

Part 1

What is Research and Why Do It?

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What is Research?

In this chapter we discuss what is meant by research, particularly in education. We examine the idea of 'practitioner research' and what it might mean for teachers, lecturers and other education professionals. This chapter introduces you to some of the key terms that will be used later in the book and gives you a sense of how best to make use of the book for your own setting.



Research, education and practitioner research

The word 'research' carries many meanings and can produce strong reactions.

'Research is just a load of theory.'

'I'd like to research this properly but I really don't have the time.'

'I'm an experienced teacher and I know what works in my classroom – I don't think research can do anything for me.'

These are some of the statements we have heard over many years of working with teachers, statements – even though they may sound negative – which have always led to very fruitful discussions.

In this book, where we set out to provide support, encouragement, advice and even inspiration to education practitioners in developing a research dimension to their work, we are hoping to dispel some of the more worrying misrepresentations of research and its application in educational settings.

It is certainly true that research can be defined in many different ways – each dictionary offers a different slant on the term.

A detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's On-line Dictionary*

Endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by scientific study of a subject, course of critical investigation. *Oxford English Dictionary*

Careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to discover or establish facts or principles. *yourdictionary.com*

In fact, there is very little agreement between these three – two emphasise finding something new, but the third indicates it can be about ‘establishing’ facts, that are perhaps already known, that is, confirming knowledge rather than discovering something original. Just one mentions scientific study. Between them they suggest the purpose is to find, variously: information, understanding; facts; facts or principles.

When we have asked teachers or student teachers to say what they think the word ‘research’ means, they do often mention words like investigation, data, surveys or theory. The way in which we wish to define research at the outset of this book is, we hope you will agree, relatively simple and will help as a reminder of three key elements in undertaking research in educational settings:

Research is systematic enquiry, the outcomes of which are made available to others.

The three elements to this are:

- 1 Enquiry – this can be taken to mean ‘finding out’ or ‘investigating’, trying to develop some new knowledge and understanding.
- 2 Systematic – for enquiry to be considered to be research, it is necessary that there is some order to the nature of the enquiry, that it has a rationale and an approach which can be explained and defended.
- 3 Sharing outcomes – the form in which the outcomes are disseminated may vary enormously, but the key point being made here is that, if it is only the researcher her/himself who is aware of the outcomes of the research, then the significance of the activity is very limited and may be better described as a form of reflection or personal enquiry, rather than research.

If one puts this general definition of research into the educational context for practitioners, one can elaborate it slightly by saying:

Practitioner research in education is systematic enquiry in an educational setting carried out by someone working in that setting, the outcomes of which are shared with other practitioners.

The additional elements of this definition are:

- 1 The qualifier '*practitioner* research'. This is taken to mean that the person or persons undertaking the research are both researching and practising, very often they are 'teacher researchers'. It is usually assumed that the research is being undertaken within the practitioner's own practice, although collaborative practitioner research may suggest a group of teacher researchers working together, investigating practice across a school or college or other educational setting.
- 2 The phrase 'in educational settings'. As implied above, this is usually taken to be a reference to classrooms, but at this stage it would be desirable to keep a fairly open view about its meaning. It could be interpreted, for example, to include activities in staff rooms, or enquiries with parents or other community members, or indeed to look into the practice of education policy-making, perhaps in local authorities or in government departments.
- 3 Outcomes to be shared with other practitioners. This relates primarily to the purposes of practitioner research. It is usually, perhaps almost always, the case, that those undertaking practitioner research are seeking to develop and improve their own practice. But this definition reminds us that it should be possible, indeed desirable, for others to benefit from hearing about and responding to the research that has been undertaken.

In this book we explore all of these themes in more detail and look at some of the challenges, opportunities and benefits that may be derived from practitioner research in education.

The term 'evaluation' is often used in educational settings and it is worth considering what the similarities and differences between research and evaluation may be. There is clearly a significant overlap between the terms and indeed many practitioners feel much more comfortable with 'evaluation', which they may see as an integral part of teaching, than they do with 'research', which they may see as an additional activity that somehow goes beyond teaching. Similarly, the term 'reflective teaching' has become very influential in professional discussions over recent years. In some ways this term has been used as a way of promoting an enquiring approach as an integral part of teaching, rather than imposing some sort of additional burden on teachers.

