

The Insider Perspective: teachers-as-researchers

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This special edition celebrates the work of some teachers who have investigated their own practice in their institutions. It provides an opportunity to recognize and value the unique 'insider knowledge' that teachers bring to improve our understanding of educational processes and practices.

Teacher as Researcher approaches involve small-scale enquiry, which put the teacher at the centre of knowledge production in the professional context of the classroom, school, college or university department. Reflexivity is a central part of such teacher-as-researcher investigations. It is important that teachers engage in critical processes of reflexivity to question the assumptions they bring to their work. Reflexivity involves critical reflection but takes this process further to include an interrogation of the taken-for-granted assumptions that teachers bring to their practice. It extends notions of individual reflection to also examine the ways that individuals are always socially situated and are embedded in complex social relations and discourses. Reflexive approaches help to develop teachers' understanding of pedagogical practices and relations at a deeper level and in the local contexts in which they are located. This helps to illuminate their own positions in educational processes and to highlight the ways that they can contribute to enhancing learning.

A range of valuable methodologies are available to teachers to support them in developing such critical and reflexive practices. Many of these methodologies involve participatory or collaborative approaches to research, and include key participants in processes of meaning-making. Such approaches can encourage teachers to work together with colleagues and students to formulate and address key research questions and, consequently, to draw on the understanding this brings in order to develop their practices. The teacher-researcher is in a strong position to shed light on the pedagogical processes of the particular educational settings under investigation in collaboration with students and colleagues. Teacher-as-Researcher methodologies usually involve small-scale research, which must be contextualized, contesting the notion that educational research should only contribute to objective and generalisable knowledge. Rather, the teacher-as-researcher approach emphasizes the agency of teachers and learners but also recognizes the wider institutional and national constraints on their diverse experiences and practices. In deepening their understandings at the local level, wider connections can be made that will help shed light on broader educational policy and practice.

Most educational research aims to make educational institutions, schools, colleges and universities, better places for learning. However, making large claims that are seen to have universal benefit across a range of diverse and different places and spaces can sometimes do more damage than good. What works in one school doesn't always work in another. Such research is unable to address the detailed and complex spaces that different teachers and learners find themselves in. Indeed, it is unable to say much about how difference and

diversity is lived out and often reinforces educational exclusions and inequalities. This special edition challenges the assumption that large-scale, positivist research is the best kind of research for developing our educational knowledge and understanding. We argue that all research, whether large or small, positivist or critical, is underpinned by particular epistemological perspectives and ontological positions and makes particular (culturally specific) assumptions about education. It is impossible, therefore, to make claims that are value-free and decontextualised. Large-scale research is important but it is not the only, and best, way of investigating learning and teaching.

The significance of insider research should not be under-estimated. Methodologies that support knowledge production from an insider perspective and at the localized level are of great value in developing more nuanced and complex understandings of educational experiences, identities, processes, practices and relations. This special edition is a small challenge to the positivist paradigm that insists on large-scale research modeled on quantitative and positivist modes of inquiry. The articles included here, in our view, make an important contribution to insider knowledge about education.

The first article is one that captures the excitement of participating in research for teachers and their students. Carol Hartland describes how she uses teacher-researcher methodologies to engage in collaborative research with her primary school students. She encourages them to formulate their own lines of inquiry in order for them to become active learners and to deepen their understanding. Hartland points out that although much of the theoretical literature argues the importance of inquiry style learning, there is a dearth of literature on the ways that teachers might put this into practice in their classrooms. Through her research project, she finds new ways to work with her students, drawing on ‘the power of the question’ to help students bring meaning to their learning experiences. The article provides a rich account of the processes that Hartland experienced with her students in using the methodologies available to her to transform classroom pedagogies.

The next article, by Julia Charles, takes us into the secondary classroom arguing for the importance of cross-curricular approaches. Charles, an English teacher, works closely with a History teacher in an unfamiliar disciplinary context. She embraces this unfamiliarity as it allows her to establish new relationships with students, and to work in creative ways using talk, discussion and presentations as central pedagogical tools in transforming the students’ approaches to their learning. The approaches they develop collaboratively in the classroom create an environment in which the students become active participants in meaning-making, and are able to focus on developing their spoken communication skills, which in turns builds their confidence and sense of ownership of their learning.

Sarah Fletcher argues passionately for the great value of teacher-researcher methodologies in processes of teacher mentoring. Fletcher examines the ways that the professional knowledge of teachers might be supported by self-study approaches that draw on the range of digital technologies available. A strong case is made for teachers’ research to be determined by teachers rather than academics, although the need for teachers to be assisted in developing their methodological understanding is acknowledged. Fletcher highlights the

ways that digital technology provides invaluable tools to the teacher-researcher and can be connected to mentoring as a process of collaborative enquiry.

Robin Bevan considers how existing research knowledge has been used in his school to develop five areas of interest: effective approaches to assessment; improved strategies for revision classes; informed responses to school transfer (from Primary to Secondary); computers as tools for learning; and effective implementation of staff development. He creatively develops 'chaos theory' using a classic chaotic system – "turbulent water flow" – to provide insights into the characteristics that such successful applications of educational research have in common. While recognizing that his school's very positive learning environment with supportive leadership and management contributed to the success of such changes, he usefully highlights some possible considerations for other teachers, and indeed policy makers, seeking success in using research findings to bring about educational innovation in their institutions.

Insider research is available to all educational professionals who are committed to exploring complex educational practices. Jackie McManus demonstrates that the kinds of methodologies available to teachers are also important to other educational professionals. Dedicated to building her understanding of widening educational participation, McManus conducts a small-scale enquiry into the operations of selection in the admissions process of a prestigious higher education institution in the field of arts. Drawing on critiques of 'deficit discourses', she highlights the problematic language often used around widening participation, for example 'disadvantaged', pointing out that in youth culture to 'dis' someone is to denigrate them. The article examines the impact of classed identities on issues of 'choice', application and admission, drawing on concepts of habitus and cultural capital. Her article is a wonderful example of how practitioner-based research can illuminate the problematic assumptions and discourses that unwittingly reinforce educational inequalities and exclusions.

The edition then moves to a focus on the detailed processes of doing research. Jane Rand provides insight into the processes of conducting a mini-ethnography of a group of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in a discrete Information Technology (IT) class. This article is particularly valuable in shedding light on the experiences of doing research from a teacher-as-researcher position, drawing on data and analyses to help the reader understand the specific context of her study. Teachers who are interested in developing their understanding of research methodology and how this might be helpful for the development of professional knowledge and understanding will find this article of particular interest.

In the final article by Kate Smith, we move to the theme of internationalizing the curriculum in higher education. This piece also gives us a detailed discussion of the methodological framework, including the ways that key concepts and theories shaped the approach to the research and the methods used. Smith presents her research findings, arguing that students who are grouped in particular ways by universities, for example as 'international students', are not homogenous communities and bring a range of different values, expectations and perspectives to their courses. Furthermore the author argues that

‘international’ and ‘home’ students share similar concerns about understanding academic writing practices and conventions and equally value the opportunity to develop their academic literacies. The value of teacher-researcher approaches to making key changes in schools and universities is strongly illustrated by Smith’s work. She draws on her data to make a powerful argument that more than policy change, universities need to develop carefully thought through pedagogic practices to support a project of internationalizing the curriculum.

We hope you enjoy this collection of articles and that it helps you to think through different methodologies available to illuminate educational processes and practices.