

## **Making it real: Realising the nexus between research and practice**

*Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director, Teaching Council to the research conference “Realising Real-World Research: Research and Evaluation in Challenging Times”, organised by REPP (Research Evaluation Policy and Practice group) and CRNINI (Children’s Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland) on 18 September 2014.*

Firstly I would like to congratulate Sinéad and all her colleagues in REPP, along with CDI and CRNINI, for organising this conference on “Realising Real-World Research: Research and Evaluation in Challenging Times.”

By way of introduction, my name is Tomás Ó Ruairc, I am the Director or CEO of the Teaching Council in Ireland. The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. This means that we promote and regulate the profession of teaching. We are a statutory body. In terms of our remit, it covers a lot of what happens after the moment you say “I want to be a teacher”.

This includes reviewing and accrediting programmes of Initial Teacher Education, advising on the standards of entry to those programmes, establishing the procedures for induction and probation of newly qualified teachers, CPD, research and Fitness to Teach.

### **Realising the nexus - connect, connect again, connect better**

I spoke just over a week ago at an event called ResearchED – it is a conference that has been “crowd-surfed” by teachers, for teachers. My presentation there was [“Thinking and talking about learning: Exploring the nexus between](#)

[research and teacher professionalism.](#)” As I am sure you can tell, there is quite a degree of overlap between the theme today and my theme at ResearchED. This in itself offers hope for those of us here today in the Ashling Hotel. It is no coincidence that in the space of less than two weeks, I am speaking at conferences that have an almost singular focus on connecting – connecting teaching, learning and research; connecting teachers, researchers and policy makers.

Connecting / connections is a very attractive concept – it is easy to imagine in your mind’s eye one bolt locking securely into another. There is something neat, logical, almost clinical about it. When you step back and look at a lot of research, teaching and learning however, you realise that it is not quite as simple as that. For me, nexus is a more apt term. It is a place where things come together, but we’re not entirely clear as to why. But we know that they do, because of the energy unleashed!

Let’s come at this from another perspective, or indeed, frontier. Those of you who spent many happy hours of your youth following Star Trek will recall the seventh film in the series, and the first to feature Captain Jean-Luc Picard. The plot centred on the pursuit by an “evil scientist” of the elusive Nexus – a band of energy which if you could enter it would guarantee you eternal, timeless bliss. It travelled through the Universe, could not be directly approached on pain of destruction and death, and could only be diverted towards you by blowing up suns and their surrounding systems. Not a bad day’s work. And having watched the film a number of times, I am still no clearer as to how the Nexus works!

This concept of a nexus is something that is mythical, elusive, where everything seems to come together and connect, and which has the potential to reveal

untold secrets. For me, this description could be applied to how the link or space between research, policy and practice should look and feel. I think that a one size fits all model will not work. We cannot micromanage how teachers and researchers will enhance their connections with each other. What the Council and others like us can and should do is to create the right environment for these connections to happen, to give every encouragement and support to the people involved, and to support the growth of an enhanced professionalism in teaching that gives teachers and researchers the confidence and awareness to engage with each other.

Today is about realising real world research. It is about reflecting on research in challenging times. In that vein, I hope to explore with you why enhanced connecting is the best response to realising real research in challenging times. As will be clear in a moment, this is a great opportunity for the profession – many researchers are knocking on doors, wanting to connect with teachers, and asking them to help them connect more. There is clearly a fundamentally human aspect to all of this – which should come as no surprise when you realise that education is all about people. I would like to give you some sense of what teachers mean by research to give you a flavour of the conversations you might expect. But we cannot be naive – we need to manage our expectations and those of others as we seek to embed a culture of research.

By exploring these points around connecting, knocking on doors, the human core of teaching and learning, teachers' understanding of research, and managing expectations, I hope to give you some sense of what making it real looks and feels like.

### **Knocking on doors - MBE**

If our starting assumption is that teachers and researchers need to “connect better”, then the good news is that many members of the research community are knocking on teachers’ doors to start those professional conversations. They want to have those conversations in a spirit of mutual respect, support and learning.

For example, I attended a recent OECD conference on measuring teachers’ pedagogical knowledge. Daniel Ansari of the University of Western Ontario talked about the relatively young discipline of mind, brain and education science [MBE]. It is not without its critics. It has grabbed my attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, Daniel closed his presentation with a very honest declaration:

*This is not about someone like me taking a fancy scan of a brain and telling teachers what to do and how to do it. This will not work.*

Further to this conference, I have been doing quite a lot of reading in the area of MBE. Whatever others may feel about it from an academic point of view, from a teaching point of view, it is pushing all the right buttons. Its core values appear to be diversity, learning, rigour and support. In other words, MBE is attempting to bring insights from a wide range of academic disciplines together in order to support teachers’ learning, and therefore their practice. Like any academic field worth its salt, they have no interest in peddling snake oil. They want to make sure that what they do meets the highest of standards in both research and practice terms.

