

## **The *Thinking Teacher* in the *Thinking School***

**in need of a**

## ***Thinking Minister in a Thinking Government***

David Miliband was Schools Minister from 2002 to 2004. He used to wear glasses. When the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) went to see him about the establishment of what became Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) in England (masters degrees and doctoral programmes for schoolteachers) he referred to *The Thinking School*. It was a slogan that appealed to him. We had hoped to be talking about the thinking teacher *in* the thinking school but although he had called the meeting he did not seem to know why we were there. I remember that it was like talking to a clever sixth former who hoped to impress despite not having bothered to do his homework.

The glasses? With them David Miliband was the spitting image of Clark Kent. He no longer wears them.

Young Clark, who as Head of Policy previously aspired to be Tony Blair's Target Setter in Chief, shut down the Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS) programme. At some event whose name and timing I can no longer remember, except that in his speech Clark told us that in the village near Leeds where he and his little brother once lived Alan Smithers was known as 'The professor', he responded to criticism of his decision with a self-deprecating smile and said that after complaints about too many initiatives he thought he was pleasing people by closing one down.

What we really needed was

*A Thinking Minister in a Thinking Government.*

As the Editor of CPD Update in January 2005 I was glad to receive the following from Iris Keating. I hope that anyone contemplating the encouragement of some collective critical professional learning might find it interesting.

Note: CPD stands for Continuing Professional Development, LEA for Local Education Authority (deceased) and DfES for Department for Education and Skills (also deceased).

## **What was BPRS, how did it work and what was learned from it?**

The Best Practice Research Scholarships Programme was launched in March 2000 and became part of the DfES CPD Strategy. The BPRS Programme was devised to support individual teachers through a bidding system, whereby an award of a scholarship of around £2500 was granted, to undertake sharply focussed, small scale, classroom-based research into teaching and learning over the period of one academic year. Teachers' research proposals had to explicitly address an agenda of raising standards. Priority areas were suggested in the Guidance Pack that matched then current government initiatives such as literacy and numeracy, the development of strong learning communities in schools, social inclusion, citizenship, workforce issues and the development of creativity. However, applications in any relevant area were also encouraged. Around 1000 awards were made in each of the four years that the scheme ran.

Teachers were required to complete a written application for an award and could apply for a scholarship as an individual or as part of a group supported by a co-ordinating mentor. Applicants had to explain what they wanted to research, why and how they intended to carry this out. They were also required to relate this explicitly to potential impact on raising standards in teaching and learning. The scholarships were available from September to December of the following academic year (sixteen months). An essential part of the programme was the need to have a mentor to tutor and support the individual research project. Applicants were expected to fund the mentoring of their projects from their £2,500 budget, and guidance indicated that around two thirds of the award could be used for this purpose. Initially, tutor mentors tended to be provided by HEIs or LEAs. Some scholars experienced a range of mentor support: school based, consultants and HEI. It was anticipated that this move towards a more collegial approach to mentoring would have been developed further had the scheme continued, with real communities of research becoming established in schools and networks of schools, supported by HEIs/ LEAs, with teachers' entitlement to undertake research embedded within the education system.

### **What has been the impact of BPRS on schools, teachers and pupils?**

Impact is, from past experience, traditionally difficult to measure but in the BPRS programme, a substantial body of anecdotal evidence has been accumulated. Teachers, in their own words, gave their views about BPRS in the monitoring and evaluation data collected by the BPRS project team:

Personal and professional development of the teacher researchers:

"It has changed my own and my colleagues' teaching."

"It has had a direct influence on my management tactics with colleagues."

Evidence of the impact on pupils:

"The children's confidence has increased as has their willingness to have a go."

"As far as pupils are concerned it has been an absolutely brilliant success."

"It raised attainment half a national curriculum point at Key Stage 3"

"(It) nearly doubled the amount of pupils taking single science at GCSE."

A teacher also reported that a school-based mentor's focus on fitting the research into the primary school's CPD programme provided the tutor mentor with a deeply held conviction that the work had profound and beneficial effects on the ethos of the school, the practice of teachers and on the attitudes of its pupils. The teacher researcher said her own teaching style had changed following developments in teaching and learning approaches based on a thinking skills strategy that formed part of the research. These and other ideas arising from the project had been shared with other staff in staff development sessions and this resulted, it was suggested, in the views of some staff about gifted and talented pupils being 'revolutionised'. This was largely in matters of awareness and attitude. Styles of teaching, also, it was suggested, were being affected beneficially.

Attitudes of pupils were also affected it was claimed. A culture of respect was being developed as evidenced in a greater acceptance of gifted children emerging, as against a rejection of them as 'swots'. The effect on the school's buddy system was quoted as an example of this. The mentor described gifted pupils teaming up with less able pupils in positive and supportive relationships. Parents were also favourably influenced. The project gave a very clear view of the work that was going on in the school for gifted and talented pupils and very positive responses from parents were being recorded about that provision and hence more broadly about the school itself.

The issue of impact measurement remains problematic. A teacher in the monitoring exercise said:

"I don't think I've got any evidence except anecdotal evidence about impact. I know that there will be a percentage of teachers that will always engage in research and be better as a result of that. It is difficult to say whether BPRS is the reason."

In moving towards the development of a "critical mass" in schools where staff are experienced in managing and supporting teacher research, we found that

some headteachers of BPRS teachers now see them as competent researchers.

