



Discussion Paper

Developing new knowledge and practice through teacher–researcher partnerships?

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Abstract

Key principles of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) are the central role of the teacher in learning and the valuing of partnerships between researchers and teachers. The intention is for these partnerships to be of a reciprocal nature—teachers building their understanding of the importance of systematic enquiry for improving practice, and researchers deepening their understanding of teaching and learning. In this way, the expertise of both teachers and researchers is used to bring new insights into issues of practice. By examining the documentary evidence collected by the TLRI co-ordination team over the past four years, this paper explores the nature of the partnerships. We draw on the work of Edwards, Sebba, and Rickinson (2007) to propose partnership arrangements that seem fruitful in contributing to the current school-improvement agenda. Even as we work our way toward designing a process that will contribute to school improvement, there is an imperative for the education sector to be transformed rather than simply improved. This paper provides some tentative ideas of the conditions required for collaborative studies to make a constructive contribution to this agenda.

Introduction

The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) was established in 2002 when the New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE) created a research fund that was meant to “support research that will provide information that can be used in policies and practices to bring about improvements in outcomes for learners” (Request for Expression of Interest letter, NZMOE, 2002). The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) was selected to be the programme co-ordinator for the grant, creating guidelines and descriptions of activities that potential grantees must understand if they are to participate in the TLRI.

Over the five years of its existence, the TLRI programme co-ordinators have watched carefully as the NZMOE’s original ideas, shaped by NZCER’s administration and oversight by an advisory board, have been given real form by the research grantees. This paper describes some of the central discoveries we’ve made over the last five years, and locates the TLRI as an intervention designed to push process changes which will allow substantive change in the content and process of educational research in New Zealand. It then poses questions to take with us into the future.

Wicked problems and the process of understanding

As far as we know, no one enters educational research for the money or the glory; educational researchers seek to understand key puzzles in the world and try to be of help to the intractable issues in education. Even as we attempt to be helpful to practice and policy, however, it is clear

that we have a long way to go to make educational research a deeply useful endeavour. There are two main issues: the *content* of the issues we face and the *process* of investigating and writing about those issues.

The first issue is that education itself is filled with “wicked problems” which are, by their very nature, too slippery to have either clear problem statements or clear solution spaces (Conklin, 2006). This means that the longer you spend with a particular intractable issue in educational research, the more likely you are to agree with Laurence J. Peter who argues that “Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.” (Quoted in Conklin, 2006, p. 1). Problems like the achievement gap between students in the dominant culture and those outside it are so socially complex that there is no simple or ‘tame’ puzzle which could be solved if we only had the right information in a row. Educational issues are bound in context, in social systems, in the idiosyncrasies of the individual, and in the compiling complexities of the collective. We will never have arrived at a solution and instead need to work by creating more and more knowledge that helps us try new, and hopefully more helpful, approaches.

The second issue is that in most cases we have not been able to figure out how to make the tight connections between policy, practice, and research that will help put the research into practice. This means that even when we have the content right and make important discoveries about teaching and learning, we still might not be able to get those discoveries to those who could make the most use of them. Instead we may find that the easiest lines of communication are not with practice but with other researchers. In a special issue about research design in *Educational Researcher*, for example, the opening article (Collective, 2003) reminds us:

Educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners agree that educational research is often divorced from the problems and issues of everyday practice—a split that creates a need for new research approaches that speak directly to problems of practice (National Research Council [NRC], 2002) and that lead to the development of “usable knowledge” (Lagemann, 2002, p. 5).

To be really effective at creating new and useful knowledge about teaching and learning, any innovative research fund needs to address both the complexity and difficulty of contributing new knowledge to education in general and the related but different difficulty of getting new knowledge into practice. Our original design for the TLRI was meant to do both.

Original hopes and their enactment

It was of vital importance in the original framing of the TLRI that the initiative would have three key aims:

- to build a cumulative body of knowledge linking teaching and learning;
- to enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices, and researchers and teachers, across early childhood, school, and tertiary sectors; and
- to grow research capability and capacity in the areas of teaching and learning (TLRI, 2003, revised 2006).

In order to meet these needs, NZCER developed a series of guidelines, practices, and procedures. These guidelines, set out in summary form in the Overview of Programme Aims document (TLRI, 2003), have guided potential grantees as they make decisions about what research questions to pursue, with whom, and to what end. Specifically, the Overview of Programme Aims (OPA) stresses that projects must have a clear strategic, research, and practice value and spells out what that might mean.

One way to ensure the connection between research and practice—to make sure that the questions of practice are central and the understanding of multiple groups is at the core—is to involve practitioners as partners in the research project itself. The TLRI stresses these partnerships, stating that “the research projects within the TLRI will be undertaken as a partnership between researchers and practitioners” (TLRI, 2003). This stipulation—meant to lessen the commonplace occurrence of research that is done *on* or *to* practitioners rather than *with* practitioners—has opened up learning spaces for us, as co-ordinators, about the meaning and value of partnerships and the meaning and value of teacher research.

