



‘Perfect Data Above All Else’? :
The Purpose of Student Research in Initial Teacher Education

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We’re all researchers now.

Learning Leaders, the Department’s recent template for Teacher Professional Learning, asserts that all teachers should have twelve ‘main characteristics,’ and among those twelve is listed the role of ‘Researcher.’ Initial Teacher Educators, then, would need to have a clear understanding of not only *how* to prepare students for this role but *why* that role is one of the essential twelve.

‘Risk Taker’ and ‘Visionary’, by the way, are two other provocative characteristics listed in the document. These might seem problematic and are potential topics for future discussions. (It is certainly difficult to mark all the exercise books and have time left over for having visions.) For now, let’s focus on seeing *all teachers as researchers* and the fascinating questions this idea raises.

In our data-driven society, the notion that teachers should be collecting and analysing student performance statistics as they teach is a given. However, difficult questions are being asked by some academics about the very nature and purposes of education research and the very nature of the evidence that it gathers. Gert Biesta, Educational Philosopher at Brunel and Maynooth Universities, has perhaps put it best:

There is...something intuitively appealing about the idea that evidence should play a role in professional work, and it is difficult to imagine an argument against engagement with evidence. [Yet, he reminds us in the next breath,] ‘there is no point in having expectations about evidence that are impossible to achieve.’ⁱ

In short, he says, evidence aids our professional judgment but is not, in itself, knowledge. Evidence is neither complete and true knowledge about our teaching methods nor is it complete and true knowledge about the young people we teach. Evidence is subject to analysis and judgment – and in that process our framework of values must come into play.

Within Initial Teacher Education we have seen a renewed and exciting emphasis on student research, a movement that started over 30 years ago.ⁱⁱ Engaging in research encourages students to develop a sense of agency and ownership over their own professional development. In fact, some students whose previous engagement with their studies might

charitably be described as ‘dutiful,’ suddenly come to life once they get their hands on a research topic that intrigues, troubles -- even, in some cases, angers them. Next thing, they are ploughing through published articles, emailing leading academics in the field and having critical, questioning conversations with other, much more experienced practitioners. The marked increase in the number of vibrant, student-led research conferences, as well, is further sign of this heightened level of engagement.ⁱⁱⁱ

Exciting though it may be, there are important questions to be asked about why we are encouraging our student teachers to do research. Is it to discover further evidence of ‘What Work Best’ in the classroom? Or is it, rather, about posing profound questions about the contested nature of knowledge and how we should teach?

Let’s put it this way. How can we tell our students to pursue problem-based, active learning in the classroom if we do not bring them face-to-face with real educational problems in their own academic experience? Do they not need a curriculum which includes exposure to the contested nature of knowledge about teaching? It is too easy just to give them puzzles to solve – that is, educational conundrums and challenges which need to be untangled but which will produce what we generally regard as a predictable result. That may be satisfying for people who like puzzles and are good at them, but such academic challenges are fundamentally different from many real-world problems.

One final-year student researcher, frustrated while tackling a seemingly irresolvable real-world problem in her project, spoke to me recently about how her evidence just refused to stack up the way she had hoped it would:

Before now I always felt I knew where I was going in my coursework. I could see the big picture, the overview. I just had to find my way to the finish line – and I could do that. This is different.

The problem for her now, of course, was that there was no finish line to her project, except for where she chose to draw one. And, unfortunately, that feeling -- in her final year at university -- was a brand new academic experience for her. She had never really been put in the driver’s seat when it came to asking and answering questions about education.

If we in Initial Teacher Education are serious about making ‘Researcher’ a key part of the teacher profile, then we must listen to Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s advice from twenty years ago: it’s not good enough to make teacher research ‘a last-semester project...rather than a way of knowing about teaching that extends across the professional life span’ (p. 17). We must also continue to listen to Biesta when he reminds us ‘why “what works” still won’t work,’ as he urges us to re-evaluate the relative merits of an ‘evidence-based education’ as opposed to, or in conjunction with, a ‘values-based education.’

Don’t for a moment think Biesta is turning his back on evidence. He is not. He is simply cautioning us against basing our conclusions about everything from classroom practice to government policy on an uncritical reification of that evidence: ‘My main worry for teachers is that the logic of research drives out the logic of teaching and that the ambition to model

teaching along the lines of the logic of research actually destroys education rather than that it enhances what goes on.”^{iv}

Let’s be clear... these are exciting times to be a teacher in Northern Ireland.^v We are living through an age of significant curricular change and possibility. And our exam-and-league-table culture is coming under increasing public, critical scrutiny in light of increasing signs that children’s general well-being and broader education are being endangered. As an expression of this interesting educational *zeitgeist*, the words of Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector of Schools in England, will do nicely. She announced in 2018 that exam results will simply no longer drive Ofsted’s school inspections. The inspection pressure on schools up to this point, she argues, has not been to produce fabulous, memorable learning experiences for children but ‘to deliver perfect data above all else.’^{vi}

Data is crucial. Without data, without evidence, we would be wandering, lost. But evidence and data alone will not show us the way forward. All of us, always, have to make judgments about which way we are going to respond to that data. And, in that sense, yes, we are all researchers now.

ⁱ Biesta, Gert. ‘Why “What Works” Still Won’t Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education’ *Studies in Philosophy and Education*.

ⁱⁱ Cochran-Smith, Marilyn and Susan Lytle. ‘The Teacher Research Movement: A Decade Later.’ *Educational Researcher*. October 1999, 15-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ To learn more, the British Conference of Undergraduate Research is just one interesting starting point: <https://www.bcur.org/>

^{iv} In correspondence with the author, 21.11.18.

^v Even the absurdity of recent funding deficits can make one feel that a revolution must be on its way?

^{vi} Adams, Richard. ‘Ofsted inspectors to stop using exam results as key mark of success.’ *Guardian* 11.10.18. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/oct/11/ofsted-to-ditch-using-exam-results-as-mark-of-success-amanda-spielman>

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