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Open Dialogue

Research-practice partnerships in education: Why we need a methodological shift in how we do research

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Abstract

Over the last decade 'research-informed practice' or 'evidenced-based teaching' (i.e., classroom practice that is influenced and underpinned by robust research evidence) has been fore fronted in educational policy, practice and research. However, this approach often positions the researchers as the experts, imparting their research insights for those in practice to use. This article argues that we need to shift our thinking and ways of doing research, moving from getting *research into practice*, by also prioritising getting *practice into research*. Collaborative approaches to research, which synthesise the knowledge, expertise and experience of researchers and teachers, has the potential to narrow the widely recognised gap between research and practice, and achieve our shared ambition of improving children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: *Research-practice partnership; collaborative; participatory research*

The use of academic research to inform classroom practice holds a prominent position within educational policy, practice and research discourse (e.g., Coldwell et al., 2017). However, in this article I argue that over the next decade we will need to shift our thinking, and introduce methodological changes, in how we conduct research, characterised by more collaborative approaches. These collaborative approaches will recognise two equally important sources of knowledge: that of the researcher and that of the practitioner (Snow, 2015). In doing this, we will shift our efforts from focusing solely on getting research into practice, by also prioritising getting practice into research (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017).

Research practice partnerships (RRPs) are collaborative approaches to conduct research which, within an educational context, aim to improve the children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes, by drawing upon, and synthesising, the collective knowledge, expertise and experience from both research and practice (McGeown et al., preprint). RPPs are collaborative partnerships formed to decide on research priorities, but also conduct, evaluate, and disseminate research. RPPs, if implemented successfully, have the potential to narrow the gap between research and practice, and achieve our shared ambition of improving children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes.

Indeed, this way of conducting research is not new. In the US in particular, the work of Penuel and colleagues (e.g., Corburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017; Penuel & Hill, 2019) and the Strategic Education Partnership (Donovan et al., 2003) provide excellent exemplars of RRPs, different frameworks or approaches, and outline the knowledge, skills and dispositions required of researchers to work effectively in this way. Furthermore, a recent systematic review (Sjölund et al., 2022) synthesising RPPs to date, provides insights into the breadth and nature of RPPs across different international contexts. In the UK, while this way

of conducting research is becoming increasingly common, there are very few examples of academic papers which seek to inform and support researchers and practitioners in this process. As a research community, we need to share our learning, to ensure the RPPs we create and work in are optimal and result in high-quality outcomes.

Research practice partnerships have the potential to close the widely recognised gap between research and practice, as illustrated by a National Foundation for Educational Research report on teachers' research engagement and their use of research to inform practice (Nelson, 2019). This study, based on 1,670 teachers, found that while 60% of teachers reported that ideas generated by them or their school would underpin their teaching approach, only 7% of teachers said that advice or guidance from a university of research organisation would. In Scotland, a mixed methods study examining teachers' use of research, based on 67 interviews and 1,036 online surveys, found that the research evidence and data that practitioners engage with most is school-level data (Lowden et al., 2019). In addition, the supports teachers rated as most helpful in planning and developing their practice were taking part in structured collegiate discussions, professional development/learning courses or working with colleagues in other schools/centres.

As a teacher myself, albeit in the Higher Education sector, I can relate to this entirely. My own teaching is underpinned by my beliefs about effective teaching practice, and I draw upon student course evaluations, peer observation feedback, and discussions with close colleagues to improve my teaching, rather than searching for relevant academic papers to update and inform my practice. I am not claiming that Higher Education and primary/secondary teaching and learning are the same: the contexts, students, purposes and practices are very different. However, I am sure many other academic colleagues can relate to this way of improving their

practice. Yet academics are often surprised, and even outraged, by the lack of interest teachers demonstrate in our academic research. Why? Why should we expect teachers to prioritise other knowledge sources (i.e., academic research) above their own (class and school level data, informal conversations with colleagues) which can feel much more closely connected to their students, everyday practices and the specific contexts in which they work?

Research informing practice

From a researchers' perspective, the use of academic research to inform and improve children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes is essential. However, teachers' interest in engaging with academic research is typically prompted by their need to solve a practical problem (Coldwell et al., 2017), rather than simply to be research-informed. For many teachers, academic research can be perceived to lack relevance (Davis, 1999; McGeown et al., preprint) and is too abstract, that is, provides insufficient guidance to be practical, actionable or contextualised for teachers own needs (McGeown et al., preprint; Solari et al., 2020). Furthermore, academic research can be difficult or expensive for teachers to access, and teachers do not have sufficient time to navigate the overwhelming body of academic literature available to find research aligned with their needs. In addition, research is also typically communicated in an academic language which can be difficult for those without highly specialised knowledge to understand. Indeed, a study commissioned by the Department for Education (Coldwell et al., 2017) found that most teachers interviewed (with the exception of those engaging in higher academic study) did not feel confident in engaging with research directly, nor did they feel confident being able to judge its quality. Instead, teachers relied on senior leaders and other organisations (e.g., Education Endowment Foundation) for this.

