

Developing a Research Culture with Trainee Teachers on International Initial Teacher Training Programmes

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Abstract

Postgraduate initial teacher training from the UK perspective is a fast-paced 36-week full time programme. In parallel with assessed teaching and subject studies, trainees carry out classroom-based research. To do this, they draw on approaches to evidence-informed teaching that include taking the best available evidence from research and practical experience to answer context-specific research questions. This paper looks at the case of trainees who undertake their PGCE programme internationally i.e., they remain based in their international schools for the practical elements but engage in the wider programme via distance learning. One of the greatest regrets of university staff working with these trainees was that the research knowledge gained was contained only within the assessment system and that the trainees would leave, taking this wealth of knowledge with them. The fear was that these emerging practitioner researchers would see their research work as being completed solely for the purpose of certification, without recognising themselves as beginning a career-long process of reflective research in their schools.

From this, the Sunderland Reflective Action in Education project (SunRAE) was developed in response to the challenge of building a community of research-informed practice when working remotely and a/synchronously across different international time zones. It is a student research conference, journal and podcast initiative integrated into the PGCE (Distance Learning) programmes. Linking this initiative to the wider research of the contribution of initial teacher education to the professional learning of teachers in schools, this critical reflection paper connects with the wider debates around developing research culture and makes links between the importance of both for creating better school-based practitioner researchers. The paper reflects that the same themes of widening participation, raising awareness, and reducing silo working that

are important for all researcher development are relevant for school-based teacher researchers.

Keywords: research culture; practitioner research; trainee teachers; international initial teacher training; distance learning

Research Culture for Educators

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise includes an assessment of research ‘people, culture and environment’. This means that increased attention is placed on an institution’s development of itself as fertile ground from which new knowledge can be nurtured from ideas through to outputs. Additional significance will therefore be placed on the conditions and processes experienced by the people in academia. It seems in everyone’s best interests that research culture is strong, and that it includes as many people as possible.

However, many academics are employed in tertiary education on the back of professional practice and wider expertise so that they can contribute to the teaching of future cohorts of professionals and practitioners. Their value to their institutions therefore is arguably as much, if not more, about teaching than research. Teaching-only, or teaching-heavy contracts further exacerbate the issue and may limit research opportunities, as will the perceived ‘research intensity’ of the institution. This can create a tension between the different aspects of practitioner educators’ roles, one which seems at odds with the fundamental nature of generating new knowledge to inform teaching and so inspire the next generation. Corner (2023) has alluded to many people feeling undervalued or excluded within the research system and the need to look at research excellence in a more holistic and rounded way. In the same way that pedagogic research and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) has suffered from what might be termed ‘Cinderella status’ (Cotton et al., 2018 citing Jenkins, 2002), its cousin, the practitioner research activity of those involved in external practice, can also benefit from recognition its purpose and contribution to research culture.

Teacher educators represent one such example of undervalued practitioner researchers. They are recruited into HE primarily because of their qualifications and experience as schoolteachers, in order to pass that practical knowledge on to trainee teachers. However, a key expectation of the role is to ensure that new entrants to the profession are exposed to educational theory and research in order to understand pedagogy and practice. This is encapsulated in the UK Department for Education’s Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (DfE, 2024) where ‘learn that’ statements are coupled with an evidence-informed ‘learn how

to' approach to reflective practice, underpinned by a government-mandated reading list structured around the profession's core concepts. This is part of research-informed teacher development (**Hidson, 2023**). Historically, research literacy was not an explicit criterion in attaining qualified teacher status, despite educational research and theory underpinning initial teacher training. The tide has now shifted, and the expectation is that everyone involved in training teachers is research-literate.

