The UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP): strategies and contributions to large-scale reform

Andrew Pollard (Institute of Education, University of London) and Mary James (University of Cambridge)

Introduction

TLRP is the UK's largest research programme in the social sciences and has provided coordination for 700 researchers in some 70 project teams and almost 20 initiatives of cross-programme thematic analysis. The first projects began empirical work in 2000 and the last project is presently expected to end in 2011. The total budget in the 2009 had risen to £43m and drew contributions from a wide range of UK government bodies. However, the programme is managed by the Economic and Social Research Council.

TLRP is thus a very clear example of a large scale reform project designed to have an impact at a system-wide national level. Indeed, since devolution of powers was agreed in 1998, it is more appropriate to think of the UK as comprising four national education systems – England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. TLRP has contributed to the development of provision in each country and within all major educational sectors. It has also been significantly concerned with enhancing the quality of educational research within the UK.

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme

The origins of TLRP can be traced to the mid-1990s when educational research was heavily criticised for being small scale, irrelevant, inaccessible and low quality. Whether or not these criticisms were entirely justified, researchers faced major challenges in demonstrating the value of investment in this field. Fortunately, thanks initially to the imagination and commitment of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, a new opportunity was created though TLRP.

TLRP's overarching strategy has been to support research which is of both high quality in social scientific terms and of high relevance in terms of policy and practice – to satisfy the criteria of 'Pasteur's Quadrant'. At the same time, considerable effort has gone into impact work, capacity building across the field of educational research and in 'bridging' between the worlds of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Over time, we believe that a greater respect for, and understanding of, the complementary forms of expertise has been developing.

The success of the overall initiative is indicated by the steady growth of the TLRP budget (now almost four times greater than the initial figure), enthusiasm for the user-researcher collaboration advocated by the Programme, the eagerness of researchers to become involved and by the take up of findings by practitioners and public bodies. A recent independent review of TLRP concluded that the quality and relevance of the research was high (see www.tlrp.org/manage/documents/NFER_Final_TLRP_Report_March_2005.pdf). Further, the Chief Executive of the ESRC has also offered a ringing endorsement. As he put it:

> TLRP has been an absolute model of the way in which researchers, working closely in partnership with beneficiaries, can cross the dual hurdle of excellence in academic quality and wider impact. The TLRP is terribly important in demonstrating this. The approach is now entirely normal practice for ESRC, but it was quasi-experimentally piloted through TLRP and has then been rolled out further. Additionally, TLRP has been a model of communication to a wider public. TLRP has also been great on

capacity building, though we acknowledge that much remains to be done for the next generation of researchers. In summary, TLRP has been a wonderful programme – a flagship. (Prof. Ian Diamond, TLRP dissemination conference, Westminster, November 2008)

There are no grounds for complacency though and 'evidence-informed policy and practice' remains beset by challenges. We do, however, feel that some progress has been made.

Aims
TLRP's aims emphasise the positive contribution being made by research on teaching and learning. More specifically, they.are:

Learning: TLRP aims to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes. These include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports research projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning. The Programme is concerned with patterns of success and difference, inclusion and exclusion through the lifecourse.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. The Programme promotes research on teaching and learning across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international co-operation and comparison.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice. This work is the particular focus of the Programme's research capacity building strategy.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and contributes to the improvement of policy and practice in the UK. The Programme works to maximise the impact of its research.

TLRP's overall development has been driven by six key strategic commitments:

- User engagement for relevance and quality
- Knowledge generation by project teams
- Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities
- Knowledge transformation for impact
- Capacity building for professional development
- Partnerships for sustainability

Because of the duration, scale and complexity of TLRP, these elements are managed simultaneously - for instance, with some projects being commissioned just as others complete. However, as the Programme matures, there is also a progressive change in the balance of activity, with more emphasis being placed on knowledge synthesis, transformation and impact. Explicit strategies to underpin post-Programme *sustainability* are being developed in relation to capacity building, the use of ICT to support research development in the field and the deepening of partnerships with cognate bodies.

