Critical Review of A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation

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Critical Review of A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation

School consolidation is the phenomenon of merging schools together. It has particularly taken place in certain rural communities of the United States of America, with the aim of making financial and efficiency savings as well as improving the educational and social outcomes for students. In their paper 'A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation', Nitta, Holley and Wrobel set out to explore the effects of the consolidation process on those students and teachers who have experienced the phenomenon. The researchers view this as a neglected field. Although there has been other research on the issue of consolidation, most of the previous literature has focused on the financial and efficiency savings of the process rather than the social impact. To investigate this more human aspect of consolidation the researchers choose to use the research methodology of phenomenology. This research method is often associated with investigating human feelings and experiences to develop a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. To conduct their research Nitta, Holley and Wrobel use this methodology of phenomenological research. As they reference in their methodological section, "the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence." (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.8) In order to uncover this they analyse their data which details different experiences of the phenomenon of rural school consolidation, and then try to draw out any common thread that is apparent throughout all the data.

As a result of the methodology the researchers have chosen, the first question that the reader must pose of the research is whether rural school consolidation can indeed be considered a phenomenon. In order to be the subject of phenomenology a phenomenon must be a human experience. Such a human experience could be insomnia, exclusion, anger, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery" (Creswell, et al., 2007, p.252). Although these examples seem to be human experiences which may contain a much wider range of human feelings, one can still say that judges against this definition the research does investigate a phenomenon of human experience. In order to conduct phenomenological research on such human experiences it is important to have one setting, one group and one phenomenon to ensure the commonality of experience which will allow for a universal essence to be distilled. Nitta, Holley and Wrobel's research is on four consolidated high schools in Arkansas and looks at administrators, teachers and students (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.1). The reader may question whether this is too broad a group to have the commonality of experience that is necessary for successful phenomenological research. There is also a noticeable

difference in the depths of feelings that may be experienced during the studied phenomenon, the phenomena in the list of examples and that of rural school consolidation. The reader may question whether the very specific and relatively phenomenon of rural school consolidation in Arkansas is comparable in depth of experience to undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery. This may mean the universal essence the research uncovers may not be very revelatory.

In order to try to find the universal essence of rural school consolidation in Arkansas, Nitta, Holley and Warbler conduct twenty-three in-depth interviews covering the high school administrators, teachers and students who moved schools during the process of consolidation, as well as members of the same three categories at the schools people were moved into (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.1). This number of interviews fits with Polkinghorne's recommendation for phenomenological research of interviewing between five and twenty-five individuals who are part of the phenomenon being investigated in order to develop the possibilities of experiences (Creswell, et al., 2007, p.254). In order to choose their sample of individuals to be interviewed the researchers make use of what the reader may find an unnecessarily complex method of sampling. This is evident from the length of the section of their paper which details their sampling strategy. In selecting their sample the researchers make a tokenistic gesture towards representativeness which does not seem logical or rational in relation to the phenomenon being explored. The researchers aim to have geographic diversity in the high schools which they investigate (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.4) and yet this seems to be at odds with the question of rural school consolidation as some districts of Arkansas are more rural than others. The sampling section of the paper also makes numerous references to the ways in which the researchers tried to ensure random selections by asking the high school principals of the schools selected to provide lists with five random administrators, teachers, and students who had experienced the consolidation phenomenon (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.5). From these lists the researchers randomly chose one from each category to interview. This is a very un-scientific approach to random sampling which when considered properly for appropriate research is a very technical and mathematical procedure (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.29). This impression of their sampling which the reader may have gained is then furthered by the fact that as a result of a scheduling error, the researchers interviewed one additional individual (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel 2010, p.5). This would seem to go against their desire to ensure a random and representative sample. All of these issues around the sampling strategies that the researchers use indicate to the reader a seemingly flawed understanding of phenomenological research. As the

researchers acknowledge it does not aim to generalise findings to a wider population (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.1). If this is the case, there is therefore no need for random sampling within the population. This is because no matter whom the researchers chose to interview, that individual should have experienced the phenomenon and therefore, in theory, have knowledge of the universal essence that the research aims to define.