Furthermore, Coldwell and colleagues (2017) found that external research was more valued by teachers when it was valued more highly by senior leaders, and importantly, was problem and practice focused. These researchers also found limited evidence of teachers directly importing research findings to change their practice. Instead, research was more likely to inform thinking and it led (at least in the more research engaged schools) to trialling new approaches. Furthermore, they found that most teachers were unlikely to be convinced by research evidence on its own. Instead, teachers needed research to be supported by observing impact themselves or by hearing trusted colleagues discuss how it had improved their practice and outcomes for children or young people

Teachers can also be hesitant about the effectiveness of academic research when it is implemented more widely as research and evaluation is typically conducted within tightly controlled settings (Snowling et al., 2022; Solari et al., 2020). As noted by Solari et al. (2020) researchers now need to focus not only on whether a programme, intervention or research principle is effective, but 'how, why and under what conditions research-based instructional practices can be implemented effectively in routine classroom based settings' (pS348). In other words, we need to focus more effort on better understanding effective implementation (Moir, 2018). While theories and research on student learning and cognition are considered relatively universal, students (e.g., abilities, experiences, interests) and classrooms (e.g., contexts, resources) vary considerably. As academic researchers, we need to do better at recognising this, and adjust our evaluation of interventions/programmes accordingly, to improve our ability to make practical context- specific recommendations about intervention/programme use in different educational settings and/or with different groups of students (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020).

A final consideration of the research to practice approach is that it can be seen to undermine teachers' professional judgement (Goldacre, 2013). While this reflects an erroneous (albeit perfectly understandable) perspective, there are concerns within the education community that the research to practice approach positions researchers as the 'experts' undermining the extensive knowledge, experience and insights that teachers have of their students and context. However, teachers with greater knowledge and understanding of research should be more able, and confident, to exercise their professional judgement to optimally support student' outcomes (Goldacre, 2013). This research to practice approach does not position teachers as simple research consumers, but as critical consumers of research, experts who are highly engaged in the process of understanding and translating research into practice, thus ensuring that academic research has the greatest potential to lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people. When working in this way however, teachers also need to learn how to evaluate their own practice effectively, using class and school level data to continue practice or inform changes.

Connecting research and practice

Recently, there has been increasing interest within the research community (e.g., McGeown et al., preprint; 2022; Penuel & Hill, 2019; Solari et al., 2020), policy (e.g., Scottish Government, 2017) and communities of teachers (e.g., ResearchED) to increase the levels of communication, collaboration and co-production between research, practice and policy in order to lead to educational improvement. See Figure 1. In our own work, we consider educational improvement to focus on improving children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes, although recognise there is often a stronger research focus on the latter. This focus on more collaborative ways of working is also reflected in UK funding

schemes (e.g., ESRC Research Programme in Education, 2022) which is essential, as RPPs require funding to initiate and sustain.

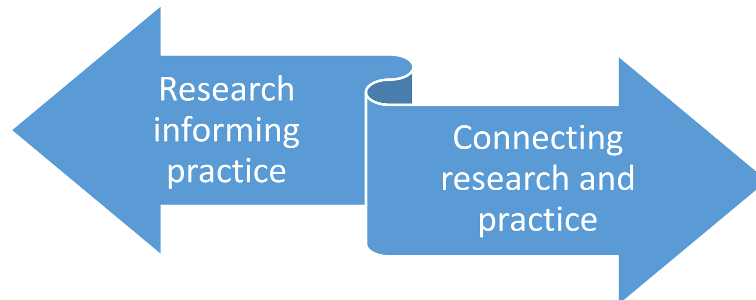

Figure 1: Changing research direction: Moving from research informing practice to connecting research and practice

With this in mind, it is important to consider the benefits, but also methodological considerations and challenges associated with RPPs. We have outlined these in a recent paper (McGeown et al., preprint) and summarised them below.

