Moving forward! - developing school-based practitioner research

Raphael Wilkins gives a definite guide to the rise of practitioner research, explores how it can be effectively developed and anticipates its vibrant evolving future!

Increasing numbers of school leaders are attracted to supporting staff in becoming engaged with practitioner research, as a form of professional development and, through that process, as a route to school development. Some time ago I offered in this journal some reasons for doing so (Wilkins, 2001). The practitioner research scene has moved on between then and now, and in this article I present an overview of some of the current issues facing its champions.

I have noticed three main changes to the practice of school-based research in the current decade. First, the incidence of teachers undertaking practitioner research and reflective action planning of the kind championed by David Frost (see for example Frost, Durrant, Head and Holden 2000) has increased, and groups of teachers working in this way have become established sub-sets of the professional culture of some schools. Secondly, and partly as a natural consequence of the first development, there is now a cadre of researcher-leaders: headteachers with substantial experience of practitioner research who promote and support it as part of their school leadership function (see for example Wilkins 2002). Thirdly, the research-engaged schools movement championed by, among others, Graham Handscomb, has strengthened the connections between small scale practitioner research projects and the more general body of education research activity (Handscomb and MacBeath 2003).

In this context, there are a number of issues that school leaders who value practitioner research might want to consider. First it is worth recalling the range of motivations for promoting practitioner research. Secondly there is the practical matter of what kinds of research activity by teachers should be given financial support. A third issue is how to take school-based practitioner research to its next stage of development, which implies something other than 'more of the same'. The final issue raised here is how research-rich schools make sense of evidence-based reform, i.e. how they manage the tension between bottom-up and top-down approaches to research utilisation.

I have had the pleasure of working with a number of 'researcher-leaders' of schools, and share below four brief examples which, while having much in common,

illustrate different shades of emphasis in motivations and approaches.

Using research to solve a problem

Jane was the headteacher of an infant and nursery school. She did not encounter practitioner research until near the end of her career. Jane and her staff investigated the expectations of new parents about the education their children would receive in the nursery. Both the process and the findings had a profound impact on school practice. As outcomes of the research, the school adopted the Epstein model of school, family and community partnerships (Epstein et al 1997), appointed a home-school liaison teacher, and undertook a building conversion to create a parents' centre.

Jane's research investigated parents' perceptions of the value of nursery education. Its purpose was to identify how to foster positive attitudes to schooling at the nursery stage, so as to bring longer term benefits to the later phases of education. The research asked parents what they saw as the purposes of nursery education, shortly after their children had been admitted. This tended to produce answers based on the children's experience, so later this data capture took place during a home visit in the half-term prior to admission. The method of investigation explored numerous specific issues and enabled analysis by various factors such as whether the child had siblings and whether they had previously been to a playgroup.

A number of changes were made to school practice as a result of the research. The school upgraded the importance given to home visits and induction, and revised the information booklet to give more information about the educational content of the nursery programme. Teaching and support staff allocated more time to caring about the family unit rather than just the child, and a parent link teacher was appointed to listen to parents and advise on matters of welfare and on how parents could support teaching. The parent link teacher gave talks to parents about expectations for their children's education. An old unused kitchen was renovated and converted into a location dedicated to working with parents. These outcomes all survived Jane's retirement and became embedded school practices. This was assisted by the fact that Jane had undertaken the research in collaboration with the staff, and in particular with the head of the nursery as co-researcher.

Using research to model beliefs and values

Some school leaders and practitioners believe, as a matter of principle, that it is right for them to model the values and behaviours they advocate to their pupils and students. These include promoting a love of learning for its own sake; the use of learning and investigation to address the issues and challenges of everyday living; and learning as a means to enable people to develop to their full potential.

Proponents of this thinking believe that the visible engagement of school staff in relevant research conveys a sense of integrity about how the school is attempting to live out its mission, which benefits its ethos and culture, and ultimately has a positive impact on learning. The nature of this impact may be less direct, and for that reason less easy to demonstrate, than where research is used to address a very specific problem. The following example describes a school where the headteacher took this approach.

