Professional Update and Practitioner Enquiry: Old Wine in New Bottles?

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ABSTRACT

Starting in August 2014, all registered teachers in Scotland are now required to engage in a process of Professional Update (PU) managed by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). The aim is to ensure that teachers at every stage of their careers participate in worthwhile professional learning, which can take a variety of forms. PU is, in effect, a system of regular professional re-accreditation. This paper examines the new arrangements, the way in which they have been devised and the thinking that lies behind them. It also looks at the provisions which preceded them and suggests that a change of terminology does not necessarily mean that there will be a significant change of practice. One particular form of Professional Update which is recommended – Practitioner Enquiry (PE) – is shown to have had a long history, but relatively modest results. A number of reasons for the slow pace of change in the field of professional learning and development are considered: these include teacher resistance, bureaucratic obstruction and academic failure. The paper concludes by arguing for greater intellectual freedom in defining what counts as legitimate professional learning and cautioning against the expectation that new systems and structures will by themselves bring about major shifts in attitude.

INTRODUCTION

As educational policies evolve, so the language in which they are described is subject to change. Sometimes the linguistic shift is substantial and signals a radical rethink of the field. Perhaps the most striking example of this can be seen in relation to special educational needs, where there has been a determined effort over a number of years to replace negative and stigmatising terminology with forms of words that emphasise the learning potential of all children (Corbett, 1996). Whereas the 1944 Education Act in England set out eleven categories of ‘handicap’, including ‘educationally subnormal’ and ‘ineducable’, the Warnock Report of 1978 rejected these in favour of a description which focused on the individual ‘needs’ of children. The influence of Warnock’s approach has been seen in a number of ways: in mainstreaming and
the development of inclusive approaches; in better understanding of a range of
types of learning disability; in determined efforts to counter discrimination and
prejudice.

What this example shows is that debates about the language of education
should not be regarded as abstract semantic exercises but as discursive sites
which may reflect important substantive arguments about the direction of
educational policy. It should not be assumed, however, that a change of
language invariably indicates a major reorientation of thinking. Sometimes it can
amount to little more than cosmetic tinkering, equivalent to the ‘rebranding’ of a
commercial product in fancy packaging which boasts that the goods are ‘new
and improved’. The purpose of the present paper is to consider whether the
launch of new approaches to the professional development of teachers,
recommended by the Donaldson Report (Scottish Government, 2010) and
developed by the General Teaching for Scotland (GTCS) along with other
stakeholders, constitute a substantial reform or simply a minor reworking of ideas
that have been around for some time. The paper begins by describing the
requirement for all registered teachers in Scotland to engage in a process of
Professional Update (PU). It then sets the new arrangements against the
background of earlier attempts to encourage professional development, noting
the changes of terminology that have taken place. One particular form of
professional learning, called Practitioner Enquiry (PE), which encourages
teachers to adopt a research perspective to their work, is examined. This is then
compared to the recommendations of Lawrence Stenhouse, as set out in his
1975 book, An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development. In the
concluding section, some of the reasons for the slow take-up of Stenhouse’s
ideas are examined and it is suggested that a combination of teacher resistance,
bureaucratic obstruction and academic failure have impeded progress. A case is
made for allowing considerable freedom to teachers in determining the form and
focus of their response to the new system of Professional Update.

THE INTRODUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL UPDATE

August 2014 saw the introduction of a new system designed to ensure that all
registered teachers in Scotland can demonstrate their involvement in ongoing
professional learning. The aims of the new system, called Professional Update
(PU), developed through consultation with key stakeholders, and managed by
the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), are twofold:

- To maintain and improve the quality of teachers as outlined in the Professional
  Standards and enhance the impact they have on pupils’ learning
- To support, maintain and enhance teachers’ continued professionalism and the
  reputation of the teaching profession in Scotland

PU comprises of the following features:

- An annual update of contact information to GTC Scotland
- Engagement in professional learning, including continuing engagement in the
  PRD processes [see below]
- Ongoing self-evaluation against an appropriate GTC Scotland Professional
  Standard
- Discussion of this engagement and its impact, as part of the PRD process
- Maintenance of a professional learning record and portfolio of evidence of impact; and
- 5-yearly confirmation of engagement in this process with GTC Scotland (Muir, 2014a).

These provisions indicate that PU is a system of re-accreditation which requires teachers to demonstrate ongoing professional learning and its impact on practice. It can be seen as a development of one of the central proposals of the Donaldson report which proposed a new ‘Standard for Active Registration’ intended to ‘clarify expectations of how fully registered teachers are expected to continue to develop their skills and competences’ (Scottish Government, 2010: p. 97).

