Gavin Murphy and Carrie Conaway - Final

CARRIE CONAWAY: Hi, I'm Carrie Conaway. I'm a senior lecturer here at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and I'm pleased to be here with my colleague, Gavin Murphy, who is an assistant professor in education at Trinity College in Dublin. Thanks so much for being with us, Gavin.

GAVIN MURPHY: Thanks, Carrie. Delighted to be here.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Can you just start by telling us a little bit more about your current role in the context that you work in, to kind of set the stage?

GAVIN MURPHY: Sure, absolutely. So as you mentioned, I'm an assistant professor in education at Trinity College Dublin. And I work in their School of Education. And my kind of responsibilities, if you like, transcend from initial teacher education, right the way up to principal preparation, which, in our context, we really look at in terms of, I guess, those students who come. It's not a formal kind of license people get to become principals. Rather, they come to study leadership and policy. That's the strand I run.

And from that, they go on to different pathways. So that's my main, I suppose, set of responsibilities. And my research interests then largely look at teacher learning in the broadest of ways, but looking at educational reform, educational policy, and how teacher learning is structured from, as I say, initial teacher education, right the way up to principal preparation, albeit that as I mentioned, we don't really call it that per se in the Irish context.

CARRIE CONAWAY: So Gavin, you've said that strong principal preparation begins with strong teacher preparation. Can you tell me a little bit more about that idea?

GAVIN MURPHY: Sure. So I think if we take a pathways approach here, we imagine we have a teacher-- student-teacher in their initial teacher education, their teacher preparation-- they're going on a journey to become a principal. So there's one reason why these things are interconnected. I also think principals have a duty to support the learning of teachers from the very earliest point in their career, often when they come to schools, when they're student-teachers on their placement, all the way through their induction period, and in service learning, when they're becoming an assistant principal.

So I think there's a really strong connection between these two focal points, that actually remains a little understudied. We still have a lot of research on principal prep and initial teacher education, and in some which way we don't join those dots together. And that's a question that really drives my own research interests.

CARRIE CONAWAY: And why do you think that is the case? Why have they been so separate up until now?

GAVIN MURPHY: I suppose, from a research point of view, how we develop our expertise and position ourselves as researchers kind of hinges on a very specific and sometimes obscure expertise that we need to become this niche researcher in. And I think that sometimes means that although we're addressing very similar questions as researchers, we don't have these conversations. For example, there's a very strong community, and even journals set up, around initial teacher education, teacher preparation.

And then, there are journals in leadership. Then, we have key aspects around the profession, like research-informed practice or professional development, that are housed in their own kind of area of this

ecosystem I'm describing. And there are benefits to that, of course, because we develop really strong strands of expertise and knowledge in these spaces.

But then, sometimes we have to step back and ask, how do we join them all together? And I think that's maybe what I'm about, in terms of my research agenda.

CARRIE CONAWAY: And what about how this plays out in schools? Why are these-- why is the preparation of teachers and principals treated so differently there?

GAVIN MURPHY: In schools, well, I guess, in some which way, what happens in schools is very much driven by policy context, priorities. So if we think about Ireland, for example, there's a very strong policy context around-- it's called [INAUDIBLE], which means you're-- it means "ladder" in Irish Gaelic, and that's kind of governing what it is students learn in the university when they're becoming a teacher, and then also in their school placement.

So in a way, it becomes disconnected from our leadership policy that happens later on in the career. And right now, I guess we're at a point where certainly, we're beginning to join those dots up. But right now, there's still a little chasm maybe as to what happens when you're at this earlier stage of your career and later stage of your career, and joining those dots together.

There's a health warning, though. I think some jurisdictions have standardized this as though there's a very defined journey across these career stages. And I'm not sure I'm entirely convinced that by standardizing all across the way, that that really reflects the diversity of journeys that people go on when they're becoming a teacher.

Because it almost assumes that you become a teacher at one point, often perhaps maybe when you finish your undergraduate degree, and you go on a journey over time to accrue your expertise. But we know that, and particularly at the moment, with teacher shortages, there are a diversity of people who turn to teaching later in their lives, maybe after a professional career.