#### **Reconceptualising standards – process vs. product**

In terms of the language of conversations between research and practice, developments in the policy space mean that both teachers and researchers

need to re-examine the concepts of standards much more closely. For in much of what we are doing as a Teaching Council, we are re-conceptualising the notion of standards in a very profound way. This is in keeping with the emergent thinking in the regulatory space internationally. Our focus as a professional standards body is on the standard of processes, rather than product. We emphasise the importance of quality of teaching and learning every day for every child and young person, more than the quality of outcome that a test or exam might show.

For both teachers and researchers, this may well be exciting, challenging and confusing, all at the same time! As concepts, “product” or “outcome” or “result” or “data” can be very attractive to the logical mind. They are tangible. But they only tell one part of the story - an important part, but only one. They have the advantage of being clear and arguably objective – who can argue with figures? Yet as Stephen Gorard from Durham University has said (quoted in MacBeath, 2012, P43):

*Numbers are like people; torture them enough and they will tell you anything.*

A shift in emphasis therefore, away from product to process can come across as diminishing the importance of quantitative data. What I am talking about here is more a re-orientation of emphasis, rather than going from one extreme to another. The reason for this shift in emphasis to process is because, at a human level, this is what life is all about. It is true to say that I would not have progressed in various stages of my academic career without passing certain thresholds – points in the Leaving Certificate, grades in my degree and Masters, and H. Dip; two interviews for this post. These were all important thresholds or “outcomes” in my life. But there is no doubt in my mind that I

would not be the person and professional I am today were it not for the quality of how I related to others, and how they related to me, that I enjoyed throughout my time in formal education, and indeed in my personal life. This “relating” was all about processes – ongoing flows or dynamics. The support, love, care and teaching that I have received since I was born have shaped who I am in ways that I will never fully comprehend.

The whole work of CDI acknowledges this fundamental truth in a very real way. Its holistic approach to research and community strikes the gong loud and clear – connecting research, teaching and learning in a way that makes a difference for all will not be easy. It will be complex and it will take time. But if we are serious about improving the life opportunities for all of us, including children and young people, if we are serious about empowering all as learners no matter what age they may be, then we will have to re-imagine how teaching, learning and research can best connect.

We will have to think carefully about how we are going to talk to each other in doing that. The paradox is that we will need a lot of structure and a lot of freedom. Freedom for professionals to create the space and time to talk to each other, and to talk in ways that are respectful of, and accessible to, both. And in a large community such as a nation, a community of communities, we will need some kind of formal structure that harnesses the energies of those conversations, without having a negative backwash effect.

### **Making it real – talking about learning**

In human terms, this comes down to parents, children and teachers. At the core of this triangular relationship is the importance of trust. It may be quite latent, but parents leave their children off to school every day, 1 million of

them, because they trust teachers. Some articulate it more clearly than others, but all parents tend to have one question on their minds regarding their children's teachers – *what guarantee do I have that you are a fit person to teach my children?* In terms of making it real, this is about as real as it gets! A parent looking a teacher or principal in the eye, seeking reassurance that their child is getting every opportunity they need. Or indeed, parents not talking to teachers perhaps because they are afraid to do so, and children losing out in terms of opportunities for enhanced learning. There is nothing more real for teachers than the well-being and learning of the children and young people in their care.

In the Ireland, and world of today, professional standards bodies are seen as an essential answer to that question from parents. A lot of weight is attached to a statutory body like the Teaching Council putting the official seal of approval on a person and saying – *you have met the standards to become a member of the most important profession in society.* A lot of reflection and hard work goes into that moment. The importance of maintaining a register of professionals in providing an objective reassurance to parents as to the fitness of the person teaching their children cannot be overestimated.

However, we will not make the progress required of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if we leave it at that. That is why parents really need to ask another question; this is the question that teachers and researchers really need to help each other with in answering. The question is this – *what are you going to do to learn about my child, and their needs, so that you can teach them in the best way possible?* Teachers do this “action research” day in, day out already. The challenge that follows, therefore, is twofold – (a) as reflective practitioners, they should always be wondering if they can do it better and (b) how often do they talk to

parents about all that they do? Researchers can help teachers with both these challenges. In terms of (a), accessible research will give teachers plenty of ideas and food for thought that they can adapt as appropriate to their context. In terms of (b), research that is accessible in terms of language will help teachers talk more about learning to the learners in their care, and their parents.

