

A Model for In-School Teacher Professional Development: Extending on Action Research

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Introduction

The professional development of teachers is a challenge facing contemporary education (Holly and Mcloughlin, 1989:ix). Teachers have much knowledge about the nature of learning; created from their own experiences as a learner, the input they receive through their tertiary training and input resulting from professional development opportunities undertaken. This creates, as Nicol (1997: 97) describes, a 'wealth of knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning'. However, these beliefs, while well formed and powerful are often resistant to responding to curriculum change (Nicol, 1997; Buchmann, 1991; Gore and Zeichner, 1991). Teachers are expected, by the community at large, to keep abreast of current thinking with regard to the teaching of literacy practices and accommodate for this thinking within their classroom practice. Teacher professional development needs to be responsive to this call. This paper aims to present a model of in-school approach to professional development. It is representative of one way a school supported its teachers in their classroom teaching of writing.

The teaching of writing has gone through some significant changes over the past decades within an Australian context. The 1960s saw writing as 'skills' that had to be learnt; the 1970s saw writing as a creative exercise; the 1980s emphasised that writing was a process; and the 1990s saw writing as having real social purpose. (Turbill, 2002a; Hoffman, 1998; Wray and Medwell, 1991; McCormick Calkins, 1986; Walshe, 1982) Teachers in our schools are coming with varied experiences of these changes. From my experience observing and working with teachers on their Literacy practices, I have found that teachers are often using snippets of how they were taught, what they've been told to do through syllabus documents and system and school policies, and what has worked for them in the past. Such teaching occurs often with limited understanding of how these fit with the writing process and understanding of how children learn to write.

A significant sum of money is spent each year on teacher professional development. During my employment as a classroom teacher I was sent to workshops, conferences, and in-services run primarily by the system by which I was employed. I found that I would return from these with great ideas, but never the time or resources to fully implement such ideas within my classroom. My experiences of professional development opportunities were typical of the 'lone-wolf scenario' Huberman (1995:207) describes. The literature surrounding professional development is voluminous. Investigation of this literature identifies some key themes pertinent to professional development. Such themes suggest that for professional development to be effective it needs to support identified teacher needs, integrate theory with practice, and build upon teacher's pedagogy all within a supportive environment (Lefever-Davis, Heller, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Danielson, 1996; Stallings, 1989). As such, the development of an in-school professional development model seems to support such traits.

The action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988:11) - with its components of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and creating a revised plan - has been drawn upon as a tool for teachers to use when refining teaching practice both at an individual and group level. Marsh (1988:29) defines an action research model of staff development as involving '...groups of teachers systematically analysing an issue or problem of concern to them and then planning action programs, executing them, evaluating their efforts and repeating the cycle if necessary'. Key elements in this approach include '... the participation of teachers in the self-reflection, discussion and argumentation'. As such, it is vital that teachers are supported in this quest to refine teaching practice; it is not enough to work through the cycle alone but within a supportive professional community working towards a common goal.

Terms such as "teacher research" and "reflective practice" have become increasingly more common when talking about educational reform with regard to teaching practice. (LaBoskey, 1994; Gore and Zeichner, 1995; Carson, 1997, Grimmett and Erickson, 1988; Kemessis, 1987; Liston and Zeichner, 1989; Oja and Smulyan, 1989; Schon, 1987) Such terms suggest that teachers must play active roles '...in formulating the purposes and ends of their work as well as the means' (Gore and Zeichner, 1995:205). Most professional development opportunities work to solve given problems. However, in actual classroom practice the practitioner has to first identify the problem before beginning to solve it. Such a process needs the practitioner to have an understanding of research methodology to assist with this. (Shulman, 1993) This then poses questions about the effectiveness of professional development opportunities provided for these teachers when often classroom practice demonstrates a miss-match of understanding and consequent strategies when teaching children to write. Professional development must stem from identified needs and work to support these.