User engagement for relevance and quality (www.tlrp.org/users):
Project teams work closely with practitioners and others in their research sites and also to link up with key national organisations with potentially 'high leverage' for dissemination and

impact activity. Such relationships are reflected in the membership of project 'Advisory Groups'.

The Directors' Team maintain links with high-leverage user organisations in each educational sector and in each part of the UK. TLRP also works directly with governments in each part of the UK to maximise the use of its research. TLRP has been represented by the Director on significant national bodies for the coordination of education research in Wales (Education and Training Research Liaison Committee of the National Assembly for Wales); England (Chair of the Strategic Forum for Research in Education); Scotland (Management Committee of the Applied Educational Research Scheme). The Programme has also sustained excellent links with senior government officials and the General Teaching Council in Northern Ireland.

Knowledge generation by project teams (www.tlrp.org/projects):
In 2000, TLRP started by funding four networks of projects. A second phase brought in nine larger projects and this was followed by funding of twelve more. At the same time, focused funding initiatives have made specific provision for teams in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – and for some high priority topics (such as widening participation in higher education and concerning technology enhanced learning). Additionally, there have been five different types of investment in capacity building – ranging from fellowships, training courses and e-resource development. With researchers from a large number of universities actively involved, project management responsibility is highly devolved but the Directors' Team provides critical friendship and encourages collaboration across projects.

Knowledge synthesis through thematic activities (www.tlrp.org/themes):
The Programme's strategy for thematic development is a major focus of work as the initiative matures. The portfolio of initiatives to add value through cross-Programme analysis has included: consultancies, thematic groups, thematic seminar series, conferences, workshops, thematic meta-tagging of outputs and sectoral reviews. A conceptual framework is used to organise and integrate this work so that it is theoretically informed. This framework and its application has itself been a significant topic of discussion within the Programme.

Knowledge transformation for impact (www.tlrp.org/publications):
TLRP's impact strategy is a multi-level one, in which we try to produce research findings in forms which are tailored to specific audiences. We both produce many of our own publications and also work extensively with user bodies to maximise impact. Outputs include 'Research Briefings' (over 70 summaries of findings), 'TLRP Commentaries' (18 applications of findings to contemporary issues), practitioner applications (over 200 classroom enquiry activities drawing on research), books (over 40 in two series with Routledge), journals (including almost 30 special issues), reports, etc. TLRP also uses an electronic repository and meta-tagging system called D-space. This has been adopted for deposition of all project publications (over 1600 depositions to date) and has significantly improved the availability of outputs via the internet and major databases. Downloads from the website (www.tlrp.org) have considerably exceeded our expectations, with TLRP Commentaries on public policy leading the way (two have been downloaded over 200,000 times).

Capacity building for professional development (www.tlrp.org/capacity):
Capacity building is an intrinsic part of TLRP's work. Indeed, in all phases of TLRP funding, it has been a criterion for project selection, and this work is supported, monitored and reported on each year. Particular attention has been paid to skill and career development of contract research staff, with special events each year. Additionally, with support from the Department for Education and Skills, TLRP has funded five Research Training Fellowships, which enable senior practitioners to study part-time for PhD's in association with TLRP projects.

From 2002-2005 the Programme's Research Capacity Building Network provided cross-Programme training services in the research methods which were felt to be particularly appropriate in the study of teaching and learning. Each included: research design issues, the use of large-scale data-sets, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. RCBN also initiated a journal, Research Capacity Building. A new strategy for capacity building provision was adopted over the period 2005-8. This was based on an explicit attempt to embed processes for the development of research expertise within the social practices of

educational researchers and was intended to complement other provision through ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods and Research Methods Programme. Additionally, TLRP developed close working relationships with the Applied Research in Education Scheme in Scotland and with relevant UK learned societies, such as the British Educational Research Association. A particular feature of TLRP's new provision is the promotion of a range of e-resources for research training which will be freely available to institutions and groups across the world.

