Action research mentoring for supporting professional development of teachers as learners: a growth of understanding in English and Croatian educational contexts.

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Abstract:

In Croatia and in England, teachers are often perceived as mediators or technicians who transmit bodies of knowledge determined by out of school experts. Action research enables the teachers to initiate changes aiming at the improvement of educational practices as well as personal emancipation. Emancipation implies liberation from invisible limitations caused by prejudices, compulsion and prevailing ideologies. In order to initiate changes in their classrooms, teachers need to be reflective practitioners and they need on-going support and challenge from action research mentors to do so.
In our paper we will explore how action research mentoring is supporting professional development of teachers in two countries, England and Croatia.

Context:

Teacher Research in England: Academic: Practitioner research

Lawrence Stenhouse is widely recognized as the father of teacher research in England. His inspirational words hold as true today as they did when they were spoken in xxx

Educational research has as its over riding aim the support of educational acts – it is not 'pure' but 'applied.' Yet it must also support the planning of research acts in educational settings. Our problem is to find approaches to research which produce theory, which is of use both to practitioners of education and to practitioners of educational research and which enables both to act in the light of systematic intelligence. BERA Presidential address in1980

There have been many inspirational leaders since Stenhouse, including Jack Whitehead, with whom I have had the pleasure of working for the past ten years as a colleague at the University of Bath. Much of the early direction and focusing in my work as a teacher researcher learning to become an academic researcher has come from dialogue with him. I brought my experience as a teacher of twenty three years in schools and latterly as a mentor in initial and continuing teacher education to colleagues to our conversations and Jack offered his support and guidance as I identified the values that give my life meaning.

I am in transition from working in educational institutions where others have largely determined the classes I would teach and the areas of tutoring I would be engaged in to a position where I am learning to take more ownership of my professional development. There is a parallel situation facing all teacher researchers in England now as they ask

What matters to me? What is my philosophy as a teacher researcher and how might I contribute to the teacher researcher movement in England in a way that will sustain it? In this paper I explore my own interaction as an action research mentor with colleagues in the intention of deepening understanding of England's teacher research movement. Through interacting with Branko and the world of action research mentoring he opens up for me to appreciate in Croatia, I can examine my own practice and to take a critical look at a culture of support, denial and challenge that now frames teacher research in England.

Never before have teachers in England had so much overt support for researching their practice in their teaching and learning environments. A supplement in the Times Educational Supplement sponsored by the General Teaching Council on June 11 2004 coincided with a national research conference where a sense of excitement was tangible. The National College for School Leadership is supporting the development of a virtual networked learning community between teacher and other researchers to share learning. The NCSL's Talk2 Learn forum enables learning opportunities about teacher research and hosted a recent 'hotseat' session with Jill Wilson chair of the Teacher Research Panel and Philippa Cordingley, of the Centre for Use of Evidence and Research in Education. Again excitement about teacher research in England came to fore but it was tempered by Simon Riding's posting. *What will the government do to enable teacher research now?* Teachers are learning to undertake research and overcoming traditional prejudices as they represent their insights and systematic enquiry to peer review. No longer leaving research to outsiders, they are opening up their classrooms as rich veins of learning opportunities to be mined. Who better to mine them than the teachers and students that interact there?

The situation is not over rosy. The highly successful Best Practice Research Scholarships Scheme funded by the Department for Education and Skills is no longer in operation. The very scheme that brought many teachers into research by offering awards of up to £2500 – funding that could buy time, resources and mentoring in research approaches has gone. The money allocated to the BPRS funding has been given to schools but not ring fenced and the impetus that brought so many insights into teaching and learning is under threat.

But all is not doom and gloom. Let us focus our attention on a scheme operating in Wiltshire Local Education Authority, which has promoted teacher research for many years and which is leading the way as a strong model for LEA/School/HEI partnerships. In Wiltshire schools contribute a small proportion of their funding to a Research and Development fund. Once a year teachers from primary and secondary schools and LEA advisors working on projects with teachers can bid for up to £2500 for research activities. Allocation of funding is a scrupulously fair process where each application is reviewed according to predetermined criteria by a board comprising teachers, advisors and myself. We try to ensure a balance between phases of education and our primary concern is to ensure that projects that enable learning around the LEA's priority areas have support. Wiltshire has a Journal of Education edited by Susan McCulloch of the Library Service. You can see issues of the journal at http://www.TeacherResearch.net where teachers and LEA colleagues (and occasionally myself) write about our researched learning in process. Regular Research and Development team meetings review the LEA funding scheme and progress of individual projects is monitored by Val Saunders who supports LEA advisors.

Wiltshire has a fine record of supporting teacher research and many other LEAs across England are involved in schemes to ensure networking between their teacher researchers. Higher Education Institutions sometimes take the lead in offering research partnerships and the http://www.Cantarnet website offers a fund of inspiring information and learning. Ingenious schemes using government funding are being conceived which enable teachers to undertake small-scale research within their schools, as a means of improving learning.

The CPD/MA model developed by Dr Steven Coombs at Bath Spa University College is an excellent example of how teachers can undertake study accredited at Ma level which is directly relevant to improving their own and their students' learning. You can find details of this at http://www.bathspa.ac.uk At the University of Bath, Teacher Training Agency funding is supporting the MA programme and teachers take a Methods of Educational Enquiry unit and an Educational Enquiry unit in their first year of study towards the award of a degree. The BPRS scheme, which I coordinated at the University of Bath in 2002, brought many teachers into research and was sufficiently flexible to enable those who wanted research mentoring towards accreditation for study at MA level to work with those who did not. It must be recognized that some teachers do not want to gain further accreditation for their research and Nicki at Corsham School teacher researcher and a group of 16 BPRS funded teachers at Hayesfield School are more intent on learning to promote learning than gaining MAs. Their own research is of an exceptionally high standard and systematically and rigorously undertaken. A key to their success as learners is a willingness to peer validate evidence of improvements that they claim are emerging from any interventions they are researching. They validate at the enquiry group meetings as they ask one another to give account of their students' and their learning, as teachers.

One of the criticisms frequently leveled at teacher research is the lack of triangulation and validation and a general dearth of rigour. Over the four years I have worked as a tutor, then as research mentor with Westwood St Thomas School in Salisbury, I took as my starting point, a need for peer validation usefully occurring at regular intervals within the group and currently the Internet enables each researcher and other researchers to learn.

