

A Case Study of how research co-creation between schools and a university research centre is supporting the development of ‘Epistemically Insightful’ curriculum transformation in English Secondary Schools.

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

The paper discusses the process and impact of establishing a research-led co-creation partnership designed to transform curriculum practice and policy whilst maintaining teachers’ agency within a whole school approach to curriculum transformation. Drawing on our findings we argue that “best practice” for researcher-participant relationship is one where the research actively involves the participants, as a community, rather than the research being “done on” them.

Furthermore, there is a complex balance to be struck between practitioner co-creation and maintaining the integrity, in this instance, of the findings of published research. After setting out the role of the LASAR (Learning about Science and Religion) Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University in establishing the Epistemic Insight Initiative (and the projects’ research aims), we explain how the co-creation process between university research and school practitioners has provided a context in which the key success criteria for a research-engaged schools are evidenced.

Full paper

This paper explores the tension between finding an approach to curriculum design that best fits the needs and experiences of individual students and teachers and implementing the findings of generalised evidence-based educational research undertaken within a university context.

Educational research into curriculum design and implementation has the power to transform school students' experiences of learning and thus broaden their aspirations for Higher education. However educational research can often fall into a model in which schools feel that the research is being "done to" them and thus teachers are more likely to feel disenfranchised in delivering research interventions and students' are less likely to receive an optimal intervention experience.

Drawing on a design-based implementation approach (DBIR) to educational research, in the case study reported in this paper, teachers, researchers and senior leaders grapple with where and how to provide opportunities for a cohort of secondary school students to become 'epistemically insightful' – in response to research that emphasises that students should be equipped and eager to work with different types of knowledge within and across their curriculum subjects. With the aim of equipping school students with the insight and skills they need to ask and explore Big Questions (a recognised curriculum priority nationally and internationally).

The paper discusses the process and impact of establishing a research-led co-creation partnership designed to transform curriculum practice and policy whilst maintaining teachers' agency within a whole school approach to curriculum transformation. Drawing on our findings we argue that "best practice" for researcher-participant relationship is one where the research actively involves the participants, as a community, rather than the research being "done on" them.

Furthermore, there is a complex balance to be struck between practitioner co-creation and maintaining the integrity, in this instance, of the findings of published research. After setting out the

role of the LASAR (Learning about Science and Religion) Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University in establishing the Epistemic Insight Initiative (and the projects' research aims), we explain how the co-creation process between university research and school practitioners has provided a context in which the key success criteria for a research-engaged school are provided by this collaboration.

Moreover, we describe and discuss the practices that enabled participating teachers to develop their epistemic agency so that they were co-creators of research within a whole school approach. Existing practitioner literature highlights the benefits of research engagement in individual schools and the importance of access to mentoring and research expertise (see Sharp et al., 2006) alongside similar guidance for the role the researcher should take in offering a 'guiding light' (Sanders et al., 2006). However, this places research engagement within the framework of school improvement plans over a sustained ethos. A decade later Nelson and Sharples (2017) highlight that evidence-informed practice is often divided between desk based "research" by teachers as separate from "academic research" conducted by 'universities or professional research organisations' (Nelson and Sharples, 2017) a model which emphasises the teachers' role as a consumer rather than creator of rigorous research (echoed in Dimmock, 2016). Indeed, McAleavy goes as far as to say even where teachers and schools are able to have "research leads" they are 'in uncharted waters without a compass. There is no blueprint for the work of the Research Lead and the coordination of research activities in schools is not necessarily straightforward' (McAleavy, 2015). The process is still relatively under-discussed, although Godfrey (2016) has provided a valuable framework to developing a co-creation model (although he focuses on the creation of a research ecosystem within a school, led by the senior team). Whilst this paper focuses on work within one case study school, some of the findings relate to setting up a research ecosystem that includes a variety of schools.

The final part of this paper presents interim results from staff and student data that evidences the impact participation has had on the research ethos and learning experiences within the school. We discuss the ways in which the partnership has equipped teachers to investigate their own related practice enquiry, and how the

continuing relationship is enabling this practitioner research to inform wider educational research and point towards the next steps for developing a whole school research-engaged ethos and co-created approach to curriculum research.

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