



The contribution of research engagement to professional learning and school development

Corina Seal provides the evidence for how engaging with and in research can help to personalise professional learning and bring about school improvement dividends.

The National Teacher Research Panel has been working for some time to draw connections between teachers' own research, their use of other people's research and day to day CPD practices. The collaborative enquiry carried out by the panel and the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) (Seal et al 2008) and consultations at our biennial Teacher Research conference in 2008 are helping to illustrate these connections – and the related benefits for teachers.

The NTRP is a group of practising teachers, selected for their expertise in teacher research who work to increase the number of teachers engaged in and with the full spectrum of research activity. The Panel is sponsored by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the General Teaching Council (GTC), the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Every two years the Panel hosts a national conference at which practitioners, policy makers and colleagues from the research community come together to explore the outcomes of projects which engage teachers in and/or with research. Contributing practitioners go through a rigorous quality assurance process led by

Panel members and their professional advisers, CUREE. This includes peer review of abstracts and research designs, a collaborative writing and editorial process and a workshop to help participants think about how to present their work in ways that can genuinely inform others' thinking and practice. From its conferences the Panel has accumulated a data set which represents a body of teachers' research questions, the ways in which they have set about answering them and the implications that they and others have identified for classroom practice, school leadership, policy and further research.

■■■ What do practitioners' questions tell us about their CPD concerns?

Our first step in exploring connections between practitioners' interest in research and their CPD priorities was to analyse the research aims and foci. We started by looking for patterns within the data and also for connections between patterns in the data and national priorities that might have been influencing school priorities, for example DCSF priorities and priorities that emerged from the GTC survey of teachers' views (2006). Initially the NTRP analysed 232 titles collected from NTRP summaries, TLA stage 1 and 2 presentations and CARA summaries

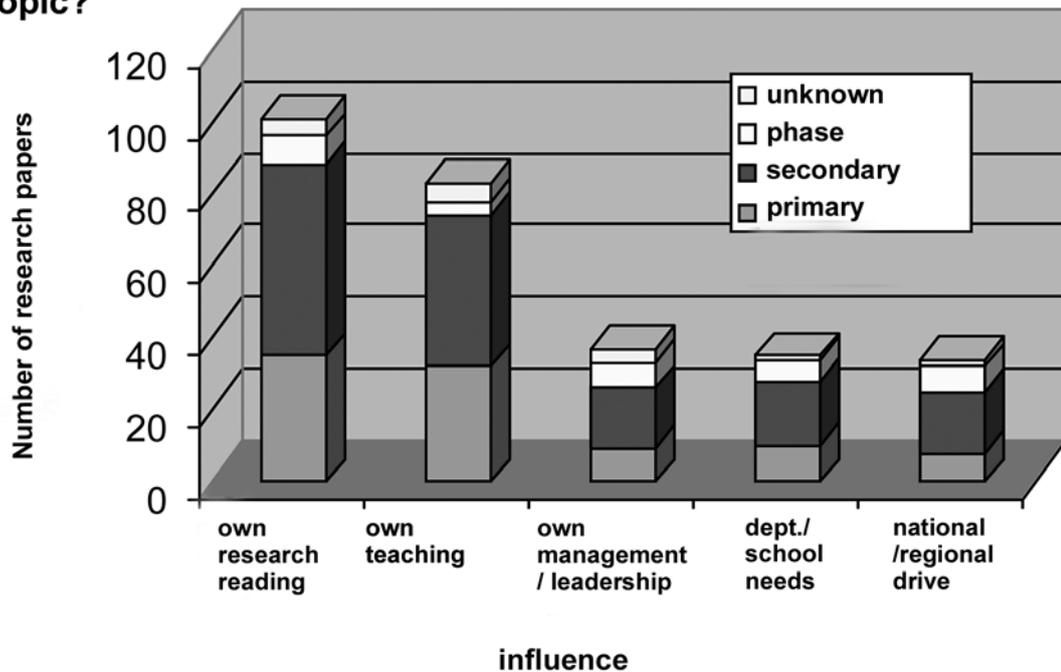
(dates ranged from 2004 to 2007). The primary focus for a pilot analysis was to develop a coding framework that could be used with the full set of data (i.e. complete papers rather than just titles). The initial findings from the pilot were that:

- English (including literacy) was much more commonly researched than any other curriculum subject area and maths was relatively little researched representing only 3% of the overall figure (this was later shown to be due to a primary phase bias).
- 53% of the summaries were focused on approaches to teaching and learning. (Which linked strongly with the DCSF pedagogy priority)
- 65% of the summaries had a particular curriculum focus.
- Raising achievement was only specifically mentioned in the title of 9% of studies even though this is a key government priority.