To bring about curriculum change and changes in thinking surrounding curriculum area teachers need to take a '...critical and experimental approach to their own classrooms' (Nunan, 1989: 3). Such an approach encourages teachers to become action researchers where they carry out research on their own class dealing with identified problems. However, the literature emphasises the importance of doing this within a supportive, collaborative and professional community (Gebhard, 1999; Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 1994; Stallings, 1989). Such a process, I believe, is more likely to lead to change in teaching practice.

It is with this in mind that I embarked on an inquiry looking at action research as the basis on an in-school professional development model to support the teaching of writing. The following questions were investigated throughout the duration of the inquiry.

- How has writing been taught within Early Stage One and Stage One classrooms over the past ten (10) years at the inquiry school?
- What structures, activities, processes and people partnerships can be identified within Early Stage One and Stage One teacher's professional development experiences?
- What is the nature of the relationship between these professional development experiences and the professional growth of teachers in the teaching of writing?

Methodology

The leadership team at the inquiry school identified the teaching of writing as being a common area of need within the school. As such, it was envisaged that the 'beginning years' be targeted first with regard to their teaching of writing. At the end of 2000 I invited all the teachers of Early Stage One (Kindergarten) and Stage One (Grades One and Two) to be involved in the development of a "balanced writing pedagogy" for these early years in the following year. All six teachers within these early stages wished to be involved.

I had a professional and personal association with the school community – I had been a member of its teaching staff since 1997. They had seen me develop from a beginning teacher to a member of the school leadership team. The notion of myself as a researcher was not uncommon to any of them, as they had seen me conduct research in the school before (Kervin, 1999). However, above all I was seen as a practicing classroom teacher, which I believe, gave me credibility within the school community that the inquiry needed in order to be fully accepted. The importance of relationships to professional development opportunities is recognised within the literature (Turbill, 2002b; Tickell, 1990).

Some may believe that my personal association with the school was in fact a limitation to my research. I believe otherwise, as having such an association with the inquiry school and being known and familiar to the staff, students and parents enabled a climate of 'trust' to be established from the beginning. Hargraves and Fullan (1998:97-98) state that building upon relationships is the key for any educational reform strategy. They write, 'decades of research on and experience in human relations and organization development in the business world, have shown that good relationships are not just emotionally more fulfilling. They also lead to higher productivity, improved problem-solving and better learning'. Relationships between the participant teachers and myself became crucial to engaging us all in improving and defining classroom practice surrounding the teaching of writing.

Over the course of the 2001 school year, the classroom teachers explored the teaching of writing in Kindergarten, Grade One and Grade Two classrooms with myself, through the use of the action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988:11) and individual reflection upon this process. I worked with each of the participant teachers in their classrooms within their normal classroom Literacy block according to a timetable devised at the beginning of each school term. During this time, I responded to the call of the literature to establish what the teachers already knew about the teaching of writing before moving further. In this way, the teachers were recognised for the knowledge they already had and this in-school professional development opportunity could work to support and extend the teachers from that point (Turbill, 2002b; Whitehead, 2000; 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997).

The main form of data that was collected involved individual teacher's reflections of their teaching of writing in their classrooms. This was recorded through their reflective journal entries, structured and semi-structured interviews and my recording of anecdotal comments. Such data relates to Van Manen's (1990:63) notion that 'the "data" of human science research are human experiences'. Each of these methods captured what was happening with the individual teacher – their thoughts, questions and consequent actions. Other data, the teacher's classroom program and students work samples were available to support this. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of data collected on each teacher.

Participant Teacher and grade taught	Interviews (semi-structured and structured)	Hours spent with researcher in their classroom	Reflective Journal entries
'Kate' (Kinder)	9	23	9
'Natalie' (Kinder)	7	27	12
'Amanda' (Year 1)	11	26	18
'Lee' (Year 1)	8	26	12
'Michael' (Year 2)	9	21	19
'Cathy' (Year 2)	2	6	3

Figure 1.1

The Role of Relationships

The notion of 'trust' and the importance of maintaining trust throughout our relationships were continual throughout the inquiry. Covey (1989:178) describes trust as being 'the highest form of human motivation'. Stoll and Fink (1996:109) state that trust is one of the four basic premises for "invitational leadership". Whilst the inquiry was centred on an area identified by the school leadership team, the teachers were invited to be participants in the inquiry and they knew that at any time they could withdraw themselves from the project. It was therefore imperative that they found the inquiry to be worthwhile for them professionally, as it was an investment of their time. Each of the teachers put themselves 'on the line' – having me in their classroom, confiding to me as to what impacted upon their teaching, identifying and admitting to 'gaps' or needs within their understanding of the curriculum area and allowing themselves to critique and be critiqued within our professional relationship. Hence, trust became central to our relationships.

