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11. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN ADULT LITERACY IN THE UK[1]

INTRODUCTION

The authors, Vicky Duckworth and Mary Hamilton, first met in 2001 when they were both members of the steering group for the Learning and Skills Development Agency Project *Learning journeys: learners' voices* (see Ward & Edwards, 2002). Since then, we have been linked in our friendship, love of urban history and passion for literacy and social justice.

When we met, Vicky was working as a basic skills lecturer at a Further Education College in Manchester in the North West of England while Mary was based at Lancaster University, teaching and researching in the field of literacy studies and involved with the national Research and Practice in Adult Literacy group, RaPAL.

We were drawn together by our shared enthusiasm and conversations about the power of practitioner research to generate meaningful knowledge in the field of adult literacy and to demystify the process of research and the academy. For Vicky this was the first step on a journey that saw her complete a PhD with Mary as her supervisor and move on to her current post as Senior Lecturer at Edge Hill University where she coordinates a large programme of teacher training in the post-school sector whilst continuing to be actively involved in community research and action. Vicky's PhD was a collaborative research study that drew on her students' experiences of learning (see Duckworth, 2013) as well as elements of her own story.

We both firmly believe that literacy education can be used to disrupt inequitable hierarchies of power and privilege and that practitioner informed policy can drive forward social justice. This is the first time we have written together. Our personal histories are woven into the fabric of this chapter, bringing together our experience of the challenges and benefits of linking research and practice in adult literacy.

The aim of this chapter is to document the history and significance of initiatives to develop such links in the United Kingdom (UK). In it we describe a range of initiatives and networks that have aimed to support practitioners to access and to carry out their own research and also ways of linking research and practice through formal professional development in initial teacher training, Masters level courses and research degrees. We explain and evaluate the development of these activities in relation to the broader context of lifelong learning and adult literacy in the countries of the UK. We argue that the idea of reflective practice prevalent in professional development is based on the belief that learning and teaching are inseparable aspects

of good educational practice and that practitioner involvement in research activities can support this goal. However, we also note that linking research and practice is not always easy to achieve nor is the outcome always empowering to teachers and learners. There are many factors, both practical and ideological that mitigate against authentic and widespread opportunities for practitioner engagement with research.

Adult Education in the UK has a long history and is often traced back to medieval guilds where origins of the vocabulary we still use (apprenticeship, for example) originated (Lucas & Green, 1999). The lifelong learning sector has always had a complicated relationship with other sectors because education is often associated with children, so there seems to be something incongruous about adults in classrooms, doing homework or taking tests. A measure of this has been the manner in which Further Education and Training (FET) has often been ignored or given less importance when governments have developed policy. Many major reforms and enquiries have treated education as if it were only about schools with adults being left out of the picture or mentioned as an afterthought (Duckworth, 2014). This has given the sector a 'Cinderella' image for much of the last century, despite the fact that Further Education (FE) colleges, Adult Centres and other organisations have played an essential role in vocational and community education as well as holding out the possibility of a second chance to hundreds of thousands of people who had failed in or been failed by their school experience.

The education system in the UK is a complex, changing and dynamic system with the rate of change particularly rapid in the area of vocational education and training, which includes literacy, language and numeracy (LLN). Since the 1970s, national policy initiatives have significantly reshaped the FET curriculum. In the UK, FE colleges now play a key role in providing LLN programmes although these began informally as volunteer supported initiatives in adult community education (see Hamilton & Hillier, 2006). The government has taken a more extensive interest in the education and training of adults over time, as lifelong learning has become part of the currency of international policy (Field, 2000). The Moser Report *A Fresh Start – Improving Literacy and Numeracy* (1999) drew on evidence from the 1997 International Adult Literacy survey (IALS) to estimate that approximately 20 percent of the UK population (as many as seven million people) apparently had difficulty with functional literacy and/or numeracy. This was defined as the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general. The resulting strategy, *Skills for Life* **(**SfL**)** identified a number of priority groups in England and Wales, including people living in disadvantaged communities (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001). It funded provision mainly in FE colleges to address their needs which were seen primarily in vocational terms. In Scotland adult literacy has traditionally been delivered mainly in the adult community learning sector and the attainment of literacy was positioned as a key to achieving the Scottish Executive's social inclusion and widening participation agendas (Scottish Executive, 2001 and see Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001; Hamilton & Tett, 2012).