Under the PU scheme, teachers’ professional learning can take a variety of forms (see http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-development/professional-learning.aspx). Examples include:

- Experiential, action or enquiry-based learning
- Professional dialogue with colleagues, other professionals, parents, and learners
- Focused professional reading and research
- Leading or engaging in practitioner enquiry/action research
- Peer support e.g. coaching or mentoring
- Classroom visits/peer observation
- Leading or participating in a working or task group
- Planning learning which is inter-disciplinary or cross-sector

However, in the supporting documentation provided by GTCS, it is evident that it will not be enough simply to claim participation in one or more of these activities (Robertson, 2014). Evidence of involvement, of how this has led to changes in thinking and practice, and the impact on the learning of pupils has to be provided. Teachers have to demonstrate a capacity for critical reflection and skills in analysing diverse material such as survey findings, quantitative data, interview transcripts and audio/video recordings (Robertson, 2014: p.26). Reflective journals are seen as a useful means of documenting the professional learning that has taken place.

It is evident that a substantial amount of work was undertaken in preparation for the launch of Professional Update. A working group was established involving representatives of local authorities, professional associations, national bodies, universities and colleges, parent forums as well as GTCS staff. This inclusiveness can be interpreted either as a genuine attempt to involve all stakeholders or as a skilful managerial strategy to forestall later criticism. Classroom teachers who may voice concerns about the recommendations can be reminded that their union representatives had an opportunity to contribute to the process. A pilot scheme involving three local authorities (East Renfrewshire, North Lanarkshire, Perth and Kinross) and one independent school started in August 2012: the results of an evaluation of the pilot were reported in September 2013 (GTCS, 2013). Watson & Fox (2014) suggest that the GTCS’s framing of the questions led to an emphasis on systems and processes rather than the underlying principles of the proposed scheme. A larger pilot study, involving
more schools and local authorities, commenced in August 2013 with a focus on professional learning: again an internal GTCS research evaluation was undertaken and reported in April 2014 (GTCS, 2014). The plan to introduce the new system was flagged up well in advance to teachers, both through the GTCS magazine, *Teaching Scotland*, which is sent out to all registered teachers, and through information contained on the GTCS website. Indeed, in a letter to *Teaching Scotland*, one teacher complained about the ‘avalanche of information on the new Professional Update programme’ (Giles, 2014: p. 12), detecting an irony in relation to the GTCS’s commitment to reducing bureaucracy (the topic of a feature in an earlier edition of the magazine).

The question of how bureaucratic the new system is likely to be is a valid issue to raise, partly because PU has to connect with existing systems and structures within local authorities and the GTCS itself. Prior to the introduction of PU, all teachers were expected to have annual Professional Review and Development (PRD) meetings with their line managers in schools and local authorities. These did not always take place and were variable in quality. PRD meetings will continue under the new arrangements, but the form they take has been subject to validation exercises carried out by the GTCS, designed to improve the way in which they are carried out. The Chief Executive of the GTCS has explained the relationship between PRD and PU in these terms: Professional Update ‘is based on effective, consistent Professional Review and Development and provides the framework to support and recognise the professional learning of all teachers’ (Muir, 2014b, p. 4). Thus there is both a local and a national dimension to the process. At the same time, it is claimed that PU ‘isn’t something that is done to teachers, but something teachers take responsibility for as professionals’ (ibid., p. 5).

PU is also expected to connect to the suite of Professional Standards developed by the GTCS. From August 2013 a revised set of standards covering different stages of a teaching career were introduced. There are Standards for Registration, Standards for Career-Long Professional Learning, and Standards for Leadership and Management. It is anticipated that the PU process will involve teachers evaluating themselves against the requirements of the relevant set of standards. For example, the Standards for Registration, the entry point for teaching, covers Professional Values and Personal Commitment, Professional Knowledge and Understanding, and Professional Skills and Abilities and can provide a stimulus to reflection on areas of relative strength and areas requiring support and development. The repeated use of the word ‘professional’ in GTCS documentation indicates the importance the organisation attaches to the concept. It almost serves as a talisman, a reassuring source of authority whose value cannot be questioned. More critical interpretations of professionalism (see, e.g., Macdonald, 1995) simply do not feature in GTCS discourse. Edwards and Nicoll (2006) have suggested that ‘An ambiguous discourse of professional development can enable a range of interests to be mobilised as a supportive audience’ and that institutional power – such as that represented by the GTCS – can impose sanctions against those who fail to adopt the approved rhetoric (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006: p. 116). They state that ‘Who authoritatively writes/speaks on such matters, upon what basis, and who is mobilised as the
audience, and how, remain constant questions to which attention needs to be
given' (ibid: p. 124). Again, Kennedy (2013) observes: ‘what is not made explicit . . . in most professional discourse, is what professionalism actually means, despite significant resources being invested in the development of professionals and their professional learning’ (Kennedy, 2013: p. 934).

For present purposes, however, the key point is that the Professional Standards developed by the GTCS serve as a reference point for the PU exercise, which in turn depends on the PRD process carried out at school and local authority level. Leaving aside questions about the recording and documenting of the various steps involved, it already seems that the framework runs the risk of becoming quite bureaucratic – despite the intention that teachers should feel they ‘own’ the process and can take control of their own career development. One head teacher of an independent school, Rod Grant, has expressed serious concern about the amount of time and effort now required to meet the demand for data of various kinds, so much so that he feels the education system is in danger of losing sight of its primary purpose, which is providing a rich and varied learning experience for pupils. He has described the introduction of PU as ‘utter lunacy’, the latest addition to a long list of unreasonable bureaucratic demands:

We have school development plans, teacher forward plans, lesson plans, evaluations, reviews and whole-school self-evaluations. We have performance indicators, quality assurance or improvement mechanisms, assessment vehicles, individual pupil tracking systems, benchmarking, national standards, target and goal setting, learning themes, policies, measurement analysis, capacities for improvement, dimensions of excellence – I’ll stop there. (Grant, 2014, p. 15).

