

Hibernia College

Primary Education Papers

Volume 1

Formal launch by Director of the Teaching Council, Tomás Ó Ruairc

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In his paper on the study of inclusion of pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds, Barry Cunningham cites a key benefit highlighted by Scott and Morrison in 2005 in relation to qualitative research. The authors state that such research can give detailed answers to questions such as

What is going on here?

I think that this is an appropriate question to ask of this collection of research papers. For I believe that the answer is very clear – here we have a group of new teachers who are leading the way in showing that research and practice can support and inform each other, infused with the professional voices of teachers. Here we have a collection of research topics that touch on some of the most salient and pertinent issues facing our wider society as well as our school

system, including cultural diversity, SEN, multiple intelligences to name but a few.

But like so much else in teaching and learning, I think that this collection of research goes much deeper than that. Because in the topics that they have chosen, in the way that they have approached and explored those topics, the teachers have done what all teachers seek to do – connect with others around them better; learn more about them so that they can do more for them. To paraphrase Samuel Beckett, they are seeking to connect, connect again, connect better.

John O'Donohue touches on this instinct to connect or belong in *Eternal Echoes*, where he describes the mind as:

...an amazing gift. It delights in the activity of exploring, gathering and relating things....In contrast to the rest of nature, the human mind makes us feel alone, aware of the distances we will never be able to cross. The mind cannot resist exploration because it always sees the world mirrored in itself. The huge longing of the human mind is to discover ever larger shelters of belonging.

For teachers, as people, this hunger to belong is perfectly natural and understandable. But as professionals, it is coupled with what Anne Loony described at the inaugural lecture to mark World Teachers'

Day in 2012 as the deeper moral purpose of the profession – what I would describe as the desire of teachers to help others belong. This of course goes to the heart of what we mean by public service.

TK Whitaker alluded to this public service calling when speaking to a group of students in Clongowes:

To know, to understand, to be a civilised, independent, thinking, charitable member of society should be our aim; to be a constructive individual and citizen, not a negative, disgruntled cynic.

Ask any person why they decided to become a teacher, and invariably their answer will revolve around a deeper moral purpose, a sense of social justice, a deep desire to make a difference in the lives of others – in fact, to empower others to make a difference in their own lives. Fundamentally, this is all about inclusion – inclusion of the Other – so that they can be the best themselves they possibly can be. So when you read through the articles, there are some common strands or threads – concern at the particular challenge that is the chosen topic for the research; a frustration at times at the perceived lack of resources or “training” for that area. But when you look even more closely, you hear and feel the beating moral heart of the teaching profession – their awareness and understanding of the issues at stake; how deeply they care for the children in their classrooms; how much they want to help. And in so far as these

papers highlight the issues at stake, teachers' awareness and understanding of those issues, and the areas in which they are seeking further insight and assistance, they have made a great contribution to supporting their fellow teachers and the learning experience of the children in their classrooms.

As Mary Kelly and Aoife Lynam both note in their foreword to the collection:

Conducting small-scale research in schools can have a profoundly positive impact on student teachers, pupils and the participating school and staff.

This resonates strongly with the point that Pasi Sahlberg has made about the importance of what he calls "small data". In a blog which I read on 12 September last, he contrasts this with the "big data" that we might all be more familiar with. The problem with big data sets, he says, is that they:

...often don't spark insight about teaching and learning in classrooms; they are based on analytics and statistics, not on emotions and relationships that drive learning in schools. They also report outputs and outcomes, not the impacts of learning on the lives and minds of learners.

Note some vital words in this statement of Sahlberg's – teaching and learning; classrooms; emotions; relationships; impacts; lives and

minds of learners. Don't get me wrong – “quants” or quantitative data most certainly have their place in educational research. But so most certainly do “quals” or qualitative research. So most certainly do emotions and relationships. If you look at the Teaching Council's current Strategic Plan, we define the three R's of teachers' professionalism as Research, Reflective Practice and Relationships. Education is fundamentally about people helping people – to learn. The more we remind ourselves of that fact, the more authentic will be the research we do and the findings that result.