The *Skills for Life* strategy, like other areas of public policy at this time, was closely monitored by central government. It introduced auditing and inspection of programme quality alongside outcome-related funding that resulted in a performativity target culture. Core curricula in LLN were developed, based on the National Curriculum in schools.

The status and professional nature of practitioners and tutors in the FE and Skills sector has long been a topic of debate with FE lecturers, including those who teach LLN, employed on very different terms and conditions to their school teacher counterparts. The professionalisation of basic skills tutors was therefore seen as a big challenge. Adult literacy teachers, many of them working part-time and as sessional workers in FE or community-based programmes, were regarded as ineffectively trained and in need of professionalisation. This deficit view, positioned them as ineffectual rendering the informal, practice-based knowledge gathered over many years by experienced teachers as invisible and of little value. A specialised qualification structure and professional standards were created for them. As we write this chapter, the professional regulation introduced during SfL has been removed from the sector and teaching qualification are no longer a requirement to teach in FET. It is once again up to individual colleges/providers which qualifications they might ask for. This history of debate and uncertainty around qualifications and training calls into question what it means to be a professional literacy teacher in the FET sector. In particular, for this chapter, to what extent is it necessary for such teachers to access theory and research in relation to their role and how are they able to access these sources of knowledge?

BEING A PROFESSIONAL IN ADULT LITERACY

Most professions and crafts have a tradition whereby people who get on well in the job are encouraged to move into the preparation of the next generation of practitioners. This can also be seen as something which derives from the medieval guild model of master/journeyman/apprentice. In this model the FE teacher is often seen as a specialist who has 'earned her or his dues' within their role, has appropriate qualifications, skills and experience and now wants to pass this on to others.

However, surrounded by a myriad of definitions, what it means to be a *professional* in FET is difficult to pin down. The phrase 'professional foul' can be used to suggest that professions may well pass on cynical or self serving beliefs and professions are often seen as in George Bernard Shaw's words 'a conspiracy against the laity'. In this way professional status can be viewed as a kind of closed shop which protects the lifestyles of its own members. Simultaneously, the last hundred years have seen a general tendency for jobs of all kinds to try to attain professional status, a process sometimes called the 'professionalisation of everyone'. A second concern is to develop professional standards and values, perhaps enforced by a professional body which lays down what kinds of knowledge and skills a practitioner should have and sets the rules by which they should/must practise. Jobs, for example, like

nursing, social work, police and others adopted a strategy of 'professionalisation'. This involved specifying acceptable levels of qualification, setting out and enforcing ethical codes, insisting on updating and staff development throughout people's careers. In the UK, teaching could be seen as a *professionalising* occupation in this sense with the process culminating in the establishment of the General Teaching Council in the 1990s.

REFLECTION IN ACTION: LEARNING AS A PROFESSIONAL IN ADULT LITERACY

One classic explanation of the professional learning process is the model of learning from experience as in the apprenticeship model historically used in the craft Guilds. Kolb (1984; Gibbs, 1988) proposes a model based on the idea of learning as a cyclical process where the learner moves from concrete experiences through reflection, conceptualisation and experiment to new experiences understood in the light of changed perceptions. The core of the model is the one element which might be seen as crucial to professionalism, that of reflection, which has a long-standing history in educational research (see, for example, Brookfield, 1995; Hillier, 2002; Schön, 1983) and in adult literacy specifically (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006).

Schön, a key figure in thinking about professional learning in recent decades, describes the nature of the learning processes which take place within professional practice. His writings are based on his rejection of what he saw as the dominant model of professional knowledge based on 'technical rationality' and his desire to develop an alternative model. Schön has a very specific view of the kind of work which can be identified as professional and he attempts to construct an:

> epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic intuitive processes which some practitioners … bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict. (Schön, 1983, p. 49)

His hostility to 'technical rationality' suggests that he sees occupations without this human or creative dimension as by definition non-professional.

Schön sees professionals as commonly engaging in complex, blurred situations which require creative and original responses to solution discovery. In these unpredictable situations professionals draw on their experiences as if intuitively (knowing-in-action) but simultaneously they *reflect* on what it is they are doing. It is this latter aspect that Schön stresses.

Reflection-in-action has flourished in terms of its hold over professional educators. Schön's (1983) book *The Reflective Practitioner* has been widely used in teacher training programmes during a critical period of growing concern with how to define professionalism in the curricula of 'newly professionalising' occupations (Becher, 1994; Eraut, 1994; Goodlad, 1984; Troman, Jeffrey, & Raggl, 2007).