So strongly does he feel about these issues, that he decided to discontinue his registration with the GTCS, a gesture that is not open to teachers in the state sector, since GTCS registration is a condition of employment. Interestingly, Grant received strong support from a number of teachers in the online discussion which followed his article, with one referring to the GTCS as ‘a self-serving political vehicle that has introduced even more paperwork this year with the massive nonsense that is associated with Professional Update’. A response to Grant’s article by Kenneth Muir, the Chief Executive of the GTCS, emphasised ‘the broad church of Scottish education’ which had been involved in the development of PU – a familiar appeal to the twin notions of ‘consultation’ and ‘consensus’ which feature regularly in official accounts of the development of Scottish educational policy (Muir, 2014c, p. 17).

For members of the policy elite, particularly senior GTCS staff who have been closely involved in the process, the PU arrangements may seem quite straightforward. For busy teachers, still preoccupied with implementing Curriculum for Excellence and getting to grips with the new examinations, it may seem less of an opportunity and more of an imposition. All innovations take time to bed in, of course, and it will be interesting to observe how attitudes to PU evolve over the next few years. Will it be seen as a genuine step forward, one that enables teachers to engage in more effective forms of learning, and encourages them to become involved in practitioner enquiries, or will it be viewed
as another set of expectations from above and evidence of territorial expansionism by the GTCS? For the moment, these questions must remain unanswered. What can be attempted, however, is an assessment of whether the new arrangements represent a real shift in thinking about professional development, comparable to the shift represented by the special needs discourse mentioned at the outset. This involves looking at the recent history of professional development in education and at the language in which it was described.

THE CHANGING LANGUAGE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

For many years it has been recognised that the initial qualifications of teachers are insufficient to sustain them throughout their careers. Changes in the curriculum and examination system have generally been accompanied by events or short courses designed to familiarise teachers with the requirements of the innovations. Curriculum for Excellence, for example, has been supported by a range of briefing sessions organised by Education Scotland and local authorities. In the past these would have been referred to as ‘in-service training’. That term gradually went out of favour, perhaps because the word ‘training’ implied a top-down approach by ‘experts’ which required little real engagement on the part of teachers: they were simply expected to take the changes on board and adjust their classroom practices accordingly. By the 1990s the preferred term was ‘professional development’, more commonly ‘continuing professional development’ (CPD), which was intended to convey the ongoing nature of professional learning, the fact that teachers at all stages could benefit from the stimulus of new ideas and new approaches. However, one commentator, writing in 1999, stated that ‘in practice professional development has been one of the poor relations of the education service’ and predicted that ‘unless the situation changes [it] will continue to be an ad hoc low level activity’ (Marker, 1999: p. 924).

In the decade that followed, various attempts were made to bring about improvements and establish a national CPD framework (see Forde et al, 2006; O’Brien, 2011). The McCrone report of 2000 made a series of recommendations intended to improve the effectiveness of CPD provision, including an increase in the time allocated to it (Scottish Executive, 2000). The report noted that ‘there was widespread criticism of the quality of CPD on offer’ and that often ‘courses did not provide what teachers required: many were thought to be disappointing, and to offer little value’ (ibid: para. 3.12). One specific proposal related to the introduction of Chartered Teacher (CT) status for experienced teachers undergoing a structured programme of CPD over a number of years, involving both academic study and evidence of practical work in the classroom (Reeves, 2007; Ingvarson, 2009). The aim was to allow experienced staff who wished to remain as classroom teachers rather than seek management posts to gain professional recognition and enhanced salaries. The CT programme did run for a number of years but the uptake was limited and opinion was divided about its effectiveness. A political decision was taken in 2011 to discontinue the scheme following a recommendation in the McCormac Report (Scottish Government, 2011).
Writing the year after McCrone, Humes set out a list of ‘conditions for professional development’ encompassing ‘practical, conceptual, intellectual, dispositional and managerial requirements’ (Humes, 2001: 12). There were ten items, each elaborated with additional text. Their order was not significant:

- Personal commitment and motivation.
- A focus on the relation between the learning of teachers and the learning of pupils.
- Time and space.
- A supportive institutional environment.
- Leadership by example, not by exhortation.
- Access to suitable CPD opportunities.
- Recognition of the contested nature of educational aims and values.
- Opportunity for teachers to choose what they wish to learn.
- Courses which are intellectually and professionally challenging.
- Regular questioning of the discourse of professionalism. (Humes, 2001: 13)

Three particular features of this list invite comment and will re-surface in later discussion. First, the assumed link between the development of pupils’ and teachers’ knowledge and understanding indicates the growing ascendancy of a social constructivist model of learning – evident, for example, in the emphasis on group work and collaborative enquiry (see Bryce, 2013). Secondly, the reference to choice raises questions about the degree of freedom teachers should have in relation to their own professional development. And thirdly, the value attached to questioning and contestation as elements in a mature professionalism argues against a rigid, formulaic approach to the learning of teachers. In reviewing the steps to establish a national framework for CPD, Purdon (2003; 2004), concluded that while there was agreement that the broad intention was perceived as positive, there was no clear agreement about its purpose. Moreover, she concluded that the move towards a standards-based approach tended to confine conceptions of good teaching within a limited policy-dominated model (see also O’Brien, 2007).