But of course, teaching is as much a professional endeavour as well as a personal one. If it was just about good intentions, passion and energy, we would let anybody be a teacher. But in Ireland we are of the view that to place the learning future of our children in the hands of anybody would be grossly irresponsible, and in fact, unacceptable. That is one of the key reasons the Teaching Council was established – to ensure that we now have a fully qualified teaching profession in this country. In other words, we want to nurture the person in the professional, but never forget either that they are a professional.

So that is why we understand that there is in fact a science to teaching – we call it pedagogy. And that is why we have determined as a matter of State policy that teacher education will be underpinned by the highest academic standards in a college or university setting, and also be research-informed. Because as

teachers, we need to know that we are not alone. We need to know that in caring and worrying about a particularly challenging or important issue, we are not the first ones to have faced it, nor are we the only ones – and the others who have may well have an answer or solution that we can adapt to our own circumstances. Research **in** teaching and learning must support action **for** teaching and learning. Research must connect professionals with each other so that we can be the best teachers we can be.

In essence, quals + quants will give us deep, reliable, human insight into the magic and science of teaching and learning – so that we can continue to enhance those processes in a way that respects the professional judgement of teachers, and that nurtures the learning and wellbeing of our children, young people and adult learners.

This is a really important point. Through our collaboration with the NCCA and the Centre for Effective Services on Research Alive!, we know that for teachers, research is not research until it is shared and talked about. In the absence of those human dynamics, research simply is not real for them. As REX, the Research Exchange network, recently stated on Twitter,

Research only thrives in daylight, within a culture.

And that is why Mary and Aoife are so right when they talk about the profoundly positive impact that small-scale research conducted by

teachers in schools can have on their peers, and their pupils. As we know from Pasi Sahlberg, small is not just beautiful, it is also insightful.

Mary and Aoife both point out to us that for many of the teachers in this collection, this paper is the first time they have embarked on formal research of this nature. I think that the nature of the achievement of the teachers whose research is published in this collection is highlighted by this quote from Simon Fitzmaurice, author of “It’s Not Yet Dark”:

We are orphans of the Universe. Our species is defined by asking questions, out into the dark, without anyone to guide us except each other.

From this, for the purposes of highlighting what the teachers have achieved, I draw at least two lessons:

1. Research is inherently uncertain and contingent, and does not always provide definitive answers. We have been asking some of the most fundamental questions out into the dark for generations, since before recorded history, and we still don’t have definitive answers.
2. Research is collaborative – in some shape or form, either directly or indirectly, research in teaching and learning

will involve people talking to each other – much as we observe in the research papers in this collection.

Seán Burns in his paper gives an interesting rationale for the questions he chose for his schedule of interviews. They were, he says,

...carefully chosen to generate open discussion.

This is what it's all about – talking about learning. In a recent Twitter chat using #UKEdResChat, we defined feedback as a process involving:

Conversations where people talk about learning – that which has occurred and that which has yet to occur.

So what else do we learn from these research papers? What could we talk about in terms of what we learn?

1. We learn from Seán that teachers are very positively disposed towards inclusion; that they understand many of its complex nuances and its human realities; and that if they are going to make the most of the resources that are available, collaboration and teamwork are essential.
2. We learn from Laura Priestley that there should be no one definition or model of intelligence, and that any reliable theory is only useful in so far as it prompts and supports reflective practice on the part of teachers.

3. Tuigeann muid ó Cliona Frost an dlúthbhaint atá ann idir measúnú teanga agus tacaíocht fhreagrach agus aireach – dhá fhocal an-tábhachtach ar fad i gcás na múinteoireachta.
4. Tugann Colm Ó Cualáin léargais phearsanta dúinn, fréamhaithe ina cheantar dúchais, ar cheisteanna náisiúnta a bhfuil dlúthbhaint acu leis an múinteoireacht i mbunscoileanna.
5. Karen Dunne makes explicit reference to one of the driving forces behind all the research papers where reference is made to how “a personal and professional interest provided a motivation for this study.” And even more interestingly, the question which a child posed – “When are we doing something fun?” When the voices of learners are a driving force for research into teaching and learning, we know that something special is happening.
6. Maria Glynn, in her study on the impact of family separation on children and their learning, emphasises the importance of communication between parents and teachers and demonstrates a very careful and professional exploration of a sensitive topic.

