**Chapter 10**

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# Chapter 10- Redressing the Balance: Practitioner-Research as Continuing Professional Development

### Trish Spedding

*“Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir—peremptorily Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind. With a* ***rule and a pair of scales****, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir,* ***ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature,*** *and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures****, a case of simple arithmetic****.”* (Charles Dickens, Hard Times first published 1864)

Hard Times is a satirical novel set in the fictional community of Coketown where Dickens surveys English society alongside the social and economic conditions of the era. The character Thomas Gradgrind MP academic supervisor, a man obsessed with facts provides a compelling metaphor to frame this chapter.

### Abstract

This chapter argues that dominant models of educational evaluation and improvement used in the Further, Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) sector have little discernible impact on student learning and teachers’ professional growth. In contrast to this is the proposal that practice-focused, HE- supported practitioner-research can offer an educative and more useful alternative to the widespread ‘top down’ approaches to evaluation and improvement currently in use.

Richard Sennett (2009) maintains that most of us, don’t just want to ‘get by’ in our work, we want to get better and better at what we do. Teachers are no exception to this and providing the means to support their development to improve should be a key responsibility for both central government and the organisations in which teachers work.

The chapter is arranged in 3 principal sections. The first examines policy and positions at the heart of this discussion the suggestion that many models of educational evaluation and improvement overlook the importance of contextualized, local knowledge and underestimate the value of teachers’ professional judgement and the power of practitioner-research. Such an oversight reduces and oversimplifies what can and should be measured and valued in education, to one of what can be easily measured.

The second examines approaches to the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers and the key concern that much of this operates to inhibit real improvements in practice by overlooking subtle, complex and crucially important aspects of the realities of how educational knowledge is ‘transferred’ and how educational practice actually improves.

The chapter closes by proposing that the methods of practice-focused, HE- supported practitioner-research and pedagogical inquiry illustrated through the ETF-SUNCETT Practitioner-Research Programme (PRP) can offer an educative and more useful alternative to current approaches to educational evaluation and improvement in further, adult and vocational education (FAVE).

**Key words:** Educational improvement and evaluation; practitioner research; continuing professional development; practice-focused research

**Section One**

**Educational Evaluation and Improvement: *Gradgrind a case of simple arithmetic***

Changing the way we go about educational evaluation and improvement in the FAVE sector is unlikely to be as easy as it sounds. Accounts from educational research foretell that such development is hard won and that what might appear to be ‘quick fixes’ rarely, if ever, ‘fix’ anything and never very ‘quickly’ (Coffield 2010; Sarason 1990; Sennett 2009). Costly limitations associated with the ways in which approaches to the improvement of education which originate at distance from teachers’ practice by educational researchers/policy/political professionals then imposed from the top-down and evaluated through ‘outcomes-based’ metrics are increasingly well documented in the literature. Such literature serves to bring this debate into sharper focus and ultimately more open to public scrutiny (Gregson et al, 2019;Gregson and Spedding, 2018; Coffield, 2017; Biesta, 2010; Ball, 2008; Gardner et al 2008).

This poses two significant challenges for policy and educational professionals responsible for the evaluation and improvement of FAVE in England. Firstly, top-down, micro-managed approaches to evaluation and improvement such as those used by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) are expensive to maintain. In turn, these are becoming increasingly difficult to justify in terms of empirical and robust evidence of educational improvement. Such a challenge directs to systemic problems in current approaches to external evaluation and improvement of educational practice in the sector, suggesting they are in urgent need of review. Secondly, despite considerable levels of public investment in the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers in the sector, return on this outlay has not produced value for money in terms of improved levels of achievement for learners. Pointing to the realisation that educational improvement within organisations, operationalised through taken-for-granted approaches to teachers’ development based upon ‘CPD days’ and other management-led ‘CPD events’ might also be failing .These challenges draw attention to the need for those currently responsible for educational evaluation and improvement and the widely accepted model of teacher CPD to find out why they are not working and and set in motion ways in which these issues might begin to be addressed.

Problems of evaluation and improvement in systems of professional and vocational education based on obtuse measures of educational outcomes are well known. Critiques of their rationalist technological concept of knowledge which seeks to separate ends from means and theory from practice is widely recognised (Carr, 1995; Dunne, 1993; Hyland 2019). From a technical-rational perspective, theoretical, disciplinary knowledge can and should be separated from practical skills, creating a systematic separation of the theoretical from practical in which the theoretical always dominates the practical in circumstances where the former is routinely imposed from the top-down by those who ‘know better’, upon those whom it is assumed ‘know less’. See, Gregson Chapters 1 and 11 for an extended discussion of these ideas.

