Leaders as Researchers: Supporting Practitioner Enquiry through the NCSL Research Associate Programme

Andy Coleman

Educational Management Administration & Leadership 2007 35: 479
DOI: 10.1177/1741143207002429

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ema.sagepub.com/content/35/4/479

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

British Educational Leadership, Management & Administration Society

Additional services and information for Educational Management Administration & Leadership can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ema.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://ema.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://ema.sagepub.com/content/35/4/479.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Sep 12, 2007
What is This?
Leaders as Researchers

Supporting Practitioner Enquiry through the NCSL Research Associate Programme

Andy Coleman

ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of practitioner-based enquiry in education and the degree to which in bridges the gap between leadership research and leadership practice. In doing so it draws on the findings from an evaluation of NCSL's Research Associate Programme. Several key drivers are identified behind the increased interest in practitioner-based enquiry, these being school based curriculum reform, the reconceptualization of the notion of professionalism, increased commitment to continued professional development and greater interest in action research. The article then explores the potential benefits of practitioner enquiry at the individual, school and system levels. It also reviews the potential challenges facing practitioner researchers and the strategies adopted by NCSL in response to these. The article concludes by highlighting the value of practitioner enquiry in encouraging reflection and school leadership is an evidence based profession.

KEYWORDS NCSL, practitioner-based enquiry, research associates, school leadership, teacher research

Introduction

Aims

The aims of this article are twofold. First, to provide a brief overview of the history of practitioner-based enquiry in education and a more focused consideration of the benefits and potential pitfalls for leaders of engaging in such activity. Second, to explore the value of practitioner-based enquiry in bridging the gap between leadership research and leadership practice, at the individual, organizational and system levels. The motivation for this comes in part from a desire to address the concern that, while widely advocated, little is known of the actual effectiveness of practitioner-based enquiry in these three regards (Middlewood et al., 1999: vi). To do so the article draws on published work on practitioner-based enquiry in education and uses the findings from an evaluation of NCSL's Research Associate Programme (RAP).
Background to Practitioner-based Enquiry within Education

Over the past 30 years there has been a growing recognition of the value of practitioner research within education. During this time increases in its take-up and scale of impact has been such that Ruddock has described it as a ‘quiet revolution’ (Ruddock, 2001: 1). As Campbell (2002: 12) observes: ‘Teacher research is an idea whose time has come.’

This change in understanding has been driven by a number of factors.

School-based Curriculum Reform

The origins of practitioner-based enquiry in education can be traced back to the work of Schwab and others in the 1960s. Writing from a science background, Schwab perceived a situation in which students found their curricula too passive and ‘irrelevant’ to their personal development as reasoning individuals (Schwab, 1962: 5–9). At the same time, curriculum reform in British schools led to greater interest in the idea of teachers-as-researchers, as many teachers struggled to identify new approaches to engage students (Elliott, 1991: 3–5). Such research contributed significantly to the establishment of new theories on the effectiveness of practice. These theories in turn contributed to the emergence of a new theory–practice relationship that challenged the then dominant view that ‘good practice’ was based on replicating established theoretical models rather than building on the practical experiences of teachers themselves (Elliott, 1991: 6–7).

This idea was given more focus and structure in the 1970s by Stenhouse, whose work developed the idea of the teacher as ‘extended professional’, originally advanced by Hoyle some years earlier (Stenhouse, 1976: 143–4). Central to Stenhouse’s (1976: 144) idea of the extended professional teacher was the belief that the individual had the ‘. . . capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures’. Stenhouse also stated that a school’s curriculum could not be developed without the ownership of the teacher whose job it was to teach it. The most effective way to achieve this was to encourage teachers to adopt the role of researcher in their own classroom (Stenhouse, 1976: 143). Later work by writers such as Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1999) also emphasized the importance of including teachers’ own perspectives within their broader knowledge base, thereby increasing its authenticity and the profession’s sense of ownership. In the late 1970s and early 1980s writers such as Skilbeck further highlighted the contribution teachers’ research could make in supporting curriculum development (Skilbeck, 1984: 46).

