Supporting professional educational inquiry in a residential special school

Teachers researching their own practice has been advocated since the 1970s, and has its roots in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975). He saw the benefits of creating a body of evidence generated by teachers for teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Creating such an environment within education empowers teachers to become agents of change through being reflective, strategic, investigative and inquiring. However, for many teachers faced with the challenges of managing day-to-day educational practice, the prospect of conducting research as an additional role can be daunting. Teresa Whitehurst looks at how Sunfield School, a residential special school, tackled this challenge and created an accessible, meaningful and rewarding process for research work, supported by appropriate ethical guidelines.

Sunfield School provides a home and education for children with severe and complex learning difficulties, predominantly on the autistic spectrum. Teachers are encouraged to seek new and innovative methods for supporting the learning journey of complex children. In order to capture innovations, and to share good practice with other professionals, Sunfield School has embedded an evidence-based research culture throughout its organisation. Key to the research process is creating a method of working that engages teachers, values their contributions and hears their voices.

Closing the gap between research and practice

Engaging teachers in the research process was achieved through creating an Accessible Research Cycle for Teachers (ARC-T) (Whitehurst and Jones, 2007). ARC-T values the traditional rigorous methods of conducting research but uses a common shared language that is meaningful for teachers. At its most fundamental level, making research accessible to teachers necessitates evolving a dialogue in which research is discussed in terms of its value to their practice and to the children and families with whom they work. Without a shared common language and understanding of the power of research, there is a gap between theory and practice. Collapsing the differences between teachers and researchers is the starting point for a cohesive approach to professional inquiry (Saunders, 2007).

The value of research from the inside

A school can find it challenging to extend an existing teaching role by adding a research dimension because, to undertake the task, it has to have resources such as budget and time and the tools for understanding research. Without these, many teachers are prohibited from engaging in a structured inquiry. However, as Burke and Kirton (2006, p.2) acknowledged, conducting
research from the ‘inside’ is ‘of great value in [terms of] developing more nuanced and complex understandings of educational experiences, identities, processes, practices and relations.’

The ARC-T model

The ARC-T model was developed by Whitehurst and Jones (2007). It enables teachers to be more than just consumers of research. They can generate and understand research about their own specific practice thus becoming both initiators and owners of that research. Hargreaves (1996) argued that there is a gap between researchers and practitioners which

betrays the fatal flaw in educational research for it is the researchers, not the practitioners, who determine the agenda of educational research

Hargreaves, 1996, p. 3

The ARC-T sought to address this gap between research and practice by creating an accessible model of research, which is underpinned by rigorous structures, demystifies the process of inquiry and facilitates teachers to be confidently involved in self-reflective practice. Through the process, teachers are able to target focused areas of inquiry and generate outcomes that are meaningful to them and other educators. This process moves away from the traditional model of research based on academic and often inaccessible language (see figure 1) to a process based on a dialogue with which teachers can identify (see figure 2).

The ARC-T was developed by Teresa Whitehurst, Research and Development Officer at Sunfield School and Phyllis Jones, Assistant Professor of Special Education at South Florida University in America. It was trialled with professionals working with children with special educational needs including headteachers, teachers, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. The trial concluded that the ARC-T gave these professionals practical support for the research process helped them to generate ideas for research and de-mystified the research process. ARC-T made those in the trial feel more confident as researchers.

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Figure 1 Traditional research cycle
Maintaining ethical research standards

Departure from traditional language, however, does not mean departure from traditional rigour, transparency and ethical practice. In relation to these, Sunfield School developed its own bespoke approach to ethical practice. It had found that there was not a single, comprehensive framework that could support research in a multidisciplinary environment. After investigating several approaches, the school blended elements from a range of frameworks, so creating a synthesis of principles that could support the diversity of roles performed in the school.