Where conditions for policy draw even harder lines between educational practice, educational theory and educational research, and where approaches to educational research are increasingly privileging randomised control trials and the elevation of ‘research intensive’ universities above their more lowly ‘teaching’ counterparts, this thinking is on the rise. This movement appears to be founded on at least three rather dubious assumptions. The first is that teachers are passive consumers of knowledge gained from research conducted by others. The second is that the role of teachers is simply to apply this knowledge in their practice. The third is that theory comes from research (not practice) and that knowledge gained from practice is somehow inferior or ‘second rate’ (Gregson and Spedding, 2018).The implications here are that educational practice, educational theory and educational research can and should be developed in separate contexts, by different groups of people, for different purposes. This chapter argues that such separatist ideas are not based upon an adequate understanding of how educational practice is constituted and how it develops but are instead founded in questionable technical-rational epistemic perspectives. One-sided rationalist understandings of how educational practice is constituted and developed, it is argued, are not only misplaced and inadequate, but that they also lead to serious problems in the evaluation and improvement of education. Sarason, (1990) describes this tricky technical-rational bind as the ‘predictable failure of education reform’. He notes how systems of education based on a technical-rational world view, lock power relations in place in which teachers are expected to act as if experience is not real. In this situation he argues fabrications of truth and reality are demanded and supplied on demand. Nothing really changes because it cannot. The conditions of the transaction are not there to allow truth and reality to ‘appear’ because this might cast doubt upon/question how ‘rational’ and how ‘technical’ the approach really is. In this way, Sarason claims education reform based upon technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement becomes locked into ‘predictable failure’.

There is a growing body of research in Education in England (Fielding et al., 2005; Ball, 2008; Ball, 2018; Gregson & Nixon, 2009; Coffield, 2017), that supports the view that the demands of highly prescriptive, top-down systems of accountability, performativity, inspection, league tables etc., introduce a climate of fear and distrust between teachers, education leaders and evaluators which in turn directs the instrumental behaviour and fabrications of compliance discussed above. In a climate of austerity, responsibility for and the costs of educational improvement are laid firmly at the door of teachers and education leaders. At the same time, overall levels of funding are being reduced, budgets are getting tighter and teacher workloads are increasing. There is a deep irony here. While the Ofsted inspection regime in England controls the field of judgement, what is judged and what criteria for measurement are used, the work of collecting performance data, monitoring and reporting in order to produce and supply the volume of information needed by inspectors and the inspection process to make those judgments (for the purposes of monitoring and controlling the sector), the weight of this work is placed upon the shoulders of teachers and education leaders. Elliott (2001) and Coffield (2017) point out how the burden of this activity consumes so much time, morale, energy and resources that in fact it is operating to seriously limit and even debilitate the sector’s capacity to make real improvements in practice. Elliott observes the seductive and fatal flaw in technical-rational systems of education is that ends can masquerade as means while real educational needs remain unmet.

**Time for change: What we have is not the same as what we need**

Education by its very nature is multifaceted. All sectors of education are complex, challenging and beset by almost continuous change. With links to the workplace and the economy, diverse student body and ever expanding range of qualifications, the FAVE sector in particular is in danger of being overwhelmed by the pace of incessant policy change ( Ball, 2008; Ball, 2018; Coffield 2008a; Coffield 2015; Coffield, 2017). Coffield’s claim that despite, *“more than 30 years of policy hyperactivity”* little sense of things moving forward for the better has taken place and if anything more harm than good is the result (2015 p.13). A damning indictment of the way things are. He points to dilemmas teachers face in balancing competing demands. He describes the toll that pressures to reflect on practice and develop curriculum alongside requirements to collect and record quality assurance and performance data as part of the constant preparation for short-notice inspections is having on teachers across the sector. Leading him to comment on relations between government policies and the teaching profession as ‘disastrous’ (Coffield 2017). Hadawi and Crabbe (2018) take a similar position, when they observe, that whatever policy-makers may think the sector is about, it is to a large extent, not shared by those working in it. Ball’s, striking critique of policy turbulence brings into sharp focus ways in which demand for speed of reform pushes teachers’ concerns to the margins in order to satisfy the voracious demands of ‘what works’.

“And in the heat and noise of reform, of initiatives and fixes of ‘what works’, the issue that is neglected or ignored, or simply just pre-empted within the processes of reform, is ‘what for’. Any sense of the values of education is lost in the maze of policy hyperactivity, and goals and purposes are forgone by the demands of fast policy …. The values, commitments and professionalism of teachers are displaced by forms of technical expertise and the celebration of technocratic solutions to social and political problems: what matters is not what is educationally meaningful, but ‘what works’.”

