

***Transforming educational experience for children, parents and teachers -  
Practitioner research***

*Brummell, B.; Malone, A.; Rickard, A. (NUI Maynooth) and Butler, M. (CDI) Eds*

*Launch event at the offices of TWCDI (Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative)*

*Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director, Teaching Council*

*26 June 2014*

**Transforming educational experience – practitioner research**

This is a most auspicious event on a number of levels. I have just come from a showcasing of NEPS research in the DES clock tower. Last week, I found the time to read this publication on my way to an OECD conference on teachers' pedagogical knowledge where they focused in the afternoon on teaching, learning and research, and the connections that we need to build between all three. Agencies such as the Council often get accused of not joining the dots, of not co-ordinating our thinking. I think that this evening and this publication provide clear evidence that teachers **are** joining the dots in a way that has real impact on the lives of our children and young people. Here we have a national university, a community-based initiative, community organisations, schools and teachers all connecting, all working together, drawing on research and policy, and making a difference in the daily reality of classrooms. This is a beautiful glimpse of the professional space that we in the Council espouse, encourage, support and seek to safeguard. In that light, it is an honour and delight for me to be asked to launch this transformation of educational experiences for children, parents and teachers.

The title seems to make a very bold claim – transforming educational experiences? For not just children, or teachers, or parents – but all three – together! Could this really be true? And the proud professional answer, without a hint of hubris or arrogance, is a resounding yes. And where, you say, is the evidence? In two simple but powerful words of the sub-title – practitioner research. This bold claim is true because professionals have conducted robust research that shows it to be so, in a myriad of settings. The only possibly misleading aspect of the title is that people might say that this is just the teachers saying good things about what they do. The honesty and authenticity of the teachers’ reflections in each of their summaries quickly puts paid to that misconception. Gráinne Smith looks at the raw and fraught area of the loss of loved ones, and the challenges teachers face in working with children who have suffered loss. Michelle Stowe quotes the teacher who says *“I am a dictator. I am reflecting on the teacher I want to be. I am going to change it.”* This is professionalism challenging professionals to grow and learn. This shows how teachers can be trusted to lead their own professional learning.

Unintended consequences and further challenges are openly acknowledged, and the centrality of voice for all learners is placed centre-stage in these research reports. Paul Dempsey’s piece is a good example of that, where he mentions the researcher’s voice, and the unintended consequences of parents feeling more marginalised. I have said before that teaching is that most self-less of professions, for we teach so that others can become themselves throughout their lives. This publication is replete with evidence of that.

As well as the publication, there is a video where the teachers talk about their work. As I watched the video, I made careful note of phrases and words that made me think – here is a representative sample

*Joining, connecting, outreach, critical mass, contribution of education to social justice, practical research, really exciting work, changing culture, I learned (from a teacher) , good relationships, challenge my brain, links, stories to tell, breaking down barriers; conversations; not being able to cope; a way of being; process; I love teaching; everything is entirely possible; just do it.*

In both the spoken and written word, this project is an endeavour of both individuals and a community; it is both humbling and uplifting; it is thoroughly academic – in the best sense of that word – and thoroughly professional.

On that note, I would like to congratulate the teachers who conducted the research that is summarised here. Work of this calibre makes me proud to be a registered teacher. Study of any kind is never easy especially when you are working full-time. Add to that family life, having a life, and the scale of the achievements that we are celebrating here becomes clear. Well done to NUIM and CDI for spearheading this initiative. And congratulations to all of the community groups and agencies who work with the CDI on an ongoing basis and who were involved in these research projects. This network of organisations working together across what may be perceived as clear lines of demarcation is redolent of the theme of this year’s Festival of Education, FÉILTE, “Talking about teaching: tearing down the walls.” The evidence of inter-agency co-operation in these research reports offers a great model of how we should all be working together to make teaching and learning all that they can be for our children and young people.

## Teaching, learning – an embedded culture of research

There is a perception that teaching is not as well informed by research as it could be, that we are behind the medical profession in terms of an embedded culture of research and reflection that could support **every** teacher in what they do. If we are to be honest with ourselves, we would have to say that there is some truth to that. This project, however, gives great cause for hope, for it clearly shows, page after page, how teachers in some of the most challenging situations in schools **can** make the time to conduct rigorous research on what they and their colleagues do, draw conclusions and most importantly, have a real impact that makes a real difference in the lives of children, young people and parents. It is worth noting here that all teachers since September of last year have free access to the EBSCO Education collection of research through their registered teacher log-in.

