

Response to ‘Research-practice partnerships in education: Why we need a methodological shift in how we do research’ by Dr McGeown

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Drawing on research examples from the field of literacy, McGeown (2023) persuasively puts forward a case for the benefits of research-practice partnerships in education. In this response, I highlight points of agreement with McGeown through presenting an overview of an established research-practice partnership in the field of autism education: the Pan London Autism Schools Network – Research group (PLASN-R). PLASN-R is a particularly pertinent example here, since it highlights nuanced challenges and complexities to collaborative ways of working: through the extension of research-practice partnerships at a more structural level (i.e., beyond the individual research projects that McGeown presents), but also through working with schools that are traditionally excluded from research opportunities (due to the perceived complexity of need of their pupils). I also echo McGeown’s important call for greater involvement of children and young people in collaborative research, outlining why this is particularly crucial within special school settings (i.e., given the long tradition of disabled young people not having their voices heard within education, e.g., Parsons et al., 2022).

I will begin this response by providing an overview of our research-practice partnership. PLASN-R is a collective of staff from autism special schools and academic institutions who work collaboratively to “discuss the challenges and opportunities experienced by all in relation to school-based research in autism and to collaboratively generate ideas for the design, implementation and dissemination of research projects” (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 274). The PLASN-R group meet three times a year, where we reiterate the purpose of the network before having two featured talks: one from a school

member (who typically presents on a topic that is a priority within their school) and one from an academic member (who typically presents on a topic linked to their latest, most cutting-edge research). These presentations facilitate group discussion around the topics presented, both with respect to the evidence-base and the implications for practice. We then invite updates from each individual member of the group (enabling members to share areas of current interest), before offering a space for informal discussion and networking around individual research ideas. As one head teacher previously involved in the network, Jude Ragan, commented “In all my years of teaching and leadership this is the first time I have seen this model. It is wonderful” (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 271).

A central theme throughout McGeown’s (2023) commentary is the importance of ensuring genuine power sharing within any research-practice partnership. Power sharing is indeed central to any form of collaborative or participatory ways of working (Nelson & Wright, 1995), and this is something we have reflected on deeply since the development of the PLASN-R group in 2009. We were particularly cognisant of a common critique of research-practice partnerships, which McGeown emphasises: that there is the potential for imbalances in power and hierarchies to be maintained, or even amplified, through such models. As such, a recent development within the PLASN-R group has been to instigate a model of co-leadership. Specifically, the network is now jointly chaired between one representative from a school and one representative from an academic organisation. Together, the co-chairs set the agendas, decide the structure and organisation of the meetings, and facilitate partnerships/collaborations in relation to specific research projects. This co-leadership model also ensures that the meetings genuinely serve the needs of all members, and that attendance and involvement (both which can be a significant commitment for those involved) is truly worthwhile.

When reflecting on the structure and organisation of our PLASN-R group, it is also important to acknowledge that there is often not a clear divide between ‘academic researchers’ and ‘school-based practitioners’. For example, one of our founder members, Rachel Walker, recently presented her doctoral research to the PLASN-R group, on parents’ views and experiences of home reading with their autistic children with moderate-to-severe intellectual disabilities (see Walker et al., 2022); a project that was undertaken while she was assistant headteacher at one of the schools within our network. Likewise, some of our PLASN-R members are autistic themselves, or have school-age autistic children, bringing additional forms of lived expertise to the PLASN-R collective. As in some of the literature cited by McGeown (2023), there is often a tendency for the focus of research-practice partnerships to centre on just two forms of expertise: researchers and school staff. Yet diversity, along with the acknowledgement of intersectionality and other forms of lived expertise, has been a real strength within our research-practice partnership.

Relatedly, a strategic priority for the PLASN-R group is the involvement of school staff and academics with differing levels of collaborative research experience, and at different levels of seniority (from teaching assistant to Executive Headteacher; from doctoral student to full Professor). McGeown (2023) highlights how engaging in research-practice partnerships can be challenging since this is an area that few of those involved have been trained in. As such, we are particularly pleased to have a burgeoning group of early career researchers (ECRs) as members of the PLASN-R group. Drawing on our recent research on the perceived barriers to participatory/collaborative research practices (Pickard et al., 2022) we have specifically sought to tailor our activities towards those at the earlier stages of their research careers. For example, our research showed that ECRs are often confused about what ‘counts’ as collaborative research (i.e., what level of involvement of community partners is optimal/acceptable?). The structure of PLASN-R meetings enables ECRs to see, first-hand, a

diverse range of examples of collaborative research; to learn from the teams involved, and to strive to emulate such approaches within their own work, recognising that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ when it comes to collaborative research (Pickard et al., 2022).

Importantly, the PLASN-R format also enables ECRs to deeply reflect on what matters to schools and how future research efforts might benefit the schools. It has been particularly encouraging to see many ECRs within our network working very closely with schools, which has included ECRs volunteering at the schools, to get a strong sense of how the school operates on a day-to-day basis and to build trusting relationships. Indeed, McGeown (2023) touches on the importance of this process of ‘socialisation’ into such an approach, and our experience is that the earlier we can do this, the better. Encouragingly, PLASN-R has also inspired several of our school members to pursue further academic study; a form of ‘cross-socialisation’. Such two-way capacity building initiatives are essential if we are to enact meaningful change in the way we do research in education, as McGeown calls for.