(Ball 2018 p. 234)

This vivid reference to teachers ‘displacement’ is evermore relevant. For it remains the case that it is teachers who have to *make* policy work in practice despite tensions between policy imperatives and teachers’ own personal values. In other words teachers’ practice and professional development are neither context nor value free. Further to this, Gregson et al, consider that for those practitioners engaged in the implementation of education policy at the local level there still remains a responsibility, “… *to take action, based on wise educational judgments, in the pursuit of educational values and ends and the human good.”* (2015 p. 110).

In essence, central to meeting the demands of policy change lies the actions of FAVE practitioners and by extension the CPD support they need to help them change improve and evaluate practice. The following section traces the position of teacher professionalism in the sector, the type of approaches to CPD currently on offer and suggestions for moving forward to more democratic, teacher-led CPD arrangements.

**Section Two**

**Teachers Professional Development: *Gradgrind - ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature***

Programmes for initial teacher education (ITE) and approaches for the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers in the FAVE sector are a relatively new phenomenon. It is only in the past 40 years that governments and universities in the UK, Australasia and the USA have formalised programmes for the professional development of teachers. Before this time, knowledge of the vocational or subject specialist area was considered both a necessary and sufficient condition in order to be able to teach. The tide of teacher professionalism appears to be turning back and the status of teaching as a profession in FAVE is increasingly contested in England. Following pressure from professional groups in the sector between 2001 and 2013 it became a statutory requirement for teachers in FAVE to hold a teaching qualification. Unlike other sectors of education during this period a high percentage of FAVE teachers were unqualified and completed their initial teacher education, in-service (Orr & Simmons, 2010). In 2011, Lord Lingfield was commissioned to review progress made in professionalising the sector. Whilst optimistically noting the pivotal role staff play and calling for teachers to be “treated with greater care and respect” (Lingfield, 2012 p. 13) the statutory requirement for FAVE teachers to be qualified was revoked in 2013. As a consequence, responsibility for decisions for the ITE and CPD of teachers in the sector shifted to individual FAVE institutions rather than to national requirements and registration through other statutory bodies. Lucas and Crowther, (2016) argue that the upshot of such policy reversal results in the serious neglect of teachers’ professionalism. A position seemingly at odds with the views of former Minister of State for Skills and Apprenticeships, Anne Milton, who insists, *“The quality of teachers is the biggest determinant of outcomes for learners in FE. It is, therefore, critical that in England we have an FE system led by teachers with the right skills and qualifications*” (Milton 2019 p.5). The necessity of well qualified teachers is a view shared by many education researchers including (Wiliam 2007; Coffield 2008b; Ball 2018) with Hattie going so far as to say, *“teachers and teacher expertise are at the heart of a successful education system”* (2019:11).

**CPD: The way it is**

At the same time as changes to the initial education of teachers, their continuing professional development (CPD) has become increasingly associated with a narrow range of ‘approved’ activities. Such activities are likely to be associated with the collection and monitoring of student data such as, recruitment, achievement, value added, attendance, etc. and the endless preparation for Ofsted Inspection led by ‘experts’ telling staff how to improve inspection outcomes. Less and less development time is focused on aspects of practice identified by teachers as being in need of improvement.

The term CPD itself varies and is now used interchangeably with a number of labels, ‘professional learning’ in particular growing in popularity. The move from ‘development’ to ‘learning’ may appear to suggest more active opportunities for teachers to be creators of their own development. Although in reality such changes in vocabulary rarely signify corresponding changes in practice!

When CPD budgets (and undoubtedly these are shrinking) are used to update the subject and pedagogical knowledge of staff it is often at whole organisation events the focus of which is inevitably determined from the ‘top-down’. Usually this experience involves attending time consuming, often expensive, workshops, conferences or other events where someone who is considered (or considers themselves) to be ‘an expert’ tells everyone else in attendance what to do.

While such CPD events and networks might be helpful in raising awareness of new developments, exchanging ideas and sharing resources - in itself a necessary first step in improving practice, it is not enough to guarantee it. It can be challenging for education managers and practitioners themselves to grasp why something as intuitively appealing as simply telling someone about somebody else’s good practice won’t work. Maggie Gregson provides a compelling discussion in Chapters 1 and 11 of how the nature of a practice and the pragmatic processes through which a practice changes and improves are complex. In contrast, notions of the validity of ‘cascade’, ‘beacons of excellence’, ‘advanced practitioners’, ‘champions’ or other technical-rational slogans and approaches to educational improvement are deeply-entrenched and consequently hard to shift.