The term 'evaluation' in teaching is commonly used to describe a process through which teachers assess the effectiveness of what they have been doing in the classroom. Following a lesson or series of lessons we might be asking ourselves questions such as:

- What did the pupils/students learn?
- Did the methods that I used for teaching them work well?
- How might I improve my teaching next time?

Such questions can be applied in a simple or in a more complex way. So, 'What did the pupils learn?' may be answered simply by observing pupils' responses during the lesson, or by administering a test or other assessment procedure or by a more detailed investigation. The question about teaching methods implies other questions, such as 'What alternative teaching methods might I have used?' and 'How could I know whether they would be better or not without actually trying them?'

'Reflective teaching' is a term that certainly incorporates an idea of evaluation, but in most definitions is seeking to encourage an even more questioning approach. Typically, it involves teachers asking themselves some deeper questions, involving values. In other words as well as the kinds of questions listed above, we may also be asking ourselves:

- What is it important that these pupils/students should be learning?
- Is the way I am teaching consistent with my beliefs about learning and about the rights of pupils/students?

Such an orientation engages with the purposes of education and with explicit statements of values, as well as questions of effectiveness and efficiency/efficacy. Reflective teaching is often depicted as a cyclical process, as represented in Figure 1.1.

Among the principles which underlie reflective teaching, according to Pollard and Tann (1993; from whom Figure 1.1 has been adapted) are:

Reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences as well as means and practical competence.

Reflective teaching requires competence in methods of classroom enquiry, to support the development of teaching competence.

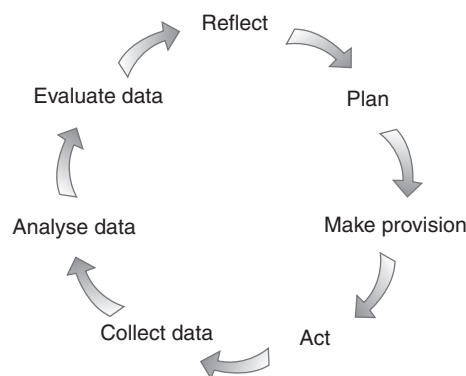


Figure 1.1 The reflective teaching cycle (adapted from Pollard and Tann, 1993)

Reflective teaching has been a very important concept in initial teacher education and evidence of its influence can be seen both in statements of standards for entry into teaching (especially in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), and in the introduction of Master's-level work into teacher education courses. However, it is not only in initial teacher education that a reflective approach has become an important element. Increasingly, the *professional development* of serving teachers and lecturers has also been informed by these ideas. In many countries recent developments in continuing professional development (CPD) have explicitly called for teachers to reflect upon and learn from their practice. A number of research studies have shown how teacher development can be much more powerful when it is based on teachers' own practices (see Day, 1999; Reeves and Fox, 2008). Furthermore, a number of formal CPD schemes have demonstrated the effectiveness of such approaches. Examples in England would include the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH), or in Scotland the Chartered Teacher Programme or the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH). It may also be that the development of the Master's in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in England will be based on similar approaches.

If we revisit the term 'practitioner research' in the light of these two other concepts, we can certainly say that evaluation and reflective teaching are deeply bound into practitioner research, but we might also suggest that there is more to it than either of those terms implies. The term 'teacher as researcher' emerged very much from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse in the 1960s and 1970s at a time, at least in England, when teachers played a much greater part in curriculum development than they did in the later part of the twentieth century. In his classic text, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, published in 1975, Stenhouse sets out in some detail, a model of teacher as researcher. This model is based on a situation in which the teacher her/himself has considerable scope for determining aspects of the curriculum and considerable autonomy in deciding on pedagogical approaches to be deployed. The increasingly prescribed nature of the school curriculum in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s and indeed the control of many aspects of pedagogy led to a model such as this being more or less inoperable. However, recent relaxations in curriculum and pedagogy, such as those encouraged by initiatives relating to creativity in education in England or by curriculum reform in Scotland, create very real opportunities for revisiting and reworking ideas of these sorts.