In order to distil the essence of the phenomenon they are investigating, Nitta, Holley and Wrobel follow the traditional phenomenological approach to data collection of individual in-depth interviews (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.8). This form of data collection is appropriate for their methodology as it is the best method of finding and collecting the individual experiences from which the universal essence of the phenomenon can be distilled. The researchers' interview questions are attached in the appendix to their paper. This shows that in order to reach the universal essence of rural school consolidation each individual was asked twenty interview questions. The reader must assume that the rationale for such a long interview is that phenomenological research requires very rich data to enable it to produce both a textural description of the feelings of those experiencing the phenomenon and the structural description describing the universal essence that has been located. However, by the researchers choosing to ask so many different questions, rather than an interview it seems that the way the researchers have interpreted this method of data collection is more as a researcher-given questionnaire. It is worth noting that in a textbook example of a piece of phenomenological research only two questions are asked, one to aid building the textual description, one for the structural description (Creswell, et al., 2007, p.255). By Nitta, Holley and Wrobel having such a detailed interview schedule there becomes little space for any probing questioning to be made based on the responses of the interviewees. Thus there is less real listening to the individual's experience.

The way in which the interviews were conducted suggests that before undertaking their research Nitta, Holley and Wrobel had already decided the direction which they believed they would find the universal essence of rural school consolidation in. In phenomenological research, as this review previously explored, it is more usual to use a more open and flexible format. This enables the researcher to explore the experience of the phenomenon from the perspective of the interviewee and to construct an understanding of how the interviewee makes sense of their experiences (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.78). The fact that in Nitta, Holley and Wrobel's research this does not seem to have been the case suggests that the researchers were simply applying a pre-decided template to their data in order for it to make

sense. The reader may question whether the findings of the literature review framed the researchers' view too much before their research was undertaken. It does seem to the reader that the researchers forgot to bracket out their own personal understanding of the phenomenon. This has therefore coloured the way in which they conduct their data analysis. This is a particular risk in phenomenological research as it relies on analysing the transcripts of the in-depth interviews to develop clusters of meaning from statements into themes (Nitta, Holley and Wrobel, 2010, p.8). If the researcher already has a clear idea of what the themes they will find when they analyse their transcripts are going to be, there is a great risk that they will not let the data speak for itself.

This possibly highlights one of the questions the reader may pose of the conclusions of Nitta, Holley and Wrobel's research and possibly of phenomenological research as a methodology - does the fact that the data must produce an essential quality mean that researchers either read too much into the data or force it into a pre-determined theoretical framework? In this paper the latter aspect is often evident to the reader. Phenomenology is a useful methodology for delving into people's feelings and emotions as long as the phenomenon it investigates is challenging and deep enough to contain a universal essence. It is doubtful that rural school consolidation fulfils either of these two criteria.

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Research Proposal: Strategies for Sharing Best Practice

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<u>Research Proposal</u>

<u>Strategies for sharing best practice across a department</u>

The proposed research will address the impact that the sharing of best practice can have on teaching and learning across a department. Best practice has become a common and increasingly wide ranging term in education policy. In this proposal it will refer to a new addition to a teacher's repertoire or a general concept which a teacher may then interpret. Best practice should be based on educational research or case studies showing its success. This research will focus on the questions of:

1. What techniques and strategies can be used by leaders within a department to disseminate best practice?
2. How can it be ensured that teachers feel they are able to, and in fact do, use teaching and learning strategies gained through sharing of best practice?
3. What impact does shared best practice have in the classroom?

These questions that the research will investigate are becoming more and more relevant in the current English secondary school policy landscape. This is because the development of in-house continued professional development is central to the current government's plans for initial teacher training. Their plans seek to encourage schools to be at the heart of teacher training allowing them to recruit their own trainee teachers and develop a specific training programme at their institution (Gove, 2012). It seems likely that the sharing of best practice will therefore become a key component of this form of internal continued professional development, and be seen as a major means of driving improvement of teaching and learning within a school.