Critics of Schön's approach have emphasised the problematic nature of his concept of reflection, proposing that the idea of the reflective practitioner is actually re-interpreted by professionals in very different ways, reflecting a range of different

emphases and models of professional good practice (Wellington & Austin, 1996). Eraut's (1994) critique questions the value of the concept of reflection and proposes a model which distinguishes between the kinds of immediate adjustments made during practice and the sorts of deliberation and conceptual re-thinking which may be pursued later through reframing and reflective conversations.

From this we can see that reflection in professional practice is not a new concept and that teachers' attitudes towards reflection may vary, as does their systematic use of reflection to improve practice. When used effectively reflection can increase teachers' confidence, resilience and self-efficacy. For Schön, learning through reflection on practice is not just an optional extra for professional workers. It is an intrinsic part of what it is to be a professional. It is this link between practice, learning and research that we now focus on to explore professional learning as a driver for research in adult literacy.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Practitioner research (PR) ostensibly incorporates the idea of professional reflection and is also a well-developed strategy within adult education in many countries outside the UK. It is promoted, if unevenly, by a range of government agencies and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). In North America and Australia, a variety of approaches have been implemented in recent years and these have been reviewed by Quigley and Norton (2002; for Australia see Davis & Searle, 2002; Shore, 2002; for Canada see Niks, 2004; Norton & Malicky, 2000; and for the US see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Fingeret & Pates, 1992).

The notion of reflective professional practice and its relationship to research has historically been linked to action and participatory research methodologies which focus on collaboration, participation and praxis (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Somekh, 2006). In the UK, Participatory Action Research (PAR) gained recognition in the area of literacy through the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972) who in Latin America, was involved in literacy with marginalised populations of Brazilian peasants as collaborators, researchers, and activists. Freire believed that meaningful social transformation would only occur in conjunction with the people affected by it. Freire's revolutionary pedagogy aimed to facilitate ordinary people to develop the critical literacy and inquiry skills that would allow them to more powerfully engage structures of power. While Freire's work is important to any discussion about critical inquiry and literacy development, the antecedents of participatory action research go back much further. The tradition of inquiry for advocacy is as old as the tradition of inquiry itself (Hueglin, 2008).

The view of PR as emancipatory is however problematic in a context where the technical rationality approach of expert knowledge dominates. Some of the contradictions and constraints around PR are discussed in a special issue of *Studies in the Education of Adults* (see Hamilton & Appleby, 2009).

Competency discourses of professionalisation can be reductive so that PR becomes a measure of professional performance, reproducing a 'what works', problem-solving approach (Brookfield, 1995), rather than a form of critical inquiry. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) identify such research as limited by technical knowledge interests. They argue that the popularisation of PR has led to it becoming 'domesticated and appropriated as an implementation tool' (p. 3), limiting critical reflective processes and their liberating potential. Performativity as the driver, can be linked to the output of individuals against productivity criteria of educational organisations and policy indicators. Practitioners can therefore be commodified within a structure where there is the 'issue of who controls the field of judgement and what is judged, what criteria of measurement are used or benchmarks or targets set' (Ball, 2008, p. 49). This reductive approach is far removed from the goal of PR which is critical, democratic and participatory (Armstrong & Moore, 2004; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Somekh, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), and gives a voice to the marginalised and oppressed (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Duckworth, 2014).

These issues are further reinforced within contemporary debates about what counts as *real* research where more quantitative approaches to literacy research, in alignment with an instrumental drive in education, are put forward as the 'gold star' in relation to quality, validity, and rigor in social scientific research.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE WITH PROFESSIONALS IN ADULT LITERACY

Hamilton and Appleby (2009) identify three types of PR that embrace different traditions which relate to issues such as independence, legitimacy, resources and critical voice. These include:

> PR that is part of commissioned or funded research; second, PR that is part of professional development which can be mandated, accredited or informal; PR that is part of networks and practice communities. (p. 110)

The first approach includes large scale government policy research initiatives (e.g. Hamilton, 2008; James, 2004), whereby the PR's role includes collecting the data, for example, interviewing students in a FE college or as a research collaborator. PR may also be part of commissioned and funded research programmes seeking to impact upon practice (Hamilton & Wilson, 2005; Hamilton, Davies, & James, 2007). The outputs from this research can potentially lead to national reports, through which the research forges links to policy and may therefore be positioned to access resources and a wider audience, all of which are often difficult to achieve (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015; Coffield et al., 2007; Gardner, Holmes, & Leitch, 2008). Conversely, this approach may restrict autonomy and sustainability, heralding the question of whether increased resources and profile are helpful outcomes when, for example, time and and financial constraints, can still be real

barriers to PR (Tummons & Duckworth, 2012). A motivation for getting involved in literacy research for practitioners may be a secondment from teaching to carry out research; linking with experienced researchers who can support and guide them and importantly accessing research tools that they can utilise to develop their practice and empower themselves as a professional.

