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Reclaiming and reframing
teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand



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Rapporteurs' report: What evidence-base do we need to build a stronger theory-practice nexus?

Presenter

Lisa Smith

Rapporteurs

Judith Donaldson and Kama Weir

Massey University

This report has two areas of focus. First, it provides a résumé of the position paper presented by Professor Smith, and second it summarises the discussion of the conference delegates who attended the two sessions in which the paper was presented.

The paper examined the nexus between theory (which in the context of the paper translates as research) and practice. After a brief narration of past attempts to link theory and practice, the author explored some of the issues inherent in the creation of collaborative partnerships between teachers and researchers. She examined other disciplines from which educational researchers might draw, and finally provided some guidance on a way forward.

Educational research in the past has tended to be driven by researchers who followed their own agenda. In such projects, teachers typically occupied the role of research subjects, rather than researchers. Professor Smith argued that researchers must change their focus from disseminating research to facilitating research projects in which teachers and researchers collaborate. Such a change of focus has implications for researchers, teachers and initial teacher education programmes.

The metaphor of the middle school dance was used to represent the at times awkward meeting of researchers and practitioners and the difficulties inherent in the creation of authentic collaborative relationships in which the particular skills of each of the players can be acknowledged and drawn on. Issues included the need for less dissemination and more facilitation of research, greater valuing of teacher voices and perspectives, the presentation of findings in teacher-friendly ways, and the tendency for teachers to embrace professional development programmes that are not necessarily well targeted or based on the most recent research.

The author argued that those in the field of education must not see it as distinct from other disciplines. There is a lot to be learned from research in other disciplines.



Examples from the fields of psychology, creativity, aesthetics and assessment practice were offered.

Projecting into the future, the author emphasised the importance of establishing strong partnerships between teachers and researchers. The kinds of projects on which teachers and researchers might collaborate include research that helps to identify the characteristics of quality teaching and factors that influence learning. Such partnerships are important because practitioners are most likely to act on research outcomes if they have been involved with the research from its beginnings. Modes of communication that work for both groups will need to be developed.

The paper gave rise to considerable discussion amongst delegates in relation to the role and nature of collaborative partnerships. Professor Smith suggested that collaborative partnerships must engage with problems of practice rather than problems of interest. Research must assist teachers to strengthen their practice in ways that lead to enhanced learning.

In order to build partnerships, collaborators must find ways to break down the ‘them and us’ discourse that can separate practitioners and researchers. Non-teachers, for example, may feel like dinosaurs when entering school settings, and academic discourses may act as a barrier to teachers. Collaborative relationships must be grounded in deep understanding of each other’s specialised roles.

A number of issues for teachers engaged in research were identified. In a research context, teachers have two roles—as consumers and as generators of research. These roles require the development of different skill sets. The challenge is to create ways for teachers to gain experience within both skill sets. This might be done through aspects of initial teacher education programmes. Examples were provided of ‘teaching as inquiry’ papers offered by one provider. One delegate provided an example of a different model of the teaching practicum through which teachers and researchers could work collaboratively.

Teachers who engage with research through postgraduate study can find themselves caught between different value systems. Whilst undertaking their study, teachers may grow to see themselves as researchers as well as teachers, but their schools may see them only as teachers. Teaching discourses can view higher qualifications as a kind of professional development and a way of gaining promotion and a higher salary, rather than a means of bringing research findings and discourses into the school. This, in turn, may lead to teachers feeling that while their research may receive financial support from their school, or bodies such as PPTA, they are not also supported at an emotional or cognitive level. It was suggested that if senior managers in schools have high qualifications, there is more support for the teachers doing research.

Researchers who undertake partnerships with teachers also face challenges, particularly in relation to the value placed on such research within the academic world. School-based research may not be seen as scholarly enough for PBRF and researchers may encounter difficulties publishing in international journals. In order to establish productive partnerships, researchers may find the need to re-evaluate research methods and strategies in order to develop pertinent researchable questions whose findings can be articulated in simple, direct language. Researchers must be proactive in breaking down the barriers between schools and research institutions. They might, for example, invite teachers into the academy for the presentation of poster sessions.

Delegates discussed a number of models of collaborative research undertaken by practitioners and researchers. Many kindergartens, for example, are keen for their teachers to become involved in research projects and there are some scholarships available. The notion of the 'teacher as researcher' has become quite powerful in some early childhood settings. Such projects might be seen as examples of 'ground up' research, in which the project develops directly from issues within practice. Funding for collaborative partnerships is also available from bodies such as Teaching and Learning Research Initiatives (TLRI). A project in mathematics education was cited as an example of such a partnership. It was suggested, too, that education faculties in universities might take on models from medical schools, counselling education or arts education, in which the faculty members are also practitioners in the field. Examples of different practicum relationships between schools and initial teacher education providers were also discussed, such as a 'Partnership Project' operating in one setting.

The discussion engendered by the paper supports the view that despite the issues involved, collaborative partnerships between researchers and teachers represent a positive way forward for educational research.