A decade after McCrone, the Donaldson report was able to record some progress in the range and type of CPD provision. But it also found evidence of a ‘lack of focus in CPD and coherence and progression within it’ (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 68). Furthermore, ‘Alignment between individual professional learning needs and school development is not always strong’ (ibid, p. 69). The report recommended that:

> The balance of CPD activities should continue to shift from set-piece events to more local, team-based approaches which centre around self-evaluation and professional collaboration, and achieve an appropriate blend of tailored individual development and school improvement. (ibid, p.70)

By promoting ‘a culture and habit of professional learning’ (ibid, p. 67), it was hoped that measurable benefits in terms of the impact on pupil learning would follow.

Donaldson also had a section on the value of teachers developing ‘expertise in using research, enquiry and reflection as part of their daily skill set’ (ibid, p. 70). Although the aspiration of teaching becoming a ‘research-led’ profession
was some way from being achieved, it was not over-ambitious to aim for a more ‘research-informed’ workforce. Towards this end, encouragement should be given to ‘knowledge exchange’ between schools and universities and to mini-projects designed to improve pupil learning. Some of the possibilities and limitations of practitioner enquiries of this kind will be discussed in a later section.

The Donaldson report provided a comprehensive review of teacher education in general and CPD in particular, based as it was on a substantial body of evidence and opinion about existing arrangements. Its recommendations were accepted in full by the government and taken forward by a National Partnership Group (NPG) involving representatives of key stakeholders such as the Scottish Teacher Education Committee (STEC) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). The NPG’s detailed work was carried out in three sub-groups and responsibility for acting on its final report (Scottish Government, 2012) was given to another body, the National Implementation Board (NIB). This system of bureaucratic delegation was in line with established Scottish practices in the development of educational policy. The Donaldson report, and the follow-up activities which it generated, clearly influenced the thinking behind the subsequent work led by the GTCS in preparation for the introduction of Professional Update. One particular strand of thinking borrowed from Donaldson is noteworthy at this stage and will be discussed more fully later. There is an emphasis on the need for demonstrable benefits emerging from professional learning, in the form of alignment between individual and institutional targets and impact on the performance of pupils. Arguably this supposes a rather simplistic ‘aims and objectives’ view of learning, a linear connection between teacher input and pupil output. Such a model of learning has been challenged by many writers, including Lawrence Stenhouse, whose work will be referred to below. Learning often proceeds by subtle, indirect routes and its effects may not be felt for some time. Kennedy (2013) notes that ‘evidence of cause and effect is notoriously difficult to identify . . . given the vast range of influences on pupils, both within and outwith school’ (Kennedy, 2013: 929, 936). A narrowly instrumental view of professional learning may fail to appreciate the value of forms of enquiry where their ‘relevance’ to practice may not be immediately apparent but which may nevertheless bring about longer-term benefits, both to the teacher and to learners.

The recent history of professional development shows the way in which the approved discourse has evolved. ‘In-service education’ no longer features and ‘continuing professional development’ is gradually being superseded by ‘professional learning’. Kennedy (2013) explains the significance of the latest term: ‘This change in terminology . . . helps to shift the focus conceptually from something that can be “provided” for a teacher (CPD) to something that the teacher owns (learning)’ (Kennedy, 2013: 927). That is certainly the intention, but does it represent a major re-think (in the way that the revised language of special educational needs did following the Warnock Report) or is it simply a minor linguistic adjustment, designed to put a new gloss on familiar attempts to reconfigure the work of teachers in line with current policy priorities? Some leverage on this question can perhaps be gained by looking at the antecedents
of one particular form of PU which is recommended as a worthwhile example of professional learning – Practitioner Enquiry.

PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY (PE) AS ONE FORM OF PROFESSIONAL UPDATE

Practitioner enquiry now features regularly in policy documents and the recommendations of professional organisations. The Donaldson Report notes that ‘the most successful educational systems . . . invest in developing their teachers as reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change’ (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 4). Later in the same document it is stated: ‘if we are to achieve the aspiration of teachers being leaders of educational improvement, they need to develop expertise in using research, enquiry and reflection as part of their daily skill set’ (ibid, p. 70). Again, the General Teaching Council for Scotland sees practitioner enquiry as a valuable way of demonstrating the kind of learning that helps to maintain high standards of teaching. As part of the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning, teachers are expected to ‘lead and participate in collaborative practitioner enquiry’ (GTCS, 2012, p. 10).