The second approach is sometimes part of a professional development curriculum framework within initial teacher education programmes where practice-based research supports teacher inquiry (Appleby & Banks, 2009; Appleby & Barton, 2009). It is also a feature of postgraduate study in further and higher education at Masters and PhD levels. The third approach, however, emphasises a community of practitioners working within a particular subject area or as part of practice networks supporting independent critical inquiry (Quigley & Norton, 2002).

It is important to note, however, that although the drivers of PR can be separated as highlighted above, they do not necessarily play out alone; each can flow and feed into each other.

This flow can be seen from Vicky's own experience of developing PR which we will describe later in this chapter, where drivers two and three were closely knitted together.

Opportunities for Practitioner Research

In the UK, there are many examples of teacher or PR within the school sector (Dadds & Hart, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Middlewood, Coleman, & Lumby, 1999). For example, The Teacher Training Agency for some years ran a programme of best practice scholarships for individual school teachers and school-based research consortia and supported an online PR network (see Kushner, Simons, James, Jones, & Yee, 2001). However, until very recently, examples in the post-school sector have been scarce. The Learning Skills Development Agency (replaced by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service [LSIS]) funded a strategy for supporting PR for the Further Education sector, giving special emphasis to the development of regional networks and developing a Research Toolkit for practitioner training. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Programme emphasised practitioner involvement in research (James, 2004). An example is 'The Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education' (TLC) project, whereby 16 FE learning 'sites' (four programme areas per college) provided the foci for an intensive examination of educational practice, learning processes and learning cultures by means of a four-year longitudinal study. The principal aims of the project were to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning; identify, implement and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities; and enhance practitioners' capacity for enquiry into FE practice.

The practitioner-led research initiative.   A further initiative includes the Practitioner-Led Research Initiative (PLRI) was run by the government-funded National Research

and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) between 2004–2006. It provided opportunities for groups of practitioners to engage in practical research. The aim was to develop effective relationships between research, policy and practice as part of the SfL programme juxtaposed to:

- building research capacity in the field
- creating findings that give new insights into adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, and
- embedding the activities of the NRDC in practice and developing and reinforcing networks linking practice, research and policy.

Applicants, from anywhere in England, were invited for the projects. Criteria included being a locally-based research group of between three and six practitioners and there was an expectation that these groups would link into existing local and regional networks. The groups (which carried out 17 small-scale projects) were funded over three rounds, receiving the award of up to £10,000 for each successful project. To be part of the project/s the lead applicant must also have been involved with programmes delivering LLN programmes in any organisational setting. Practitioners were recruited for nine months, and taken from a wide range of institutional settings, specialisms and geographical locations. As part of the project dissemination they were tasked with producing a 5,000 word report documenting activities and findings. Ongoing support was offered to the practitioner with a designated Research Support Person (RSP) to support day-to-day project activities, arrange/deliver research methods training and coordinate report writing. The project facilitated research practitioners to develop their research skills, work in a community of practice and importantly generate their own knowledge which could be implemented in their practice, shared with colleagues and disseminated to a wider national audience. Whilst the PLRI created a valuable space for practitioners to engage with research it had many limitations (Hamilton, 2007). The bidding process inevitably acted as a kind of filter on the projects so that those that were funded were aligned with the aims of policy rather than the priorities of practitioners or learners. The initiative was not successful in linking practitioners' research activities with recognised professional qualifications and practitioners still found it difficult to carry out their research alongside the demands of their work as teachers. It was therefore difficult to sustain engagement once the project had ended. It was also a struggle within the NRDC to get recognition for this research alongside the high status quantitative projects which were the main emphasis of the R&D centre.

Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LfLFE).   The LfLFE project (Ivanič et al., 2009) was a collaboration between two universities, Stirling (in Scotland) and Lancaster (England); and four FE colleges, two in Scotland – Anniesland and Perth, and two in England – Lancaster and Morecambe, and Preston.

