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The outsider looking in: developing deeper understandings of the complexities in ‘leading’ professional learning in schools as ‘the knowledgeable other’

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ABSTRACT

This article examines leadership and practitioner professional learning (PL) across two multi-school networks. This ethnographic empirical study involved the development of research communities comprised of teacher-led research projects in collaboration with academic researchers (ourselves). We explore what the impact this type of PL and our role as ‘outsiders’ had on developing teacher agency and teacher/leader identity, and how *leadership for professional learning* (LfPL) emerged through these research activities. Our research sites were a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and a Teaching School Alliance (TSA) in England. Ethnographic data were collected over a three-year period. Significantly, our approach to understanding the complexity of these learning contexts draws upon socio-cultural theory, particularly Figured Worlds to construct understandings of PL within an identity and agency framework. Further, it utilises the Bakhtinian concept of *outsideness* to theorise how knowledge is mobilised through these collaborations. This approach offers novel insights for conceptualising LfPL as the intra-actions and practices of our research participants as they mediate our entangled PL spaces as leaders, teachers and researchers, together with developing understandings of the complexity of academic positionality as ‘the more knowledgeable other’ among those who are actually in the know.

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1. Introduction

Policy, practice and research within the field of compulsory education are entangled and mutually reproductive (Francis 2015). The implications are that such entanglements occupy and complicate teacher/leader professional learning (PL) in ways that attempt to cohere multiple perspectives, and, at times, opposing ideas and drivers. It can also be argued that in the attempt to meet powerful policy priorities, that PL is currently configured in ways that are narrowly focussed, workload demanding and ignore the benefits of a richer educational environment (Perryman and Calvert 2019). These discursive pressures have arguably led to teacher attrition and more recently teacher strikes over pay and conditions in England (Adams 2023). We are therefore interested in how leadership for PL (LfPL) becomes an important force in (re)configuring a practice context for educationally and practice-based learning that is connected to teachers’ intrinsic educational values.

To expand on these ideas, we consider how LfPL connects understandings of leadership with professional learning (Poekert *et al.* 2020) where our framing of leadership is ‘as practice’ (Simpson

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2016, MacBeath *et al.* 2018, King and Holland 2022) rather than ‘the preserve of any position’ (Wilkinson *et al.* 2010, p. 69). Leadership as practice shifts thinking about leadership away from individuals to one that focuses on the development of agency as produced through the flow of collegial and professionalising activities, such as, in our case, collaborative teacher research (MacBeath *et al.* 2018). We regard this as identity work that might reframe teacher self-understandings as more agentic and transformative (Reid *et al.* 2022) and explore the ways in which discursive constructions of professionalism might be disrupted and re-configured in a stretched professional space that gives equal weight to multiple voices. In this way, we suggest that leadership, collegiality and agonistic democratic practices are connected as LfPL.

We analyse these LfPL practices and intra-actions that exemplify re-configurations of self, by drawing upon aspects of the Figured Worlds Framework (Holland *et al.* 1998). Essentially, the notion of figured worlds builds on the work of both Bakhtin and Vygotsky to develop a practice theory of identity and agency that encompasses how we mediate the specific cultural worlds that we enter. For example, we bring with us a sense of what it is to be a teacher, and as we enter that world, observing and experiencing how to behave, think and re-present ourselves based on the activities of the people, rituals and artefacts that surround us. However, these social and cultural resources can be mediated and reconfigured in ways that may be considered agentic. We propose that LfPL is the key to unlocking a sense of agency.

Thus, we contemplate how these LfPL practices are formed in the ‘intersubjective spaces’ of collaborative research to develop ‘a set of conditions that make such practices possible’ (Kemmis *et al.* 2013, p. 14). In this sense, we explore the role of Higher Education academic ‘as an ‘outsider’ in developing an enabling context. This paper offers new perspectives on theorising the role of the HE academics in such collaborations by utilising the concept of ‘outsideness’ (Bakhtin 1981). *Outsideness* is the ability to see oneself through dialogue with the other. To see oneself from the viewpoint of another, and ‘build up an image that includes the whole of me and the room, including those things I cannot physically see’ (Holquist 2002, p. 35), we suggest, is necessary to facilitate truly transformative learning that troubles the delivery model of education where the more knowledgeable other ‘fills empty vessels’ (Biesta 2014). Thus we contribute to the field, offering a conceptualisation of LfPL as evolving within the practices of collaborative teacher research where the enablement of an alternative multi-voiced professional space allows new ideas to be trialled without judgement. We demonstrate how these practices might both disrupt and disturb the discursively constructed established status quo.