Loughran (1997:59) identifies 'trust' as a central feature of teacher education. He states trust between the two parties '...regardless of the participants' previous learning experiences ... might genuinely be able to approach learning as a collaborative venture'. In order to maintain the trust of individual teacher's throughout the inquiry I established a 'code of conduct' for myself at the beginning of the inquiry and maintained this throughout the 2001 year. This code was designed and implemented by myself, I did not communicate this to explicitly to the teachers as it was more about creating a climate conducive to trust as being the core of this collaborative venture. The following points highlight some key points of this 'code of conduct'.

- I remained a member of the school community. I did keep a teaching load on a class, and was included on the playground duty roster on the days when I was at the inquiry school.
- A timetable was devised at the beginning of each term to advise teachers as to when I would be in their classroom and adhered to this when ever possible.
- I was conscious not to talk to teachers about issues to do with the inquiry in the staff room or within hearing distance of anyone else. All planning, feedback and comments were made to teachers with their privacy assured.
- I was conscious not to meet with the principal straight after being in a teacher's classroom, particularly behind a closed door.

- I consistently aimed to communicate with the teachers about the findings of the inquiry and regularly spoke to them about the direction in which it was heading.
- The teachers were provided with regular updates of my writing drafts.

Such points worked towards creating an ongoing relationship of trust with each of the teachers throughout the duration of the inquiry.

A hermeneutic, dialectic process (Guba and Lincoln, 1989:233-243) formed the basis for the inquiry. The process was 'hermeneutic' in its interpretive nature and 'dialectic' as it drew upon the constant comparisons and contrasts of the divergent views of the inquiry participants. A 'circle of respondents' – which included participants, stakeholders and respondents – were involved in this process working towards the construction of the emergent themes from the data. This then allowed for a shared interpretation developed by the participant teachers and myself. Such a process relied on a relationship of trust.

Results

Reflections over the course of the inquiry demonstrated that the participant teachers were in fact empowered through the nature of the inquiry and this enabled them to direct it according to their needs. Whilst we started out originally to create a shared 'balanced writing pedagogy' the nature of the research responded to their needs and their ownership of the inquiry. This changing nature of the inquiry will be described according to each of its phases.

Phase One: Ethnographic Study of the School and Teachers

This inquiry did not look to ethnography as a way to explicate meanings specific to particular cultures (Van Manen, 1990:11), instead ethnographic principles were used as a way of understanding where the teachers were coming from and adding to the 'thick description' required to understand and work with these teachers' stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1988:22) state that it is important to acknowledge the role the 'past' has played when collecting data in the 'present'. The desire to treat this inquiry '...as an open ended endeavour' (Delamont and Hamilton, 1993:26) was of paramount importance from the beginning. It was imperative that the past experiences of the teachers were explored and acknowledged in order to develop and tailor a professional development experience that was responsive to their collective and individual needs.

As such, the ethnographic aspect of the inquiry involved investigating the history of the school and looking at school and diocesan initiatives with regard to literacy practice. The professional development experiences of these individual teachers were also explored, particularly in relation to the impact of these upon their own developing understanding as demonstrated in their classroom. I entered the inquiry with some idea and an understanding of school and diocesan policy with regard to literacy initiatives and the history of the school with regard to literacy instruction. Consequent professional development experiences were built upon this understanding.

Phase Two: Initial Project Aims "Towards a Balanced Writing Pedagogy"

The ethnographic component of the study enabled me to understand the background of the teaching of writing and establish a starting point to begin the development of

'Balanced Writing Pedagogy' for each of the teachers. The focus of the inquiry then became the Early Stage One and Stage One classrooms and the teachers and students within those classes.

