

**Teachers as Enquiring Professionals and  
Career-Long Professional Learning in  
Scotland**

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**Abstract**

This paper begins by setting out the vision and aims of the General Teaching Council for Scotland. In its efforts to deliver this vision and to meet these aims, GTC Scotland has given extensive consideration to various aspects of teacher professionalism. A discussion of a range of teacher professionalism paradigms follows before an explanation of the Teacher Education Standards in Scotland which aim to create a continuum for teachers' professional development. Teachers should consider their own development and therein arises the question of the relationship between teachers and research. The paper goes on to discuss two questions: Should teachers be researchers? Should teachers be users of research? It is argued that having teachers who are enquiring professionals is at the heart of moving the education system forward positively, delivering school improvement and ultimately having better quality teaching and learning. The paper concludes on a note of caution; the ultimate impact of practitioner enquiry should be improved pupil learning - but there is not necessarily a straightforward route to this nor is it something which is easy to judge.

**Keywords**

Enquiring professionals; Career-long professional learning; General Teaching Council for Scotland

**Introduction**

The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) has a long history and a central place within Scottish education. It was originally set up by an Act of Parliament in 1965 as a Non-Departmental Public Body and in the 50 years since then has been subject to various legislative changes which increased its powers. These changes came from both the Westminster Parliament and, following on from 1999, the Scottish Parliament. However, the most significant change came from the Public Services Reform (General Teaching Council for Scotland) Order 2011 (Scottish Government, 2011) which changed the status of GTC Scotland and in essence gave it independence from Government. This means that since April 2012 GTC Scotland has been an independent Professional Statutory Regulatory Body.

In its new independent form GTC Scotland aspires to:

- maintain the confidence of the public through effective governance and by always working in the public interest;
- be a world leader in professional education issues;

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- maintain and enhance standards of learning and teaching;
- actively promote teacher professionalism;

and to meet these aspirations has the following two specific aims:

- to contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning; and
- to maintain and improve teachers' professional standards.

In its efforts to deliver this vision and to meet these aims, GTC Scotland has given extensive consideration to various aspects of teacher professionalism.

Ian Menter and colleagues in the Literature Review on Teacher Education on the 21st Century (Menter et al, 2010) (completed as part of the review which led to the report Teaching Scotland's Future, Donaldson, 2011) identified various teacher professionalism paradigms. One paradigm is that of the effective teacher where there is very strong emphasis on standards and competence with very specifically and fully developed accountability mechanisms. To illustrate this, Menter et al point to the research of Mahony and Hextall (2000) which has explored this paradigm. The next paradigm identified is that of the reflective teacher with its emphasis on and commitment to personal and professional development. Here Menter et al refer to the work of Pollard (2008). The third paradigm illustrated is that of the enquiring teacher with its emphasis on the teacher as researcher and curriculum developer. Menter et al look back to the work of Stenhouse (1975) for some of the earliest developments in this field but it is also of course of growing contemporary significance and will be returned to below. Finally, Menter et al suggest that there is a fourth paradigm, that of the transformative teacher who sets out to challenge the status quo and has a commitment to progressive social change and greater social justice through education. For this paradigm reference is made to Sachs, 2003.

Over and above these paradigms, GTC Scotland has considered various other concepts central to teacher professionalism. Thought has been given to teachers as change agents (Fullan, 1993), the development of activist teachers (Sachs, 2003) and teachers as adaptive experts (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005). Consideration has also been given to the inquiry (sic) as stance approach (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). In terms of wider views and approaches to professionalism, GTC Scotland has also been influenced by Evetts (2012) who has looked at traditional forms of occupational professionalism, then contrasted more recent forms of organisational professionalism before proposing a hybrid form of contemporary professionalism. Evetts suggests that occupational professionalism has traditionally had a commitment to altruism, high standards and ethics but is subject to criticism for perpetrating a closed shop in which self-interest and protectionism may flourish. She then further identifies organisational professionalism which has central to it an emphasis on standards, targets, accountability and managerialism. In organisational professionalism teachers are simply functionaries, curriculum deliverers (cf the effective teacher approach above). Evetts goes on to posit a new hybrid professionalism which encompasses the professional wish for empowerment, innovation and autonomy but recognise the public interest need for quality assurance and accountability. This has real resonance in Scotland which has GTC Scotland as the guardian of teacher education standards and teacher professionalism but where it is also

recognised that with 96% of children in Scotland in State schools, the vast majority of teachers are paid from the public purse and hence it is widely accepted that public accountability is fair. Also of relevance to Scotland are two of the teacher education priorities identified for the European Commission by Piesanen and Välijärvi (2010) namely to create a continuum for teachers' professional development and to support teachers' life-long learning. Both of these developments chime well with the approaches being put forward by GTC Scotland and are evident in how the teacher education Standards have been written and are being used.

