Doing participative practitioner-based research

Undertaking participative practitioner-based research in educational contexts can be both rewarding and revealing. **Andrew Armitage** offers some words of advice concerning the pitfalls and follies of doing this kind of research and how to avoid them.

Participative practitioner research comes in many guises, for example, action-research approaches that are familiar and popular in educational settings, ethnographies, and socially constructed experiments that attempt to explore the dynamics of schools and local authorities that support the infrastructure of the educational providers and settings. However, no matter the approach taken, organisational research relies upon the voluntary participation of participants – for example, social experiments that might investigate classroom behaviour, or action research where the participants may be involved in the design of the study or in helping to find solutions to the problem being investigated. Participants may also be involved in implementing the outcomes of the research and in their management, especially if this involves a change process or drawing up of a whole-school policy.

If it is to have effective outcomes and solutions for professional practice, participative practitioner-based research should engage a variety of stakeholders ranging from teachers to parents, local authorities and pupils. This can be an emancipatory experience for those involved in the study, and provides an ethos emphasising autonomy and empowerment in the solution of real-life problems. This would suggest that a researcher acting in isolation from their research environment cannot undertake participative practitioner-based research. If valid outcomes are

required to support change – for example, in the classroom or to inform institutional policy-making initiatives within local authorities – then the researcher needs to be sensitive to those who take part in the study. However, whilst there are advantages of doing participative practitioner-based research, you need to guard against certain traditional attitudes concerning the research process.

Some traditional assumptions about research

Doing organisational research should be a participative endeavour if the researcher and the institution are to gain from the experience, because if practitioner-based research is to be effective then the outcomes of such studies must be of benefit both to professional practice and institutional policy making. The researcher must therefore take into account the practical nature, outcomes and impact that their study might have upon professional practice and policymaking. Take, for example, a study of classroom teaching effectiveness. If this centres solely upon explaining generalisations rather than addressing specific solutions to specific issues, then their implementation in practice might prove difficult as it might alienate teachers who have not participated in the study – the results will have no relevance to them for changing and improving their professional practice. Despite

the benefits of a participative method, some 'traditional' assumptions, which Lawler and Drexler (1980) first identified are still held today by researchers and participants alike about the nature of participative practitioner-based research.

Assumption 1: The researcher has most or all the information and knowledge needed to carry out a well-designed research project.

Assumption 2: Any instrument the researcher designs or selects will be accepted by the organisation.

Assumption 3: The institution and its stakeholders do not need to know the researcher's orientation or the purposes of the research.

Assumption 4: Researchers do not need to know the institution's orientation or 'implicit' organisation theories.

Assumption 5: Institutional commitment to participating in research can be obtained in the interest of 'science'.

Assumption 6: Adoption and implementation will follow assessment, diagnosis, and identification of solutions.

As this list suggests, the 'researcher as expert' approach assumes that institutional stakeholders will be ready and willing to cooperate with the research agenda set by the researcher. Furthermore, those who take part in the study will be only too glad to exchange their thoughts and ideas about how things 'can done for the better around here' and will be eager to get involved without any second thoughts. It also assumes that the researcher can remain oblivious to the organisational context in which they intend do their study. However, this may not be the best way to engage those who are ultimately to benefit from the outcomes of participative practitioner-based research. Indeed, good case-study research always takes into account the context in which a study takes place, and the conclusions are specifically focused on a particular issue or

set of issues. Therefore, we must always ask the following questions before we enter the research environment.

- What are the reasons for conducting this study?

- What are the characteristics needed by the organisational researcher?

- What ethical issues have to be overcome?

- How can the traditional assumptions of research be reformulated to enable participative enquiry to be successful?

Reasons for doing participative research

So the question might be asked: why do participative practitioner-based organisational research? Would it not be better to let the researcher dictate the pace and direction of the research process?

For those who are contemplating a practitioner participative-based study there are many advantages of this approach. The major reason is its collaborative approach, which can act as an institutional change agent through its stakeholders, ideally at all levels of the hierarchy, thereby leading to the empowerment and involvement of participants in a problem-solving process and environment. This is illustrated in Box 1, which shows an example of the S-P-I-E approach, where each stage 'pulls in' different stakeholders. This encourages a democratic and open approach when conducting exploratory studies that can enable change in professional practice.

Other reasons for doing participative practitioner-based research are to do with the attainment of human potential and self-efficacy. This can be achieved, for example, by action-research approaches that create communities of professional practice and knowledge leading to new insights, substantive theory and model building of organisational practice and policies and the formulation of further research questions to be investigated.

