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'It gives meaning and purpose to what you do': Mentors' interpretations of practitioner action research in education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experience of three mentors working with a group of 12 practitioner action researchers; practitioners who were recipients of an Action Research Grant (ARG) in a programme initiated and managed by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). The EIS is a trade union, which represents over 80% of Scotland's teaching professionals. The paper draws on these experiences, the views of participants and the research literature, to illustrate how action research, particularly that which is mentored by experienced colleagues, can empower teachers and enhance their practice to make positive difference to their learners and beyond and so becomes participatory action research (PAR).

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Introduction

In 2017, the EIS Council approved an Education Committee decision to set up a funding stream that supports practitioner action research amongst EIS members. The purpose of the EIS action research grants is to facilitate both learning and action, and in doing so, offer teaching professionals the opportunity for personal and professional development. There have been three iterations of the programme for a total of 60 participants conducting education-related action research. We are unaware of similar programmes anywhere else in the world.

Two of the mentors have been involved with the programme since its inception and were joined in the 2020 iteration by a new member of EIS staff. Eager to reflect on the process of mentoring, the three authors reflected together on the mentoring process and undertook consultation with the participants. The three mentors are representatives of the EIS, the University of Glasgow, and a volunteer from the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) Co-ordinating Group. The mentoring process included participation in dialogue in meetings either face-to-face or by Zoom, peer discussion, responding to questions and assisting participants to access resources, and personal and professional support through informal discussion outside meetings. This support embraced all stages of a research process from conceptualisation to presentation of findings.

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We have selected a quotation from one of the participants in the EIS ARG programme as the title for this paper as it reflects the feelings of the value of being an action researcher and also reflects the feelings of the three mentors, who choose to participate on a voluntary basis and see the reciprocal value it adds to their own professional practice.

The development and importance of practitioner action research

The concept of the teacher as researcher emerged, in North America in the 1950s (Corey 1949), and during the late 1960s and 1970s developed in the UK but was characterised by a greater recognition of the relationship between action research and teacher agency and the importance of reflective and reflexive practice in teaching (Stenhouse 1975). For Stenhouse, to be an effective teacher, the practitioner had to conduct and engage with research.

The benefits of practitioners conducting and engaging with research have been consistently emphasised in the literature, which argues that being actively and collaboratively engaged in inquiry is a key factor in effective teacher professional learning and educational improvement (Elliott 2009). For example, Rütten and Gelius (2014), consistent with Stenhouse in the 1970s, argue that it is crucial for practitioners, to engage with research to inform and improve their practice. Paor and Murphy (2018), state that such 'teacher research has been identified as a transformative model of continuous professional development' (169). Reeves, Redford, and McQueen (2010) found that practitioner research as part of a General Teaching Council, Scotland (GTCs) pilot programme improved teachers' understanding of learning theory, improved analytical skills, reflection and increased attention to issues of evidence and pupil learning. Reeves, Redford, and McQueen (2010) also stressed that political support for this type of professional learning is a key factor in maximising its potential at all levels. Furthermore, practitioner action research has the potential to empower the individual and those they work with to have a broader positive impact, becoming participatory action research. The term 'participatory action research' is used as a broad conceptual umbrella that covers a variety of practices (Ortiz Aragon and Brydon-Miller 2021). It includes a range of processes adopted by the teachers, who are the subject of this paper, whereby evidence is gathered and analysed in a participatory way. The aim of participatory practice and the mentors' aim was to 'construct spaces where groups can learn what they need in order to engage in collective problem solving within a participatory and often emancipatory ethos.' (Ospina et al, 2021, 5).

Judkins et al. (2014) reported the benefits of using practitioner research, being engaged with research as encouraging self-critique and reflection on teaching practice, stimulating innovative ideas to inform teaching and learning, and encouraging teachers to look beyond their school and gain a wider perspective. Teachers also reported benefits of research for learners as being improved achievement and attitude, often as a result of teachers using research evidence to create more varied and innovative lessons that engaged learners.