Researcher–practitioner partnerships

The stated intention is for these partnerships to be of a reciprocal nature—teachers building their understanding of the importance of systematic enquiry for improving practice, and researchers deepening their understanding of teaching and learning. The goals of these partnerships are twofold: i) to make research closer to practice to increase the influence on practice and ii) to make sure that researchers have great respect for practice and practitioners. The collaboration is the key ingredient in that connection building and has ensured that researchers take practice and practitioners very seriously indeed. However, over time we have discovered that these partnerships have also been a major limitation because teacher/researcher partnerships—like all forms of collaboration—bring with them complex and time-consuming issues, issues not always central to the research questions themselves.

While all of the research theoretically includes practitioners as partners of some sort, our experience is that there are many different kinds of partnerships. In these last five years of projects (55 in total), we have found that there are two key archetypes of practitioner/researcher partnerships. While many of the projects use elements of both archetypes, we find drawing the two extremes a helpful beginning.

Practitioner as research assistant

In this model, the research knowledge, ideas, and practice all come from the researcher. The practitioner's job is to be a helper alongside the researcher—either as a research assistant or as an informant about the research topic. Researchers set goals, create research questions and methods, and do the bulk of the data collection. Often the practitioners co-ordinate some forms of data collection, hosting focus groups (which researchers lead) or distributing surveys (which researchers have created). Sometimes the researchers teach practitioners to gather some data; sometimes the practitioners themselves are informants about the research question. The researchers analyse the data and write about it, often checking in with the teachers for feedback along the way. This model is not miles away from the more traditional roles, and in some cases does slip into a model where researchers conduct research *on* practitioners rather than *with* them.

Researcher and practitioner as associates

In this model, researcher and teacher are collaborators. Researchers teach teachers about research, but teachers often decide on the questions that interest them (often under a particular umbrella) and investigate those questions inside their own classroom. Teachers and researchers collect data (sometimes with the teachers collecting data in their classroom and the researchers collecting data on the teacher/researcher partnership) and talk about what they're learning. The partners analyse the data together. Sometimes they even write up and present the findings together.

Benefits and limitations of these models

There are some benefits of using the *practitioner as research assistant* model. Professional researchers can create well-designed projects asking important questions which are connected to the literature and thus have the potential to make real contributions in the field. Because this is a model that many researchers and practitioners understand, it doesn't take lots of extra time to negotiate contested relationships: the relationships are fairly clear, and the researchers and practitioners step into them quite easily. The limitations of this model are that these traditional roles do not challenge the top-down stereotypes of research and may be less likely to create long-lasting practice connections. Additionally, by using the word 'partnership' to describe what is more an apprentice or assistant relationship, researchers lose the potential for reciprocity and risk the age-old pitfall of undervaluing the potential practitioner contribution—and limiting the practitioner's learning experience. Researchers may simply make use of practitioner access and the practitioner's ability to co-ordinate data collection without actually making sufficient use of their deep practice-based knowledge. Similarly, participating only in a co-ordination role may not make a sufficient contribution to the practitioners' knowledge and understanding, and in turn limit the potential impact on practice.

The *researcher and practitioner as associates* model brings with it an entirely different set of benefits and challenges. The benefits of this model are that teachers learn enormously—they learn about research methods and design, about how to step back from their practice, and about the particular content area of the investigation. As they collect data, the practitioners often make real changes to their teaching, ensuring the connection between their research and their practice. This model also teaches researchers about practice and practitioners in deep ways. Because it challenges the status quo, this model also makes new ideas possible and has the potential for unusual discoveries that emerge from the synergy of the work. On the other hand, this model brings with it serious drawbacks in practice because the projects tend to be smaller in scope, have more basic research designs, and often are not well connected to the literature—all of which follows from having novice teacher-researchers investigating inside their own classrooms. This means that while the teachers learn a great deal, the researchers learn much less—especially about the topic of the research itself. Similarly, while the connections to practice are instant inside each teacher-researcher’s classroom, the connections to practice outside these classrooms is much less common; indeed, the findings from these research projects often focus on their non-generalizability. Because of this, these projects often don’t contribute as much on a wider scale. Also, unless the projects are funded with significant release time for teachers, the steep learning curve and time-consuming nature of research means that researching teachers are often stressed and overwhelmed at times during the process.

New partnerships for new frontiers

Partnerships were put in place originally to make tight connections between research and practice and to attempt to ensure that researchers were respectful about and engaged with the real work of practitioners. The TLRI projects have certainly taken the idea of practice very seriously and have accomplished our goals in differing degrees. However, the downside of the partnerships can be larger than the benefits that the partnerships bring—especially when thinking of the best questions and the best research design to develop more knowledge about teaching and learning.

