

Editorial

The University of Northampton's School of Education has a long track record of ensuring that students studying at all levels engage with research, both as consumers and producers. Many foundation degree and undergraduate programmes incorporate a small-scale research project towards the end of the course, while students taking courses at master's level are required to undertake more detailed inquiry in an area of professional interest and relevance to their practice.

Growing numbers of students from a wide range of professional and national backgrounds are undertaking doctoral-level research within the School, contributing to the body of knowledge and developing innovative practice. Students at all levels are supported by research-active staff, many of whom publish widely and have an international reputation for their work in the field of education and related areas. In most cases these academics began their careers as practitioners, and their engagement with research as professionals has been instrumental in shaping their practice. In this way a vibrant research community continues to evolve within the university and beyond.

Interestingly, the role of research in teacher education is the focus of a current British Educational Research Association (BERA) and Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce (RSA) inquiry (BERA, 2014). Their interim report discusses findings related to initial teacher education and to continuing professional development within a changing landscape. The first paper within this report (Beauchamp et al., 2014) identifies how policy and practice relating to the role of research within initial teacher education (ITE) is changing in the United Kingdom. While the concept of teachers as researchers has strengthened in Scotland and Northern Ireland over recent years, the authors describe the policy shift towards what they view as 'teaching as craft rather than intellectual activity' in England. Despite the potential erosion of research-based practice as a result of this policy, Beauchamp et al. (2014) recognise the continued strong commitment of ITE providers to the use of research-based knowledge and the promotion of research-related skills. The challenge lies now, however, in sustaining and strengthening this practice as training routes for new teachers change and Government policy dictates reduced emphasis on university-based learning and more on fast-track school-based practice.

The BERA report further recognises the importance of teachers' ongoing engagement with research beyond their initial training, both as individuals and as part of a wider system. It identifies it as vital that teachers (and teacher educators) are equipped to become research literate and able to be discerning consumers of research. Winch, Orchard and Oancea (2013) argue that such an engagement can make a positive contribution both to teachers' practice and development as well as the wider knowledge base, and note that 'by engaging with research findings and processes, teachers will be better equipped for the rich reflection required in practical deliberation, strengthening their processes of reasoning and the exercise of professional judgement. At the same time, research itself will be enriched, through greater insight into the challenges and complexities of educational practice' (p. 21). Similarly, Mincu (2013) demonstrates how research can support school and system improvement, with teachers actively engaged as action researchers and inquirers collaborating to share effective practice and work on innovation. In this way, collective capacity for inquiry-oriented practice can be built to enhance the learning of all pupils.

While recent discussion about the role of research in education has tended to focus on the role of large scale quantitative studies in 'building evidence into education' (Goldacre, 2013), the BERA report reaffirms the importance of inquiry-oriented practice in enabling teachers to become more reflective and effective practitioners. The importance of blending 'academic' knowledge with practice in initial training is recognised, alongside the need to provide models of continuing

professional development that enable innovation and collaborative inquiry to be embedded within the professional culture across the spectrum of educational practice.

These are goals to which the University of Northampton is committed, and which are reflected in the articles within this special issue of Support for Learning. All of the articles here are written by staff, students and associates of the university within the School of Education and provide a snapshot of the research currently being undertaken within the field of special and inclusive education.

The first article focuses on the condition of glue ear which, despite affecting the majority of young children at least once (and many children more frequently and severely), is an under-researched area, especially in terms of its educational impact. In her article, Carmel Capewell, a doctoral student at the university, reports the experience of pupils with glue ear and their families, and makes recommendations regarding the classroom environment that will be helpful for teachers working with such young people.

The concept of choice is de rigeur in all aspects of education, but what does it mean to families of children with special educational needs? This is the topic addressed in the article by Meanu Bajwa-Patel, a doctoral student in the Centre for Education and Research (CeSNER), and Cristina Devecchi, an associate professor at the university. Investigating the experience of 380 families in England, they identify that for many families, the reality is that choice is both limited and problematic.

David Preece also focuses on parental experience, in his case with regard to parents of children who present challenging behaviour. While professionals working with such pupils and students are expected to be trained in its management, such training is often unavailable to parents. David, a senior lecturer within CeSNER, reports on the impact of a pilot training programme for parents provided by a local authority, and draws comparisons with other models of local authority support.

As Nick Petford, the university's vice-chancellor, identifies in his Foreword to this special issue, the work of the university's School of Education has a strong international aspect. This is illustrated in the article by Julian Brown and Sheena Bell, two Senior Lecturers in the School's SEN and Inclusion Division, who have close teaching links with schools in Thailand. In their article they report on research undertaken while teaching MA students in Bangkok, regarding how the needs of students with dyslexia are addressed in schools there.

Lisa Shepherd, a drama therapist, is an associate lecturer at the university, teaching on the BA SEN and Inclusion course. In her article, she reports on how drama and comedy were used to help teenagers from a range of countries become more confident in using the English language, as well as to help them address their feelings regarding their experience of migration and transition.

Issues regarding transition – this time between primary and secondary education – are also addressed in an article by Ron Fortuna, another associate lecturer and former MA student at the university. Ron explores the experience of five students on the autism spectrum through collecting data from the children, their parents and their teachers; his findings reveal the complexity and challenges of the transition process for such students.

It is clear from the range of topics presented in this special issue that the School of Education within the University of Northampton continues to support a vibrant research community with a focus on supporting professionals, parents, children and young people through research which has direct application to practice in schools and communities.

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