Practitioner action research is more likely to be effective when it is part of teachers' professional identity and becomes embedded in planning and practice rather than a sporadic activity. For example, Reeves and Drew (2013) stress the importance of having cycles of action research where knowledge gained from action research feeds and

influences practice, which, in itself, generates new knowledge and ways of working that are the focus of further research. Research has also shown that practitioners who engage in systematic action research, which enhances their professional learning, are more likely to promote positive educational outcomes for learners regardless of their socioeconomic background (Opper 2019; Hamre and Pianta 2005; Rivers and Sanders 2002). It has been argued that practitioner action research can help teachers to promote positive learner outcomes and contribute to more effective systems but only if it facilitates teacher agency and is not imposed from above (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

Chapman et al. (2011) in their evaluation of the English Extra Mile initiative argue that school improvement which is informed by action research is much more likely to emerge and be effective if it emerges as a result of collective and collaborative working, which empowers teachers, rather than it being mandated and part of accountability mechanisms. The literature argues that having educators collaboratively engaged in research can promote professional learning and educational improvement at a systems level (Elliott 2009; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Hadfield and Chapman 2009; Ainscow 2012; Hadfield and Ainscow 2018; Christie and Menter 2009). Where action research involves teachers and partner colleagues working collaboratively, these people can maximise the impact of their shared learning. The ability of action research to improve professional learning and impact on practice and learner outcomes is further enhanced when they become part of a systematic collaborative learning activity within, between and beyond establishments.

The importance of practitioner action research and engagement with research in education has also been recognised by the Scottish Government and reflected in policy and initiatives. Government funded pilot programmes such as Schools of Ambition (SoA) and the School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP), which aimed to promote educational improvement and equity, included practitioner action research as an integral part of their design. This reflects the Scottish educational policy stance on aligning the use of research evidence with the development of the teacher profession. The SIPP has proven successful as a model of collaborative action research that improves professional dialogue, leadership, teacher agency and, crucially, practitioners' skills to promote educational equity (Chapman et al. 2016).

Supporting educators to develop their action research skills

While the benefits of using evidence and adopting action research are evident from the literature, practitioners often report the need for support and advice to enhance their skills and knowledge in this area (Lowden et al. 2019). In Scotland, educators' roles have developed to incorporate a greater focus on research engagement and practitioner enquiry, as government and the research literature stress that practitioner engagement with research is crucial for educational improvement (OECD, 2015; Scottish Government 2017; Scottish Government 2020). Since 2013, programmes such as SIPP, and its subsequent development in Scotland by the Robert Owen Center for Educational Change, have continued to support collaborative practitioner enquiry and build capacity for action research in local authorities and professional associations (Chapman and Ainscow 2021). This has included working with the EIS and other academic colleagues to support the Action Research Grants (ARG) programme.

The role of the mentors was emergent but can now be defined as participating in providing advice to less experienced colleagues. It was a role that embraced building trust, listening actively, contributing to motivation, assisting with research process planning, inspiring, and providing opportunities for learning and connections with the literature and resources. We aimed to encourage teachers' engagement with and in research, using the ideas of others, as well as generating new knowledge themselves. The role of mentor has been interpreted individually by each of the three mentors who are the subject of this paper. We are, however, in agreement that mentoring is a relationship between two people or one person and a group, with the goal of professional and personal development, sharing knowledge experience and skills. We develop relationships with the ARG learners in a group setting, where peer support is also valued highly and then provide subsequent one-to-one support on request from the ARG learners. Typically, this involves assistance with methodological and implementation problem solving, sourcing relevant literature, and contribution to ideas for analysis. This mentoring is done on a voluntary basis.

Action Research Grants (ARGs) as an effective model of professional learning

There are many different interpretations of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The EIS ARG programme has developed over time and reflects in its character the interpretations of the EIS staff and mentors to the programme, which are nuanced but include a commitment to participation and to influencing practice for the individual, colleagues and policy/practice. Ortiz Aragon and Brydon-Miller (2021) suggest a starting point for participatory researcher is the desire to leverage knowledge in participatory ways to support meaningful change. Stringer and Ortiz Aragon (2021) frame PAR in a way we share as consisting of 3 core elements: (1) Learning through and for action; (2) action informed by learning; and (3) participation by those who know. Henson defines the action element as the process of studying a 'real' environment to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction (1996). Our use of PAR combines these three approaches.

Influenced by many key thinkers, the EIS ARG programme is a model of professional development intended to both develop the teaching skills of the practitioners, to enhance their practice, and empower them as professionals and support the objectives of their professional association. The ARG embodies key characteristics of effective professional learning, which are highlighted in the literature. For example, studies have shown that approaches that include mentoring and coaching to provide a critical friend role in this case, from EIS and academic colleagues, and which include enquiry are particularly effective (e.g.: Hargreaves 2005). The ARG model also reflects attributes of effective professional learning highlighted by reviews and meta-analyses, including those identified by Desimone (2009).

Desimone (2009) suggests that effective professional development results when teacher learning changes attitudes and beliefs, that subsequently changes teacher practices, that then promotes learner achievement. This echoes the findings of other studies that demonstrate the association between teacher knowledge, practice, and student achievement (Hill, Ball, and Schilling 2008; Phelps and Schilling 2004; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998; Wilson and Berne 1999).

