



Developing the enquiring profession

Graham Handscomb explores the potential of practitioner research to transform professional development and school practice and points the way to challenges that still lie ahead.

Why should teachers and other staff engage in research, what difference does it make and how best can they be equipped to become enquirers into their own practice? These are some of the intriguing questions that are posed in this issue of *Professional Development Today*. The issue is dedicated to the theme of practitioner research as a fundamental and vibrant part of professional development.

■■■ A new image

Research tends to have an image problem amongst many practitioners. “The term ‘research’ can have unfortunate connotations - of white coated boffins in laboratories, of ivory tower academics, dusty tomes, unread, impenetrable articles in esoteric journals” (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003). At best many see it as a laudable extra that you do if you have time after the core business of teaching, school improvement and raising standards. At worst it can be perceived as a distracting indulgence in a climate in which teachers are working harder and longer and where this is little time and motivation left for carrying out research.

Well the good news, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, is that this is not the experience of a growing number of practitioners, who have found research activity to be an essential feature, at the very heart of their work. There is now a body of evidence indicating that an enquiring outlook is a core ingredient of reflective practice and professional development and that it can make a clear contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning and to raising standards. “School-based enquiry and research are now being seen to make an important contribution to self-evaluation, improvement, and the professional learning of staff” (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2004).

■■■ Teachers doing it for themselves!

Many teachers and other school staff are keen to reflect on their work, explore different approaches and try out new things in the classroom. Research activity provides the opportunity to support such enquiry by making it more systematic. In a real sense this relates to seeing teachers as learners as well as their pupils. Research covers a wide range of activities and includes what teachers routinely expect

of their pupils. They encourage their pupils to engage in enquiry as a key element of their learning and to do this systematically and with a concern for evidence. The same principle applies to adult learners themselves – what’s good for pupil learning is also good for professional learning and development!

So we have the emergence of the powerful phenomenon of practitioner research. Instead of research being seen as something done by others to teachers we have the growing belief that often the best people to research their classrooms are teachers (and other school staff) themselves. Practitioners have found this has brought considerable benefits to their work. Through encouraging them to question, explore and develop their practice, it has revealed new insights, delivered new levels of understanding, and enhanced the quality of teaching and learning. In short many have testified to practitioner enquiry being a highly satisfying activity which has become an integral part of their continuing professional development and school improvement (Sharp et al, 2005; Handscomb and Ramsey, 2008).

■■■ The credibility of practitioner research

This has raised some interesting questions about the nature of practitioner research and its relationship with what goes on in the classroom and with the wider research community. Teachers have long been involved in examining their practice in order to make further improvements. When does such activity “count” as research? What is the relationship between large-scale research conducted by university departments and a piece of evidenced-based practice carried out by a teacher or a learning support assistant within their classroom? And how is such evidenced-informed practice any different to what good teachers do anyway in refining and honing their craft in day to day lesson preparation and evaluation?

At the heart of this heated debate lies perhaps the most contentious question of all: Is such practitioner enquiry credible? In an environment where university departments strive to gain good “make or break” outcomes in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) on which their funding depends, the academic world has been reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of school-

based research. The judgement tends to be that whilst it is a powerful form of professional development and contributes to improving classroom practice, the jury is still out on whether practitioner research adds significantly to the body of professional knowledge about what works (Furlong et al, 2003). Practitioner researchers appear not to be keen to take note of existing research or to contribute to the evidence base, but prefer to focus on finding their own answers and then taking prompt action (Sharp et al, 2005).

■■■ Systematic enquiry, made public

Many have found this a rather arid debate and are uncomfortable about making too sharp a distinction between school-based practitioner enquiry and academic research. Perhaps the most useful understanding of what constitutes research is “systematic enquiry made public” (Stenhouse, 1975). This can encompass both individual researchers focussing on one feature of their craft, as well as large scale higher education projects involving many schools. The important common elements are that research is undertaken with rigour and communicated to others (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003; Frost and Handscomb, 2009).