The GTCS website has a number of useful pages on both professional update and practitioner enquiry (see http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-update/practitioner-enquiry/practitioner-enquiry.aspx). The following statements give a sense of the value attached to the latter concept:

Practitioner enquiry should lead to deep transformative learning which significantly informs and influences professionals’ understandings, practice and subsequent impact.

Individuals who adopt this enquiring stance as the core of their professional practice will critically question their own educational beliefs, assumptions, values and practices. This locates the education professional as career-long learner, critical knower and knowledge creator.

The model of practitioner enquiry embedded in the new Professional Standards is not about identifying single ‘best practices’ to be ‘rolled out’ across schools/local authorities without questioning their relevance and purpose for individual contexts or understanding the principles and theory upon which they are based.

- It is also suggested that teachers engaged in practitioner enquiry should routinely ask themselves a series of questions:
  - What am I making problematic and why? And what am I not questioning?
  - What knowledge will I gain/what can be known from this enquiry?
  - For whose benefit am I doing this enquiry?
  - For what purpose(s)?
  - Who is/should be involved and why?

The GTCS website material acknowledges that practitioner enquiry is not an entirely new idea and notes its overlap with terms such as teacher research, action research and practitioner research. Nevertheless, it is claimed that what is now being proposed is different from previous approaches in three key areas:
• the underpinning principles and aims of practitioner enquiry are stated for the first time
• it is envisaged to become an integral aspect of the day-to-day practice of teachers and other education professionals
• it is being recognised that for systemic change support is required at all levels of the system.

How do these statements fit with the academic literature on practitioner enquiry (see Reeves et al., 2010; Reeves & Drew, 2013)? The growing attention to the subject does not provide a clear picture. Baumfield et al. (2013) see it as occupying the middle ground between reflection and action research, and focus on three elements: the intention of the enquiry; the process by which it is pursued; and the audience with which it is shared. Practitioner enquiry is perhaps a less intimidating term than research. The latter can convey the message that it requires extensive training in a range of methodologies, skill in research design and data gathering, and advanced techniques of analysis, perhaps using statistical methods. Small-scale investigations carried out by individuals or groups of teachers certainly need to be carefully conducted and their results analysed systematically, but they need not require all participants to have undergone a full programme of research training. It is quite common for initial teacher education courses to include modules on the basics of research so many teachers would not be starting entirely from scratch. In any case, the aim of practitioner enquiry is not to produce findings that are generalizable and likely to bring about major shifts in educational theory, but rather to extend and enhance a teacher’s stock of ‘practical knowledge’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Academic literature reporting the findings of large-scale research projects may well offer useful insights in relation to small-scale studies: however, the principal aim of PE is to reach a better understanding of context-specific educational issues and problems. In this regard, the situated, experiential knowledge of teachers has much to contribute to the direction and focus of any investigation.

Whatever precise terminology is used, certain common features can be identified. The first is an attempt to move beyond routine, formulaic teaching and subject what goes on in the classroom to critical scrutiny. Teachers are encouraged to see connections between their understanding of how pupils learn and their own learning needs as professional educators: a simple example would be where a teacher sees pupils having difficulty with an aspect of the curriculum and asks, ‘What do I need to know or do in order to overcome this difficulty?’ Addressing this question might involve a range of activities: careful observation of pupils’ behaviour; systematic analysis of the misunderstandings and errors that have arisen; dialogue with the pupils to gain their perspective on the problem; attempting to establish links with areas of knowledge where the pupils’ understanding is secure; discussion with colleagues who may have encountered a similar problem; looking for insights in professional and academic literature; trying new methods of teaching and monitoring their effects. Taken together, these techniques involve an attempt to make classroom practice more ‘evidence-based’. That is not to say that traditional craft skills cease to be important, but it means that teacher judgement is informed by information of various kinds. It is
by gathering evidence in this way that a teacher’s repertoire of professional knowledge is extended and enhanced.

A second feature of PE is often its collaborative nature (Kennedy, 2011). The social interactionist model of pupil learning has shifted the focus away from pupils working in isolation to a greater emphasis on paired and group learning: similarly, there is now recognition of the fact that teachers can learn a great deal from each other, sharing problems and insights, and engaging in collaborative enquiry in order to improve practice. Kirkwood and Christie (2006) refer to the potential of networks of teachers, with common interests, forming communities of enquiry which serve to deepen understanding of problems in learning and teaching. This, they suggest, involves reflection, systematic investigation and professional judgment. However, they also observe that classrooms are not the same as scientific laboratories where complete detachment is the aim. They are perhaps better compared to artistic studios where the creative element in shaping performance is recognised and valued.

While agreeing that PE has much to commend it, Humes (2014) cautions against regarding it as a panacea for bringing about personal and organisational change. He concludes:

Practitioner enquiry can make a useful contribution . . . but it would be wrong to assume that it is sufficient on its own to transform a teaching force that has been on the receiving end of top-down directives for too long into an “activist” profession, confident of taking the initiative and re-shaping its own future (Sachs, 2003). There is still a great deal of work to be done (Humes, 2014, in press).