Box 1 The S-P-I-E approach

The researcher will need to determine who the key players are when addressing an organisational problem. A simple, yet effective approach is S-P-I-E – Strategy, Plan, Information, Evaluate – as it reminds the researcher of who should be involved in the study and at what stages.

Strategy

At this stage of the project the researcher will need the support of the school's senior management team in order to formulate a strategic approach to tackle the issues. To enable an informed debate in diagnosing the problem and determining the scope of the study they will involve other key players in the school, such as heads of year and form tutors. This shows a commitment and a sense of ownership of the problems from the 'top' and a willingness to include others who can have a key set of inputs in determining the issues to be addressed.

Plan

This stage involves the planning, design, and approach of the study. Heads of year might be given the responsibility in conjunction with the researcher for directing the study 'on the ground'. These are key players in determining where the issues might best be investigated because they have a good overview of what is happening in their particular year. Form tutors might also be involved at this stage as they are a key link in the identification of problems on a day-to-day basis, as they are the 'eyes and ears' of a school's culture and learning environment.

Information

Form tutors might be best placed to collect data first hand if, for example, the study is concerned with truancy or reduction of exclusions from the classroom, as they have direct experience of the incidents. The researcher needs to work closely with information and data collectors to ensure consistency in its collection. For example, in a truancy reduction programme the collection and reporting of registration figures in a timely and accurate manner is important in determining where and when key parts of the school week are more prone to absent pupils than others.

Evaluate

This stage of the study requires the researcher to bring all the stakeholders together to discuss its findings. This is an important stage of the study as accurate feedback is vital for setting a course of action to address the problem in any policy formulation. This will mean that the researcher needs to bring together senior management, heads of year and form tutors to evaluate what has been found and to formulate a school policy based upon the collective input of all stakeholders in the study. For example, if the study was investigating classroom behaviour then the formulation of any school policy to address this problem needs to take account of form tutors' views, as they will probably have the responsibility of administering and monitoring its effectiveness. The role of senior management in this case might be to ensure resources are in place to support heads of year and form tutors to address these issues.

Characteristics needed by the organisational researcher

The first issue the researcher needs to think about is his/her role and the relationship he/she has with the institution and those stakeholders who will take part in the study. For example, is the researcher an internal or external member of the organisation? Is he/she a participant or non-participant in the research process itself? These questions are fundamental for participative practitioner-based research. Secondly, the participative practitioner-based researcher needs to be a good organiser and astute organisational politician when negotiating access to information in order to work with professionals in tight-knit communities of practice.

When doing a participative practitioner-based study, a researcher needs a number of skills (see Box 2). He/she must be a good listener in order to take in the views at all levels in an organisation, to get a feel of 'how things are around here'. A sympathetic ear and being supportive is also needed, especially to those who might feel 'vulnerable' and wary as to the reasons a study is to be undertaken. Ignoring the feelings of those the researcher is to work with might jeopardise the entire research project if negativity becomes infectious.

He/she must also be an effective networker – this is an essential part of the researcher's skill set. Doing a successful institutional study often requires the help of others to 'open doors', especially when dealing with gatekeepers. The ability to be an effective

practitioner-based research should engage a variety of stakeholders ranging from teachers to parents, local authorities and pupils

'power broker', negotiating successfully and diplomatically without causing offence is essential. Being a good facilitator, able to work collaboratively with stakeholders and showing a supportive attitude towards stake-

holders is also an essential quality of the participative practitioner-based researcher.

Finally, institutional stakeholders who take part in the study must not overlook the important characteristics of trustworthiness, honesty and reliability – without these qualities the researcher will almost certainly run into the barriers of non-cooperation and this might result in a complete withdrawal if they feel they are being slighted in any way.

Box 2 Characteristics of an organisational researcher

- Good listener
- Sympathetic
- Good communicator
- Good networker
- Good facilitator
- Collaborative
- Supportive
- Good power broker
- Trustworthy
- Honest
- Reliable
- Good negotiator – especially through and with gatekeepers

When conducting participative practitioner-based research, ethical issues are paramount and the researcher must always ask the following questions before entering the research environment.

- Who is the client?
- What is the power relationship of researcher to participants?
- Can I access the data – are there any confidentiality issues?
- Where should findings be disseminated?
- When should findings be disseminated?
- Are there dangers of 'scapegoating', for example, exposing and blaming a teacher for unsatisfactory professional practice?