The teaching staff in the four colleges were recruited as participant researchers within the LfLFE project. The research was based on the premise that collaboration

and team work was a central driver of the research project (see later section *Supporting research and practice through networks and organisations*). Practitioners participating in the project were given secondments to assume the role of College-Based Research Co-ordinators (CBRC) for a period of three years. The project drew on previous work on literacy practices engaged in by people in schools, higher education, and the community (see, for example, Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000) and aimed to extend the insights gained from these studies into further education. It explored the literacy practices of students and those practices developed in different parts of the curriculum. It was the first major study of literacy practices in colleges in the UK. The PR component of this large prestigious project enabled the teachers to gain experience via working alongside a highly experienced, professional research team, who had already gained the respect of the national and international research communities.

The learning journeys project: A first-hand example of Vicky's practitioner research. My research journey began with the opportunity to be seconded as a research practitioner on a Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) funded research project 'Learner learning journeys: Learners' voices. Learners' views on progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy' (Ward & Edwards, 2002). I was one of 14 researchers, from eight different North West literacy and numeracy providers. Geographically from both urban and rural areas, we represented FE, adult and community learning and the voluntary sector and between us interviewed 70 learners. The seconded practitioners were trained in research methods regularly through the project and also offered telephone, e-mail and face-to-face support. Participation in the project was both liberating and empowering. I gained the confidence, skills and experience to carry out qualitative research and importantly made links to experts in the field of literacy (including Mary Hamilton). Meeting Mary and speaking to her about the research that was taking place at Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre made me realise the value of a collaborative and democratic research process. It was also the catalyst to my pursuit of further PR which resulted in completion of a part-time PhD with a sociological focus on literacy, identity and symbolic violence (Duckworth, 2013).

A number of practitioners on the project, however, experienced drawbacks on their research journey. Ward and Edwards (2002) describe how:

One person withdrew completely because of the pressure of work and three were unable to complete the data analysis for the same reason. Estimates of time spent on the project ranged from 48 to 124 hours over 22 working weeks. The main reason for the difference was that we had asked each institution to carry out 15 interviews, including one group interview. This was based on the assumption that a team would carry out the research but, with hindsight, we should have adjusted this where researchers were working alone … the project created pressures as we started at the beginning of December, which

was so near the end of term that it was difficult to organise the pilot phase. The researchers were trying to finish the data analysis and make sense of the findings in late spring and early summer, which is one of their busiest periods of the year. (p. 49)

The above initiative was not linked to accreditation. This was a positive aspect of the project because I could focus on the learners and research rather than worrying about how to find the time and space to write assignment/s and being judged on them. The lack of accreditation did not stop the criticality. The research facilitated us to engage critically with questions about what counts as 'evidence' and how this relates to both educational policy and professional identity. Questions about how professionals use evidence in making practical decisions were actively explored in the development sessions rather than simply assumed. Such exploration is especially important in a climate of 'evidence-based practice' linked to a growing skills agenda in the education of adults (see Bingham & Smith, 2007).

Professional Qualifications and Research: Formal Routes for Linking Research and Practice

Research is not only a focus for university academics, lecturers, professors and researchers. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students carry out empirical research as part of their Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Master of Arts (MA) degrees which may lead to writing a lengthy dissertation. For undergraduates, a small-scale project can often form a *pilot project* for a more sustained piece of research as part of an MA.

Teaching in the UK is set to become to become a Masters level profession, bringing it into alignment with some of the highest performing school systems such as Finland, where the notion of a Master's level teaching profession is considered to be a contributing factor to its success (Tryggvason, 2009). MAs are now an established Continuing Professional Development (CPD) route for literacy practitioners in the UK and several dedicated programmes have been offered on full, part-time and distance learning basis. Participation has been limited by a lack of funding for full-time study, with some employers optionally paying fees for individuals. Lancaster University, for example, ran a flexible, modularised blended learning programme between 2001 and 2010. Over 200 students enrolled during this time. The taught curriculum as well as the dissertation component was organised to link research, theory and practice and some participants progressed to doctoral level research.