Edwin was the headteacher of an independent preparatory school (ie private, fee-paying - not a state school) for children aged from two-and-a-half to eleven, located in a county town in the east midlands of England. Edwin developed his interest in practitioner research through a research-based M Ed degree programme. After arriving at his current school, he involved the whole school staff in research projects investigating the perceptions of the children, and the professional culture of the school. At the same time he introduced the Jackson model (Jackson, 2000) of separate organisational structures for maintenance management and for change management. These strategies were used to take forward school policies and to encourage all staff (including support staff) to be proactive in their own learning and development. He had also arranged for a university to provide an in-school certificate programme based on reflective practice, for an initial group of 15 staff (including some support staff).

Shortly after taking up his appointment as headteacher, Edwin also introduced pupil perception feedback as part of the working practice of the school. This formed one of a suite of strategies to develop the culture of the school. Over a period of two terms, staff were introduced to

the concept and practice of pupil perception feedback; questionnaires were designed, trialled, discussed with parents, and administered; then the results were discussed in a series of staff meetings. Edwin established from the outset of his headship that research engagement was, henceforth, to be a non-negotiable aspect of the way the school was to be run.

Using research to lead and develop staff

Another perceived benefit of research engagement is its developmental effect on the staff involved. This effect may include increased motivation, a sense of revitalization, more conscious observation and reflection, greater confidence, a heightened sense of, and pride in, professional expertise, and an increase in constructive professional dialogue with colleagues. Professional development of this kind has a general benefit across the whole of a person's work and is not limited to the particular topic which is the subject of the research investigation. The following example illustrates the work of a headteacher committed to this approach.

Sonia was an experienced secondary school headteacher, leading the development of a new school with certain innovative features. She had personally used an action research approach since working as a young English teacher, and as a deputy headteacher had worked in a school where staff had been encouraged by the headteacher to undertake research projects. When Sonia became the headteacher of a very large community college (her last school), she had introduced part-time secondments for staff to carry out research and development projects. The staff development group identified the issues which needed to be addressed, and the time allocation they needed (for example, one day per week for a term, or two days per week for a year), and then invited proposals for research, like a job application. Some participants did their research in ways which counted as modules towards MAs, and some worked in pairs on projects. Five or six of these projects were undertaken every year for several years.

When she moved to her new post, which involved establishing a completely new school, Sonia took the decision that reflective practice and action research would be an important part of the professional culture of the school, and that all staff would be expected to work in that way: this was a factor in selecting staff for appointment.

Using research to champion teacher-led change

Sometimes the champion of research engagement as a means to enrich the professional culture of the school may not be the headteacher. Indeed sometimes such champions of research engagement who go on to become headteachers and holders of other senior leadership roles began using that approach at earlier career stages. My fourth example describes the work of such an individual.

Andrew was a Senior Teacher at a comprehensive school, who was in the process of moving on to take up a deputy headship elsewhere. He had developed an interest in classroom based research as a young English teacher excited about the possibilities of what were then the new areas of media and communications studies. Andrew was introduced more formally to action research through a school-based MA programme; after completing the programme he went on to act as an in-school tutor for a group of teachers taking the same programme. He had recently completed doctoral research on the impact of teacher-led development work on teacher, student and school development, and he had also published on this subject.

Andrew's practitioner research investigated how 'reflective action planning' (Frost et al 2000) could be used to support teacher-led change in his school. This was essentially an action research project, learning through doing, which took place over an extended period of more than six years. The project involved forming a school-based group of teachers who worked together as a team, and engaged in individual small scale action research projects which were accredited by a higher education institution. As well as initiating this work and engaging in it himself, Andrew investigated and recorded the process over the whole life of the project. Over the period of six years, about 25 teachers gained accreditation through this programme, with a group of about ten being engaged at any one time. The scale of this activity meant that it had a significant effect upon the professional culture of the school.

Andrew's own involvement in developing, recording and analysing the process included the production of his own masters and doctoral theses and various publications. At every stage, what Andrew learnt from the investigation was fed back into the ongoing development and improvement of the project. This immediate application of learning

was one of the guiding principles upon which the whole project was built.

Motivations and congruent funding sources

In the examples above I have identified four motivations for encouraging practitioner research: solving problems, modelling values, developing staff, and enabling practitioner-led reform, although of course in practice all of these occur together in complex patterns. At the more granular level, individual staff members engaging with practitioner research may have a wide range of motives, such as interest in a topic or career progression aspirations. Schools producing a staff development policy which makes reference to the level of institutional support for practitioner research projects have to make judgements about what can be funded. These judgements could take account of the range of motivations for practitioner research and the range of possible funding models, and which matches are considered appropriate. Figure 1 offers a tool for making those decisions.