A central aspect of the meetings between members of the Westwood St Thomas group and colleagues from the University of Bath has been the regularity of sharing learning. This sharing has occurred through creation of a 'creative space' as Jack Whitehead calls it, where each session individuals start discussion by talking through the learning to which they see themselves having contributed since the last get together. Often this 'accounting for one's own practice' is illuminated by the use of digital video accounts of interactions with students. One of the most memorable sessions at Westwood was when students joined the group of teachers as co-enquirers, intent on improving the school's approaches to assessment. Mentoring occurred through face-to-face discussion where I sought to assist teachers as they clarified how they see their practice improving learning Sometimes the mentoring has been enabled by email and I often acted as sounding board and validator for research accounts being drafted by the teacher researchers in the group. Jack and I have opened our own practice to critical review as self-studying researchers. We invite a critical gaze to help us improve how we are assisting Westwood's research.

Recently we held the final meeting of the in-house master's group at Westwood School. This meeting was a celebration of the work so far achieved by the group and this has been substantial as you can see from the July 2004 Research of the Month section at http://www.TeacherResearch.net which features the on-line version of the compilations gathered together in draft form for the group. My role as a research mentor is to assist, not just in the preparation of assignments for accreditation at the University of Bath but to enable dissemination of teachers' knowledge generated to an international audience. With the assistance of the British Education and Technology Agency and, in particular, Dr Michael Harris, I am learning how to represent teachers' knowledge on websites. My website is my media pilot area where I test new techniques for initiating and developing an on-line database for teacher researchers to share accounts of their learning. Using a variety of formats including the 'KEEP toolkit' from the Carnegie Foundation, I am experimenting to see how teachers can be assisted to post up their research to Becta's website. There is to be a pilot section on http://www.becta.org.uk specifically intended to generate discussion about suitable formats. Members of BERA are invited to participate. The nurturing of learning in relation to teacher research is not restricted to work in school and if teachers are to be enabled to establish their work as a complementary counterpoint to research undertaken by colleagues in higher education, we need to know how to assist. Teacher research does not replace traditional academic research; it enriches its insights. If there is a lesson we must learn as researchers, it is that nobody owns knowledge creation.

We need to find a means to creatively harness tensions arising from a traditional theory practice divide in academic research to generate a capacity for collaborative learning. It is tempting to see researchers in higher education as the enduring experts and gatekeepers in research methodology. This would be a fallacious view, in my opinion. With initial input from research mentors, like myself, teachers generate their own research mentoring. Unless we enable a growth of capacity for research mentoring teachers will sustain their dependency on tutors in higher education and this could be to the detriment of everyone. The profession of teaching needs to place research at its heart and to do this better action research techniques need to be developed by school as well as higher education mentors. Teacher research mentors could and should bring their own insights to teacher research processes. They can enable the growth of learning through teacher research in schools, synthesizing research from other researchers into a form that is accessible for teachers. This does not eliminate a need for research mentors in higher education. On the contrary, it reinforces it. Research mentors in higher education act as research mentors to mentors and enable a networking of skilled research mentors across all local education authorities.

As I was contributing to the NCSL on-line discussion about mentoring on 14th September 2004, a thought suddenly struck me. If Advanced Skills Teachers could form an on-line community of research mentors, we could tap into their expertise to enable accessible professional development opportunities for all teachers. By asynchronous mentoring the problems of a shortage of time for reflection and opportunity to engage in discussion on specific issues could be circumvented. A.S.T.s could tap into sources of research and mentor practicing teachers who sought their advice in a particular area of expertise…

Research mentors need to develop new and better ways to assist teachers in action research. In my own case, this means, among other things, that I need to develop more effective forms of e-mentoring. In the Research of the Month section for July on http://www.TeacherResearch.net you can see my early attempts to mentor teacher researchers in China. I was faced with the challenge of having limited insights into the environment they are working in though the regular newsletters from Dr Moira Laidlaw who is working with them to develop co-learning has helped me. I am not in the position to give spontaneous support as a mentor to the teacher researchers but I can assist in supporting mentoring that Moira gives by distance learning mentoring. I am hoping that the teacher researchers in Guyuan will soon become research mentors in time just as I have had the pleasure of seeing Emma Kirby whom I mentored in action research approaches to improving her practices as a novice teacher in a Post Graduate Certificate of Education Group develop her research capabilities to become a research mentor for colleagues in her own and other schools as she interacts as an Advanced Skills Teacher.

Emma and I presented an account of our work together as co-enquirers in the context of teacher research at BERA last year. The model of research mentoring that she helped me to understand – using the metaphor of a swimming pool, particularly struck me. She was the swimmer beginning to gain confidence in her own ability to propel herself through the water as I, as her mentor, swam with her to ensure she came to no harm …

Account of Emma's model:

As a PGCE student, Emma was part of my pilot study using action research approaches to enable novice teachers to meet the requirements of Qualified Teacher Status in the UK. Later we worked together as she was in her first year of full time teaching and an account of her first enquiry can be accessed at www.TeacherResearch.net She took module after module in the MA programme which I tutored for the University of Bath which you can also access at http://www.bath.ac.uk (a similar program in the Mteach is at bathspa.ac.uk.

Clearly Emma is an exceptional teacher to have attained Advanced Skills Teacher status in her third year of teaching and she attributes her success to our research co-mentoring. Through working with Emma over time and across different educational contexts I have been enabled, through her help and that of Catherine Meacher, one of the mentors in the pilot programme to assist novice teachers to become researchers, to develop my learning as a teacher, mentor and researcher. It is a stage in as well ironically as the culmination of my learning as a professional educator as I move into working as a mentoring consultant. Catherine Meacher's work, which can be accessed at Teachernet.gov.uk represents the crucible of my own learning as a research mentor and it both frames, informs and is informed by the resource that is my own website at http://www.TeacherResearch.net

One of the greatest joys in creating the site (and it is permanently 'under construction') is the privilege of learning about teacher research in contexts very different from my own. From Branko's photographs and the transcript of his dialogue with school children, I suddenly caught a glimpse of what it might be to bring students into c0-enquiry with research mentors. The ease with which the students talked to Branko and used action

research terminology greatly impressed me and inspired me to work with a focus group of students from Hayesfield School to assist them to create a video account of their own research into the use and usefulness of digital video projectors in a classroom context. Emma tells me that her greatest breakthrough in undertaking teacher research was the realization that her students were experts and could take control of action researching. Prior to engaging with the research by Branko and Emma and the Westwood St Thomas group, I had paid lip service to the idea of students as co-researchers to improve learning.