At a superficial level, the challenge for teaching with research appears to be far more complex than that of medicine. The human body is largely the same whether you live in the country or the town, in Asia or Western Europe – lungs are in the same place, as is the heart and brain. So a breakthrough on the treatment of a physical ailment in one place, once peer reviewed and verified, can be relatively easily transferred from one place to another – all with the benefit, of course, of good teaching. The dynamics of human relationships are vastly more complex than that. This is a point acknowledged in a book that I would recommend to anyone – Positive Linking by Paul Ormerod. In its introduction he calls for more thoughtful government. This publication of CDI's is a great example of thoughtful research and practice grappling with the complexities of teaching, learning and human relationships.

## **Reflection, collaboration, action – a clarion call**

The editorial is a powerful clarion call to action, and the belief that we can make a difference, if we only think carefully (Ormerod) about what we do before we try and do it. Being totally unbiased, I love the fact that it opens with a reference to the Council's Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education. Continuum is another way of saying that teachers, like everyone else, learn throughout their lives. In many ways what the Council is about is trying to make explicit what has been implicit for far too long, particularly in terms of teacher research, professionalism and reflection. This collection of research is a great notch in the post of that process of explication! There are references to collaborative research, close community, collective reflection, constructive commitment, and focus on the next steps. Taken together, these words speak of an empowering sense of collegial and collaborative professionalism that is determined to make a difference. That determination, however, is not aggressive, is not blind to risks nor to unexpected outcomes. The key is the integration of research. Research creates an architecture of support for deeply reflective practice. It can reaffirm teachers in what they are doing. Or it can equally challenge. But make no mistake, used professionally, as evidenced in this book, authentic use of research by teachers makes a powerful, and empowering, difference.

The closing paragraph of the editorial is worth quoting in full:

*Each of the studies set out in this collection recognises the inherent and fundamental principle of acting differently as a result of learning from experience. These stories are ones of optimism and from them we learn that commitment to community activism. They bear witness to an order of discourse*

*which challenges the prevailing status quo. Things need not be the way they are and efforts at active reform need not be futile.*

**Acting differently as a result of learning from experience** – this is a profound statement whose simplicity belies its importance. I am reminded of Prof. Barrie Bennett from Canada who has been a leading light in the Instructional Leadership initiative here in Ireland at post-primary, whose response to boasts of “I’ve been teaching for 40 years” tends to be “Big deal!” His point is that experience is not enough if you do not learn from it and most importantly, if you do not apply that learning. Such fears for the profession are powerfully and beautifully countermanded in these research projects.

**Stories of optimism, commitment** – this publication has a lovely style to it. Each project is grounded in robust academic research. But true to the context and the humanity of teaching and learning, each project tells its own story – of students being happier and doing better at school as a result of physical exercise; of teachers becoming professional learning communities and supporting each other in reflections. Stories are not just for children – stories are how we make sense of the world around us. Whether it be a good at a community event, a family gathering, or the fairy tales that our children love like “Frozen”, stories are the ploughed fields in which our seeds of reflective practice bear fruit and nurture those who work with us and come after us.

**Bearing witness and challenging the status quo** – this speaks to the moral aspect of teaching. I have spoken before about how the teaching profession is perfectly placed to blaze a trail for the country as a whole. If we are to avoid the mistakes of the recent past that led to the crisis of 2008, we can never again assume that we have cracked it, that we have nothing more to learn. If we are saying (and we are) that at the heart of a teacher beats the heart of a

great learner; that the old clichés of sage on the stage or guide on the side no longer hold, then teaching can lead the wider community and Irish society on a journey of responsive honest learning that ensures that our policies and actions have the best possible outcome. That is why I found the last sentence in particular so arresting:

**Things need not be the way they are and efforts at active reform need not be futile.**

What a wonderfully challenging and enthusing statement. So simple, yet so profound. It counters the somewhat pessimistic view of the Governor of our Central Bank, who said that another financial meltdown cannot be ruled out. He bases his view on the fact that the near miss of the 80's clearly was not enough of a lesson for us to avoid the complete bulls eye of a meltdown that we had in 2008. Failure to learn, and failure to share learning, are the cardinal sins of professionalism – they are also the common elements of crises around the world. Thus can the profession of teaching, historically the oracle of knowledge, help create new ways of thinking and doing for everyone. This is not utopian mumbo jumbo. This collection of research shows that learning and the sharing of learning are already happening, and making a difference.

### **Research summaries**

There are so many things that appeal to me about the research summaries. One is that they each read like the extracts from a reflective journal. They are not dry, objective accounts of intervention X with methodology Y leading to outcome Z. They are infused with a humanity that epitomises how teaching is as much a personal as it is a professional endeavour. It involves the investment of your own person in working with learners – it involves the care and

attention to relationships. As Simon Brennan says at one point, “It was therefore my responsibility as a teacher to create opportunities for students where they could experience success.” He closes by saying that his hope is that “initiatives such as mine can be implemented in a variety of school settings, thus encouraging students to set personal goals.” Sharing learning!