Critical to this, is the argument that educational practice cannot be reduced to the simple or instrumental application of concepts, theories, ideas or tips for teachers. Instrumental approaches to the professional development of teachers, often presented in the form of recipes, which on the face of it appear to offer simple solutions that are intuitively appealing and seem to be easy and cheap to implement are seldom what they seem. Such recipes for good teaching can prove difficult and sometimes quite impossible to put into practice across the FAVE sector’s wide variety of contexts. This is largely because the instrumental application of recipes or tips either overlooks or significantly underestimates the amount of professional knowledge and additional learning and support that is needed to develop in order to put good ideas into practice in educationally sound and sustainable ways. A lot more ‘new learning’ (Eraut, 2004) and ‘recontextualisation’ (Guile, 2014) has to take place before knowledge is ‘transferred’ well enough to bring about real changes in practice. Eraut uses the metaphor of an iceberg to explain how practice really changes. He argues that abstract, theoretical knowledge and information about a ‘good practice’ constitutes only one-eighth of the knowledge needed to put a ‘good idea’ into practice and that the remaining seven-eighths represents the amount of *new* learning needed to bring about real changes in practice. Guile’s view is that practice is a continual process of ‘recontextualisation’, in which knowledge, as it is applied, is not simply transferred from the old context but always to some degree transformed to suit the new context.  This view suggests that most complex practice (such as teaching) involves ‘research’ in the broadest sense most of the time, as teachers are always in effect testing and renewing their expertise in contexts which are never quite the same. Every teaching session is effectively a laboratory session from this perspective, with the potential to generate both professional learning and innovative ideas. Closely-related to this is the tradition of peer review, which is used widely, both formally and informally, in higher education and is at the heart of both quality assurance and the development of new knowledge. Formal and informal peer review of teachers’ work (for example peer observation of teaching, moderation or collaborative curriculum work) can be valuable for the development of professional expertise. Social frameworks characterised by shared expertise, experience and trust within which informal professional learning can take place are often referred to as ‘professional learning communities’.  Lave and Wenger’s work (1991) paved the way through their conceptualising ‘communities of practice’ (CoP). Emphasising these as, “a group of people who come together to share common interests and goals, with the aim of sharing information, developing knowledge and developing themselves both personally and professionally” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29). Wenger (1998) advocates a joint understanding of the purpose of the community, a mutual agreement of how the community evolves and the development of the community’s knowledge and practice. It is possible for these communities to exist over long periods or temporarily for the life of a single project, and can also operate partly or wholly on-line, making use of digital media tools allowing for synchronous online team-working.  Likewise, learning communities can exist wholly within or across different organisations. See Taylerson Chapter 8 for an interesting discussion of on-line professional learning communities.

Recognising that changing and improving practice involves *more than* the simple transfer of information or somebody else telling you what to do is fundamental to the principles of practice-focused research. The practice-focused approach to CPD acknowledges that change takes time. It recognises that the reality of putting ideas into practice places greater demands upon the relationships of those involved in the processes of change and those responsible for the practices of improvement.

In view of this, education leaders need to think carefully about the extent to which existing, taken-for granted approaches to CPD can be justified in terms of value for money and impact on learning. A useful table identifying many of the main strengths and limitations associated with a range of approaches to CPD can be found in Duncan et al. (2020 forthcoming).

**CPD can be different**

CPD can and should be determined by the needs and support identified by teachers for themselves. When opportunities are present for teachers to think carefully, to share their thinking with others and to improve their practice in a spirit of critical professional friendship then meaningful change will happen.

Gregson et al, (2015a) use three key concepts, reflection, judgement and wisdom to describe how teachers might develop the capacity to change. Reflection is seen as the ways in which teachers think carefully about what they do – alone and together with others. Judgement focuses on one particular aspect of reflection, namely engaging with the question of how to do things and with the question of what is to be done – the question of purpose. Judgements are not about the application of rules or about following prescriptions, but are about applying knowledge, standards, principles and theories to the always concrete, and often complex and unfolding situations in which teachers work. In a sense, these are the unique situations in which teachers find themselves day-to-day, minute-by-minute. Wisdom refers to the way in which, over time, a teacher begins to embody their capacity for good educational judgement so that it becomes part of their whole professional self. Sennett (2009) refers to judgement and practical wisdom as being necessary to the development of professional practice. Returning us to the start of this chapter and the significance of getting better and better at what we do, rather than simply getting by (Sennett, 2009, p. 24).

What makes good sense for leaders, managers and teachers is to use the knowledge, expertise and talents of existing staff, alongside educational research and the resources they already have available. This will enable them to build and develop collaborative and mutually responsible relationships and arrangements, capable of supporting improvements to educational practice.  Practitioner-research which utilises approaches such as Joint Practice Development (JPD) can help to make real and sustainable improvements in teaching, learning and assessment as an integral part of an organisation’s CPD strategy (Fielding et al. 2005; Gregson, Nixon and Spedding 2015b). JPD provides different, arguably, meaningful and practical ways to improve practice, meet professional requirements for continuing professional development (CPD) and becoming more ‘expert’. The importance of teachers’ reflecting and developing practice through interaction with peers throughout their careers is a vital aspect of meaningful professional development.