In the project I convened between the University of Bath and Torfaen LEA, I intuitively knew it was important for students to be consulted about how learning could be improved but I didn't see a possibility of enabling students to become the collaborative researchers. They were part of a research project, providing answers to questions created by teachers but what if they generated the questions? What if they decided the format and content of a video account of their research into their learning? In the video that I am creating with Hayesfield, I can see how students not only can, they must be involved in the design and on-going research into improving teaching and learning in schools. Clearly there will be ethical issues to resolve, but the potential gain in knowledge about what kind of teaching enables individuals learning in schools will be enormous. There is much learning to do!

My Philosophical stance viz a viz teacher research:

What do I recognize in my emerging practice as my philosophy of research mentoring?

> *Teacher research is best enabled through partnerships between students, teachers, local education authorities and higher education institutions. each has a complementary role to play in assisting learning by all concerned. No one party has ownership of knowledge creation and research is an integral part of professionalism. This does not necessarily mean that all teachers must register for higher education degrees. Rigorous and systematic research does not necessarily entail gaining accreditation, but where appropriate it may do. Teachers need to be supported and challenged as researchers and enabled to validate and disseminate their work. The Internet can play a key role in this and I hope to see more teachers developing their own web based repositories for their learning like one I was invited to review at http://www.myeteacher Just as no one authority source has ownership of knowledge creation, no one authority has ownership of how learning through teacher research is enabled. Teachers need creative space to develop new research techniques and new forms of representation to challenge and enrich traditional textual accounts. Teachers are not to be viewed purely as data collectors for other researchers. They need to be involved in the design of research projects as they develop. Teacher research cannot and does not replace other forms of knowledge creation about how learning is enabled in schools – it complements these. The role and responsibility of the government in the UK is to overtly support teacher research. The demise of BPRS was a mistake, needing to be rectified.*

Teacher research enables teachers to regain ownership of their own learning and in an era of ever more strident demands on a workforce, this is motivating and plays an essential part in rekindling the flame of excitement teachers lose.
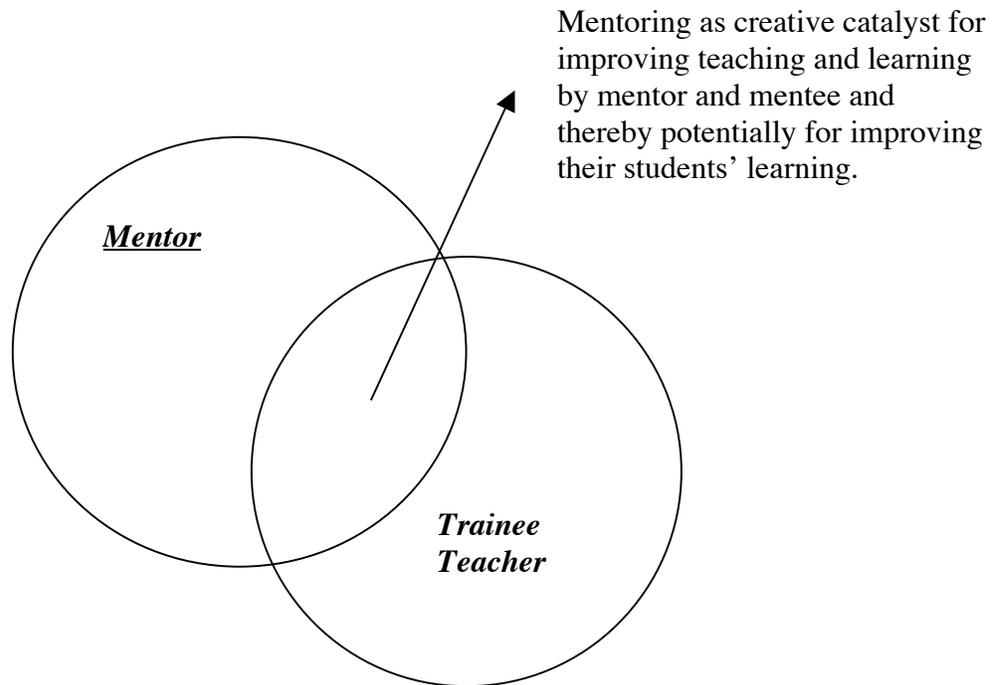
When I became in the BPRS scheme as a tutor/mentor in 2001, I had no set guidelines to assist me in developing my (sometime faltering) practice. I learnt from the second cohort of novice teacher researchers in my PGCE group that an early overt focus on identifying their professional values could be intimidating for some. One PGCE student brought me up short with comments about being a guinea pig as I learnt to become a research mentor And I found that I was a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989) since I was convinced that I was enabling this novice teacher's professional development, whereas I was in fact impeding it. Research mentoring is an art and like all great artistic endeavours, it needs practice and reflection if it is to improve. The BPRS guidelines I wrote for the DfES at http://www.teachernet.gov.uk represent my early attempts to communicate my own philosophy of research mentoring. I am becoming increasingly excited about the potential of using ICT to enable the research mentoring process and developing ideas about this.

My model of research mentoring

The various models chart my development in understanding about mentoring since 1991 to the present day. I began mentoring in the Licensed Teacher Scheme organised by Bedfordshire LEA. I was given a booklet with twelve competences for the trainee to meet and I created my own programme so that this might happen. I was working more or less autonomously and largely in isolation at the outset.
The University led the PGCE partnership arrangements I joined in 1994. Assessment, resided in HE unlike the Licensed Teacher model where I was the assessor as well as the mentor and senior teachers moderated my work.
When I became a research mentor I was working with a school-based mentor and a novice teacher to build a collaborative culture of on-going systematic enquiry. As pupil voice became increasingly recognised as significant in evaluating teaching, so the mentor/tutor/novice relationship involved another stakeholder. Theoretically were in transition from a supervision model of school-based ITT to a collaborative, emancipatory model that increasingly embraced action research.