RPPs benefits:

- Research more likely to align with educational priorities
- Research more likely to be acceptable and feasible in education settings
- Increases likelihood of research uptake within educational settings
- Improves teachers' attitudes to research and research self-efficacy
- Democratises research: those in education contribute to the research agenda and research knowledge
- Supports researchers and teachers' professional development

RPPs challenges and methodological considerations:

- Considerable time required to nurture and sustain high quality partnerships and synthesise input from multiple individuals
- Those in research and practice may have different priorities and views of what 'counts' as research
- May require researchers to shift their own research interests to better align with educational priorities
- Potential for imbalances in power and hierarchies to be maintained, or even amplified
- Requires researchers and teachers to work in atypical ways, which requires an openness and training to do so
- Research process harder to predict, which is challenging for funding applications, ethical procedures and open research practices
- Potential for disjointed or miscommunication which can lead to a greater disconnect between research and practice
- Potential for poor-quality outcomes that satisfy neither those from research or practice

Within the next section, I will outline some recent examples of RPPs in the UK, using examples from within our own research group, in addition to the work of others. In the Literacy Lab at the University of Edinburgh, we have been engaging in different forms of RPPs to conduct our research, which focuses primarily on finding ways to improve children and young people's literacy experiences and outcomes. The Love to Read project (McGeown et al., preprint; 2022) involved synthesising insights from relevant theory and research, with input from children, teachers, Educational Psychologists, and individuals from national literacy and education organisations, to co-create and evaluate a programme to increase reading for pleasure. Paws and Learn (Steel et al., 2021; McGeown et al., 2022) involved researcher-teacher collaboration to co-create a reading to dogs programme to support

children's' wellbeing and reading affect. Growing Up A Reader (Webber et al., 2021) involved working with a national literacy organisation and a group of primary and secondary school children to create and conduct interviews to better understand children and young people's reading experiences with different text types. While the Young People's Reading Project (Webber et al., preprint) involved working with a national literacy organisation and a group of six young people for over 14 months, to inform, conduct and interpret research findings focused on why young people do, and do not, choose to read, and to identify ways to increase and sustain independent reading during adolescence. In each of these papers we have evaluated and shared our methodological processes and experiences, which span from the participatory research projects with children (Webber et al., 2021) and young people (Webber et al., preprint) to the research-practice partnerships with teachers (Steel et al., 2021; McGeown et al., preprint) and national organisations (e.g., McGeown et al., preprint). Our other projects (e.g., Sharing Stories, Move & Read, Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction) have also adopted RPPs, with a broad range of non-academic partners including a community-based organisation, family support team, city council, children's publisher, and children's book author, in addition to teachers and national literacy organisations. These projects demonstrate the breadth of non-academic expertise available to inform research projects, from design to execution to dissemination. Indeed, a first step in creating research-practice partnerships is to consider which practice partners are in the best position to guide and inform your research (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017).

Furthermore, we have evaluated these partnerships from both the researchers and teachers/young people's perspectives, as there is a tendency for evaluations of RPPs to be weighted towards first person accounts (Sjolund et al., 2022). This is the case with all, with the exception of the participatory research project with children (Webber et al., 2021) which,

as our first project, we consider an oversight on our part, as these children would have been able to clearly communicate their perspectives and experiences of working with the academic research team and we regret not capturing these. That said, each of these papers provide different insights into the benefits, challenges, limitations and practicalities of conducting collaborative research and contributes to our evolving understanding of participatory approaches and RPPs within the UK context.

While all of the projects we have conducted to date are set within the context of literacy research, the methodological approaches are equally relevant to explore other educational topics and issues. For example, it aligns with Fletcher-Watson and colleagues (2018) call for more participatory autism research, and also with the insights offered by Skipper and Pepler (2021) as they discuss methodological considerations associated with researchers and practice partners working together to co-create research and educational interventions more generally. Furthermore, Moir (2018) discusses the importance of implementation science within educational contexts, recognising that many educational programmes fail to become embedded successfully in real world classroom contexts, often because insufficient attention has been paid to the necessary components to ensure authentic and sustained implementation of the intervention when rolled out into practice. Moir argues that Educational Psychologists in particular can play an important role in bridging the gap between research and practice.

In addition, a recent Special Issue in the Journal of Research in Reading (2022) provides varied examples of RPPs, with the level of collaboration and type of input from practitioners varying across the projects. For example, teacher-researcher partnerships (of various forms) were used to translate an existing educational programme (Peer-Assisted-Learning-Strategies), created for use in a specific context (US), to ensure it would be educationally

relevant, appropriate and optimal across other international contexts, specifically the UK, UAE, Taiwan and Iceland (Vardy et al., 2022). Furthermore, collaborative research with family learning teams responsible for the delivery of an adult phonics intervention provided researchers with better insight into practicalities associated with the implementation of this intervention in practice (Hulme et al., 2022). Finally, Snowling and colleagues (2022) share a detailed account of the promises and pitfalls associated with delivering a language intervention at scale. In it, they recognise the importance of communication and collaboration between all individuals involved, including researchers, senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals (e.g., Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, etc), and in particular, early involvement within the initial design of the intervention.

