Student Teacher Educational Research (STER)

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Student Teacher Educational Research (STER) is an Irish Higher Education partnership project that supports education students to share their dissertation research with the wider education community. STER provides students with a unique opportunity to publish their research with the support and guidance of the STER team, a collaboration between students and staff.

Introduction and Context

The aims of the project are to provide student teachers with an opportunity to share their research findings with peers, teachers and teacher educators; to create a positive, research-rich environment; to encourage mature appreciation for educational research and its role in the continuum of teacher education.

We have achieved these aims by encouraging students and graduates to engage in dialogue and critical reflection about education research. Underpinned by a student-staff partnership ethos, the project is run by a team of student and staff volunteers. Participation is open to all final year education students and recent graduates. Students and graduates can share research in any the following ways:

- Peer-reviewed e-Journal Article
- Podcast Interview
- Conference Presentation

For many years, teachers have perceived educational research as far removed from the classroom (Viadero, 1994; Tseng et al., 2017). Reviewing teacher education in Ireland in 2019, Sahlberg et al. were "not convinced that all students really understood the value that a research approach would have in their future positions as teachers" (p.28). A deeper understanding of the relationship between research & practice, & an appreciation for research in education needs to be fostered amongst student teachers. The project developed as a result of conversations with students about their needs within their initial teacher education programme. Students were struggling to see the relevance of engaging with/in research for their professional practice in the classroom. The design and development of STER grew from suggestions, conversations and feedback from students.

Since 2017, the project has hosted four annual conferences, published six volumes of the e-journal, launched a podcast series and supported more than one hundred students from Irish HEIs to share their research.

Project Outline

The Student Teacher Educational Research (STER) project was established in response to two persistent issues in initial teacher education, firstly the lack of opportunity for students to share practice in relation to research, and secondly, the risk of early disengagement due to a sometimes tenuous link between research and practice. It was important to us that the project would engage students more deeply in teaching and learning through

(Harland et al, 2017; Reid and Duke, 2015) and by creating a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) underpinned by partnership (HEA, 2016).

We were inspired by the principles of student engagement outlined in the report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education (2016). In particular, we wanted to advocate for a 'students as co-creators' or 'student as partner' approach to STER and developed supports that would ensure students could participate fully e.g. 'clear procedures for interaction, in which participants receive[d] specific training' (Topping, 2005 p.635-637) were developed. The coordinator recruited a team of staff and student volunteers who would work in collaboration with them to grow, develop, inform and manage the project.

All decisions are taken in collaboration with the team. The importance of student voice and engagement in decision making has been recognised by participants. Students have said: "*there was a sense of community [with STER]. I think that it's important to instil in teachers a want to collaborate on research with peers for their future careers*" (Year 2 student, 2019); "*it was very beneficial to see students… and ask them questions. More of this. Students are happy to receive advice from other students who are further along in the process*" (year 1 student, 2019); "*I enjoyed working with my fellow students in the STER project, collaborating with them, learning from them, their experience of research*" (year 2 student, 2019).

Research that has been published on the work of the project includes:

- *Brennan, A. 2019.* Student Teacher Educational Research (STER): An Innovation in Irish Teacher Education, *Education Research and Perspectives,* 46(1), 44-74
- Brennan, A. (2021). Reflections on establishing a student-staff partnership in Irish university-based teacher education. In Shagrir, L. and Bar-Tal, S. *Exploring Professional Development Opportunities for Teacher Educators: Promoting Faculty-Student Partnerships.* Routledge.
- Brennan, A. (2021). The important risk-taking of advocating for student partnership practice. *International Journal for Students As Partners*, *5*(1), 8–11.

Project Action	Brief Description
Action A	The running of the STER project (conference, podcast and e-journal) is done by a team of student and staff volunteers who meet bi-weekly and collaborate on all decisions.
Action B	Staff and students were trained and supported to peer-review and provide constructive feedback to graduates who submitted research to the e-journal. Consequently, both peer-reviewer and peer-reviewed learned new skills and received important feedback.
Action C	Sessions at the conference, including a panel discussion were chaired by students. The result was that the conference was tailored to the needs of students involved.
Action D	Marketing of the project (including design) was done by a student-staff team who took responsibility for creating content, posting to social media and upholding the brand of the project.
Action E	We are currently working on co-presenting and co-writing research articles (with students) to disseminate the results of evaluation research.

Reflections

Embedding a culture of research appreciation is more than simply dissemination. The real success of STER has been in its championing of a student-staff partnership approach and developing students' ability to evaluate and improve their own work and the work of others (Oliver 2011). Since its inception, the project has positioned participants as co-creators, responsible for their own learning with valuable expertise to contribute (HEA, 2016). Not only has this approach enhanced student learning, it has boosted students' confidence and engagement (Brennan, 2019). For example, 88.9% said that STER was successful / very successful in encouraging student-staff engagement (Q15, 2022). According to our research, staff gained a stronger appreciation for working with students outside of lectures, identifying improved relationships & reduced 'distance' between staff and students (participant 4, 2021). Furthermore, working online or face-to-face, partnership requires investment of time & support - 100% of participants were very satisfied with supports provided by/within the team (Q30, 2022).

The key principles the STER partnership are:

- *All participants (staff and students) are expected to take equal responsibility for tasks.*
- *Dialogue is valued and all participants are invited to freely express their opinions*
- *Training, information sessions and peer support is provided to staff and students so as to scaffold their participation.*
- *No incentives (time off, credits or payment) is provided to staff or students for being involved.*
- *Students and staff self-select their areas of interest and the areas in which they will enhance their skills e.g. podcasting, presenting, editing, marketing*

While the partnership approach has been hugely supportive to the work of STER, it should be acknowledge that partnership also presents various challenges, particularly around managing uncertainty, student power dynamics and navigating professional roles. As much as is practicable, partnership should be presented and viewed as an opportunity for professional development and learning. When addressed, the challenges associated with partnership can expose our weaknesses, help us to identify our strengths and reinforce our values as educators. Finally, to ensure the sustainability of student-staff partnerships in teacher education and higher education, the commitment of staff partners must be recognised and rewarded by policymakers and HEIs. There is work still to be done in this regard.

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