Figure One: School-centred mentoring for ITT
This model replicates my practice as a Licensed Teacher Mentoring in an upper school 1990-4

Mentoring as creative catalyst for improving teaching and learning by mentor and mentee and thereby potentially for improving their students' learning.

Mentor

Trainee Teacher

How does this model emerge from my practice as a mentor under the Licensed Teacher Scheme operating in Bedfordshire in 1992?

I notice how isolated the interaction between mentor and mentee is in this model. There is no indication of context or direction in the mentoring although the realisation that mentoring can have a direct influence of students' learning is evident. This model is very similar to the ones used by my trainers within the Licensed Teacher Scheme.

With LJ I was often called in as a kind of peacemaker in her class. She wanted me to be the manager that she felt inadequate to be. Management support from senior staff was virtually non-existent. It came from other mentors in the Bedfordshire Scheme and my tutor. My account of work with LJ can be found in Chapter Five.
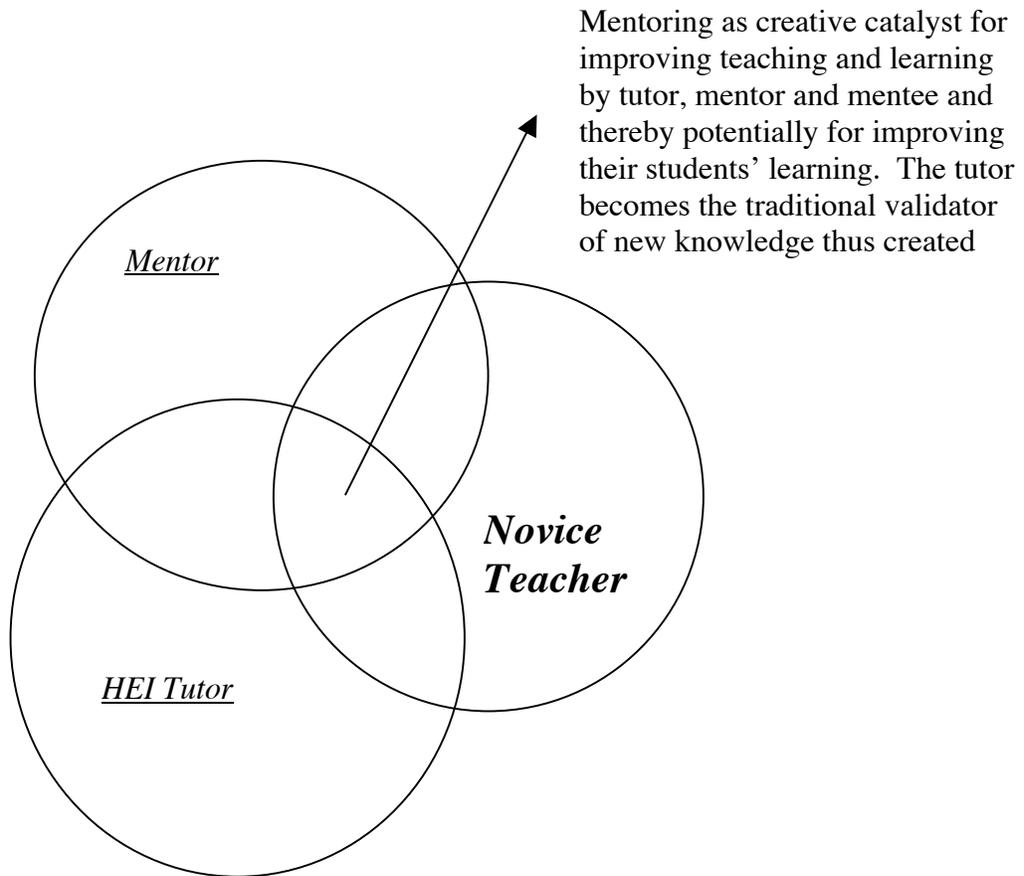
With PJ, I was the restrainer at times – she was almost out of control at some points and acting unprofessionally by undermining my work as a mentor by ridiculing my presence as an invited observer in her class. She was difficult to work with and refused to attend HEI sessions that became an integral pat of the Scheme. Effectively we worked alone. Because of the shortage of teachers of languages senior management insisted on keeping her on as a teacher although she failed assessment.

Figure Two: University and School-based mentoring for ITT
(This model replicates the PGCE partnership I joined as a PGCE tutor in 1994)

Mentoring as creative catalyst for improving teaching and learning by tutor, mentor and mentee and thereby potentially for improving their students' learning. The tutor becomes the traditional validator of new knowledge thus created

Mentor

Novice Teacher

HEI Tutor

How does this model relate to my practice as a mentor when I joined the PGCE team in the Department of Education at the University of Bath in 1994?

The idea of a novice teacher was familiar though under the Licensed Teacher Scheme to trainees assumed responsibility for class teaching from the outset. Though in training, novices were still effectively teachers and many had experience of teaching in other contexts prior to joining the PGCE programme. Responsibility has moved increasingly from the HEI tutor to become a shared enterprise between the school-based mentor, the HEI based tutor and the novice teacher. This shift is evidenced by the increasing requirement that novices take responsibility for creating their own Professional Development Plan (PDP).