Indeed, it would be very misleading to suggest that there had been no developments in teacher research during the last part of the twentieth century. Through the persistent and committed efforts of a number of teachers and lecturers the legacy of Stenhouse has given rise to a range of networks of practitioner research in education (some of these are listed at the end of this chapter). In particular the concept of *action research* has been developed to apply within an education setting. Having emerged originally in a community



Figure 1.2 A cyclical model of action research

development setting, the notion of carrying out an ‘intervention’ and assessing its effects in order to refine future action has been very popular in writing about educational change. There are quite intense debates between various schools of thought each claiming the title ‘action research’, but all of them share a concept again – similar to reflective teaching – of cyclical or spiral development, often going through several iterations (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

Figure 1.2 shows the broader conception of action research for practitioners, while Figure 1.3 demonstrates an action research project in progress.

Practitioner research and the teaching profession

In our definition of research at the beginning of this chapter, one of the key elements was the dissemination, or as stated there ‘sharing’, of findings with others. While this is one of the key distinguishing elements that moves us beyond evaluation or reflective teaching, it is also one of the key elements in reminding us of the social nature of research activity. ‘Sharing’ is a form of learning for others as well as for the instigator of the research. But it is not necessarily the only social aspect of practitioner research. And the professional development that may be associated with practitioner research

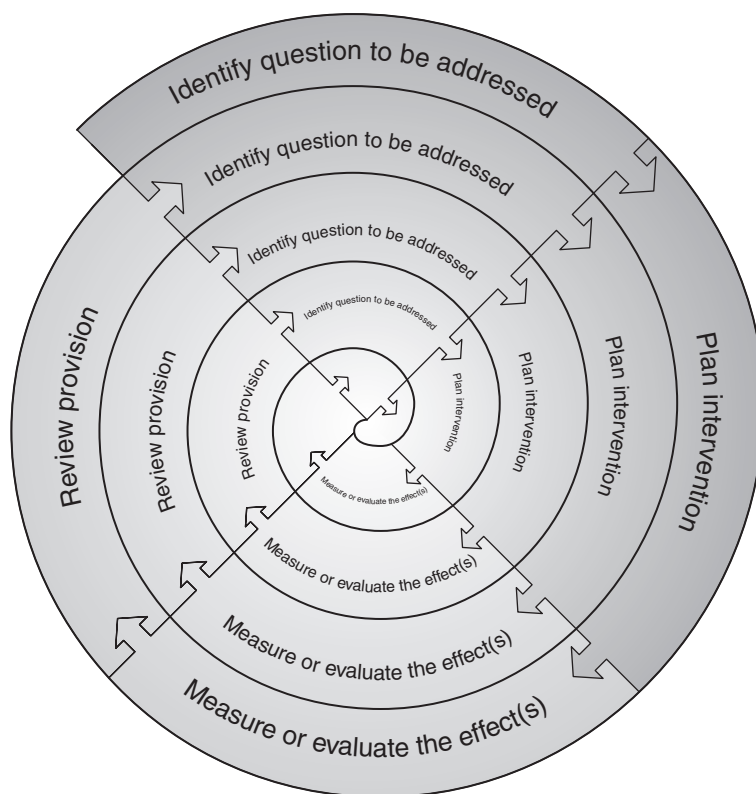


Figure 1.3 A spiral model of action research

may not be for individuals alone, it may well be professional development for a broader grouping of staff, for example, members of a subject department in a secondary school, a team of teachers and assistants in an early years setting, or an inter-institutional network of college lecturers. Furthermore, practitioner research may also be associated with other forms of development such as curriculum development or school/college development. It is to these wider matters of the social nature of practitioner research that we now turn.

One of the key issues in any form of research is that of 'objectivity'. While we will be addressing this topic in much more detail later in the book (and seeing just how slippery a concept it is), at this point we will limit ourselves to the simple assertion that it is desirable that our research activity is unbiased and dispassionate (that is not to say that our own values are unimportant or that we should not have passion about our research). It is for this reason that many practitioners engaging in research have found enormous benefit in collaborating with others. Specifically, the engagement of a 'critical friend' to work alongside you has proved to be invaluable for many practitioner researchers. Throughout the research process, from initially defining the

question you are addressing, through data gathering and analysis, to writing a report on your activity, it is valuable to be able to share your experiences with a colleague, especially one who is both familiar with the setting in which you are working, as well as having some experience themselves in practitioner research. That critical friend can ask questions of you and you can ask questions of her; this may lead to all kinds of insights into your research that might not otherwise arise.