He also suggests that much of the thinking behind current initiatives is not really new, raising interesting questions about the time lag between the origins and implementation of educational policies.

THE WORK OF LAWRENCE STENHOUSE

Many of the current ideas about professional development and practitioner enquiry, although expressed in rather different terminology, can be traced to the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1926-82). Stenhouse taught English and History in Scottish secondary schools and was Head of Education Jordanhill College in Glasgow in the 1960s before becoming Director of the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia. His best known book is An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development (1975) in which he argued that ‘curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher’ (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 142). Rejecting an ‘aims and objectives’ view of curriculum in favour of a ‘process’ model, he acknowledged that the latter was more demanding on teachers but potentially much more rewarding for both teachers and learners. A central plank of his argument was that extended professionalism required the following characteristics:

The commitment to systematic questioning of one’s own teaching as a basis for development;

The commitment and the skills to study one’s own teaching;

The concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of those skills. (ibid, p. 144)
He added:

In short, the outstanding characteristic of the extended professional is a capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures.

(ibid, p. 142)

Various models of teacher research are considered by Stenhouse and he favours ‘anthropological’ approaches which respect the uniqueness of particular contexts rather than aspiring ‘towards an unattainable objectivity’ (ibid, p. 157): ‘the uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal . . . needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his own classroom’ (ibid, p. 143). This is consistent with what was said earlier about the value of situated experiential knowledge.

Stenhouse acknowledges that what he is proposing is not easy: ‘the main barriers to teachers’ assuming the role of researchers studying their own teaching in order to improve it, are psychological and social’ (ibid, p. 159). Examining one’s own professional performance is potentially threatening and the social climate of many schools is not always supportive of such attempts. For this reason, he recommends ‘mutually supportive co-operative research in which teachers and full-time research teams work together’ (ibid, p. 159). One Scottish headteacher, who has sought to introduce an enquiry approach to staff development in his school, endorses Stenhouse’s comment about the challenges this involves: ‘this is definitely not an easy option, it’s complex and messy and one size does not fit all. But I believe this is the best way to achieve deep, sustainable change in schools’ (Gilchrist, 2014: p. 34).

It is interesting to compare these suggestions with those of a study some 40 years later jointly commissioned by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). This led to two reports (BERA/RSA 2014a and 2014b). The interim report reviewed evidence from a range of sources including a systematic analysis of studies of the contribution of research to teachers’ continuing professional development (Cordingley, 2013). Among the features identified as being characteristic of successful CPD were: collaborative enquiry and structured peer support; the use of specialist advisers and external experts; and a preparedness to challenge prevailing discourses. In the final BERA/RSA report, which has the sub-title ‘Building the capacity for a self-improving educational system’, it is stated: ‘research-rich schools and colleges are those that are likely to have the greatest capacity for self-evaluation and self-improvement’ (BERA/RSA, 2014b: p. 14). Some examples of good practice were found but the general picture was inconsistent: ‘in many settings, teachers’ experience of CPD is fragmented, occasional and insufficiently informed by research in all its different forms’ (ibid, p. 12). The report draws an important distinction between research ‘as a body of knowledge’ and research as ‘a professional learning process’ (ibid, p. 18). Whereas teachers may not make use of the former, regarding it as remote from practice, the latter can ‘have a deep influence on how they understand research and may lead them directly
towards more active engagement in undertaking enquiry themselves’ (ibid., p. 18). This is entirely in line with Stenhouse’s vision of the teacher as researcher as outlined in An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development.

The BERA/RSA final report makes specific recommendations for each of the four jurisdictions within the United Kingdom. The Donaldson report is seen as having the potential to stimulate improvements: ‘In Scotland, the Donaldson Review has established the policy framework to meet many of the aspirations for a research informed, research literate and research engaged teaching profession’ (ibid, p. 30). The challenge is threefold:

- To ensure that practitioner enquiry becomes an intrinsic part of professional and school development, not another ‘add on’.
- To use creatively the Scottish Government’s commitment to funding the development of partnership working between schools and colleges and the university sector.
- To build on the existing appetite for giving research and enquiry an important role in school improvement planning (ibid, p. 30).

It is recommended that an important principle underpinning teachers’ professional learning should be ‘the development of research literacy and research engagement’ which should become ‘a key feature of teachers’ professional development and review’ (ibid, p. 31).

**DISCUSSION**

One of the key questions to arise from the account offered above is why has it taken so long for Scottish education to take seriously the issues raised by Stenhouse nearly forty years ago. In the United States, approaches that were consistent with his thinking, placing teachers in schools at the centre of professional and curricular development, were advocated and practised by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle from the 1980s onwards (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; 2009; 2011). Indeed it can be argued that their ideas were more radical than the ones currently being introduced in Scotland. At a lecture given in Edinburgh in September 2014, Cochran-Smith made the case for a strong critical perspective in enquiry approaches. Moreover, she pointed out there was a danger that they could be co-opted for dubious purposes and reduced to a rigid, prescriptive formula applied by bureaucrats. She emphasised the political dimension of enquiry, the value of ‘productive tension’ and ‘constructive disruption’ of a kind that would extend from local issues to strategies for bringing about social change and promoting social justice. This rested rather uneasily alongside another contribution at the same conference: Tom Hamilton, GTCS’s Director of Education and Professional Learning, argued that it was advantageous to have all policy levers pointing in the same direction, which he suggested was now the case in Scotland. Genuine enquiry is unlikely to flourish in a climate of general consensus.

