So what exactly do teacher-researchers think about doing research?

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The desirability of teacher engagement with research has been made apparent by several recent secretaries of state and encouraged through legislation and some support mechanisms intended to encourage practitioner-led investigations. Yet it is still regarded as exceptional, rather than the norm, when teachers become involved in formal research processes. In this article Amanda Watkins examines the factors which might encourage teachers to become more involved in research, discussing their motivations, the support required and the advantages which they perceive as emanating from classroom inquiry. Having conducted her own classroom-based research she suggests that there is a clear case for promoting practitioner inquiry, but that there remains a need to examine the conditions which must be created in order to move this agenda forward.

Key words: practitioner, motivational factors, reflection, professional learning.

Over the past decade the debate about teacher involvement in research has been nothing if not growing in momentum. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) lecture given by David Hargreaves in 1996 (Hargreaves, 1996) seemed to provide quite an impetus for an examination of the role teachers may or may not play in educational research generally. Hargreaves’ main criticisms were that much of educational research was poor value for money in terms of improving the quality of education in schools, non-cumulative, had little relevance to classroom practice, and often focused upon methodological issues that meant nothing outside of academia. His most pointed criticism was that most research:

[makes no] serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge … is irrelevant to practice … is unco-ordinated with any preceding or follow-up research … clutters up academic journals that virtually nobody reads.

(Hargreaves, 1996, p. 7)

These criticisms were later reflected in the 1997 TTA report Teaching Matters. The report suggested that research was too rarely presented in a way which could be used to inform policy making, that it was not focused upon classrooms, that it was unrelated to daily teaching practice, and that educational research findings generally were presented in ways that did not meet the needs of teachers.

Michael Bassey (1995) had already debated whether much of educational research amounted to ‘trivial pursuits or significant insights’. However, it appears that Hargreaves’ (1996) arguments, that the ‘gap between researchers and practitioners [is the] fatal flaw in educational research’ and that ‘researchers not practitioners … determine the agenda of educational research’, were a real trigger, not only for widespread debate and reflection upon the purpose of educational research generally, but also for a consideration of the role of teachers – and specifically teacher-researchers – in educational research.

Gomm and Hammersley (2002) examine the historical and present-day perceptions of practice and theory as separate elements within education, with researchers generating theory, teachers being busy with daily practice and their two worlds rarely meeting or interacting meaningfully. They consider the dangers inherent with this two-world situation, but also highlight the difficulties of bringing these two worlds together in a mutually beneficial way.

However, the bringing together of these two worlds is something that many researchers have been advocating for a long time. Gibbs (1994) and Biggs (1994) are only two examples of writers who suggest that teachers are only acting as true professionals when they make active attempts to link and apply educational theory to their practice. Similarly, Loughran (1999) argues that teachers should
make their tacit knowledge of teaching and learning explicit by systematically articulating that knowledge to themselves and others.

Hargreaves (1996), however, argues for a completely different interpretation of the two-world theory. He sees the fact that teachers do not use research in their daily practice as an issue for researchers and not teachers. Hargreaves essentially considers the problem as stemming from research not being practice based, rather than from teaching not being theory based.

A developing focus on practitioner research

Whichever research chicken or practice egg we consider as coming first, there is no escaping the fact that the potential value of research to teachers – and through them to their pupils and the wider community – has become the focus of attention for a wider audience, including the government. The present government agenda is focused upon requesting more evidence-based research from professional researchers generally, as well as establishing initiatives to support more practitioner research. The Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS) scheme is an example of such an initiative.

Interestingly, practitioner research is also becoming the focus of more and more research for professional researchers. Pring (2000) is an example of a professional researcher seriously investigating the value of practitioner research for education generally. In the special education sector, Rose (2002) has looked at the potential roles of practitioner researchers for special needs teaching. While this is nothing really new – teachers as researchers is not a new phenomenon – the focus does appear to be changing. The emphasis is now upon professional researchers working collaboratively in partnership with practitioner researchers rather than supporting them in their small-scale, independent research projects (which were very often part of higher education study programmes).

