[Empowering a research-engaged profession]

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter presents three examples of practitioner research (PR) in different school contexts in England. The authors have been playful with the term PR engagement, using here the term 'engaging *with* research' for practitioners who critique existing research, and 'engaging *in* research' for practitioners conducting their own research. As well as more traditional modes of research engagement, a more inclusive research practice is presented here: '*re*-searching' one's own practice through reflective activities (Marsden, 2020).

KEYWORDS:

1. Research engagement
2. Reflective practice
3. Continuing professional development
4. Senior leadership
5. Professionalism
6. Agency

Introduction

Recent policy rhetoric in England has positioned teaching as an 'evidence-informed *profession'* (emphasis added) (DfE, March 2016, p.37). According to Evetts (2013), what differentiates a profession from an occupation is the agency to contribute to a shared knowledge base. PR, involving various modes of research engagement, offers possibilities for this grassroots construction of knowledge, which Carr and Kemmis (1986/ 2002) conceptualised as educational enlightenment. Carr and Kemmis' (1986/2002) notion of the enlightened critical teacher is of one who may reflect on existing research, or one's own practice, but ideally generate their own findings to interrogate the knowledge base generated by external others.

This chapter presents three vignettes of different forms of PR. They have been constructed from qualitative data from interviews conducted during Marsden's (2020) doctoral study, which received the appropriate ethical approval. It is hoped that they will provide ideas for senior leaders to empower a research-engaged profession. Developing Goswami & Stillman's (1987, p.30) concept of teacher researchers 'looking - and looking again', we postulate that '*re*-searching' (quite literally, 'looking again' at one's practice) is a good starting point for PR.

Discussion
Vignettes of PR Engagement

To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used, reminiscent of social media handles (Goodyear et al., 2019), indicating participants' position in their school. Each practitioner researcher revealed specific aspects of their identity, power, and positionality, with each of these elements influencing the teacher's research practices in different ways.

@MrSEND: Identifying as a *Re*-searcher

In a secondary school for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), it was decided that continuing professional development (CPD) for an academic year would take the form of individual research projects for all teachers and Teaching Assistants (TAs). Each practitioner was to focus upon a particular student and research ways to help that individual. This involved careful reflection and attention to students' individual education plans (IEPs). In effect, staff were to *re*-search their current practice, i.e. to look again at their craft. This CPD activity took place during dedicated non-teaching time to avoid any extra burden. In this allotted time, staff were to devise certain strategies and then reflect upon their implementation. Colleagues then disseminated their findings to one another via presentations to learn from each other.

A middle leader in the school, @MrSEND, believed that he was empowered to construct a knowledge base that was more relevant to his unique context. This was preferable to basing his practice on someone else's academic research, which is arguably a more passive process (see Godfrey & Brown, 2018). Furthermore, in his view, outputs constructed by teachers were more accessible to busy practitioners, who do not have time to read long academic publications. He was glad that he was not expected to write a research report on his findings, presenting, instead, in a mode more familiar to teachers.

One might argue that the nature of research in this school represented typical CPD and did not differ to what teachers do all the time. After all, the Teachers' Standards in England mandate that teachers

'reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching' (DfE, 2011, p.11). However, such reflection may be an introspective activity. In contrast, the practitioners in this school were empowered to work collaboratively in developing a shared knowledge base that is useable by others in their unique context. This kind of grassroots CPD is not promoted by the Department for Education's (July 2016) Standard for Professional Development, which positions teachers as passive recipients of evidence gathered by external researchers. @MrSEND identified himself as a researcher because, together with his colleagues, he was an active agent in constructing and disseminating knowledge. These critical reflections are part of what Winch et al. (2013) identified as professional knowledge, along with tacit and technical knowledge. We argue that the hyphenated term 're-searcher' more accurately highlights the active process of searching one's own practice to address localised issues, which may act as a springboard for future engagement *with* research more broadly.

<u>@MsDeputy: Empowering staff to engage *with* research</u>

In a primary school that had recently been designated as a Research School (RSN, n.d.), a senior leader, @MsDeputy, organised research seminars for staff within the Academy Trust. @MsDeputy valued the research of academics and when interviewed, expressed her pride about her membership of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). She had attended BERA's annual conference, paid for by the school, so she could network with established researchers and invite them to present their research findings to the Academy Trust practitioners. The invited speakers were to give presentations in voluntary CPD seminars after school. To persuade researchers to participate, @MsDeputy offered to publicise their future projects to facilitate the recruitment of research participants. @MsDeputy also said she was aware that academics were encouraged to disseminate their findings beyond academia, and the CPD seminars provided them with a platform for doing so. In this way, practitioners were able to access the latest research, making the initiative mutually beneficial.