Desimone's conceptual framework (2009) builds on the model of Penuel et al. (2007) and Garet *et al.*'s (2001) critical features approach. Desimone claims that from the empirical professional learning and development literature we can identify features necessary for effective professional development. These include a particular focus on *content* likely to lead to a specific impact or change; engaging the teacher as a learner (*active learning*); having the professional learning consistent with teachers' knowledge, perspectives and wider ideas on educational improvement (*coherence*); having an appropriate *duration* for the professional development and involves the *collective participation* of teachers that promote professional dialogue and reflection. Desimone's (2009) model sets this path within a context of teacher and student characteristics, curriculum, school leadership, and the policy environment.

Methodology

This paper results from critical reflection individually and together of the three mentors, analysis of their experience in mentoring the programme over a number of years, and inquiry with participants. It involves a deeper look at the premises on which thinking, action and emotions are based (Fook and Gardner 2007) and critical reflection promotes a purpose to confuse, disarrange and thereby become awakened (Ekebergh 2009).

Participants in the 2020–21 EIS Action Research Grants (ARG) programme were invited to take part in a discussion, answering three key questions, which were derived from critical reflection founded on our experiences of the programme:

- 'What do you as an ARG participant hope to get out of your research?', with a focus on the personal benefit to ARG participants themselves.
- 'What difference might your research make to other educators?', inviting ARG participants to reflect on the professional consequences of their research.
- 'What might the "ripple effect" of your research be on other decision makers?', inviting ARG participants to consider the political implications and consequences of their research.

Five 2020–21 ARG participants provided answers to these questions, through a mixture of live discussion and written responses. The live discussion was held online via Zoom as part of a routine ARG Researchers Meeting on 9 May 2021 months into the 10–11 month 2020–21 ARG project cycle. Participants' project updates at this same meeting indicated that those who contributed to the discussion were at the point of completing action and data gathering tasks and were well into data analysis, critical reflection and writing-up their projects. Others, who did not attend, were unavailable or declined the opportunity to participate.

The mentors engaged in three critically reflective conversations with each other to discuss the findings and analysed the findings through thematic and discourse analysis, from which the themes described below emerged.

Findings – Empowerment

Lister (2021) describes how empowerment can be a ‘chameleon feel good term’, which means different things to different people. We agree with this and are aware of its frequent use in an imprecise manner by practitioners, in particular. This is at least in part because it is a multi-faceted term. Lister explains how empowerment can be a recognition of existing power relations and oneself in them and a taking of action to change them. This is the definition we use here. It is a form of critical reflection, where power relations are critiqued by participants and linked to reflexivity and assumptions about self and society are challenged. Participants reported seeing themselves in new lights and growth in opportunities in professional life.

For example, in a number of cases participants’ aspirations for their projects’ impacts have been realised following completion of their projects, particularly those projects which engaged with acute local service needs. One participant, Laura’s success in networking newly qualified teachers was recognised by the local authority and extended in 2021–22 through the creation of a short-term role in the local authority education service focused on supporting Newly Qualified Teachers employing Laura’s own methods. Similarly, another participant, Angus’ innovation in the distribution of PEF funding was noted by his school’s leadership team and his method specified in the subsequent re-recruitment to the school’s PEF coordinator role. Both Angus’ and Laura’s projects successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of their innovations for meeting acute local needs in a way, which was a good solution for local decision-makers. Those decision-makers had the relevant powers to extend the innovative activity immediately. For researchers whose projects engaged with broader educational and pastoral objectives, or for whom the key decision-makers were more remote, the publication of their research reports in autumn 2021 represented the beginning of dissemination and sharing evidence with colleagues at various levels through sector events and further professional learning activity.

Reflection as part of action research is a process for the individual, which releases the capacity to make strategic life choices and to participate in the processes which frame such choices. In this context, it is a process that applies to the participants in the EIS programme, who we consider were empowered through the action research process in the ways described above. Empowerment also applies to the pupils, participants and colleagues, with whom the EIS action researchers undertake their inquiry. This multi-faceted empowerment is illustrated in the example below. All participant names have been changed, and only details are provided that will not identify the participants. Informed consent was sought, and confidentiality was assured.

One participant in the EIS ARG programme, Angus, chose to explore participatory budgeting by parents and pupils in a school context. Angus is a secondary Principal Teacher of English in Scotland, exploring the use of participatory budgeting of Pupil Equity Funding as a method for community engagement within his school. Participatory budgeting is a form of citizen participation, in which people, who are usually recipients of a service, are involved in the process of deciding how public money is spent. In Scotland, there is a fund called Pupil Equity Fund (PEF). Pupil Equity Funding is additional funding, allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty-related attainment gap. One way in which this fund is distinctive is that it is administered directly by Headteachers.

