

# **‘It's definitely part of who I am in the role’. Developing teachers' research engagement through a subject-specific Master's programme: case studies from modern languages**

## **Abstract**

The final report of the BERA/RSA Inquiry (2014) calls for teachers to engage both with and in research as a core part of their professional role. After considering some of the reasoning and evidence underpinning this ambition, we explore one way in which it might be realised: namely, through a Master's course in teachers' professional learning with a strong component of practitioner research. To do so, we present three case studies of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teachers who have recently completed such a course, investigating the participants' perceptions of both (a) the benefits and drawbacks of the course in terms of their professional learning, and (b) any facilitators and barriers they encountered when completing it. Our findings support existing evidence for the positive impact of research engagement on teachers' perceptions of their competence and efficacy. We conclude with a series of personal characteristics that seem likely to support individual teachers' engagement with and in research, and by offering some recommendations for schools, university-based teacher educators and policymakers in terms of how such engagement might be effectively supported.

**Keywords:** Teacher professional development, teacher research engagement, Modern Foreign Languages; MFL; Masters level inquiry

## **Introduction**

The final report of the BERA/RSA Inquiry (2014) calls for ‘research literate’ teachers who are both ‘discerning consumers of research’ and able to ‘conduct their own research,

individually and collectively, to investigate the impact of particular interventions or to explore the positive and negative effects of educational practice' (11). This ambition relates to a wider view of teacher professionalism, conceptualized as a normative, occupational value and implying 'the exercise of discretionary decision-making and good judgment' (Evetts, 2014, 37). It also entails a critical attitude towards established practices and orthodoxies, characterized by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, 121) as an 'inquiry stance'. For the research-literate teacher, research evidence can help provide well-informed foundations for this process of critical judgment and decision-making.

Such views of teacher professionalism contrast with other, more limited conceptualizations of the teacher (Winch, Oancea and Orchard, 2015, 1): for example, as 'craft worker' with little (if any) need for direct contact with research; or as 'executive technician'. In the latter case, research does have a role, but it is carried out by others and provides information about 'what works', to be 'handed down' to teachers to apply in their practice. Arguably, these views of the teacher are better aligned with recent tendencies to redefine the nature of professionalism, not only in teaching but also more widely, through the introduction of 'elements of hierarchy, bureaucracy, output and performance measures and even the standardization of work practices, all of which are more characteristic of organizational rather than professional forms of occupational control' (Evetts, 2014, 44).

What, though, are the benefits of developing teachers' research literacy? Arguably the most important yardstick should be its effects on classroom teaching and learning. Evidence linking teachers' research engagement to improved pupil outcomes remains limited. Nonetheless, a recent summary of findings from several systematic reviews by Cordingley (2015) concluded that teacher CPD that is 'research-informed and rich in research-related

processes' is linked to 'substantial benefits for pupils', including in attainment, behaviour and attitudes (236).

Teachers' research engagement may also have positive outcomes for the teachers themselves. For example, Cordingley's (2015) review found that participation in research-rich and domain-specific CPD activities provided benefits for teachers that included 'improved knowledge of subjects and teaching and learning strategies, willingness to innovate and continue learning, improved confidence and skills in matching teaching and learning strategies with individual needs, and confidence in embedding strategies highlighted as high leverage by research in their day to day practice' (236). Further, research engagement may lead teachers to develop an enhanced sense of identity and agency as professionals, better able to make well-informed, discretionary decisions in their classrooms (Leat, Reid and Lofthouse, 2015). In turn, this may increase their motivation – a key issue at a time when, in the UK, teacher retention is a serious concern (Allen, et.al., 2016). It is perhaps for such reasons that research engagement may 're-invigorate' teachers (Leat et al., 2015, 270), helping to 'develop or rekindle an excitement or enthusiasm about teaching' (Zeichner, 2003, 318).

### ***The nature of research literacy and the way in which it is developed***

The BERA/RSA call for research-literate teachers follows in the tradition of Stenhouse (1975) – and many others since – who have promoted the notion of teachers' engagement both *with* and *in* research.

Engagement *with* research involves teachers critically interpreting published research of relevance to their classrooms. Ur (2013), writing specifically about language teachers,

describes a process whereby teachers develop their own 'situated methodologies' drawing on research-informed principles to decide what is of relevance to their students. Borg and Burns (2008), however, found that languages teachers very rarely refer to theory or pedagogical principles when asked to explain their pedagogical decision-making. This apparent disregard for or disconnect with theory is noteworthy, given that there is a significant body of research literature in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) with potential relevance for languages teachers.

However, various complications arise here. Not least, much of the relevant research is not readily accessible to classroom teachers. Despite recent increases in open access to research journals, there is continuing relevance in Borg's (2010) argument that most language teachers (and from which it is perhaps reasonable to argue, most teachers), except those engaged in programmes of formal study, are unlikely to have ready access to research literature – nor have the necessary time and motivation to read it.