The article thus begins with a focus on how neoliberalism has distorted and discursively constructed the practices of professional learning. We contrast this with discussing the implications that wider understandings of teacher professionalism and identity might bring to educational practice. We move on to consider the beneficial aspects of teacher research within the context of the neoliberal project, discussing both Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and academisation (in particular multi-academy trusts – MATs) in relation to educational practices, and how multifaceted collaborations (including those with academics) expand the possibilities presented by research activity. The method section not only discusses the approaches adopted to data collection and analysis, but also expands on the research sites involved. We then discuss the data in three sections, the first focussing on the beneficial potentials of outsideness; the second considering the necessity of safe spaces for open discussion for learning; the third exploring language, its neoliberalised shifts in meaning and its reappropriation to something more aligned with teachers’ educational beliefs. We conclude with a discussion of the benefits of academically supported risk and uncertainty, where all involved experience PL.

2. Context: market values in education leading to ‘what works’ priorities

The affective consequences of neoliberalism on education have been profound as they have reconfigured all aspects of the complex education milieu in constraining and reductive ways. The Education landscape in England has changed dramatically over the past 50 years, becoming increasingly linked to top-down political agendas (Apple 2019, Ball 2021). Aligned to globalisation

and the Global Education Reform Movement, agendas are stimulated by perceived connections between the performance of nation state education systems and economic productivity and growth (Sahlberg 2015). This economic imperative underpins and justifies prevailing and powerful beliefs that neoliberalism is the only way to bring about improving education systems, articulated through its associated technologies of managerialism, marketisation and performativity (Ball 2021). In England, since the New Labour government introduced ‘quasi-markets’ and competition as the means to deliver improvement, a pervasive audit culture has emerged related to centrally imposed powerful fields of judgement such as standards, high stakes testing, published league tables and graded Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspections (Power and Whitty 1999). Performativity therefore involves extreme accountability measures through monitoring, control and judgement across the school system and is embodied, understood and enacted by those who work within it (Perryman *et al.* 2011, Clarke and Matthew 2013). The intensification and hegemonic dominance of the neoliberal project has continued under subsequent Governments with the acceleration and expansion of the academies programme, which has become normative in the way it constructs knowledge and practices in schools (Rivsi and Lingard 2010, Ball 2021).

The outcomes of neoliberal narratives are a fixation on performance, competition, individualism and a need to control, leading Biesta (2020, p. 101) to question ‘... whether we are measuring what we value, or whether we are valuing what is being measured’. The implications of the ‘*normative validity*’ of these measurements as ‘evidence-based’ education result in the ability to be taught ‘what works’ on a national and even global scale, which has fundamentally shaped notions of ‘the professional’ (Crow *et al.* 2017). For Bakhtin, these hegemonic discursive constructions are *monoglossic* (Bakhtin 1981). Monoglossia signifies ‘the dominant forms of language, representing the world-view/interests of dominant social groups, which are positioned or imposed as unitary and total’ (Francis 2012, p. 4). Understandings of professional norms based around a culture of collegiality and collaboration have been replaced with competitive and ‘highly individualised, responsabilized subjects’ (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 248) who have ‘internalised an identity of “performance”’ (Apple 2019, p. 919). Thus, the work of school leaders becomes managerial, transactional and concerned with organisational performance (Ball 2021). This affects interpersonal relationships of school colleagues, leading to the breaking of social bonds (Lyotard 1984). Further, the role of measurement in education lies within a globalised and powerful network that connects and implicates all those participating within it (Biesta 2020). Stakeholders (professionals, teachers and learners, parents, academics, governments and policymakers at the national and global level) collude both consciously and unconsciously in the production of this normative validity so that it is difficult to locate or change this fixed ‘truth’ about education and its constitutive realities (St.Pierre 2013). Indeed, Holloway and Brass (2018, p. 361) suggest that the neoliberal teacher has accepted a ‘normalisation of the marketised teacher, the managed teacher, and the performative teacher’.

However, this normalisation is not working for all teachers and constrained versions of what it is to be an educator are arguably resulting in a ‘crisis’ in recruiting and retaining teaching staff (Kelchtermans 2017, Perryman and Calvert 2019). The intricacies of teaching need to be recognised as ‘a complex activity requiring teachers’ professional and ethical judgement’ and their agency to be reasserted in discourses around ‘good’ teaching’ (Reeves 2018, p. 105). Moreover, audit cultures tend to work against more agentic constructions of education as the use of narrowed metrics necessarily reduces what can be measured and compared. Competitive, marketised systems need winners and losers where winning cements positivist understandings of truth and knowledge with other more qualitative ways of knowing being diminished. Thus, education becomes constructed and constrained through objectivist onto-epistemological arrangements that produce decontextualised and generalisable knowledge and practice. Practitioners become more dependent on standardised ‘what works’ approaches and avoid risks attached to individualised responsibility for any perceived failure. This exacerbates the need for epistemic certainty and heightens what Bernstein (1983, p. 18) termed the ‘Cartesian Anxiety’, as alternatives could lead to uncertainty and complexity (Harrison *et al.* 2020). It is within this ‘contemporary socio-historic moment’ that we explore collaborative teacher research as contributing potential for rediscovering a broader, more teacher-centred educational exploration.

