

**Building Research Capacity after 40 Years:  
Stories from a new University's School of Education**

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**Introduction**

We are three educational researchers working together in the School of Education of the University of Northampton: a new university. In 2013, we were seconded for a minimum of two years as our School's first substantive researchers at senior lecturer level, with Dr Cristina Devecchi since appointed an Associate Professor. In a context of significant change for education in England, our core role is building educational research capacity. Currently comprising six Schools and 14,000 students, our institution became a research degree awarding University in 2005. The journey began 42 years ago, when Northampton College of Education opened to student teachers in 1972. Our School of Education remains a major part of our University, with a good reputation for teaching, though less renowned for research. In this paper we relate our professional stories as educational researchers in 2014, reflecting on where we have come from, where we are and where we hope to go in a highly dynamic space.

**Dr Cristina Devecchi**

My academic career started in my mid-30s when I pursued a Master's degree in Special and Inclusive Education at the University of Cambridge. After 10 years as a teacher of Italian in the UK and abroad, some years as a teaching assistant, and with growing children, the time seemed right. The Master's was followed by an MPhil in Educational Research and a PhD.

My first job was as a research assistant at an EU funded project in a London university. After one year I applied for a position at the University of Northampton. I was appointed Lecturer in 2009, Senior Lecturer in 2011, and Associate Professor in 2013. During the first 4 years I taught mainly educational research modules at undergraduate and graduate level and supervised PhD students. Besides my contractual 550 teaching hours, I continued researching,

presenting at conferences and getting published. Working at a teaching university meant my research engagement was mostly at weekends and during holidays. While continuing to teach and research, I remain committed to integrating research into this new university's systems and culture so am a member of Senate, Deputy Chair of a research board, Senate representative at the Research and Enterprise Committee and Deputy Research Leader in my department. I am also increasingly involved with the University's status as an AshokaU Changemaker Campus.

I find my job interesting and challenging, yet tiring and sometimes frustrating. Combining teaching, research, administration and management responsibilities requires unbounded energy and determination. Nevertheless, I have reaped some rewards and intend to be in a position to convert to full Professor within three years. Although concerned about the future of educational research, I remain positive. To be an academic in such a future will require rethinking education as a discipline and our contribution to knowledge.

### **Dr Jane Murray**

My introduction to educational research was through the BEd degree I completed in England in 1983. Following the James Report (1972) my initial teacher education focused on educational theory and research framed by the four key educational disciplines (Bridges, 2006). I thoroughly enjoyed it but the Honours element was optional, requiring a fourth year. I was keen to start teaching so opted to leave as a graduate qualified teacher without the dissertation. I taught for twenty years in nursery and primary schools but quickly regretted not completing the Honours year. In 1998, despite teacher education policy distancing theoretical rigour, I embarked on an MA Education and found the research fascinating: my dissertation focused on the implementation of the first Foundation Stage Curriculum. Subsequently, I completed NPQH which included practitioner research, though I found the experience intellectually inferior to my Master's.

In 2003, alongside rapid development of educational and early childhood policy and research under the Blair government, I started a new career as a senior lecturer in early years education. Here, I have led on undergraduate QTS and

postgraduate programmes, maintaining strong commitment to research in my teaching, supervision and leadership. Personally, I have remained research engaged throughout, for example, working on the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and completing my PhD part-time on young children as researchers.

I find my new role the most challenging yet. We are in a volatile context of rife marketisation, increasingly scarce research funding and - in England - anti-intellectualism in teacher education policy. Nevertheless, thirty years in the mutable field of education suggest to me that the continued, systematic production of new knowledge gained through rigorous research will be *the* key success factor for educational development, going forward. I intend to be part of reifying that vision.

### **Dr David Preece**

After a PGCE in the 70s, I spent most of my working life outside education, as a nurse, a residential care worker and a local authority manager. In the mid-nineties I was appointed to manage and develop services for children with autism; not knowing much about the topic, I secured funding for a PG Cert in Autism at the University of Birmingham. Twenty years after my previous (somewhat desultory) university experience I was back on campus, but with new-found passion and interest. I then completed an MEd in Special Education (Autism) in 2001 and decided to do a PhD (as a hobby!) while working full-time. I was awarded my PG Cert in Research Methods in Education in 2005 and my PhD in 2010.

Through the noughties, by now described as a 'skilled and qualified practitioner', I became a regional tutor for Birmingham University, teaching and supervising up to Masters level. I found teaching enjoyable and satisfying - but even more I enjoyed doing research, and supporting others with theirs. I was pleased and surprised to be appointed Senior Lecturer in SEN (Autism) at University of Northampton in 2012; and when this research secondment became available, I went for it.

To a large extent I can't believe my luck. Two years ago this was not even a daydream. I feel immensely privileged to do, as a job, what I spent years doing for fun. My own experience - of using others' research to inform practice as well as researching myself - has made me aware of the crucial importance of research in education and the difference it can make to children and their futures. My intention is to share that passion and enthusiasm with my colleagues, and make the University of Northampton's School of Education a place where research and teaching are seen as two sides of the same coin.

### **Summary**

Within a context of significant national change in education, our research roles are a departure for the University of Northampton's School of Education, which has historically given primacy to teaching. We three became research engaged through our professional work in education, though we all completed PhDs, rather than EdDs. We remain motivated by the strong belief that education needs research. Increasing capacity for knowledge production may be the biggest change our School of Education has made in over forty years but it may be the one move that will keep it alive for the next forty and beyond.