So, this project was highly innovative in seeking to transfer the potential for decision-making and concomitantly power for decision-making from a headteacher to parents and pupils. Angus was concerned about the values behind implementation of the fund, how 'intransparent' PEF can be from the point of view of how decisions were made; how he felt excluded from this process; how others were excluded, such as parents and pupils; and the assumptions that were behind the idea that headteachers themselves know how to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Angus implemented a participatory budgeting process for parents and for pupils and this attracted much attention from the Scottish Government, which chose to include participatory budgeting in their National Attainment Improvement Framework (NIF), which seeks to address the attainment gap in Scotland. Closing the attainment gap is a high government priority in Scotland. Analysis by Audit Scotland showed that the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more awards at level five was 82.7% for pupils from the least deprived areas of Scotland, compared to 46.5% for school leavers from the most deprived areas, a gap of 36.2%.

Accordingly, there was evidence of empowerment in a multi-faceted way. Critical reflection on the part of Angus, prompted by the mentors, about these disparities led him to challenge the ideas behind who makes, what are very important decisions, about pupil experience. It changed his behaviour to challenge the status quo. This had an impact on him as an individual, as he felt more empowered and applied for a new job, to find it had participatory budgeting in the role profile. It had a combined professional and policy impact in terms of inclusion in the policy and practice guidance of the National Improvement Framework. Finally, there was the inclusion dimension of empowerment for parent and pupils, encouraging them to participate in decision-making and themselves be critical and think of choices and decisions.

Another participant in the EIS programme, Laura (not real name), manifested empowerment through the expressed passion and deepening knowledge and experience she derived from participating in the action research. She said, 'it gives meaning and purpose to what you do,' which we have adopted as the title of his paper. Empowerment is closely linked to identity. Identity may be seen as a social construction which we both assemble and live out, with the demands of everyday life (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). It is also closely linked to how we experience possibilities and construct self in both professional and personal terms. Empowerment is crucial to this process in terms of what is possible and allowed by self and others in this process of construction of self. Transformation of identity is germane to definitions of learning, as will be discussed in the final section of this paper, where we propose a model of professional development linked to inquiry through action research.

For Laura, her project concerned reading in the school. It was 'undervalued from the top'. The library had been 'decimated'. Her empowerment was both personal and professional, in that undertaking a literature review helped her make explicit what she knew intuitively; that literacy is important across the curriculum and is 'talked about but not implemented'. She was challenging the status quo too, through critical reflection. She chose to write for a journal, a process to empower others both professionally and in policy terms, and the school budget was increased for books, a direct impact on pupils and on her sense of personal agency and identity. Laura was a secondary English teacher in Scotland, analysing the use of growth mindset language in a blended learning environment, focusing on pupils' language skills.

It was important for the mentors to reflect on the context of the programme, which was being offered by a trade union organisation, which arguably enhances the empowerment of the participants giving them a freedom from the orthodoxies of higher education (McArdle 2018), which can circumscribe approaches to and theories of research and also the processes and experiences that accompany assessed work. Conversely, access to the resources of higher education whilst available through the mentors was not as immediately accessible or as structured.

Empowerment has a ripple effect in the community of education, where personal, professional and political impact can be seen as concentric circles of influence and these circles are discussed in the next sections.

Findings – Individual benefits of undertaking action research

Several ARG participants articulated an interest in engaging with educational research to enhance their own learning, and their understanding of action research as an accessible and relevant model of educational research for teaching professionals. Jane explained that her ARG project was her ‘first time doing educational research’, and that the opportunity to engage with guidance and experienced educational researchers was a clear benefit of undertaking the project. Angus similarly noted a prior interest in educational research, and that the ARG scheme had been presented as ‘a supported opportunity to try out’ research for his own learning.

Where participants expressed a belief in the value of engaging with educational research for their own learning, they often articulated this value in terms of improving their own knowledge of specific topic areas. Jane described her learning through action research as ‘deepening [her] knowledge of a specific topic.’ one in which she had a prior interest in exploring – through professional reading and focussed observation of practice in her own context. Morag explained that her research project benefitted her personally by providing her with more detailed knowledge about her research subjects, including the structures of her workplace and the perspectives of colleagues.