3. Developing our position for collaborative teacher research as LfPL

The context for the collaborative teacher research was a Teaching School Alliance (TSA) and a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). Teaching School Alliances were schools who grouped around an OfSTED inspection rated outstanding lead school, government approved to offer professional development support. Teacher-research had been a policy imperative under New Labour, its purpose being to contribute to the notion that school alliances should become self-improving systems (Greany and Higham 2018). The role of teacher-research was to develop an evidenced based teaching profession akin to the ‘what works’ approaches previously described. Interestingly, this helped shift the focus of schools towards a research agenda and provided a rationale for some to begin working with university academics. As an extension of this thinking the development of Academies and then Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), academies that are grouped together as one entity, became the dominant model for schools promoted by government and considered independent in the sense that they operate outside of the control of local authorities, funded and managed by central government (DfE 2016). Similar developments have taken place globally such as the charter schools in the USA, and the Independent Public Schools in Australia (Francis 2015). Greany and Higham (2018) describe how academisation has become part of a wider school self-improving system, forming one legal entity with centralised control. The significance of these developments has been the subject of much controversy and the debates around MAT effectiveness continue (Greany and Higham 2018). Even if unconvinced, the pressure on schools to become academised and join MATs has intensified (Simkins *et al.* 2015). Indeed, the promised autonomy of this intensified neoliberal project has always been held in a ‘controlled decontrolled’ tension (du Gay 1996). Nevertheless, the movement has presented potential for integrated ways of working across different schools, and, perhaps exacerbated due to the speed of academisation through the English school system that has led to ‘system chaos’ (Francis 2015, p. 448) and ambiguous accountability (Ehren and Perryman 2018). This enabled the TSA and MAT at the time of our study to develop collaborative teacher research communities with some degree of freedom. We were therefore interested in how these neoliberal contexts might offer possible opportunities for school leaders and teachers to mediate ‘these discursive site[s] of contestation’ (Francis 2015, p. 449), and how teacher collaborative research may contribute to the reconfiguration of more agentic professional identities.

Teacher research should be about the development of critically reflexive spaces for professional learning (Giroux 1988) that allow teachers the intellectual space to define their own boundaries (Mouffe 2005). Within this ‘decontrolled space’, we sought to understand how teacher research might help teachers mediate their professional selves through a flow of activities that encouraged leadership, collegiality and agonistic democratic practices. Indeed, Sachs (2016) argues that teacher research is essential to the reshaping of teacher professionalism and should be an integral part of professional learning approaches. In adopting an agonistic democratic approach to research activity, staff were engaged in shifts in thinking and understandings through listening carefully and respectfully to multiple voices, in recognising that there will always be elements of dissensus between them with this as a necessary part of engagement with each other and finally learning that in order to see things afresh and to shift practices in meaningful ways, they will need to ‘let go’ of former practices and mindsets about what works (Hammersley-Fletcher *et al.* 2018).

Whilst enhancing teacher capacity, shared understandings and sense of purpose are well-known advantages of undertaking teacher research (Black *et al.* 2002, Wells 2002), we were also interested in how teacher research might reshape the professional space with teachers more likely to challenge ‘top down’ approaches to leadership (Kincheloe 2003). Involvement may also develop a heightened ability to unravel links made or assumed between approaches used, quality measures and testing (Hooks 2003). In other words, LfPL involves engaging in practices and thought that can unsettle the ‘taken for granted’. As Fielding and Bragg (2003) point out, this may present those who are seeking conformity with a challenge, particularly at a time where

compliance has been championed (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009, Loh and Hu 2014). We contend that the challenge is important, as when research becomes part of normalised practice, embedded into daily activities, passion follows (Stemler *et al.* 2006) shifting engagement with teaching. Indeed, school leaders are developed from such work as they become empowered through the knowledge and experience gained from research in ways that facilitate them to drive initiatives (Hammersley-Fletcher *et al.* 2018). In this way, we considered how research participants acted and understood themselves in differing situations and contexts (Holland *et al.* 1998).