In short, the objective of TLRP's capacity building work is to work *with* the academic community and to support the development of new forms of commitment and provision for the professional self-improvement of educational researchers. An important evaluation, 'Mapping the Ripples', showed the significance of such *expansive* strategies.

Partnerships for sustainability:
Despite its size, TLRP is still small in relation to the challenge and range educational research. It is also only expected to exist for a limited period. For such reasons, we have sought to develop close working relationships with other organisations. A least five different forms of partnership can be identified.

First, we seek expertise from which we can benefit. Such partnerships exist with the British Education Index (BEI) for electronic knowledge management, the Cambridge Centre for Applied Research in Education Technology (CARET) for development of an advanced ICT infrastructure, and Routledge for book and journal publications. Second, as indicated above, we work with key user organisations which are generous enough to promote TLRP work through their communications systems, and thus lend us some of their leverage as we attempt to maximise impact. Third, we work with partners where cooperation enables us to be more effective – for example, a 2007 newspaper supplement was co-funded with NIACE and LSDA and collaboration on Commentaries is well established. TLRP aspires to contribute to a series of sectoral reviews, developed in partnership with others. For example TLRP has contributed substantially to the Nuffield Foundation's 14-19 Review, and the Cambridge Review of Primary Education. Similar work is undertaken with the Institute for Employment Research on work-based learning. Fourth, as indicated previously, we work where we can with the government bodies which help to form policy regarding education research within each country of the UK. The contemporary emphasis given to evidence-informed policy has helped to establish these relationships.

Finally, we have worked with organisations which will, in due course, take on some of the resources, assets or commitments of TLRP into the future. Indeed, one of our informal goals is to 'give everything away' by the end. The most important legacy organisations are seen as being among the professional research associations – and, in particular the British Educational Research Association (BERA). TLRP participants are active in membership and a number of key positions are held by colleagues who bridge both organisations. There are many areas on which deep cooperation has been established, including the support of capacity building activities and resources and the transfer of tools and components from of TLRP's IT infrastructure. On the capacity building front, we have worked with the research committee of the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) and the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE), with major contributions being made to their annual conferences.

Substantive findings

It is very difficult to summarise TLRP findings because the coverage of projects and thematic analysis is so wide. However, a very concise 'Impact Leaflet' is available on the website at: http://www.tlrp.org/pub/index.html

For the purpose of this paper, it must suffice to settle on a case study, and I have selected the work which has been done to distil findings into 'ten principles of effective teaching and learning in schools'. Similar work is in fact going on in relation to post-compulsory education, but I focus on the school sector here.

The position TLRP has taken is that a great deal is now known about effective pedagogy, both in the UK and internationally, but the synthesis, communication, implementation and embedding of such knowledge is far weaker that it should be. This was why, in attempting to draw together some of the key findings of schools projects, we chose to present them in the form of ten principles. We published them first in a Commentary and then refined them a Guide for teachers[1]. Using these vehicles we invited practitioners and policymakers to consider how a limited number of principles, derived from well-founded research evidence and scholarship, might engage professionals and support them in making contextualised judgements, whilst, at the same time, progressively generating understanding and a language for use in a renewed public debate about the why, what and how of future education policy.

The first of TLRP's 10 principles relates to the educational values and purposes discussed above:

> *Learning should aim to help people to develop the intellectual, personal and social resources that will enable them to participate as active citizen and workers and to flourish as individuals in a diverse and changing society. This implies a broad view of learning outcomes and that equity and social justice are taken seriously.*

Although this was drawn from evidence of the range of purposes pursued explicitly or implicitly by TLRP projects, it also drew on theoretical deliberations carried out by across-programme thematic groups: for example, work conducted in association with the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain[2].