As McGeown (2023) also notes, a major consideration in relation to collaborative research is the issue of time, funding, and resourcing. Buy in from schools is viewed as particularly essential to facilitate research-practice partnerships. PLASN-R is somewhat unique in that it was instigated not by academic researchers, but by the schools themselves. As detailed in Parsons et al. (2013), PLASN-R was set up by a group of head teachers at autism specific schools in and around London, who wanted to advance their practice through research. This goal was laudable, especially considering that these schools had been traditionally under-served by research. Specifically, it has been well documented that certain sub-groups of autistic people are systemically excluded from mainstream autism research (Russell et al., 2019) and this situation is likely exacerbated for young people in PLASN-R schools, who have a range of communicative, social, sensory, cognitive, emotional and/or

physical needs in addition to their autism diagnosis (see Richards & Crane, 2020).

Anecdotally, PLASN-R schools have reported that academic researchers were approaching their schools about enlisting them to participate in research. However, the researchers only wanted to work with the schools' 'most able' young people, typically so that the performance of the young people could be carefully matched against that of non-autistic peers on standardised tasks. School staff also raised concerns around 'over-testing' of this niche group, and the lack of generalisability of research findings to their whole school community. Staff further lamented the lack of post-research engagement from researchers (e.g., not returning to the school to present research findings and its implications for practice), which meant that – as one head teacher noted – “the effect of the research on school life has therefore been extremely limited” (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 271). It has been extremely encouraging to see PLASN-R schools 'reclaim' research through our network, ensuring that research truly works for their benefit.

As McGeown (2023) notes, however, there is a cost to research engagement. For example, schools invest heavily through releasing staff members for PLASN-R meetings and subsequent research activities. Ironically, the challenge of time, funding, and resourcing has become even more exacerbated within the PLASN-R network because of schools becoming increasingly research engaged! For example, many of the schools in the network have been inspired to set up their own research boards, whereby a small team of school staff decide their research priorities, evaluate requests for research participation, and provide feedback on academic research projects they are involved in. Our schools have particularly benefitted from having an academic researcher as part of this board, often with autistic representation and/or parental representation as well. Operating a successful and productive board therefore requires time and investment from many people within and outside each school. Likewise, schools have begun to conduct and/or commission their own research studies but undertaking

a high-quality piece of research – of benefit to the school community and credible to the academic community – takes significant resourcing. PLASN-R members have had to think very creatively about how to approach their work. For example, one of the schools within our network approached their Local Authority to fund the evaluation of a satellite class initiative, whereby autistic young people in special schools transferred to ‘satellite classes’ in local mainstream school settings. A team of researchers worked with the schools to elicit the views of parents, teachers, and young people on the opportunities and challenges of such a model, making recommendations for the future (see Croydon et al., 2019). Notably, this approach addressed the issue of funding power dynamics highlighted by McGeown, as Local Authority funding (as opposed to funding awarded to the academic researchers) meant that the power was firmly with the school.

PLASN-R schools have also explored other creative ways of engaging with research. For example, some schools have begun to fund or part-fund members of their teams to undertake postgraduate study, as a Continuing Professional Development opportunity. Other schools have had staff members who have opted to self-fund postgraduate study but have been able to benefit from the school facilitating participation for their dissertation research. As one example, a practitioner at one of our partner schools conducted an action research study to address a topic of critical importance to the school – pupil voice. The practitioner was able to access the school to conduct research, which was written up as their dissertation and as a subsequent academic publication (see Richards & Crane, 2020). That said, it is important to emphasise the impact of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis on those working in the field of education in the UK. As McGeown (2023) looks to the next decade in her *Open Dialogue*, it should be acknowledged that Local Authority-funded projects may become even rarer (resigned to schools who have a strong infrastructure for research), and fewer staff

may be able to self-fund postgraduate study. It therefore becomes even more important to explore other avenues for capacity building, as McGeown outlines.

There are also particular challenges to address in relation to collaborative research within the context of special school settings, especially around how we engage the voice of the students in the research we do. Such involvement is crucial given the long tradition of disabled young people not having their voices heard within education (e.g., Parsons et al., 2022). Meaningfully involving young people in research is certainly an area of development for our network, and it is notable that McGeown (2023) highlights how – even without the complexity of need experienced by pupils in special schools – children and young people’s voices are often absent from research-practice partnerships. I was inspired by McGeown’s excellent examples of facilitating the involvement of young people in research and was encouraged to reflect on good practice examples from special school settings. For example, Pellicano et al. (2014) conducted a study on the experiences of children and young people in residential special schools, which was shaped by the involvement of a Young Researchers’ Group, who advised on aspects of the methodology and helped make sense of the results. Importantly, the process through which the young researchers were involved was documented in the write-up of the report, providing a framework for other researchers to aspire to (as emphasised by McGeown). Greater involvement of children and young people is certainly an area for development across the PLASN-R network, and it is likely an area whereby the involvement of school-based practitioners – with their extensive knowledge of the young people and their communication preferences – will be particularly important (see also Richards & Crane, 2020).

In summary, I wholeheartedly agree with McGeown (2023) that collaborative research has the potential to narrow the research to practice gap in education. Great strides have certainly been made in this regard, in a range of research fields. As a next step, it is

important to build further capacity for collaborative research (e.g., through infrastructure such as the PLASN-R network), but also to ensure that, irrespective of research area, children and young people's involvement is consistently at the centre of such efforts.

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