While this does not provide a comprehensive overview of the diversity of RPP projects in the UK, these papers do provide useful, and different, insights for those interested in working in RPPs in the UK context. I would strongly encourage researchers currently involved in RPPs to consider evaluating their RPPs, from practice partners as well as researchers' perspectives, to contribute to our increasing understanding of effective practice. As we move towards strengthening the connections between research and practice and sharing our learning among the research and education community, it is important to consider priorities to guide and inform our work. In this final section, I suggest four distinct areas to consider.

When to use RPPs

For researchers engaged in basic or experimental research related to our understanding of how children or young people learn, the idea of RPPs may seem unnecessary. Indeed, when thinking about the process of translating research to practice (Solari et al., 2020) we need to

recognise that this process often consists of many steps, for example, from more basic or experimental research, to more applied research, before being applied in classroom settings. This leads to important considerations about when practice partners are best suited to being involved in the research process. From the basic/experimental stage – guiding researchers' priorities from the outset – or only from the applied research stage, providing input into pedagogic ideas, acceptability, feasibility or other implementation considerations. Individual researchers will need to make their own decision on this, but any research which is more closely linked to practice and policy priorities will have greater chance at being impactful (McGeown et al., preprint; Snowling et al., 2022).

Developing and evaluating different types of RPPs

In recent years, there has been growth in the number of academic publications focused on sharing and evaluating the effectiveness of RPPs in the UK, reflecting our increased use of this approach. However, considerable gaps still remain, for example, how to optimally include children and young people's perspectives; how to work collaboratively in research areas characterised by polarised perspectives; how to successfully work through miscommunication or conflict, how to manage RPPs when strong hierarchical relationships exist. Furthermore, it would be helpful for us to be able to more clearly describe the benefits, challenges and methodological considerations associated with RPPs across diverse research projects/relationships and distinct aspects of the research process (e.g., development of research questions, co-creation of programmes/interventions, evaluation decisions, approaches to dissemination and impact). Academic publications, conferences, networks and informal communities will all play a role in sharing this knowledge and the development of skills and dispositions required for successful RPPs.

Guidance and training for researchers and practitioners to create and sustain successful RPPs

For the majority of researchers, practitioners and policy makers, engaging in a RPP will be a new experience, and one which we have not been trained in. RPPs require researchers (and practitioners) to work in new ways, described by Skipper and Pepler (2021) as a shift from an independent self (an autonomous researcher) to an interdependent self (a researcher highly reliant on others). Indeed in RPPs, researchers often become facilitators (McGeown et al., preprint) responsible for guiding individuals through the research process, ensuring inclusive practices that integrate the knowledge, expertise and experience of all involved, and ensuring the final outcome (e.g., intervention, programme) reflects these insights from all, while still being grounded in relevant theory and practice. Specific knowledge, skills and dispositions are beneficial to ensure RPPs fulfil their potential, by allowing shared goals to be achieved via a non-hierarchical relationship characterised by clear communication, trust and an openness to listen to, and draw upon, others' knowledge and experiences (Denner et al., 2019). It has been suggested that researchers may need to be 'socialised' into this approach (Snow, 2015). With this in mind, we must invest in sufficient training and opportunities to develop experience in RPPs to optimise the quality of practice and outcomes.

Funding schemes which allow non-hierarchical RPPs

In recent years research councils and funding schemes have increasingly called for practice and policy partners (from international, national or community contexts) in initial grant applications; yet often their role is as consultants, or co-investigators, and research funding is typically awarded to universities before being distributed to policy and practice partners. This model has the potential to create an unbalanced power dynamic from the outset (Cooper et al., 2020) as practice partners are employed by the University to contribute to a university

based project. A move towards co-PI funding models would allow those from research and practice to work in equal partnership, ensuring research is equally informed and led by those working in these different contexts.

Conclusion

Research-practice partnerships have considerable potential to close the gap between research and practice and lead to positive change in the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people. Indeed, those in educational research, practice and policy share very similar goals, but a lack of communication and collaboration has hindered our progress to date. Moving forward we need draw upon the cumulative breadth and depth of knowledge, experience and expertise available to us, to ensure research benefits the children and young people at the centre of our work.

Points to consider:

- Baum (2000) warns of being overzealous about RPPs without fully appreciating the time, resources, skills or dispositions required for RPPs to be effective. How can we train and support researchers to facilitate effective RPPs, and how can we encourage researchers to publish unsuccessful/ineffective RPPs, as well as successful ones, to ensure the research literature accurately reflects progress and experiences in this area?
- RPPs may require researchers and teachers to shift their priorities and ways of working. However, what compromises should researchers and teachers not expect to make when working in RPPs?
- This article focused primarily on research-practice partnerships, but how can input from policy be integrated without creating hierarchy in the process?

- How important are co-PI funding models? Would the benefits of these outweigh issues associated with inefficiency?

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