The other nine principles cluster under three headings:
1. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
2. Personal and social processes
3. Teachers and policies

Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
Principle 2 drew particularly on projects with a close focus on learning within specific school subjects [3] [4] [5]. These demonstrated that carefully designed teaching sequences, incorporating diagnostic questioning, based on the best evidence of how pupils learn certain concepts or skills, can enhance performance. However, these projects also raised fundamental questions about what it is that children should be learning i.e. about the nature of the curriculum. TLRP concluded from this that:

> *Teaching and learning should engage with the big ideas, facts, processes, language and narratives of subjects so that learners understand what constitutes quality and standards in particular disciplines.*

Principles 3 and 4 are strongly linked and have theoretical and empirical underpinnings, derived from Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner and others.

> *Teaching should take account of what learners already know in order to plan their next steps. This means building on prior learning as well as taking account of the personal and cultural experiences of different groups.*

> *Teachers should provide activities which support learners as they move forward, not just intellectually, but also socially and emotionally, so that once these supports are removed, the learning is secure.*

The importance of taking account of prior learning, in cognitive terms, has been shown to be important in teaching subjects such as mathematics and science where early misconceptions create serious barriers to new learning and need to be tackled. TLRP projects in these

[1] http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/Principles%20in%20Practice%20Low%20Res.pdf
[2] See http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/bridges.html
[3] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2h.html
[4] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1bsept.html
[5] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/Scot_extd.html

subjects made this a particular focus although the insight applies to all school subjects to some extent and in different ways. But there are possibilities as well as challenges associated with the influence of prior learning. A number of TLRP projects, especially those working with young children and/or investigating computer use [6] [7], found benefits in teachers making more deliberate and positive use of the informal knowledge and understanding that children and young people acquire in their homes and local communities.

TLRP research projects on the use of computers and other ICTs in classrooms [8] [9] [10] [11] helped to clarify the nature of teaching and learning as purposeful 'tool mediated activity'. In other words, encounters between teachers and learners involve the use of tools such as textbooks, computers and other materials, and signs and symbols such as language and grading systems. Thus the relationship is triangular with interactions involving teacher, learner and tools. Such tools, including language tools, are crucial in scaffolding learning but need to be chosen and used appropriately. As the saying 'rubbish in; rubbish out' implies, tools such as interactive whiteboards are not intrinsically valuable. Their worth depends on how they are used. As TLRP projects found, the usefulness of new technologies was associated with the ways in which they were incorporated into the flow of learning activity and classroom dialogue.

TLRP's 5th Principle moved the focus to assessment issues:

> *Assessment should help to advance learning as well as to determine whether learning has taken place. It should be designed and carried out so that it measures learning outcomes in a dependable way and also provides feedback for future learning.*

In this regard, TLRP projects [12] and a thematic seminar series [13], identified validity problems with conventional, short, externally marked tests which tend to focus on factual recall and therefore narrow the scope of the performance being assessed. For example, tests in science often overestimate students' understanding of key concepts because such things can rarely be measured by a single question. Complex learning outcomes almost always require observation over time and across different contexts. This is an argument for considering ways of enhancing the role of teachers in assessment, albeit with due regard to their professional development needs if their judgements are to instil confidence.

Personal and social processes
TLRP Principles 6, 7 and 8 shift the focus from external conditions, contexts and systems to the nature of learning itself. They recognise that learning has both personal and social aspects and involves the development of knowledge, dispositions, and practices – it has cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions.

> *A chief goal of teaching should be the promotion of learners' independence and autonomy. This involves acquiring a repertoire of learning strategies and practices, developing a positive attitude towards learning, and confidence in oneself as a good learner.*

> *Learning is a social activity. Learners should be encouraged to work with others, to share ideas and to build knowledge together. Consulting learners and giving them a voice is both an expectation and a right.*

[6] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html
[7] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html
[8] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/Scot_extc.html
[9] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2i.html
[10] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/rtfbevan.html
[11] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/kennewell.html
[12] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1bsept.html
[13] http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/daugherty/index.html

Informal learning, such as learning out of school, should be recognised as being at least as significant as formal learning and should be valued and used appropriately in formal education.