Protection of the most vulnerable children is paramount. Consent, confidentiality and anonymity are considered in all aspects of research. Indeed, no child, whatever their abilities, can be fully informed when giving consent to taking part in research. They cannot be aware of the wider implications or consequences of agreeing to participate. Therefore, the consent of parents or guardians is always needed. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make parents, guardians and children aware of their rights and give them full information about the research in a form they can understand.

In the same way that a researcher would give a typically developing child the choice of whether or not to take part in research, it is important that children with complex disabilities are also given this choice at a developmental level appropriate to them. Although many children with complex disabilities have challenges in communicating in traditional ways, alternative approaches can be adopted and, where possible, facilitated through a speech and language therapist to ensure children are not merely acquiescing. In a residential setting, it may also be necessary to obtain the approval of children’s social workers before their participation in any research is confirmed.

Figure 2 The accessible research cycle for teachers (ARC-T)
The Code of Ethical Conduct

Sunfield School took special consideration of these factors when it developed its Code of Ethical Conduct. This code guides all members of staff prior to commencing a research project. It ensures the research is conducted to a high rigorous standard, and children and families are protected at every stage of the research process.

Case study: an inquiry into inclusion

Supported by both the ARC-T and the Code of Ethical Conduct, the teachers at Sunfield School began to explore areas of their practice. One example involved staff working collaboratively on a drama project with children from Sunfield School and a local mainstream school. This project adopted the ARC-T to help explore children’s perceptions of working together in an inclusive way. Embedding the project into the ARC-T helped to construct the framework of inquiry shown in figure 3.

Teachers from Sunfield School were keen to explore what inclusion means for children. Through the ARC-T framework they were able to build a set of questions from which they could ascertain how children, both mainstream and those with complex disabilities, think society can become more inclusive.

Working through the ARC-T pathway, the teachers were guided to consider literature pertaining to inclusion (which was primarily focused on teachers’ reports and parents’ perspectives) and to begin to evaluate their own project.

Interviews were chosen as the preferred method of data collection, and children were interviewed according to the Code of Ethical Conduct. The interviews were carried out in a familiar environment (the school) by adults sensitive to the children’s needs and abilities. However, the interviewers were unknown to the children so that they were less likely to elicit acquiescent responses. The data was analysed to produce a set of consistent themes reflecting what the children said.
The data was used as the basis for further collaboration between Sunfield School and the mainstream school, and shared with wider audiences to inform inclusive practices (Whitehurst and Howells, 2006; Whitehurst, 2007).

Conclusion

Creating ways to support teachers is crucial to scaffold the research process for teachers whilst ensuring the research is rigorous, reliable and valid. Developing approaches that facilitate teachers to conduct meaningful research goes some way to collapse the differences which are perceived as insurmountable boundaries between the worlds of education and research (Saunders, 2007).

The ARC-T, infused with jargon-free questions, can help teachers make research inquires about their practice. In this way, teachers can become producers of knowledge and be active participants in building knowledge in their discipline.

This, in turn, validates the role of the teacher as both teacher and researcher. As Whitehead (cited in Carpenter & Egerton, 2007) stated, research is not distant from practice but its lifeblood. It feeds the cycle of reflection, evidence, evaluation, teaching and learning. It’s what excellent teachers do.

Carpenter & Egerton, 2007, p. 11

As a consequence of introducing ARC-T at Sunfield School, large number of research projects have been conducted and written up by practitioners (Carpenter and Egerton, 2007). ARC-T has proved to be an effective way of introducing teachers to the benefits of researching their own practice.

References


About the author

Teresa Whitehurst has been the Research and Development Officer at Sunfield Research Institute for seven years. Teresa has
a first degree in psychology and postgraduate training in research methods, and has recently gained a Masters in clinical neuropsychiatry. She is passionate about leading rigorous professional inquiries that translate into meaningful outcomes for children, families and professionals.

Sunfield School is a residential special school set in the West Midlands. It provides care and education for children and young people with complex learning needs, including autism. It is proud to have recently been awarded the status of Research Engaged School by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Further information on Sunfield School can be obtained by visiting www.sunfield.org.uk

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