Sustainability of teacher research beyond the life of a project: Report on a plenary talk at IATEFL 2022 ReSIG Pre-Conference Event

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1. Introduction

In this report, which is based on the plenary talk I gave at the 2022 ReSIG PCE event, I explore the issue of sustainability of teacher research (TR) projects, that is, how they can continue after the project has ended. I draw on my experience of working on three recent projects: (i) Sierra Leone (SL), part of the Leh Wi Lan project (2019-21), (ii) Bangladesh (2014-17), part of the 10 year *English in Action* project, and (iii) the ARMS (Action Research Mentoring Scheme) project in India run by the British Council for a year (2018-19). Teachers researching their own classrooms to understand them better was seen as an immediate outcome of these projects.

From being neophytes to becoming more mature and autonomous researchers and adopting TR as a continuous professional development (CPD) tool beyond the projects was also considered a possible, though not automatic, long-term goal. There were other stakeholders who facilitated the process of TR throughout and benefited from it in significant ways: the TR mentors, and I, who was a mentor's mentor, and the national teaching-learning experts (only in SL). I aim to reflect on my understanding of the insights developed on our collaborative journey in relation to the projects' short- and long-term goals.

A key concept informing TR in the three locations is the focus on an 'empathetic' (as opposed to intellectual) understanding of life in the classroom, which involves being able to see things from another person's point of view, and informs everyday classroom decision-making (Allwright, 2015*). It is the sort of understanding that is perhaps "beyond words", but that can nevertheless be "lived", even if it cannot be usefully described* (p. 22). In more concrete terms, TR offers a way to question everyday practices within the local context, which in turn helps develop a deeper understanding of classroom processes that include learners, the teacher, colleagues, materials and so forth. A main goal of this activity is to create more aware learners and teachers, better learning outcomes and thus support teachers' own CPD.

2. Highlights of the projects

Teacher Researchers interrogating their classroom practice formed the core of the projects, and their research revolved around the what, why and the how of their work. Early on, one began to see how there is no standard research question, let alone a standard approach to address it, although many focused on active learner participation in the teaching-learning process. Given the teacher-centred focus, at least in this part of the globe, the teachers' decision to involve learners more in the classroom activities was understandable. One specific example was the teacher setting up a group work task and observing what kinds of grouping and instructions helped to increase active learner participation. It was interesting to see how the three contexts, while similar in certain respects, were very different as well. For example, in SL, teachers' concerns had to do with children arriving late (because they had to walk long distances to fetch water), sleeping in class (often due to hunger), or girls taking less active participation in class than boys (because they felt inferior). These concerns were all deeply embedded in societal issues, about which a teacher couldn't do much, alone. At the same time, it was disconcerting to discount their real issues as not amenable to classroom-research. This was also an ethical dilemma.

Teachers learnt to look critically at their work and enabled learners to tell them frankly and honestly what they could do together to make the classroom a better place. They also considered their colleagues' perceptions on the issue. The language used by teachers illustrated a shift in perspective, from *do it, it works* to a research-oriented one, *try it and see what works and why and in what context* (see Appendix for a sample of what teachers felt and said). The projects had thus helped teachers to change their mindset, which is perhaps sustainable at an individual level, at least in some cases. However, the question of what kind of school culture/support would see desirable spin-offs at the school/country level remained unanswered.

Mentors played a key role in supporting the teacher researchers throughout the project, which was originally planned for a year, although both in Bangladesh and SL it got extended. Based on a cascade model, after receiving training in carrying out research, mentors in turn held workshops for teachers to help them set up a small study which emanated from their specific context and carry it out. Typically, action followed exploration and continued while the project lasted or stopped due to other extraneous factors. One significant realisation was that one question leads to another and that there's no final solution to any problem. As one SL teacher explained: *[…] The end of one research is the beginning of another*.

