

Mind the gap: factors which inhibit supporting student teachers to engage in action research while on school placement

Maria Moore, Dermot O'Donovan, Pauline Logue

Department of Creative Education, Atlantic Technological University, Ireland.

Abstract

In the Irish context, there is an expectation for research to be embedded across the continuum of the teaching profession, including initial teacher education. The Teaching Council has set out the requirement for student teachers to engage in research on their own practice, while on school placement, which links learning in their higher education institutions and the host school. This paper aims to examine some of the factors which inhibit support for student teachers to engage in action research while on school placement. This case study uses a constructivist and interpretivist philosophy. The design and analysis are underpinned by the triangulation of qualitative data collection through questionnaires, focus groups, group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Themes are developed using thematic analysis. Key findings include challenges encountered in supporting student teachers to engage in action research, not least conducting research ethically, and the power dynamics at play in school placement.

Keywords: *Initial teacher education; action research; student teachers; school placement.*

1. Introduction

Increasingly, knowledge-based societies require a consistent supply of quality teachers who are equipped with the skills to actively engage in ongoing professional development and to conduct school-based research to develop a culture of professional learning and sharing in school settings (Darling-Hammond, 2017). A teaching practicum, or school placement is a mandatory part of the preparation for teaching in most jurisdictions (OECD, 2022) and is regarded by the Irish Teaching Council as the ‘fulcrum’ of teacher education (Teaching Council, 2020, p. 9). By integrating new pedagogical knowledge and skills into initial teacher education (ITE) and working in partnership with schools to develop reflective practice, student teachers are facilitated to incorporate theory and practice (Hall et al., 2018; OECD, 2019).

The Department of Creative Education in Atlantic Technological University (ATU) undertook funded¹ research to develop a framework model to support student teachers of technological subjects engage in action research while on school placement. This paper aims to present initial findings that identify some of the challenges which inhibit student teachers from engaging in action research on school placement. This paper contributes to the growing field of study relating to teacher education in Ireland, with a specific focus on technical education. It begins by examining literature pertinent to school placement and follows with a description of the methodology employed to gather data. Findings from the research are discussed and the paper concludes with some recommendations. The term ‘co-operating teacher’ is used to describe a teacher who provides support for a student teacher on school placement. Teaching Council documentation refers to this person as a *Treoraí*, the Irish word for ‘guide’.

2. Literature

The quality of an education system depends on the high standards of its educators (OECD, 2019). Reflective practice and research-informed teaching are recognized internationally as supporting quality teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Significant developments have been made in ITE in Ireland in the last 30 years, in response to changing social and economic demands, as well as in response to a proliferation of academic research in this area (Hall et al., 2018). Among these changes was the establishment of the Teaching Council in 2006, which is tasked with establishing and increasing high standards for teaching and teachers (Teaching Council, 2020). The Teaching Council aim to reconfigure ITE to meet the ever-changing demands of society and learners in the 21st century. Their *Research Strategy* sets out three pillars “Research, Reflective Practice and Relationships” to support research-

¹ This study was funded by a Research & Innovation Strategic Endowment (RISE) Scholarship from ATU.

informed teaching (Teaching Council, 2016, p.1). As well as informing policy and decision making in the Teaching Council itself, the strategy also aims to develop a “vibrant research culture within the profession, whereby teachers as reflective practitioners and enquiry-oriented learners are actively engaging in and with research” (Teaching Council, 2016, pp.1-4). This strategy aligns with findings from international studies of high functioning education systems, where there is a focus on research in teacher education, and where graduate teachers are equipped to use research critically and reflectively (Sahlberg et al., 2012).

Of relevance to this paper is a requirement by the Teaching Council for student teachers on school placement to “engage in research on their own practice”, that makes connections between their learning in higher education institutions and practice in school (Teaching Council, 2020, p. 13). Internationally, practitioner research is viewed as being particularly suitable for student teachers in ITE (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). It is premised on the belief that they can develop professionally by examining and reflecting on their own learning, as well as their teaching and learning (Qing-li et al., 2019). Action research is one approach. It is based on a cyclical process of self and critical reflection, evidence gathering, planning, implementation and review (Mc Niff, 2017).

3. Methodology

Using a constructivist and interpretivist philosophy, the research design for this case study facilitates triangulation of qualitative data collection, through questionnaires, focus groups, group interviews and semi-structured interviews. It has a single specific area of focus, which is to gain an insight into some of the factors which inhibit support for student teachers to engage in action research while on school placement. This gives a holistic view of the issues from the perspectives of different stakeholders (Denscombe, 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics sub-committee of ATU, and this study abided by the ethical standards set out in the ATU research ethics policy.

Participants were selected strategically, based on their expertise in the field of education and their subject specialist knowledge. The population represented four groups of education stakeholders. Group one consisted of post-primary school principals (n=15), and group two of post-primary subject specialist teachers of Design and Communication Graphics and Construction Studies (n=10). For these groups, stratified random sampling was used to create a sampling frame and schools were selected proportionally from the Department of Education’s online database of schools in Ireland (Department of Education, 2021). Group three comprised of school placement tutors (n=6) from ATU, reflecting a mix of genders and experience levels, who participated in a focus group. Group four consisted of education experts (n=3), identified based on their own field of study in ITE, who took part in semi-

structured interviews with the researcher. While this paper focusses on the stakeholders pertinent to school placement, due to time constraints, the scope of this study excluded student teachers, their pupils, and the parents/guardians of pupils.