At roughly the same time, initiatives such as the Guidelines for the Review of Internal Development in Schools (GRIDS) and the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) gave added impetus to the principle of
school-based enquiry, the motivation for this coming from the promotion of self-evaluation as a mechanism for wider whole-school improvement (MacBeath, 2005). Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) International School Improvement Project also promoted these principles (Reynolds et al., 2000: 3). The recent move towards a more light touch inspection system of schools by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is also based in part on a belief in the value of self-evaluation by schools (Ofsted, 2004: 4–6).

Re-conceptualizing the Notion of Professionalism

The increased emphasis on teachers’ professionalism was in part a reaction against the view that teaching had become increasingly mechanistic and deskilled. Indeed, it is worth noting that this trend is seen to continue to the present day, exacerbated as it is by the high level of government intervention in classroom practice (Campbell, 2002: 4), which in turn have reduced the autonomy of teachers to innovate (Leat, 2005: 1). The desire to embed a commitment to knowledge creation within teaching can therefore be viewed as part of a broader drive to reclaim the professional autonomy of teachers (Carter and Halsall, 1998: 71–2). However, it is also consistent with some of the values that underpin the teaching profession. Foremost among these is Dewey’s belief that teachers should actively investigate pedagogical problems which are therefore a key source of understanding into the successes and failures of the school (Kincheloe, 2003: 36), a point also argued by Ruddock who notes that: ‘[teachers must focus on] the things that lie at the heart of their professionalism: pupils, teaching and learning’ (Ruddock, 2001: 1).

The focus on enquiry connects strongly with Schön’s call for the emergence of reflective practitioners, who possess the capacity to explore their own approaches and develop strategies that can support their responses to the constantly changing context in which they operate (Schön, 1983). Kincheloe meanwhile sees practitioner enquiry as a central aspect of the culture of good work, supporting, amongst other things, greater professional self-direction, increased work variety and enhanced job-based learning (Kincheloe, 2003: 25–7).

The more general focus on research is also consistent with a broader view that distinguishes between professional and non-professional occupations, according to the value they place on theoretical knowledge and research. For instance, the high standing afforded to medicine and law is based at least in part on the high regard they have given to research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 8). While it is worth noting that in contrast with nursing for instance, teaching has never been viewed as wholly research based, greater focus on practitioner enquiry may potentially strengthen the profession’s evidence base, thereby increasing the degree to which research underpins practice and placing greater
value on individuals’ experiences and craft knowledge as sources of understanding (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 5–6). The latter of these is therefore important in raising the general esteem that the profession is held in.

**Supporting Continued Professional Development**

The increased commitment to continued professional development (CPD) for teachers, seen from the early 1970s, has also led to greater emphasis being placed on self-assessment and reflection as mechanisms for enhancing personal performance. At the same time, there has been considerable growth in the provision of professional development programmes by higher education institutions (HEIs) and local authorities (LAs), many of which contained substantial enquiry-based elements. The rapid expansion of the doctor of education (EdD) programme over the past decade is a good example of this trend.

Meanwhile, the observed trend away from the situation where such research is based solely on an area of individual interest, towards one where regard is given to the broader professional setting in which the research takes place, has further increased the relevance and potential impact of many practitioner enquiries (Robson, 2002: 534). As a result, practitioner-based research has gained popularity with educational theorists such as Hollingsworth, for its ability to support systematic and structured self-reflection (McGinnis, 2003). Indeed, practitioner enquiry is now invariably seen as a ‘good thing’ because it encourages individuals to make sense of their own experiences and challenge previously held assumptions, while also supporting the creative development of knowledge (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 28). Additional personal benefits have been found to include increased self-confidence, greater willingness to exercise professional judgement and improved use of research (Cordingley and Bell, 2002: 1–4). The latter of these is particularly important if the potentially positive impact of increased enquiry is to be fully realized (NTRP, 2005: 6).

**Overcoming Professional Suspicion of Research**

Many writers have explored teachers’ historical suspicion of research. Central to this has been the degree to which teachers have viewed research as having little to do with their day-to-day teaching ‘craft’; it was instead grounded in personal experience and peer-to-peer learning (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 8). Research then was more often likely to be viewed as ‘threatening’ and lacking relevance, as the theoretical ideals it described invariably failed to match an individual’s own reality:

Teachers feel ‘theory’ is threatening because it is produced by a group of outsiders who claim to be experts at generating valid knowledge about educational practices . . . as such it is remote from their practical experience of
the way things are. To bow to a ‘theory’ is to deny the validity of one’s own experience-based professional craft knowledge (Elliott, 1991: 45–6).