Holland *et al.* (1998) explore identity and agency in specific cultural worlds, such as education by building on the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism to say that we use our ‘inner speech’, or voice (Vygotsky 1978, p. 57, Bakhtin 1981, p. 145;) to address external voices and make sense of them whilst still attending to personal beliefs and values or ‘internally persuasive discourse’ (Holland *et al.* 1998, p. 219). Professionals, such as teachers, learn to use this inner voice to take on an ‘authorial stance’ (Holland *et al.* 1998, p. 182) where dominant ‘authoritative discourses’ (p. 29) are sifted through and start to sit more comfortably with one’s own internally persuasive discourse. Whilst LfPL strengthens the authorial stance, this is achieved through grappling with a range of discourses which may raise questions about dominant discourses. Thus, teachers are more able to develop their own powerful discourses, backed by the literature, varied opinions and practice resulting from their research activity.

Crucial to this study is that we illuminate Bakhtin’s concept of ‘outsideness’ (Bakhtin 1981, Holland *et al.* 1998, p. 174) as necessary to critically reflect on habitual and often unquestioned practice. In being able to see oneself and one’s practice and circumstances from the outside, more ways of acting become available. We consider the role of the visiting academic and the cross-school collaborative working groups in this study as instrumental to the participants’ ability to achieve outsideness and notice structures, discourses and habitualised actions that might otherwise limit the choices they felt available to them. The role that the academic takes asks teachers and leaders to notice, answer and address the multiple voices and discourses encountered. The academic needed to be flexible and learn from the group to develop deeper understandings of practice which then informed a more nuanced and shifting set of research support mechanisms. Care was taken for the pace and challenge to feel empowering rather than critical. The agonistic democratic approach is a social and collaborative approach to learning that can be likened to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is described as follows:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978, p. 80)

Whilst we move away from the idea of capability as a means of development, collaborative research groups are spaces to explore differing perspectives and ‘different surpluses of seeing’ which may come together to create alternative possibilities. In this case, the ZPD was about facilitating movement from one perspective to another whilst recognising the accompanying challenges to certainty.

Our research offers some challenges to the field of LfPL through the exploration of the following research questions:

- (1) In what ways might teacher collaborative research and the role of the ‘HE outsider’ develop LfPL, teacher agency and autonomy against a backdrop of discursively constructed professionalism (MacLure 2003)?
- (2) To what extent does the role of the ‘outsider’ facilitate teachers who might move from living with certainty to living with uncertainty without this becoming too troubling (Cottle 2016)?
- (3) How does professional learning through ‘outsideness’ allow teachers to reappropriate language and develop new possibilities and perspectives?

4. Method

This ethnographic study explores LfPL through teacher-led research in collaboration with academic researchers (ourselves), across two different study sites. Data were collected over a period of three years using a variety of different research methods including observations, interviews, focus groups and field notes. One research site was a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) made up of twelve geographically dispersed schools in South/Midlands of England involving 24 teachers across 10 primary (pupils aged 4–11) and 2 high schools (pupils aged 11–16). The other was a Teaching School Alliance (TSA) of eight primary and one high school in the North-West of England, involving 17 teachers. Representatives included staff volunteers across all schools as part of a Trust and Alliance-wide call from within the organisations themselves. Teachers included senior leaders, middle leaders, classroom teacher and teaching assistants. The data for this paper were drawn from 17 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus groups from the academic years 2017/18 to 2019/20.

Data analysis involved two of the authors (one as research facilitator, the other as doctoral researcher). Two additional authors were invited to engage with these data to add a further ‘outsideness’ to broaden the perspectives and understandings arrived at through analysis. The data was analysed using an iterative framework (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, p. 1) that highlights the reflexive process involved as ‘key to sparking insight and developing meaning’. This allowed us to view the data while being plugged into our theoretical positioning (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) and to consider and focus our emerging insights around data which illuminated events that were considered as connected to LfPL, identity construction and agency so rather than being ‘an objectivist application of analysis procedures, the process is highly reflexive (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, p. 77). This necessarily involved deep discussions among the research team around meanings, interpretations and themes arising. Given that this is a very large data set, a clear selection of data were important for the purposes of this article, and it is not our aim to convey our findings as a truth, rather it is to uncover the potentialities of collaborative teacher research as LfPL. As it is the pedagogical approach, rather than the differing aims and structures of the Alliance and MAT that we are focussing on, three key themes emerged: ‘Bringing “the outside” in’; ‘Creating a safe environment to take risks’; and the ‘Reappropriation of language’. Moreover, the participants themselves were invited to reflect upon the data derived throughout the data collection period and through a final report and presentations. Ethical consent was given by the university, the school trust and school alliance and by the participants themselves.