Further, even when such access is available, research publications can be highly specialised and technical (Vanderlinde and Braak, 2010), requiring a certain level of expertise in order to engage critically with the findings and conclusions. Specialist support (e.g. in the form of academic researchers) may be needed to help teachers develop such expertise or otherwise mediate their research engagement. In an attempt to alleviate this issue, there have been several attempts to synthesise research in SLA for classroom practitioners (Ellis, 2005; Lightbown, 2003; Macaro, Graham and Woore, 2016; Smith and Conti, 2016). There is very little evidence to date, however, of languages teachers' engagement with research in SLA in any form.

Even when achieved, an appropriate critical understanding of the research literature is only the first step in ‘bridging the gap’ that McIntyre (2005) identifies between the sort of knowledge that ‘good scholarly educational research’ produces on the one hand (379) and the pedagogical knowledge that ‘directly informs [teachers’] own practice in managing their classrooms and in facilitating their pupils’ learning’ on the other (359). The former is propositional (it is ‘knowledge that’), characterized by features such as impersonality, abstraction, simplification and generalizability. Pedagogical knowledge, by contrast, is procedural (‘knowledge how’), personalized, contextually specific and inherently complex. In order for research knowledge to inform educational decision-making, McIntyre argues, a series of further steps are necessary. These include making explicit relevant aspects of teachers’ pedagogical knowledge; reflecting critically on the advantages and drawbacks of any proposed innovations; and finally, trialling the innovations in their own classrooms ‘through a process of systematic and self-critical action research’ (369).

Turning now from engagement *with* research to engagement *in* research, the latter refers to teachers becoming active participants in school-based research processes, in order to address issues of teaching and learning. Engagement *in* research can be conceptualized in terms of a continuum from researcher-led studies on the one hand to teacher-led studies on the other (Cordingley, 2015; Schleicher, 2011. Leat et al., 2015). There is evidence that the greatest benefit from teachers’ engagement in research occurs when the individual teacher has some responsibility for decisions regarding the focus and nature of the research (Zeichner, 2003; James and McCormick, 2009). This is most likely to occur at the ‘teacher-led’ end of the continuum described above, including in studies undertaken as part of a Master’s course.

This emphasis on teachers' autonomy in shaping their research should, however, in no way be taken to imply that they should work in isolation. On the contrary, Cordingley's (2015) summary of review findings highlights the value of peer support in effective professional learning. For example, it can help teachers make their current practices explicit and provide a safe space for the discussion and trialling of new practices. Peer support also 'emerges strongly as a key approach to motivating teachers to persist in engaging in professional learning and development and thus with research processes and/or findings' (Cordingley, 2015, 242).

Just as in the case of teachers' engagement *with* research, their engagement *in* research is also likely to require mediation or facilitation, in order to overcome potential barriers (see Borg, 2010 for a summary), such as the need to develop appropriate research skills. Teachers need to be adequately supported if they are to research their own practice (McIntyre, 2005; Timperley and Alton-Lee, 2008, James and McCormick, 2009). This may involve the provision of time and other resources; a supportive school context that encourages collaborative inquiry; and the help of a 'facilitator', whose role is to guide teachers as they 'construct new knowledge and practices' (4). However, as Leat et al. (2015) note, teachers' research engagement may not always be welcomed in the school context, and indeed may invoke antipathy from colleagues, since it may raise issues which question or contradict the school's existing priorities – which may be particularly problematic in an era of performativity.

Masters level study has been promoted internationally as a means to develop teachers' research literacy (Schleicher, 2011). In England, there has long been discussion amongst policymakers of aspirations for teaching to become a Masters-level profession in line with

high-performing international models (Thomas, 2014). Several policy initiatives have aimed to increase the numbers of teachers who have studied at this level: from 2006, postgraduate qualifications in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) have carried 60 optional Masters-level credits. Between 2009 and 2011, newly qualified teachers were encouraged to continue their education by accessing part-time, fully-funded Masters level courses in Teaching and Learning (MTL), delivered within a national framework (TDA, 2009). Many at the time saw the potential benefits of such a programme (see, for example, Field, 2010; Castle, Peiser and Smith, 2013) but its quick demise removed what had been seen as an opportunity for ‘personalised professional development foregrounding research and context-specific practitioner enquiry’ (la Velle, 2013).

### **The current study**

The current study focuses on the impact of a part-time, two-year Masters course developed at a particular university and introduced to run in parallel to the national MTL model mentioned above. The first year aims to develop teachers’ research skills, as they engage with published research (with structured support) and experiment with a range of data collection methods. Sessions covering general aspects of pedagogy are followed up in either generic or subject-specific groups, as appropriate, the latter focussing on the development of the teachers’ *subject specific* pedagogy. The final year requires teachers to design, implement and evaluate an innovation in their own classrooms, following an ‘action research’ model. This research project is then written up as a 20,000 word dissertation. Teachers are free to choose their topic for the final project, but must demonstrate that they have worked collaboratively with colleagues to implement their research. Thus, the course involves practitioners engaging both with and in research.

Our paper investigates three MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) teachers' experiences of undertaking the practitioner research project in the final year of their Master's course. We use this specific context as a way of exploring how one model for developing 'research literate' teachers (BERA/RSA, 2014) can work in practice.