Figure Three: Research mentoring as a catalyst for co-enquiry
(This model replicates my growing involvement as a research mentor for ITT – for example as consultant at workshops for the Macmillan College in Middlesbrough in January 2002 where novice teachers and their mentors were working with me.)
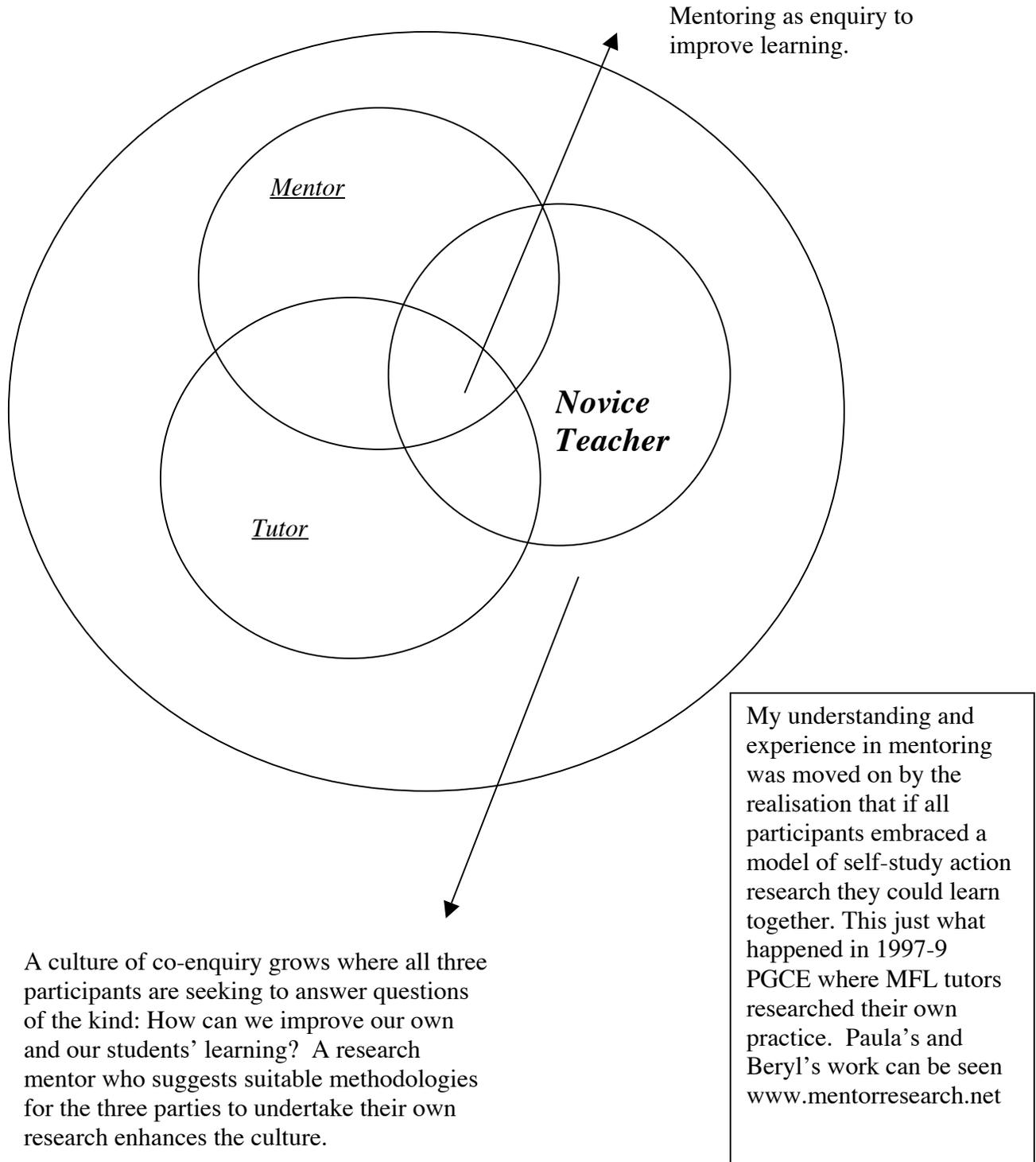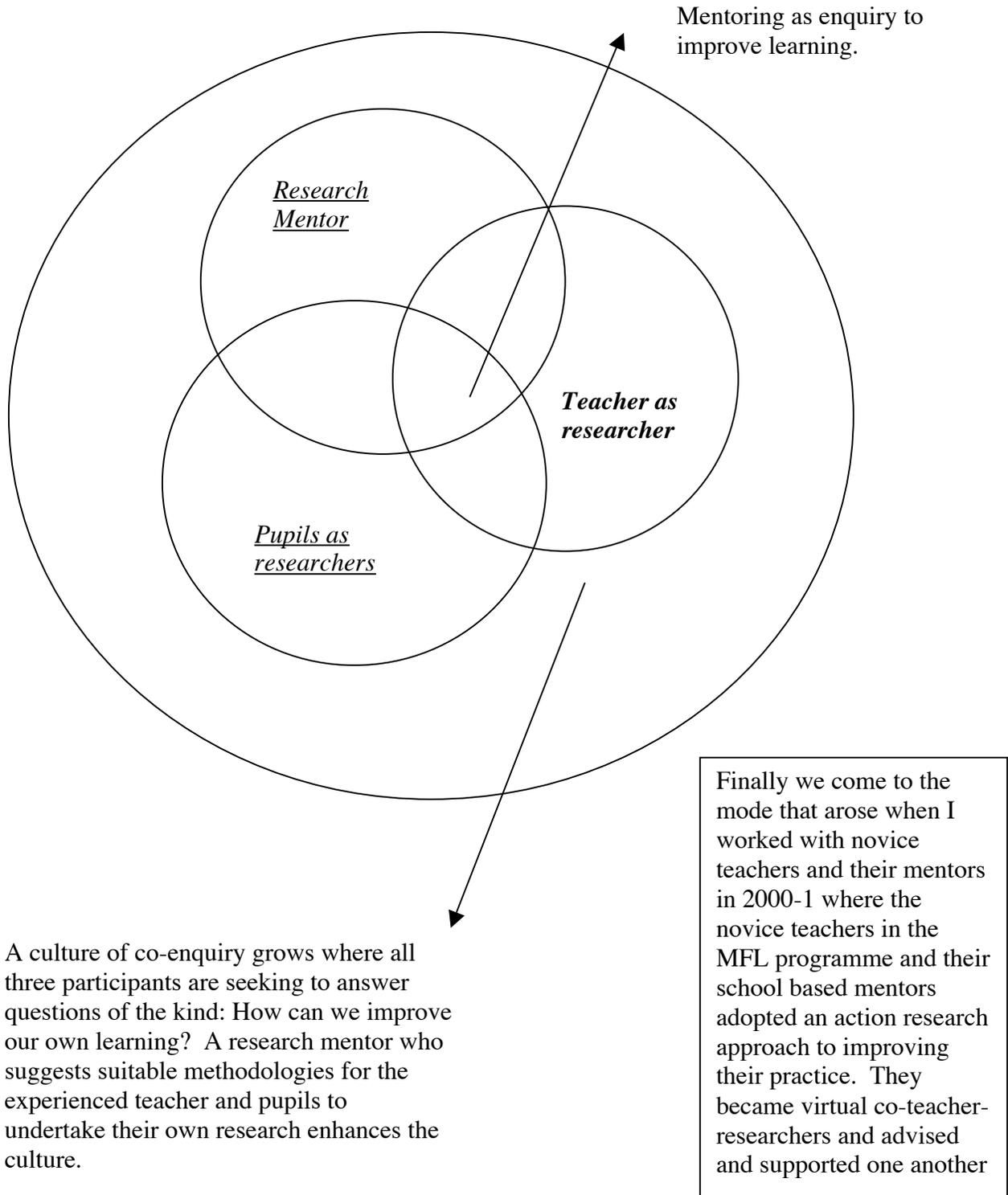
Mentoring as enquiry to improve learning.

