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Why is research important? Reflections for professionals and parents

Lila Kosyvaki

I decided to write this article in order to present in brief my line of argument on why research is important. This is a question I often get from professionals and parents of learners with complex needs. In a nutshell, my answer is that research is a concise and efficient way to improve the life of the people we work or live with and care about. Given that the focus of this edition is on communication, the PMLD readership should be aware that effective interventions in the field such as Intensive Interaction (Nind and Hewett, 2012) and Responsive Environment (Ware, 2003) are based on extensive research.

Research has always played a significant role in how I approach teaching; now as a university lecturer and in the past as a schoolteacher. I feel more confident to either teach communication skills to learners with PMLD or innovative interventions for learners with PMLD to university students if I am aware of the current research on the topic. Why not to benefit from work that other people have done before and learn from their successes and mistakes? Am I a minority? Maybe, but I am not definitely the only one thinking and acting this way. I am extremely passionate about this topic as I often see people underestimate the academic background of teachers and the science behind education, let alone special education. I will use the term teachers in this article to refer to all professionals working with learners with PMLD as my arguments are more relevant to school-based staff but they also have applicability to other relevant professions. Many of the points I will raise might also be pertinent to parents and carers. For this article, I will focus on the importance of intervention research, as I believe the benefits of this type of research are very explicit.

The main benefit of research for teachers is that they can use it to improve their practice. Teachers have very limited time to try out interventions which have no evidence that they can be effective. Usually these interventions come with expensive training packages and in some cases with the added cost of equipment. Schools buy them and by trialing them they soon find out that they cannot be used in their setting due to staffing and time limitations or inappropriateness for their learners. Is this good use of a school's budget? To take this a step further, is it ethical to waste money as well as staff and learners' time experimenting with something we have no data showing that it can be beneficial for learners with PMLD? Sometimes when data are finally collected they show that the learners did not develop any new skill while they could have spent this precious time on interventions which have some research evidence behind them. For the above reasons, teachers should read research and also be critical consumers of it. For example, a study conducted by an independent body (e.g. university, charity) carries far more weight than studies which are conducted by people who are going to benefit financially from the use of an intervention. Scholars have listed quality indicators in order to conduct good quality studies or judge the quality of existing ones (e.g. the characteristics of participants should be provided in detail, more than one researchers should

collect a certain amount of data and check whether they agree on what they see, reliable outcome measures should be used before and after the introduction of an intervention etc).

Another equally important benefit of research is that it can be used to show the wider public what works. Teachers might have come up with some amazing interventions which sadly stay within the limits of their school or even class because they do not feel confident enough to collect data on their effectiveness and disseminate the findings broadly. The same question comes to mind again. Is it ethical to keep knowledge for us when by sharing it the lives of other people can improve? This is why teachers need to be trained in basic research skills and where the universities should step in. I have often witnessed teachers struggling to collect data using a number of sources while a single but well developed data collection tool can do the job. In research, it is about quality not quantity and sometimes novice researchers should do less but do it properly. For example, asking the right interview questions to support staff is likely to provide more useful data than combining long unstructured observations and a reflective diary completed by a single person. An argument which should be addressed here is that research with people with complex needs cannot develop further as they are a very heterogeneous population. So are the people who have autism ranging from individuals who gain PhDs to learners with autism and PMLD but they are the most widely researched group within special needs in the last decades.

I can go on for many pages listing arguments in favour of research and elaborating on them. This is what I do for a living; I train professionals (i.e. teachers, teaching assistants, therapists, key workers) and parents/carers in Severe, Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (SPMLD) at the University of Birmingham, sadly currently the only university programme of this kind in the UK. One of the learning outcomes of the programme is to facilitate students in developing rigorous evidence-based practice. The SPMLD programme consists of a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students who have to conduct small research projects for their assignments. These are based on theory, professional practice and also and very importantly research. Many of the students' assignments can be found as articles in the PMLD link and elsewhere building on the limited existing research in the field of PMLD. These students can confirm that I live and breathe research; in other words, I am biased. This is what in research we call positionality, a researcher's stance in relation to the wider context, and should be disclosed in good quality studies. In sum, research can help teachers do their job better and disseminate their good practice widely. It might seem hard in the beginning but there are some ground rules to follow in order to expand the certainly limited research in the field of PMLD.

References

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