Of course, our participants represent a small, self-selecting sample of teachers, sufficiently committed to research that they completed a part-time Master's course alongside their full-time professional responsibilities. Furthermore, all three teachers obtained a Distinction grade on the course, achieved on average by only 20% of each cohort. Our rationale for this highly selective sampling approach is that we see these participants as successful 'pioneers', whose experiences of developing their own subject pedagogy through engagement both with and in research may be helpful for thinking about teachers' research engagement more broadly. Our research questions are:

1. What did the three teachers perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of their research engagement?
2. What did the teachers perceive to be the facilitators and obstacles to their research engagement?

## **Data collection**

At the time of undertaking our study, 119 students in total had completed the MLT, 15 with an MFL specialism. Of these MFL students, four had obtained a Distinction. A further three of these Distinction-level students met our additional criterion of working as teachers in the state education system when their research was conducted. This criterion reflected (a) our



desire to explore the impact of their research engagement on their classroom practice, so that they had to be currently practising teachers; and (b) our department's commitment to inclusive models of education, so that they had to be working in non-fee-paying schools. The three graduates of the course who met all our criteria were approached. All were fully informed of the aims and nature of the investigation, and consented in writing to participate. We refer to them henceforth by the pseudonyms Sarah, Bob and Lynn. All three had completed their Initial Teacher education at the university and returned to complete the MLT course. At the point of completing the MLT, Lynn and Sarah were both in their third year of teaching post-ITE, and Bob in his second.

The three participants completed an on-line questionnaire (Appendix 1) comprising 26 questions, a mixture of multiple choice items, open-ended questions and Likert scale items. The first section elicited background information concerning the respondent's employment (e.g. the type of school in which they worked). Second, they were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about their learning as a result of engaging with and in research, and the impact this may have had on their practice: for example, "My reading of published research literature as part of the MLT course has helped to make me a more effective teacher. Strongly agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly disagree". Finally, a series of questions invited them to comment, in their own words, on (a) any benefits or drawbacks that they perceived their research engagement to have had; and (b) any factors that may have helped or hindered this research engagement.

To explore the participants' views in greater detail, two of the authors read through the questionnaire responses and made notes on any issues relevant to the study's research questions. One author then conducted individual interviews with the participants (one in

person and two by teleconference), using the notes to inform the questions asked. The interviews were therefore personalized according to each individual's questionnaire responses. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was subsequently transcribed by one of the authors.

The participants all knew the interviewer well (as a tutor on their Master's course), which might conceivably have influenced their responses: for example, they may have wished to paint their research engagement in a positive light. The interviewer therefore emphasised to them the importance of answering honestly to ensure the validity of the findings – something which the participants all understood, having engaged in depth with research methods as part of their course. Further, since the participants had already completed their Master's courses (between one and two years previously), there was no longer any unequal power relation between them and the interviewer.

## **Analysis**

The questionnaire and interview data were analysed by two of the authors<sup>1</sup>. First, working independently, they both read through all of Sarah's questionnaire and interview responses, making open-ended notes in four categories as determined by the research questions (benefits/drawbacks; facilitators/barriers). They then classified the participant's responses using categories that seemed to them to 'emerge' from the data. Subsequently, the two authors met to review their interpretations and classifications. There was a very high level of

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<sup>1</sup> One of the participants in the study subsequently joined the research team following a change in professional role (being seconded from their school to work as an Initial Teacher Education tutor at Oxford University Department of Education). This unanticipated change in status occurred after all of the data for the current study had been collected and analysed. The participant's involvement in the current paper was therefore restricted to working on the discussion and conclusions only, and we are satisfied that there is no conflict of interest that might have affected our findings.

agreement in their initial analyses. Through detailed discussion of the data, a final, unified (and more elaborate) picture of Sarah's responses was obtained. Having thus 'calibrated' their analyses, the two authors then independently analysed the other participants' questionnaire and interview responses, and met again to discuss their analyses. Finally, the agreed analyses were used to write a 'pen portrait' of each participant, and these were then discussed by all three authors (with additional minor changes being made as a result).

## **Findings**

In this section, we present our analysis of each participant's questionnaire and interview responses in turn. We begin each of these 'vignettes' with some brief background information concerning the participant's professional experience and the nature of their dissertation studies.

### ***Vignette 1: 'Sarah'***

Sarah taught French at a large, state-funded, grammar school (an academically selective school) in south-east London. Her dissertation focused on pupils' spontaneous use of the target language in the classroom. Sarah designed and implemented an intervention which explicitly taught strategies for manipulating language for creative and communicative purposes. Post-intervention questionnaires revealed that pupils overwhelmingly thought that they spoke more French in class, and did so more confidently. Analysis of pupils' oral output also showed widespread increases in successful manipulation of language and a reduction in periods of silence.