Learning understood in this way holds many challenges for teachers. For example, one TLRP project [14] found that, whilst teachers want to promote learning autonomy in their pupils, they find it difficult because of constraints. Those who were most successful were those who took responsibility for what happened in their classrooms – they were not inclined to blame pupils or the Government for what went wrong – and they adopted an enquiry approach to their own learning, individually and in collaboration with others.

Similarly, projects focusing on the promotion of group work [15] [16] showed benefits in terms of significant academic gains, which were seen across schools in different social contexts. However, this required teachers to make deliberate efforts to improve the quality of group work and children's mastery of cooperation and collaboration. A TLRP project on pupil consultation also found evidence of enhanced self esteem, agency and improved learning opportunities. However some pupils had more 'communications competence' or were 'heard' more than others, which indicates that teachers need to be especially alert to social class, language and gender differences.

Likewise, at least two TLRP projects [17] [18] found that young people draw on school experience, and develop it at home, and bring home experience into school, and that such knowledge exchange can impact positively on outcomes. But, again, this impact is mediated by social class, gender and other factors so needs to be handled with sensitivity to avoid negative consequences.

All of these findings about learning have profound consequences for teachers and teaching and the policies of agencies that support and regulate the work of schools.

Teachers and policies
The remaining two TLRP Principles, 9 and 10, are concerned with the implications of the others for teachers own learning and for policy frameworks.

The importance of teachers learning continuously in order to develop their knowledge and skill, and adapt and develop their roles, especially through classroom inquiry, should be recognised and supported.

Policies at national, local and institutional levels need to recognise the fundamental importance of teaching and learning. They should be designed to make sure everyone has access to learning environments in which they can thrive.

Without exception, all TLRP projects had a great deal to say about teachers' professional development because, even with access to new programmes and technologies, improvements in pupils' learning and achievement depend on teachers' learning. Teachers need opportunities to develop their own knowledge, beliefs and values, alongside their practices. A strong message from the evidence is that simply being told what to do, mindlessly, will not secure sustained change. It might serve in the short-term for short-term gains, but practices become ritualised and ineffective if they are not underpinned by the beliefs and understanding that will enable teachers to adapt practices, or create new ones, as contexts change.

Targeted professional development and teaching materials, developed from research evidence 'translated' into practical advice, are valued. But TLRP evidence also suggests that a crucial strategy is for schools to support and make space for teachers' critical enquiry into practice in classrooms. Ideally this should involve teachers working with colleagues. These

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[14] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2f.html
[15] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/Scot_extb.html
[16] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2a.html
[17] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html
[18] http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2i.html

may be from within their own school or department although visits from teachers in other schools can be invaluable for questioning assumptions. This is challenging, of course, and teachers' levels of commitment and resilience are important. Schools with traditions of distributed leadership, staff participation, cultures of inquiry and professional networks support such change best. TLRP projects observed that when senior management support innovation it becomes sustainable. However, head teachers also revealed their concerns about leading learning in their schools within the context of prescriptive government policy. There was sometimes a perception that progress was being made despite government policy rather than because of it.

All of these principles have implications for the future of the teaching profession and particularly the way teachers construe their roles and the kind of professional development needed to support change. Few people would deny a role for teachers in imparting knowledge, explaining ideas, and coaching skills, but if effective pedagogy is also about finding out where pupils are in their learning, diagnosing strengths and weaknesses based on best evidence of commonalities, differences and trajectories in learning, scaffolding new learning, modelling and encouraging learning dispositions, fostering dialogue, collaboration and peer and self-evaluation, and so on, then the programme for professional development is potentially very large.

