

Researchful Practice in Early Years Settings

Introduction and background

Over recent years there have been frequent calls for the professionalisation of the early years sector and for a clearer progression ladder within it. This will involve giving early years staff enhanced opportunities to engage with research.

This timely project from Dr Frances Giampapa at the University of Bristol school of Education and Dr Claire Lee from Oxford Brookes University offers such an opportunity. The project, 'researchful practice in early years settings' was funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and was used to develop a toolkit to enable early years staff to engage with and conduct research.

Key points

The benefits of 'researchful practice'

- The educational landscape has recently seen an increased awareness of the importance of developing research rich environments. The British Education Research Association has recently stated that: 'every teacher is entitled to work in a research-rich environment that supports the development of their research literacy and offers access to facilities and resources that support sustained engagement with and in research'.
- 'Researchful practice' as understood within the context of this project is wider in scope than 'research literacy', i.e., being able to access and engage with research. It also involves teachers being able to incorporate research into their own everyday practice.
- Effective engagement with research is vital to the development of self-improving schools and teacher professionalism. It should not be seen as another task to add to teachers' workload but should rather support their professional development and their autonomy.
- Teachers who engage with research are able to develop their practice beyond the remits of national guidance or advice about 'what works'. They are also able to draw on their own understanding of the unique characteristics of their own settings.
- Engagement with research also enables teachers to enter into more confident dialogue with stakeholders, justifying their practice and basing their practice on context-specific evidence.

- Teachers tended to see research as framed within one particular model – the model of action research. Researchers were keen to move teachers beyond this understanding.
- Initial discussions revealed that the teachers already had wide experience, though their work, in gathering qualitative evidence. Researchers were keen to build a package of resources which would build upon that existing experience, enabling teachers to move towards more embedded, small-scale projects.

Development of the toolkit

- A toolkit was developed to help teachers to engage with research and to set up their own projects. It comprised a series of training workshops, PowerPoints, a booklet, activities, and resources. There was also one-on-one support for teachers as they worked through the toolkit and developed their understandings of research.
- The toolkit was divided into 6 main topic areas. These were: understanding different approaches to research, finding and engaging critically with research literature, qualitative research methods, ethics, data analysis including thematic analysis, and the practicalities of designing and carrying out achievable research projects.
- Through using the toolkit, teachers were encouraged to see reflective practice and research as something which they were already doing as part of their subject leadership work, or in their classrooms.
- Teachers were invited to reflect on the toolkit itself, and on what they had learned by using it. Prior to the discussion, they had already met together to consider how they could embed some of the suggested methods into their everyday practice, particularly in terms of subject leadership.

Next steps

- The next step in the project will be for teachers to undertake some small-scale research projects within their own settings.

Project overview and aims

- The project began in a local authority-maintained nursery school in Bristol. Teachers were initially asked what they wished to develop in terms of their researchful practice.
- In the course of a knowledge exchange event, teachers were asked to say what research meant to them. A word cloud generated from the discussion highlighted several positive ideas which they had; the word 'helpful' was the most clearly indicated. However, while teachers considered research to be useful, it was clear that they also saw it as an 'add-on.'



- Subject to approval of a new research bid, the team at Bristol are intending to transform the toolkit into a website which could be used by early years teachers. The team is now looking for looking for diverse schools to pilot the website and do small scale co-produced research which they would support.
- If you are interested in hearing more about the project, or is you would be interested in becoming a partner school, please contact Dr Frances Giampapa: frances.giampapa@bristol.ac.uk

More details about the project and the toolkit from:

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