### *Benefits and drawbacks of research engagement*

Sarah portrays her research engagement in an entirely positive light and identifies no drawbacks. First, she ‘strongly agrees’ that both her reading of published research and her own classroom-based investigations have helped make her a better teacher. The focus of her dissertation ‘is very much at the heart of my classroom ethos’; several of the practical techniques developed for this project have made their way into her daily practice.

Second, Sarah believes that these techniques have improved her pupils’ speaking proficiency and, consequently, their outcomes in speaking tests conducted as part of national examinations (GCSEs): ‘these guys are very much able to ... keep that that level of fluency going. Speaking doesn’t faze them’.

A third benefit which Sarah reports of her research engagement is the depth of understanding that it has given her of pedagogical issues. She values the fact that the MLT allowed her to ‘reconnect with the theory behind my practice rather than just concentrating on new methods or activities’ and this seems to be linked to a sense of ownership over the tasks she implements in the classroom. For example, she describes how a particular model of communicative language teaching had been officially adopted by her school department and how her initial reaction was one of scepticism and resistance.

I just sat there at the training just going, ‘This is not me, I am refusing to do this, this is not the way I teach’ ... If you take on someone else’s activity, you do it because you’re told to but ... there’s no growth to it, there’s no development to it, because you don’t know why you’re doing it.

However, the Master's course gave Sarah 'the opportunity to investigate the research and the thinking behind this method and understand how I could integrate the methodology into my teaching practice in a way which fitted with my teaching style'.

Fourth, Sarah feels that the MLT led to more effective discussion and collaboration with colleagues, giving her the opportunity to discuss issues in greater depth than would otherwise have happened. Furthermore, Sarah feels that the anonymity associated with the formal data gathering for her research project changed the nature of her discussions with colleagues. It provided a kind of licence to speak freely: '[they] were more happy to ... talk about their thoughts [and] be honest', without needing to worry about complying with the views of their managers.

Fifth, Sarah feels that her Master's study has influenced the practice of other teachers. She has presented her findings both in school and in the wider London borough. Several colleagues have requested copies of her dissertation, but Sarah also emphasises the importance of 'those kind of informal chats you have', followed up in some cases by her observing other teachers' lessons and giving feedback on issues related to pupil talk in the foreign language.

Finally, Sarah seems to view her research engagement very much as part of her professional identity. She clearly sees herself as someone who brings a research-informed perspective to bear on the practical problems she faces, in both her own teaching and her wider departmental role. For example, in her role as the department's team leader for post-16 pupils, 'I'm trying to raise standards in writing so I'll go away to the library and research ...

I'll take a very different approach to some of the other Key Stage leaders and I think it's definitely part of who I am in the role'. By contrast, other teachers 'don't see themselves as that researcher role' or 'as that kind of academic person'.

### *Facilitators and barriers*

The main obstacle Sarah mentions to completing her Master's course is a shortage of time. A particular difficulty was her involvement in a school trip for five weeks of the summer: she vividly describes 'trekking round India with results in my bag ... scribbling notes for my data analysis'. Nonetheless, she emphasises how helpful her school was in allowing her to take time off to study when appropriate. The main thing that Sarah found helpful in dealing with time pressures, however, seems to have been the structure of the Master's course itself, specifically the requirement to produce written work by fixed submission deadlines. She refers to this numerous times. For example:

If you've got a specific deadline to hit, it becomes one of those things you prioritize a bit more.

In particular, the need to produce written assignments gave her 'that push, that drive' to reflect on issues in greater depth than she would otherwise have done.

A further potential obstacle to research engagement, Sarah feels, is the pressure for classes to cover the prescribed schemes of work, although she says she was 'very lucky' that her school 'trusted [her]' to integrate her action research project into her teaching, whilst still covering the required material.

Sarah mentions no other obstacles. She does, however, highlight several additional facilitators. First, she feels that her school is one which values and promotes teachers' research engagement. Second, she emphasises the value of discussions with colleagues. Her department is clearly a lively one in which 'there's always a good hubbub, there's always a good kind of discussion between us and it's very forward-thinking, it's very kind of trying new things'. Third, Sarah mentions the cooperation and support of the pupils themselves who participated in her research and wonders whether pupils in some other schools might be less 'amenable' to this kind of research involvement. Finally, though Sarah sometimes found her studies challenging, she was sustained by her enjoyment of academic work: 'you do these things because you enjoy them and because you see the value in them and because you know they're actually worth doing'. Not everyone, she feels, would be happy to dedicate so much time to academic study.

### ***Vignette 2: Bob***

Whilst studying for the MLT, Bob was teaching French and German in a medium-sized state-funded comprehensive (non-academically selective) school in a large town in the East Midlands, England. For his dissertation, Bob investigated the role of writing in MFL, highlighting the tensions acknowledged in the literature between writing tasks envisaged as opportunities for skill development (process-oriented) and those used primarily for summative assessment (product-oriented). The two linked interventions in his study targeted pupils at Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14). The first aimed to develop their sense of audience as a way of increasing their motivation to write. The second comprised a series of smaller, collaborative writing tasks with an explicit focus on improving pupils' strategic approaches to

writing. After the interventions, pupils' work showed substantial increases in the total number of words written and the average length of sentences, when compared to baseline tests. There was evidence of pupils experimenting more with the language, and their attitudes to writing also improved.