These issues are taken up by Raphael Wilkins who opens PDT with a thorough critique of the practitioner research scene. He describes three significant developments over the last decade: the growth of practitioner research, the establishment of a cadre of school research leaders, and the championing and influence of the research-engaged school movement. After providing illustrative case study examples he then looks at motivations which encourage practitioner research. Then, via an analysis of the thinking of Slavin, he examines the tension between “top-down” applications of “proven practice” research with practitioner research. He concludes that research engagement at school level is determined less by the influence of evidence-based reform than by “the self-motivated professionalism of teachers”.

■■■ The How to Do Research Guide!

The HOW TO section contains contributions from Mark Rickinson and Caroline Sharp which give a grounded and detailed guide on how to engage in school-based research

effectively. The first piece is on how to set about planning a research project. It is written in straightforward accessible language such as posing “what or whose ignorance will this research help to reduce?”

In a similar vein Caroline Sharp emphasises the fundamental importance of ensuring sufficient attention is paid to asking the right questions. She persuasively explains that these questions are “key to every stage of the research”, form its “backbone” and inform decisions about design, sample, data collection and analysis. She then widens her scope to give an in-depth insight into becoming a research-engaged school, drawing on a range of first hand testimonies and summarising its essential features. The further development of research engaged practice will be enhanced by the planned launch by the National Foundation for Educational Research in October of The Research-engaged School and College Award.

■ ■ ■ Using research to change practice?

In the next article Corina Seal provides evidence from investigations conducted by the National Teachers Research Panel into the research projects carried out by teachers and explores connections with their CPD practices. From this analysis of a large number of practitioner research reports it appears that teaching and learning, the curriculum and professional development were prominent themes. A particularly interesting outcome is that teachers tend to request CPD on areas which they seem reluctant to research themselves, like ICT, leaving the author to reflect that perhaps they only tend to research areas that they think they already know a good deal about!

The Reference section begins with an account of the development of a new Masters in School Improvement programme which has practitioner research as its *modus operandi*. We gain a picture of the gestation of this

programme from the different perspective of its three partners who jointly run it – the School of Education at the University of Wales, the local authority and the schools themselves. Although it is early days, what emerges is the powerful potential of practitioner research and partnership working as drivers for school improvement.

■ ■ ■ Further challenges

The potency of collaborative research communities also features in Andrew Morris’ description of the development of a research and development toolkit in the learning and skills further education sector. The characteristics of the toolkit were group-based support materials and an approach that incorporated modular, bite-sized flexibility. Morris rues the lack of implementation of the toolkit - although there are recent signs of movement with the Learning and Skills Improvement Service testing out the implementation of interesting research in four pilot F.E. Colleges (TES, 09). However, in reflecting on the limited use of the toolkit, Morris concludes with a stark judgement that an evidence-based culture is yet to develop in education: “Few leaders, few politicians, few local or national officials and few teachers advocate the use of research evidence in deciding on effective practice”. So whilst Wilkins at the outset of this PDT issue charts the increasing amount of practitioner research activity, Morris says we have a long way still to go in winning the hearts and minds of policy makers and practitioners alike. For those of us who are committed to championing school-based research this poses a considerable challenge. So in our next issue of PDT we will continue our focus on this vital dimension of professional development, exploring in particular its contribution to improving teaching and learning.

graham.handscomb@essex.gov.uk

References: Furlong J, Salisbury J and Coombs L (2003) Best Practice Research Scholarships. DfES. ■ Frost R and Handscomb G (2009). Active Enquiring Minds: empowering young researchers. International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), Vancouver, Canada. January 2009. ■ Handscomb, G and Ramsey, D (2008) Meaningful self-evaluation: using reflection for self-evaluation and the SEF, Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE): Essex County Council. ■ Handscomb G and MacBeath J (2003) Educational Enquiry and Research in Essex. Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE), Essex County Council. ■ Handscomb G and MacBeath J (2004) The Research Engaged School. Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry (FLARE), Essex County Council. ■ Sharp C, Eames A, Saunders D and Tomlinson K (2005) Postcards from Research-Engaged Schools. NFER. ■ Stenhouse, L. (1975) An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development. Heinemann. ■ Times Educational Supplement (2009). College “labs” to boost research. TES 31st August 2009, Page 31.