All participants identified that the opportunity to address and overcome specific challenges in their teaching practice or workplace, was a personal benefit of undertaking their projects. In some cases, these were previously observed challenges around which participants had designed their projects. Mary explained that she had observed a situation in her department where the curriculum was structured such that disabled learners’ urgent support needs were only addressed out with class time and designed her project to respond to her feeling that ‘there must be some way of using time in class to address learner’s challenges’. On that basis, Mary had designed her ARG project specifically to support and assess adaptations to her own practice and overcome that specific challenge. Similarly, Angus explained that he had conceived his ARG project in response to his new responsibility for distributing PEF funds which required a structured and methodical approach to be successful. On that basis, Angus adopted the methods of action research to directly aid him in meeting this challenge with innovative participatory budgeting methods and ensure an effective outcome.

In other cases, participants explained that they hoped to use action research to identify and interrogate challenges that were not well defined prior to their project commencing. Laura described her project ‘exploring the effect’ of specific adaptations to the upper-

primary curriculum in her school, and that she hoped to 'explore whether there are elements of existing good practice' related to those practices elsewhere. Morag and Jane likewise described how their projects were designed in response to a sense that they needed to know more about aspects of their immediate context to identify emerging challenges, respectively concerning the experiences of recently qualified teachers and the reading habits of secondary learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across all these examples, participants articulated that they believed there was significant individual benefit to undertaking action research, because it allowed them opportunity to identify and describe previously unacknowledged challenges which they could subsequently address.

All participants noted that the practical aspect of action research was beneficial, and they valued the opportunity to adapt aspects of their practice within a structured research project. Jane described action research as intrinsically 'impactful research activity' since it includes practical adaptations, and that the 'action' part of action research can be valuable in its own right. Mary noted that her research project had been an opportunity to build stronger relationships with her students, and Morag identified active engagement with a new cohort of colleagues, as a personally beneficial aspect of her project. In these ways, participants expressed that their ARG projects had been a motivational opportunity for them to adopt new practices that were in and of themselves valuable.

Enhancing teacher leadership was a common theme across a number of participant responses regarding personal benefits of action research. Laura explained that her research project was conceived in part 'to inform whole school curriculum design in academic session 2021–22', positioning her as a key curriculum leader through use of action research practices. Morag noted that her project had facilitated engagement with junior colleagues on the topic of their professional development, positioning her as a leader within her network 'but without managerial responsibilities'. Both Morag and Angus further observed that their projects additionally supported them to succeed in formal leadership roles in their school, local authority and trade union.

Findings – Impacts of action research on colleagues and professional context

Participants whose projects focussed on specific shared challenges, common to a group of teaching professionals, identified specific measurable differences they hoped their project would make for those educators. Morag noted that her project had been designed to address retention of newly qualified teachers in the profession, including through improving their access to professional development opportunities, their self-confidence regarding skills and upskilling, and their sense of being valued in the sector.

Many participants identified that their action research projects could provide an evidence base for other teaching professionals to adopt specific adaptations, methods or strategies. Laura explained that her project had identified 'a significant gap in literature around learning through play beyond the early level', and that she hoped her project would provide an evidence base which 'inspire[s] practitioners to have the confidence in taking the leap' of adopting this specific innovation in their own setting. Angus described how he hoped his research findings would demonstrate a 'proven method' for effective decision-making regarding PEF funding, and that this would support colleagues to adopt

the same method in their own context. Mary described how she had already committed to informally sharing aspects of her project with colleagues to persuade them to adopt similar adaptations to their own curriculum planning. She was additionally considering disseminating her findings as a formal professional learning offer to colleagues in order to support this. In this way, participants articulated their understanding of action research as an opportunity to undertake 'prototype' or 'proof of concept' activity, implementing adaptations in their own practice and generating an evidence base which would persuade colleagues to adopt the same adaptations.

This sense of action research supporting participants' advocacy for specific changes to their working context was also true in responses from participants whose projects had sought to develop a clearer understanding of emerging challenges. Jane noted that she hoped her project findings would support her to advocate within her own school for appropriate library resourcing and decision-making processes that meet the needs of learners, on the basis that those needs have been clearly identified and described through her research. Similarly, Morag articulated how her research was already informing her local authority regarding staffing and resources for 'building professional learning communities' in response to ongoing challenges identified through her research. In this way, participants expressed hope that their project findings could be impactful in shaping the working context of their colleagues as well as their own and colleagues' practice.

Some participants also described how aspects of their projects might additionally support colleagues to overcome related challenges which were not directly the focus of their own projects. Angus noted that his innovative methods regarding PEF funding had opened up opportunities for community engagement, including with families, third-sector partners, and a wider range of stakeholders, and so represented a powerful tool for colleagues with interests or challenges in that area of work. Laura expressed a hope that the success of play-based innovations in her specific context might persuade colleagues to explore that topic for their own practice 'regardless of age/stage'.