As we enter the next phase of the TLRI we are trying to keep our focus tightly on both raising research capacity and capability and also developing new knowledge about teaching and learning that is useful to practice. We have made a variety of redesigns that are meant to provide more support to grantees in grappling with both the difficult content of research in an area filled with wicked problems and the difficult process of research across different spaces of expertise (research/practice/policy). We do not want the partnerships to diminish the possibility of high-quality research questions and design, and we don’t want the partnerships to hijack the process and become the driver for the design of the question and methodology rather than one key component. Simultaneously, we do not want to lose the potential for transformational discovery that comes when people from different backgrounds and with different assumptions work together on the same issue.

What we have discovered, though, is that there is another benefit to partnerships that becomes increasingly necessary as we move towards a transformation agenda in schooling¹: increasing the circle of partners means an increase in the number and variety of people working on an issue, which expands the thinking and solution space to include a variety of new possibilities. This space can only be expanded, however, if we expand the scope of those who are thinking about the wicked problems. Gibbons (1999) reminds us “Reliable knowledge may have been produced by ... cohesive (and therefore restricted) scientific communities. But socially robust knowledge can only be produced by much more sprawling socio/scientific constituencies with open frontiers.” (quoted in Edwards, Sebba, et al. 2007, p. 647)

Thus, to keep the focus on the core aims (to connect the research well to practice and to be very respectful of teaching), we have made several key changes to the original model; these will take effect in the 2008 funding round. It is our hope that these changes maintain some of the benefits of the initial model, but also move away from the potential issues of concern. We want to put the focus back on high-quality research questions and design that will contribute to the educational agenda in New Zealand and internationally through new understanding of known problems about teaching and learning. At the same time we see research implemented through innovative researcher–practitioner partnerships as a fruitful vehicle for discovering new ideas and new ways of thinking about our wicked problems and so potentially providing insights into ways we might transform education. To achieve these dual goals, we have created two different forms of research on teaching and learning. It is our hope that these allow plenty of room for grantees to attempt different forms of research leading to advances in the understanding of teaching and learning.

Research projects: building knowledge about teaching and learning

These projects are to be designed to explicitly build on the TLRI aims: to build cumulative knowledge about teaching and learning, and to build research capability. They are to build knowledge by clearly drawing on existing evidence to take the particular field forward and by taking account of learning from completed TLRI projects and other relevant New Zealand-based research initiatives. They are to have a very clear research design with specific questions that come from an exploration grounded in the literature. They are to be led by an experienced principal investigator and be designed in a way that explicitly offers opportunities for emerging researchers to develop their skills (so that in time they might develop the expertise required of a principal investigator). Also integral to the design is a researcher–practitioner partnership. We are not wanting the partnership, however, to drive the project, but the research question(s). To this end there is to be more of a focus on the individuals in the team using their collective expertise than on explicitly developing the research skills of teachers. It is still pivotal that every party learns, but, for example, the research question might emerge from a school’s need to understand a particular area (which also required exploration because there is a hole in what is known in that

¹ The TLRI involves research in all sectors of education—early childhood, school, and tertiary—but for the purposes of this paper the work within the school sector is highlighted.

area). In this collaboration, practitioners might take the role of advisory board, data gatherers, informants, etc. rather than being integral to all aspects of the thinking inside the partnership. It is, of course, necessary that the researchers have clear and consistent regard for practice and practitioners and that the practitioners have clear and consistent regard for research and researchers.

Research projects: exploratory studies

These studies are to be more experimental and innovative, with practice and research valued together. Drawing on the idea that imagining new possibilities requires a team with diverse expertise and interests—so expanding the thinking and solution space—the projects are to focus on questions where researchers and teachers are exploring new ideas together; examining uncharted territory and so possibly contributing to a transformative agenda. Projects are to be constructed in a way that explicitly draws on the questions of the whole project team and be focused not on teachers themselves (as this makes them the subject), but on emerging issues in curriculum, on student learning and/or student voice, or any other important area that researchers and teachers can examine together. It is our expectation that these projects will mostly be in areas where there is much less research known, perhaps where innovative research designs or topics might be central. In this model, it is important that the teachers and the researchers are thought partners together, where the learning of each is augmented by the partnership.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to set out both the context and the process for our thinking about how to use an educational research fund to help raise the capacity and capability of those who care about teaching and learning in New Zealand. We believe the reach of these ideas extends beyond the border of our small country, however, and is part of a larger conversation about how we in education might work together across disciplines to increase our understanding of the wicked problems that are threaded through educational practice. We have focused here more on the potential of partnerships than on any other potential innovation (such as innovative research design, etc.) because the partnerships have been so core to our work in the TLRI thus far and have been one of the central pieces that set us apart from other forms of research funding. We understand that creating a research fund is in its own way a form of partnership, and that this partnership—between the Ministry of Education, NZCER and the TLRI advisory board, and the researchers and practitioners who become the grantees—enables us to reach beyond our current understandings as well. We look forward to this next phase of the TLRI work and to the new forms of partnerships which will be made possible by the changes we have made. And, most especially, we look forward to the new discoveries that the partnerships may themselves make possible.

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