The fundamental importance of studying at Masters level is the assumed increase in reflectivity and reflexivity. Within the FET sector the route into teaching can determine the level of the teaching qualification. It is still possible to enter FE teaching, which includes teaching LLN, with no teaching qualification and begin a qualification once teaching. Practitioners also arrive to teaching with different

levels of specialisms and study in different settings. In a higher education institution, practitioners with a level three qualification, for example, an A Level in English, may follow the undergraduate route; whilst practitioners with a degree may study up to level seven. Across the levels of study and qualifications offered, a central component of teaching qualification is reflection and PR. This can take many forms. As part of the assessment literacy practitioners may prepare a research paper or presentation focusing on contemporary issues around literacy teaching and their influences on their own personal and professional development linked to current and future practice.

Having tasted level seven study through the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), progression to a full Masters can be very appealing for practitioners, providing the opportunity to undertake a more substantial research project related to their area. The credits gained from their earlier study can be presented as Accredited Prior Learning (APL) resulting in practitioners progressing straight onto the dissertation element of study.

Supporting Research and Practice through Networks and Organisations

Progression through PR research may be supported by a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The concept of learning communities draws on a wide body of theory related to learning and sociology. They relate to a constructivist approach to learning that recognises the key importance of exchanges with others, and the role of social interactions in the construction of values and identity. The need for networks is reinforced by Kitchen and Jeurissen's declaration that:

> if we are to take seriously the business of creating an environment which will nurture teacher research then there must be places where the voices of teacher-researchers can be seen and heard beyond their own school gates. (2006, p. 39)

There are a number of research and practice networks in the UK, which align to the above constructivist approach to learning and which link with literacy practitioners. Some key examples are described below. Firstly, the *Collaborative Action Research Network* (CARN**,** see http://www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/index.php) was founded in 1976 in order to continue the development work of the Ford Teaching Project in UK primary and secondary schools. It has grown to become an international network drawing its members from educational, health, social care, commercial, and public services settings. CARN encourages and supports action research projects (personal, local, national and international), accessible accounts of action research projects, and contributions to the theory and methodology of action research. It is committed to supporting and improving the quality of professional practice, through systematic, critical, creative inquiry into the goals, processes and contexts of professional work through regular conferences and study days and publishing papers resulting from these.

Established in 1985, the *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy group* (RaPAL, see http://rapal.org.uk) promotes itself as the only British national organisation that focuses on the role of literacy in adult life. An independent network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in adult basic education, it campaigns for the rights of all adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives and offers a critique of current policy and practice arguing for broader ideas of literacy starting from theories of language and literacy acquisition that take account of social context (see Herrington & Kendall, 2005). It encourages a broad range of collaborative and reflective research involving all participants in literacy work as partners whilst supporting practices whereby students are central to a learning democracy and their participation in the decision-making processes of practice and research is essential. RaPAL is run and funded entirely by its membership. Over its 30 year lifetime, RaPAL has published a journal three times per year and it organises an annual conference to which researchers, activists in adult literacy, practitioners, learners and policy makers are welcomed. Practitioners involved in postgraduate level professional development find RaPAL a useful network and value the independent space for discussion that it offers. The Learning and Skills Research Network, (LSRN, see http://www.lsrn.org.uk) began in 1997 and was supported by a quasi-government organisation, the Learning and Skills Development Agency. It is a network based in the regions of England and Northern Ireland with links to multiple partners in all the countries of the UK. It brings together people involved in producing and making use of research in the learning and skills sector and higher education and provides a welcoming atmosphere for those new to research. Like the other networks described here it has an annual conference which provides the opportunity to discuss PR findings and their implications for practice. The audience can often provide feedback that can help practitioners drive the research forward and help them further explore the research findings.

The networks described above, and other, more local and transitory ones act as safe and nurturing spaces for practitioners.

Continuing the Practitioner Research Journey through PhD Level Study

In Vicky's research journey, involvement with these networks was both refreshing and vital in sustaining her energy and commitment. Vicky's own research took the form of a PhD and was part of her professional and personal development. This extended also to the literacy learners she worked with who were co-investigators and co-constructors of the knowledge generated (Duckworth, 2013). Vicky began to listen more closely to the learners' voices, letting their needs, aspirations and dreams shape the lessons and curriculum. The pedagogy allowed for critical discussions whereby Vicky and the learners were able to unpick the themes of the research and see how this could be further expanded on and illuminated in the lessons and in the local and wider community. This involved developing activities that valued the learners' everyday practices within the classroom (Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015).