David Murphy’s research is fascinating for the way it describes how the students rewarded the risk the teacher took by giving them new responsibilities, how they seized the opportunities they were given. His piece is a good microcosm of the overall project, in that it places a language of humanity centre-stage at the heart of robust academic research – noting the improved student-teacher relationships that were one of the results of the research. He says “I believe every student has something to give in school....We as teachers get to see this hidden talent through these extra-curricular activities.” Another example of making explicit what has been implicit for far too long.

Deirdre O’Callaghan says “The aim of this research was to increase resilience in the children by enabling them to find their voice, name their oppression and actively rehearse ways to deal with these situations. It aimed to provide a safe space within which the children could ‘rehearse for real life’.” Sometimes people say that teachers need to see more of the real world. This quote from Deirdre shows that they see more of the real world than those critics could ever realise!

Caitheann taighde Fiona O’Fiaich solas nach beag ar thábhacht tuismitheoirí in oideachas a bpáistí – tábhacht a luaitear go minic ach b’fhéidir nach n-aithnítear ar bhealach sách fíor (authentic). Is breá liom an tagairt a dhéanann



sí don chaoi a raibh sí ag súil leis go mbeadh sí féin agus na páistí ag fás is ag forbairt le chéile agus iad ag machnamh.

*Fiona O’Fiaich’s research gives great insight into the importance of parents in their children’s education – an importance that is often mentioned but perhaps not sufficiently recognised in an authentic way. I love the reference that she makes to her hope that she and the children would grow together as reflective practitioners.*

The impact of Pauline O’Hanlon’s research is summed up in the “At a glance” section where it says – Relationships matter. So they do! All learning is understanding relationships, as George Washington Carver said. To paraphrase Ger Loughnane as he expounded on Eddie Brennan’s hurling some years back, relationships are the meat and veg of teaching and learning. Pauline’s research shows what a wise man Ger Loughnane is! In describing how other teachers are taking up her model, she shows how learning with enthusiasm and commitment begets further learning.

### **What next? Connections!**

The big challenge now is how do we share these stories with other professionals, with other communities, in a way that supports and encourages them in what they are doing. On the one hand, this is not rocket science – we live in an era of connections. We need to connect more, like we are doing this evening; like NUIM and CDI did in supporting this initiative. And we need to connect more, with more people. But doing that effectively, and scaling up at the same time, needs careful thought and planning. Our work with the NCCA and the CES with Research Alive! is clear evidence of this. We are trying to explore and enhance the nexus, the connections between research, teaching

and learning, and policy. Our hope is to create a space in which research can be made more accessible, in the broadest sense of that word, for teachers so that they can reflect on and enhance their own practice, like other professions. In its presentation, in its attention to detail, in the measured approach to language, in its simplicity yet rootedness, this collection of action research projects offers us a very useful guiding light. For that, I would like to say thank you, and well done!

If there are people here, or out there who read my comments afterwards, and say – *I am doing this as well, they're not the first* – I would paraphrase Billy Joel and say – *Tell us about it!* If this project, and this event teaches us anything, it is that we need to talk a lot more about teaching and learning, to each other – we need to talk a lot more about teachers' **learning**, as well as their teaching; and teachers need to lead those conversations, as professionals. We need to tear down the walls and talk a lot more.

I opened my address here by talking about the auspicious circumstances in which I began to prepare for this evening. On foot of the OECD conference, I decided to do some follow up reading in the area of neuroscience, teaching and learning, and came across an article called the Future of Educational Neuroscience (Fischer et al, 2010 in *Mind, Brain and Education*). In its opening remarks it talks about how cosmetics, agriculture and medicine all have very vibrant cultures of practitioner-driven research improving decisions and policy making. The authors' view is that education has not been **systematically** grounded in such practical research. They go on to say:

*The traditional model will not work. It is not enough for researchers to collect data in schools and make those data and the resulting research papers available to educators. That is not a way for research to create knowledge that*

*is useful for shaping education. The traditional way leaves out teachers and learners as vital contributors to formulating research methods and questions and neglects the importance of the ecology of schools and other learning environments. Contributions from researchers, teachers and learners together can create more useful research evidence that will feed back productively to shape schools and other learning situations.*

In this publication on transforming educational experiences, we see the vital contribution of both teachers and learners, we sense clearly the ecology of the schools. There is plenty of useful research evidence here, and my fervent hope is that it will feed back productively to shape learning for the better. We in the Council are keen to do everything we can to enhance connections to support that process. As one small step in that process of support, I am delighted to officially launch this report on transforming educational experiences.