Figure 1

Matrix 1: Motivations and congruent funding sources

Funding

1. researcher's private time, no money needed
2. self-funded by researcher
3. research activity integrated into normal school or departmental budget
4. funded by partner higher education institution
5. grant-aided without 'strings'
6. sponsored with 'strings'
7. commissioned by third party: research under contract

Motivations

A. personal curiosity
B. individual professional and career development
C. team development of practice
D. school improvement (eg 'official' projects in school improvement plan)
E. evaluation of school practices and initiatives
F. production of 'transferable' techniques
G. to inform (or justify) policy (at school level or wider)
H. to inform the building of theory
I. to contribute to large or longitudinal data sets
J. to address issues identified by a sponsor or commissioner

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A							
B							
C							
D							
E							
F							
G							
H							
I							
J							

Which spaces on the matrix represent congruent combinations of motivation and funding source?

Widening the scope of practitioner research

The most likely image conjured up by the words 'school-based practitioner research' will be of individual practitioners investigating their own practice by undertaking small research projects, often as part of the requirement for completing a higher degree course. Probably the majority of practitioner research projects which have been undertaken up to the present time have been of that nature. That same impression is conveyed by much of the 'methods' literature of school-based action research, such as Elliott 1985,1991, McNiff 1988, Halsall 1998, and Burton and Bartlett 2005, although all of these writers advocated communities of practice rather than isolated endeavours. Collaborative activity by a critical mass of school staff has been widely supported, for example by Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby (1999), Frost et al (2000) and Frost and Durrant (2003), and by the National Research Engaged Schools Project (Sharp et al 2005). The progression of the practitioner research movement beyond small scale individual projects makes it timely to emphasise the range of different scales on which practitioner research can be orchestrated, and the range of research methods available to school-based practitioner researchers. Figure 2 offers a tool to help schools or groups of partners to review the scope of their current practitioner research.

There are two purposes that might be served by supporting larger scale practitioner research projects employing a wider range of methods: greater and more demonstrable impact on school development; and greater and more authoritative contribution to the field of educational research as a whole.

Figure 2

Matrix 2: Scope of practitioner research

Scale

1. individual
2. in-school departmental team (or primary equivalent)
3. in-school cross-departmental team (or primary equivalent)
4. cross-school team
5. individual school with partner (eg higher education institution or local authority)
6. group of schools
7. group of schools with partner (eg higher education institution or local authority)
8. major national project

Research Method

A. reflective practice
B. reading
C. participant observation
D. non-participant observation
E. ethnography
F. experiment
G. case studies
H. qualitative survey
I. quantitative survey

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A								
B								
C								
D								
E								
F								
G								
H								
I								

Which cells are populated in the current pattern of practitioner research activity?
For enhanced quality and impact of practitioner research, which cells should be populated next?

Practitioner research and evidence-based reform

It might be expected that champions of school-based practitioner research would regard favourably attempts by governments and others to implement research findings system-wide through what has become known as 'evidence-based reform'. In reality, the top-down imposition of 'evidence based reform' may sit uneasily with the notion of teacher-led reform through practitioner research. These approaches seem to reflect different views about the nature of teaching as an activity, about teachers' professional practice and how this evolves, and about the kind of 'knowledge' that teachers 'know' and the ways in which this can be spread and applied. These potential tensions have to be reconciled at school level.

One way of opening up these issues is by offering a critique of an article by Robert Slavin, a distinguished figure in the school effectiveness field and in the application of research to education policy and practice (Slavin 2008).

Slavin argues that the problem in education is not a lack of knowledge about effective educational practice, so much as a widespread failure to apply that knowledge, ie a problem of behaviour. He compares this to failures to observe standards of hygiene in medicine, despite its importance being known. Slavin considers the new emphasis on evidence based reform in education lags behind medicine, agriculture and engineering; that there must be 'proven programmes in every area'; user-friendly reviews of research identifying which practices are 'proven'; and government incentives for the adoption of proven programmes. Slavin also draws attention to the much lower incidence of experimental research in education in the UK than in the USA, and how this might be addressed including through design competitions.