This suspicion of theory has therefore served to reduce teachers' engagement in enquiry and increased the extent to which their practice remained principally private (Kelly, 1985: 139).

Furthermore, many writers have expressed concerns over how little research has historically been undertaken to support broader efforts at school improvement. This has stemmed in part from the degree to which research has been seen to be done to and not with teachers and the extent to which the results of such work have been considered helpful in producing tangible benefits for schools (Carter and Halsall, 1998: 75). Further concern over the quality of education research and its relevance to practitioners comes from Tooley (2000) and Darby, who, in a review of 41 published articles, highlighted concerns over the partisanship of research, methodological weaknesses and the effective dissemination of findings. These concerns were echoed by Hillage et al. (1998: 44–8), who also expressed reservations over the relevance and accessibility of research, and the general lack of connectedness in research work overall, which has resulted in duplications and gaps in the knowledge base.

As a result, the past two decades have seen evermore calls for research to be made more relevant to the daily needs of educational practitioners (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 6), and for the findings of this work to be disseminated more effectively (Bassey, 1998). Greater practitioner involvement in enquiry is seen by some as one means of ensuring this (Loughran, 2002: 1–4), with bodies such as the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) having highlighted the importance of a more collaborative approach to research between practitioners and academics (NTRP, 2005: 4). Encouragingly recent years have seen a general improvement in the connection between research and practice in education and increased regard for research among practitioners in schools. Evidence for this comes from Cordingley et al. (2005), who describe a ‘snowball of initiatives’ designed to support practitioner enquiry. These have included the General Teaching Council's (GTC) research of the month, the establishment of the NTRP itself and the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) research-informed practice (TRIPS) website (Cordingley et al., 2005: 2). However despite these developments, Cordingley et al. conclude their paper by expressing concern over the degree to which much published research still failed to meet the needs of the profession (Cordingley, et al., 2005: 7), highlighting the need for still further work in this respect.

**Changes in the Philosophical Landscape of Social Research**

As noted above, the increased popularity of practitioner enquiry has, in part, been a reaction against the perceived lack of relevance of research per se and a desire to increase the degree to which its findings inform practice within schools. Practitioner enquiry can therefore be viewed as a more politicized form
of research, as its underlying aim involves achieving change rather than simply studying an issue for its own sake (Coleman and Lumby, 1999: 18). This increased focus on action and the presence of a more overt political agenda is consistent with many critical theories, which seek not only to describe an existing situation but also establish what the preferred model of existence should be (Cohen et al., 2000: 28).

It is of little surprise then that the increased focus on practitioner-based enquiry should have accompanied a period of greater interest in critical theories and a move away from more positivist approaches, which have been accused of being more sympathetic to the divorce of research and practice. Indeed, writers, such as Kincheloe (2003: 2), have actively promoted its potential to challenge the reductionist view of human nature that positivist approaches are seen to promote. Others have noted the empowering nature and liberating effect of practitioner enquiry for the individuals involved (Cohen et al., 2000: 35) and highlighted its potential to uncover and challenge the broader powers and interests that help shape society (2000: 28).

The extent to which much practitioner enquiry is truly critical and presents serious challenges to the status quo is something of a moot point. However, greater interest in critical theory has been important in promoting a more egalitarian perspective towards the completion of research and the notion that it is not the exclusive preserve of the academic researcher (Cohen et al., 2000: 36). There must also be some doubt over whether the greater focus on critical theory has led to a rejection of more traditional positivist approaches. However, one of the overwhelming strengths of practitioner research has been its greater flexibility and how it encourages individuals to take a more pragmatic approach to the research process, rather than the slavish adherence to one school of thought:

[In recent years] disciplinary boundaries have become permeable and modes of scientific enquiry have become multi-faceted and less paradigm fixated. (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 9)

Action Research and Wider School Improvement

As noted, for many practitioners, securing tangible improvements in conditions in schools is a fundamental driver behind their decision to undertake research (Coleman and Lumby, 1999; Barker, 2005). This focus on change is important in promoting the use of action research methods, which are often adopted by practitioner enquirers and help embed and assess the relative strengths of potential changes (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 16).