Mentor

Novice Teacher

Tutor

A culture of co-enquiry grows where all three participants are seeking to answer questions of the kind: How can we improve our own and our students' learning? A research mentor who suggests suitable methodologies for the three parties to undertake their own research enhances the culture.

My understanding and experience in mentoring was moved on by the realisation that if all participants embraced a model of self-study action research they could learn together. This just what happened in 1997-9 PGCE where MFL tutors researched their own practice. Paula's and Beryl's work can be seen www.mentorresearch.net

Figure Four: Research mentoring as a catalyst for co-enquiry
(This model replicates my growing involvement as a research mentor for CPD – for example as research mentor for two Best Practice Research Scholarship 2001-2 and for twenty nine BPRS holders in 2002-3.)

Mentoring as enquiry to improve learning.

Research Mentor

Teacher as researcher

Pupils as researchers

A culture of co-enquiry grows where all three participants are seeking to answer questions of the kind: How can we improve our own learning? A research mentor who suggests suitable methodologies for the experienced teacher and pupils to undertake their own research enhances the culture.

Finally we come to the mode that arose when I worked with novice teachers and their mentors in 2000-1 where the novice teachers in the MFL programme and their school based mentors adopted an action research approach to improving their practice. They became virtual co-teacher-researchers and advised and supported one another

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As my experience in and knowledge of mentoring developed, I integrated action research approaches in my work. I came across action research in 1994 (Calvert and Fletcher).
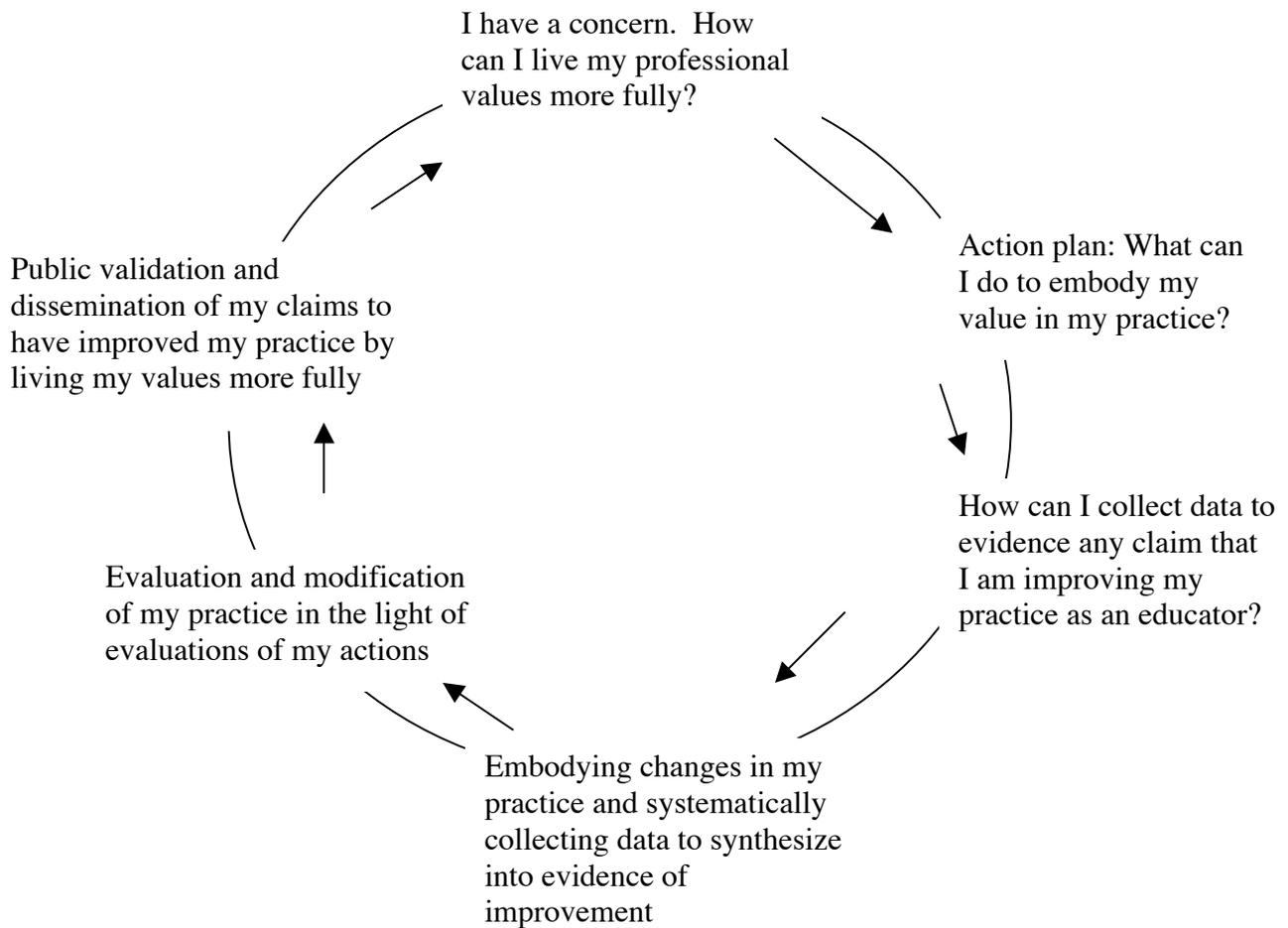
Model One: Mike Calvert 1994 Working with your Student Teacher, (page 71)