Whether the mentors should have prior TR experience or not, and if they should also carry out research alongside their mentees had important implications for how well mentors could support their mentees and what the long term impact of that might be. Each project had its own compulsions and was handled in a way that was appropriate to the situation, with varying benefits. ARMS expected the mentors to have some experience of classroom research (school or college level). There was some continuity in the scheme over the three years it lasted (before COVID-19 struck) in that many mentees became mentors for the next round of ARMS.

In Bangladesh, we worked with about 50 primary/secondary level mentors who were Teacher Facilitators on the *English in Action* project's school-based teacher

development programme. They were all practising teachers and also carried out TR while mentoring a group of 4-5 other teachers in their vicinity. SL's model of mentoring was distinctly different to the one followed in Bangladesh (see Figure 1) and some of the lessons learnt from Bangladesh were incorporated into this model. Leh Wi Lan's School Support Officers (SSOs) and TSCs (Teaching Service Commission) Deputy Directors with no prior experience of TR were inducted as mentors. We were aware that SSOs would leave the project when it ended, while Deputy Directors would ensure some continuity. There was also a group of four National Teaching and Learning Experts in SL who engaged directly with me, teacher researchers and mentors. This helped to keep the programme going when schools closed because of COVID-19 and I was available only online. The non-hierarchical mentoring model with porous boundaries had open communication channels and allowed free movement of ideas between mentor groups and between individuals. The various workshops and district-based clinics enriched our understanding and helped us all to grow. Therefore, it wasn't a sequential chain but a loop that went backwards and forwards, up and down. In fact, the materials that were repurposed and recycled from earlier TR projects, trialled and refined in the various workshops became part of a rich resource-pack for future work (see Smith & Rebolledo 2018; Smith 2020; and more recently the SL materials).

Figure 1. Mentoring model for teacher research in Sierra Leone

My role as an expert from the Global South on the three projects was one of figuring out what the local context is, and listening to teachers and students to make the programme as culturally sensitive as possible. A lot of my previous experience was very useful in acquiring a lens sensitive to the country-context so that we could design a programme that would 'start from where they are at', taking people along their research journey. An important concern was also about how they would carry on this work when the project finished and what kind of support they would need. We strove to keep it locally meaningful and relevant for people to want to commit to this work.

3. Life after the project: Possibilities and challenges

On all three projects, the benefits accrued are clearly evident (see Appendix). Doing TR is something all the teachers value and recommend for all teachers of all subjects, at all levels. Their enthusiasm, renewed energy in their work towards a learner-centred pedagogy and willingness to help others on their research journey is palpable. Most teacher researchers see helping other teachers to embark on a research journey as their responsibility: *I've been trained and gained a lot of knowledge. It is my responsibility to help other teachers to change their methods of teaching and thinking.*

We could expect activities of the kind mentioned below, known to be self-sustaining and generative at the micro/school level, to continue without much overt support from authorities at the country-level:

- Involving students to make the teaching-learning process mutually enriching
- Working in a collaborative (as opposed to a competitive) climate
- Self- and peer-observation and subsequent dialogue
- Confronting own beliefs (usually teachers don't regard what they do as theory) and supporting teachers to arrive at a critical explanation of what they do, i.e. theorising from the classroom
- Writing journals, as it gives time and encouragement to reflect
- Having a mentor, becoming a mentor
- Doing classroom-research and sharing it with others - experimentation in practice leads teachers to think through their ideas in order to construct their own knowledge (see reports on the small studies teachers carried out in both these contexts)
- Being part of a community of practice across countries through webinars and online networks.

The cadre of mentors created on the projects, experts in their own right, who can support teachers and themselves in their CPD, is an additional asset to the country and needs to be used and further strengthened.