But also, there are, in certain contexts around the world, a diversity of pathways in teacher preparation for people to become a teacher anyway. So I think that to go back to your question about joining these two bodies of knowledge together, that makes it harder because of the diversity of pathways, in certain contexts around the world, of becoming a teacher and becoming a principal, and trying to join them together. It makes for a very kind of spaghetti junction-type effort of joining the dots together.

It's easier in a context like Ireland, where there's university-based teacher preparation that really feeds in. And we draw on frameworks that allow that adaptivity, I think, is important in supporting people to both, yes, address what it is we agree on is really important by way of the policy, that determines what quality leadership and quality teaching looks like, but that also recognizes the contextual differences that these individuals encounter when they go to schools in rural communities.

CARRIE CONAWAY: So we don't want something where there's a huge chasm between teaching and being a principal. We don't want it overly structured. So what's in between those things? What would, ideally, the system look like to you?

GAVIN MURPHY: Well, I think there are certain aspects of systems that have intelligent accountability around how we govern these processes. I think, as I mentioned from a research point of view, then it demands that initial teacher education scholars, those interested in professional development and those in principal preparation, have conversations where they convene their various, let's say, bodies of knowledge that they've generated.

I think, from a policy point of view, it's about acknowledging that there is not just a singular route to developing these bodies of knowledge and that standards-driven approaches can actually sometimes be counterintuitive to cultivating adaptive expertise, which you need as a leader. And then, I think, in a practice point of view, it's about, how do we support knowledge development in and through practice, and not having it something that's completely divorced from it, that happens in, maybe, university classrooms or in hotels where CPD happens or whatever.

It's about, how do we build it into the work we're doing. And I think one way-- and this is what we have in common-- is that by engaging in research and evidence-informed practices in particular routines, in your organization, in your school, I think that's a really good productive way to not only learn, but to develop knowledge that responds to your community's needs.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Yeah, and you're right. This is the thing that you and I are so interested in. So let's talk a little bit more about that. I am really curious about how research-based practice fits into the other work teachers do, and the other work leaders do. So can you tell me more about how you envision that connecting?

GAVIN MURPHY: Sure. So I think one of the ways where it really feeds into the expectations that are on teachers and school leaders now-- and I say school leaders deliberately here to divert our attention from just the principal alone. Because in a model of distributed leadership, like the Republic of Ireland, where we have a framework of quality leadership, we have our process of school self-evaluation or school-based inquiry to actually question, through our inquiry, where are we at with our school improvement journeys and the model of distributed leadership, well, we need to use the language of school leadership, because it implies that there are middle and senior leaders, as well as, perhaps, informal teacher leaders, who are actually stepping up to lead this inquiry, but also, I would argue, frame their learning.

So it's very central to school improvement work, which is, in our system, for sure, in the Republic of Ireland, seem to be something that's a coprofessional exercise between those internal to the school communities-- that's to say, your leadership team, but also your teachers, informally, who maybe aren't appointed to assistant principalship roles yet-- as well as the inspectorate from the department from the outside, who come to have conversations around the evidence that's generated in broad and diverse ways in the school community-- street-level data, we might call it-- as well as things like more traditional ideas, maybe, that we draw on in this space, like assessment results.

So I think that's definitely one thing-- is the question of quality. How do we know that what we're doing is of quality, and what, maybe, do we need to change in order to achieve those markers of quality that we're setting out to achieve?

CARRIE CONAWAY: And are you envisioning-- or what is the balance, maybe, between using existing research evidence to inform practice in schools, versus building your own evidence about your own work?

GAVIN MURPHY: Yeah. When I think about this, I often think about the journey we go on as educators, sometimes, in engaging with research. So first of all, we engage with it. Then we might use it in our practice. And then, we might generate it ourselves.

And I think all too often, we can, in particular kind of policy reformulations, where we say, hey, we've got an idea, let's get all teachers to kind of become research generators-- I think that kind of skips some important early steps to kind of not only restructure their work, but also reculture their ideas towards what it means to use research productively. In some contexts, we know and have learned that data-driven approaches can be counterproductive.