### *Benefits and drawbacks of research engagement*

Bob paints a wholly positive picture of his research engagement; 'the limitations in terms of professional learning were minimal'. Again, a key benefit he identifies is the positive impact on his classroom teaching. He 'strongly agrees' that his reading of published research and his own classroom-based research have helped make him a better teacher. He feels that all the assignments and tasks completed for his Master's course have 'informed my teaching practice'. Furthermore, Bob is clear about the value of engaging with subject-specific (rather than simply generic) research. For example, he is critical of the fact that his school had sought to introduce standardised practices in teaching, marking and feedback across all subject areas: 'the way you might do AfL [Assessment for Learning] or give feedback in Languages ... would be very different to the way you'd do it in English or History or Maths'.

A second key benefit that Bob sees in his research engagement is the resulting deeper understanding of pedagogical issues. For Bob, this is not simply an 'academic' exercise: it impacts directly on the quality of his teaching. Indeed, he argues that 'you can't really do a proper job and really get the most out of something unless you know the reasons behind why you're doing it'. This, in turn, is linked to a sense of empowerment as a teacher, of taking control over the development of his own practice. His Master's dissertation, he says,



showed me that I was able to collect data at school, even on a small scale, which could then inform changes I made to my practice. It has given me the confidence to question established practices.

A third (related) issue is the contribution of Bob's research engagement to his sense of identity as a teacher. He implicitly contrasts his own approach with that of other teachers who, in his view, may be more willing to adopt practices without understanding the theoretical underpinnings. For example, Bob highlights school colleagues who 'get told to do AfL' and subsequently 'do lots of traffic lighting cos it's AfL'. He also says his Head of Department 'didn't have much knowledge at all of ... theory and research'. Moreover, Bob identifies himself as someone who 'quite enjoy[s] sitting down and actually writing when you get in the flow of it', whereas 'writing 20,000 words isn't going to be everybody's cup of tea'.

Finally, a fourth benefit which Bob mentions of his research engagement is its contribution to his career progression. He feels that completing the Master's course helped him subsequently get a Head of Department post, implying that it gave him 'credibility' despite what he perceived to be his relative youth. His Master's work was discussed at the job interview. Furthermore, he reports that many job advertisements he saw specified an understanding of recent research developments in the subject area and a willingness to disseminate these to staff.

*Facilitator and barriers*

Bob mentions several obstacles encountered during his Master's course, most notably a lack of support from colleagues. Several 'were not interested at all in the project' and some members of the Senior Management Team apparently tried to dissuade him from enrolling on the course in the first place, on the grounds of cost, workload and the difficulty of providing cover for Bob's attendance at university seminars (amounting to eight afternoons in total over two years).

Despite this hostile climate, Bob completed his Master's successfully. To some extent, his colleagues' resistance seems to have bolstered his own sense of identity as someone positive, research-engaged and keen to develop his practice – in contrast to the more negative picture he paints of those around him in school. For example, this can be seen in his description (quoted above) of his Head of Department as someone lacking research knowledge and expertise.

The other obstacle which Bob mentions is time pressure and the difficulty of balancing other commitments. However, he portrays this as a challenge to which he felt equal, rather than an insurmountable problem.

What, on the other hand, did Bob perceive to be the facilitators of his research engagement? First, his Head Teacher was supportive of his studies, despite the more negative attitudes of other colleagues. The Head Teacher was 'very much into' research, felt that the Master's 'would be a brilliant course' and helped arrange the practical support which Bob received, such as time off school for seminar attendance and a contribution of £500 towards the course costs.

Second, Bob mentions the wealth of resources available to him as a Master's student, both in hard copy (in libraries) and electronically (for example, e-journals). Ironically, he says, 'now I have finished the course, and I have a bit more time, I no longer have access to the vast amount of research literature that I did ... at the university'.

Finally, Bob valued the structure and discipline of the Master's course assignments. Without these, he says, he would not have engaged with issues in the same depth. Further, 'it helps to really ... crystallize my thinking by writing things down'. Bob feels that, having been through the structured process of completing classroom-based studies for his various assignments, he has established sound foundations for continuing to analyse and evaluate his own practice in future.

### ***Vignette 3: Lynn***

During her MLT course, Lynn was teaching French and German at a large, state-funded city comprehensive school in south-east England. Her dissertation focussed on reading in MFL and was situated within the field of research into motivation for language learning. Her interventions were designed to help pupils develop 'adaptive' attributions for their success or failure on reading tasks (Weiner, 1972): i.e. they were encouraged to perceive their outcomes as depending on how effectively they had gone about the tasks, rather than on factors outside their control such as the difficulty of the task or fixed notions of their own ability. This was linked to the development of effective strategic behaviour, which would give pupils some sense of control over the task outcomes. The results of the study suggested that the interventions had significantly improved pupils' attributions, in particular when they

performed poorly on a task. Lower-attaining pupils also appeared to have made better progress in foreign language reading, compared to peers in non-intervention groups.