Throughout the inquiry, the teachers and I employed the 'action research spiral' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988:11) in their individual classrooms where we worked on their individual writing teaching practice. The key components of this spiral – plan, actions, observations, reflections – were observed as the teachers and I engaged in planned sessions of team teaching, demonstration teaching with the teachers encouraged to continually critique their own and my literacy practice with regard to teaching the writing process.

Mentoring relationships between each of the participant teachers and myself coupled with the guiding principles of the action research spiral flavoured our interactions. Such relationships were guided by principles from the work of Boreen and Niday (2000), Acton, Smith and Kirkham (1993) and LaBoskey (1994). Each of the teachers and I established a mentoring relationship. However, each relationship was different and as such was responsive to the individual professional development needs of each teacher. This was not something that I could control; instead it seemed to be a natural progression in the professional relationship between the teachers and myself. Acton, Smith and Kirkham (1993:71) identify that the key role of the mentor is to give constructive feedback. It was this understanding that guided my responses to the individual teachers.

Throughout Term 1 2001 the teachers and I concentrated on managing the practicalities of literacy practice in classroom life. This involved us in working through the content outlined in the New South Wales English K-6 Syllabus document (1998) for each specific grade, catering for individual student needs in the classroom and ensuring a 'literacy block' was in place (Ivey, 2002; Crevola and Hill, 1998). This was coupled with input as to what the 'experts' were saying with regard to the teaching of writing. This came from sources I collected (such as excerpts from texts and journal articles on the teaching of writing) and other professional development opportunities the teachers were involved with. Connelly and Clandinin (1988:25) emphasise the importance of 'personal practical knowledge'. Such knowledge enables the teacher a way of '...reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation'. The acknowledgement by both the teacher and researcher of individual teacher strengths enabled the project to ascertain a "starting point" for each teacher.

It was important for me not to replace what the strategies the teachers had with what I believed should be happening. Instead, it was important at this time to consider the experiences of each teacher – their own school experiences, professional development opportunities and beliefs about how children learn to write – and work with these as a starting point. Connelly and Clandinin (1988:184) emphasise this point when they write, 'practices are expressions of a teacher's personal practical knowledge and are not without meaning in the way teachers know their teaching'.

'Michael' wrote, 'As a teacher of writing I need to understand how to write. It is very easy as a (reasonably) proficient writer to forget that the children are learning about, experimenting with and learning to write. I therefore need to understand the various components of writing, as well as the 'totality' or 'finished product' (Reflective Journal – 10.12.01).

Once each of the teachers had the “practicalities” under control they demonstrated need to then refine their own understanding and their own classroom practice.

The data collected on each of the teachers allowed for individual teacher case studies to be developed. Data was collected on each of the six teachers systematically and within the context of their own classroom experiences. These data collection methods correspond with Burns’ (1994: 313) position that ‘a case study must involve the collection of very extensive data to produce understanding of the entity being studied’. Such methods substantiated the ‘thick description’ vital to naturalistic research (Guba and Lincoln, 1981:376). Such description enabled me to best explain the ‘rich interpersonal, social and cultural’ features that were vital to this inquiry (Eisner and Peshkin, 1990:249).

Whilst writing up each of the case studies I encountered some problems. In an attempt to remove bias and remain as objective as possible the flow of the case studies became stilted. After consultation with some academic colleagues it became apparent that by removing myself from the data I had in fact lost the ‘voice’ of the teachers. At this point it became obvious that I was part of the data and my input was unable to be removed. In order to rectify what had happened, and to perform an act of member checking, the writing that I had done on teachers was given to them and time was made to meet with each teacher individually to collect their feedback and for me to be able to hear their ‘voice’ again. Such a discovery reiterated the literatures call for collaborative relationships to be a part of professional development experiences.

This discovery in the research led me to consider Hogan’s (1988) notion of research relationships. The relationships I had established with each of the teachers in these Early Stage One and Stage One classrooms was ‘empowering’. Hogan describes these relationships as involving feelings of ‘connectedness ... that are developed in situations of equality, caring and mutual purpose and intention’ (Hogan, 1988:12). The relationships that the participant teachers and I shared were a key component to this professional development experience.