4. Findings

In the online questionnaire and interviews, participants were asked to consider from their perspective, “What challenges might there be for student teachers to engage in action research?” Power dynamics and the challenges of meeting requirements to research ethically were identified as potential inhibiting factors, which are discussed further below. Participants were anonymized using the following key: principal in questionnaire (PQ 1-15), subject specialist in questionnaire (SSQ 1-10), principal in group interview (PGI, 1-3), subject specialist in group interview (SSGI), school placement tutor (SPT 1-6), subject specialists (SS1-3) and education experts (EE 1-3) in semi-structured interviews.

4.1. Power Dynamics

That tensions in professional relationships exist in schools between principals, teachers, and student teachers, emerged during the analysis of data. Participants suggested that power dynamics could negatively impact on the student teacher’s ability to fully engage in action research while on school placement. An aspect of this was the predicament which might exist if student teachers were pressurized by school management to engage in supervision of classes, or other school activities, at the expense of time allocated for college attendance or research practices. EE3 described how, in their experience, student teachers are faced with the dilemma of “wanting to do the work for the principal, for financial reasons, but also to keep the principal happy, but...they’re trying to also do their thesis.” EE1 suggested that the solution was in empowering student teachers to advocate for themselves, to enable them to address the power dynamic and to withstand the pressures which might be exerted on them in schools. However, EE1 also acknowledged that the ad hoc nature of school placement impeded structured supports: “we help the students advocate for themselves, but in practice because of that lack of formalised structure, and the power dynamic...some students just do not get the support for a range of reasons.”

Another aspect of the power dynamic related to the role of the co-operating teacher. Teaching Council documentation states that “the student teacher shall discuss their research plans with the Treoraí [co-operating teacher], as they have overall responsibility for the class” (Teaching Council, 2020, p. 19). However, EE1 noted that in Ireland “teachers aren’t chosen for their skills as co-operating teachers, they are chosen because they are the class teacher... so the age-old issue is that co-operating teachers are not trained or recognized [as co-operating teachers]”. This perception suggests that there may be a reticence, reluctance or even a lack of skill, on the part of the teacher, in their role as co-operating teacher and researcher. This

reticence was evident in the online questionnaire from both principals and subject specialists, who were asked to outline the challenges there might be for student teachers to engage in action research. SSQ5 suggested that there may be a “reluctance of schools and staff to participate”, while PQ8 intimated an “unwillingness of others to engage”. PQ6 implied that there might be a challenge of “getting the co-operation from other staff who might be willing but not see it as a priority”. A different aspect of the power dynamic was articulated by PQ5 who expressed this as “(how) to explain what is involved to students and how to ensure teachers don't feel vulnerable”. This alludes to a consciousness on the part of teachers around deficiencies in their knowledge about action research, which may challenge their own perceptions of being an expert. For some, this may result in them feeling exposed professionally. These and similar comments, allude to challenges for student teachers who are required to engage in research, yet may face a lack of support from staff in schools.

4.2. The Challenges of Researching Ethically

Researching ethically is based on the principles of honesty, reliability, respect, and accountability (All European Academies, 2017). A range of challenges to researching ethically emerged in the analysis of the research data. PQ3 identified the principle of informed consent: “I think it is important that all involved know the research is taking place”. However, there did not appear to be alignment between respondents as to how this should be achieved. PG11 was prepared for student teachers to use the school's consent policy, however, they would be constrained by this and “you'd have to be very clear with the students that they obviously are bound by the school policies and have to work within those parameters”. This differed from PQ9 who wrote, “I would be happy that parents and students are aware and that parents can sign for their students not to participate only”. While PQ8 noted that “without signed permission the school could find itself it a trick[y] situation.” Others held differing views. SSQ9 felt that “depending on the nature of research and assuming student work is anonymous, I don't see the need for informing parents/students”. These comments highlight both the varied understanding of the ethical requirements for consent and the range of differing approaches in place in schools.

Another aspect relating to informed consent emerged, that of problems which the requirement for consent from participants might pose for the student teacher undertaking research. As EE1 put it:

One of the other issues was parental consent...the age-old issue of handing out these letters and getting them back in. You know that they were never coming back in. So, it's... caused issues with the data collection...What do we do with kids who can't be involved?

There are a range of potential challenges raised, including when data collection can begin and how to navigate lack of permission with pupils in the class. Other concerns were raised

by SS3 who suggested that the refusal of parental consent might single a pupil out in class “(t)he student themselves might feel excluded...everybody else in the classroom is handed out a questionnaire and...they're not allowed to ... take part in it”. This could result in classroom management issues for student teachers, as they navigate how to deal sensitively with the situation. The literature suggests that where consent is not obtained, the researcher “should decide whether this was an active refusal of consent, in which case they would need to respect this and find a practical solution.” (BERA, 2018, p. 12). As these are real issues, a policy might be devised to support student teachers in dealing with these scenarios.