Of note in the call for ‘bottom-up’ approaches to evaluation and improvement is the suggestion that in relation to developing wisdom and practical judgement JPD as a type of practitioner-research has a potential key role to play in moving our thinking beyond individual reflective practice towards a more active, collaborative, practice-focused, research and evidence-based approach to improvement.

Improving practice is about making, acting upon, and evaluating judgements in the complex and unfolding situations encountered in everyday teaching. Shortcomings in framing the concept of reflection solely in terms of individual teachers thinking about their own practice (Thompson and Pascal 2012) points to the need for more pragmatic, co-operative and exploratory ways of making sense of our work and improving what we do together with our learners.

Changing practice in this way encourages teachers to consider how their actions and understandings inform not only the improvement of practice but the business of what being ‘a professional’ really entails.

**CPD Starting with Practitioners: Getting better at what we do**

Practitioners whatever their role in FAVE organisations, have unique cultural and material experiences making up their biography. Being able to review ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ helps teachers examine their aims, their educational values and philosophies. A balance between idealism in commitment to teaching and a concern with practical realism takes place. Teachers have to cope personally as well as professionally, with the vocational contexts in which they work. Reducing constraints on teachers to enable them to exercise professional judgement in a wider range of circumstances is called for. However, as discussed earlier, inspection regimes, target-driven funding systems and league tables operate to shape teachers in less than helpful ways. Corresponding with thinly framed CPD activities to match.

Coffield moves our thinking forward and away from top down approaches to educational evaluation and improvement by proposing a new model of inspection based on, “*pragmatic, collaborative, formative and open-ended system that promotes the learning of all those associated with it” (*2017 p. 43). Of particular interest to this chapter is his positioning of, ‘*Professional Learning: The engine of improvement’*, (p.45) seeing this as an essential component of the new model and casting teachers firmly as the drivers for improvement. Of note are the questions he poses to senior managers, *“… what percentage of the budget is spent on professional learning and how could it be increased? Is the culture of the college as conducive to the learning of tutors as it is to the learning of students? What model of staff development do they have and how effective is it?”* (*Ibid* p.45).

Such questions together with his alternative model for improvement stand in stark contrast to the discussion in Section One of this chapter. Further illustrating how the constraints of top-down approaches to improvement is at odds with a growing body of research evidence claiming that the most significant means of improving the performance of national education systems is through encouraging and supporting the on-going development of creativity, excellence, research and innovation in teachers and their teaching (Hattie, 2009; Hattie, 2012; Hattie, 2019). Here teachers are seen as the main creators of professional knowledge and improving educational practice resides in their capacity to scrutinise ideas, theories, ethical values and empirical evidence as an integral part of what they do. This involves teachers working together, strengthening the shared professional language used when talking about education in ways that make sure teachers understand it for themselves and for this discourse to be able to stand up to scrutiny, argument and evidence from others. At the same time encouraging and enabling teachers to present, share and justify their professional practice in research and evidence-informed, accessible and collaborative ways are central to the success of teacher-centred models of improvement and evaluation.

Educational practice involves making moral judgements about what to do in complex and unfolding situations both for the individual and collective good. So even if we are sure that a particular action is likely to lead to a particular outcome, that outcome might not be in the interests of students or staff in those circumstances at that time. Therefore we cannot assume that identifying a set of universal laws of ‘what works’ will be possible or even desirable in informing our practice. The danger of such approaches to improvement is that under-researched and under-examined ideas can be (and have been) rolled out on a ‘one size fits all’ basis sometimes to the detriment of good educational practice and often with educational costs to learners and financial costs to public funds.

In response to the position argued in this chapter for locating teachers at the heart of educational improvement and evaluation is the suggestion that the methods of practice-focused, HE- supported practitioner-research and pedagogical inquiry can offer the educative means to do just that.

**Section Three**

**Educational Evaluation and Improvement: Time to relinquish Gradgrind’s rule and scales**

This closing section discusses the possibility of a different model for educational improvement and evaluation illustrated through the ETF-SUNCETT practitioner-research programme (PRP) from its inception in 2017 to date. The PRP as a starting point for a more useful, alternative way to develop teachers’ professional practice stands in glaring difference to current approaches to educational evaluation and improvement used in the sector.