5. Data analysis and discussion

5.1. Bringing ‘the outside’ in

Our data suggest that the Higher Education (HE) approach described in this study was crucially supported by the senior leadership team because it was not framed as conventional continuing professional development. The research lead Val at the TSA stated that (author 4) was welcomed specifically because she did not present herself as someone who would help the school to tick boxes and tell teachers how to do what works. Val stated:

... I do not think we found each other and tapped into each other because we have the same beliefs. What we liked about [author 4] was that she was a loose cannon, it was WOW, she puts a thing that was a bit controversial from the start. I meant it was that we were not aligned in our thinking because at that time we were in school, on a journey, a journey driven by the government, by Ofsted, and then all of a sudden, this person coming in and flinging questions and challenges us that actually made us question what, you know, we are supposed to be doing in our school... (Val interview)

This quotation would suggest that the TSA was actively looking to unsettle and question assumed and ingrained beliefs that could be described as an underlying ‘authoritative discourse’ (Holland

et al. 1998, p. 29) within the alliance and that they felt that they needed someone from ‘outside’ to help them to do this. Val does not call (author 4) ‘a more knowledgeable other’, nor does she describe a delivery model, where knowledge was imparted to vessels that needed to be filled (Biesta 2014). Rather, here outsidership was necessary in order to disrupt, and challenge current practice.

In a similar way the research lead at the MAT Nic explained,

in the Trust I am the initiator, I am the person that made a decision with colleagues . . . and said I think it is time for our Trust to start to do some action research . . . I was hoping it would release some time for staff to think about those things that challenge us in our daily practice and come up with solutions . . . (Nic interview)

The research lead here was keen for the creation of collaborative spaces where staff were scaffolded to experiment and seek solutions for everyday issues within practice. This approach necessarily flattens the hierarchy and can foster LfPL practices for those involved who had opportunities to find new and innovative ways to ‘play’ with the curriculum.

(Author 4), as an outsider, was able to ask questions of the ‘taken for granted’ practices embodied by and within teaching staff at all levels and her voice not only provoked and added to other voices but also encouraged the participants to think differently and question the unspoken norms of practice. In this way they began to achieve ‘outsidership’ so that they could critically engage with their practice in new ways. (Author 4’s) presence and agonistic style of facilitation created a mediated space to talk about and research practice and started from the premise of difference rather than alignment. The teachers were in a new Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where they could interrogate assumed practices and think about them differently. This ‘loose canon’ enabled a reconfiguring of the professional space to allow questioning of previously authoritative discourses and understandings (Holland *et al.* 1998, p. 29).

This is echoed by Peter (MAT) who describes the freedom that comes from doing research where,

Doing research means getting you to identify ideas, extract ideas and challenge them . . . you need to be open to other ideas and not let your background or the background of the research dictate how you interpret and what you make of the data you collect . . . When you start actually listening and opening your mind, it is actually listening, impartial listening, it is fabulous. (Peter Interview)

What is important in this way of understanding HE facilitated practitioner led research is that it sits counter to the concept of results led, performative teaching and teacher training, where everyone knows how to play the game. It instead looks to the facilitator/mediator to ask difficult questions that help those involved to see something that goes beyond what they are anticipating or ‘looking for’. This, Esther (TSA) states, ‘was really scary’ but that she found it helped her to ‘not be as controlling in the classroom, and outside’. Esther (TSA, focus group) goes on to describe a sense of ‘empowerment’ when conducting research with others, stating that,

working in one school, teachers can get very much looking inwards, even with a research head on, and once you are on that track it’s hard to sometimes look out, whereas when you are talking to people from other schools doing something similar, it’s like ‘Oh I’ve not tried that, I might try that’ or ‘we’ve found this’, and sometimes it can be completely different, but that’s really, really powerful to share.

For Esther, then, research has freed teachers, to really engage with the complexity of education so that through achieving ‘outsidership’ they can see things differently and critique, adapt and change practices that they see as problematic. It is interesting that an image of education as filling empty vessels with knowledge, used to critique teaching and learning for pupils (Biesta 2014), was utilised in the focus group by Esther to raise concerns about teacher development. Esther argued that, particularly with younger teachers, being part of the TSA had helped them towards being independent instead of staff colleagues telling them, ‘You should be doing this in English, you should be doing that in Maths’. Instead, TfPL was offering a number of alternative perspectives.