The term action research was first coined by the social psychologist Lewin (1948), with the principles first applied to education by Corey in the 1940s (Smith, 2001). However, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that action research really grew in popularity (Greenbank, 2004: 2). Action research is intended to
combine a strong and rigorous research activity with a respect for participants’ knowledge and understanding. It therefore brings together theory and practical knowledge, to test each other with the purpose of developing practice (NTRP, 2005: 7). As such it builds on the existing expertise of practitioners, rather than denying the validity of their prior experiences, a criticism often levelled against more theoretical work.

In action research, theoretical abstraction is secondary to the development of practical understanding. Its focus then is on evidencing practice and increasing understanding of the specific situation under investigation, rather than attempting to develop general theory and transferable principles. Action research is also concerned with transformation and change, providing a mechanism for individuals to improve their situation (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996: 3–4). Such studies are therefore felt to be more relevant to practitioners as they are grounded in the specific issue under review and underpinned by a more relevant application of theory, rather than the emphasis being the other way around.

**Broader Agency Support**

As already indicated, the drive to engage in enquiry has been mirrored by an increase in the level of support offered by external agencies. For instance the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), DfES, Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE), professional teaching associations and NCSL have all actively supported the completion of practitioner-based enquiry in recent years. The NTRP has also been established to promote the use of research by the profession and encourage more practitioners to engage with enquiry (DfES, 2005). The following statement from the Scottish Education Research Association (SERA) is typical of these agencies’ desire to support this type of activity:

> We are arguing for a different kind of research policy which involves practitioners as research partner. . . . Developing a research culture in schools will make a significant contribution to the promotion of lifelong learning advocated for local communities. (Francis, 1999: 49)

HEIs have also played a significant role in providing school leaders with the conceptual and methodological skills needed to undertake research. Furthermore, they have contributed to the development of a cadre of teachers with experience of and commitment to research, who are able to support and encourage others in their enquiries. Other agencies have also played an important role in promoting increased rigour in the use of research methods. For instance, NTRP (2005: 9) has published a series of research criteria for underpinning practitioner enquiry, while NCSL (2003) has also published advice and guidance in this regard. Many local education authorities (LEAs) have also
developed support for individuals and schools interested in undertaking enquiries. Arguably the best-known example of this is Essex LEA, whose Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE) has been the inspiration behind the notion of the research-engaged school (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003).

Elsewhere, journals such as *Education Management Administration & Leadership* and *Managing Schools Today* have increasingly provided a platform for the publication of such work, while programmes such as PAVOT and PEEL in Australia provide evidence of a broader, international interest in this field (Loughran, 2002: 9).

**Why Does NCSL Support Practitioner-based Enquiry?**

NCSL supports practitioner enquiry principally through its RAP. This helps school leaders to research an area of interest to them and NCSL in the field of school leadership by sponsoring their release from school for up to 30 days over the course of a year. Such projects may be relatively small scale and undertaken individually, or form part of a larger-scale enquiry. In either case they will invariably extend beyond the associate's own school, and investigate an issue of relevance to schools more widely.

As part of the programme, NCSL provides training on research methods and ongoing tutorial support in the design and writing up of the research. It also promotes the dissemination of associates' findings by publishing summaries of their reports and encouraging them to present at national and international conferences.

The RAP has several key attractions for NCSL. First, it provides a mechanism for formally gathering some of the craft and practitioner-based knowledge that exists among school leaders. In doing so, it celebrates the value of this knowledge and acknowledges its validity. Second, associates' research is also seen as particularly likely to directly support school improvement through its dissemination of good and interesting practice. Meanwhile associates model the personal benefits of undertaking enquiry and so help promote engagement with research more broadly among leaders and across schools in general (NTRP, 2005: 7), which is one of NCSL's specific aims.

In the following sections, evidence from NCSL's own evaluation of its RAP is used to explore these issues and the broader benefits of teacher research in more depth. This evaluation comprised interviews with 18 associates from cohorts one and two of the programme, conducted during 2002. Further information on the impact of their involvement in the programme was gathered via email during 2002 and 2003. Follow-up interviews with four of this original sample of participants were completed in December 2005 to provide greater clarity over the effects of involvement in the programme.