However, as Worrall (2004) points out, while there is a lot more attention being paid to the possible benefits of teachers engaging in research, there is very little research that actually looks at what teachers themselves may think about this. Worrall has conducted some small-scale investigations into teacher-researchers’ perceptions of being involved in research in mainstream schools. Rose and Gamer (2002) have conducted similarly small-scale research into the views of teacher-researchers in special education. Generally, though, information from teacher-researchers themselves is quite limited.

What do teacher-researchers in special education say about teacher research?

This article presents some first-hand observations from teachers in special education who have all been involved in teacher research projects. These observations were gathered within the context of a teacher research project. As a practising teacher I undertook a higher education research degree. The research involved a quite usual pattern of designing and implementing a classroom-based research study. However, what wasn’t so usual – or expected – was the fact that the most important thing to come out of this study was not the research results, nor even the understanding of research methods and possibilities, but a genuinely clearer understanding of personal learning styles and problem-solving approaches, as well as a developing set of ideas about what teaching and learning actually could mean to me. The research project lead to a process of real self-reflection as well as a decision to dig a little bit deeper and see if other teacher-researchers had similar experiences in terms of the motivation and self-questioning involved in being a teacher-researcher.

My personal experiences had highlighted a number of concepts that could be examined in relation to teachers’ willingness and ability to engage in research. These concepts centre around issues of: motivation – both initial motivation to get involved in research and then also the on-going motivational ups and downs experienced during research projects; support – personal and professional, expertise, time and material resources; and opportunities for professional learning.

Teachers’ observations were gathered through semi-structured interviews with nine practising teacher-researchers. These teachers were essentially an opportune sample of what can only be described as successful and enthusiastic practising teacher-researchers. The interviews explored the concepts outlined above and aimed to give teachers an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of being involved in research. An overall analysis of these teachers’ views shows that there was a genuine degree of agreement on a number of main issues. These issues are presented below, with direct quotes from the teachers themselves used to illustrate and exemplify the key points.

Motivation for doing research

Worrall (2004) talks about the importance of personal biography, professional contacts and experience as factors influencing involvement in research in the first place, but then also ‘staying the distance’ (as one teacher interviewed here termed it) and seeing research projects through. For the teachers involved in this study, being involved in a higher education course was very often a key first step into personal research:

[I wouldn’t have got involved] without the course.

I think what made it so motivating was the [higher education institution (HEI) named] course which is one that is very well run.

Other motivating factors were identified by the teachers:

The desire to have that standing back and that sort of external look at your practice.
The key motivating factor for being involved in research was being able to have that evidence of impact.

… partly it was about developing my staff’s skills.

In terms of motivation to keep going with a research project once it was started the following factors were highlighted. Learning from others was important:

A real opportunity to find out what other people are doing.

In addition to this:

There is the subject area development as well as the challenge element as a researcher.

Seeing the practical relevance of research information to the classroom setting was another motivating factor:

We are very focused on teaching and learning in the school, and all these aspects of research only impact on that.

For one school manager, engaging in a school-wide research programme was something that was necessary for whole-school development:

The research … came about as a school; I came here as head, I felt that special schools needed to change and needed to be much more outward looking and developed a programme.

However, it was recognised by all the teachers that research is not something that every teacher wants to engage with. This quote seems to sum that opinion up:

I think there is no doubt that in order for practitioners to get involved in research they have to have something within themselves. It is not for everybody.

The sense that some teachers were almost ‘predisposed to enjoying a research-type approach’ was raised in different ways:

[with research] I think you have more freedom, more flexibility, more independence … and I think that is probably because of the type of person I am, that is probably why it interested me.

What is crucial really is for education to move forward and to be innovative and motivating and all of these sorts of things, you have to be a rebel, you have to be radical, you have to want change, as nothing will change unless there is a radical way of moving forward so you have to be constantly looking for different ways.

A key issue that came out of this investigation was a consideration of why teachers choose to do research and not use other approaches – such as curriculum development work – to examine their practice or address teaching and learning issues. Some ideas emerging were:

…using the sort of critical frame model was the difference in that … I think it is like self-review.

You are bringing in someone else to, say, ask critical questions. I don’t think it [curriculum development] has the same standing, you have got to have that kind of rigour, you have got to have that kind of – using the framework of some sort of research with a proper data analysis to actually get something that is useful.

I am not saying that the other aspect [curriculum development] is not useful, it is useful, but actually you want it at a different level and you say you are making judgements that can be used by other people, because the other aspect is very good for yourself, you have learnt through that yourself.