The critical spaces formed enable dialogic engagement whereby the learners shared the barriers they faced on their learning and personal trajectory and the violence and trauma they had experienced in their lives. Issues related to addressing violence and trauma were then embedded into lessons and are now part of a set of national resources (McNamara, 2007). Strong networks and practice communities were forged on the research journey by both Vicky and the learners with, for example, the Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre Group, RaPAL and, in the US, the Adult Higher Education Alliance which saw Vicky and her former literacy learner Marie McNamara travel to Alabama to receive, respectively, the International Professional Scholarship and the International Graduate Student Scholarship.

Vicky's experience of PR shows how, by its nature, it can offer practitioners a voice in the research dialogue and cycle and enable them to claim an equitable place on the research continuum.

CONCLUSION

The potential strengths and indeed benefits of PR are well documented in the existing literature in North America and Australia (for example, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Comber, 1999; Smith, Bingman, Hofer, & Media, 2002). These benefits include: to improve practice through encouraging critical reflection; to inform and challenge policy; to enable dialogue between practice and research; and to create new knowledge through the recognition of practitioner perspectives. In addition, in writing about the experience of funding PR in the UK, Hamilton, Davies and James (2007) identify how practitioner standpoints can offer a fresh perspective and findings of particular use to policy. For example, Duckworth (2013, 2014) highlights how PR is a powerful tool to challenge inequality and work towards social justice both within and outside the classroom. Involvement in PR additionally contributes to professional development and can boost the status of a marginalised professional area such as adult literacy.

PR does not take place in isolation but in a wider context of professionalism, policy and practice that may support or undermine its aims. Mainstream social policy research in the UK, North America and Australia increasingly aims to incorporate PR into its own vision of research impact where PR is also seen as a way of encouraging 'evidence-based' practice and even as a self-monitoring tool. The field of adult literacy in the UK has become more organised by quantitative survey measures such as the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (OECD, 2000) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (see Hamilton, 2014a, 2014b). These measures further encourage a performative approach to professionalism, the valuing of quantitative evidence and the judgements of distant experts as a basis for assessing notions of good practice. The strengths of qualitative research based on practitioner enquiry which we have presented in this chapter, have constantly to be asserted in such an environment and are marginalised in terms

of the funding allocated for research. This means that for many teachers, carrying out PR in the FET sector it is not an easy landscape to navigate through. Often the emotional labour which teachers invest in their job can be draining (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004). In addition finding time plus funding can be real barriers for both potential and in-service literacy practitioners partaking in qualifications and other forms of Continuous Professional Development informed by PR. However, PR is fundamental to developing a greater understanding of the work of practitioners and what happens in the classroom and should also enable professionals to widen their thinking and approaches to teaching and learning as educationalists.

Debates about who are the legitimate creators of knowledge and what is the relationship between theory and action are at the heart of debates around educational and literacy research (Estrella et al., 2000). Being positioned as an 'insider' is the lynchpin of action research as is its democratic ethos (Kemmis, 1993) and emancipatory nature (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). It challenges the status quo, and in doing so questions the nature of knowledge and the extent to which knowledge can represent the interests of the powerful and serve to reinforce their positions in society. This position challenges positivistic approaches to knowledge which suppose that those with distanced and 'objective' views of practice (for example, researchers from the academy) can best understand and steer practitioners who are seen to be too close to practice to perceive it accurately. Such positivistic approaches lead to a hegemonic understanding of knowledge where practitioners cannot begin to take ownership of and understand their own practice. Instead, they must seek 'experts' to create and clarify knowledge. The institution takes control and the practitioner is positioned as passive and disempowered – not a maker of knowledge, but a receiver. The shift in the power position in relation to the role of teacher as researcher, allows the practitioner researcher to take agency and generate their own knowledge (Hamilton, Ivanič, & Barton, 1992).

PR can be powerful both for the teacher and their learners. There is an urgent need for more recognition and investment in practitioner-led initiatives where practitioners can be seconded and have the space to engage with research. Institutions like FE colleges need to see the value of research to their teaching activities and their workforce. Being involved in action research allows teachers to come to their own understandings about their teaching. It is based on the belief that the practitioner is the best judge of her or his practice. In an era of compliance and delivery, practitioner enquiry based on informed professional judgements offers a way for literacy teachers to engage more deeply with research and through this to become more active in crucial educational policy-making arenas.

NOTE

[1]   Recent policy on adult literacy has been formulated by the UK government in Westminster, but only applies to England because education is now the responsibility of the devolved administrations in the

other countries of the UK (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). This chapter focuses on England and except where specifically noted.

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