The research will not set out to address the question of what elements of best practice should be shared. Much other research has already been done into the most effective aspects of assessment for learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), differentiation (Webb, 2009) or any other classroom strategies to be shared. In fact there is a whole section of the OFSTED[1] website called devoted to examples of good practice. Instead the proposed research will focus on the processes of dissemination and embedding of shared best practice. This is a much less explored educational research field. The dissemination and embedding of shared best practice has been recognised as a key way to improving teaching and learning in the classroom

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[1] The Office for Standards in Education inspects state schools in the United Kingdom

however little research has been done into how it can be successfully achieved. Indeed much of the previous research in the field of sharing best practice has found that dissemination is weak and that there are no effective mechanisms for disseminating best practice or evaluating its impact (Vanderlinde and Van Braak, 2010, p.302)

Scotland is one area where the process of disseminating best practice among teacher learning communities and then embedding it into classroom practice has become actively encouraged. The education department has introduced a 'Curriculum for Excellence' programme in secondary schools in which there has been a noticeable shift away from teachers simply sharing tips, towards a model based on the fundamental principles of "participation, dialogue, engagement and learning" (Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace, 2011, p.271).This makes research into this Scottish model particularly relevant to the proposed research project as not only is it based in the secondary sector, but there is engagement with the deeper processes that are the foundations for the dissemination and embedding of best practice rather than simply the content of the best practice.

In their 2011 research into the impact of teacher learning communities in Scotland, Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace researched how groups of teachers sharing best practice could help to promote and sustain changes to teaching and learning practices in schools. The research then identified the barriers that the teacher learning communities had faced when trying to introduce innovation based on sharing of best practice. The research showed that encouraging teachers to experiment and share feedback was key to successful teaching and learning changes (Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace, 2011, p.281). To enable these improvements to take place the analysis of the research data identified four main elements that supported the process: time for semi-formal pedagogical discussion and collaboration, accessible research as a basis for best practice, leadership support for experimenting with the implementation of best practice leadership in school, and recognition of successful innovation. The proposed research will make use of these findings, particularly in the devising of the sharing best practice intervention in the third stage of the research's action research cycle.

Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace's findings are based on the primary data source of five detailed case studies. Each case study focused on an individual teacher who had volunteered to be part of the research, due to their enthusiasm for the project and their desire to improve their teaching and learning strategies (Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace, 2011, p.273).

For each volunteer teacher the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and observed them teach, as well as using any supporting documentation provided to them by the participating teachers. This primary data source was supported by field notes from five teacher learning community meetings which took place different schools and structured discussion activities with notes and outputs from activities a further two voluntary focus groups. These voluntary focus groups were made up of members from the five teacher learning communities whose meetings were observed (Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace, 2011, p.273). Methodologically Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace's research is based on a much more substantial data set than the proposed research will use. There are however some aspects of their research which the proposed research will integrate. Just as in their work on learning communities the proposed research will make use of observations, as this seems the best method to measure whether teachers are using elements of shared best practice. It will similarly make use of field notes, or memos. This will allow the proposed research to collect more informal data showing the impact of sharing best practice.

One area where the proposed research will differ from Priestley Miller, Barrett and Wallace's is in the teachers it will use as its primary data source. Their research uses volunteers who are enthusiastic about the project on the basis that this will provide the researchers with better insights into what is needed to underpin lasting classroom change, rather than if they were working with teachers who were more sceptical and less enthusiastic about change (Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace, 2011, p.273). Although this may be the case it does make it more difficult for the research to make any wider findings around how to engage all teachers in the sharing of best practice, a vital element to ensure that all teachers are developing their own teaching and learning. Therefore the proposed research will use the primary data source of one department with a range of teachers. This should allow the proposed research to question whether there are any particular links between elements such as length of service or other responsibilities within a school, which may lead to particular challenges in the dissemination and embedding of best practice within a department.

A second research piece which contributes to the idea of the proposed research is Hodkinson and Hodkinson's paper on 'Improving schoolteachers' workplace learning'. This paper takes Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace's focus on deeper principles underpinning the sharing of best practice further and by examining how to ensure that teachers are learn within schools as a means for school improvement. Their paper aims to make the connection between internal CPD as explored in the Scottish learning communities and more generalised theories