Some participants also expressed a hope that their research would inform broader professional discussions and sector-level understandings of complex topics. Jane noted that she hoped her research would inform 'a realistic understanding across the profession' of young people's experiences during the pandemic. Mary explained that she hoped that her research would encourage 'broader conversations about learners' needs' at the college level, especially in comparison to the focus on Scottish Qualifications Alliance (the accrediting body) guidelines. In this way participants expressed a hope that their research would enrich broader professional discourse regarding learners' needs and experiences amongst other sector priorities, beyond but informed by the specific challenges examined within their research projects.

Findings – The 'ripple effect' of action research on other decision-makers

All participants identified that their projects engaged with contemporary themes, trends or movements in the Scottish education sectors and expressed a hope that their activity or research findings could contribute to positive developments within those areas.

Some researchers identified specific decision-makers, and the ways in which they hoped those decision-makers would be influenced by their research findings. Morag specified local authority managers as a key group and expressed a hope that her findings

would influence policies and funding decisions related to supporting recently qualified teachers. Jane similarly specified school and local authority decision makers with budgetary responsibility and expressed hope that her findings could influence decisions regarding spending on library resources.

Relating her project to broader debates within her college specifically, Mary articulated how her research could demonstrate a 'need for adult student spaces within the college'. In this way, Mary sought to link her specific interrogation of learners' support needs within her own area of practice to broader challenges concerning the support and inclusion of disabled adult learners in the college as a whole and speculated that her research represents a practitioner contribution to a 'whole college approach' to an institution-wide challenge.

Angus articulated his project as relating to trends in educational narrative and values in Scotland, including the Empowerment agenda and teachers' collective agency. As with his 'proven method' assessment of his project's local impact, Angus suggested that his research was 'modelling' a method that provides a practical example for realising these sometimes-abstract concepts and centring the role of the teacher as a leader of educational engagement for a wide range of stakeholders.

Mirroring other participants' articulation of action research as furthering advocacy for specific innovations in teaching practice, Laura located her research clearly in the context of campaigns related to her topic and expressed hope that her findings 'might be recognised by political campaigners such as Upstart Scotland'. Upstart Scotland is seeking to persuade the Scottish Government to introduce a statutory kindergarten stage in Scottish education, so here Laura expresses a thorough awareness of how her specific and local research activity relates to general and national political contexts and processes.

Across all of these insights, participants gave the impression that the process of engaging with action research and required them to consider both how their own research activity might inform high-level decision-making and how the high-level political context in turn informed their existing practices.

Discussion: Empowerment, Agency/Identity and the Ripple Effect

We saw from our findings that, as we had observed from the mentoring process, the research had an impact on personal, professional and political dimensions of practice. This was not unexpected and framed our questions to researchers, but we also found that the EIS ARG programme had an influence on empowerment, agency/identity; and what we have described as a ripple effect, a phrase which captures the multi-level impact of the research that represents a merging movement outwards from the centre, which is the researcher.

Thompson (2007) in analysing the theory of empowerment, discusses the idea of the 'autotelic' self and cites Giddens (1994) who uses the term to refer to:

an inner confidence that comes from self respect, and one where a sense of ontological security originating in basic trust allows for the positive appreciation of social differences. It refers to a person able to translate potential threats into rewarding challenges. (192)

We have seen in our participants this autotelic self-respect, which is nurtured by the PAR process and the ability to translate potential threats into rewarding challenges. The case study of Laura illustrates the ways in which the research process empowered her to overcome the 'decimation' of the school library and to develop self-respect, as both leading teacher and researcher. Thompson (2007) further discusses how helping to empower others in practice involves the use of the professional knowledge base, which we argue is a feature of our mentoring model, the use of support networks which are in place in the EIS ARGs, and taking the opportunity to challenge and remove barriers. The latter is something we assist and support the educators to do in their practice. We cannot remove barriers, but we can empower others to seek the means to remove barriers themselves. We find ourselves as mentors working in this way frequently, not least during the pandemic, where new ways of completing research had to be found by participants drawing on the questions and experience of mentors.