### *Benefits and drawbacks of research engagement*

Lynn identifies a number of benefits of her research engagement. First, she too ‘strongly agrees’ that her reading of published research and her own classroom-based research have improved her classroom teaching. For example, she says she placed greater emphasis on: developing pupils’ learning strategies; peer collaboration; pupil talk in the target language; and the processes (rather than just the products) of learning.

Second, Lynn sees the MLT as having built effectively on her research engagement as part of her Initial Teacher Education course. Although she was enjoying her teaching, there were elements of her practice that she wished to develop further, and she said that she was ‘missing’ the opportunity to engage with and in research as a tool for addressing these issues.

Third, for Lynn, a particularly important aspect of the MLT was developing a greater understanding of the principles underpinning effective classroom practice. This, she says, came from her reading of the research literature, discussions with fellow students on the course and her own practitioner research. She found the process of developing a wider frame of reference ‘liberating’, in that it ‘brought certain elements of my teaching into sharp focus and allowed me to compare what had become normal practice in my own school context with the findings and recommendations of others’. For example, ‘seeing different evidence-based perspectives on task design ... prompted me to question and revise my own assumptions about the value and usefulness of the tasks I set’.

Lynn's subject department already valued research and frequently drew upon research findings to inform discussions about practice (for example, at department meetings). Nonetheless, she felt an increasing need to develop her own personal understanding of pedagogical issues. She felt that she had learnt a lot from observing other colleagues, particularly during her induction year as a newly-qualified teacher, and that her teaching had benefitted from replicating some of the classroom practices she had observed. However, she wanted to gain a better understanding of the reasons why such practices might be successful. Furthermore, she was aware of a sense of frustration amongst colleagues in school when they were directed by Senior Managers to implement specific practices: 'unless teachers understand why things are being done in this way, they can end up being disaffected'.

Fourth, Lynn feels that the MLT helped her understand her pupils better and that the formal data gathering as part of her dissertation study enabled her to have different kinds of conversations with her pupils, conversations which were not 'directly about their behaviour or learning in my class'. Pupils seemed willing to share views and insights that they might have been reluctant to discuss within the usual teacher/pupil dynamic.

A fifth advantage relates to Lynn's professional identity in three distinct ways: first, her aspiration to be the sort of teacher who draws on research evidence in her daily practice; second, her desire to play a full part in the community of practice in which she was working, where research evidence played a discernible role in informing departmental discussions and individuals' practice; and third, the way in which Lynn saw herself developing intellectually. She enjoyed the challenges of getting to grips with difficult concepts related to her own

classroom teaching, and felt that completing the course enhanced her status in the wider school community:

My confidence all round in my academic ability ... made me interactive with so many more colleagues in school and at a senior level.

This sense of increased confidence and perceived status in school was further enhanced by the way in which her research findings were embraced by colleagues: for example, the teaching strategies and approaches that she successfully developed have been integrated into departmental schemes of work.

#### *Facilitators and barriers*

Lynn identifies few obstacles to her research engagement. She does highlight the time demands of the Master's course, sensing that a teacher could only commit to this if they enjoyed what they were doing. In her own case, however, she does not feel that time was a major problem. She also mentions a lack of knowledge of specific research methods (relating to statistical techniques for quantitative data analysis), but indicates that she addressed this by enrolling on a course provided centrally by the university.

By contrast, Lynn identifies several factors that facilitated her research engagement. The structure and discipline of the Master's course appears to have been important in providing both the impetus for in-depth study and the framework for carrying out her own investigations, with the sense that it would 'force' her 'to make space in my working day for re-evaluating my teaching and my students' learning'.

Lynn also highlights the value of other people in supporting her studies. On the one hand, the ethos of the group of students on the course was an important factor which helped her to sustain her focus on her studies alongside her professional responsibilities in school: ‘my priorities reshuffled because I knew other people were doing this with me’. On the other hand, she highlights the support received from colleagues in school. This was evident both in practical ways (for example, they covered her lessons to allow her to gather data) and in terms of the interest they showed in her work. She feels that this was facilitated by the positive, research-oriented culture which already prevailed within her department.

## **Discussion**

Our three participants raise a range of issues in relation to our research questions, some of which are specific to their own particular cases. We therefore hope that the vignettes above are illuminating in themselves. In this section, however, we draw together some of the common threads and key points. We turn first to the benefits and drawbacks of research engagement as part of a Master’s course, as perceived by our participants.

The drawbacks are easily dealt with: none were reported. In terms of the benefits, we begin with what we consider to be the most important issue, namely the effects on teaching and learning. In line with recent reviews of evidence concerning the effects of teachers’ CPD (e.g. Cordingley, 2015), all three teachers felt strongly that both their engagement *with* published research, and their engagement *in* their own classroom-based research, had improved their classroom practice. All three reported positive effects on their pupils’ learning, in terms of both motivation and language proficiency. Our data do not permit us to

make any stronger claim than this concerning the effects of our participants' research engagement on their pupils' learning: our sample is very small and we acknowledge the limitations of relying on self-reported perceptions. Nonetheless, we would argue that the teachers' rich contextual knowledge of the pupils in their classes, together with the systematic nature of the investigations conducted for their dissertation studies, lends some weight to their views.