Once the teacher’s had each reviewed their individual case study, I attempted to work on them again. They still did not seem to flow as a logical part of the story. At this time I returned to the work of Connelly and Clandinin (1988:24) where I read, ‘stories, of course, are neither seen nor told when one part is focused on in isolation from other parts. When this happens, we analyse and learn about the parts. But the unities, communities ... in the whole are not seen’. This led me back to my analysis of the data. When I looked at the data closely, it became evident that the data was in fact showing me how our professional relationships and responsiveness to individual teacher needs had extended the action research process we were using; not the separate teacher journeys I had been trying to identify. Whilst I had responded to the direction the teachers had taken the inquiry in, I had not comprehended fully the implications of this to the action research spiral. Such a discovery led into discovery of the third phase of this inquiry.

*Phase Three: Evolution of the Project
“Action Research as a Professional Development Model for
the teaching of writing”*

Mid-way through term 3 2001 the inquiry changed. The teachers had clearly become co-researchers of the inquiry. The responsibility for the direction of the inquiry was transferred to them, as they became the owners of the writing pedagogy that we had developed. Each of the teachers was able to articulate their understanding of their writing pedagogy and critique not only what they saw from others but themselves as teachers.

<p>'Kate' described this professional development as "ongoing", "challenging" and "thought provoking" (Reflective Journal – 7.5.01; 21.5.01; 10.12.01) 'Michael' described his experience of this professional development as being 'professionally formative and inspirational' (Reflective Journal – 10.12.01)</p>
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Sanders (1992:1) writes that the key to research which involves observation and evaluation of teaching practice is to '...listen and respond, share information, discuss your intentions and obtain feedback, clarify expectations, provide clear and useful reports in a timely manner, and maintain an open evaluation process...' Such a list of requirements contributed to the ethical nature of the research. It enabled the teachers to take ownership of their work while at the same time involving me in regular opportunities of member checking and peer debriefing, all contributing to the clarification of the research area.

Each of the teachers demonstrated increased development of personal tools, namely reflective practice. Reflective practice was a process I used to engage teachers in thinking about and articulating their professional practice. While this was used consistently throughout the inquiry as teachers were encouraged to journal to issues that arose during the inquiry and later to critique their own teaching, there became a greater depth to reflections from teachers once they had gained ownership of their teaching practice.

Reflection is not easily acquired or practiced (Baratz-Snowden, 1995; Gore and Zeichner, 1991, LaBoskey, 1997). From looking at the case studies presented by the participant teachers, the different levels of reflective practice became evident. 'Michael', a more experienced teacher had good control over reflecting on his practice through his journal entries. 'Amanda', a less experienced teacher, found it more difficult to be reflective on her practice and used her journal more as a tool to clarify her understanding of the Stage One outcomes and associated content. It could be then proposed that reflective practice occurs as a result of the individual person's experiences and the input they receive on professional practice at a school level and external level. These contribute to reflective practice which itself occurs at two distinct levels – the commonsense thinker and the alert novice (LaBoskey, 1994:29). As such, it is important to recognise this when reflective practice is used within professional development opportunities.

LaBoskey (1997: 161) states, 'reflective teachers tend to be guided by "passionate creeds"'. The journey of a teacher through the abovementioned process establishes this passion that comes from a true understanding of the curriculum area.

<p>'Kate' wrote, 'I am a very confident teacher of writing who thrives on modelling and passing onto the children everything I know ... it [teaching writing] has become my</p>

passion' (Reflective Journal – 30.7.01).

The use of questioning was also used consistently to assist their understanding of the writing process. This mostly took the form of researcher to teacher and vice versa. The establishment of a team mentality between teachers within Early Stage One and Stage One worked to establish cognitive coaching amongst team members and team members and the researcher.

I was no longer the 'expert'. I had become one of the teachers working within the inquiry. All the teachers were empowered in their understanding and description of their classroom practice in terms of teaching writing. A community of learners had been established and true collaborative practice was in action.