The strength of this argument, based as it is on the actual experience of education reforms in a range of contexts, and the clear aim of improvement, is so obviously sound that at one level it is beyond criticism. On the other hand it represents characteristics of the 'school effectiveness' approach that are relevant to the range of opinions that might be adopted about research engagement at school level.

Slavin's article treats education as comparable to scientific fields such as medicine, agriculture and engineering, and refers to 'proven programmes' in terms almost reminiscent of Taylorist scientific management with its 'one right way'. While education is partly scientific, for example in its use of psychology, aspects of a teacher's work can also be compared to other occupational areas such as the law, the church, the performing arts, journalism and politics: fields drawing upon case by case judgement and discretion, pastoral care, inspiration, interpretation and persuasion, rather than upon the application of science alone. Actually the same is true of some of the work of doctors and nurses. The point is that if education is only partly a 'science', then the idea of 'proven' practices and programmes can be only partly uncontested. Much of the basics of effective teaching, such as well planned interesting lessons, good classroom management, and so on, can certainly be accepted as 'proven practice' but Slavin is implying something different from that: specific innovations that have been developed and tested.

Self-motivated professionalism

Slavin implies that these innovations will be the work of 'research and development organisations' and 'researchers, developers and entrepreneurs', ie large specialised organisations external to schools and teachers. While it is only realistic to recognise that significant developments often require such approaches, the implication here, perhaps unintentionally, is to portray teachers as operatives who will be told by others what constitutes the 'right' practice and then will be incentivised to implement that practice. The reality for a teacher at the receiving end of an 'evidence based policy initiative' in an average school, is unlikely to be a sense of personally engaging with research findings and of reaching professional judgements about how best to apply them. It is much more likely to involve being told by an external change agent to implement a new method of working, by following officially produced materials.

The idea of research engagement at school level rests upon a different set of assumptions. Its emphasis is not upon the top-down systemic application of 'proven practice', but rather upon the self-motivated professionalism of teachers, drawing upon a range of internal and external sources of evidence to make judgements about what will 'work' best in their specific context. Research engagement ascribes value to small scale practitioner research; generally, evidence based reform does not. Research engagement

assumes a proactive role for schools which take part in research projects conducted by other organisations on their premises, and a leading role for them in drawing upon, evaluating and applying published research findings to school issues.

Research-engagement – making a difference

Assuming that evidence based policy initiatives will continue to come down through the system from time to time, it is worth considering the differences in the way in which they are likely to be received in a school which is research engaged, through practitioner research, in comparison to a school which is not. For a school which is not research engaged, the 'evidence based' origins of the initiative are unlikely to distinguish it greatly from other externally driven changes. In a research engaged school which scores highly on the Research Engaged School Health Check created by Handscomb and MacBeath (2003), two of the four criteria are that significant decisions are informed by research, and that people have access to tools that help them to challenge their practice. These qualities will enable school staff to be discerning about an externally driven evidence based initiative in four important respects.

First, they will be able to see this particular 'proven programme' within the wider context of the field of research of which it forms part. They will be able to have a view about the ways in which this initiative is different from and allegedly better than other related work, and to understand the points that are debated and contested within that field of study. Secondly, they will understand the 'evidence base' sufficiently to see how far and how accurately the initiative is actually implementing that evidence. Some evidence based initiatives remain truer than others to their underpinning research, as demonstrated in Saunders (2007). Thirdly, staff in a research engaged school may be better able to judge how the initiative can be implemented appropriately within their local context, and in particular, to differentiate between authentic application to the peculiarities of local conditions, from unhelpful adaptations which would be incompatible with those findings. Finally, in a research engaged school, teachers will want to monitor and evaluate the effect of the project and, through that process, add to the field of knowledge.

Conclusion

The school-based practitioner research movement has continued to become stronger on every dimension, especially in developing an institutional rather than individual focus. In this article I have drawn attention to the role of researcher-leaders; issues for the management and further development of practitioner research including its funding, purposes, scale of operation and range of methods employed; and the relationship between practitioner research, research-engaged schools, and the related but contrasting development of evidence-based reform. Moving forward with these issues will continue to be undertaken most effectively where there are strong partnerships among like-minded schools, and between schools, higher education establishments and local authorities.

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