This is a very specific form of teacher professional learning that requires critical thinking and outsidership to enable teacher-researchers to (re)ask themselves as a group ‘what the

school is supposed to be doing' and how they might address and adapt their own practice(s). Concepts of value and purpose come to the fore, giving space for professional identities and practices to be re-considered and re-evaluated. Teachers and indeed the facilitator, were exposed to a heteroglossia or plurality of relations and voices that must be worked through, that must be answered and addressed. This involved reformulation of their sense of purposes for education and delving into potentially expanded or different routes by which they could still meet school and government requirements, but which also made education more meaningful as practice for staff and students. This took place both socially in the research groups and privately, as each individual re-authored their professional self (Holland *et al.* 1998).

5.2. Creating a safe environment to take risks

Whilst teachers are used to grappling with new government initiatives and curriculums which offer uncertainty (Perryman and Calvert 2019), they learn to cover uncertainty with surety allowing them to uphold their own status in the classroom as the more knowledgeable other. They are not, however, used to uncertainty in relation to formulating and taking risks decided upon by themselves. Nic states that teachers are usually the person with 'authority' and 'influence' in the classroom. To facilitate a research environment to work,

You have to have your senior leadership and your governors buy into it in order to give people the time and the permission to try out new things, because sometimes things do not work, you know it is about taking risks, isn't it? Being given that permission. (Nic MAT lead interview)

The research space is then similar to a ZPD where teacher-researchers are encouraged by the facilitator to take risks and analyse why things do and do not work, and this sits very differently to the 'what works' agenda (Biesta 2020) and professional development focussed on proving success to Ofsted. The academic facilitator is thus acting to 'give permission' as Nic states above. Post-panoptic performativity requires 'excellence at all times' (Goodley and Perryman 2022) and this restricts the freedom to take risks and the freedom to learn from mistakes (Biesta 2014). LfPL activity encouraged new ways of acting and being for the individual where new worlds, new rituals and symbols of what a good education can look like are developed.

Naomi (TSA, interview) described the environment of the facilitated sessions positively against a backdrop of marketised schooling,

... because you are in this conditioned environment and it is very politically driven, and (author 4) probably cringed at some of the things we said because we are working under these constraints and conditions all the time but she never said that ... understanding the pressures that these schools are facing, she has never been critical when she's seen us going down the route that was not ideal.

In other words, HE facilitators must not judge but encourage different ways of seeing educational practices and support a range of voices to be heard. Nic (MAT lead interview) describes research activity as professional development within their Trust as follows:

a way of bringing schools concerns, leadership concerns and interests into the same arena ... the quality of conversation amongst those teachers and heads has become very different [since their engagement in research activity]

So, conversations were changing as new voices were introduced into the senior leadership meetings, and rather than taking new initiatives 'at face value' a culture of 'stop and think and question' (Val, TSA interview) individually and as part of a team was becoming a part of the culture of the schools involved. Staff were developing leadership approaches through demonstrating well-reasoned perspectives, using these to challenge current practices and thinking.

One aspect of successful facilitation is that academics were deliberately invited into the room so that they could question and challenge habituated understandings of practice and ways of knowing

simply because their knowledge differed, and they were not conversant with the practices of each school. The goal of facilitation was not so much to impart knowledge as to create a space in which different knowledges could be exposed, interrogated, explored, revisited and created. Teacher-researchers did not want to be ‘blinded by science’ or to make ‘things more complex without interaction to facilitate learning’, rather they describe being ‘fed ideas that have challenged our own perceptions and also helped us to articulate our philosophy’ (Nic – MAT lead interview). Such a space is not always easy to create in an age of measurement (Biesta 2020) but this MAT and TSA were suited to an agonistic approach, where alternate visions of school practices and policies were being sought. The space required new social bonds (Lyotard 1984) to be formed, new voices to be answered and addressed, and new identities as teachers, leaders and schools which would feed into how the MAT/TSA articulated their vision to key stakeholders. Heidi (MAT Interview) argued that having a facilitator who introduced literature with care and support in helping contextualise it, allowed her to learn,

... about ways, paradigms and thinking about research, and I would not have known how to do that without having somebody who can explain to me how ... having that somebody to tell you, ‘You do realise that is new public management ... you need to realise it is an ideology’ and recognise oh ok I need to look it up ...

And Jim suggested, ‘Literature provokes us to think and reconsider the problems we face.’ (TSA focus group). So, through asking questions and providing insights into literature, these teachers were being encouraged to consider deeper underlying pushes that were having an impact on practice that in the safety of the space created, they were able to voice and discuss.

