

# **Educational Policies and Professional Identities: Showcasing Lessons from Doctoral Practitioner Research**

## **The background to the collection**

The inspiration for this collection can be traced to an earlier book, Bathmaker and Harnett's (2010) edited Routledge volume 'Exploring Learning, Identity and Power through Life History and Narrative Research'. That collection contained twelve chapters, many sole-authored by staff of the University of the West of England (UWE), and most of which focused upon doctoral studies employing qualitative approaches to educational research. Contributors included Richard Waller (RW) and Jane Andrews (JA), two of this collection's editors. RW and JA have co-led UWE's Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) since 2014, having redeveloped the programme upon appointment to the role.

Unlike the previous collection, this volume only showcases doctoral work, much of which was influenced by UWE's EdD's Researching Educational Policy and Professional Identities (REPPI) module. REPPI explores the interplay between education policy (whether at national, regional or local level) and the professional identities of those working within the education system. These topics are frequently investigated by candidates in the EdD's research phase, and occasionally by our PhD students too (many of whom are practitioner-researchers themselves, including Georgie Ford, the sole PhD graduate whose work features here). That was the case before the REPPI module was developed and introduced in 2014, and has remained so in the decade since. REPPI explores issues, across all education sectors, including the tensions between professional autonomy, personal values and 'performativity', and how they are facilitated or constrained by policy diktats, whether on a macro, meso or micro level, and that is what the chapters here consider.

The notion of pairing Early Career Researchers (ECRs), all of whom were recent doctoral graduates (as lead authors), with a supervisor or other senior colleague with greater experience of academic writing as a co-author, significantly assists the ECR's journeys into publication and aids their development as researchers in the post-doctoral phase of their careers. Anecdotally from our experience as programme leaders, and discussions with those in similar roles elsewhere, we knew that the academic activity of recent graduates from practice-based doctorates such as the EdD often stalled

as the demands of their personal lives and professional roles returned to the fore after completing their studies. Curating and developing collections such as this helps strengthen the education research community within and between the university and its partner organisations, offering clear routes into publication for the co-authors. The process of how this happened is outlined later within this chapter.

Whilst there have been several recent books focusing on EdD study (e.g. Emerald's excellent 2020 collection edited by Iona Burnell Reilly and Jodi Roffey-Barentsen), none actually exclusively feature the work of doctoral students themselves. Our book acts as an example of practitioner-researcher doctoral study within various professional settings and emphasises the impact and transferability of the findings across a range of educational sectors. It also highlights lessons that other practitioner-researchers, including those on professional doctorates, can benefit from learning about the process of doctoral research; as such it offers a unique contribution to the literature on doctoral study.

The book concludes with a chapter from a leading academic in the field, Prof Meg Maguire of Kings College, London, who reviews the contribution of the collection in furthering our understanding of educational policies and professional identities, and reflects upon the role doctoral studies can play in exploring such topics.

### **Setting the Scene: Researcher Development**

There is a continuing focus on researchers' development during and after their doctoral studies both nationally, in the UK, and internationally. In 2023, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) published a review document entitled 'The State of the Discipline' which made the following warning: "future career trajectories after completion of doctorates are too uncertain", BERA (2023: 2). This warning was further qualified with the observation that the career uncertainty was worse for researchers from minoritized backgrounds. The Researcher Concordat (VITAE, 2019) had raised a similar concern, as expressed in its foreword:

"there is still much to do to create the healthy and supportive culture needed to ensure our researchers are given every opportunity to thrive and realise their potential"

Both of these sources signal the need for the routine provision of developmental opportunities to scaffold doctoral graduates between being postgraduate students and the next stage of their research careers. We planned this book project with the goal of generating a supportive culture for post-doctoral students from our institution to work together, turning an aspect of their thesis into a book chapter.

The Researcher Concordat further recommended that in the post-doctoral phase, researchers need time and opportunities to develop their academic identities, reflecting the move from being a supervised doctoral student to being an independent researcher. Attention to how the needs of the researchers of the future can be met was explored in 2019 by an international group of research leaders gathered in Germany. The outcome of that meeting was published as the Hannover Recommendations for Doctoral Education, all of which coincide with our own commitment to continuing support for graduates and, in particular, to equity in doctoral students' experiences.