Stenhouse had a clear vision of what a committed, intellectually engaged teaching profession should look like, contributing to thinking about the form and content of the curriculum, understanding pedagogy as a flexible process rather than a pre-determined set of objectives, and adopting research perspectives in
the investigation of classroom practices. Part of the reason for the neglect of his ideas for so long north of the border may simply have been that once he left Scotland his work was focused on developments in England. But other reasons, some of them rather uncomfortable to contemplate, may have come into play.

Scottish teachers and the organisations which represent them have often been ambivalent about their own professionalism. They are understandably concerned about standards of entry to the profession and with ensuring that only those properly qualified to teach are allowed to do so. But until relatively recently the focus was on initial qualifications rather than on the need to keep abreast of new developments. Colleagues who voluntarily attended courses leading to additional awards (such as Master’s degrees) were sometimes viewed with scepticism: staffroom critics asserted that what mattered was experience and classroom practice, not additional theoretical input. Moreover, although professional autonomy was valued and ‘top down’ innovations seen as political intrusion into areas where teacher judgement should hold sway, when major reforms were introduced there was often a call for more direction and centrally produced resources. This helps to explain some of the discontent that accompanied the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (Humes, 2013a). While the reform was intended to give teachers more freedom to decide what to teach and how to teach, it sometimes led to the paradoxical response; ‘just tell us what to do and we’ll do it’.

The attitude of teachers and their organisations, in this regard at least, received support from influential groups within the policy community. For a long time many senior figures within the inspectorate and the national curriculum and assessment bodies were sceptical of the value of research, believing that the information they gathered in the course of their inspection programmes and internal deliberations, constituted the best source of evidence about the strengths and weaknesses of Scottish education. They invoked the notion of ‘best practice’ (now criticised by the GTCS) as the standard against which the profession as a whole should be judged and saw their role as disseminating such practice as widely as possible, through a ‘cascade’ model - a model which subsequently fell into disrepute as ineffective. Moreover, the history of government-sponsored educational research in Scotland has been fairly chequered, with periods when relations between academic researchers on the one hand and inspectors and officials on the other were decidedly frosty (see McPherson, 1984; Humes, 2013b). Until recently, the notion that not just academics but that all teachers should be encouraged to embark on research enquiries would have been greeted with considerable scepticism. The scepticism may have been partly dependent on doubt about the value of what would emerge from such studies. But it is at least arguable that fear of a loss of power in the face of growing professional confidence may also have been a factor in the minds of inspectors and senior officials within central and local government.

The academic community itself must bear some responsibility for the long time-lag between Stenhouse’s proposals for teachers as researchers and the general acceptance of the value of practitioner enquiry as part of professional update. There are two aspects to this. As teacher education in Scotland
gradually became part of the university sector from the 1990s onwards, staff in the new faculties of education came under pressure to demonstrate that they could produce research output that was comparable to other work in the social sciences. This led to an emphasis on rigorous methodology which could meet the expectations of the leading academic journals. Publication in such journals was regarded as important evidence of having demonstrated high intellectual standards. Working with school staff on small-scale projects focused on local circumstances was not regarded as academically prestigious.

The second point is a direct consequence of this. Academic writing has to conform to certain conventions, is often densely conceptual and may employ specialist jargon and technical shorthand. Few teachers in schools have the time or inclination to read journals aimed primarily at researchers in universities. That is not to say that the studies carried out by the latter may not be relevant to the work of the former. But the findings need to be presented in an accessible fashion, relatively free of professional jargon and with the practical classroom implications made explicit. A minority of researchers did make the effort to ‘translate’ their findings in this way but, for too long, there was a sharp divide between the abstract, theoretical world of ‘academic’ knowledge and the applied, operational world of ‘practical’ knowledge. It is only in the last decade or so that a rapprochement between the two has taken place, evident, for example, in the introduction of professional doctorates (such as the Doctor of Education degree) which require direct connections to be made between questions deriving from work in the classroom and insights gained both from existing academic literature and from practical investigative projects carried out by the doctoral candidates.