This then becomes a risk-taking space (Biesta 2014) created with a knowledgeable other, where the voices of all participants are heard, and school hierarchies are more open to question. The teacher-researcher can both experiment and innovate but also understand more about how they are operating and why. This works to their advantage in ‘playing the game’ according to the terms and values, or ‘criteria of competence’ (Lyotard 1984, p. 20) so activities can be couched in ways that support Ofsted criteria whilst also enriching what is happening in classrooms. This is essentially, where risk taking and LfPL is put back into education rather than removed from it and where social bonds are created rather than destroyed.

... we feel more comfortable to share which is really nice and it definitely helped me a lot. I think I get some support from other teachers as everyone has the same ethos ... we all work with each other, and we are all from the same Trust. Oh, and just to put it into perspective in terms of the research methods, it is so beneficial. (Julia, MAT, focus group)

5.3. Reappropriation of language

We found that as the process of research took place, the teacher researchers continued to use neoliberal terms in their conversations, but that these seemed to have been ‘imbued with their own meaning’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 88). One example of how meaning is added to and therefore changes the meaning of the term is ‘what works’. Through reading around the ‘what works’ literature, Sam (MAT focus group) states:

But what do the children need, what works for the children, so how can we make that work for us?

This is very different to performative fabrications (Ball 2003, 2021) as here the focus is on creating an education that works for the pupils, rather than to perform effective teaching during an observation or effective leadership through data collection and vision statements.

Similarly, and importantly, the concept of professional development has changed through this process:

[Research] is the absolute heart of professional development because it is directed by the teachers’ interests and concerns rather than the organisation’s concerns. In the ideal situations those two overlap, um and in the

worst case scenario, professional development is all about a kind of policy agenda and nothing to do with the school leadership or teacher. So, it is a way of bringing um schools concerns, leadership concerns and interests into the same arena (Janet MAT Interview)

In this sense, both the academic concept of research and the concept of professional development and leadership are changed. Research in this context is addressing individual professional concerns, allowing uncertainty and for there to be greater understanding of the issue rather than seeking a quick 'fix'.

Illustrating the change in thinking about how research articulated with professional development and overcoming pre-conceived images of what research might be, Jenny (TSA focus group) thought that teachers in general were known to be 'very controlling', and when she first started doing this research, especially open-ended research,

it was really scary, so for me it [research] helped me to overcome that and I think it is a very empowering thing, so I can say, I'm doing this because I've either read some research or I want to give this a go because I want to undertake some research at the same time.

So Jenny was seeing advantages for justifying the work undertaken in schools through research and in this way reconfiguring her own identity as a process of becoming a leader (Reid *et al.* 2022). What is more this raised nods of recognition within the group.

A further questioning of meaning was orientated around the word 'better'. In one of the MAT focus groups Darren argued,

I think it depends how you view better? Better as in we're better than you or we're doing it in a different way, are we right we should do it like this, or better as in this is the optimal way for our school and our community . . . better might be different from school, to school, to school, so meaning not so much better, but best for us, a clever way of doing it.

Again, the idea of betterment and better practice is rife in schools and tied to assessment agendas. However, here we find teachers asking questions about its interpretation and recognising that there is a complex and important story to tell that makes interpretations of the word, individual and in need of questioning. LfPL was demonstrating its impact in terms of re-appropriating educational understandings.

What is interesting is that these terms are widely used and understood in education, and for example 'what works' and 'better' have become specifically linked to neoliberal practices, and yet these teachers choose to use them and push up against them. Research is allowing them to use the language that is appropriate to the game, and yet to change its meaning, and the way that it is understood on an individual and collective basis. This is a powerful example of how the teacher-researcher is becoming, through this process, a more reflective and engaged other. Asking difficult questions has led to a different level of criticality and engagement with accepted norms. It also allows for heteroglossia and the values-based internally persuasive discourse (Holland *et al.* 1998) to become more visible. For example, in the following excerpt, Kara (TSA Focus Group) states,

This way of doing things just makes you question things constantly doesn't it? I think that's something in education that we don't do. You know it goes back to the training: you go on a course you come back and very rarely do you sit down and go 'Wow, why am I using green and pink pens?'. 'Cause someone said on a course that they use it so this moves learning forward . . .'. 'Does it? Well show me the reason.' So, this makes you question the reasons why more . . . well, why rather than just doing as you're told we might vary it slightly in questioning, and seeing if it does have an impact, in that it works for your children and staff rather than just take things and say 'yeah that somebody or some expert said . . .'. So, it's made me question more.