Teacher training for UK postgraduates is usually experienced as a fast-paced full-time programme over one academic year, often as little as 36 weeks. Trainees not only learn to teach in schools, but also to apply theory to practice during this relatively short time. In parallel with assessed teaching and subject studies, they carry out school-based research in their placement classrooms. To do this, they draw on approaches to evidence-informed teaching that include taking the best available evidence from research and practical experience (**Scutt, 2018**) to answer context-specific research questions. These programmes are the domain of professional teacher educators, who are part of a symbiotic relationship between schools and tertiary institutions. Teacher educators are charged with mobilising school-based research: research that is close to practice. They are also likely to conduct their own research in these settings.

'Under the radar' research

The Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) undertaken for the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Close-to-Practice (CtP) report of 2018 highlighted an absence of high-quality studies addressing the research of teacher educators (**Wyse et al., 2021**). Despite these academics initiating, supervising, and assessing school-based research assignments on undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research courses, this uniquely positioned group of practitioner researchers does not typically produce CtP outputs that are recognised in terms of national or international reach and significance: their innovations are 'below the radar' (**Perry et al., 2017: 28**). Their significance within an institution's research culture is therefore arguably also below the radar.

This raises a question about what research culture looks like for different kinds of academics. It also challenges teacher educators to consider the extent to which they might be considered as not 'practising what they preach', when they aim to develop teachers who can carry their emerging research dispositions with them and contribute to the research culture in the schools that employ them. What, therefore, might research culture look like for teacher educators and trainee teachers during initial teacher training?

Research culture as an educational community of practice

Although developing research culture for all trainee teachers is arguably important overall, this paper presents the even more critical case of trainees who undertake their initial teacher training programme internationally i.e., they are geographically based in their English Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools (**Richards & Pun, 2022**) around the world for the practical teaching elements of their programmes but engage in the substantive study and assessment processes via distance learning. In this case, a sense of community and culture needs to flourish without the physical co-location of the staff and students.

One of the greatest regrets of university staff working with these trainees historically was that the highly contextual applied research knowledge gained was contained only within the institution's assessment system and that the trainees would graduate the course, and by definition of being an international learner, leave taking this wealth of knowledge away with them. The concern was that these emerging practitioner researchers might see their research work as being completed solely for the purpose of certification, without recognising themselves as beginning a career-long process of reflective research generation in their schools.

The Sunderland Reflective Action in Education (SunRAE) Initiative

In seeking to attract recognition of initiatives that contribute to developing research culture, this paper reports on the Sunderland Reflective Action in Education (SunRAE) initiative, which was developed in response to the challenge of building a community of research-informed practice when working remotely and a/synchronously with PGCE trainees across different international time zones. At the simplest level it is an online annual student research conference, e-journal and podcast integrated into the PGCE Education (Distance Learning) programmes at the University of Sunderland. However, SunRAE is now part of the established discourse of the programme, referred to by tutors, programme and module leaders, and built into the programme calendar. Trainees are encouraged to share their work in any of the ways that are comfortable for them, or simply to attend or catch up asynchronously. Having identified that trainees may be shy to do so, some of the programme assessment formats have been amended to strengthen online presentation and communication skills to pave the way for increased future participation:

- Two annual conferences have been held, with presentations archived and available from the SunRAE site. The third annual conference is set for June 2024.

- The SunRAE podcast series currently has 24 episodes published, with an average of 139 plays each.ⁱ
- The SunRAE open-access journal (ISSN 2753-4200) has two annual volumes of three issues each (conference proceedings, case studies, action research) so far.ⁱⁱ
- As of 01/03/24, lifetime statistics for article access were: 4,932, with a monthly mean access rate around 173, busiest at assignment times. 21 articles (3 conference proceedings and 18 articles based on student assignment submissions, with a further 9 articles under review.

The digital poster (see **Figure 1**) submitted to the Warwick International Research Culture Conference (IRCC) 2023 highlights the aims of the SunRAE initiative.

Figure 1: SunRAE Poster from the IRCC '23 Conference.

