

## CHAPTER 12

### Developing Professional Knowledge as a Consortium: Moving from 'I' to 'We'

**The RATED Consortium consisting of:** Claire Haresnape Tyson<sup>a</sup>, Matthew J. Easterbrook<sup>b</sup>, Lewis Doyle<sup>b</sup>, Alison Glover<sup>c</sup>, Elizabeth Hidson<sup>d</sup> and Thomas Perry<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Homewood School and Sixth Form Centre

<sup>b</sup> University of Sussex

<sup>c</sup> The Open University

<sup>d</sup> University of Sunderland

<sup>e</sup> University of Warwick

#### ABSTRACT

Spoken by a teacher researcher from the 'third space', this chapter explores a practical solution to a school-based problem. Claire Tyson explains how, as consortium members, they explored their shared values and theories as well as harnessing their differences, to create a consortium focused on a project about unconscious teacher bias. Learning, as they did so, that maintaining strong lines of communication, having complementary perceptions of the impact of the consortium and shared motivations for participation were important factors. By bringing together both practical and academic forms of knowledge, they showed a willingness to embrace the multiple perspectives represented in the group.

**Keywords:** Third space; practitioner research; research-practice partnerships; collaboration; teacher bias

#### Introduction

*As a teacher researcher in a secondary school I sit in the 'third space' (Skattebol & Arthur, 2014, p. 363), a sometimes uncomfortable and uneasy position due to the contested nature of the relationship between educational research and educational practice. (Biesta & Aldridge, 2021, p. 1449) – Claire*

In this contribution, we explore a practical solution to this problem, explaining how we forged an alliance with researchers from Higher Education, how we navigate our differences in background and role, and describing our first shared project on tackling unconscious teacher bias. We draw upon our shared values, which are in line with a pragmatist worldview, our shared understanding of Close-to-Practice Research (Parsons, 2021), our own domains of expertise and an appreciation of the practical wisdom that underpins good teacher practice. Although we have not formally characterised ourselves as an Education Research-Practice Partnership, we do share many of their characteristics as described by Wentworth et al. (2024). Maintaining strong lines of communication, having complementary perceptions of the impact of our consortium and shared motivations for participation that relate to our larger goals are all evident when we reflect on our progress to date.

#### Discussion: Coalescence

The origins of the RATED consortium can be traced back to contacts created in an earlier research project. The opportunity to participate in the EEF 'Writing about Values' project in 2016/2017 (See et al., 2018), brought our school into contact with Dr Matthew Easterbrook and his team at the University of Sussex, School of Psychology. Over the course of the next five

years, we planned and delivered an iteration of Writing about Values at Homewood School Sixth Form and this intervention is now embedded into our KS5 Pastoral Programme.

Despite the challenges of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, Matthew and I managed to maintain a commitment to working together. This included meeting in person as well as the increasing use of virtual meetings, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape. The benefits of being involved in a school gave Matt and his associates a connection with the grounded reality of classroom practice, whereas I benefited from being able to access his academic expertise and ethics panel resources. Moving from being participants in 'their trial' to becoming research partners, shifted the power dynamics to create a more equal relationship. The developing connection also gave credibility to my role as a teacher researcher by demonstrating to my school that I was creating genuine outward facing relationships that brought benefit to the school.

A new challenge arose when my school became aware that a group of parents were not engaging with the school's parent consultation appointments. Building on our work with Matthew about 'Stereotype anxiety' (Insert reference), I was interested in exploring this data further but I was conscious that it was potentially sensitive data and a high stakes exercise so I felt that some external research support might be a good idea. I approached academic consultants who specialised in this field but it was clear that this was not an affordable option for our school. At the same time, I was becoming aware of debates about the nature of 'expert knowledge' and 'Close to Practise' research, and realising that we were not necessarily in a position of weakness. We could draw upon our own knowledge and skills if we collaborated with the right partners.

The existing relationship with the University of Sussex was a robust starting point, and other connections had been made through my work as a co-convenor for the BERA Practitioner Research SIG. AF from the Open University was an important influence who gave me the confidence to reach out via email to my network. My timing was perfect, a growing interest in working with schools led to four academics responding to my callout. In early June 2022, I was able to hold an online scoping meeting attended by myself, Thomas Perry, A H-J, Carmel Capewell and Matthew Easterbrook. The 'I' had become 'we'.

Our group has not been static, the sad loss of A H-J in 2023 was acknowledged by the Open University who were keen to honour her academic legacy and suggested that Alison Glover would be a good fit for our group. We have also welcomed Elizabeth Hidson and Lewis Doyle, research assistant CG and more recently post-graduate student A-F C-M.

