The Evolution of Postgraduate Students’ Identity as Research-Engaged Practitioners While Completing a Professional Doctorate in Education

Claire Lloyd, Jane Moore
Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

Over the past 2 decades there has been a growing awareness of the important contribution research can make to educational effectiveness. However, initial conceptions of the relationship between research and practice as a straightforward, linear process have been rejected in the wake of fundamental barriers to making education an evidence-based profession (Levin, 2013). In large part these difficulties have revolved around the lack of reliable, intelligible research that could speak to practitioners’ needs and usefully inform their practice (Biesta, 2007).

Given these shortcomings a new, critical role is emerging - that of mediators who can create connections between research evidence and potential users (Levin, 2013). The role of mediator is embedded in a process of knowledge mobilization that draws together 3 key dimensions of an evidence-engaged system: areas of research production; the settings where research is used; and the various organisations, processes or individuals that mediate between production and use (Qi & Levin, 2013). Currently much attention is directed toward the mediation role as it is considered key to creating greater coherence and integration between producers and users (Sharples, 2013).

One group who could potentially play an important role in mobilizing research knowledge, but have received very little attention to date, is postgraduate students in education (Levin 2013). Often undertaking a master’s or doctoral degree while continuing to work as practitioners, these students inhabit the world of both producers and users. As such they are in a unique position to foster links between the two contexts. Yet neither schools nor universities tend to capitalize on this potential by making explicit efforts to help postgraduates understand how research could contribute to their own practice or to decision-making within their wider school community (Levin, 2013).

Using a qualitative longitudinal design, this study explores the evolution of postgraduate students’ identity as research engaged practitioners while undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Education and beyond this as they continue in their practitioner roles upon completing the programme. Particular attention will focus on how these students can be supported in bringing the knowledge and skills gained through the programme to bear on their practice, specifically in terms of the nature of their research use (as both consumers and producers of evidence) and the connections they make to contribute to the mobilization of research knowledge in their schools.