The concept of empowerment is also linked to the 'ripple effect' where we found the researchers themselves empowering others through Holstein and Gubrium's ontological security, originating in basic trust. So, the parents were empowered in participatory budgeting and the pupils in the library project; a response to structural inequalities, which are frequently linked to:

- Access to resources: such as access to decision-making and power;
- Ideological assumptions: hegemony, such as head teacher or the generic school/college knows best;
- Barriers: such as school boundaries to knowledge. (Derived from Thompson 2007, 6)

This ripple effect was entirely consistent with the implicit values of equality and inclusion of PAR in its participatory dimension and also of the explicit values of equality and inclusion of the trade union, the EIS, showing congruence between the EIS ARG programme and explicit and implicit values. These values were having an impact at multi-levels. The ripple effect is large and wide when we include the trade unions members a beneficiary of the projects.

This ability to overcome barriers requires a sense of agency, agency being the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. This is linked to identity, and an identity which sees this overcoming of barriers to be a possibility and we would argue that this is a part of the transformatory process of learning (Jarvis 2006), which is transformational for the individual; a new person is formed; a new identity. Jarvis explains that the essence of learning is that the initial feeling of confusion or absence transforms into knowledge, competence, attitude, values and emotions. In the course of learning, the individual integrates the transformed contents of the initial disorientating situation into his/her own life history and a new person is 'formed', one who possesses more experience. This was our experience of the processes in the EIS's ARG programme. As new researchers at the beginning with a lack of confidence, we saw researchers growing in confidence to become practised researchers with their own solutions to problems; and a growing knowledge of their own practice challenges; an ability to find

their own solutions to challenges including research practice challenges linked to Covid 19. For example, they sought how to do in-depth qualitative research online rather than face to face. Sub-skills developed included goal setting and planning, as well as accessing literature, making choices in complex environments; and taking decisions. The biggest challenge for the participants in this cohort was the need to adapt methodologies, in particular, because of the pandemic and the need to be socially distanced.

Identity is the nexus of a person's practical knowledge and the landscapes past, present and future with which the person lives and works; who we are and who we have become and who we are becoming. The self is not only something we are but something we actively construct and live by (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). We also have multiple selves for different people and contexts. The quotation below captures this often messy but important means of developing an identity as researcher.

an interpretive salvage operation, crafting selves from the vast array of available resources, making do with what she or he has to work with in the circumstances at hand ... (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 153)

Experience provides the means and meaning through which one becomes conscious of who one is (Holstein & Gubrium *ibid*) and we would add who one will become. We observed as mentors, researchers learning from experience either crafted by us or their own initiative and becoming the confident and autonomous researchers who could tackle their own challenges and become 'experts' in their own research knowledge contexts. Autonomy in a research context may be defined as 'a degree of confidence or certainty that what one chooses to do is right.' (McArdle 2018, 34)

The ripple effect of influence was apparent in all of the cases that we examined for this study. Impact or influence may be considered to embrace scale, quality and significance (McArdle 2020). Scale may be argued to be 'large' where large refers to an indirect impact on a wide range of people and policies. The scale of impact for the EIS ARG researchers was far-reaching, and the ripple effect was also wide-ranging, as discussed earlier. A policy link as in the participatory budgeting example has the power to influence the population of teachers in Scotland and beyond. The library example can influence all teachers who are members of the EIS through reporting of the findings. In addition, the ripple effect of the work of the ARG researchers is facilitated nationally and internationally via the organisational channels and networks of the respective mentors, which mobilises knowledge from the ARG as part of their academic and professional activity.

Quality refers to a judgment about the effectiveness or 'goodness' of an intervention and we saw the quality of impact in terms of the difference made to work contexts, such as schools and colleges. 'Goodness' may be linked to positive values or virtues, where virtues may be defined as values in action. Effectiveness applies to the worth of an intervention and is linked to values and judgements in that participatory budgeting was worthwhile for inclusion and equality and, arguably, effective decision-making. The re-establishment of a library falls into this 'goodness' category providing an indubitable resource for pleasure and learning for children.

Significance refers to whether it matters and it clearly did matter as it had an impact on policy at local levels for the library project, as an example, and indeed at a national policy levels for the participatory budgeting project. The research mattered to all the pupils and students who were part of these interventions, to professional colleagues, to researchers themselves and to policy and decision makers at local, national and international levels and to put a personal viewpoint it mattered to the three mentors who give freely of their time for the implicit rewards of participating in an effective programme, of contributing to learning and growth; and of contributing to the knowledge base of their profession.

Implications arising from the research

The findings from this research have implications and learning for mentors of those engaged in practitioner action research, those conducting PAR as well as professional organisations and government. The EIS ARG model of PAR has a positive impact on the professional skills and empowerment of practitioners which ‘ripples out’ to benefit those they teach and work with. Professional associations and local and national government could help maximise this impact by supporting and encouraging this type of professional learning, including offering professional accreditation and funding for PAR activity. Educational leaders could also disseminate the benefits of PAR and consider how they organise curriculum and professional learning planning to facilitate time for PAR and reflect its findings.