Additional informal dialogue with subsequent participants on the programme has confirmed and reinforced the findings of this work.
Potential Benefits of Practitioner-based Enquiry

In this section, the potential benefits of practitioner-based enquiry are explored within the context of the RAP and the themes introduced in the previous section. This is structured by considering these benefits at the individual, organizational and system levels.

For Individual Leaders

Learning and Development of Research Skills

For school leaders, practitioner-based enquiry provides an opportunity to divert attention away from the day-to-day demands of their school and explore instead an area of personal interest. This may potentially be highly empowering and come as a welcome contrast to the often reactive and at times fire fighting nature of headship. That a significant proportion of associates choose to focus on the leadership of learning highlights the programme’s value as a mechanism for reconnecting leaders with this fundamental area of interest in their role as teachers.

Pedagogically, practitioner-based enquiry has been found to be a consistently powerful learning method that supports learning through direct individual participation and autonomous learning (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 13–14). As noted earlier in this paper, involvement in enquiry also promotes focused reflection that can further support change. This emphasis on reflective learning is a hallmark of many other areas of NCSL provision.

The opportunity for reflection more broadly has been highly valued by associates and found by many to have had a major regenerative effect. Participation in the programme has also often re-ignited individuals’ interest in study and research. In addition it has increased leaders’ capacity in research skills and several associates have subsequently decided to continue their study, having since embarked on a PhD, EdD or MEd. As an associate from a primary school said:

An important thing for me has been using my research and building on it further. So I’ve used it as a basis for an MPhil at Warwick University. It's contributed to my further professional development because I've found it such a stimulating area of study and interest.

Application

Increased understanding and knowledge resulting directly from their study often has a positive impact on individuals' confidence and associates frequently report that their work had had a complementary effect on their professional practice. Involvement in the programme has also led to other changes for practitioners.

Many participants have also reported improved understanding of the wider schools’ policy environment, often stemming from their closer link to NCSL.
In some instances, this was enhanced by the time an associate spent away from the school as part of their associateship. For instance one secondary head stated:

The personal impact was huge. I went back to school and re-evaluated what I was doing and how I was doing it. The school benefited from my refreshment and what I wanted to do as a result of this. I undertook a review of everything we did and how we did it, and some quite significant changes were made as a result.

**Encouraging Collaboration between School Leaders**

The benefits of improved collaboration and networking as a means of learning and mutual support for school headteachers is well documented (for example, MacBeath, 1998; Bush, et al., 1999; Southworth and Lincoln, 1999). More specifically, within the context of practitioner-based enquiry, collaboration can provide a mechanism for quality assuring methods, offering mutual support, sharing resources and funding, clarifying research questions and promoting the dissemination of findings (Barker, 2005: 20–1). Involvement in the RAP provides an opportunity for associates to participate in a broader professional community and builds on the development of other networks such as the Learning and Skills Research Network, Networked Learning Communities and Bath University Teacher Research Network (Barker, 2005: 20).

One key approach to this has been the establishment of action learning sets (ALS). Protocols such as ALS are intended to encourage mutual support and cooperation, by increasing awareness of individual enquiries, sharing of specific issues and the development of potential solutions. Co-coaching forms a central part of this approach. ALS promote group commitment and interdependency and often lead to the establishment of relationships that persist beyond the life of individual enquiries. For instance, as a primary head stated:

There was something about the people I undertook this with. NCSL set up the action learning set and this has been a lasting collaboration. I still meet quite frequently with these colleagues and we have really helped each other's thinking.

More broadly the chance to network and develop personal contacts supports individuals' wider leadership activities and improves the overall quality of their enquiry. This is important as the quality of research remains one of the main challenges facing practitioner enquiry per se (Barker, 2005: 7). The opportunity to draw on the understanding and knowledge of individuals from higher education and the college itself is also warmly welcomed by associates.

**Development of New Roles**

Many taking associate status have benefited from the range of new opportunities their involvement in the programme has presented, which have often stemmed from their increased involvement with NCSL. For others, the research itself led to further reflection on how they perceived themselves and the degree
to which they wish to explore other challenges, away from headship. For instance one secondary head who subsequently left headship to pursue his research interests further reflected:

I'd always been a head who'd spent most of his time in school and ended up being one who spent a lot of time out as a result of my associateship. This led me to re-evaluate what I wanted to do personally. It lifted my head and opened my eyes. The more engrossed I got in the research the more I wanted to do it.