The issues of critical reflection and analysis were also clearly linked in teachers’ minds with the issue of external authorisation of their work:

… and audience, yes.

We wanted to make sure it [a school-based investigation] had the proper rigour and that somebody external was involved to evaluate it.

**Perceived strengths and weaknesses of research**

As well as identifying a range of factors that motivated them to get involved and keep being involved in research work, the teachers were very clear as to their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses that research as an approach for practitioners offered them.

In terms of strengths, the factor of research as a very useful and applicable tool was apparent:

Having that research to actually evaluate [the issue] is a very powerful tool, it is very powerful. It is powerful to go on to justify increasing and developing that.

Research as a systematic and rigorous approach was another strength:

The strength of it is, what I have highlighted really, the kind of rigour, the profoundness of it.

The possibilities that research presented for examining practice that may not have been available otherwise was a very positive aspect for teachers:

Research methodology has been given me a great deal because this made me look at how I teach and very much looking from the students’ and pupils’ viewpoint which is quite important really.

Similarly, possibilities for contacting others that may not otherwise have been possible was raised:
It is networking … [that] is very important.

All teacher-researchers were aware of the potential weaknesses of research, and one of the major weaknesses was seen to be the degree of inflexibility that taking a research approach can sometimes present:

The weakness of it is perhaps it is too narrow in terms of focus. It doesn’t allow for some of the other things that are going on.

The potential tensions between research and other pressures being placed upon schools were also raised:

There is a real tension in the need for the school to have outputs, and research doesn’t always have productive outputs in that way.

The uncertainty of learning and looking and researching – I happen to think it is very healthy for teachers to get involved in that, but the culture in schools is not there because the time is not there. The government has put so many agendas in at the same time, which agenda is the priority? And it is certainly not doing the research for the teachers which will come out.

Similarly, the potential impact of a teacher-researcher’s project work upon teacher colleagues was acknowledged:

Although we have a supply teacher in covering me and it is the same one every week, so it is not disruptive for the children, it inevitably impinges on colleagues.

Other identified weaknesses can also be interpreted as factors that teachers saw as being main barriers or demotivators to research. The most obvious factor was time available to engage in research activities:

Time is a definite weakness.

Time is crucial.

Alongside time constraints went the potential ‘juggling act’ of researching whilst still teaching:

The sheer time it takes is a barrier, isn’t it? To do at that level. With everything else in school, where would people put it as a priority?

It concerns me that I may not be able to do justice to both, and that is real worry, as I don’t like to think I am short-changing anybody.

It is useful here to highlight the link between two of the factors raised by teacher-researchers: time, and the initial step to get into research being made as a result of undertaking a higher education degree. As Hargreaves (1998) points out, most teachers develop their research skills during study for a higher degree, but after finishing their degrees relatively few of them are able to continue being active in research:

This is because they are never given the opportunity, or time, to engage in further research.

Support for research activities

Support for teacher-researchers to carry out research is very important. What was interesting from the discussions with these teacher-researchers was that, although the practical aspects of time, and access to certain basic research facilities – IT, telephones, etc. – were mentioned, the single most important factor highlighted by all of the teachers was personal and moral support from other people. Such support could come from a number of potential sources:

It is leadership and the support of your colleagues within the school and also links with higher education, but also with the different service providers within [the LEA] as well.

However, support from school colleagues was a decisive factor. Negative views held by colleagues were a real barrier, but positive views were seen as being a crucial form of support:

The practical thing of actually having the time to do it [is one thing], but the moral support, the peer support was important.

People I work with at school are really interested in what we are doing and it is quite nice, as they feel as if they are part of something exciting too.

Encouraging you, that is the main thing. Without that I think it would be difficult – I think that would be awful.

The role and direct support of colleagues in senior management was seen as imperative:

My head was very, very supportive.

The governors were behind me 100%, and just the fact that people were willing to say, yes, take a day a week, that will be a good use of your time, so that was really good.

In order to effectively carry out any research in the school you need to have the sympathy and support of the governors and head, which we luckily do, but there are still pressures on governors and particularly the head in terms of how much time they will give, as time means money and supply teachers.

