



FEATURE

## Research engagement for the school teacher and its role in the education community

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## Research engagement for the school teacher and its role in the education community

Jonathan Firth

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### Synopsis

This feature article discusses whether teacher professionalism can and should include research engagement as part of a broader conception of the teacher's role. The importance of teachers' awareness of research is considered, and an argument is put forward that more active forms of research engagement are likely to have better outcomes in terms of professional learning and skills. The various forms that teacher research could take are briefly discussed, and the establishment of a research centre at the author's school is presented as one possible model for increasing teachers' research engagement. Barriers to teacher research are also considered.

Keywords: Teacher research; professionalism; autonomy; evidence-based practice; schools

### Introduction

*"There is an urgent need to challenge the narrow interpretations of the teacher's role which have created unhelpful philosophical and structural divides, and have led to sharp separations of function amongst teachers, teacher educators and researchers."*

Donaldson, 2011 (p. 5)

Learning which is inspired by curiosity and an element of discovery has become a standard recommendation of social constructivist approaches to education, and most school staff would agree that research can be a valuable part of the learning process. Research tasks have been built into the new national qualifications, with most Highers and Advanced Highers featuring a research project that is worth a large proportion of the overall mark.

Strangely however, engaging in research is not typically seen as a typical part of the teacher's role (Donaldson, op cit.; BERA, 2014). Instead, teachers' ability to act autonomously and engage with research is threatened internationally due to top-down, regulatory approaches to teacher professionalism which promote a conservative and risk-averse profession (Sachs, 2016). This feature examines the levels at which teachers can engage with research, discusses the potential benefits of doing so, and looks at a novel school research centre which aims to facilitate teacher research.

### **Research engagement**

Why should teachers engage more fully in research? In recent years there has been an increased emphasis on the role of research *awareness* in teaching; the Sutton Trust report (Coe et al, 2014) lists a number of areas of 'great teaching' based upon research evidence, while grassroots organisations such as ResearchEd ([workingoutwhatworks.com](http://workingoutwhatworks.com)) have also emerged, organising practitioner conferences where evidence-based practice is shared. Ensuring a strong evidence base for teaching practices arguably allows us to navigate between tradition and assumptions on the one hand, and newer but often flawed 'progressive' approaches on the other. A notable example is the work of Hattie (e.g. Hattie, 2008) whose meta-analyses of educational interventions provide evidence which often flies in the face of received wisdom on issues such as class size and group work.

However, there are flaws in the 'what works' approach: it can detract from teacher agency, and is associated with government mandates that fail to take context into account (Biesta, 2007). One possible antidote to this pitfall is to make the teacher, rather than governmental bodies, the locus of judgements on whether research is relevant, equipping them with the skills to evaluate findings from the literature and to use them for their own research-based interventions. This in turn can generate further evidence.

The concept of research awareness, therefore, would be better stated as 'research engagement', with a greater emphasis given to co-creating research evidence rather than simply using it. As the quote at the beginning of this feature states, the social conception of the role of a teacher is a very narrow one. 'Evidence-based' teaching can be critiqued as placing teachers in a consumer role, rather than reconceptualising them as members of a broader educational community in the way that Donaldson (op cit.) envisages.

### **Professional learning**

Teacher research can clearly play a role in the realm of continuous professional development (CPD), too. This is a costly undertaking for schools and governments, but a vital one because of the benefits of developing highly skilled teachers. Psychologically, there are good reasons to believe that research-based learning is likely to have a major impact on professional knowledge: greater agency increases motivation (just as it does with pupils), and from a memory point of view, learning which is spaced out over weeks/months, such as a research project, results in better retention of facts and concepts than the 'massed' learning of a one-off CPD course (see Cepada et al., 2006, for a review of the 'spacing effect'). Additionally, items which relate to our own actions and interests, and particularly to our future plans, are better remembered (Klein, 2014).

These considerations fit well with the conclusions of Donaldson (2011), who notes: “*The impact of one-off courses or events, however stimulating, tends to dissipate on return to the realities of the classroom. The most powerful forms of development are local, collegiate, relevant and sustained.*” (p.9). There are therefore multiple grounds to promote a deeper teacher engagement in research, rather than just using research to inform classroom practice.

What form should teacher research take? There is a huge range in the potential scale of such work, ranging from brief and self-contained ‘action research’ within a classroom - reviewing a limited body of literature and running controlled studies with one’s own students, for example - to more longitudinal and formally structured collaborations between different schools and/or with HE institutions. Drew, Priestley and Michael (2016) describe a collaborative schools-university research initiative which led to an increased sense of agency among teachers, and “*fostered the development of criticality – a more constructive critical engagement with practice – through engagement with academic literature and research, and working with external partners*” (p.99). In terms of the role of such collaborations in translating knowledge of evidence into teaching practice, Cain (2015) reports positive outcomes from a project where teachers integrated research findings about gifted and talented pupils into their work via semi-autonomous projects. Both universities and schools can stand to gain more broadly from such collaborations due to the different skill sets associated with the different sectors: teachers typically lack experience of academic writing and of research funding, while many academics have limited direct access to schools and may have less familiarity with current issues around how qualifications are implemented on a day-to-day basis.