Recognising the impact of teacher educators on developing research culture with trainee teachers: the Sunderland Reflective Action in Education project (SunRAE)
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Background and context
International teacher education via distance learning
 This project was developed in response to the challenge of building a community of research-informed practice when working remotely and a/synchronously with PGCE trainees across different international time zones. It can best be imagined as a student research conference, journal and podcast integrated into the PGCE (DL) at the University of Sunderland. ↓

What were (are) our aims?

- 1. RESEARCH CULTURE**
 Schools' partnership links with university ITT can support their first steps into becoming a research-active school. We wanted to foster a reciprocal research culture, building on our team motto of "distance not distant".
- 2. DISSEMINATION**
 We wanted to create a platform to showcase effective practice internationally. With 600+ trainees per year there is real potential for knowledge exchange.
- 3. PEER-LEARNING**
 Students are hungry for real-world examples of educational research that has an impact in schools and regions like theirs. By promoting student research through the SUNRAE project, we wanted to help our students to learn from their more knowledgeable peers in previous cohorts.
- 4. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:**
 Student engagement has traditionally been challenging for our off-campus students. We wanted to harness the momentum provided by hybrid learning to dissolve the barriers to student engagement. →

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CONFERENCE JOURNAL PODCAST

OUR PARTNERSHIPS AROUND THE WORLD

The challenge of 'under the radar' teacher educator innovations
 The Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) undertaken for the BERA Close-to-Practice (CTP) report of 2018 highlighted an absence of high-quality studies that 'addressed the research of academics with responsibilities for initial teacher education (ITE)' (Wyse et al, 2021, p. 1480). Put simply, no relevant studies were found that reported on CTP research done by teacher educators. Despite these academics being in a symbiotic relationship with schools, and despite them initiating, supervising, and assessing school-based research assignments on undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research courses, this uniquely positioned group of practitioner researchers does not typically produce CTP outputs that are recognised in terms of national or international reach and significance: their innovations are 'below the radar' (Perry et al. 2017, p. 28). In seeking to attract recognition of initiatives that contribute to developing research culture, this poster showcases the SunRAE project. The project won a Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Award 2021/22 and the funding was used to set up an open-access journal platform, university-hosted WordPress website, and develop a podcast series. →

SunRAE progress so far

- The project began in the 21/22 academic year.
- We have now run two annual online conferences, in June 2021 and June 2022, inviting guest speakers, colleagues and students to present and share their learning; planning for the June 2023 conference is underway.
- The first volume of the journal was published at the end of 2022; the second is in production.
- We worked with staff and students on the MA in Radio, Audio and Podcasting and the Sunderland Creatives Agency to develop the podcast series and edit the episodes, strengthening cross-faculty collaboration.
- 24 episodes of the podcast have now been published, with further episodes in production.
- Our close-to-practice, participatory and practitioner research culture continues to develop. ↓

Further aims and developments

- 1 FULL PURPOSEFUL INTEGRATION**
 - use our innovation to its maximum effect
- 2 SUPPORT STAFF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT**
 - enhance staff and student research culture
- 3 SHARE OUR LEARNING JOURNEY**
 - get out from under the radar! ↓

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SPARK, Creative Agency, VCTF, SUNRAE, lifechanging, University of Sunderland

SunRAE's Contribution to Research Culture

Firstly, SunRAE recognises that widening participation is key to research culture. Schools' partnership links with university-led initial teacher training have the potential to develop an extended community of practice. Research has shown that less experienced teachers showed higher levels

of research engagement than their more experienced colleagues, potentially linked to the stronger focus on research use during initial teacher training in recent years (**Walker et al., 2019**). Involvement with research and knowledge exchange for trainee teachers and for in-service postgraduate researchers means framing schools as environments where close-to-practice research takes place, and where discussions can be had about research questions, research methods, data collection and analysis. Trainees see how the concept of practitioner research is valued, and that staff do 'practice what they preach' in terms of acknowledging and promoting the work of early career teacher researchers. Trainees develop a greater appreciation for the potential of applied educational research to influence practice.