The important role played by research mentors – most often colleagues working in higher education – was raised by all the teachers interviewed:

Outside intervention or the outside involvement of people like [mentor named] and colleagues at [HEI named] - that was a supporting factor.
[Mentor named] is very supportive and I think she is very good at picking up on people’s concerns, and her whole approach to us is very good I think, supportive, encouraging, and yet she takes the lead when she needs to.

[Mentor named] is very much building relationships with local schools and I think that is a very good thing and that is the way forward.

The role of a research mentor appeared to be important not only in providing specialist expertise but also in contributing to the wider development of research in the school – what could be considered research communities or research cultures:

I think there is still a long way to go, without a doubt, but I am into creating a research community within the school and there are a few of us here.

I think leadership is important there because we have the head, who is very keen on research, and very much wants to see the school as a school that is always conducting different research projects.

Really to support you there is a need within your school situation to be, maybe, not a research culture but an ethos which values research and teachers.

**Research as a form of professional learning**

One of the most interesting findings – for me – from talking to fellow teacher-researchers was that, in line with my experience, the most important outcomes of research projects were not just about developing research skills, nor even about developing an increased understanding of the subject matter of the research. Although these were obviously very important, for all the teachers interviewed research was clearly seen as a vehicle for professional learning that was unlike any other form of professional development open to them:

*It is not just the content of what you are researching, it is not just developing your information levels – it is something more.*

*It is a very useful form of professional learning … Particularly if you can be involved in research with other colleagues, from different areas, different schools.*

*You can’t move forward without reflecting on what is happening and why and I think, you know, research allows you that opportunity really.*

*… it is something more because it is more about me pressing myself about how I do things.*

Sometimes the learning from the research came from dealing with failure, difficulties and problems:

You can think how easily, by getting it wrong, you can get somewhere else, can’t you? And that was a big learning curve really.

You are going to move from a state of knowing to a state of unknowing and back to a state of knowing again, and I think it is good for all professionals to experience, although it is not an easy road.

Overall, though, the idea that research is a way that teachers can develop their thinking about and skills related to the processes of teaching and learning as well as their understanding of a particular subject matter was supported by all the teachers interviewed:

*I can’t begin to tell you how much I have learned in terms of improving my knowledge and understanding of the practice of teaching and learning.*

**The future of teacher research?**

Hargreaves (1998) quite rightly looked at the criticisms of educational research in his 1996 work and proposes how some of these points may be addressed. He discusses the concept of the knowledge-creating school and argues that classroom and school-based research carried out by teachers themselves is a vital element for this:

*… educational knowledge creation is likely to be at its most explicit and effective when schools are engaged in school-based teacher training and school-based research.*

(p. 9)

The potential value of developing teacher and school research activities was something with which all the teachers interviewed were in agreement. This seems to be summed up by one senior school manager who said:

*Unless you do that [investigation into teaching and learning issues] in depth you are really just skirting round the edges. You never really give that the time, the rigour, that amount of data … so I would like all my teachers to do some form of research in the next few years, to be involved in something.*

Teacher-researchers were also very clear about the areas of change required if more teachers are to be given opportunities to engage in meaningful research activities. The first of these is related to generally raising the profile of teacher research with teachers themselves:

*I am sure if you did a survey on all the teachers in the country and asked them if they ever thought about research and if they knew how to engage in research, I am sure there would be very few who knew how to actually actively go about it.*
... the work of teacher-researchers can and should be contributing to through their investigations: that is developing a wider, shared understanding of what is meant by ‘special needs education’. Wilson (2002) rightly argues that the entire educational community needs to engage in a debate about the myriad values and meanings behind the term. A more open interpretation and a move away from dominant conceptions could possibly lead to new, more productive research approaches in the field.

Wilson argues that:

... if educational research is to change practice for the better … It can only do this by operating through the minds and the understanding of practitioners.

(p. 143)

I would argue that, given the right situation, motivation, support and working environment, the most effective way of engaging the minds of teachers is to facilitate their involvement in systematic research into their own practice. Only through developing opportunities for teachers to research their own personal conceptions of what special needs education is – and isn’t – will the wider educational community really move forward in its thinking.

After meeting and talking to some fellow teacher-researchers, I am confident of the real contribution teacher research can and does make to the development of special education theory and practice.

References


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