It was clear that internal support was stronger in schools where there was already an ethos of learning from each other. In schools where the headteacher fully subscribed to a research community, there was often systematic support and in some cases the creation of new, long-term roles to continue the work. Such examples were rare. It was also clear from the data collected from our sample for the Quality Assurance and monitoring exercise, that many schools are not yet ready to take responsibility for the research mentoring role but can be expected to play a greater part in other aspects of the mentoring of teacher researchers. This could then lead to their playing an increasing role as teacher research becomes more widespread and a critical mass is progressively established in schools. There would appear to be some provisional evidence of impact at all levels: individual development, colleagues' development, school policy and most of all children's learning. The best examples via BPRS are available in ICT, Maths and Early Years contexts. A specific example would be the use, evaluation and development of interactive whiteboards particularly in the early years settings. Furlong et al 2003 found significant improvement in teachers' confidence in their own professional judgement and a growing understanding of their professional learning as a result of participation in BPRS.

### **Lessons learned**

The BPRS Programme, according to the various Quality Assurance Reports, evidence gained from dialogue with teachers and the Evaluation Report, has progressively increased the benefits of professional development for teachers in a variety of ways. It provided bespoke, individualised contexts for professional development, through research into classrooms and schools. Teacher professional development is a large and complex area and teachers' perceptions of professional development vary greatly depending on their career stage and previous experience. However there is evidence that teachers' perceptions of professional development tended to a narrow, traditional model of professional development as characterised by workshop and course attendance. There is some evidence in the project outcomes that BPRS has gone some way to widen this view.

Involvement with BPRS created opportunities for teachers to influence the school improvement agenda in their own and others' schools, encouraging an improved discourse about professional development and practice amongst participating teachers. There is clear evidence from the Evaluation Report (Furlong et al 2003) that there were positive benefits for children's learning as a result of teacher involvement in BPRS. They report that the BPRS teachers whom they interviewed

“talked to us at length about the ways they felt their BPRS work had impacted upon the children...” (p31)

However Furlong et al acknowledge that many BPRS teachers did not design their research projects in such a way that allowed for the collection of hard data and indeed it could be argued that this focus, although of benefit when evaluating the project, may not have been appropriate to the particular research question being explored. Whatever the impact data, be it hard (which Furlong et al describe as “systematically collected and analysed”) or soft, Furlong et al concluded that

“BPRS projects have had a significant impact in at least three areas. There was evidence that they have impacted upon teachers’ learning – how they think about themselves as professionals... There was also substantial evidence of an impact on practice... in a majority of cases there was also evidence that their projects had influenced the practice of other teachers in their own schools and beyond. And there was evidence, some of which was robust, that these changes in turn have impacted on pupils’ learning” (p50).

The engagement of teachers in BPRS has created a group of informed practitioners able to disseminate their findings from research. It has also helped to increase teachers’ autonomy and confidence in professional development. These both serve to aid the retention of teachers.

We suggest that this scheme has led to a better understanding of the value of teacher research, putting teacher research on the national and international map. Further an almost unintended outcome has been to provide teachers, academics, consultants, and LEA officers with the opportunity to share and develop their ideas about teacher development and research at local, regional and national levels. Indeed the experience of mentoring has been particularly interesting with real changes observed over the life of the scheme.

There are longer-term benefits to whole school ethos and culture of such projects and the embedding of school-based research in this culture is a desirable feature that matches current thinking about professional learning communities and networks to support professional development. In the past the positive experiences of schools who have had a BPRS scholar have encouraged more staff to apply, creating a whole school culture of succeeding cohorts of staff who value classroom research and disseminate the outcomes to their colleagues. There are many benefits of group projects where teachers work collaboratively and disseminate their findings across schools in a networked learning community. It will be practically impossible for a group of like-minded teachers to be sure of securing equivalent funding from each of their schools in order to work on a group project as they have in the past, where 40% of funded projects were group projects. Furlong et al were clear about the benefits of group projects.

The demise of BPRS is to be regretted therefore on a number of grounds, but interestingly the most poignant is the timing of its ending. In some ways BPRS was a victim of its own success. Schools had started to take on increasing responsibility for the development, establishment and continuation of teacher research. Indeed this was encouraged and the final, 2003 cohort were invited to involve a school-based mentor as well as, or where appropriate in the place

of, an external research mentor. There is evidence from the record number of applications received in 2003 that this advice has been acted upon and the development of a range of innovative mentoring partnerships has emerged.

However, it is unclear if these embryonic developments would have continued without the established support of BPRS. Ironically, it could be argued that with a few more years of BPRS, the scaffolding it provided would have become less necessary since teacher research would have become more firmly embedded in the lives of schools and the entitlement of teachers. Two important lessons are highlighted in the evaluation report: the combining of research and professional development was powerful for many teachers; and varied and high quality support provided essential and effective mentoring for teacher researchers. Whether teacher researchers will continue to flourish in a climate where there is no designated central funding, no structured support and no monitoring of the quality of projects, remains to be seen.

Iris Keating  
BPRS Professional Manager

Furlong, J., Salisbury, J. and Coombes, L. (2003) Best Practice Research Scholarships: An Evaluation, University School of Social Sciences

### **Further comment**

**The possibility of multiplying BPRS with PPD was not on the political cards. But then again thinking coherently was not a characteristic of a government which poured upon the profession a confusing sequence of white papers, bills, acts and initiatives designed, it seemed, to create the impression that activity signified progress.**

**UCET's single meeting with Charles (not Kent) Clarke as Secretary of State promised coherence but all the meetings to achieve this were cancelled by his successor, Ruth Kelly.**

**Cliff Jones June 2016**