We also know that there are issues around how access to research prohibits teachers to engage with us even when we want them to. In Ireland, we have good, I suppose, leadership from our teaching council, who've actually gone so far as to make databases available to teachers. But still then, we have the question of researchers writing for an audience that might be other researchers, rather than an audience of practitioners. So we have to get around all of these obstacles, I think, to achieve that.

So with all of those obstacles in mind, I think we have to start thinking not only at a systems level, within and beyond the education system, about the challenges encountered, and then also at the school level, what data do we have access to here? What data might be useful for the problems of practice that we are agreeing on when we're trying to identify our focus for our school improvement efforts that, as I've mentioned earlier, both sustain our professional learning in response to these problems, but also help us address questions of quality in kind of democratic ways that respect teacher professionalism?

And so the senior leadership there, or middle leaders with distinct responsibilities, have to start weighing up, you know, where do we go for maybe evidence to help us in these efforts to join the dots between data and research and evidence to respond, I suppose, more compellingly to the challenges that they face. So it's about tapping into all kinds of funds of knowledge, formal and informal, internal and external, and getting around the challenges, like I mentioned, like access. And also what is useful knowledge, maybe? Where do you go?

And I think, actually, sometimes a lot of that is about relationships as well-- building relationships with people like me in universities who maybe seem so divorced from everyday school life in some ways, but are just so eager to actually make those connections with schools to tackle the really contemporary issues that schools are facing, which are often questions connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their practice.

CARRIE CONAWAY: And I definitely want to talk about that. But I have one more question on research use first, because I'm-- to me, in my experience-- and I'm curious what your reaction is to this-- research use is fundamentally a social activity. And I think that's the thing that's often the most missing from the policy environment and the practice environment-- is not assuming a model that's just like, here's the research, go do that thing, or teacher, become a researcher yourself, but planning for the social part of the work. How does that resonate with you?

GAVIN MURPHY: Yeah, well, I mean, that raises the question straight away. When I hear social, I think collaboration. So we'll get to that. But you're right. I mean, a lot of previous activity that we look at in the research literature, for sure, has thought of research engagement, research use, and research generation as a very technical activity.

We know that first of all, that doesn't kind of whet the appetite of professionals. But it's not reflective of the quality mark that we might attribute to actually good engagement with research evidence and data to actually drive school improvement. So as I said then, that raises the question of collaboration.

We know that schools-- we know from studies like Dan Lortie, Schoolteacher, since way back when, that teaching is an activity that can be an incredibly individualistic thing. But we need to now imagine how schools collaborate not only within the organization, but beyond the organization, to actually think about research use in, I suppose, the most contemporary of ways, which raises questions like-- I know you're really interested in research brokering, for example, and how when we're studying education, we need to move towards, I suppose, models like research practice partnerships.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Mm-hmm. Absolutely. All right, I want to talk about equity. Because I know this is central to your work, and it's central, really, in education systems in general. That's a lot of what we're here for. That's what we're trying to accomplish. How can prioritizing equity help strengthen teacher and principal pipelines?

GAVIN MURPHY: Well, I think, as I mentioned a while ago, it's very much a signature piece of what teachers and school leaders are encountering in real-life classrooms and schools. I think also, therefore, it is probably going to feature in the dynamics and the dilemmas that they are facing every day in their practice, and so constitute the problems of practice that often, we talk about evidence use and research-informed practice as a way to address those problems of practice.

So I think it's part and parcel of it, even if it's not always explicit, in terms of the problems and practice that-- problems of practice that are encountered by teachers and that they explore by researching their practice. And I think also, I use very deliberately the word, dilemma. Problems typically have solutions. And dilemmas have different ways of approaching them, where there isn't always a certain answer.

And that very much connects to this notion of research and evidence-informed practice as a cycle of inquiry that's never quite complete but that we go back to, to keep, I suppose, pursuing how to improve our practice, but also try and arrive at some sense of a better outcome for now that maybe is a dynamic beast that keeps shifting. So I think, for that reason, it's a way to sustain how you develop your professional knowledge, how you get around those problems of practice you encounter, and then fundamentally, get to the heart of the challenges that teachers face over their career, in terms of the learning that they need.