Secondly, SunRAE recognises that limiting recognition of impact solely to the classroom or to an assignment limits dissemination opportunities, and that a research culture necessitates knowledge exchange. The discourse around sharing outcomes through podcast interviews, through conference presentations and through submitting work to the journal is a process of raising awareness of practitioner research in schools. Equally important is the idea of encouraging trainees to see the organic nature of practitioner research so that their skills are maintained and extended in practice. We know that a safe but challenging community is vital to a teacher's professional identity (**Salter & Tett, 2022**). Trainees will be able to recognise and acknowledge the depth and breadth of practice in international settings and build on what we know works in these distinctive contexts. While evidence from organisations such as the UK Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)ⁱⁱⁱ and The US What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)^{iv} is embraced, no similar platform exists that is devoted to research in the international school sector. The trainees are empowered by the small spotlight on internationally-focused but home-grown outputs giving credibility to their applied research in their contexts.

Thirdly, by encouraging peer learning and student engagement in this way, SunRAE aimed to tackle the concept of silo working, showing trainee teachers that identifying others with shared interests can stimulate professional learning and ideas to replicate or reproduce in their own settings. Trainees have the opportunity to develop their personal learning network, speak knowledgeably and 'raise the quality of debate within a school' (**Cain et al., 2019: 1080**) about the kind of research being done that relates to their professional age, stage, subject, region and country. They will develop their appreciation of transnational education practices and be able to contribute to knowledge exchange in their own schools and regions.

And what of the teacher educators, and their research culture? Partly, the answer lies in developing the extended concept of research culture: that they are part of this ecosystem. Through participation, staff have the opportunity to embrace and develop their identities as practitioner researchers, irrespective of their own formal research experience or activity.

Perhaps more importantly, by critically reflecting on research culture and taking the opportunity to push back against the idea of ‘flying under the radar’ we can argue why standard metrics alone cannot quantify the reach and significance of research culture.

Arguably, by putting teacher educators’ initiatives ‘on the radar’ through modes of dissemination such as this, new lines of education research can be opened, allowing for new questions to be asked about the co-construction of school-based research with a view to increasing the number of high-quality studies by practitioner researchers.

Concluding Comments

The critical reflection presented here is that teacher educators’ responsibilities for developing evidence-informed new teachers means that the significance of research culture requires a broader scope than simply as a pipeline for academics’ own research and outputs. This group of practitioner researchers, like many others in academia, for example in the fields of health education or social work, have a responsibility to the profession to extend research culture out from academia into practice if they are to fulfil their responsibilities and contribute to the wider professional community of practice.

The same themes of widening participation, raising awareness, and reducing silo working that are important for all researcher development are relevant for practitioner researchers. Examples of innovations such as the SunRAE initiative discussed here should be factored into the wider debates around developing research culture in order to appreciate its reach and significance as part of a community of practice. In the case of teacher educators, this is part and parcel of creating better school-based practitioner researchers.

Hopefully, the spirit of Corner’s (2023) call to ‘recognise all the outputs of research, not just the publications and documents but also the impacts, research system innovations and, importantly, the skilled people who are at the heart of a thriving research system’ will pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of the nature of teaching and research for practitioner researchers in time for the next REF.

Dr Elizabeth Hidson is a Research and Knowledge Exchange Fellow at The University of Sunderland. She is founder of The InterAction unit, a research lab dedicated to impactful research with schools and teachers. As a senior lecturer in International Initial Teacher Training, Elizabeth works with schools and teachers in over 60 countries.



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Endnotes

ⁱ The SunRae podcast can be accessed at: <https://wp.sunderland.ac.uk/sunrae/podcast/>.

ⁱⁱ The journal can be found at: <https://ojs.sunderland.ac.uk/index.php/sunrae/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>.

^{iv} See: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.