- Only 6% of studies mentioned a focus on gender in their title –This contrasted with the DCSF priorities where raising standards and narrowing attainment gaps featured strongly.
- Notwithstanding a strong policy emphasis on home-school links there was very little research in this area, possibly because of the challenges this provides for a teacher. researcher.

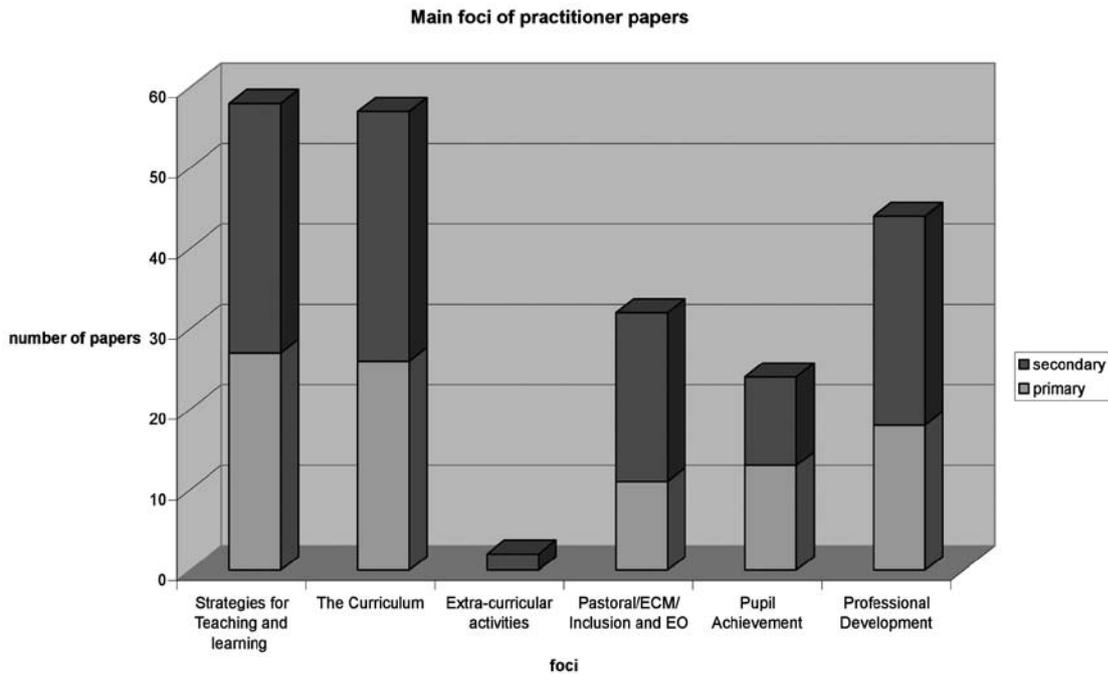
The main study used a coding framework resulting from this preliminary analysis to analyse a set of 106 NTRP and TLA papers (2004 to 2007). First and foremost, the full analysis confirmed that practitioner research is driven strongly by teachers’ personal professional concerns. Practitioners’ own research/reading and teaching was the primary influence on their choice of project, although a third of practitioners also claimed that other factors such as their leadership role, department and/or school needs and national or regional drives had influenced their work.

What influenced practitioners' choice of research topic?



The most common themes in the practitioner research papers, especially in the primary phase, were ‘strategies for teaching and learning’, ‘the curriculum’ and ‘professional development’. The least common was ‘extra curricular activities’ with only 3% of the studies mentioning this as a major focus; all of them in the secondary phase. Given the higher primary interest in developing the curriculum and teaching and learning strategies it was not surprising to see more reference to pupil achievement in the primary papers. Both phases gave similar levels of attention to professional development issues.

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Teachers were primarily interested, at all phases of education, in developing the curriculum and teaching and learning. Issues such as behaviour and pupil achievement, despite the weight attached to them by the media and government priorities, featured less strongly in these studies.

The 2006 GTCE survey found that the top professional development topics identified by teachers as needed in the following 12 months were:

1. using ICT in teaching (57.6% of all teachers);

2. strengthening and/or updating skills and knowledge in curriculum subject areas (50.8%);
3. addressing underachievement in groups of pupils (45.4%);
4. teaching pupils with SEN (45.3%); and
5. teaching gifted and talented pupils (44.5%).

