Teachers as learners and creators of knowledge – an essential for change and development

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I began teaching over 40 years ago and am proud to have been part of a quiet revolution in how teachers are seen in relation to learning and knowledge creation. When I began teaching, the idea of the teacher as a continuing learner was not at all the accepted one. The widely held view was that you learned how to teach at the beginning of your career and then you were competent for life. How times, understandings and expectations have changed.

These changes have been driven by the view that school improvement and learner achievement are inextricably linked to the quality of practice in the classroom. Many teachers and classrooms can be ‘change-proof’ and as a result policy can falter at this stage. Yet key research studies \(^1\) increasingly showed that schools can, and do, make a difference. This has developed into a realisation that teachers too can also make a significant difference and they have the potential to develop education through their own reflection and action. This is encapsulated in the following quotation by Lawrence Stenhouse \(^2\) in 1975, *It is teachers in the end who will change the world of school through understanding it*. Stenhouse was one of the first people to suggest that teachers should study their practice in systematic ways in order to improve and question the reality of classroom practices. He could be said to have invented the phrase ‘teachers as researchers’ and argued for knowledge on practice as equal in status to theoretical knowledge. I will return to this.


In the intervening years we have seen the growth of research evidence on the importance of supporting teachers to reflect and collaborate, and to benefit from time given to professional development. Many of the high achieving education systems place great emphasis on teacher learning and have seen the ensuing results. So far not much in this piece will be a surprise. What is still a surprise, however, is that the development of teachers is still not the priority it should be.

The recent World Bank Flagship Report, the first on education, shows that there is still a crisis in learning despite increasing the numbers of students in school. The number of students with access to basic education, mainly primary education, has expanded at an exponential rate. However, the quality of learning in the schools has not improved at such a rate. The report concludes that ‘schooling is not the same as learning’ (p.45) and that there is still a crisis of learning. ‘After prepared and motivated learners, equipped and motivated teachers are the most fundamental ingredient of learning (p.131). Despite our recent learning about the importance of teachers and despite teacher salaries taking up most of the education budget in many countries, we are still not giving teacher learning, pre-service and post, the priority it should have.

The quality of teacher learning is linked directly to the nature of the learning experience. We have also learned much about the nature of effective teacher learning:

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the importance of linking it to student learning; of its dialogic nature; of the need for the content and experience to be continuous and scaffolded; and of the linking of theory and practice. Much current practice of teacher learning is ineffective, short term, unconnected and sporadic. It is also not helped by public campaigns in the media which demonise teachers, or proposals that suggest that any professional and pedagogical learning at all is not necessary.

Research on teaching and teachers has taught us a great deal about how teachers work and learn. However, we have underused teachers as generators of knowledge about practice, education and learning. The fashion for large scale intervention studies has meant that we have underplayed the role that teachers’ own research can play in helping us to understand the nuances of practice and interactions in classrooms. Engaging in systematic enquiry can also be a highly motivating practice for teachers, and is known to restore the original motivations to become teachers, as the following quotation from a teacher demonstrates:

We no longer felt like research fodder, but professionals in control of our own improvement, having a voice in local and national decisions. The research had moved in to our own back gardens – our classrooms. It has made me focus much more on the diversity of learners. It has heightened my awareness of the range of learners. I’m more responsive to their needs. I now look more clinically at what I am going to be doing with them, offering opportunities for the students to perhaps question a bit more and I am trying in my own turn to perhaps listen to those questions rather than expecting things to happen by divine right....

The task now is to prioritise the development and learning of teachers in policy making and other developmental activities. The quality of the learning for students is tied to teacher development, and it is this that we must prioritise, deepen, and value. A key element of this agenda must be to enable and support teachers to research their own practice. Revisioning teacher professionalism in this way places teacher learning at its heart. As Kurt Lewin\(^6\) said Research which produces nothing but a book will not suffice (p34).