However, perhaps the key benefits that our participants perceived from their engagement with and in research relate to the issue of teacher professionalism. All three participants could be characterized as espousing an occupational, rather than organizational view of professionalism (Evetts, 2014). This was evident, for example, in their desire to fully understand the theoretical and evidence-based underpinnings of their classroom practice, rather than simply accepting practices that they had been told to use or had seen others use (as might be implied in the 'craft model' or 'executive technician' models of teaching). Our participants sought 'ownership' of their practice – to feel in a position to make well-informed, rational judgments about the merits and demerits of a given task or approach, before being willing to implement it in their classrooms.

They also adopted an 'inquiry stance' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), problematizing and questioning current practices and orthodoxies. We would note that there is potential for conflict here. Engaging with and in research as a basis for questioning current practices (as required for the completion of this Master's course) equips participants to exercise a degree of occupational control which, in practice, they may not enjoy, or to which their institutions (or some individuals within it) may be resistant.



Interestingly, our participants justify their insistence on occupational control and discretionary decision-making not in any ideological terms, but in terms of the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that results: ‘off-the-shelf’ approaches used without understanding, they think, can only ever work to a certain extent, because these approaches cannot be developed further in light of the pupils’ needs. As Sarah and Bob put it, ‘there’s no growth to it’; the ‘real potential’ will not be realised.

A related issue is that, for all three of our participants, their participation in the Master’s course nourished a strong sense of professional identity as research-literate teachers. Further, they clearly find their research engagement rewarding and indeed enjoyable. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they contrast themselves with other teachers in their schools who are less interested in research, or in some cases even hostile to it.

For our participants, then, the ‘gap’ that McIntyre (2005) discusses between research knowledge and pedagogical knowledge appears to have been successfully bridged. Research knowledge permeates their practice and even forms a core part of their professional identities. There is a palpable ‘buzz’ of positivity around their engagement both with and in research, bringing to mind Zeichner’s (2003, 318) observation that research engagement can help ‘to develop or rekindle an excitement or enthusiasm about teaching’.

### *Facilitators and barriers*

The obstacles to participation that we uncovered fell within the expected areas. Lack of support from (some) colleagues was an issue for one of our participants, although not for the others. However, the chief issue, mentioned by all three, was that of time pressure and

workload. Completing the MLT course demanded considerable time and hard work, which they had to fit in alongside their existing commitments as full-time teachers. This is particularly salient at a time when teacher workload is acknowledged as problematic in England, with steps being taken at a policy level to reduce this (DfE, 2017).

However, whilst all our participants mentioned time pressure as a challenge, it did not constitute an insurmountable barrier. The teachers managed to absorb the additional work associated with the course, and indeed seemed to derive satisfaction and enjoyment from doing so. Perhaps this is because their engagement with and in research was linked to a sense of agency and occupational control – the opposite of being ‘ground down’ by tasks which are imposed by others and which one may perceive as having little value (Goddard, O’Brien and Goddard, 2006).

That said, we would observe that this capacity to fit in Master’s level study alongside full-time employment may be less feasible for some teachers than it was for our participants, particularly those who have less opportunity to work as flexibly. There are therefore questions about the accessibility of the course and how this kind of professional learning opportunity might be further democratised.

Besides the issue of time, there were other barriers that might have been predicted but which were not mentioned. For example, financial pressures were conspicuous by their absence. Two participants did mention that their schools made a contribution to course costs, albeit on a small scale. Unfortunately, Master’s courses come with a price tag which, though clearly not prohibitive for our participants, might be so for others. Again, this raises questions about the accessibility of the course to all those who would like to complete it.

### *Facilitators*

A key factor which all participants mentioned as facilitating their research engagement was the formal requirements of the course itself, specifically its examined assignments and deadlines. Once they had embarked upon the course, these seemed to provide our participants with a strong extrinsic motivator. The examination process can therefore be seen as an effective ‘tool’ for promoting research engagement, at least for our participants who were able to respond positively to this challenge.

Another common factor facilitating our participants’ research engagement was the support they received from others. Lynn explicitly mentions the motivating effect of her course cohort, reflecting the importance of peer support, as emphasised in Cordingley’s (2015) review. Support was also drawn from colleagues in school. However, whilst two of our participants had entirely supportive school contexts, Bob reported indifference and even hostility from some colleagues, similar to that reported by Leat et al. (2015). However, he seemed to turn this challenging context to his advantage, using it to strengthen his sense of identity as a research-literate professional, which he contrasted with ‘plenty of teachers’ who seemed to show little interest in research. In other words, the hostility he encountered seemed to make him even more determined to pursue his vision for his own professional learning.