This is where realising the nexus comes in. Teachers need to talk more to parents, and more often, and vice versa, about their children's learning. They need to do so in a way that is both accessible (especially in terms of language) and reassuring. Reassurance in this context means the parent saying to themselves – *yes, you know what you are talking about. You are not trying to baffle me with jargon. But neither are you dumbing it down and making me feel stupid.*

The reason that I am bringing the nexus back in here is that even if we wanted to, we could not micromanage every one of these conversations that might happen. The connections can and must happen – but we could not map them all. Not just because of sheer numbers and the inability to bilocate! But also because life is insanely complex. If you stopped and thought for five minutes about the dynamics in this room alone, the mind would boggle. There can be no accounting for all the possibilities when people begin to relate to each other. We can give guidance, support, information – but the only ones who know best how to manage conversations between parents, pupils and teachers are themselves!

In order for this to happen, teachers need access to research, they need critical engagement with that research, and they need every support we can give them in unlocking the potential of that research to support them in their



journey of lifelong learning. The great thing is that these are not my words, but those of teachers!

### **Teachers talking about research**

For the Teaching Council, the concept of voice is very important. There are many voices to be heard in teaching and learning – just walk into any classroom! – but from a policy point of view, one of the first voices we listen to is that of the teachers. The reason for this is that we are endeavouring to live out our core value of professional leadership. The Council has a teacher majority on it – this is a unique privilege and responsibility. Professional leadership means teachers leading conversations about teaching and learning in a spirit of true partnership, and in a way that empowers all learners.

In that light, I thought that it would be good to give you a flavour of what teachers think research means. I put out the call on twitter a few weeks ago – with the hashtags #researchmeans and #researchmatters. Please tweet your own thoughts now and we might get a conversation going. But what I saw to date from teachers included the following:

#### ***Research means...***

- *Having the confidence to keep going or try something new.*
- *Looking at why we do things in the manner in which we do and asking if we could do better.*
- *Exploring a topic critically, systematically, ethically and reflecting on the findings' implications for educational practice.*

- *Finding new and better ways to facilitate teaching and learning, constantly innovating new ways to engage students.*
- *Critical Reflection + Rational Inquiry + Honest evaluation = Constructive and Informed Iteration.*
- *Critical thinking about what we are doing in ed and why we do it.*
- *Questioning, experimenting and sharing knowledge to inspire and aid progression.*
- *Researchers should be gathering practical experiences and adding to body of knowledge for now and future teachers.*
- *Critical reflection to improve or enhance our practice.*
- *The ability to see if other perspectives from around the world are working and what we can learn from them.*
- *First and foremost access to research that already exists for teachers.*
- *Encouraging teachers to read, discuss and implement (try) ideas and share outcomes with colleagues and students.*
- *Action research Plan / Act / Observe / reflect as groups of teachers involving students – making explicit.*
- *A global community of reflective practitioners sharing knowledge to improve practice.*

Such a diverse and wide range of definitions of what research means to teachers! But if you step back and look at them again, I think the following underpinning strands are clear in all of them:

For teachers, research in teaching and learning is:

- About access and accessibility!
- Tentative / contingent / uncertain
- Reflective
- Collegial / collaborative
- About improving / making a difference

When we step back from this, I think that we need to remind ourselves that a culture of research is all about story. We all know that one of the most effective ways we have to share information and learning is story. If you browse any thread on social media about teaching and learning, you will find that the most popular ones are where teachers talk about research through the story of their own experiences. Researchers and teachers need to tell their stories to each other. Good storytellers know that they must adapt their language to their audience.

As Chris Mooney said (2013),

*Given the power of our prior beliefs to skew how we respond to new information, one thing is becoming clear: If you want someone to accept new evidence, make sure to present it to them in a context that doesn't trigger a defensive, emotional reaction.*

(18 June 2013, writing for Mother Jones)

### **Research Alive!**

So do we have any concrete example that might make what I am talking about a bit clearer? Yes, we do!

