Blog post

Part of series: Action research: Research into action

Practitioner enquiry: Embedding research in practice

Kate Wall, Professor of Education at University of Strathclyde • 14 Mar 2023

A common trait of expert teachers is a natural scepticism which prompts constant questioning of what they hear and do (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For many, this leads to research as a means to find answers. I am evangelical about this process of teachers engaging in and with research (Cordingley, 2015). However, if I am going to preach about the value of research for professional learning, then I must also ensure the model of research is doable and not yet another thing on a teacher's list of things to do. As such, it cannot be predicated on activity done outside the working day, and it must be connected to learner need so that the outcomes are useful (Hall & Wall, 2019). This blog post offers four suggestions about how this can be achieved.

1. Iterative cycles

Plan–do–review, introduced to teachers early in their careers is a useful bridge into research (Wall, 2019), with cyclical professional learning mirroring cyclical models of research (Baumfield et al., 2012). In both, learning is cumulative with potential outcomes informing next steps. It does not mean all cycles of plan–do–review become research, but research can fit over those pre-existing cycles to facilitate a research lens on practice. When research is introduced, the method needs to have an appropriate fit with the teacher's intent, and some wariness is needed in case cycles of research begin to overshadow pedagogy.

n going to preach about
lue of research for
sional learning, then I
lso ensure the model of
ch is doable and not yet
r thing on a teacher's list
gs to do.'

2. Targeting a question

Naturally, sceptical teachers have lots of questions. Most will resolve themselves, so practitioner enquiry is about turning the volume up (focusing the research lens) on one that is most problematic, interesting and useful. Two types of potential research question are suggested: the 'what happens if…' (intervention) and the 'what's going on…' (exploratory) (Hall & Wall, 2019). Dominant discourses can mean teachers think change is always necessary, but the option to stand back and observe is just as important. Identifying which question applies is usually down to the individual teacher, and conversations about how to address perceived student need within their setting are essential. To focus on someone else's question, or to choose one that lacks relevancy or interest, leads to the dangers of research becoming extra and outside practice.

3. Collecting pedagogically appropriate evidence

Rather than presuming traditional research methods are better, a model of data embedded in the evidence-rich contexts of schools and in teacher's own pedagogic repertoire is needed. Most teachers can confidently provide a long list of pros and cons about whether a test is an appropriate measure of attainment. Why would this be put aside just because they are presumed 'proper'? Therefore, rather than othering the process of research and imposing more work for evidence-collection purposes, teachers need to see practice-generated

information as valuable data. This could be evidence collected routinely by the system (attendance, test scores, behaviour logs, additional support records, and so forth), as part of teaching and learning (work samples, assessment, discussion activities, and the like), or that can be incorporated into normal school routine (observation, school council, recordings, and so on). With a bit of flexibility and some permissions, practice-based evidence can be enough; indeed, as it is embedded, it should have added relevancy and so increase the likelihood of being useful.

4. Making public

This can be the scary bit, but a commitment to a professional community learning through research is predicated on the commitment to share learning (Stenhouse, 1981). One of the challenges comes when sharing is only at the endpoint (our shiny, perfect, retro-fitted version) rather than throughout the process when the actual learning about pedagogy and research is happening. Learning through research should be authentic to practise – sometimes it works, other times it does not, but that is OK.

As teachers we are perfectly OK with the learning that comes from those difficult lessons that do not work as expected; what we need to cultivate is a similar learning disposition to the research process. There are no perfect research designs, there are a bunch of decisions about research that may or may not work depending on the context in which they are applied. Seeing the parallels between pedagogy and methodology will help us be more forgiving of what we don't know, while being more confident of how we might attempt to find out.

References

Baumfield, V., Hall, E., & Wall, K. (2012). *Action research in the education: Learning through practitioner enquiry* (2nd ed.). London: Sage

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). Teacher research as stance. *The Sage handbook of educational action research* (pp. 39–49). Sage, 39-49.

Cordingley, P. (2015). The contribution of research to teachers' professional learning and development. *Oxford Review of Education*, *41*(2), 234–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2015.1020105

Hall, E., & Wall, K. (2019). *Research methods for understanding professional learning*. Bloomsbury.

Stenhouse, L. (1981). What counts as research? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *29*(2), 103–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.1981.9973589

Wall, K. (2019) Bridging the gap between methodology and pedagogy. *Scottish Education Review*, *50*(2), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-05002002

Themes: Research methods **Communities:** Practitioner Research • Research Methodology in Education

About the authors

Kate Wall, Professor

Professor of Education at University of Strathclyde

Kate's work focusses on the development of innovative pedagogies and research methodologies (including visual approaches) that facilitate effective talk about learning (metacognition). She is interested in the development and exploration of democratic spaces where learners can talk about their experiences of learning.