As teachers become more research engaged, they simultaneously gain more from their academic reading, developing a more sophisticated ability to understand educational literature. With increased involvement in the co-creation of primary educational research, a philosophical question arises about this changing role - are they essentially consumers or creators of educational research, and if the latter, what status should this work have in relation to their teaching duties? More fluidity between the roles of teacher and researcher and easier transitions between the sectors - for example, for teachers who also wish to work as teacher educators - could potentially be beneficial, but there may be losers in such a scenario, and practical questions would need to be asked about how this would operate. More work is also needed to find out about the role research activities can play at different stages of a teaching career, and exactly what conditions make it most effective in professional learning.

### **Establishment of a research centre**

In my place of work, a large independent co-education secondary school, a framework has been established to promote and facilitate staff engagement in research. This 'research centre' – the *Hutchesons' Centre for Research* - has two aims in particular – to build an ethos of research throughout the school, and to develop a collaborative community of scholars - comprising both pupils and staff, and connecting with external researchers.

In my own practice, this has so far led to several projects. I am working with the Psychology Department at Queen Margaret University to investigate early secondary school learners' memory for vocabulary in a foreign language, and I am also studying changes to the scheduling of homework tasks. My colleagues have also launched several exciting projects, from classroom-based action research to the establishment of broader networks – one of which is an international network of schools aiming to look at obstacles to girls in education worldwide. There are also ongoing collaborations with both Glasgow and Strathclyde education faculties. We are hosting a visiting research fellow from a local university, and running a staff/pupil research conference to which other local schools are invited to contribute.

This research centre provides opportunities for teachers to get involved with research in a way that for many is a novel and challenging experience. There is a system for proposing new projects, as well as an ethics board which scrutinises proposals and considers any impact on pupil wellbeing. Staff are provided with a mentor if required, and links with external partners are facilitated. We also guide senior pupils who choose to write independent research papers, and are working on ways to develop research interdisciplinary research skills from S1 upwards.

I feel that this 'research centre' model is promising as a means of fostering the research engagement and professional learning discussed earlier in this feature, and in future it will be interesting to compare it with other structures for supporting staff research. Some schools, for example, have established a 'research lead' role – usually this involves an individual teacher being given the remit of disseminating educational research to colleagues. This is positive, but arguably may fail to foster a broader culture of research or to challenge the limited conception of a secondary teacher's role as described in the quotation at the beginning of this feature.

### **Barriers to teacher engagement**

On the face of it, teachers as graduates and professional educators (many with postgraduate qualifications) are well qualified to conduct research, but practical barriers may stand in their way. Time and money are at a premium in the education system, with increasing time pressures in most schools and widespread cuts to support staff; the TUC reported that teachers work more overtime than any other profession (Wiggins, 2015), and staff may

therefore struggle to fit in additional research tasks. Another obstacle is a lack of the comprehensive library facilities which are standard in most HE settings - most teachers have limited access to research journals (if any).

Some barriers are mitigated slightly compared to previous years due to the ease of networking and sharing resources online. The need for face-to-face meetings is reduced by the use of technology such as Google Hangouts, and access to resources is easier than in the past due to increased open access and internet sharing of resources, as well as the GTCS's (General Teaching Council for Scotland) useful EBSCO Information Services research collection. Many academics are happy to provide a copy of a recent publication on request, too. However, while these things can help, teacher time and funding pressures are not going to disappear, and it is simply not possible for schools to release staff from classroom duties or fund them to run research. A very positive step would be the establishment of small-scale research funding to facilitate teacher research - accessed by competitive grant application - to provide for some classroom cover, travel and admin costs. Schools could also show flexibility in timetabling when staff have committed to a research project, such as freeing them up from certain extra-curricular or admin duties or compressing their hours, and allowing this work to count towards target CPD hours. A peer-reviewed journal specifically for research by school teachers would also be a welcome development.

Finally, as so often, a major obstacle to behaviour change can be cultural inertia. It's possible that tackling some of the obstacles described could lead to the more enthusiastic teachers becoming 'early adopters' of research as an innovative behaviour (Valente, 1996), and to this rippling outward to the broader teaching community. However, this is much more likely to occur with institutional support. It is encouraging to see organisations such as British Educational Research Association (BERA), Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) and GTCS taking a positive stance on the issue of teacher research, but more widespread and proactive support at school leadership level will be necessary. At a time when the value of research in education is increasingly being recognised and technological developments help to facilitate collaboration, this is a good moment to push forward with teacher research as a key element of professionalism.

## **Conclusion**

This feature has argued that active research engagement is an effective but under-utilised method of professional learning, and described one novel structure whereby teacher research has been embedded into a school context. Overall, if the education community is truly committed to developing teachers who engage in continuous professional enquiry, these and other possible means of supporting teacher research must be evaluated, and barriers must be addressed.

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