libraries you will use, and how they work, will be time well spent. Similarly I quickly came to appreciate how important it is to keep an accurate record of every book or article consulted. Two minutes making an accurate note at the time of initially consulting a work can save hours later trying to find a 'lost' paper or book. I found it useful to make notes on my computer and to make and keep dated backups so that I could always go back through my archive to find the original source of any quotation or idea. I also found it important to make a note of which library I had found the book or article in and the shelf-mark of each book; this made going back to the original that much easier.

It is likely that in doing your research you will come across references which you need to follow up but which are only obtainable from elsewhere. Perhaps you will find some references impossible to trace, perhaps because they are incorrectly noted in your sources. This at least was my experience. Although initially frustrating, I came to enjoy pursuing lines of inquiry and tracking down a book or article which had almost been 'lost'. I was delighted by the care with which library staff (in the UK and abroad) and academic staff would try to help track down papers from 20 or 30 years ago, where perhaps only one copy remained in some dusty file. This camaraderie is part of what binds those working in what is sometimes called the 'academic community'. Becoming part of that community you will be attending meetings and conferences where you may meet people whose work you have read but whose faces are unfamiliar. This was my experience, made all the more enjoyable by the realisation that I could contribute and have my ideas scrutinised by others. Sometimes I was happy to participate as a silent witness to exchanges between well-known academics and to follow the cut-and-thrust of a lively academic debate. Either way, whether as contributor or witness, this involvement with those at the forefront of research is exciting and rewarding. This is an aspect of the academic community to which reference is made in this book which rings true for

me. And the contrasts which research affords can be illuminating; an early morning meeting with my supervisor followed by a drive to my school for the rest of the day's work would see me switching thought mode from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein to the normal routines of school within an hour. But even here the insights given by my research enabled me to view the daily life of school in a new light.

Perhaps you wonder what your colleagues will make of your involvement in research. Perhaps some will see it as slightly bizarre. If so, this is something to relish, just as those who enjoy other interests relish them, interests which you may find bizarre. Variety is the spice of life. Some may be interested and eager to participate or to know more. Some may have done research previously and be eager to discuss your ideas and progress with you. But much of your research will be quite a lonely task, at least in terms of the physical presence of someone doing the work with you. But come to see the books and papers you will be using as the voices of colleagues in another room and it does not seem so lonely after all. And, of course, you will come to meet with fellow researchers, even if infrequently, who can help to offer the framework of critical support which can help to move your own work forward.

Making your research results public in some form is an important aspect of research and of professional development. The discipline of publication helps sharpen arguments and reduce confusion and errors and opens up your work to peer review, a vital role of the academic community. Not only is it professionally rewarding to see your work made public but it can also give personal satisfaction to you and those who have supported you through the sometimes lonely experience of research. It is also to be expected that, having completed your research, you will have conclusions to share with others; having your work published provides a way of formally presenting your ideas for this purpose.

Your involvement in research may result in some form of accreditation. It may also give you a lasting interest in your chosen area of study, to which you may be able to return at a future date or continue in another form after the official part of your research is completed. Other consequences of carrying out your own research for professional development are likely to include an increased scepticism (in my view, healthy) of many of the edicts handed down from 'on high' to the teaching profession, and a recognition (again, in my view, healthy) that the learning community is one which extends across formal institutional boundaries and that practising teachers have an important contribution to make. For reasons such as these I am delighted to have been asked to contribute this Foreword.

Perhaps reading this book will give you new ideas for research as part of your professional development. If so, the underlying message of the authors, it seems to me, is that you should have the confidence to take your ideas forward.