

Research Space

Book chapter

Do I really have time to engage in research?

Stone, P.

Do I really have time to engage in research?

Paula Stone

Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom. (Gove, NCSL speech, 2010).

Do you agree with this statement? What does this statement suggest about the importance of theory in the teaching profession?

This view of learning to teach places an emphasis on acquiring the relevant experience and using common sense as the key constituents of being a good teacher. This model denies the value of research. Of course, teachers can become better practitioners through the experience of ‘making judgments about educationally wise actions’ (Winch et al. 2013 p.3) and developing their technical knowledge and understanding. However, I would argue that this in itself is not sufficient to be a good teacher. It is through engagement with theory and research that teachers and student teachers are able to form judgments on statistics and policy and its relevance to their practice. Engagement with theory and research can contribute significantly to becoming a critically reflective teacher and this is the one thing that distinguishes the best teachers from others (Winch et al. 2013).

What contribution can educational research make to a teacher’s professional competency? Jot down any initial thoughts about this?

An essential part of most university-based teacher education programmes in the United Kingdom is the reflection on action through which the student teacher reflects on what they have done with a view to improving their practice in the future (Schön, 1987) and, critical analysis of past and current educational theory. However I would argue that

In Sangster, M. (ed) *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education: Exploring Issues in Practice*. London and NY: Bloomsbury

both of these approaches to critical reflection can be enhanced if student teachers and teachers are encouraged to engage in a more systematic approach to research into their own practice. This is not a new idea. Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) was one of the first educationalists to promote the idea of the teacher as 'extended professional' which encompasses 'systematic self-study' and the 'testing of theory in practice' (p144).

However, a constant cry from students and teachers alike is, "How do I find time to engage in research when I am so busy preparing to teach and teaching?" It is not as difficult as it might first appear. Probably the most accessible way to engage in research-based practice is to partake in teacher-enquiry. This is often called 'action research' because the findings are fed back into the original situation to bring about change. As the research is conducted by the teacher/student teacher it becomes a process that helps the teacher/student teacher to develop a deeper understanding of what they are doing in their everyday practice. It has both a personal and social aim. The personal aim is the improvement of your own learning and the social aim is the improvement of your own practice and the impact this has on the learners (Mcniff and Whitehead, 2010). Thus, teacher-enquiry is a systematic way of examining and improving your practice.

It often begins with something in a teacher's practice that they want to examine and improve upon, so the research process becomes a developmental process of identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it and changing practice in the light of the evaluation. Action research begins with the question, 'How do I improve my work?' (Mcniff and Whitehead, 2010).

Thus, underpinning action research is a constant evaluation of what you are doing, why you are doing it that way, and the impact this has on teaching and learning. I suggest

In Sangster, M. (ed) Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education: Exploring Issues in Practice. London and NY: Bloomsbury

that action research is not seen as a 'bolt on' or an additional task to complete; it should be part of every teachers' professional development and should be embedded in their practice from the outset and be on-going through their trainingand beyond. Thus action research is inspired and sustained by a commitment to educational improvement.

Research literature offers a number of different models for teacher-enquiry/action research. This model has been adapted from a model developed by McNiff and Whitehead (2010). Firstly, you need to identify something that you are interested in researching. Is there something in your practice you think you could do better? Are you worried about a particular group of learners? You will need to be clear in your own mind about why you want to examine this issue. Is it something that is contrary to your values and beliefs? Action research is often a way of working that helps identify the values and beliefs that are important to us as teachers.

What aspects of your practice that you would like to problematize, improve on; challenge; or are worried about and would like to change?;

Once you have identified a research issue, you should formulate a research question. This can be stated in terms of 'How do I ...?'. These are some of the research questions student teachers, with whom I have worked, have posed:

How do I use questions more effectively to enhance children's learning in history?

How can I use guided group work to enhance children's learning in reading?

How can I use mixed ability groupings to enhance children's engagement with science?

How can I use assessment more effectively to improve the behaviour in my class?

How do I encourage children in YR to make mathematical marks?

How can I use Systematic Synthetic Phonics to help the less able children in Y6 to read?

Can you now write you issue as a 'How can I....?' type of question?

You will then need to think about how you will gather the evidence to show what you are doing is making an impact on children's learning. Write down what evidence you can gather to show your practice is having an impact on children's learning; for example, if you want to examine your use of questioning you could start by asking a teaching assistant to write down the type of questions you are asking. You could then look at how many open and closed questions you used? You could then try to introduce more open ended questions. Your teaching assistant could then record how children respond to these types of questions. You can use a variety of methods for collecting this data – journals, diaries, notes, audio and videotape recordings, surveys, attitude scales, pictures to name a few. Be sure that you are sensitive to any ethical and moral issues that may arise.

Once you have gathered your evidence you will need to examine the data and evaluate the impact of what you are doing. This may make you consider how you will change or develop your practice. You should continue to evaluate your 'interventions' until you have answered your question.

The final and most important step is to think about how you can share your enquiry with others; this is an important part of educational research. Think about how you could do this with your colleagues and others.

Can you come up with more ideas than I have below?

This could be done through collaborating with colleagues to develop practice across the school. You could perhaps consider using lesson study. This is a form of collaborative practice based on the professional sharing of practice in which a group of teachers collaborate, identifying a research theme that relates to the school's improvement plan. For more details see Burghes and Robinson (2009). Or, you could share your research by publishing your findings through a subject association or primary teaching magazine such

In Sangster, M. (ed) *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education: Exploring Issues in Practice*. London and NY: Bloomsbury

as The Times Educational Supplement (TES) or Teach Primary or even through a blog (E.g. <http://www.consider-ed.org.uk/>). Most primary forums would be delighted to receive example of practitioner-based research that contributes to the growing body of knowledge of what is happening in the primary classroom. Many higher education institutions offer academic professional development programmes designed to support action research projects for teachers. These would provide you with support from tutors and a group of peers with whom to collaborate and share ideas.

What better reason to engage in action research is there than to improve your practice for your own benefit and for the benefit of the children in your care, i.e. to provide improved opportunities for learning? In addition, if you can improve what you are doing, or at least develop your understanding of what you are doing, this will enable you to articulate good practice and begin influencing the situation you are working in. Furthermore, your increased awareness and your readiness to be self-critical will probably have an influence on your colleagues' practice too.

References and further reading

Burghes, D. and Robinson, D. (2009) *Lesson study: Enhancing Mathematics teaching and Learning*, Plymouth: UK Centre for Innovation in Mathematics Teaching (CIMT), <http://www.cimt.plymouth.ac.uk/papers/lessonstudy.pdf> (accessed February 2014)

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2010) *You and Your action Research Project* (3rd Edition). London and NY: Routledge

NCSL (2010) Speech made by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education at *National College Annual Conference*, <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/2010-June-17-MGove-NCSL.pdf> (accessed February 2014)

Schön, D. (1987) 'Teaching artistry through reflection-in-action', *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (pp. 22-40). San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Stenhouse, L. (1975) 'The Teacher as Researcher' p142 – 165. In Stenhouse, L. *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London: Heinemann.

In Sangster, M. (ed) *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education: Exploring Issues in Practice*. London and NY: Bloomsbury

Teach Primary Magazine available on- line <http://www.teachprimary.com/> accessed 7/3/2014

Times Educational Supplement (TES) available on- line <http://news.tes.co.uk/> accessed 7/3/2014

Winch, C., Oancea, A. and Orchard, J. (2013) 'The contribution of educational research to teachers' professional learning – philosophical understandings', *British Educational Research Journal: Research and Teacher Education: The BERA-RSA Inquiry* (December 2013)

PROOF