The goal was to empower practitioners to interrogate the research presented by academics, drawing on experiences from their own practice to challenge the findings in a dialogic way (Wall and Hall, 2017). @MsDeputy disclosed, however, that she was disappointed that after a year of half-termly seminars, the intended collaborative exchange of knowledge was still a 'work in progress'. Delegates at the seminars did not question the researchers, perhaps because they lacked confidence or prior experience of critical engagement with research. Although the researchers were outsiders entering the physical space of the school, perhaps the normative identity of 'researcher' was seen to overpower the professional identity of the 'practitioner'. Therefore, although practitioners were provided with the opportunity to engage critically with research, the power dynamic created by the format meant that this was not fulfilled.

Nonetheless, practitioners were provided with access to current thinking, which, according to Hordern (2016), is important for a profession. Knowledge from research is often behind a 'paywall' or only accessible by enrolling on higher education (HE) courses (Maxwell et al., 2015). In this context, there was, nevertheless, still a cost to this research engagement since the school funded the seminars from their Research Schools Network budget. Whilst not all schools will be able to do this, teachers can connect with their local Research School to partake in opportunities like this, as recommended in a report by the Royal Society and British Academy (2018). Without it being part of the CPD allocation for practitioners, though, voluntary initiatives like this run the risk of excluding those who have other commitments beyond their work. The ideal would be to empower all teachers to engage with research by normalising this as part of dedicated CPD time.

@MrIndependent: Positionality as a teacher engaging *in* research

In a fee-paying school that partly funded Master's courses for staff, one middle leader, @MrIndependent, relished in engaging in his own research project. @MrIndependent considered himself as a 'natural academic' and thought that his aptitude for discovery had motivated him. Reflecting on the matter that one must have the means as well as the inclination, he realised that it was only now, near the end of his career, that he was able to contribute to the fees as he no longer had significant financial or family commitments. He admitted that partaking in a Master's degree at the later stage of his career meant that he might not be able to embed his findings in his practice. Nevertheless, @MrIndependent found the process of researching to be beneficial, and he thought that he and his pupils benefited from his research engagement in other tangential ways.

@MrIndependent's identity as a teacher morphed, not only into a researcher, but also a learner. This identity shift afforded him more empathy with his pupils; he re-positioned himself as a role model for his pupils to see the value of life-long learning. In staff meetings also, he felt that he had more 'clout', as he was able to point to research to support his contributions in what Foreman-Peck and Heilbronn (2018) have argued is a democratising function of PR. @MrIndependent, therefore, was empowered by his access to research through his HE course, and re-positioned himself as both a source of authority amongst colleagues, and an empathetic teacher to his students. He repeated the necessity for practitioners to be funded to engage in HE courses like he was. Funding earlier on in one's career would transform practitioners into practitioner researchers who are able to contribute to the knowledge base that will inform their practice, and that of others.

Enabling teachers to engage in research in this way, however, does not overcome the other barrier that @MrIndpendent had encountered in the early days of his career: time constraints. In order for research engagement to have a positive impact on practitioners earlier in their careers, and to elevate teacher agency and professionalism, research engagement should be integrated into school CPD as a normative practice (Royal Society and British Academy, 2018).

Conclusion

As these vignettes illustrate, PR can encompass a range of activities that can empower teachers, as in Carr and Kemmis' (1986/ 2002) conceptual framework. If PR is to be enacted in the teaching profession, however, endorsement and prioritisation from school leaders is necessary (Brown et al., 2018). We have seen how PR may be funded from the school's budget, whether that is to pay for conference attendance, or to partially fund a Master's degree. These models could be cost-effective, according to Thomas (2017), as an alternative to one-off CPD sessions delivered by a consultant in which practitioners are passive recipients of knowledge.

A less costly model of research engagement as CPD has been to build what we identify as '*re*-search' into the workload of teachers. The example here empowers reflective practitioners as '*re*-searchers' who 'look again' at their teaching practice more systematically, sharing their self-discoveries for others to learn from.

To summarise, the vignettes have demonstrated how decisions of senior leaders in particular contexts result in variable research practices and outcomes. Whilst there are clearly benefits of different types of PR, it is also important to note the challenges raised by the practitioners here so that future pathways for PR are successful.

Questions:

1. What does PR mean for you? Engaging *with* research, or engaging *in* your own research?

2. How might reflective practice be transformed into *re*-search?

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