A distinctive feature of the studies explored in chapters 2 to 15 in this collection is their focus on exploring educational policy, practice and professional identities through research, across a range of educational sectors in England. The perspectives of practitioner researchers in education have been highlighted and discussed recently within the work of BERA in their delineation of "close to practice" research, which is defined as follows:

Close-to-practice research focusses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both."(Wyse et al, 2018:34)

We believe that the practitioner researchers in our collection have identified issues relevant to their practice and are contributing to improving and understanding those practices better. We would also go further, however, in suggesting that the studies offer insights into the policies shaping the practices documented in the specific contexts where the studies were located. These are studies that are close-to-policy as well as close-to-practice and are enhanced through being generated by insider researchers.

In the UK context the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is used as an accountability tool for reporting on the quality of research outputs, the impact of research and the research environment associated with research-active institutions, usually universities. In a post-REF report (2021) relating to the discipline of education, particular mention was made of the crucial contribution of postgraduate research students to “the vitality and intellectual life of research units”. We believe that this collection is reflective of that vitality.

## **Rationale**

This text brings together a collection of chapters highlighting lessons relating to educational policy and professional identities arising from the doctoral studies of 14 practitioner-researchers, 13 of whom were EdD graduates and one a PhD graduate. The lessons the studies offer therefore come directly from ‘researching professionals’ (Butcher and Sieminski, 2006) whose research is entangled with, and informed by, their professional roles and expertise (Boud and Lee, 2009). As a result, their contributions prioritise learning within, for, and about, professional contexts (Fink, 2006) and thus the lessons, and the type of knowledge they generate, have a strong tendency to be applied, transdisciplinary and highly contextualised. The chapters illustrate aspects of the researchers’ journeys in navigating the relationships between their workplaces and the academy as sites of learning and knowledge production (Tennant, 2004), but also sites of responsibility and expectation. The nature of these relationships has the potential to create challenges in relation to realising the potential for wider value and impact from professional doctoral research, including through publication (Boud et al, 2021). Whilst models for supporting doctoral practitioner researchers typically prioritise the need for intellectual rigour (Wildy et al, 2015) for busy professionals who may be primarily located outside of the academy, accessing time and support, and developing understanding of some of the ‘hidden’ rules involved in academic production has the potential to present challenges and barriers to traditional forms of academic activity during and post-doctoral study.

In editing this collection, we therefore had two key objectives: First, we sought to bring together a range of high-quality examples of practitioner doctoral research studies which offer valuable, contextualised, insider, perspectives on issues relating to educational policy and professional identity. We believe that these illustrate the often unrealised potential of this form of research and will have value for a range of audiences, including doctoral students, academic colleagues, and education practitioners across a diverse range of contexts. Second, we aimed to utilise the development of this collection as an opportunity to begin to create a practitioner research community, supporting doctoral graduates to share their research findings, to write for publication and to think about their next steps as ECRs. It is worth noting that in the majority of cases the chapters included here represent the ECR authors' first recognised academic publication of this nature. The following sections will briefly outline how these two central objectives informed the structure of the book and the approach we took to working with the authors during its production.

## **Structure**

The collection is organised into three sections: 'Constructions of the Professional and Society', 'Interrogating Approaches to Being, Becoming and Developing as Education Professionals' and 'Challenging Educational Policy and Practice'. These sections each include chapters addressing topics relating to educational policy and professional identity in a diverse range of contexts, from early years education through to higher and professional education. The structure of the book aims to embrace this contextual diversity, whilst prioritising a focus on the nature of the contributions and lessons these examples of doctoral studies offer in relation to the collection's substantive focus. We hope that this will encourage readers to reflect on their potential to offer critical perspectives across educational contexts.

### *Constructions of the Professional and Society*

The four chapters in this first section offer insights into the variety of contexts and the various different career points where professionals learn and develop. The contexts represented are early years settings, further education, higher education and the National Health Service (NHS) in England. The

studies provide explorations of how professionals negotiate their changing identities, at different career stages and in response to existing or changing policies and practices. The authors use their doctoral studies to expose and explore enduring issues such as power imbalances between professionals, gendered professional identities and two alternative perspectives on hybrid professional identities.

### *Interrogating Approaches to Being, Becoming and Developing as Education Professionals*

The book's middle section contains five chapters set in a range of educational contexts. Two are based in primary schools, one in a further education college and two on teacher education programmes. One primary school focussed chapter explores how learning happens in a specific classroom, the other examines the influence of teachers' science backgrounds for those leading the teaching and learning of that subject in their school. The further education focussed chapter explores the nature of continuing professional development in the sector, arguing persuasively for a more bespoke approach to provision than currently exists for lecturing staff. The two teacher education chapters centre on different routes into the profession, and how the teacher education programmes pursued impact the process of becoming education professionals.