During the last phase of the main projects in Bangladesh and SL, a good deal of thinking, effort and time was spent discussing with the governments and their different curriculum/teacher training agencies how they could own the TR initiative

and embed it in their regular programmes, such as their pre-service teacher training programmes. In SL, the Education Sector Plan, TSC's Professional Standards, and the curriculum for Teacher Education, it seemed, were all ready to include TR as an integral part. Moreover, there are school-based mentors and national experts, especially in the case of SL, who would be proud to own the idea and implement it. This however hasn't happened so far. An unduly long gap when all the stakeholders wait anxiously is likely to result in a loss of interest, motivation and momentum, and ultimately, in frustration. One of the teachers endorses this in no uncertain terms: *Human skills are only sustainable when persistently done and it will have roll out effects on the succeeding generations of children and teachers as well.* The situation is worse when governments get busy with projects on other supposedly more important topics or when changes in leadership result in a change of priorities.

In the nineties, a common paradigm for funded projects consisted of bringing in an expert from a country in the Global North (Alderson & Baretta, 1992) so that people in the low- and middle-income countries (Global South) could quickly adopt/adapt what they learned to local conditions. When the projects ended and life returned to normal, there was the fear of "tissue rejection" as Holliday (1994) cautioned us, when an innovation "does not become an effectively functioning part of the system" (p. 134). We have moved sufficiently away from this paradigm in the last three decades (see Anderson (2022) for a research-based persuasive argument on this idea). With local expertise along with localised and piloted resource materials developed, as in the case of SL, project continuation seems like the next logical step. This however, as discussed above, comes with certain challenges. One of them, a serious one in my view, is the amount of money, time and effort spent on creating 'local experts', only to create them afresh on a new project.

Some questions that seem to be worth asking at this point are:

- Can the last phase of the project be devoted entirely to institutionalising the crucial aspects of the project? Can this be agreed to at the policy makers' level at the start of the project?
- Given that capacity building of stakeholders is an important goal in itself, can the project/Government visualise ways in which it can be put to use and developed further?
- Can tracer/follow-up studies be carried out systematically to throw light on how teacher researchers and mentors are actually using their learning in their everyday work?
- Can we think of some novel ways of sharing the expertise in other country contexts in the Global South? (See, e.g. Eric Ekembe's work)

References

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Appendix: What did teachers and other stakeholders say about the projects? Their actual words are presented below.

Bangladesh

- A student: Our teacher gives us lots of activities in the class and we can say what we like and what we want.
- A Government official: This kind of work should be extended to all teachers for all subjects.
- Teacher: I wanted to find out causes of inactiveness of weaker students. They actually think questions are not for them! In cycle 3, I did big changes on strategies like making friendship-based grouping and making weaker students as group leaders. Group work without planning for weak students cannot be effective.
- Now I don't need to worry about how my class went, I just ask the students.

Sierra Leone

- This research has helped me develop new skills on how to find and solve classroom problems.
- It has made me change my attitude towards my pupils and my method of teaching.
- Pupils can do better if they are given the chance to give feedback and also involved in classroom activities.
- This work taught me to be a more integrated teacher to interact with pupils and colleague teachers to find solutions to any classroom challenge.
- One method will not solve all problems. Students could do better if they are allowed to take part in their own learning.
- Even the slow learners talk when you teach them through the local dialect. They discuss it in their language and translate it to English. The progress is slow but it's very much there.
- There were so many things in my teaching that I found unprofessional and outdated. Firstly, …. (about using a cane) I realized that this was one of the habits that discouraged pupils in class.

- Before this research work, decisions were taken without making further investigations. But with the series of trainings I have transformed my mindset, skills, techniques, behaviour of my teaching and decision making.
- TR should continue until at least 90% of teachers are involved.
- Above all, I learnt that classroom research work should be a priority to any classroom teacher because it enhances efficiency in the classroom. A lot of mistakes are made by teachers in the classroom during lessons. It is only classroom research that can correct them. I will always remember that classroom research is one of my best tools as a classroom teacher.
- From (other teachers') presentations I understood how many solutions there are to each problem.
- About continuing TR: Yes, because it'll help to do more research in the classroom. At the end of one research is the beginning of another.

Rama Mathew believes that doing teacher research is a very powerful way to keep oneself and students motivated, and to figure out ways in which teaching and learning can be made meaningful to all.