The following table shows, in comparison, the percentage of practitioner papers which addressed themes corresponding to these concerns.

PD topics identified by GTCE 2006 survey	Primary	Secondary	Cross phase	Unknown phase	Overall
Using ICT in teaching	14	11	25	0	13
Curriculum subject areas	72	58	33	40	59
Underachievement	36	19	8	0	23
SEN	0	8	8	0	3
G&T	0	6	0	0	3

Whilst practitioners appeared happy to investigate curriculum issues through research, and to a lesser extent were able to explore issues of underachievement, they seemed less keen to investigate ICT themes. SEN and Gifted and Talented were also themes that emerged as priorities for teachers in the GTC survey but which did not feature strongly in their research; though identified by over 40% of teachers as areas needing development, these topics were each only tackled in 3% of practitioner research studies; all in secondary phase papers. Perhaps the problem is that ICT, Gifted and talented and SEN are issues where teachers feel the need to seek out specialist support from others –or perhaps they feel these are areas that are hard to research? In reflecting on this the panel turned to systematic review of research about CPD to set their findings about practitioner enquiry in context and help them reflect on questions such as these. In particular the panel wanted to explore how CPD including practitioner enquiry affects pupil learning.

■ ■ ■ What are the benefits for teachers' personal development of engaging in and with research

Systematic research reviews show that some school CPD strategies are linked to positive outcomes for teachers and for their students and reveal links between building a whole school research culture and use of collaborative (co) coaching, and specialist coaching.

■ ■ ■ What sort of CPD has proved to be effective?

The NTRP analysis of practitioner research questions showed that over 50% of the practitioner papers had CPD as one of the main themes. Whether CPD is being explicitly studied by practitioners or not, it can be argued that practitioner research, especially when it is collaborative, provides an excellent vehicle for professional development because it 'ticks all the boxes' of what has been shown to be effective CPD.

Systematic Reviews of studies of the impact on teachers of sustained, collaborative CPD in primary and secondary schools' show that 'the teachers changed or substantially developed aspects of their teaching following the CPD intervention, and showed ongoing collaborative work. Teachers' motivations, confidence, attitudes and beliefs were enhanced.' (Cordingley, Bell, Evans & Firth 2005). The review is clear that effective CPD processes included both the opportunity for teacher to engage in action research ('teachers experimenting in applying the new skills in classroom teaching') but also opportunities for 'peer support and specialist expertise'. Whilst practitioner research is valuable, systematic research reviews reveal that 'studies of individually-oriented CPD offer only weak evidence of its capacity to influence teacher of pupil change' but that 'there is evidence that collaborative studies improve pupils' learning and behaviour, and teacher practice, attitudes and beliefs'. Key factors in collaborative CPD are:

- the use of external expertise linked to school-based activity;
- observation;
- reflection and experimentation;
- an emphasis on peer support;
- scope for teacher participants to identify their own CPD focus;
- processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue;
- processes for sustaining the CPD over time to enable teachers to embed the practices in their own classroom settings; and
- recognition of individual teachers' starting points.
- (Cordingley, Bell, Thomason & Firth, 2005)

■■■ How Can School Leadership facilitate effective CPD?

If we accept that collaborative practitioner research is a valuable source of CPD then we need to explore how school leaders can support and facilitate its use. Several ways in which school leadership can facilitate effective CPD have been identified:

1) Raise the status of research engaged CPD in the school

In its thematic review of CPD (2002), OFSTED remarked that all too often this role is given a low status and undertaken as a bursarial rather than a pedagogic function. Cordingley et al (2003) argue that there is a need for a 'more explicit approach to identifying and building CPD capacity in schools' and they present resources which have been developed 'as a means of alerting CPD coordinators to key messages from research about CPD and of drawing to their attention the benefits of engaging in and with research about teaching and learning within CPD activities'.

2) Provide a structured framework

In a review focussed on teacher-only outcomes of collaborative continuing professional development, Cordingley et al (date) cite several case studies including that of Swayne Park School, Essex, where the head teacher had put coaching and mentoring at the centre of the school's development. Both specialist coaching and

co-coaching are used at the school and both are integral to the personalised CPD scheme which is tied closely to the Performance Management System. Members of staff at the school are active in identifying their own Performance Management Targets and identifying how to address these targets through a choice of CPD activities which include:

- specialist coaching;
- collaborative practitioner research;
- opportunities to analyse their own teaching via video; and
- co-coaching.