For Schools

School Improvement

As noted above, there is a well-established tradition of practitioner-led research within the school improvement field and the RAP has added to this. This has centred on two main areas of change:

- systemic changes in school; and
- cultural changes.

Systemic Changes in School

Associates frequently engage in projects that have a specific school improvement focus. Many others identify particular issues to address as a consequence of their associateship. For instance, one headteacher established a new post at his school to develop information and communications technology (ICT) support for the delivery of the curriculum. Another associate has undertaken research focused specifically on identifying potential models of change within schools similar to his. A third used her associateship as an opportunity to introduce a range of school improvement projects, each of which was focused on a specific area of concern.

Participants often report that their associateship coincided with the generation of a range of new ideas to managing their school. Examples have included practical changes to one school’s performance management system and the development of a self-diagnostic tool for reviewing the effectiveness of another’s senior management team. In general, such new ideas have emerged specifically from their enquiry.

To date the proportion of individuals who have adopted formal action research approaches has been relatively small, however. The main reason for this is the relatively short duration of associateships, which makes the completion of action cycles problematic.

Cultural Changes

Impacts on associates’ schools have also often been the result of more subtle factors.
As noted, the headteacher’s engagement in enquiry sends a powerful message to other members of the school community. Their modelling of the ‘lead learner’ behaviour often brings greater openness to using and undertaking research. This in turn promotes greater willingness to reflect on the fundamental issues facing teachers, rather than the day-to-day distractions. For instance, a primary head noted:

Becoming more involved in the research made me more questioning and I think this has filtered through the school. We’re more reflective here now.’

Associates frequently note that their enquiry provides others with the opportunity to develop. This can be most marked in instances when the head's research takes them out of their school for prolonged periods of time, providing their deputies with a chance to experience the practicalities of headship for themselves and freeing up the creative thinking of other colleagues. Examples of specific changes introduced by other staff in the absence of the head have included the redevelopment of one primary school’s playground and the completion of its computer suite, and the successful introduction of Investors in People (IiP) at another. Other changes introduced by associates can also have a marked impact:

Talking to my old deputy, it’s clear that my associateship had a direct influence on his learning. There was a change in the relative emphasis on management and leadership that came about as a result of changes I made to the leadership structure. He grew in that environment. If the aim of having a leadership team is to build capacity then it has succeeded because it has developed him and others.’

More broadly, associates have reported the development of a wider culture of distributed leadership within their schools, stemming from the greater demands on the headteacher that come from their enquiry activity. Encouragingly, this new culture has usually persisted after the conclusion of the enquiry.

Finally, an associate’s close relationship with the College itself has often raised awareness of opportunities for their staff to participate in NCSL activities.

For the Wider Education System

Assessing the broader impact on the wider education system of practitioner-based enquiry in general and the RAP in particular is extremely problematic. This issue has been the focus of considerable debate, both in terms of the directness of the link between this and other types of professional development activity and wider systemic change and in relation to the specific methods that need to be used to assess it (for example, Hallinger and Heck, 1999; Heck and Hallinger, 2004; Leithwood and Levin, 2004).

Despite these problems, there are indications that the RAP contributes to wider school improvement in a number of ways.
Contributing to the Knowledge Base

Much of the focus for impact from practitioner enquiry has been micro in nature and centred on the individual involved and their school. This is particularly so for action research where the focus is on addressing specific concerns within an individual school (Kelly, 1985: 131). However, projects that are concerned with informing the broader knowledge base have made a valuable contribution towards ongoing debates on a range of issues, by providing a valuable practitioner perspective. Most notable amongst these are instances when associates have contributed to larger-scale projects that have contained both theoretical and craft knowledge. Examples of these include work on learning-centred leadership and the personalization of learning, both of which have been significant in helping leaders develop their schools' curriculum. As noted, an important factor in this is the fact that using practitioners as researchers in such projects increases the work's resonance with other professionals (Ruddock, 2001: 3). That a fellow professional has undertaken the research can also positively affect the nature of the research process itself, as it helps to address concerns over the degree to which research is done to and not with participants. For instance, as a secondary head notes:

I am different. When I go into a school, it's not like a researcher coming in from a university. I have a connection. When I expose my vulnerability as a head, it's disarming. I get material other people might not. With heads it's hard to be vulnerable. Heads find it hard to expose their weaknesses and talk about them. I think I've become quite skilled at getting heads to talk about what's not hunky-dory.'