### *Challenging Educational Policy and Practice*

In the book's final section the five chapters feature studies seeking to challenge, and illuminate the implications of, a selection of key contemporary educational policies in England. Addressing a range of educational contexts, including primary, secondary, further and higher education, the chapters explore the complexity of policy enactment and the impact this may have on range of stakeholders. As practitioner-researchers, the authors provide important, grounded contributions relating to a range of issues embedded in their own practice and lived experiences and shaped by educational policy in England. These encompass areas including the teaching of sensitive and controversial issues, the enactment of counter-terrorism policy and support for students' mental and emotional health.

## **Process**

The process for developing the collection took place over a period of approximately 18 months and had a pre-planned structure designed to focus on researcher development and building a practitioner-researcher community. The project was allocated some internal funding by the University to support these aspects, and as part of this expressions of interest were invited for an ECR to gain experience as a co-editor, through working with RW and JA as more experienced authors (this role was taken on by TC). A call for abstracts was then issued to recent doctoral graduates from the Department, which resulted in a high level of interest – over 20 were received – and subsequently a selection process to identify the final 14 chapters, which was the maximum number as editors we felt we could accommodate given the collection's word limit. All doctoral graduates were encouraged, but not required, to consider working with a member of their doctorate's supervision team or another colleague with greater experience of academic writing, who could act as a second author and help guide the chapter's development. Two chapters were sole authored by the doctoral graduate alone, ten by the ECR and one other writer, and two in collaboration with a couple of co-authors. Once the chapters' writing teams were identified, we ran an initial briefing session, at which we provided detailed guidance to all authors, and also facilitated introductions and invited overviews of each proposed contribution. Given the various professional commitments of the authors, this took place as a hybrid session in the evening.

The project then included a number of aspects intended to support our objectives relating to individual researcher development and the strengthening of our wider research community. Firstly, each author was invited to work with their co-author to determine the most constructive approach to their individual roles, and levels of input, into the writing process. Alongside this, they were also paired with the author of another chapter and encouraged to share and discuss their writing, and their challenges, as the work developed, and to provide feedback on each other's drafts as 'critical friends'. Each section of the book also had a lead editor (RW, JA or TC) who acted as a primary point of contact for discussing questions, ideas and requirements throughout the process. At the beginning of the project a detailed timeline was provided, and this included a series of writing retreat sessions for the authors, providing designated time for writing and promoting further opportunities for connections

between contributors. These sessions utilised a format developed by Rowena Murray (Murray, 2012; Murray & Newton, 2009), consisting of designated writing time alongside opportunities to discuss writing objectives and any individual challenges. Authors attending these sessions frequently commented on the significant value they offered in progressing their work. The final key source of support for authors was the production of guidance in response to emerging queries as we progressed. For example, authors were provided with recorded video guidance about getting started on planning their chapters after some had highlighted the potentially overwhelming nature of trying to move from a lengthy doctoral thesis to a distinct chapter which captured key lessons for other PGRs.

The editing and review process took a similarly supportive approach, with each chapter going through at least three cycles of review and feedback including responses from each of the editors. We developed a feedback template to ensure consistency of editorial approach and that the guidance was clearly structured, enhancing its utility. We ‘moderated’ our feedback to one sample chapter before the editing and feedback process began in earnest. This aimed to highlight both the strengths of the chapters and areas for potential development, and to adopt a supportive and constructive tone throughout. Regular communications were provided to contributing writers to explain the editing process and authors were encouraged to discuss feedback and revisions with their co-authors.

In addition to these structured aspects for supporting the writing process, we also utilised this collection’s development to create additional opportunities for the doctoral graduates to share their work including through conference presentations and other events. Papers arising from this collection were presented at the 2023 British Educational Research Association (BERA) and Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) conferences, and presentations were given to our University’s Education and Childhood Research Group and at postgraduate research seminars. All of these opportunities featured selected authors involved in this book and again in some cases this was the authors’ first experience of presenting their work in such fora.

Alongside the valuable contributions these chapters offer individually, we hope that the collection as a whole, and the editorial process detailed above, will provoke reflections on opportunities for supporting doctoral graduates’ and other ECRs’ next steps. We also hope to highlight the significant



potential of the wealth of knowledge and expertise contained within postgraduate practitioner research of this nature.

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