Formative interventions and practice-development: A methodological perspective on teacher rounds

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine Rounds as a research-based method of developing practice in school settings, a method that claims to integrate teacher professional development and school improvement. We see these research goals (teacher learning and organisational development) as linked and mutually generative (Corwin, 1975) but as goals that nonetheless raise some questions about the development of practice itself—in this case, the professional practice of teaching in schools. Our focus is on Rounds (specifically Teacher Rounds, Del Prete, 2013) as a means of research-based development that has a wider collective and social dimension, a method that proposes a structured and systematic approach to collaboration among teachers with the goal of developing the practice of teaching through the generation of new knowledge in the practice situation. In its emphasis on the development of practice as a goal (perhaps *the* primary goal) of research activity, Rounds might therefore be understood as a formative intervention, an evidence-driven tool that has a practitioner-centred view of the development of their practice at its heart. Engeström makes a fundamental distinction between formative intervention and design experiment as types of research: formative interventionists work *with* practitioners and from *their* perspective – and do so with a developmental purpose – rather than seeking to deliver findings (e.g. previously published research findings) to practitioners for them to implement with varying degrees of fidelity. In these ways, our discussion in this article is therefore methodological: we analyse Rounds as a type of collaborative research that seeks to generate new knowledge that can inform the development of practice, and our analysis proceeds by way of a comparison with another type of collaborative research that has the same end-goal. Our analysis is not based on our own participation in a Rounds intervention but from our examination of the research literature, our observation of Rounds in action in other settings and the planning of our own Rounds intervention in a group of schools in London.

At the same time, our own previous work has involved collaborations with teachers with formative goals and we have also engaged in practice-developing research that has drawn on a related but distinct tradition of work. Ellis (e.g. 2011, 2010, etc.) has worked alongside teachers, to learn in and from practice and to help teachers to develop their collective practices.

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Gower (2015) is currently engaged in collaborative teacher professional development using video as a tool. Frederick, as a school leader, has long-standing experience of operationalizing different approaches to teacher development in the context of school improvement. And Childs has studied the use of physical space in teacher collaboration that is intended to develop their pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. Childs et al., 2013). Ellis's approach to practice-developing work, in particular, has been informed by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), not because of a particular commitment to the role of one specific theory in the improvement of educational practices but because CHAT is characterised by at least two distinctive, methodological claims. First, if it is enacted as its originators in Helsinki intended, it involves a method that is, in terms, development *and* research. Rather than accepting this integration of research and development as the lesser form of 'applied research' (distinct from 'basic' research in Psychology or the Learning Sciences, for example), CHAT-informed research sees this integration as likely to lead to more rigour and to produce better research that answers difficult questions in complex situations. The development of practice – from the perspective of the practitioners – therefore becomes a form of research that involves the production of new social scientific knowledge about practice (and the challenges of changing practice) itself. As Olson (2004) has pointed out:

> The reputation of educational research is tarnished less by the lack of replicable results than by the lack of any deeper theory that would explain why the thousands of experiments that make up the literature of the field appear to have yielded so little. (p. 25)

In other words, CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development are less likely to lead to frustration with teachers or among teachers for not enacting change with high levels of fidelity to the interventionist's ideas. Indeed, the claim is that they are more likely to provide insights into the challenge of stimulating change in practices and they are more likely to be sustainable (although this last point, as with other traditions of practice-development, continues to be moot).

Second, CHAT-informed formative interventions involve working with and alongside teachers and other practitioners rather than working *on* them. The starting points for the specific problems of practice have come from teachers as practitioners and the outcomes of the collaborative activity have to meet the tests of reliability and fitness-for-purpose of these practitioners rather than only the interventionists, whether managers driven by performance targets or academics driven by their own disciplinary cultures of performativity. So the quality of communication that takes between practitioners and between practitioners and interventionists in these sorts of projects are vital—what CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development seek to achieve is a mediating social space where all participants can come together, safely, and talk, to collaborate; communication is intended to enable to collective examination of current practice, to make distinctions and ultimately decisions that are likely to move practice forward. So CHAT-informed development and research, for example, is not like a design experiment where the researcher thinks they might have the answer and asks teachers, whose interests may or may not coincide, to help them test this out.

1.1. A methodological perspective

The points of contact between Rounds and CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development are interesting, we believe, and will help us to structure the methodological discussion in this article. We use the term *methodological* to signal our interest in the common stance of Rounds and CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development: a commitment to research (defined in its most basic sense as the generation of new knowledge through systematic enquiry) and a commitment to participatory ways of knowing in which the role of any outside 'researcher' is not to lend the process authority or objectivity. The focus in Rounds of gathering data through observation for joint analysis, the importance of conversation and open communication in that analysis, the future-orientation to the work of the Rounds activity and the underlying commitment to seeing theory and practice as a whole rather than as separate, hierarchically-ordered entities—all these align easily with the general CHAT approach, as we will show in this paper, and they both might therefore be understood as interesting forms of specifically educational research.

That said, we do think there are important differences that might be worthy of discussion and help to develop the Rounds approach as an enabling intervention and to understand the terms of the relationship between practice-development and research more generally. We will not be arguing that Rounds needs to learn from CHAT, however. CHAT has its own learning to do. But there are three areas in which we think further clarification and elaboration of the methodology of Rounds would be useful. The first is the relationship between individual and collective practice; this is a perennial concern for CHAT also. This question addresses how developing the work – the teaching – of an individual teacher through systematic enquiry can have wider impact on their colleagues, their department, their school. Teachers are not only a collection of individual workers behind closed classroom doors. They are part of an organisation and also part of a field or practice (such as high school Mathematics teaching) with its own historically-developed norms, values and bodies of knowledge. What is the possible relationship between individual practice-development and collective or organisational practice development? And how do we know?

The second methodological question addresses the role of theory in the process of Rounds; the usefulness (or otherwise) of abstract, propositional knowledge, and how this might or might not take the development of a practice forward. CHAT doesn't argue that abstract concepts alone will improve practice. CHAT does, though, as did Vygotsky (1974), argue that by bringing people's own ideas into contact with some 'scientific' (academic) ideas, you can then develop mature concepts, a hybrid of abstract and spontaneous concepts that help people to do some work in the world. Our view is that, perhaps