In contrast to the ‘top-down’, ‘outside-in’ approach to educational improvement the work of Dewey (1933) and Hunt (1987) supports the case that practitioners in the FAVE sector interested in improving educational practice should begin with themselves and value their direct experiences of practice. Hunt explains how, through personal and practical experience, he became dissatisfied with the conventional view that theories developed and verified through research can and should be applied directly to classroom practice. He argues that abstracting theory from practice in this way cuts us off from direct experience thereby removing us from the realities of the practice we are trying to improve. (Gregson et al, 2019)

This ‘inside-out’ approach underpins the practitioner-research programme (PRP) and its model of educational change and improvement is rooted in experience and grounded in personal and practical knowledge. Hunt, (1987) calls for ‘inside-out’ to come first, ‘because among other things, this approach provides a valuable base from which to consider outside-in information’ (p.2). Importantly, Hunt is not declaring that implicit theories held by practitioners are completely valid or that experienced knowledge is better than all formal theories. He takes the view that identifying implicit theories of practice creates a foundation for determining their validity and value compared with formal theories from ‘outside’.

**Redressing the balance: The ETF-SUNCETT practitioner-research programme (PRP)**

The PRP is an extensive national programme of practitioner-research funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) the national representative body for the FAVE sector in England. The programme aims to develop understandings of practice-focused educational research, its role in improving educational practice and its potential to contribute to theory. The overarching purpose being to create epistemic conditions in which teachers, education leaders, policy professionals and university researchers can talk openly about problematic aspects of educational practice from a teacher’s perspective and in the context of direct experience. Through the PRP, practitioner-researchers aim to address a number of questions including the question of if or how educational practice and the development of educational theory can be improved through practice-focused educational research.

The programme is built on the premise that the relationship between educational research and educational practice cannot be reduced to the simple application of knowledge gained from research conducted by others. As discussed earlier in this chapter, and elsewhere, (Gregson & Spedding, 2018; Gregson et al, 2019) is the belief that teachers far from being passive consumers of knowledge produced by others, often in the form of ‘blueprints’ or ‘recipes’ for good practice, are in fact the creators of new educational knowledge as well as potential generators of and contributors to educational theory. Practitioner-research emphasises that the new learning involved in putting an idea, concept or theory from educational research into educational practice is a process of inquiry and therefore an important and legitimate form of educational research. This approach to the continuing professional development of teachers, based upon practice-focused educational research and inquiry-based pedagogy, coupled with a programme of dedicated research support, can enable teachers to produce significant, well-theorised and systematic educational research, leading to improvements in educational practice.

In this way the PRP begins with the practice-focused concerns of teachers and uses direct experience, inquiry into practice, story, and other creative media to develop understandings of key ideas, theories and concepts in educational research and practice. These include considerations of the realities of conducting educational research: recognizing and knowing what you have found; the processes of educational inquiry; the processes involved in the improvement of practice; and the processes involved in the development of high standards of research and scholarship.

Depending upon the scale and scope of the research this includes documenting the investigation and its contributions to knowledge, through the production of a written assignment at Masters Level or an MPhil or PhD thesis. Other research outcomes include as a minimum the production, presentation and justification of findings in the form of a research poster and/or a presentation at the Foundation’s National Annual Research Conference in London or the University of Sunderland’s International Conference on Practice-Focused Research. In addition to these mandatory assessed outcomes a burgeoning collection of published research outputs from practitioner-researchers are now in the public domain. These include, research papers in peer reviewed journals; chapters in books; articles in professional journals; presentations at regional, national and international conferences; workplace CPD events; contributions to research networks, blogs and think pieces. Such research outputs are providing important sources of evidence for the evaluation and improvement of practice stemming from the PRP. Furthermore, they ensure that scholarly research outcomes stemming from practice-focused concerns and solutions are disseminated to ever-wider audiences. In addition to the above, different forms of quantitative and qualitative data are being collected in terms of research impact grids completed by practitioner-researchers and their evaluations of residential PRP Research Development Workshops. The programme is also subject to scrutiny and evaluation from the academy, the ETF and professional evaluators.

**Getting involved in the PRP**

FAVE Practitioners in England are encouraged by the ETF to apply for a place on the programme. It is noticeable that many applications come via ‘word of mouth’ demonstrating the powerful effect that involvement in the programme (or previous versions of it) has had upon teachers, managers and leaders in the sector.

Application to the PRP requires practitioners to submit a written research proposal focusing on an aspect of educational practice identified by them as being in need of improvement. Written applications are considered by the ETF and SUNCETT teams, carefully scored and moderated before shortlisting to the next stage of selection. Shortlisted applicants are invited for telephone interview so that further exploration of their proposal with members of the team can take place. Successful candidates are then offered a place on the programme and according to the quality of the proposal, previous research experience and qualifications practitioner-researchers are allocated to either an MA Short Course or MPhil programme of customised research support. A number of practitioner-researchers who began the programme in 2017 have transferred to PhD from MPhil and at the time of writing, four are scheduled to submit their PhD thesis in 2020 with a further eleven in 2021. The customised MA/MPhil programme of support financed by the ETF and delivered by SUNCETT does not apply to PhD study. However, the number of students capable of and desiring to move to PhD is testament to the success of the programme of support at MPhil level and the capabilities and commitment of individual practitioner-researchers to continue their research at this higher level. The current 2019-2020 cohort of the PRP consists of seventy practitioner-researchers from across the FAVE sector in England.