Development of a Grounded Theory for In-School Professional Development leading to Curriculum Change

Figure 1.2 represents the flow of the inquiry throughout the year. Analysis of each of the previous stages resulted in the development of a grounded theory for curriculum change. Significant aspects could be seen which contributed to this professional development model. These aspects are described according to the order in which they appeared in the inquiry.

Mentor Relationships

Each of the teachers responded to having someone to work through issues with them. It was important to recognise both strengths and weaknesses amongst both parties in order to ascertain a starting point for this professional relationship.

'Michael' made reference to 'having a professional, well informed and supportive practitioner ...who is quite comfortable in letting herself be observed and critiqued... as being a benefit to the professional development experience
(Reflective Journal – 10.12.01)

This in-school professional development model built upon a constant mentoring relationship between each of the participant teachers and myself. As a member of the school staff I was accessible, therefore a constant resource to the teachers.

Understanding of Input and Managing the Practicalities

Each of the teachers had been exposed to a significant amount of input from their own experiences, tertiary training and professional development opportunities. Having someone to talk through these experiences, particularly conflicting input areas, enabled the teachers to begin to make connections with their understanding of the writing process.

Each of the teachers demonstrated the need to have control over the practicalities of their classroom. This incorporated their understanding of the syllabus documents and the structure of their literacy block.

Once these two aspects were in place the teachers could move forward, increasing their understanding of the writing process and how subsequent classroom practice.

Cognitive Coaching

The teachers needed constant input that was targeted at their specific needs in the classroom in order to extend and refine their understanding with regard to their teaching of writing. The provision of literature in the form of excerpts from textbooks and journal articles, to support these needs was effective as it worked with their individual and sometimes collective areas of need. This input also aided discussion and assisted with the identification of areas needing to be explored further. Such a process assisted with moving the teachers forward in their understanding and application of this to their classroom practice.

Increased development of Personal Tools Working Towards True Reflective Practice

Each of the participant teachers entered the inquiry with their own repertoire of personal skills that they used within their teaching practice. These skills were acknowledged, but the inquiry also endeavoured to build upon these through the incorporation of reflective practice as a key inquiry instrument that drew upon the principles of the action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988:11) with an emphasis on teacher recalibration of practice.

Reflective practice was used as a tool for data collection throughout the inquiry. It was evident that each of the teachers attained a different level of reflective practice. However, there was development of this reflective practice throughout the course of the study for each teacher – moving from description of what was happening to reflecting on aspects of their own teaching practice that could be changed to best support the learners.

'Michael' wrote that it is important to be '...reflective of my own practice ... and being prepared to take on other ideas...' He continues by saying that this is important in order for himself as a teacher '... to do the best by the children in the class...'
(Reflective Journal - 10.12.01)

The Creation of a Community of Learners and True Collaborative Practice

Establishing a community of learners is more than being a mentor, facilitator or friend. It involves actively "...transcending the diverse personal and work experiences of colleagues" (McNiff, 2000:65-66). Such a community encourages people to move beyond their comfort zone and together 'explore new epistemologies of learning'.

Whilst the teachers started out working with me, a 'team' mentality took over where close working relationships were formed amongst grade partners and the stages as a whole. The teachers worked together to create and maintain 'balanced writing pedagogy'. My role changed from being the 'expert' to being a member of this 'community of learners'. Such a reaction is indicative of true collaborative practice as opposed to 'contrived collegiality' described by Hargreaves (1992:235).

'Natalie' wrote, *'The infusion of expert knowledge with the general teachers knowledge has been very beneficial ... the collaboration has been fantastic and enhanced the children's writing immensely with the infusion of ideas and analysis on teaching practices and strategies'* (Reflective Journal – 10.12.01)

Conclusion

Throughout the course of 2001, the participant teachers and I worked through the creation and maintenance of 'balanced writing pedagogy' within these beginning years at school. While this was in response to the identified needs of these teachers, and in fact the school, what eventuated was so much more. The full embrace the participant teachers gave to the inquiry and the true collaborative nature of our relationships enabled the inquiry to take the direction it took. By responding to the needs of the teachers the inquiry was able to extend the methodology of action research and in the process present a grounded theory for in-school professional development leading to curriculum change.

