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A Productive Relationship? Testing the Connections between Professional Learning and Practitioner Research.

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ABSTRACT

This article is written in response to a recent report on a review of teacher education in Scotland undertaken by Graham Donaldson (2011). In particular it questions the recommendation that engaging teachers in professional enquiry and research-informed teaching is the way forward for developing the professional capabilities required of “21st Century teachers”. The report reflects an increasing emphasis in the literature on school effectiveness and improvement of the need to further teachers' professional learning and a pedagogic pressure for them to adopt constructivist approaches to teaching that are based on research evidence about how children and young people learn best. Practitioner research is seen by policy makers as an important strategy for achieving these objectives. This article, based on a series of empirical studies, sets out to identify some of the issues revealed by the attempt to use practitioner research as a vehicle for affecting classroom practice within the context of a policy initiative to support the development of accomplished teaching. It argues that, if such a strategy is to be effective, it is important to conceive of it in systemic terms and to confront the challenges involved in developing the sets of networked relations that will be essential if such a strategy is to prove worthwhile.

INTRODUCTION

Reporting on a recent review of teacher education in Scotland, Donaldson (2011) harked back to Hoyle's (1974) notion of the teacher as an 'extended' professional, and underlined the importance of teachers maintaining a commitment to research and evidence-based practice, stating that a reliance on classroom experience as the basis for teacher development was no longer acceptable. He asserted that:

The most successful educating systems invest in developing their teachers as reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who are able to teach successfully in relation to current expectations, but who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change. (2011:14)

This statement represents a further, possibly significant, shift in the model of school improvement which dominated policy in the schools' sector in Scotland from the late 1980s until the early years of the new millennium.

After decades of placing a reliance on the power of detailed, centrally prescribed curricula to improve pupil outcomes we are seeing attempts in the UK, on both sides of the Scottish border, to promote the introduction a curriculum based on a different set of assumptions about both learning and the purpose of schooling derived from the discourse of lifelong learning. In Scotland, *Curriculum for Excellence* proposes teaching approaches based on personalisation, active and independent learning and the acquisition of core transferable skills (Scottish Executive, 2004). The engine for this change is seen as the professional development of teachers despite the failure of continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives in the past to achieve the kind of transformation in classroom practice that this