Influencing NCSL and its Partners

Research associates have regularly had a significant impact on NCSL's programmes and activities. Most commonly this is through involvement in evaluations of the College's programmes. Practitioners have also regularly contributed to the development of College publications and seminars, while many associates have represented NCSL at seminars and on research steering groups and committees.

The principle behind all this is that the dichotomy between researcher and researched is a false one, and that the quality of research is strengthened by the direct involvement of practitioners. Indeed it is argued that aspects such as the focus of the study and interpersonal interactions during data collection are inevitably influenced and potentially enhanced by the experiences and knowledge that the associate may bring (Robson, 2002: 27). This makes the prospect of any associate undertaking a strictly positivist enquiry almost impossible, a point reflected in the fact that in practice, associates' studies have been almost exclusively from an interpretivist perspective.

Furthermore, the use of associates reflects the College's commitment to a collaborative approach, where each party has a stake in the successful completion of the project. In this way associates have directly influenced the
broader work of the College and its partners, thereby increasing its relevance to practitioners in schools.

While time spent with NCSL and other policy makers has often been enormously beneficial for the associates, NCSL and the broader schools system, the increased absence from school that it may entail can have potentially negative implications for the school and therefore requires careful managing. As one primary head noted:

My links with NCSL and enthusiasm for broader system work meant that I was able to take on a bigger role, linking with other schools than may otherwise have been the case. But even though we’ve got quite a bit of capacity at the school, it has been difficult. And it’s a paradox because you’re a successful headteacher because you’re so hands on. And of course that becomes diluted and means that the school may begin to suffer if you’re not careful.

Promoting Reflection and Debate

As already noted, in instances where practitioner-based enquiry is action focused, the degree to which identified lessons are found to relate directly to individuals in other situations may have been limited. However, even here broader principles have still often resonated strongly with other school leaders. Research associates also contribute to the wider schools system by promoting the use of enquiry in individual professional development and school improvement.

What Are the Potential Problems with Practitioner-based Enquiry?

There are a number of theoretical and practical issues that need to be recognized in any discussion on the merits of practitioner enquiry. This section explores these issues within the context of the RAP and considers the steps that have been taken to address these concerns.

Undertaking Research within Your Own Organization

As noted above, one potential attraction of practitioner enquiry is the extent to which it offers a relatively easy means of accessing the target group. This is particularly the case when the enquiry is intended to occur within the researcher’s own organisation. However, undertaking research within one’s own organisation has its potential drawbacks. For instance, while this approach may offer greater understanding of the institution’s culture and situation, there is the danger that the researcher may rely too much on their own taken-for-granted assumptions (Winter, 1996, 18–19).

A second, ethical issue relates to the recruitment of participants within the project and the fact that this may involve a potential conflict of interest between
an associate’s natural inquisitiveness as a researcher and their responsibilities as guardian of the school (Connexions, 2001: 11).

A final concern relates to the reasons why an individual opts to undertake research in their own organisation in the first place. In most instances, it will be driven by a combination of factors, including the issues of access and understanding already mentioned above. However, on some occasions it may be motivated by an unacceptable high regard for personal convenience, which while understandable (given the competing demands on their time), is nevertheless an insufficiently robust rationale for sampling and one which may further compromise their subsequent findings.

**Time and Expertise**

By definition, practitioner enquirers undertake their research in addition to their everyday job. While this dual role brings the benefits of understanding and experience, it presents them with the challenge of juggling these competing demands (Winter, 1996: 17). A related difficulty concerns the degree to which such time constraints inhibit the effective promotion and dissemination of the findings of such work.

The level of research expertise that the practitioner enquirer may possess can also be a concern (Barker, 2005: 13). A further source of anxiety relates to the cognitive dissonance many experience as the findings of work call into question some of the taken-for-granted knowledge that they may have held (Leat, 2005: 3).

**Addressing these Concerns**

In its Research Associate Programme, NCSL attempts to address these issues in several ways.