In May of last year, in collaboration with the NCCA and CES, we hosted a conference on the theme of [Research Alive!](#) This is an initiative where we wanted to find out how teachers were engaging with research in the here and now, and to explore new ways of encouraging and facilitating that engagement. We brought teachers, researchers and HEIs together and deliberately mixed them up in groups to discuss the relevant issues. Teachers said that they wanted access to research, and most importantly, critical engagement with that research. The first question we answered last September, with the introduction of free access for all registered teachers to the EBSCO Education Source. The second, as you might expect, is taking a bit longer. We have been working at it ever since, but it is taking time. As part of our learning from the conference, the NCCA, the CES and ourselves committed to reflecting and sketching our thoughts as to where we would go next. The insights that I gleaned from the conference included the following:

- Teachers who are interested in research are beginning to find their voice in questioning the discourse of research at third level. Not in an arrogant way, but at the same time, interrogating the rationale for what currently counts as educational research, and wondering why it does not seem to be more focused on impact in the classroom, where it really matters for teachers.
- Diversity of community seems to be essential to the dynamic of *Research Alive!* We made a conscious effort to have a mix of teachers, HEI staff members, researchers and stakeholders at the conference, both in plenary session and in each of the small groups. This facilitated a rich and engaging discourse.

- There was a clear sense from the teachers that research should not just be about improving practice. It should also seek to enthuse / affirm / reaffirm / motivate teachers in what they do.
- One teacher said that *Research keeps teachers alive!*

## **Mol Feasa**

On foot of this feedback from teachers, the Council, NCCA and CES have decided to create a new online space to help teachers and researchers articulate their professional voices in a way that helps each other. This website we have called molfeasa.ie – from *mol feasa*, the Irish for hub of learning or wisdom.

*What kind of a hub would we like to see?*

1. A hub that connects.
2. A hub that facilitates learning.
3. A hub in which teachers lead.
4. A hub that facilitates and supports teachers in:
  - a. Identifying
  - b. Discussing
  - c. Defining
  - d. Explaining
  - e. Describing
  - f. Summarising ..... Good research so that it empowers them to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom.

So we have a sense of how we think connections between research, teaching and learning will look and feel. We even have a “beta version” of one way in which those connections could be supported, through *Research Alive!* In the time-honoured tradition of risk management, what challenges or obstacles do we need to be alert to? I am sure that you could come up with quite a few yourselves. I look forward to hearing those in the Q and A. But I would like to focus on one in particular – expectations.

### **Managing expectations**

One of the challenges researchers and teachers both face is that of managing expectations. There is the clichéd warning of “publish or die!” in academia. Teachers, for their part, have to face the expectations of 30 pupils, plus parents, guardians and extended family, and the anxiety that can arise when a child does not fulfil their own or others’ expectations. There can be a lot of pressure on the personal front to do something quickly. Add to that the media cycle where issues can flare up in the media, and the response of many is to call for topic X to be made a compulsory part of the curriculum.

What this shows is how much researchers and teachers need each other. A discourse rooted in the high standards of professionalism will demand to know what impact the publication of research will have on practice - *If it does not make a difference, what good is it?* Teachers will be better able to address the deeper concerns of parents, and resist the pressure for immediate, quick fix solutions, if they are fully informed and supported by rigorous, academic research. As Dr. Carol Campbell said in a recent edition of AERA’s pamphlet on Educational Change (Rincón-Gallardo and Kew, 2014):

*...being evidence-informed requires research knowledge combined with professional judgement.*

Sometimes people commission research in the expectation that something big will happen quickly. We all know that is not how the world works – at least, not sustainably. Tom Bennett is a teacher in the UK who has established ResearchED, an annual national conference to promote connections between teaching, research and learning. He closed the first conference by asking those in attendance not to think the day would change everything, nor that it would change nothing, but that it would change something. Imagine, just for a moment, if 87,000 teachers made one change to their practice as a result of research that improved student learning. At a conservative estimate, that would mean over 2 million moments of better learning for our young people. If each of these teachers made just one change every day of the school year that improved learning, that would mean over 400 million moments of better learning. Just one change, one teacher, one classroom – and imagine the difference. That's some something! The great thing about today is that if we get the discourse right, this is but the low hanging fruit. The sky really is the limit!

### **This is messy!**

The other set of expectations that teachers and researchers may have is that of themselves and each other. And these can be the most demanding set of all. Both communities may approach research in education with the expectation that clear questions and properly conducted research must yield, if not definitive answers as to what works, at the very least clear, concise guidance. That of course should be the outcome. The process, however, may be something else. To quote Dr. Campbell again (Rincón-Gallardo and Kew, 2014),

*Discussions of ‘evidence-informed policy and practice in education’ often assume a rational, linear process in which research evidence informs policy at the outset, policy is made, and then it is implemented. This is not how it happens in reality!*