Kara is exemplifying the ways in which some professional development on offer utilises simplistic and ill-considered 'solutions' for teachers that offer little by way of meaningful thought driving them. She was beginning to realise that she had every justification in asking questions about such 'expertise' and, through voicing these inner thoughts within the focus group, received affirmations from colleagues that changes of practice needed to be researched and justified – not just offered as

answers. Others chorused their dissatisfaction with the depth and developmental power of many professional development programmes. This is not only querying the value of ‘what works’ training courses, but demonstrates the identity work taking place as Kara and colleagues question who they are as a professional and how they want to behave and be seen in the future. As Nina (MAT focus group) expressed,

our behaviour and everything we do from the moment we get up to the minute we leave our job influences all of those little people as well as our colleagues around us.

Thus, there was a high level of consciousness that shifts in practice needed to be carefully justified and meaningful, and that this did not necessarily tie in with superficial edicts and inspection criteria in terms of what matters most in teaching and learning. Research could also provide justification for work undertaken.

For Jay (MAT interview), research was about finding ‘innovative ways to solve problems’.

... those problems may not be the same this year as they were last year, to put them on a shelf, but these are still things in your repertoire ... you do research because you want to do a good job and to do a good job you want to do it the right way.

The notion of a ‘right way’ is problematic and part again of a neoliberal discourse. It moreover became clear that Jay was under pressure to perform in specific ways by his headteacher and over the period of the research both moved on to other schools, Jay because as his understandings grew, he became frustrated with narrow interpretations of ‘what works’ in his particular school, especially where he could see other practices in operation in other schools within the MAT (Holland *et al.* 1998). Nonetheless, teacher colleagues across both settings were expressing deepening understandings that led them to ask questions about where particular initiatives were positioned, what had led to this and what exactly was meant by terms formerly accepted as understood. LfPL through research activity was indeed beginning to influence the critical nature of the approach of these teachers to their work and develop their leadership perspectives.

However, it is important to acknowledge that both organisations in this study were committed to research activity at a senior organisational level. Working with staff who were not receiving the same level of support would be likely to have had very different outcomes. Indeed, even within this study the example where a staff member and indeed his headteacher left the MAT, the head not aligning with the MAT philosophy on LfPL and the member of staff because he felt blocked in his progress by the head demonstrates the potential for problems. Moreover, in such a large study there are always some staff who have been told rather than volunteered to take part. In this case, those in that position became increasingly engaged and enthused with the work as working together created a ‘buzz’. This demonstrates the importance of working with senior leaders in such organisations and carefully talking through the potentials of such a programme of research is extremely important in establishing a solid foundation for such work to take place.

6. Conclusion

The article makes an original contribution to the field through its detailed exploration of LfPL as emerged through collaborative research as identity work exemplifying the ‘self-in-practice’ (Holland *et al.* 1998). We also offer a novel examination of the important activity of collegial conversations in developing the necessary ‘outsideness’ for transformative learning (Bakhtin 1981). Indeed, we assert that outsideness is crucial for the development of LfPL when leadership is conceptualised as practice, collegial and agentic. The outsideness role within the ZPD facilitates working within spaces of uncertainty through collegial, agonistic conversations. This reconfiguring of the intersubjective space allows teacher-researchers to mediate multiple voices and contest the authoritative discourses that surround them, which in turn facilitates them in developing their personal authorial stance. LfPL is thus re-confirming the professional as knowledgeable in the

classroom, holding ideas and experiences that allow them to engage in meaningful debate and shifts in practice through research engagement and discussion with others.

We further argue that when different voices and ways of thinking are actively sought out, and where risks are actively taken, teacher-researchers can become comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. For us, the role of the HE academic is not to impose knowledge, but to encourage teachers to think differently about their practice and to facilitate risk-taking and the possibilities of (and indeed opportunities provided by) failure, which is an important part of learning. In a time where teachers are either leaving the profession or becoming disenchanted, LfPL through research activity offers opportunities for schools to re-engage with an enlivened curriculum, enlivened staff body and really listen to and hear different/outside perspectives. This can only enrich educational practices, strengthen teacher agency and build confidence to lead schools into a future that is uncertain and shifting.

To conclude, the policy implications of this work are the need to inject professionals with the confidence to realise that their ideas can be valid that they can learn from all situations and that research is a way to facilitate leading innovative practices across schools. For practice the importance of introducing outsiders to introduce provocations and fresh perspectives is essential to enliven and grow staff learning. Finally, research is a tool that when facilitated by an expert can create an enabling context for teachers to experiment, make mistakes and engage with new thinking drawing on well-founded perspectives that involve literature, data interpretation and new recommendations for practice. It is therefore important that future projects engage with this work and develop more mutually beneficial models of work between HE and the schools' sector. Thus notions of identity development, outsiders and honesty with schools about the challenges that such development presents facilitate successful partnerships.

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