Scotland has a suite of Teacher Education Standards<sup>1</sup>:

- The Standards for Registration (Provisional, Full)
- The Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning
- The Standards for Leadership and Management (Middle Leadership, Headship)

The Standards for Registration are in two parts, Provisional and Full, the former being what students have to meet at the end of their Initial Teacher Education programmes in Scottish universities and the latter being what must be met at the end of their probation period (normally one year within the Teacher induction Scheme) in order to gain full registration with the GTCS. The Standard for Full Registration thereafter remains the baseline Standard for teacher competence. Both Provisional and Full Registration are mandatory steps which must be met in order to become a teacher in Scotland but in contrast, the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning is a voluntary and aspirational standard, designed to be used potentially throughout an un-promoted teacher's whole career as they develop as an accomplished teacher. For teachers wishing to follow a promoted post pathway, the Standards for Leadership and Management apply, firstly at the Middle Leadership level and then for those aspiring to be school leaders, Headship.

Clearly the GTCS approaches to the Standards and Career-Long Professional Learning fit well with the suggestion from Piesanen and Välijärvi (op cit) to create a continuum for teachers' professional development and to support teachers' life-long learning. It is of course also good to see Scotland's approach being validated by policies being developed at the European level. Another important element in supporting teachers' life-long learning is through the development of the GTC Scotland Professional Update scheme. The Public Services Reform (General Teaching Council for Scotland) Order 2011 (Scottish Government, 2011) sets the GTCS a legal duty to 'make and publish a scheme setting out measures to be undertaken for the purposes of allowing it to keep itself informed about the standards of education and training of registered teachers.' The GTCS has chosen to entitle this Professional Update, a scheme which is premised on teachers having a responsibility to consider their own development needs and an entitlement to a system of supportive Professional Review and Development, leading to a confirmation that they are maintaining the high standards required of a teacher.

As an element of teachers considering their own development comes the question of the relationship between teachers and research. Should teachers be researchers? Should teachers be users of research? GTC Scotland recognises that there will be different relationships between

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/standards/standards-for-registration.aspx>

teachers and research at different times in their professional development and at different stages of their careers but the Council supports teachers as enquiring professionals. For example, the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning states that it is underpinned by the core principles of practitioner enquiry which involves teachers having an enquiring disposition at the core of their professional practice. This means thinking critically and questioning their own educational beliefs, assumptions, values and practices. There is an expectation that they will be involved in creating knowledge to enhance progress and lead the learning experiences of all their learners and will also work collaboratively with colleagues. The teacher is seen as an adaptive expert who is open to change and engages with new and emerging ideas about teaching and learning.

External endorsement of this approach is found in Research and the Teaching Profession (BERA-RSA<sup>2</sup>, 2014:9) which considers the professional identity and practice of teachers and suggests that in a research-rich, self-improving education system:

Teachers share a common responsibility for the continuous development of their research literacy. This informs all aspects of their professional practice and is written into initial and continuing teacher education programmes, standards, and in registration and licensing frameworks.

During the course of qualifying and throughout their careers, teachers have multiple opportunities to engage in research and enquiry, collaborating with colleagues in other schools and colleges and with members of the wider research community, based in universities and elsewhere.

A practical example of what is being argued for here is provided in how GTC Scotland is trying to encourage the development of the teaching profession, as can be seen from the following model taken from the GTC Scotland website<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/BERA-RSA-Research-Teaching-Profession-FULL-REPORT-for-web.pdf?noredirect=1>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-update/professional-learning.aspx>

## Teachers as Enquiring Professionals



GTC Scotland would argue that having teachers who are enquiring professionals is at the heart of moving the education system forward positively, delivering school improvement and ultimately having better quality teaching and learning. Again this approach seems to align well with international evidence and policy as the OECD argues in the latest outcomes from The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013 (OECD, 2014) that teaching staff need to be able to innovate and adapt their practice continuously which includes having critical attitudes which enable them to respond to students' outcomes, use of new evidence from research and practice, and professional dialogue. Indeed the results from TALIS suggest that teachers engaging in professional development are also more likely to use innovative teaching practices. The OECD report goes on to stress that successful education systems tend to have teachers with a sense agency, leading to feelings of self-efficacy and, ultimately, job satisfaction.