In our own case as a Teaching Council, we are currently piloting a new model of induction and probation for the profession called Droichead. We drafted a policy internally, we consulted on it, we launched the pilot, and then we commissioned research with the ESRI to learn from the pilot over 3 years. We are refining the pilot as we go along, which is effectively changing some of the goal posts from a research point of view. But this is about learning, this is about a much closer alignment of policy development, research and practice than has applied heretofore. The more colloquial description of this would be that it’s messy! If children teach you anything, they teach you that life is beautiful, and it’s also messy – often at the same time! And the messiness, in hindsight, augments the beauty. Research in teaching and learning is about working with children and young people. A bit of messiness is no harm, as long as we are all clear, as reflective practitioners, as to what we need to learn. As Robert and Edward Skidelsky put it (2012, P154):

*In subjects that are inexact by nature, honest roughness is better than spurious precision.*

**We want answers!**

*Great, some of you might be saying, you lead us up the garden path, you paint this lovely picture of an idyllic future for research in teaching and learning, and then you leave us with no clear guidance as to how to get there! You talk about*



*a nexus and not being able to be exact as to how this can be realised. We want answers!*

This is an understandable frustration – the likes of me appearing to do nothing more than pontificate about a vision, new ways of thinking, new ways of working, but no practical answers. Two points worth considering here:

### *Teacher professional leadership*

- a. Our Teaching Council has a professional majority on it. Some say that this is untenable in the modern era, that no one grouping can be trusted to regulate themselves. Such a view is based on a narrow view of what a Teaching Council is all about. We are not just a regulator; we are a professional standards body. What does that mean? It means that we seek to encourage, support and empower the profession to lead the enhancement of its own standards, in partnership with all other stakeholders in education, especially parents and pupils.
- b. What this means for those who want answers is that we are seeking to create the space and time in which teachers as professionals develop the answers themselves, informed by research, supported by parents, pupils and researchers, and open to learning from others. Any one solution to how to connect, how to realise the nexus, could not possibly take account of the myriad complexities of the contexts in which teachers teach. The only sustainable solution to self-sustaining, sustainable, high quality change in teaching and learning is authentic professional

leadership of integrity that acknowledges and always learns about the landscape in which it is happening. That applies to researchers as much as it does to teachers.

### **Closing comments**

If you have a sense that I am saying that teachers and researchers should see each other as the most natural of companions, then that would be quite accurate. For both groupings seek to inform and support learning for others.

Simon Fitzmaurice (2014, location 381) puts it most eloquently when he says:

*We are orphans of the Universe. Our species is defined by asking questions, out into the dark, without anyone to guide us except each other.*

So where are we after all that? By now I hope that the following is clear:

1. Teachers and researchers need to connect with each other. Bodies like the Teaching Council need to support and guide them. But we cannot, and should not, micromanage this process.
2. In supporting and guiding, we need to offer a clear and inspiring vision of where teachers and researchers can lead us. But we also need to be alert to the expectations and myths that teaching and research must contend with. And we must be especially alert to the pressures that teaching and research put on themselves.
3. The processes by which teaching and research enhance their connections will not be linear nor sequential. New models of policy development offer some guidance in this area.

4. In order to lead, teachers and researchers will need to have new types of conversations. Clarity of language, and re-imagining what we value, will be essential to supporting those conversations.
5. Teachers and researchers have a lot to offer each other - the strength of a consistent professional voice and the credibility of authentic, rigorous and accessible research.
6. Research matters. Teaching and learning matter. And they are all of vital importance to each other. If we get the connections right between all three, we can empower teachers and pupils alike to take teaching and learning to places we can hardly imagine today.

For me this can all be summarised most effectively by Jane Coombs who posted back in June (29 June 2014):

*I love research.*

*I love people more.*

*I love using research to help people most.*

Me, I love teaching, learning, research, and talking about them, and learning about them. And like Jane Coombs, I love talking to other people about them. What I love most of all is the hope that in so doing, we can, and do, make a real difference in the lives of those in greatest need. For those reasons, and more, it is great to be here, and to have this opportunity to talk with you. Thank you!

## **References:**

1. Fitzmaurice, Simon, (2014), *It's Not Yet Dark*. Dublin
2. Kew, Kristin and Rincón-Gallardo, Santiago (2014), *Lead the Change Series: Q and A with Carol Campbell*, (Issue no. 41, August 2014), AERA Educational Change Special Interest Group
3. MacBeath, John,(2012), *The Future of the Teaching Profession*, (Education International Research Institute and University of Cambridge)
4. Mooney, Chris, (2013), *The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science*, [Blog post 18 June 2013 <http://t.co/n2CzohSOT1>.]
5. Skidelsky, Robert and Edward, (2012), *How Much is Enough?: Money and the Good Life*, (New York: Other Press)