There are other grounds for not accepting uncritically the claims that are made for the new system of PU. It is, in effect, compulsory – all teachers are required to take part. Although the intention is to give greater freedom to teachers, conscripts may not experience the process as liberating. Watson and Fox (2014) argue that there is a real tension between the accountability and improvement functions of PU. They suggest that, while PU is presented as a development opportunity which teachers can take ownership of, the GTCS Standards are really ‘a form of control, in which insidious power relations . . . are disguised as a means to self-actualisation’ (Watson & Fox, 2014: p. 4). Interestingly, the teachers involved in the PU pilot studies, whose views Watson and Fox canvassed, did not perceive any tension between the accountability and improvement dimensions of PU: it was ‘resolutely understood by them as a supportive process aimed at facilitating personal growth and capable of leading to systemic school improvement’ (ibid: p. 9). They attribute this to the GTCS’s successful management of the process to forestall resistance and to disguise its assumption of ‘a more centralised form of authority not just on the profession overall but on each and every individual’ (ibid: p. 11). They conclude by posing this question:

Will PU deliver an enhanced level of professional responsibility with a concomitant increase in the quality of teaching and learning (however understood), or will it, in the name of rationality, undermine the profession through the absurdity created by its contradictory and conflicting demands? (ibid: p. 12)
Furthermore, as noted above, it is a heavily monitored system involving school management, local authority oversight, GTCS validation and the provision of documentary or online evidence that the various requirements of PU have been met. The GTCS will have a central role in this bureaucratic process – rather ironically at a time when the Scottish Government set up a working group aimed at tackling excessive bureaucracy. In April, 2012 the GTCS became a fully independent self-regulatory body under the Public Services Reform (General Teaching Council for Scotland) Order 2011. This gave it greater freedom to set its own agenda and the PU initiative could be seen as part of a drive to expand its sphere of operations. As has often been observed in the study of bureaucratic organisations, it is in their nature to seek to take over additional functions, unless subject to strong external regulatory control. A significant increase in the registration fees of teachers and the appointment of new staff in 2014 could also be seen as evidence of a tendency towards territorial expansionism. It is true that the introduction of PU has received the backing of other key stakeholders, including the teacher unions, but this is consistent with the familiar pattern of ‘managed’ consensus within the Scottish policy community.

A further cautionary note relates to the kinds of topics that will be considered appropriate in relation to Professional Update. The documentation so far has tended to give prominence to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, areas where a direct connection with teaching and learning might be expected. But this tends to assume a fairly instrumental view of the enquiry process and depends on a short-term, simplistic conception of ‘impact’. It is a view that runs counter to the line advocated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle. For them, practitioner enquiry is a ‘stance’, an open-minded exploration of possibilities, not a fast route to clear-cut answers. A question worth posing in relation to the parameters set out by the GTCS in its documentation is ‘What might not qualify as a legitimate form of PU?’ Will teachers be encouraged to ask ‘Why?’ questions, not just ‘How?’ questions? Could their enquiries extend to critical analyses of current policies, not be confined within parameters established by school or local authority management? Kennedy (2014), in a paper that examines international trends in professional learning, suggests that the individual creativity of teachers is accorded less value than other educational purposes promoted by policy makers – notably ‘socialisation’ and ‘the development of human capital’.

But perhaps the most fundamental reservation about the new arrangements is a point made by Gordon Kirk as long ago as the year 2000 when he wrote: ‘perhaps the hallmark of the professional teacher is that he or she holds open the possibility of enhanced performance, not as a response to political diktat, not as a form of compliance, not in fulfilment of contractual requirement, but as an expression of an inner professional commitment to improved practice’ (Kirk, 2000: 51). This suggests that bureaucratic systems, however carefully planned and however well managed, will not produce the results that are sought unless they are supported by the personal motivation of individual teachers. Such motivation depends on a number of factors: the quality of their initial education and training; the level of job satisfaction which they enjoy; the extent to which they feel they are well led and supported by head teachers and local authorities; the relationships which they have with pupils, parents and colleagues; the
existence of a desire to engage with new ideas and to read beyond the latest policy document. Deep issues of trust and respect are involved here, which are not necessarily aided by the introduction of prescriptions masquerading as entitlements. Scottish education is good at setting up systems and structures. It is much less good at encouraging exploratory approaches of the kind favoured by Stenhouse. There often seems to be an inherent lack of trust in the way local authorities treat their teachers, viewing professional learning in a narrow, instrumental way and being suspicious of anything that does not seem to have an immediate tangible benefit.

Finally, it is worth recalling what the great American educator, John Dewey, had to say about worthwhile learning, whether applied to pupils or teachers. He suggested that, in the final analysis, there is really only one criterion against which the success of an educational experience should be judged: that was the extent to which it encouraged learners to go on learning and to engage in a process of continued growth. The phrase he used was a ‘continuous reconstruction of experience’ (Dewey, 1966: p, 80). That is a good measure against which to assess not only the learning of pupils in schools but also the learning that teachers engage in as part of a programme of professional development. National frameworks for CPD, formal provision for PRD and PU, and elaborate statements of Professional Standards are all very well, but without the willing intellectual engagement of teachers, they will amount to little more than bureaucratic hurdles to be overcome, allowing for only inert knowledge designed to satisfy managerial and political priorities. To bring about the transformations that documents such as the Donaldson report seek may require a more searching examination of uncomfortable aspects of the prevailing culture of Scottish education. These include elements of anti-intellectualism, a preference for soft rhetoric over hard analysis, and a leadership class (Humes, 1986) that uses narrative privilege to present a positive account of its own achievements. But a proper consideration of these points would take us well beyond the scope of the present paper.

REFERENCES


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