Another area on which there was significant consensus, was on the issues raised by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Enacted in 2018, there is a high awareness of this legislation in schools. Among the respondents in the online questionnaire this knowledge was in evidence, as articulated by PQ1 “(t)he whole area of GDPR needs to be respected by and complied with by everyone concerned”. However, there were few specifics as to what this might include, apart from the legal requirements involved and here seemed to be some confusion between GDPR and informed consent, as indicated by SS3 “GDPR would be another issue...and you would find that...could be one of the most difficult parts of the work, is actually getting permission from parents...whether it be a signed document or ...getting them to respond to an email.” EE1 summed up the impact of these difficulties “I think it's getting more and more difficult involving the pupils in the schools”. However, once there is an awareness of the issues, it may be possible to put measure in place to address them. In relation to gathering informed consent, SSG11 proposed that it might be of use “if there was some sort of...a consent form, with...the header from [name of TU]” Therefore, a generic form could be designed, and adapted for use by student teachers, to be shared with research participants in schools.

5. Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper suggests the requirement for a national policy on informed consent, which could be developed by the Teaching Council as part of their strategic plan for 2022-27. Their goal for developing collaborative professional communities for sustainability, includes developing greater collaboration between stakeholders in education (Teaching Council, 2021). However, this is a complex issue, as the Teaching Council, while responsible for developing effective policies, regulation, and research in relation to education, are not responsible for the dissemination of this at a local level in schools. The recommendations of the *School Placement Working Group*, in relation to the training of co-operating teachers, awaits implementation (Teaching Council, 2019).

The aim of this paper was to examine some of the factors which inhibit support for student teachers to engage in action research while on school placement. Pressure on student teachers

to engage in supervision and substitution of classes in schools, issues around effective support from co-operating teachers, who may feel professionally vulnerable, a lack of consensus on informed consent and difficulties posed by GDPR, have been identified as potential inhibitors. In the absence of a national policy, one recommendation of this paper is that the Department of Creative Education in ATU develop documentation and resources which support action research, informed consent and GDPR for student teachers engaging in action research while on school placement.

References

- All European Academies [ALLEA]. (2023). *The European code of conduct for research integrity*. Retrieved from ALLEA | All European Academies: <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.). Retrieved from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York: Teachers College.
- Cochran-Smith, M., Friedman, A., Barnatt, J., & Pine, G. (2009). Inquiry on inquiry: Practitioner research and student learning. *Action in Teacher Education*, 31, 17-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2009.10463515>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2021). Defining teaching quality around the world. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 295-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1919080>
- Denscombe, M. (2017). *The good research guide* (6th ed.). London: Open University Press.
- Department of Education. (2021, october 8). *Find a school*. Retrieved 2021, from [gov.ie: https://www.gov.ie/en/service/find-a-school/](https://www.gov.ie/en/service/find-a-school/)
- Hall, K., Murphy, R., Rutherford, V., & Ní Áingléis, B. (2018). *School placement in initial teacher education*. School of Education, University College Cork (UCC). Retrieved from <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/website/en/publications/teacher-education/documents/school-placement-in-initial-teacher-education.pdf>
- Mc Niff, J. (2017). *Action research: All you need to know*. SAGE.
- OECD. (2019). *A Flying Start: Improving initial teacher preparation systems*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1787/ef74e549-en>.
- OECD. (2022). *Education at a glance 2022: OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>

- Qing-li, H., Torres, M. N., & Shi-Ji, F. (2019). Collaborative action research for preparing teachers as reflective practitioners. *Systemic Practice & Action Research*, 411-427. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-018-9461-z>
- Sahlberg, P. (2018). *The Structure of teacher education in Ireland: Review of progress in implementing reform*. Higher Education Authority. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/resources/publications/the-structure-of-teacher-education-in-ireland-review-of-progress-in-implementing-reform/>
- Sahlberg, P., Munn, P., & Furlong, J. (2012). *Report of the international review panel on the structure of initial teacher education provision in Ireland: Review conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills*. Department of Education and Skills. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Retrieved from <https://assets.gov.ie/25013/6e0e25a092e7409ea4212db97cdad1b0.pdf>
- Teaching Council. (2016). *Research strategy*. Retrieved from The Teaching Council: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/_fileupload/research/research-strategy-updated.pdf
- Teaching Council. (2019). *Report and action plan of the School Placement Working Group*. Maynooth. Retrieved from <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/teacher-education/initial-teacher-education/school-placement/school-placement-working-group.pdf>
- Teaching Council. (2020). *Céim: Standards for initial teacher education*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council. Retrieved from <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/news-events/latest-news/ceim-standards-for-initial-teacher-education.pdf>
- Teaching Council. (2021). *Teaching and learning for all*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council. Retrieved from <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/publications/strategic-plan/teaching-council-strategic-plan-2022-to-2027.pdf>