If an individual practitioner researcher can be greatly assisted by the involvement of an individual critical friend, what are the implications of a more collaborative, team approach to research activity? The whole research process may be very different if a team is involved. From the outset, when a group of people are defining what the question to be investigated is, through the design and implementation of the enquiry, through to analysis and writing, discussion, negotiation and collaboration will be necessary. This does not mean that all members of a practitioner research team will be doing exactly the same things in their respective classrooms nor that their roles within the team will be identical. Indeed it may well be that different data collection methods are deployed in different locations and that each member of the team takes a leading role in particular phases of the research. But it does mean that there needs to be some coherence and shared sense of purpose and direction, in order for the research effort to achieve its potential as a collaborative venture.

Here is a description of a collaborative research project taking place in a Scottish secondary school.

The Leadership Group in school C identified four areas they wanted to investigate in a systematic manner. These areas were areas that had provoked some curiosity; they posed 'problems'/questions where there was a need for further information. The Leadership Group were also concerned to encourage the professional development of teachers at a relatively early stage of their teaching career (four to five years' experience). A group of teachers was convened to establish whether there was an interest in forming a research group to investigate the areas prioritised by senior management. A small group of teachers met with a member of the Research Support Team to explore ideas, strategies and methods. Each teacher took responsibility for preparing a draft plan for one line of enquiry. Through an iterative process, with support from the external research mentor, research plans were formulated for each project. The teachers accepted a modest honorarium for the additional work involved in leading these strands of enquiry and agreed a timeline for completion of the work staggered over a year.

The group struggled to find time to meet and share ideas and plans in the early stages. The mentor forwarded relevant research briefings and encouraged

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group members to construct a timeline with target dates for the completion of activities mapped against pressure points in the school calendar. The group identified areas where they needed support, for example working with focus groups and constructing interview schedules, and these needs will inform the programme of support for the coming months.

The biggest thing that we have been finding is that people need to talk to each other and spend time with each other and that is really difficult as a teacher because your job is to teach pupils in a classroom and you are on your own in that. There is very little time to actually speak to other people and spend time with other people sharing ideas and talking. (Class teacher, int.)

The research group plans to hold six-weekly working lunches with the Leadership Group to share work in progress. They are supported by a deputy headteacher who provides coordination and facilitates communication/requests for support/access to resources.

The headteacher plans to expand the group to include a wider range of staff. It is planned to invite post-probation teachers to participate in the group for specific purposes, for example supporting the lead teacher-researchers where appropriate. It is also planned to recruit more experienced senior colleagues to join the group to encourage cross-departmental and cross-role collaboration. One of the strands of enquiry focuses on primary–secondary transition and this brings a further dimension to the work, strengthening cross-sector links.

One of the common motivations for undertaking a collaborative research project in a school or college is the desire to improve practice. ‘School improvement’ and ‘school development planning’ have become key notions in educational management and leadership over the past twenty to thirty years (for example, Harris et al., 2003; Lingard et al., 2003). The process of bringing about positive change in schools and colleges is now recognised as a highly complex task, involving great skill and commitment from the institution’s leaders and needing ‘buy-in’ from the wider school or college community (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves and Fink, 2005).

Practitioner research is not an essential element of school improvement or development, however it has been demonstrated that it can play a major part in making change more systematic and indeed sustainable. Furthermore it has the additional pay-offs that have been mentioned above, such as contributing to the professional development of the staff involved. We can find numerous examples that have been published – and there are likely to be thousands more that have not been made so readily available – of schools, colleges or departments that have identified areas for significant development and have constructed some kind of action research process to frame the innovation, so that there can be a thorough assessment of the success of the

implementation of the change, as well as learning lessons about the viability of future development plans.

For example, in Scotland, the Schools of Ambition scheme was a government-funded initiative to support designated schools in implementing their own 'Transformational Plan'. A university-based research team was commissioned to provide research support for these schools in studying the success of these innovations. This work has been made available in a number of forms (see Learning and Teaching Scotland website: www.ltscotland.org.uk/schoolsofambition/about/schoolsofambitionresearch.asp). It appears that a key element to the effectiveness of the research strand of this work was the way in which the research activity within the school was managed, specifically who was involved in it and whether the senior management members of the school were active in it or not.