7. Aideen Lawlor cites research which indicates the importance of a positive teacher-child relationship in supporting a child's sense of security and self-esteem and in providing a setting that maximises the child's efforts to cope with parental separation.
8. We learn from Rachel Hayes how "primary school is recognised as a safe environment for children to learn, flourish and grow."
9. And Clodagh Burke touches on some of the salient issues in terms of inclusion of the Travelling community when she cites the NEWB's statements around the importance of parental involvement on the one hand, and the reluctance of Traveller parents on the other to attend school events given their own negative experience of schooling.
10. And we learn from Caitríona Breslin about the importance of understanding transitions as extended processes, not just connection points between one phase of education and another.

I think that it is safe to say that the collection of papers touch on some fundamental issues in terms of the labels we attach to certain issues, and how they may mask or blind us to resources that could be

helpful, and indeed to the potential of our agency as professionals to make a difference in the issue that has emerged. The best thing we could do with these papers, the best thing the authors could do, is to continue to generate conversations around the questions that they raise, interrogate the findings further.

The importance of conversations around teaching and learning and research cannot be overstated. I have already talked about how teachers view research and talking and sharing as virtually synonymous processes. But if you want another example, have a look at the *Imitation Game* – the film about Alan Turing and how he and his colleagues cracked the German’s Enigma code during the Second World War. Here was a seemingly impossible challenge. And a group of people who seemed incapable of working together – collaboration is not always a rosy process! For me the film highlights many important insights about research – how often it is conducted without any guarantee of success or breakthrough, even when it is applied research – or maybe especially! Here was a team of people who were faced with some of the highest stakes possible – no textbook to fall back on, no formula – where the deadline was ever present, yet unknown. And even when Turing had invented his machine, it would not work fast enough – as the Germans changed their code every day.

And the breakthrough moment happens when Turing overhears a conversation in the bar on the military campus, and they work on the assumption that all German messages commence with Heil Hitler. The rest is literally history.

Research and talking, in our case talking about learning, are symbiotically linked – and as teachers, we are best placed to understand that and apply that understanding, so that others can benefit.

Just a couple of points of information that I want to leave you all with, in terms of the Council's ongoing support for research, and engagement with research:

- We recently announced a new Research Support Framework with a budget of €100,000 to support teachers in engaging with research and conducting research. Further details will be available soon.
- Please use the #molfeasa when tweeting about research, teaching and learning – you will find a growing and vibrant community of people on Twitter via this hashtag.

- We have our next Research ezine and webinar coming up in a few weeks on transition from primary to post-primary. Webinar is on 10 May.
- All registered teachers have free access to the EBSCO Education Source of journals through the Council website, teachingcouncil.ie.
- And we have a Research Engagement Group of practising teachers from around the country who meet in our offices on average three times a year to advise us the implementation of our Research strategy, and to help us out in realising its vision.

During our Shared Learning Day on research with the NCCA and the CES in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick recently, I was very taken with the keynote given by Dr. Carol Campbell. And it seemed to me that in many respects, she was describing the teacher researcher's journey to making that difference as akin to moving from passion to feasibility. We are all passionate about what we do, but as we noted earlier, enthusiasm, passion and good intentions are not enough. Yes, we are people, but we are also professionals. The dynamic of that space can be both exciting and terrifying.

In that kind of space, we need two things – courage and hope. David Whyte, the poet, reminds us that courage is not an external brave face or shield – it is something much closer to the heart.

Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life, with another, with a community, a work; a future...to be courageous...is to live up to and into the necessities of relationships that often already exist, with things we find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on and always has begged us on. To be courageous is to stay close to the way we are made.

In this quote, David Whyte touches on many of the points that we have covered here – the deep moral calling of teaching; how deeply we care about other people – always have, always will. And that is where the hope comes in. There is a hashtag on twitter #MyReasonForHope. And my own tweet on states that my reason for hope is

the people who teach and learn every day. Wisdom, understanding and empathy are the best bulwarks against fear and loathing.

Today I would update that to say that my reason for hope is the people who teach and learn and research every day – because through research, the voice of one teacher is infused with the voice of many teachers. In a world of post-truths, alternative facts, where

we are all supposedly sick of experts, the work of teachers who empower us to wake up, read, listen, reflect and challenge and engage is of vital importance.

On that note, I congratulate the teachers who wrote these research papers, their supervisors, and all the teachers who worked with them in conducting their research.

I am delighted to formally launch this collection of research papers.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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