The EIS ARG model of PAR has highlighted the benefits of mentors working collaboratively together to provide this type of support. By collectively sharing insights and drawing on their own learning and range of expertise, their synergy enhances the support a single mentor can provide. Working this way also allows mentors to support each other and act as critical friends. For those involved in conducting PAR, our findings show the importance of working with colleagues and their networks, particularly those in positions of power, to tackle challenges that arise during their research and to disseminate their findings in order to maximise and ‘ripple out’ the impact of their findings.

Conclusion

The model of EIS ARGs, we argue, promotes a sense of agency/identity, empowerment, and a ripple effect of impact beyond the individual participant. [Figure 1](#) shows how empowerment overlaps into the ripple effect and agency/identity and how identity and agency are linked to empowerment and the ripple effect. At the centre is the development of the researcher and his/her development through the EIS ARG programme, which contributes to the empowerment, agency/identity of the individual and has an impact through the ripple effect on first the researcher and then, others. We propose that this model of trade union sponsored and supported PAR is strong and has international significance. The sample studied for this paper is small but correlates with the experience for two of us of working more widely within the EIS ARG programme, with 60+ participants and within our wider experience of PAR in a Higher Education context.

Model of EIS ARG Programme

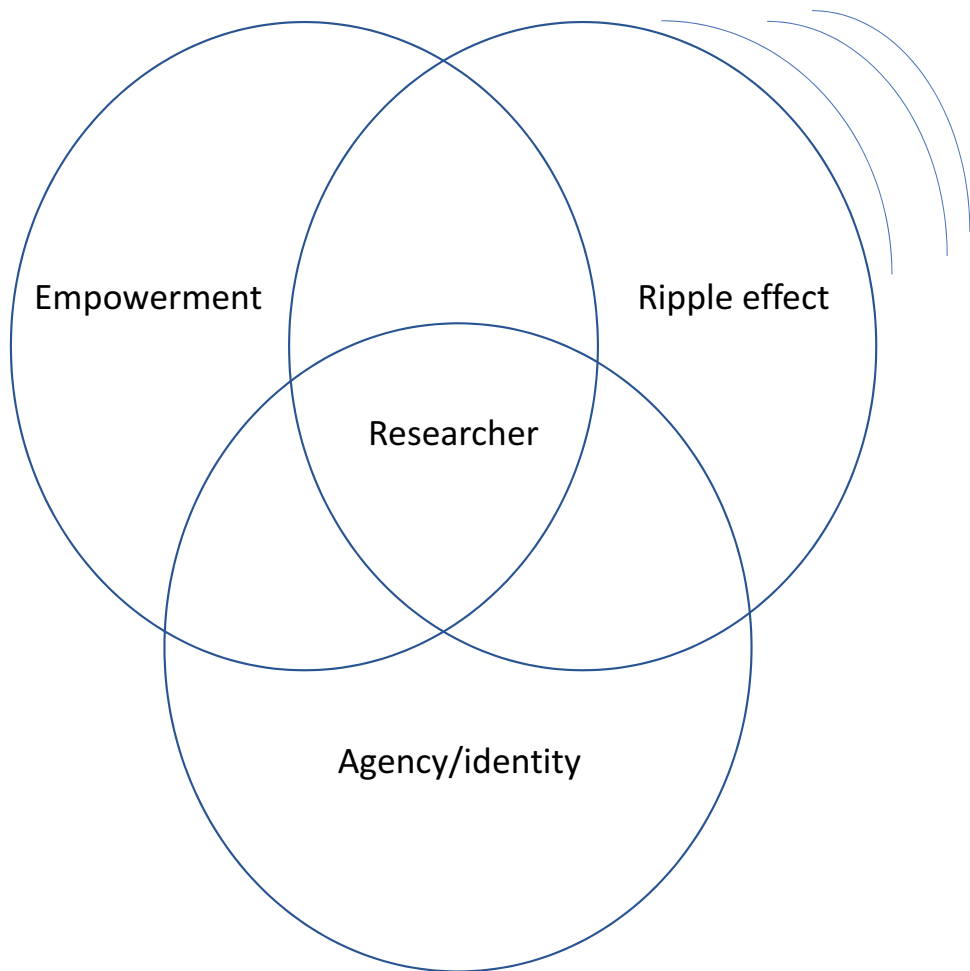


Figure 1. Model of EIS ARG programme.

Disclosure statement

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