As part of supporting the development of practitioner enquiry and to encourage agency, self-efficacy and job satisfaction GTC Scotland has been supporting three different initiatives. These are EBSCO<sup>4</sup>, the EducationHub<sup>5</sup> and the Teacher Researcher Programme<sup>6</sup>. Building on developments initiated by the Teaching Council Ireland, GTC Scotland, through the EBSCO system, is providing online access for all registered teachers in Scotland to 1800 education journals and various ebooks. Over the first year of this pilot project the statistics monitoring the level of use have been very positive as has been the general reaction to the pilot (including considerable interest from outwith Scotland). Further funding has therefore been agreed for the forthcoming academic year. The second development is the EducationHub which is an interactive platform providing teachers with

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ebsco.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/research-engagement/about-research.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/research-engagement/TRP-application-form.aspx>

the chance to share, discuss and review unpublished practitioner produced research and enquiry. It aims to be inclusive and make practitioner research more accessible. It is also an important step that promotes and values this work as a legitimate contribution to knowledge about education in Scotland. While this too is a pilot, initial reactions have been positive and it too seems to be making a positive contribution to developing practitioner enquiry. The third strand of this work is the Teacher Researcher Programme, a longstanding GTC Scotland initiative which provides funding to individual teachers (or small groups of teachers) in order to allow them to complete small scale projects. The funding provided can be used to pay for cover to allow the teacher to be released from teaching so that time can be spent on their research or perhaps for travel expenses to allow observation or collaborative work in other educational settings. Reports are written up and presented to GTC Scotland for publication on the Council's website but some teacher researchers have gone on to make academic conference presentations or to publish their findings in educational research journals.

It is important to stress that GTC Scotland is not trying to turn every teacher in Scotland into a researcher but is working with a model of teaching which emphasises the complexity of that task. Teachers are not seen in Scotland as functionaries who simply deliver the curriculum given to them from on high by 'experts' (or indeed politicians) but rather are 'reflective, accomplished, and enquiring professionals who are able to engage with the complexities of teaching and learning, the changing contemporary world of their learners, and the world beyond the profession and its institutions, in order to enhance the learning experiences for all learners.' (GTC Scotland, Standard for Career Long Professional Learning, 2012:4) Practitioner enquiry is being encouraged and at times teachers may even be actively involved in research projects but certainly they should, at all times, be looking at educational research with a critical eye. For example, what should be made of the following? This was published in Scientific American on 15 July, 2014, entitled Scientists Bring New Rigor to Education Research (Kantrowitz, 2014).

Researchers are using tools borrowed from medicine and economics to figure out what works best in the classroom. But the results aren't making it into schools

Anna Fisher was leading an undergraduate seminar on the subject of attention and distractibility in young children when she noticed that the walls of her classroom were bare. That got her thinking about kindergarten classrooms, which are typically decorated with cheerful posters, multi-coloured maps, charts and artwork. What effect, she wondered, does all that visual stimulation have on children, who are far more susceptible to distraction than her students at Carnegie Mellon University? Do the decorations affect youngsters' ability to learn?

To find out, Fisher's graduate student Karrie Godwin designed an experiment involving kindergartners at Carnegie Mellon's Children's School, a campus laboratory school. Two groups of 12 kindergartners sat in a room that was alternately decorated with Godwin's purchases or stripped bare and listened to three stories about science in each setting. Researchers videotaped the students and later noted how much each child was paying attention. At the end of the reading, the children were asked questions about what they had heard. Those in the bare classroom were more likely to pay attention and scored higher on comprehension tests.

This 'research' may have produced an interesting finding about 'attention and distractibility' but to what end? Can it really have escaped the researchers' attention that there is huge irony in proposing kindergarten (children's garden) classrooms with bare walls so that the inmates are not distracted by 'cheerful posters, multi-coloured maps, charts and artwork'? Is the purpose of early education really just to ensure that it leads to higher scores on comprehension tests? One wonders how this research proposal got past the university's research ethics committee.

### Conclusion

The ultimate impact of practitioner enquiry should be improved pupil learning - but there is not necessarily a straightforward route to this nor is it something which is easy to judge. GTC Scotland is actively encouraging the development of teachers who can engage in professional enquiry (or research when appropriate) and certainly should have the knowledge and skills to look critically at research. Research may tell us something but for real impact it needs to be looked at critically and interrogated before being put into practice. In other words, teachers need to beware of the snake-oil salesmen who may seem to be providing research giving solutions to educational issues but are actually commercially (or politically driven): this research proves X so buy product Y which will be the panacea to all your educational ills.

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