New teachers and practitioner research:
willing; able; irrelevant

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some of the key findings of a mixed-method exploratory case study investigating the perceptions and realities of new teachers' engagement in and with research. Newly qualified teachers are well prepared to engage with research literature for the development of practice, and to employ the research skills which they develop during their undergraduate degrees and their initial training programmes. In school, their research knowledge and skills are seldom put to good use, however. Should initial teacher education therefore abandon research methods modules and focus on developing the skills which enable new teachers to access and critically evaluate existing research evidence? The study employed a hybrid analytical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006), a three-stage process of inductive and deductive theme-generation and scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012 the Department for Education (DfE) initiated a review of the role and impact of research evidence in teaching, resulting in a series of reports (viz. DfE 2013a–d; Goldacre 2013). The review described examples of evidence-informed improvement as 'pockets of brilliant professional practice' (DfE 2013a: 3) but concluded that there was 'a paucity of data … about how best to put effective techniques into practice in the classroom' (DfE 2013d:

7). These conclusions underpinned the DfE's assertion that policy decisions, school improvement and teaching practices in England would henceforth be informed by research evidence of 'what works' (DfE 2013b: 4).

The study described in this paper developed as part of a project looking at the value and use of research evidence in teaching. The study sought to develop an understanding of the nature of teachers' engagement in research, and to explore their

perceptions of it. The following research questions were devised to drive the study and to allow evaluative conclusions to be drawn:

- What is the nature of teachers' engagement with research?

- How do teachers use the research skills developed during their training?

- What research skills are required of teachers in their professional role?

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The study was an opportunity to gauge the impact of a research skills module, which ran between 2014 and 2017, forming part of an inner-city Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme, with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) awarded on completion. The investigation set out to ascertain the extent to which newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were utilising their research skills, and the value they attached to them. The findings were to inform developments to the programme and improvements to taught research-related elements.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

It is important to point out that there is a huge breadth and variety of terms, titles and definitions associated with educational research. This is because the field encompasses many different traditions and methodologies. For example, while the term 'practitioner research' is prevalent in literature concerned with research by professionals in education, social and health services (see, eg, Vetter 2012; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier 2013; Lunt & Shaw 2017), it remains a 'blanket term [which includes) teacher-research, practitioner inquiry, problem-based inquiry, action research and action learning' (Ellis & Loughland 2016: 122–3).

Practitioner research was the preferred term of reference for the study because it is characterised by a desire or commitment to understand practice, through investigation, assessment and evaluation, with the aim of developing and improving teaching methods and interventions. The term explicity reflects research activity which is practitioner-led, as opposed to being initiated or conducted by external institutions. Stenhouse (1975), exploring teachers' engagement in research in the 1970s and early 1980s, developed the notion of an 'extended professional', including a description of how practitioner research might be realised:

Autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of work of other teachers and through testing of ideas by classroom research procedures. (p. 144)

THE STUDY

The research study adopted a mixed-method exploratory case study approach, drawing on student cohort evaluation data and individual questionnaire responses. A hybrid analytical framework was adopted (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006) – a three-stage process of theme-generation and scrutiny. The stages were:

1. Developing theory-driven codes

2. Reading data, applying codes and additional coding

3. Connecting codes and exploring themes

The theory-driven codes essentially summarise and represent key themes which are identified through a review of literature. The analysis of the collected data is subsequently 'guided, but not confined' by the constructed code manual (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006: 88), which acts as theoretical framework through which to interpret data.

The second stage of this framework sees the application of the preliminary codes to qualitative data and the development of additional 'inductive codes' where themes develop. The third stage involves the exploration of the coded themes: a narrative analysis of the emergent patterns, identifying 'consensus [...] and areas of potential conflict' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006: 89).

Exploring data in this theoretically grounded, systematic manner serves to improve the 'interpretative rigor' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006: 82) of the analysis, and the validity and credibility of conclusions. A fuller description and application of the hybrid analytical framework can be read in Ayres (2017).