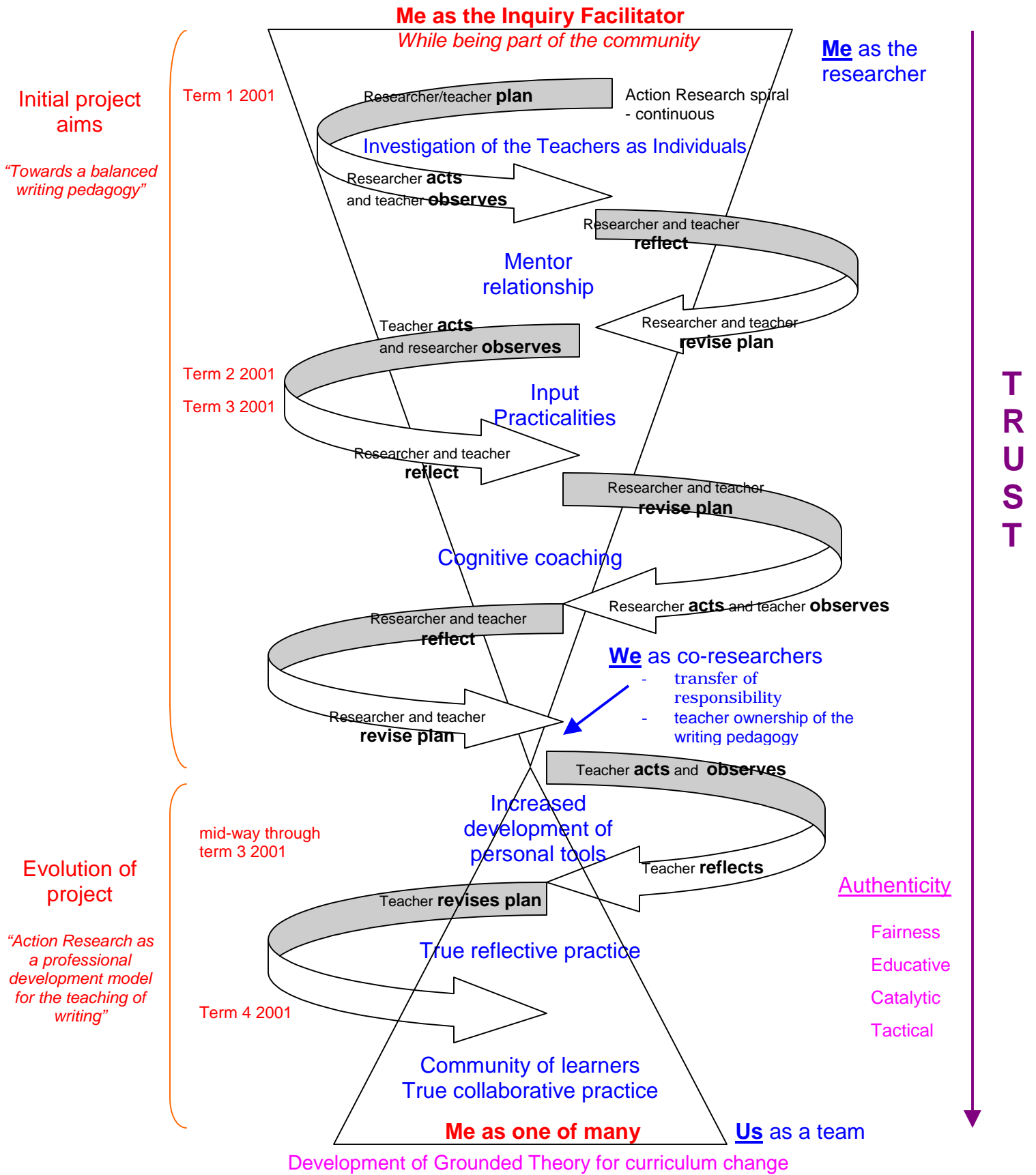


Figure 1.2 – A Model of In-school Professional Development

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