Extracts from Annual Report of *Research to Support Schools of Ambition 2008*

There is a need to afford sufficient senior management time to the development and coordination of activities associated with School of Ambition. While promoting leadership opportunities across the school community, senior managers lend authority to developments and have a key role to play in synthesising evidence and bringing coherence to the implementation of the transformational plan. (p. 50)

The involvement of a wider constituency of school staff in the planning stages contributes to the sustainability of initiatives throughout the transformation period and enhances the sustainability of changes in the longer-term. Although the original transformational plan may be principally authored by senior management there is considerable scope for devolution of detailed operational planning and the promotion of wider engagement through consultation and action planning. (p. 49)

Evaluation has been enhanced where the School of Ambition plan is aligned with the school development plan. This avoids a perception that there are two different streams of development taking place in school. It also enables the School of Ambition plan to be subject to similar levels of deliberation through established school development planning procedures. (p. 49)

In today's world of high accountability and inspection, it is also worth considering the contribution that institutionally based practitioner research may make to evaluation processes. In England, Scotland and elsewhere, inspection regimes have increasingly used the language of 'self-evaluation', often building on the work of MacBeath and others (MacBeath, 1999). There is now an expectation that schools and other educational institutions carry out regular reviews of their activities, sometimes to the extent of preparing a document that assesses their performance against their own

objectives (for example, a 'Self Evaluation Document'). Any institution that has carried out systematic enquiry into its developments and practices will be able to include this work as evidence not only of effectiveness but of a mature self-critical approach.

Practitioner research and education policy

Finally, in this chapter, we wish to discuss the relationship between practitioner research and education policy. So far, in this discussion, the emphasis has been very much about the relationship between research and practice – perhaps not surprisingly, given the focus of this book on practitioner research. One of the criticisms that is sometimes levelled against practitioner research is that its influence is very limited. So, it is suggested that while good quality practitioner or action research may lead to significant improvement in a teacher's classroom practice or even across a department or whole institution, the wider learning and the implications for policy are very limited. Indeed, this argument is sometimes extended to suggest that practitioner research rather than contributing to an extended form of teacher professionalism is actually leading to a more restricted professionalism, where the teacher's contribution is constrained to their own direct field of practice.

Various responses may be made to this criticism. There certainly can be a problem of this nature and indeed it may be that not all practitioners actually wish to influence practice. At the simplest level however, the kinds of ideas about collaborative effort discussed above are likely to lead to wider developments in practice that may indeed amount to a development in institution-level policy.

However, there is a stronger argument about the framing of practitioner or action research that can facilitate a greater engagement with policy processes. If a research study is framed from the outset in relation to wider policy, whether it be policies on the teaching of literacy, policies on bullying and harassment, policies on the management of teachers' time – whatever the area is – then it may well be that the outcomes of the research study will be of much wider interest. Carr and Kemmis (1997) urge that all action research should have a 'critical edge'. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue for 'inquiry as stance', that is, that practitioner enquiry should be aiming to bring about desired changes. Indeed, this concept implies a slightly different relationship with policy – almost research as a form of policy implementation.

The point we wish to make here is that practitioner research does not need to be restricted. It can, and we would argue should, play a significant part in bringing about developments in education policy at all levels, from school/college, to the region, indeed to a national and even supra-national level. Sachs (2003) refers to teaching as 'a transformative activity'. Building upon her arguments we would see practitioner research as an essential element of transformative teaching.

In the next chapter we consider some of the purposes of practitioner research in greater detail. We build on the ideas that we have discussed in this opening chapter.

Further reading

Evaluation in education

MacBeath, J. and McGlynn, A. (2002) *Self-evaluation – What's in It for Schools?* London: Routledge.

Reflective teaching

Pollard, A. (2008) *Reflective Teaching – Evidence-informed Professional Practice*. London: Cassell.

Professional development

Campbell, A., McNamara, O. and Gilroy, P. (2006) *Practitioner Research and Professional Development in Education*. London: Sage.

Forde, C., McMahon, M., McPhee, A. and Patrick, F. (2006) *Professional Development, Reflection and Enquiry*. London: Paul Chapman.

Communities of practice, communities of enquiry

Cassidy, C. et al. (2008) Building communities of educational enquiry, *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(2): 217–35.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Teacher as researcher

Stenhouse, L. (1975) *Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: Heinemann.

Action research

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical*. Lewes: Falmer Press.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2005) *All You Need to Know About Action Research*. London: Sage.

Relevant networks

British Educational Research Association (BERA) Practitioner Research Special Interest Group (SIG): www.bera.ac.uk/practitioner.

Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN): www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew.