

## Breaking down barriers through research

***Calling for more support for research in FE, Heather James maintains that teachers are professionals; ‘we know what we’re talking about; we can see the problems and the solutions, and we need the time and space to say it.’***

In 2019, I’d been teaching English to GCSE resit students in an inner-city college for three years, having taught the new specification introduced in 2017 for two years. I’d begun with enthusiasm and determination, as we all do. But already I was sinking, and had come to accept that the qualification (now largely deemed unfit for purpose) was damaging students and teachers - all of us felt we were failing despite putting in every effort to make it work. Teachers weren’t being listened to at government policy level nor at organisational policy level, with every decision flying in the face of what we were saying students needed. I’d turned into a deliverer of content that neither I nor the students were anywhere close to being passionate about.

I’d been reading Professor Helen Gunter’s *The Politics of Education - Reform Ideas and Issues* (2018) to try to get a deeper understanding of the situation. I found it a relief to have my experiences of the education system articulated so clearly. She refers to our policy makers’ “glossy claims about ‘empowerment’ in order to ‘make a difference’, while in reality teachers actually labour and work for survival fellowship, and to prevent the worst excesses of reforms from damaging children” (p46). This was exactly what my role in FE entailed - the book spoke volumes to me, and, after contacting her to thank her, she told me about a PhD from 2015 by Victoria Ruth Johnson - *‘Policy, practice and assessment: revealing the relationship between the GCSE English assessment and educational reproduction’* - that once again validated what I was seeing in the FE sector. I can’t tell you how transformational this was for me - I no longer felt disempowered or at a loss, but began to see my role as crucial in gathering evidence of the realities of the student/teacher experience.

It was at this point that I joined the union in the hope that I might meet other like-minded people who, despite the struggles, were still able to maintain some hope for positive change. It turned out to be a huge turning point in my career and transformational in how I approach my teaching.

It was not long after, when I signed up to one of UCU’s research training days that I got talking to a lecturer in higher education about my experiences as a teacher in FE, and by chance was introduced to Professor Rob Smith. This was the link I had needed

to be introduced to the diverse, nationwide community of like-minded free thinkers who were critiquing the education system every day: making the connections from front-line experiences to policy makers and their agendas. This was when I saw there was something bigger to be part of. There was unity and resistance.

Through Professor Rob Smith and Professor Vicky Duckworth, I was introduced to the *Transformative Teaching Scholarship Scheme*, an opportunity to contribute to their research and be supported (without having to take out yet another student loan). Commissioned by UCU, the *Further Education in England: Transforming Lives and Communities* research project was set up by Rob and Vicky to understand and provide evidence of how further education is vital in transforming lives. It was an opportunity to contribute evidence of the work that goes on in the sector - to demonstrate how we seek to offer people from diverse communities hope and agency, and to look at how we can break down the barriers that we face. Crucially, it’s a space that provides my students and me with the opportunity to tell our stories.

The scholarship scheme has enabled me to be supported to do research into the effects of the English and Maths GCSE resit policy. I’m still teaching the same qualification and it’s still an uphill battle, but, because I feel more empowered, my students pick up on that. They become part of the solution by critiquing the qualification themselves. When students started asking how they would measure language competency, and what they wanted to read and why, suddenly we had a vibrant learning environment.

If we can support the unions to fund more of these opportunities, more teachers will see themselves as researchers collecting evidence that can be drawn upon to shape policy. We need to create more connections from the realities of the student experience to policy makers, and we need to show students that together our voices will be heard.

It has been empowering for my colleagues, as well as myself, to have our struggles in FE acknowledged, and to feel supported by those in HE. The unity between FE and HE is vital and the role of the unions in this is invaluable.

#TransformativeFE #FEResearchMeet