**ETF-SUNCETT Research Development Workshops**

Research Development Workshops are essential to the PRP model of evaluation and improvement. The workshops provide space to investigate how various stakeholders experience and respond to challenges in conducting, completing and reporting their practice-focused research, including sharing the findings of their research with colleagues, wider stakeholders, policy professionals and other researchers in the field.

Three Residential Research Development Workshops each of 3-4 days are provided over a ten-month period for practitioner-researchers progressively engaged in Year 1 and Year 2 of a customised Master of Philosophy programme or stand-alone MA Short Course. In addition, participants are supported through a series of regular supervision and tutorials across the year. Research Development Workshops use a variety of stories of research and practice as well as creative media to help teachers from the sector research to improve an aspect of their practice. Methods used include, stories of educational research, practice and knowledge development; narrative enquiry; multimedia ICT based games and conventional board games; music; film and art. These resources are used throughout the programme to enable and encourage teachers to engage deeply with key ideas and concepts in educational research. Engaging with published educational research texts helps teachers to deconstruct the research designs of others to see what good research in a range of educational situations looks like. Workshops include critical considerations of rigour, originality and significance in educational research. They also involve in-depth discussion of what it means to be critical; how to read between the lines when reading published educational research texts and how to develop individual and collective capacities for research and scholarship. The process of teachers critically evaluating and making sense of epistemological, methodological and educational issues for themselves in the contexts of their own practice resides at the core of the PRP programme.

What follows is an outline of some emerging guiding principles which appear to be important in realizing an alternative approach to educational evaluation and improvement in practice.

**Guiding principles of the PRP**

Six guiding principles have emerged as important for conducting practitioner research on this programme. Direct, practical, co-operative and mutual engagement in practice-focused research appears to be a central principle in the ETF-SUNCETT PRP. This suggests that the starting point for educational research should be an issue or concern in educational practice identified by the practitioner in the context of their own professional experience.

The second principle is that each PRP participant should have the support of a research active mentor from a University who has previously worked as a teacher in the FAVE sector and who has maintained direct contact with the sector.

The third principle is that attending a number of residential Research Development Workshops where practitioner-researchers work alongside a research-active mentor of the SUNCETT team, helps practitioners to begin to engage in the research process by enabling them to talk openly about the ‘problem in practice’, think about it more carefully in order to try to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem and the extent to which the work of other researchers might contribute to helping to address the problem.

The fourth principle is that the mentor and the practitioner-researcher embark on process of co-operation and mutual engagement in identifying an intervention which may potentially address the problem in practice. The practitioner-researcher then implements the intervention and examines the consequences of the intervention in practice in collaboration with their mentor. It is important to note that this is not a one-way process in which teachers simply apply the ideas and theories of others to their own practice, or where the mentor simply tells them what to do. On the contrary, it is a process through which practitioners and their mentors question and challenge theory and published research in the light of and with reference to their experiences of practice. In this way, teachers use practical experience to contribute to the development of theory and develop the courage, care and qualities of mind to critically examine and challenge ideas from research conducted by others in practice.

The fifth principle is that each residential workshop is designed to reflect relevant stages in the research process. At each workshop, University mentors provide stage relevant research training for PRP participants. It is important to note that this involves SUNCETT and other invited research mentors sharing their own experiences of research with PRP participants at each stage in the research process including mistakes made, and lessons learned. Residential Research Development Workshops are designed to provide time and space where PRP participants can talk openly with their mentor and other PRP participants about what is really happening in practice. Workshops also provide time to think, time to read and time to write about what is happening in practice with reference to the work of others who have thought, read and written about the same issues in educational (and other forms of) practice.

The sixth principle is that each practitioner-researcher is expected to prepare and present and justify the findings of their research. As described earlier this requires as a minimum, a research poster, presentation of findings at a research event and a written research report or thesis depending on their pathway. These outputs are shared with the ETF and made accessible to practitioners in the sector via the ETF website and through regular updates on practitioner-research in the Society for Education and Training’s (SET) professional research journal InTuition. As discussed earlier, a growing majority of participants are disseminating their research findings through publication in peer reviewed journals, books and conference proceedings and presenting and sharing work at conferences, development events and networks both in person and through virtual channels.