CARRIE CONAWAY: So how do we do this concretely? Or how does it look different from what we're currently doing?

GAVIN MURPHY: I think in the past, you know, equity didn't even really come into the picture when we look at teacher education programs. Probably, it's featured there for longer than it has in principal preparation programs. But certainly up until 2000, principal preparation wouldn't globally-- the literature suggests-- have tackled questions of equity. It was all about excellence.

And I think it's slowly changing since then. There are certainly some exemplary programs that are employing things like the PSEL standards and are part of the UCA's efforts in terms of what a quality program looks like. One of the things, for example, is not tagging on equity, social justice perspectives as a module that's discrete from everything else, but that really, equity is front and center, whether we're talking about developing ourselves and other people, whether we're talking about leading, teaching, and learning, or if we're looking at leading improvement, innovation, and change-- that equity is a strand that actually is throughout all of those questions.

So you know, I think that's certainly one way to frame this change over time. So beyond the programmatic changes we're seeing globally, I suppose, another thing is that we need to tap into our theories of change when we're looking at problems of practice and when we're trying to think about not only the consequences or the actions, but what are the values and beliefs that are behind this.

Traditionally, we've kind of blamed students for their failures, or we think, oh, it's a problem with management or leadership. And we don't actually think about the systems we're working in. And I know that this is something that we share common ground on as well-- is that by examining particularly research and evidence-informed practice, they help us build up a kind of sense of system knowledge. And I think that's a really key aspect of it as well.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Yeah, that's definitely one of the things that makes me crazy-- is people who are attempting to use data and do the exact kind of thinking you're doing, but the way they're using data isn't showing the system. So they're looking at breakdowns by race or gender or income or something like that and not asking questions around, how did the system produce the result that we're seeing.

GAVIN MURPHY: Exactly. It's realizing, I guess, that part of our interpretation, when we look at our data trends, or when we look at the research and evidence we generate in a school context, the school is nested within a system. And being aware of that is so key to help you with the interpretation piece that goes with this kind of work. But also, that, to me, is about developing your own leadership capacity and developing leadership capacity in other people.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Yeah. Yeah, and this actually gets at one of the things I wanted to touch on a little bit, which is, in order to accomplish the vision that you've described here, you really need to be building a learning organization. And so I'm curious, what do you think are the essential elements of a learning organization, and how can we build those?

GAVIN MURPHY: So one of the things I think is, again, like I mentioned earlier, collaboration-- cultivating collaboration from within, between the most senior and the most junior colleagues in the building. It's also about acknowledging the different funds of knowledge and expertise that people have in the building. And I would say the channeling diversity perspective there is also really, really key. So that's to keep on the theme that we're discussing today.

I also think prioritizing and championing learning, which is something that we can forget about in the thrust of everyday life in schools-- it's so tiring sometimes, different peaks and troughs in the school calendar. We have to remember that prioritizing learning and seeking to drive inquiry into our practice and having those professional conversations and those moments of awe and wonder are really key, I think, to actually sustaining a learning organization as well. I also think that leaders in those organizations build coalitions with outside organizations. They may be formal universities. They might be community-based teacher-educators who work in various charities or organizations that are addressing very pressing problems of practice as well.

CARRIE CONAWAY: I could imagine a teacher who's maybe seen a few reform initiatives in his or her day, feeling like, oh, this is the flavor of the week. I don't-- I'm not engaged in this. How do we help turn around teachers who might be coming into this with a feeling of, I'm not into this, I don't want to be a leader, I don't want to-- I just want to teach my class?

GAVIN MURPHY: I think first of all, it's first about working with the willing and being patient. I think then, when you build that capacity in the organization, in time, those people who resisted initially may be the ones who change around. I think that's taking, maybe, a kind of a social network analysis view. Yes, work with the willing, but also work strategically.