In summary, as the illustration of work on schooling indicates, by building on project findings and their representation in accessible ways, TLRP has contributed to the renewed focus in UK educational debates on key processes of teaching and learning, and on the ways in which these relate to curriculum and assessment.   For example, a major report on the national curriculum from a Parliamentary Committee was published in April 2009.   Speaking on the BBC, the Chairman said:

> 'This report has taken a year, we've listened to everyone, we've travelled, we've taken oral and written evidence and you know, if you do this job well, you pick up a resonance. The resonance is that the National Curriculum is too prescriptive, it's too top down, and it's about time it was changed. The pendulum has swung the other way.' (Barry Sheerman, BBC Today Programme, 2nd April 2009)

It appears that the direction of educational policy development, across political parties, now echoes the analysis which TLRP has developed over the last decade. To a greater or lesser extent, this is demonstrable in each part of the UK and in all major sectors. Although we certainly recognise broad trends and do not claim direct causal connections, TLRP's commitment to user engagement has helped to build this 'resonance' and the work of the research community appears to be constructively informing understanding of the issues and challenges which contemporary education faces. Indeed, similar accounts of TLRP's work could be constructed in respect of workplace learning, higher and further education, lifelong education, etc.

Conclusion
TLRP has represented a major opportunity for UK educational research. It aimed to contribute new knowledge for the improvement of learning across the education systems of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – but it also aspired to improve the quality of the educational research which will be available in the future.

If all the complexities of such a large-scale programme are stripped away, there are some quite simple foundations. These explicitly combine principle and pragmatism. Thus we have the six strategies which have been described in this paper, but we had to 'bob and weave' regularly to sustain them. Networks, relationships and alliances have always been important. Similarly, in respect of the key issue of knowledge accumulation, we have been guided by a particular theorisation of key issues in teaching and learning, but offered an inclusive approach to the contributions which colleagues wished to make. A more extensive account of

this principled pragmatism and of some of the challenges and opportunities with which it has generated is available at: http://www.tlrp.org/dspace/handle/123456789/380 (Pollard 2006, Christie and Pollard 2009))

We feel we have some successes – but we also experience many challenges and frustrations. For example, with such a wide range of aspirations, we find it impossible to follow up on all the opportunities which present themselves. In such a complex society too, it is extremely difficult to know how to focus our limited resources and track impact with precision. Most fundamentally, we struggle between the assumptive worlds of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the knowledge of considerable differences in their daily experiences, cultures, priorities, accountabilities and incentivisation systems. Sometimes, things get lost and, to our eyes, opportunities have been missed.

Overall though, as a large and well funded programme, TLRP has provided an opportunity for educational researchers in the UK to regroup after the critiques of the mid-1990s. The work produced now is generally well received and we believe that the research community is justified in being more confident in facing the future (though the plight of teacher-educators engaged in research is a rather different story). The policy climate is more open than it once was and, even allowing for some selectivity, there is greater respect for evidence. We feel that we have both benefited from such developments and contributed to them.

The Programme has recently been funded to take forward a more focused group of projects on Technology Enhanced Learning to 2011 and beyond. This extension will benefit from the specialist leadership of Richard Noss (Institute of Education, University of London) but TLRP's broad, generic portfolio will end on September 30th 2009. Books and other publications will continue to emerge for some years. Additionally, UK leadership in knowledge creation in education will to be taken up by ESRC investment in a small number of Research Centres on more focused topics, whilst the capacity building role of TLRP will be taken forward through the British Educational Research Association, the National Centre for Research Methods and other specific institutional initiatives. The Programme will, therefore, pass the educational baton on to new forms of research organisation. We hope that these new research teams will benefit from a climate in which educational research is seen as an important contributor to high quality policy making and professional practice in an open, democratic society.

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Notes

Andrew Pollard was Director of TLRP from 2002 to 2009. Mary James was Deputy Director from 2002 to 2007.

Some parts of this paper have previously been published in Pollard (2007) and in James and Pollard (2008).