of workplace learning where little connection has previously been made (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005, p.112). This is important to the proposed research, as if it is to look at a wider variety of teachers rather than just those who are enthusiastic; it must consider the different ways in which teachers learn to use shared best practice.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson report on a longitudinal research project looking at how experienced teachers learn. They identify three key features which influence teachers' learning. These are the attitude of the individual teacher, the teaching and learning culture of a department, and management of teachers at school and national level. Some of these features match those located by Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace's research particularly the leadership and management aspect, but also to an extent the culture of a department matches the focus on time for pedagogical discussions. However in Hodkinson and Hodkinson's research the attitude of individual teachers becomes more important as their data does not just focus on enthusiastic and supportive teachers. This allows them to ultimately expand upon Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace's conclusion that not only do teachers need to have the possibility of increased learning opportunities through sharing best practice, but also that the strategy of sharing best practice must be designed to enhance the likelihood that teachers will want to take up the strategies shared (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005, p.1).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson's longitudinal case study was conducted over three years across four subject departments in two secondary schools. Departments were chosen as a result of their small size to enable enough access for the researchers, and their willingness to take part over the three year time frame. As the researchers note this meant that they were generally working with smaller more successful departments (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005, p.114). Even though working with such small departments the research generated a large amount of data. This included

> documentary evidence from national bodies, schools, departments and individual teachers on staff development and learning matters; observation within the schools, and particularly of the teachers working in their departments and up to three semi-structured interview with each teacher about their career history and learning as a teacher. Nineteen teachers, four student teachers and two senior teachers were directly involved in the research. There were over 50 transcribed interviews and over 50 days of observation." (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005, p.115)

The sheer amount of data collected in their research allows Hodkinson and Hodkinson to draw some very detailed conclusions. Obviously the proposed research will not produce such

a large data set however as with the Priestley, Miller, Barrett and Wallace paper there are certain methodological approaches which the proposed research is able to make use of. There is again a focus on observation which is used to monitor whether shared best practice is being implemented. Hodkinson and Hodkinson are also very clear that each phase of their fieldwork was informed by what they had discovered in their previous data and that they constantly revisited their data as a result of emerging ideas (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005, p.115). This approach is one that the proposed research will follow. One element that the research will differ is in its data set. Hodkinson and Hodkinson were only able to work with small non-core departments[2], however the proposed research will take place in an English department of nineteen teachers including the teacher-researcher. This may well throw an interesting light onto the elements needed to create a supportive department where best practice can be disseminated and embedded in the classroom.

It is clear then that although much research has been done around the question of how to introduce and sustain teaching and learning change through sharing of best practice there are still many areas where there are possibilities for further investigation. Therefore the proposed research will seek to explore some of these elements. The proposed research will be an action-research project. The teacher-researcher will share an example of best practice with their department during a department meeting and ask teachers to implement this into their classroom teaching and learning practices. The way in which the best practice is shared with and disseminated within the department will have a basis on the findings of the literature review. The implementation stage will then take place over a four week period. During this time the teacher-researcher will observe other teachers looking for elements of the shared best practice, write field notes based on any informal feedback, and write memos reflecting on the way they have incorporated it into their own classroom. There will then be a final feedback session in a department meeting to reflect on what has worked well with the best practice, whether the best practice been successfully disseminated across the department and embedded in teaching and learning practices, and finally what could be done better in the dissemination process and if necessary what needs to be done to ensue that the practice is fully embedded in the department.

The context of the school provides a good opportunity for practitioner action-research. This is why this research methodology has been chosen. The teacher-researcher is a head of

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[2] At secondary school level in the United Kingdom the core subjects are English, maths and science. All other subjects are considered non-core.

department responsible for dissemination of teaching and learning strategies at the departmental level. The proposed research will be carried out in the context of a large English department of 19 including 3 training teachers. The department has a new head of department, the teacher-researcher, and also incorporates four members of the school's senior leadership team. As with all practitioner action-research it is important that there is a clear distinction between the teacher-practitioner and the teacher-researcher. It is vital that the practitioner is able to step outside of their professional role and behaviours and into the very different activity of educational research (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.168).

The school is a large secondary school in an inner-London borough with a large percentage of EAL pupils. Based on areas of development identified in its most recent OFSTED report the school is focusing on improving teaching and learning. The head teacher is seeking to create an outward looking school culture where research based practice and examples of best practice from other schools are integrated into classroom practice. This means that the proposed research will match elements of the school's improvement plan. This lessens ethical discussions of the proposed research as the principles of the research and the way the data is evaluate can be linked to the institutional objectives (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.40). As well as it's appropriateness in the particular context of the school, the action-research methodology has been chosen as it provides the unique opportunity to conduct cycles of research based on a constant process of collecting data, reflecting on and analysing of this data, interpreting the data to allow for further action and overall evaluation (Altrichter & Posch. 1989, pp.27-30). This should help to counteract research access difficulties to those teachers who are less enthusiastic about taking part in the project. Action research has as one of its goals development and improvement of professional. Therefore action research should make the research more useful to those who take part by making a difference to their practice.