Current Practice

Consider Implication

Define Solution

Evaluate Effectiveness

Design Solution

Implement Solution
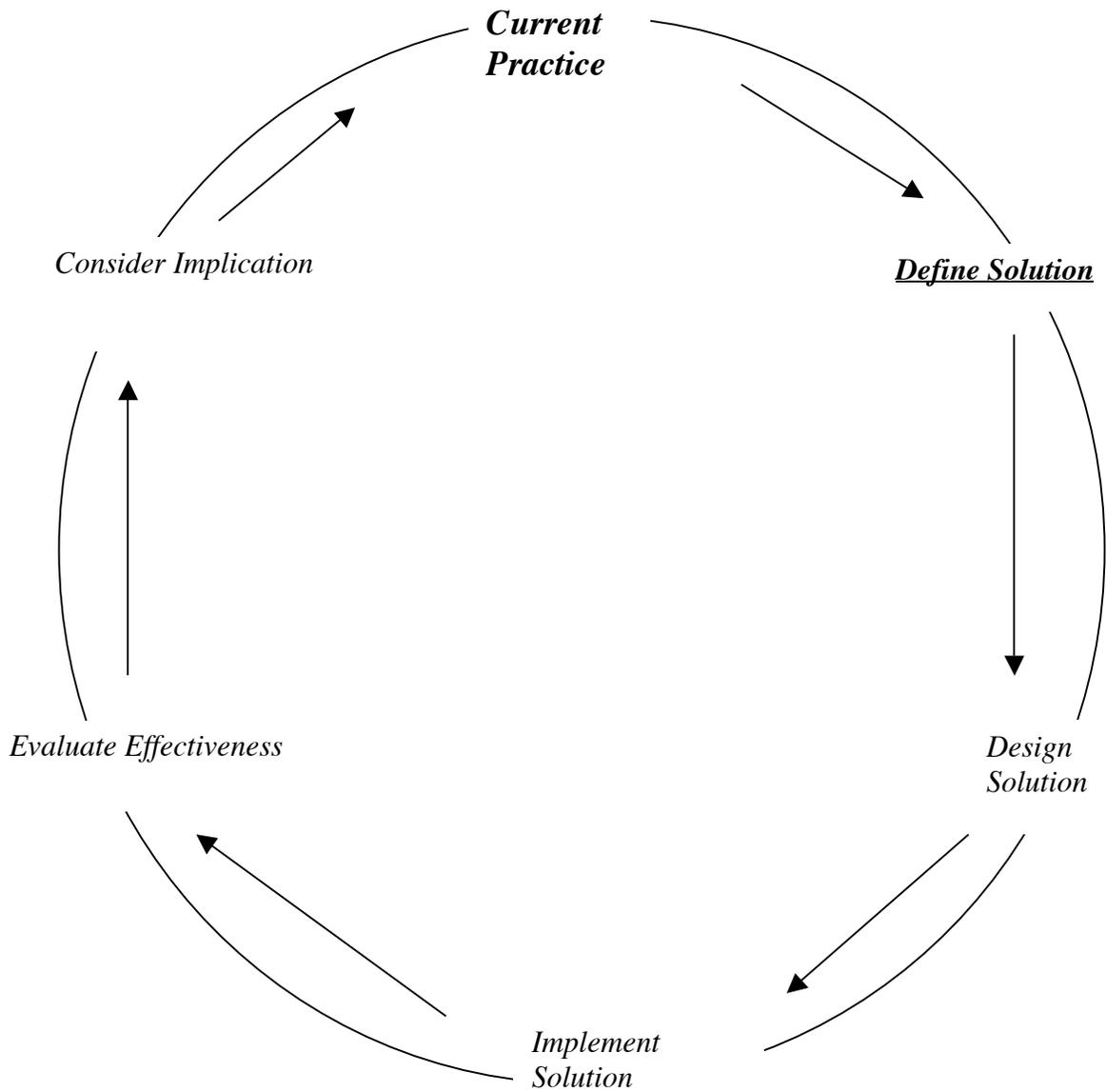
My first experience of action research came from Mike Calvert. I owe him a debt for making an overt connection between the PGCE course and school-based research. In his model, however the mentor did not occupy not the key role but rather the HEI tutor. This meant that the other stakeholders held the tutor in a kind of reverence augmented by their role as assessor. The action research cycle is neatly cyclical and I came to wonder why my own mentoring did not fit such a neat unproblematic profile. There is no evidence of personal responsibility in this model – no 'I' accountability.