Staff at all levels in the school actively collect and analyse data on their own and others' performance and needs. This is done via regular lesson observation by line managers, departmental reviews, use of advanced skills teachers, links with higher education institutes (the school is actively involved in ITT), pupil voice, regular research and development groups, visits to and from other schools and coaching days. This structured framework had led to very high levels of staff retention and a positive attitude toward CPD (Cordingley, Bell, Evans, Firth, 2005).

An example of a national framework for structuring practitioner research is the TLA. An evaluation of the TLA by the NFER in 2006 found it to be a 'highly regarded model of professional development' and that the main impacts on submitters were:

- the opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning;
 - the development of their teaching practice;
 - the acquisition of new knowledge and skills; and
 - the opportunity to work with colleagues.
- Core dimensions highlighted as having particular significance in the above were:
- accessing peer support;
 - evaluating the impact on practice and own learning; and
 - disseminating what has been learnt.
- (Moor et al 2006)

3) Establish an ethos conducive to CPD

If a school is to encourage practitioner research, then its leaders need to establish an ethos that:



- values openness, reflection and professional debate;
 - commits to using evidence;
 - commits resources; and
 - embeds research into existing school systems.
- Morris et al (2007)

School leaders need to commit significant resources to practitioner research if teachers are to work collaboratively and then share their findings. Sharp reported that even research engaged schools encountered difficulties with teachers finding time for analysing, reflecting and reporting on research findings (Sharp et al, 2005).

4) Facilitate wider access to research and support

As well as providing funding so that time can be made available for research, school leaders need to recognise the way that teachers access and use research at different stages of their careers. Bevan (2004) identifies three phases of teacher engagement with research, as consumers or users, as:

1. filtering – the subjective selection and rejection of research with personal interpretation;
2. fragmenting – research findings taken in isolation, and removed from context; and
3. fiddling – applying findings, informal action research, tinkering and transforming.

Bevan suggests that ‘researchers can reasonably build upon this model of practitioner engagement, to plan successfully for the transformation of educational research knowledge into practical policy advice or pedagogical principles. Knowing in advance the likely distortions that may be imposed on the research allows researchers to plan to mitigate these effect – using summaries, through illustrations or metaphors to encapsulate an idea, and by ‘road testing’ their outputs’. These suggestions are just as valid when sharing academic research or the outcomes of practitioner research.

Based on her systematic study, Robinson (2007) reports that sustainability appeared to be dependent, firstly on

whether teachers acquired an in-depth understanding of the underlying theoretical principles so they could use their learning flexibly in their classrooms, and secondly, on whether they learned how to inquire accurately into the impact of their teaching on students.

Listing the factors affecting the use of research by practitioners, Morris et al (2007) identify ‘mediators such as professional associations, teacher unions, Local Authorities, ‘professional learning networks’, collegial networks’ and ‘practitioner research networks’ as important sources of inspiration and support for practitioners. School leaders can help in the building and maintaining of collegial networks or can provide finances to support staff in joining professional networks.

5) Get involved in research themselves

Robinson (2007) identified five dimensions of leadership, using a systematic study of 11 studies, and investigated their relative impacts on student outcomes. The largest effect came from the leadership dimension ‘promoting and participating in teacher learning and development’ which she claims ‘Supports calls to school leaders to be actively involved with their teachers as the ‘leading learners’ of their school.

■■■ Conclusion and recommendations for future research and practice

The value of practitioner research is evident from the studies above; the NTRP analysis suggests that it is mostly

focussed on teaching and learning, the curriculum and professional development. Practitioners base their research on their reading as well as on their own research, and teaching. This implies a need for the existing knowledge base (including both academic and practitioner research) to be easily accessible to practitioners.

The way practitioner research is presented can be affected by the purposes to which it is to be put, and by its funding or supporting bodies. This must be taken into account when analysing published papers.

There is a discrepancy between teachers’ expressed need for CPD in ICT, SEN and G&T and the apparent low level of research in this area. Do practitioners choose to research something that they feel they have a reasonable basis of knowledge in already rather than the areas which challenge them the most or are there other reasons for the discrepancy?

It would be interesting to compare the practitioners’ research themes to those in other national agendas and reports such as the 20-20 vision report (Gilbert, 2007) and the Every Child Matters agenda.

Whilst the NTRP analysis of practitioner research questions has revealed some interesting themes, a more extensive exploration is needed (plans are in place to analyse the full set of NTRP summaries produced during the panel’s 10 year existence). Through this analysis the NTRP plans to further explore how practitioner research acts as a form of CPD and to map how such activities relate to the teachers’ standards.

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