To conduct the research one cycle of action research will take place. It will be a seven stage process. The first step, which has already been taken, is to identify the problem in practice. This is what the action research will investigate. Then a literature review will then be completed looking at what has already been researched around the identified problem. The literature review will also include any research which although not directly linked to the content of the research, may make use of some of the methodological approaches being used. The two papers already discussed will form part of this. The third stage of the research is that on the basis of the literature review the teacher-researcher will devise an intervention. This will then be implemented over a four week period in the fifth stage. The final two stages of

the research will be to evaluate the implementation and then to consider whether the problem identified in the first stage was the correct problem to investigate or is the problem actually something else. The final stage will also hope to identify whether there is a new problem which future research should investigate. If the research were to carry of longer this seven stage cycle would begin again to further refine and develop the practice however as this research is for an M.A. course dissertation the research will not continue past this first complete cycle.

Data will be collected throughout the research through the use of field notes, as these allow for the structuring of the empirical field to occur throughout the fieldwork as each set of notes is analysed allowing the researcher to constantly refine the focus for their observations and findings (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p.61). These analytic memos are important in an action research methodology, as a supplement to other formal analytic techniques (Somekh, 1995, p.4). The writing of field notes will begin from the first stage of the action-research cycle. During the implementation stage of the cycle, an audio recording of the section of the department meeting where sharing of best practice is being discussed will be made. A second audio recording will be made during the departmental evaluative discussion on the dissemination and embedding of the best practice. Both recordings will be transcribed. These two data collection methods allow for the research to have a holistic view. Alongside the field notes which provide evidence of the more informal aspects of the ongoing research, the transcriptions should evidence any planned and intentional activities intended for learning something new or different, which are used during the research. As a result of the short literature review in this proposal it is also evident that the proposed research will also need to make use of observations as a method of data collection. These are vital to seeing if there is any impact on teaching and learning based on the shared best practice being researched. Without the observation it would be difficult to monitor or evaluate any impact it has, which is a key aspect of the research question. It is important to recognise that such observations may be affected by the fact they will be conducted by a new head of department and this may eliminate one of the common elements of best practice research where staff feel no responsibility to do anything differently. This will have to be considered during the data analysis.

To analyse the data the proposed research will follow action research's aim to value the unique context of the action above the generation of more general research knowledge, however it will not totally neglect any general findings it may be able to make. As previously

stated Hodkinson and Hodkinson use a methodology which revisits their data based on emerging ideas and this approach is one that the proposed research will follow as it will not create any division between data collection, data analysis and interpretation (Somekh, 1995, p.343). This is an analysis strategy which action-research borrows from grounded theory. The data analysis will seek to generate categories and organise them to ensure that any theories being generated by the data are inductive and fully emerge from the research not from any undisclosed theoretical frame, again as in grounded theory. Transcripts will be analysed for common themes that are apparent. They will also be compared to the findings from the teacher-researcher's observations of teachers to support any emerging ideas or to see if there are inconsistencies between them. As in grounded theory the analysis will try not to be led by any particular theoretical field but instead through engagement with the empirical setting, however the literature review will aim to provide a good sense of the theoretical problem being researched before the implementation stage of the action-research cycle.

It is hoped that the proposed research and its findings could lead to a better knowledge of methods of disseminating best practice across a large core department. As an action research project the research could be taken further and more than one cycle completed. This would help to refine any strategies which prove successful in sharing of best practice. It could also be extended particularly in relation to the third aspect of the research by fully examining the impact of the best practice on students. The proposed research could be extended to include interviews with students with a focus on what they feel the impact of the shared best practice has been on their learning in the classroom. Both of these would be valuable additions to the research but would generate too much data to be fully analysed as part of an M.A. piece of research. Even without these two extensions to the proposed research it is hoped that the findings of the research may help the dissemination of best practice between teachers in a department, helping to ensure that successful teaching and learning strategies are shared with the overall aim of enabling teachers to develop their own classroom practice in this context and allowing as many students as possible to benefit from innovations taking place in classrooms.

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