This point highlights the importance of the interplay between individuals and their context (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003), including the individual teacher’s orientation towards learning on the one hand, and the environment for professional learning on the other (Mutton

et al., 2010). All three participants in the current study can be described as having helpful orientations to learning from their Master's course, but their schools appear to have differed in terms of how conducive a learning environment they offered. The fact that all three participants flourished on the course – even Bob, whose workplace environment was less conducive – seems to indicate that personal orientations to learning might (at least in some cases) be the more important factor in determining the success of the learning. The formal structures of the Master's course may have helped Bob here by legitimizing, or indeed mandating, the adoption of an 'inquiry stance', even in a context where this was not entirely welcomed.

Finally, building on the previous point, perhaps the most powerful facilitator for all three of our participants was their strong sense of identity as research-literate professionals. This identity was nourished by the MLT course (as discussed above), but it also sustained their engagement with it. Our participants were people who enjoyed academic work, and who found engaging with and in research a very positive experience. As we have already noted, however, our sample is a highly selective one. It will be important to find out more about the perspectives of other teachers, such as those who have undertaken Master's courses but with less success, or who feel resistant to such courses in the first place.

## **Conclusions**

We are aware of the tentative nature of any conclusions that can be drawn from our small, selective sample of participants. Nonetheless, we would observe that the Master's level study which they undertook exhibited a number of the characteristics of effective CPD identified by Cordingley (2015). In particular, our three teachers were required to design sustained enquiries, making use of specialist expertise; they engaged in reciprocal risk-taking and

professional dialogue with peers; and they collected evidence about pupil outcomes to develop practical theories alongside their practice (240-241).

However, as Kennedy (2016) notes, whilst it may be useful to identify such ‘features’ of successful CPD courses, these features cannot in themselves guarantee successful teacher learning and sustained impact. The conditions under which individual teachers may engage successfully with learning opportunities are shaped by a complex web of personal and contextual factors (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003; Opfer et al., 2011). Drawing on our three participants’ experiences and relating these findings to the existing literature, the following list contains (in no particular order of priority) some of the key personal characteristics that we have identified as facilitating teachers’ engagement with and in research. While many of these characteristics may be familiar, bringing them together in this way helps us to understand better the range of factors at play and the potential interaction between them. We would argue that individual teachers with a range of these characteristics are more likely to sustain successful research engagement.

- A sense of dissatisfaction with existing teaching and learning practices (which might be expressed as ‘dissonance between the ideal and the assessment of current capability’) acting as a catalyst for change (Opfer and Pedder, 2011, p. 389)
- Specific aspirations for improved teaching and learning (Oosterheert et al., 2002)
- The adoption of an ‘enquiry stance’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Hall, 2009; Winch et al., 2015)
- A deliberative, proactive approach to professional learning (Eraut, 2000; Hagger et al., 2008)

- A willingness to seek out knowledge and perspectives from beyond the immediate context (Pedder et al., 2005; Hammerness et al., 2005, Hagger et al., 2008)
- A sense of personal agency and of ‘power to enact a change’ (Hiver, 2013, p. 219; van der Heijden et al., 2015)
- A sense of resilience when faced with constraints to research engagement (such as lack of sufficient time or resources) (Gu and Day, 2007).

Above all, it must be recognised that the above characteristics are, in and of themselves, helpful but not necessarily sufficient for teachers’ effective engagement with and in research. There is much that can be done to create a fertile context for such engagement. We would therefore suggest that the following are important issues for key stakeholders to consider.

First, schools themselves can play a significant role in encouraging the development of research literacy (BERA/RSA, 2014). This involves not only the provision of suitable resources (time, funding and access to published research) but also the promotion of a research culture within the school. For example, this might involve being open to the critique of existing policies and practices; empowering individual teachers to initiate change; establishing the conditions for systematic inquiry to take place; and facilitating the dissemination of practitioner research findings.

Second, given our paper’s focus on accredited Master’s level study, it would seem important for university-based teacher educators to support the development of appropriate research communities, capable of ‘bridging the gap’ (McIntyre, 2005) by bringing university-based research knowledge and school-based practical understandings into closer dialogue.

Furthermore, teacher educators need to explore ways in which they might help to break down potential barriers to teachers’ participation in part-time Master’s courses. This may involve,

for example: re-structuring course work to enable teachers to study flexibly; seeking to engage with a wider range of teachers across a wider range of contexts; and ensuring that such courses allow teachers to control the direction of their studies, including provision for teachers to investigate subject-specific issues.

Third, policymakers need to address the potential barriers that hinder teachers' engagement with and in research, including their participation in Master's-level study. For example, appropriate and equitable funding must be available for all teachers. It would also help teachers to engage effectively with research if key academic publications and other research findings were freely accessible in schools. Further, policymakers could work to ensure that accountability measures reflect the importance of school support for teachers' research engagement.

To conclude, we would argue that the three case studies presented here support existing evidence that engaging with and in research can impact positively on teachers' perceptions of their competence and efficacy. Nonetheless, we would echo the conclusions of the BERA/RSA (2014) Inquiry that further research is needed into the link between teachers' research engagement on the one hand and their pupils' outcomes on the other.

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