Although we have different backgrounds (teaching economics, sociology, child development, teacher education and psychology), we have a common interest in tackling educational disadvantages. This fitted well with the intersectional issues on which the group has focused: our starting point for understanding educational inequalities was that there are many reasons why some groups of students can have lower performance, attendance, and poorer behaviour records and these include structural and psychological reasons.

We characterised ourselves as an informal group of close-to-practice academics, teachers, and teacher educators who collaboratively work together to reduce educational inequalities and disadvantages using evidence-based approaches. Thomas Perry was tasked with finding an acronym; his suggestion of RATED (Research-Informed Approaches to Tackling Educational Disadvantage) was agreed by the group. Our early virtual meetings were used for introductions

and explorations of our intersecting interests, values and skills, the intersecting interest was a focus on inequality and narrowing the gaps that exist for students.

We identified unconscious teacher bias as a potential area for research and in September 2022 we first started working on co-developing a rubric tool for teachers to use in conjunction with video technology (<https://www.schoolinclusion.org.uk/access-further-materials>). Teacher bias against learners' social identities can have a significant impact on their educational experiences and outcomes (Childs & Wooten, 2023). Teacher bias on the basis of social class and 'race' in particular, are key reasons for inequity in education (Gillborn, 2015).

Although bias is a difficult topic to approach it does need to be tackled head on as it tends to perpetuate existing inequalities. We discussed the sensitive nature of bias in practice, looking at it from our different perspectives of academics or teachers, and how this can be framed for working in schools thus avoiding the 'Gotcha' or negative perception of practice.

There has been no 'blueprint' for working together but our shared values have helped create a group identity. Another thing that has gone in our favour was a successful funding application from Sussex University which allowed us to pay a research assistant to conduct a literature review and to coordinate a pilot study to co-create and design the rubric with teachers and students from Homewood School.

As a group we are interested in the idea of Phronesis (Biesta, 2007), and how the practical wisdom of great teaching is developed through both experience and ongoing learning. In the context of informed, practical action, we are conscious that the nature of educational issues is not always immediately clear and tend to be interconnected. Our analogy is that investigating educational inequalities is like moving to a new school – it takes time to make sense of the people and the context; understanding of the issues and possible responses emerges in connection with one's familiarisation with the new school rather than being something one can know in advance.

My role as a teacher researcher also enables the practical issues, such as the time and resources, to act as the administrator for the group. By using shared drives and virtual meetings that are not too long or too frequent, we have built an enjoyable working relationship based upon mutual respect. We have a flat power structure with responsibilities based on skill sets rather than a hierarchical structure.

## **Conclusion**

There was always an assumption that both academic and practical forms of knowledge were important, connected and connectable. Keeping an ecosystem model in mind (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the locus of the research questions and the way that these might be tackled have been co-constructed between the school and the RATED team. The issues are rooted in knowledge of the school, but are turned into a 'researchable' question through the collaboration. We are an example of both applied and applying education research, blending both academic and practice-led thinking.

We now acknowledge and celebrate our individual successes and support each other as a group with activities such as funding applications, writing for publication and conference submissions. At the time of writing this, we are working together to source more funding to allow us to continue developing our Rubric project.

## Response to the Editorial Perspective

What does Dewey's pragmatism have to offer us? Taking our rubric project as an example, the psychologists in the group used theory and evidence to design the rubric, but needed the pragmatic input from the teachers to find out whether it would work in practice. There is a form of knowledge that sits in psychology which represents/describes the world, and the consortium is taking that conceptual knowledge and converting it into pragmatic knowledge through action and inquiry. In this way, we create knowledge together by acting and reflecting on the results of those actions. We are essentially pluralistic in nature, acknowledging that the world is complex and multifaceted, and that we need to take multiple perspectives and put them together in order to explain it. Having a consortium with members with different ontological and epistemological positions facilitates this pluralistic position (Shan & Williamson, 2023).

Our different backgrounds allow us to bring different viewpoints and one consortium member described our discussions as a 'bridge' that translates knowledge from each of our domains and returns new, co-constructed knowledge to that domain. By avoiding our silos, we create richer ideas about how useful these concepts are both as theoretical frameworks and practical actions. We are open to being theoretically flexible, all forms of knowledge are valued and everybody has input as the project evolves. Our takeaway message is that a successful collaboration between practitioners and researchers must embrace this pluralism and the values that it represents.

### Note

1. A few names in this chapter have been anonymised as AF, A H-J, CG and A-F C-M.

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