**What we have started to find out : Emerging findings**

Recent and extensive experience of working with significant numbers of practitioner-researchers supports the claim that teachers in the FAVE sector do not routinely have enough time, space, support or resources to conduct systematic research into their own practice with a view to improving it. Likewise, practitioners are also increasingly limited by time and space made available to them for any continuing professional development. This lends further support to the argument that current technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement in England, based on the assumption that it is enough just to tell teachers about the good practice developed by others, is failing to enable teachers and education leaders to realize educational improvements in practice. Practitioners repeatedly cite these problems as being a direct result of the financial and human costs involved in providing data for real and anticipated short notice Ofsted inspections and the increasing number of activities associated with the bureaucratization of teachers workload. According to practitioners we have worked with, the lack of opportunities to engage in research into their own practice in order to improve is made difficult by the absence of supported opportunities to systematically investigate and address aspects of practice they know to need improvement. Teachers and education leaders who do get opportunities and support to engage in practitioner-research through the PRP, report that traditional approaches to CPD based upon management organised ‘events’, together with historical and socially constructed divisions between educational practice, theory and research, which routinely elevate theory and research above practice, have in the past discouraged them from engaging directly in research practice-focused research and from using practice to interrogate, challenge and extend ideas generated from theories and question research conducted by others.

Outcomes from the PRP to date suggest that co-operation between practitioner-researchers and their research-active SUNCETT mentors, coupled with mutual engagement in a research project designed to investigate an educational problem identified by teachers in the context of their work, is crucial in developing research capacity across the sector, building appropriate levels of scholarship, capturing ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ evidence of impact and securing real improvements in practice. Almost all of the practitioner-researchers who begin the PRP see their research through to completion and present the findings of their research at the ETF Annual Research Conference. Wider and varied dissemination is becoming the norm on the programme, as described earlier. In addition, a growing and critical mass of data related to the impact of such research on the FAVE sector, individual organisations, learner and practitioner progress is being gathered by practitioner-researchers themselves using Impact Grids designed for the PRP. Similarly, high numbers successfully achieve qualifications on the programme, submitting written accounts of their research in the form of an MA assignment or MPhil thesis. One practitioner-researcher from a previous cohort has completed a PhD and co-authored a book with her SUNCETT mentor. A further four are due to submit their PhDs in February 2020 and eleven from the current cohort are beginning to pursue their research at PhD Level after successful transfer examinations in 2019. Seven PRP participants from current and previous cohorts are contributing authors in this book alongside Paul Kessel-Holland the policy professional at ETF the programme’s sponsor together with the editors, SUNCETT mentors Maggie Gregson and myself trish Spedding.

**What next?**

Any new approach takes an extended period of time to develop and mature and the PRP in its current form has been in operation for only two years. The six guiding principles presented in this chapter are offered as an interim account of the challenges associated with developing a new approach to the continuing professional development of teachers and an alternative model for the improvement and evaluation of practice in the FAVE sector. Emerging findings are understandably at first base but point to solutions to the well documented structural problems of space and time reported here and realized through high completion rates and advancement to higher degrees by the practitioner-researchers on the programme. Showing that when practitioners have the support, time and space to be involved in practice-focused research they are more than capable of seeing research through to completion and sharing and disseminating their research findings to wider audiences and beyond a library shelf.

Future research will need to focus on the impact of practitioners’ practice-focused concerns.. This will include identifying improvements in levels of achievement for learners and further development in professionalism of teachers. The analysis of ‘impact grids’ collected during the course of the programme (and beyond) will provide a useful first step here. Related to this is the enduring challenge associated with tackling the thorny issue of “scaling up” this approach to the whole sector (Nutley et al. 2003)

**Summary thoughts**

Consistent throughout this chapter is the proposal that the continuing development of teachers involves much more than simple introductions to the knowledge and techniques of teaching and learning. Rather, it is argued that key to meaningful professional development is the necessity for teachers to take control of what they identify as being important to change or develop, to critically and systematically examine this through practitioner-research and to engage actively with the discipline of education throughout their careers. Such ways involve upholding the values of educational practice and being able and prepared to challenge ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions about what should be done in the field of education and in the subjects and disciplines that are taught. Being able and prepared to justify positions taken and judgements made as a teacher are critical and enduring qualities of any professional engaged in improving and evaluating practice.

The PRP as a bottom-up, practice focused and inquiry-based model of educational evaluation and improvement offers education and policy professionals in the FAVE sector an alternative to current technical-rational, top-down, outside-in, approaches to inspection and improvement in educational contexts. The PRP draws upon what is known about how the incremental ways in which a practice is constituted and how it develops through problem-finding, problem solving and critique is developed. It criticises current technical-rational approaches for their expensive and time-consuming shortcomings in practice.

It is argued that experience, learning and the development of knowledge happen though participation in practices and that it is in practice that theory is tested through the processes of inquiry involved in putting an idea into practice. The alternative model and emerging guiding principles discussed above, aim to make educational evaluation and improvement more democratic and educational for those participating in a wide variety of practices, including the practices of education, evaluation, theory-development, research and policy-development.

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