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A key element of the study was the design of the questionnaire which would be completed by participating teachers. The questionnaire was collaboratively developed and pre-tested: Initial plans were shared and developed with delegates at an education conference, helping refine the study's design and the wording of the questions. The pre-test involved a group of trainee teachers who agreed to pilot the questionnaire and provide feedback.

To reduce inherent bias, the questionnaire was designed to avoid any suggestion that engagement in or with research was particularly good or bad. Respondents were not asked to agree or disagree with normative statements about research. And, in an attempt to avoid cognitive overload (Newby 2010) and achieve a healthy response rate, the questionnaire was limited to the following six questions:

Q1. Which of the following labels best describe your professional role? (Multiple options were provided.)

Q2. To what extent would you describe yourself as a researcher?

Q3. How would you define 'research'?

Q4. What impact does research have on your professional role as an educator?

Q5. What is the nature of your involvement in research?

Q6. What research skills, attributes and/or values do you possess?

A target of 50 respondents was established, based on the work in similarly grounded studies (eg Hammersley-Fletcher et al. 2015). Two hundred invitations to complete the questionnaire were emailed to teachers who had qualified in the previous three years, through existing communication networks. The questionnaire was systematically delivered, using a secure online survey tool. The questionnaire achieved a response rate of 22%, which was satisfactorily robust given the estimated maximum response rate of 25% offered by Newby (2010). Data was retrieved from the online survey tool and codified by practitioner (P) and question (Q) (eg P1Q1, P1Q2, ...), which allowed for efficient, anonymous management of responses.

DISCUSSION

More teachers than not reported seeing themselves as researchers to some extent. Over 80% of respondents indicated that they possessed competent research skills, including knowledge of research methods and the ability to analyse statistics, and some indicated understanding of principles of research ethics.

'...mainly qualitative approaches to empirical research. Advanced literature searching and reviewing skills. Developing clear research proposals. qualitative data analysis skills, including use of CAQDAS (NVivo). I'm also skilled at participative research, use of visual and multimedia methods.' (P30Q6)

'I have been trained quite rigorously in the art of research.' (P27Q6)

This is perhaps to be expected; postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes tend to include research modules in their programmes. Many NQTs are trained to become 'critical consumers' of research (Goldacre 2013: 13), with the evaluative skills to identify and apply evidence-supported practices (Munday 2016). Carter (2015) supports the notion that critical engagement with research literature, and the development of research skills, supports effective teaching.

And teachers value research. Over half of respondents related research activity explicitly to the development of practice and communicated either benefits which practitioner research might present, the value of engaging with research findings, or both. Responses indicated that teachers have a particular interest – an implicit willingness – in supporting their professional development through accessing research to keep themselves up to date, or to effect changes and improvements to their classroom practices. For example:

'[Research literature] really helped in understanding autistic and other SEND students and how to teach them effectively.' (P15Q4)

However, when disclosing their own engagement in research activity, respondents frequently offered planning, teaching and assessment processes, and their involvement in the generation and analysis of pupil assessment data.

'As teachers we research every day. Looking at a new activity to help pupil progress. Even looking at pupils work is researching.' (P18Q2)

There does exist an overlap between the daily expectation that teachers ensure pupils make progress and the traditional action research cycle (cf. Ferrance 2000). This tendency, for teachers to align research with the collation and interpretation of pupil data was recognised by Hammersley-Fletcher et al. (2015), who warned that the perception is limiting, and does not reflect the innovative, transformational potential of practitioner research.

A small number of respondents indicated that they were expected to engage in distinct research activity, using literature to support evaluation of practices. One described conducting action research into effective approaches to the teaching of spelling. Another implied that it was an expectation placed on all teachers in their school:

'... we all carry out action research. So therefore I see myself as a researcher albeit more casual than someone attending a masters course.' (P25Q2)

The school described here has established a research culture, of sorts. Teachers are required to consciously apply their research skills. However, the response exemplifies a further theme which emerged through the study. Teachers tended to see practitioner research as being somehow 'more casual' than that which might be conducted as part of a postgraduate programme of study.