**Capacity and Expertise**

As already noted, the College provides training in research techniques at the start of the programme, thereby increasing individuals' capacity in this regard. Included in this is guidance on ethical issues, such as the need to protect individuals who participate in their research. Further support is also provided by way of ongoing supervision and tutelage, which helps to address variations in the amount of support individuals require. Participants are also encouraged to collaborate in their research, thereby facilitating mutual support and self-help. The most common approach to this is through the formation of ALS, which provide a forum for critical peer review and the dissemination of findings (Ruddock and Hopkins, 1985: 40; Barker, 2005: 5).

As noted, NCSL provides considerable support and encouragement in the dissemination of findings from work. This includes publishing summaries of research and disseminating these to schools, stakeholder groups and policy
makers wherever relevant. NCSL also hosts an annual research associates conference, at which participants are encouraged to present the findings of their work to colleagues in other schools, policy makers and other interested parties.

**Scale**

One frequent criticism of practitioner enquiries is that they are too small scale and specific in nature to offer more broadly applicable learning points (Winter, 1996: 17). Caution is needed here as regular feedback from readers of associates' reports has found that a key appeal of these papers is that they are so grounded in the daily practice of leaders. Nevertheless a number of strategies exist for addressing this concern. Foremost amongst these is the fact that a key criteria for supporting associates' studies is that they offer potential for wider learning. Studies are also underpinned by a review of relevant literature, which makes connections between their study and existing research in their field. NCSL also makes links between studies where possible, by using associates as fieldworkers on broader studies, for instance in relation to distributed leadership, learning centred leadership and personalised learning (NCSL, 2004, 2005, 2006).

**Maintaining Independence**

In the majority of instances, the ability to pursue an enquiry will not be entirely within the gift of the practitioner, with consent and support often required in relation to resources such as time, funds and access to respondents. In many instances this will also extend through to publication. This phenomenon is not unique to practitioner enquiry, but may apply to any study dependent on some degree of patronage. At its most extreme, this influence can result in concerns over the introduction of bias and a loss of researcher independence. For instance, a study conducted by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the public service union, Prospect, noted that at least one in ten researchers had been asked by a commercial backer to skew their findings in order to support their sponsor's agenda (Prospect and AUT, 2005: 7).

While NCSL inevitably exerts some control over the outcomes that emerge from these studies and the nature of the work it publishes, this comes from a will to protect the College's reputation as a sponsor of quality research rather than any desire to silence 'dissenting voices'. Evidence for this comes from the fact that it actively encourages associates to publish and present their findings in other public forums. Elsewhere associates often have strong connections with senior academics in HEIs, who act as an additional potential check to such undue influence.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on published literature and the evaluation of the RAP, this article has sought to demonstrate how practitioner enquiry promotes the notion of
professionalism within schools generally and in schools leadership in particular. It has also highlighted the broader value of enquiry at the individual, school and system levels.

This article has noted how the general principles underpinning practitioner research support its use in a range of contexts. Central to this is the ‘fact’ that leaders represent the most important source of knowledge and understanding on leadership in their organisations. They are also ideally placed to explore the challenges they face and can produce findings that support both their own learning and that of peers facing similar issues.

The article has used NCSL’s RAP to explore issues that should be borne in mind when considering the findings of practitioner-based enquiries. In doing so it has outlined the specific steps the College has taken to address these concerns on this programme. Core to these are ensuring that research is of a consistently high quality and promoting the effective dissemination of their findings. Efforts to increase cohesion between studies also help to increase the potential impact of associates’ work.

Arguably the greatest contribution of leaders as researchers is their promotion of leadership as an evidence-based profession. By modelling the behaviour of the practitioner enquirer, they empower others to challenge existing principles and perceived ‘universal truths’ and to review their learning and practice with others in the profession. Through this they help to stimulate the ongoing discourse that is so fundamental to the creation of the reflective profession, needed to prepare today’s children for tomorrow’s challenges.

References


Nottingham: NCSL.

Biographical Note

Andy Coleman is a senior researcher at the National College for School Leadership. His research interests include collaborative leadership and practitioner enquiry.

Correspondence to:

Andy Coleman, National College of School Leadership, Triumph Road, Nottingham NG8 1DM, UK. [email: andy.coleman@ncsl.org.uk]