Maybe there are more and less reluctant people that you can tap into to start making that kind of organizational change you're aspiring towards. I think that's one thing you can do. I think it's also about that point of differentiation I mentioned earlier, and being aware that when we are engaging in inquiry, having this notion of constructive developmental theory in adults, much as like young people, we maybe need a differentiated approach. You know?

Don't treat all of the teachers in your school in the same way, when it comes to their learning orientation towards inquiring into their practice or developing their leadership capacity. And then, I think it's just about

being patient. Sustainable change takes time. And you've got to kind of ride through the initial resistance in change as well.

Because many people will say that they're unhappy with the way things are, but they're also unhappy with the direction of change that's going there. So maybe what that also suggests is you need open channels of communication where you arrive at some consensus in that. Very first thing we do when we're inquiring into our practice is identifying the focus, so I think that's something that's really important as well.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Yeah, that makes a ton of sense. You touched on it a little bit, but I'd love to talk a little more about, when is it more helpful to have an external partner, and where is it where internal capacity is really what you need to be bringing?

GAVIN MURPHY: Well, there are always kinds of-- there are always a load of issues to think about when you have an external partner coming in. I think, first of all, there are the questions around what is a quality professional development kind of experience when somebody is coming in from the outside, first of all, is that it's research-informed and trustworthy. And the second is that perhaps, it actually cultivates collaboration on the inside of your organization, and it's going to be sustained over time.

So there are just certain mechanisms we look for to ensure that it's actually a good fit. I think sometimes as well, it's about those power relationships. You don't necessarily want somebody coming in, a smash-and-grab telling people what to do and departing.

And other times where it's appropriate for an outside organization to come in is if the topic is perhaps quite niche, and so you need that knowledge to actually support teachers with the very busy workload that they already have and wide set of responsibilities. We can't expect them to come up with the answers to everything themselves. So there has to be sometimes a deliberative judgment arrived at, where it's productive to bring in this outside perspective to actually prompt the teachers to lead and continue the work themselves in more generative ways than otherwise.

CARRIE CONAWAY: Yeah, that's always-- I know, in my own previous work in state government, deciding, where is it that the external partner can actually get us farther faster, where is it that we need to build. So thank you for having some guidance on that.

So Gavin, what I love about your thinking is that you have this really wonderful vision for a very interconnected, authentic learning inquiry approach that's taken from teachers through principals, bringing in equity, bringing in research design. And I love this vision. Where do we start? What do we do first?

GAVIN MURPHY: It's a busy vision. I'll give it that. And there are a constellation of, if you like, these dots that we're trying to bring together. That's what makes it challenging. It's what also makes it exciting, at least to me.

Where do we start? Well, I think we, first of all, have to start by making this a priority in our work. And the best way to, I think, sustain teacher learning at all stages of career points, whether it's the student-teacher on their placement in a school, the teacher who's just newly qualified and is looking for that support during their induction phase-- I'm an interior teacher. I may or may not aspire towards leadership, or I'm a principal, or even a system leader-- is to acknowledge that we're all on the same team, and that we all can support each other, and that actually, I would argue, by developing each other, we're developing ourselves in that process.

Teachers will often say the best way to learn something is to try and teach it to somebody else, to their students, right? So we need to think about our professional work in that way, and including our

aspirations towards what quality education looks like. It's a sustainable development goal, goal number four. It's everybody's business globally.

But I think we all need to start seeing it as each other's business and as a global, national, and local priority. Then and only then can we actually make strides forward, and not having so-called maybe mavericks like me preaching that it's really important and trying to bring all these sometimes competing perspectives together. And that brings me right back to maybe where we started talking today-- is these disparate groups in different bodies of literature, sometimes almost become competing rather than complementary perspectives.

My message is that the more we collaborate, the more we're looking for complementary approaches, while remaining, to some degree, critical of each other's standpoints to drive forwards meaningful change as well as consensual change, then obviously, I think that's a good place to start.

CARRIE CONAWAY: I love it. I'm fully on board. Sign me up. Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Gavin. It's been a pleasure.

GAVIN MURPHY: Thanks Carrie.