'I'm an "informal researcher" researching when I want to find out something. Not as formal as what you do for a masters about evaluating and reflecting.' (P36Q2)

'I feel like I am constantly changing

what I do because of formal and informal "research".' (P31Q4)

'[I look for] the best way to do things, or more official/academic research.' (P39Q6)

Respondents referred to differing levels of formality of research activity. It appeared that the tendency to classify research activity as more formal was associated with postgraduate study and the attainment of academic credit, and perceptions that research is conducted either with or by external partners (Lunt & Shaw 2017).

An argument which developed from analysis of the theme of 'formality' was that teachers perceived practitioner research as less rigorous and, therefore, lacking validity compared with accredited or externally validated research. This perception seemed to be somewhat supported by several participants, who described their research in terms of activity to secure their subject knowledge ahead of teaching, for example:

'Learning about a new topic you may need to teach sometime soon.' (P31Q3)

'When teaching a new topic, I would generally research about it (P7Q2) to enhance [my] subject knowledge.' (P7Q5)

This theme was unexpected. Many sources (eg Hulse & Hulme 2012; Carter 2015; Hammersley-Fletcher et al. 2015; Munday 2016) argue that teacher engagement with research enhances practice. But they tend to describe enhancements in terms of pedagogy, rather than addressing gaps in teachers' subject knowledge.

While this was a somewhat surprising development, the most striking finding which emerged related to the percentage of participants engaging in research activity. Although teachers possess the skills and understanding, and high levels of willingness to engage in research, over two-thirds of respondents either stated or suggested that they had no current involvement in research at all. For example:

'During my psychology degree I would consider myself to have been a researcher as I conducted my own experiments based on memory and looked at other research to compare findings and identify gaps in research. However, as a teacher you only look at other people's research and not your own.' (P12Q2)

'Since my dissertation, I have had no involvement in research, other than helping others [gather] evidence for their studies by completing surveys and answering interview questions (P38Q5); I do not really consider myself to be a researcher as I haven't conducted any formal study since completing my PGCE...' (P38Q2)

Respondent P38 communicated a commitment to evidence-informed practices and valued research for professional development. He or she had been educated to postgraduate level and possessed practitioner research skills. However, expectations since gaining QTS had reduced his or her practical engagement in research activity to searching the Internet:

'...if I am [un]sure of something or need to understand something better, I tend to use the internet.' (P38Q2)

This perception of research – turning to the Internet to fill in gaps in professional knowledge or understanding – was echoed by other participants. For example:

'My research is limited to researching ideas on twitter or Facebook.' (P2Q2)

'I know how to google!!' (P13Q6)

CONCLUSIONS

During their ITE, trainees do engage with research literature. They are required to critically evaluate findings in terms of practical strategies and the development of their teaching. They learn the benefit of relating theory and practice. Many NQTs also bring primary research skills with them to the profession; even where research skills are not taught during ITE, many graduates will have conducted empirical research as part of their first degree. We therefore have a workforce well-placed to engage in practitioner research as an integral part of the professional role.

There is inconsistency between schools in the extent to which teachers' research skills are valued and utilised. In schools in which leaders identify and value teachers' research skills, no evidence of these skills being further developed in school was found by this study. The reality is that a significant proportion of teachers do not engage in research activity at all, unless they are enrolled on a postgraduate programme of study or participate in someone else's research project.

Developing practitioner research skills during ITE promotes a critical approach to pedagogy and allows trainees to make meaningful links between theory and practice (Hulse & Hulme 2012). However, since teachers' empirical research skills appear to be under-utilised in schools it should be considered whether the workforce is trained unnecessarily in this area. Should ITE abandon research methods modules and refocus on the development of skills enabling access to and critical evaluation of existing research?

The context-dependent nature of research engagement in different schools presents an implication for trainee teachers seeking employment – their NQT posts. The value placed on teacher research activity may be a wise question to put to an interview panel, to help ascertain whether practitioner research is likely to be encouraged and supported, or an irrelevance. ∎

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