It wasn't until I began working with Jack Whitehead, my next-door colleague at the University of Bath, in 1997 that I found the model of action research that inspired me:
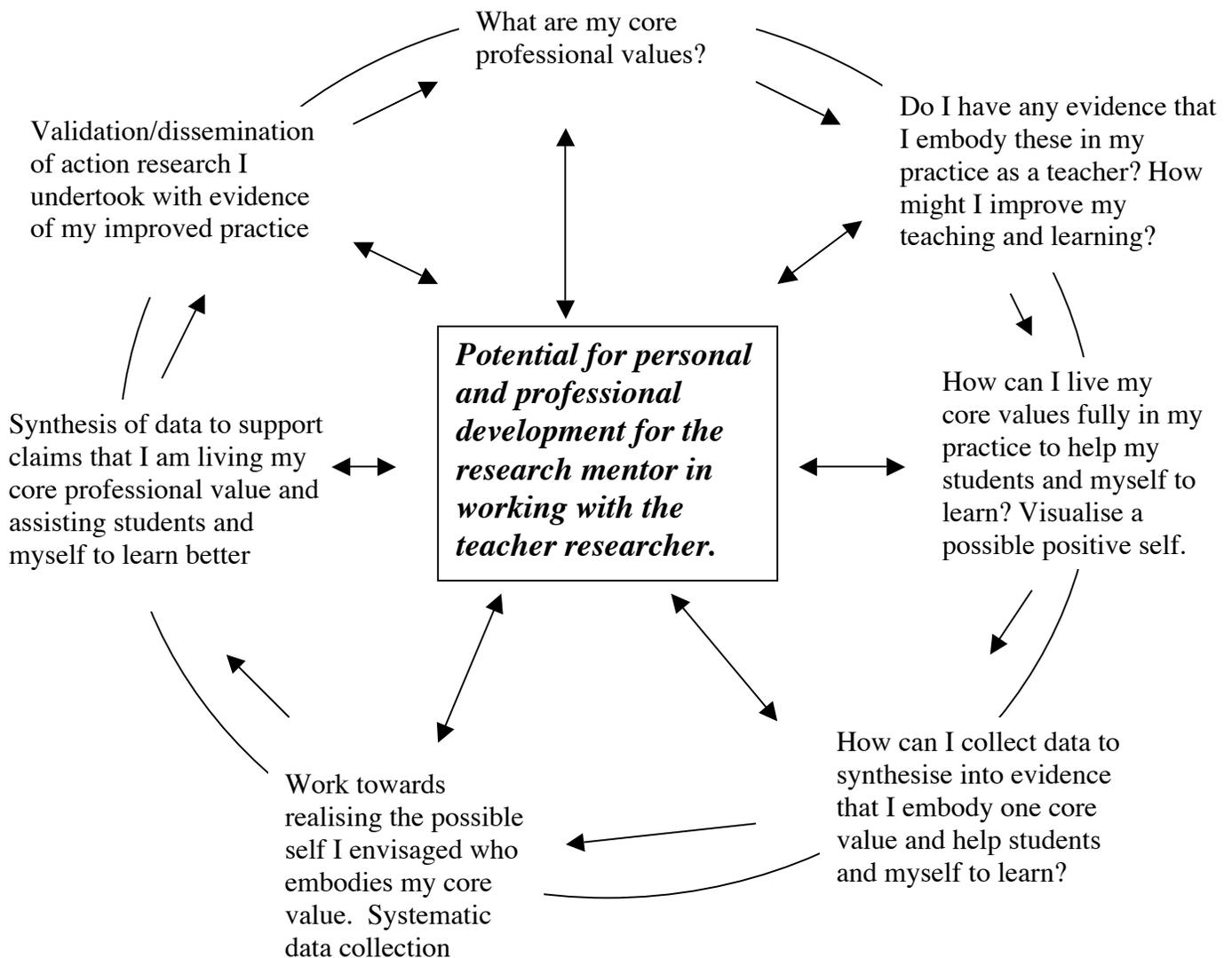
**My interpretation (2000) of Whitehead's model of action research**

I have a concern. How can I live my professional values more fully?

Action plan: What can I do to embody my value in my practice?

How can I collect data to evidence any claim that I am improving my practice as an educator?

Embodying changes in my practice and systematically collecting data to synthesize into evidence of improvement

Evaluation and modification of my practice in the light of evaluations of my actions

Public validation and dissemination of my claims to have improved my practice by living my values more fully

The most striking feature of Jack Whitehead's model is the self-study where the living "I" as he puts it (1989) asks how to improve. This is a marked departure from the model Calvert included in Working with Your Student Teacher. Research is no longer undertaken **on** but **by** the individual.

The impact of mentoring on action research cannot be underestimated. The guidance and support that I have received has led me to believe in my future research and removed any fears or preconceptions that I may have had. Sarah has smoothed the way; helped me to give my work direction and filled me with the confidence to carry out action research.
Catherine Meacher, BPRS researcher (Wiltshire Journal of Education Summer 2002)

What are my core professional values?

Validation/dissemination of action research I undertook with evidence of my improved practice

Do I have any evidence that I embody these in my practice as a teacher? How might I improve my teaching and learning?

Potential for personal and professional development for the research mentor in working with the teacher researcher.

Synthesis of data to support claims that I am living my core professional value and assisting students and myself to learn better

How can I live my core values fully in my practice to help my students and myself to learn? Visualise a possible positive self.

Work towards realising the possible self I envisaged who embodies my core value. Systematic data collection

How can I collect data to synthesise into evidence that I embody one core value and help students and myself to learn?

My model of the role of a research mentor working alongside a teacher researcher through self-study action research emerges! Notice how I have incorporated the work by Markus and Ruvolo et al, in my study by focusing on the visualisation of a positive, possible self. This, I believe, is the key to linking a theoretical study of one's own professional development, which is then applied to practice to a model where the embodied self as goal arises from practice and is attained through living theory. Mine is an original and communal model of self-study facilitated and supported through mentoring.

The models I represent here have evolved over my 12 years as a research mentor. Taking Furlong and Maynard's work as a starting point and developing their model of mentoring through experiencing my own practice and reading appropriate literature (Tomlinson et al) I now feel more confident about sharing my conceptualization of mentoring integrated with action research. I cannot conceive of a situation where I say 'I know what there is to know about research mentoring'. My own learning as a research mentor is on-going and I can see how my ideas are evolving as I look back over the resources that I prepared for presenting workshops for the past four years to teachers and other researchers in Japan. I also see a development in my ideas as a research mentor enabled through multi media. Thankfully each of my workshops was videoed and I am able to learn about my learning. I point this out as a way of saying that research mentors need to reflect and learn as they engage in their art. I have realized that as a mentor, I need mentoring support to help me and while some of this has come from teachers as co-enquirers with who I have worked, much has come from colleagues in LEAS and HEIs as well as from books and websites.

Conclusion:

In my contribution to the joint paper with my colleague Branko, I have set out some of the local, national and international influences that have shaped my learning as a research mentor. I see significant differences between my work as a tutor in higher education and as a research mentor and I believe that mentoring as co-enquiry holds offers a potential for professional and personal development for all engaged in mentoring relationships. It is no magic cure all. Mentoring and coaching are sometimes held up as guaranteed ways to improving practice. They are not and I am indebted to the insights in Colley's (2003) book for a fresh light on the pitfalls awaiting the unwary and the unprepared. Each mentoring situation is unique and mentoring can potentially harm as well as heal. It can enable a growth of learning about what occurs in schools but unless it is sensitively undertaken it holds a danger of overloading the main work of teachers teaching students. Research mentoring is best developed as a means of enabling the teacher to understand their own practice and to create a creative space in which teachers can reflect and learn. Where it dictates research methodology it could impede and impair teachers' learning processes. Research mentoring needs to evolve through practice informed theorization rather then develop from an imposition of any government research mentoring initiative. Where teachers are required to undertake action research, they are less likely to enjoy it. My hope for the future is that I participate in enticing and exciting teachers into research!

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