A new set of assumptions for doing research

Before we consider a new set of assumptions required for doing a participative practitioner-based study, the researcher needs to consider the following. The context of the research study must not be ignored before entering the research environment. Researchers need to recognise the needs of the institution as well as those of stakeholders that take part in the study. This means they need to strike a balance of being directed rather than always having to lead – in other words, they have to adopt a 'facilitative attitude' during the research process. If we now reconsider the initial assumptions of doing participative practitioner-based research, whether in the role of researcher or participant, they can now be set out as follows.
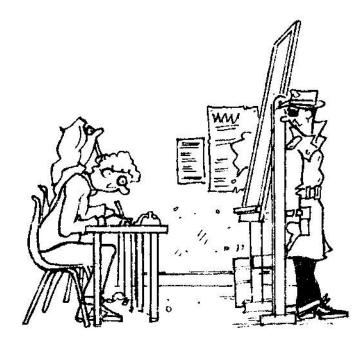
Assumption 1: The researcher needs the information and knowledge that organisational stakeholders have in order to design the research correctly. This is vital if the researcher is to engage participants. For example, the formation of a new school policy concerning behaviour will need to draw upon the experiences of teachers who work with their pupils on a day-to-day basis if the right sets of problems and questions are to be addressed.

Assumption 2: The kinds of measurement instruments used and the content of the measurement instruments need to reflect a good knowledge of the local culture and climate of the organisation. This requires the researcher to take into account the way participants will react to surveys or observational instruments. For example, it is important that researchers do not intrude into the 'private life' of the classroom without first agreeing with teachers what instruments will be used. It would not be advisable to carry out observations of teaching styles and performance if the researcher made observations that might compromise the teacher concerned. Sensitivity in the design and use of instruments is needed if

the researcher is to maintain participants' trust.

Assumption 3: The institution and its stakeholders need to know a considerable amount about the researcher's orientation to organisations and the reason for doing the particular research study. For example the introduction of a government or local-authority policy into the school or classroom environment might 'set alarm bells off' if they thought the findings from the study might be disseminated to external bodies such as local authorities, parents and so on, possibly compromising their standing and ability to attract and retain pupils.

Assumption 4: The researcher needs to know the client's orientation and implicit theories of organisation with reference to the cultural aspects of the organisation. The researcher must have a sound grasp of 'what is going on around here' before he/she commences the study, treating the teaching staff as a single 'corporate entity'. Even in a small primary school this might be inadvisable in view of the fact that they are engaged in a wide set of issues in their day-to-day practice. For example, the experiences of an NQT will probably be different from those of an experienced senior teacher and it is important that the researcher recognises these

the S-P-I-E approach

differences before making general assumptions about the 'culture' of the organisation.

Assumption 5: Client commitment to participation in research can best be obtained by involving the institution and its stakeholders in the design of the research and fully communicating to them the purpose of the research. This is important because participative-based research is intended to empower participants beyond the 'confines' of the research study and empowers them to become independent organisational problem solvers in their own right. If teachers are not engaged in the design of a study then the implementation of its outcomes might not be embraced and owned by those who had a hand in helping to formulate them. For example, a pupil bullying policy might include only senior managers and teachers in the scoping and design of the study and will therefore ignore those at the 'coal face' who have to deal with issues directly on a day-to-day basis. This could lead to the formulation of the wrong research questions and the alienation of teachers and students who have to cope with these issues on a one-to-one basis, and any outcomes might not address strategies for dealing with 'flash points' or ways to improve the school environment.

Assumption 6: Implementation and adoption are most likely to follow when research participants have been actively involved in the research process. The involvement of teachers and policy makers is vital for the long-lasting effectiveness of a study. For example, a study that investigates truancy will require that all members of staff need to be involved in the successful implementation of any school policies that might emerge from its findings. This is vital both in terms of school reputation and the educational attainment of individual pupils. Involving members of staff and disseminating findings (even when the study is in progress) ensures timely communication with those who have to translate findings into practice. It is also important that channels of communication to the researcher are available to teachers who will have to implement and manage any subsequent truancy policy, so that new lines of enquiry might be explored in the next cycle of the study.

Reference

Lawler, E.E. and Drexler, J.A. (1980). 'Participative research: the subject as core-searcher.' In: Lawler, E.E., Nadler, D.A. and Cammann, C. *Organizational Assessment: Perspectives on the Measurement of Organizational Behavior and the Quality of Working Life*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Further reading

McNamara, O. (2001). *Becoming an Evidence-based Practitioner: A Framework for Teacher-research*. London: Routledge.

Murray, L. and Lawrence, B. (2000). *Practitioner-based Enquiry: Principles for Postgraduate Research*. London: Routledge.

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