

Practitioner Research Project

Richard Caffyn, Anna Simandiraki & Zhen Yao, the *IB Research Unit at the University of Bath (2004-2006)*

Executive Summary



Introduction

Overview

The Practitioner Research Project was an IB research team investigation into the needs and support requirements of researchers based in schools throughout the IB world. It looked at the following:

- The ways in which teachers and school staff working in IB schools can be supported and encouraged in research activities.
- The perceived needs of research practitioners working in schools.

By ‘practitioner researchers’ we mean any school staff engaged or having the potential to be engaged in research, for example, teaching staff, management, administration, librarians, support staff, board members, governors etc. Research in this context refers to any investigation, reflective study or evaluative effort.

Aims and objectives

The aim was to identify areas in which practitioners can best be supported in their efforts to effectively undertake school-based research in a more effective way. From this various strategies for network building and the creation of support services have emerged.

Methodology

The approach involved contacting practitioner researchers, non-researchers, and management in a sample of 600 IB schools. The project used an online questionnaire to investigate individuals’ understanding of practitioner research, challenges involved in undertaking research, and views on existing IB services for practitioners. In total 344 individual replies were received, which divided into 112 researchers, 164 non-researchers and 68 from management. The piloting for this was done through telephone interviews and mailed questionnaires.

Results

Views of practitioner researchers

Typically the research undertaken by the practitioner researchers surveyed was aimed at maximizing benefit for their students, their school and/or themselves. In most cases research was mainly carried out within the researchers’ own school and the majority of

research was undertaken into teaching and learning, curriculum, and assessment. Less research was being done into areas such as policy and international mindedness. Most research was undertaken by individuals, though some investigations were done at group or department level. Research cooperation was mainly confined to school colleagues.

Views of non-researchers and management

Many of the non-researchers were interested in doing research, though workload and a lack of desire to change their job meant that few were willing to become involved. There was a high correlation between management interest and an extensive research culture within schools, suggesting that management were keen to actively promote and enable research activities. However, research was regarded as a focus of individual interest and responsibility.

Issues

Time, access to literature and contact with other researchers and colleagues appeared to be the most important constraints on research. There appeared little or no support for practitioner researchers from external organizations such as universities. The use of the Internet (browsers, online journals) and email were the most frequently used systems of communication and accessing information. Conferences were perceived as the main opportunity for researchers to discuss their findings and network, though the importance of online conferences was regarded as having potential. It appeared that researchers were relying more and more on online resources and systems of communication for their research.

IB support

The IB does provide various mediums to support practitioners' work, notably the OCC and *IB World*. However of the various research services, only *IB Research Notes* appeared to be used. Respondents infrequently used the International Education Research Database (IERD), though *IB Research Notes* was more frequently used and mainly regarded as effective. Personal contact was seen as an effective and well-utilized support system. This means that there is a need for more extensive and effectively publicised support systems that directly benefit practitioner researchers and promote school-based research.

Conclusions

Practitioner researchers

There were a number of different perceptions of research. This is often typical depending on individuals' relationships with research and whether they have undertaken any or seen the advantages of it. It further underlines the importance of marketing research and demonstrates its positive benefits to school and individual development. Researchers are more positive about research. Since they are already using research they can practically see how it can be active in developing or assisting change.

The research undertaken by the practitioner researchers surveyed was aimed at benefiting the students, the school and practitioners themselves. This research was mainly carried out within the researchers' own schools. Further detailed investigations of the kinds of research topics and questions important within the IB will be useful to develop and encourage within an organization-wide research strategy.

Non-researchers and management

The results indicated some reasons why non-researchers were reluctant to start or have not started research. It is a challenging issue to encourage practitioners to become enthusiastic researchers. The focus could be towards encouraging the use of research findings and small-scale research on practice to assist individual staff, school, and IB reflection and development.

As seen throughout the data from the three questionnaires, managers were perceived to play a central role in encouraging or assisting research. It would appear necessary to include school managers in enabling a powerful research culture in a school and in supporting research. This could be undertaken through marketing and demonstrating the use and importance of school-based research for the development of learning. The significance of gatekeeper roles in schools needs to be explored further in other studies to develop an approach for promoting research in schools.

IB support

There are research areas that the IB cannot address as an organization. However the organization can support schools and individual researchers, such as by encouraging school-based practitioners to undertake research, setting up funding for school-based research, and developing support systems and services for the benefit of the IB, individuals, and schools. There needs to be a strong and effective support system and

more efficient marketing of the advantages of practitioner research through workshops, conference presentations, articles, and visits to schools and regional offices. Effective communication and marketing are essential aspects of any research support.

There is a limited extent as to how much the IB can provide support through literature access, except through the IERD. However, the use of an online research forum could solve this where formative and summative research is posted by researchers. There could well be a case for different levels of access to IB data held at Cardiff for researchers, as this is often a question put to the research team. There needs to be clear and differentiated access to IB data so as to encourage research that investigates the claims of the IB programmes and widens the amount of quality research into IB schools and international education.

Mentoring can be developed with closer links between practitioner researchers, universities, and the IB. A stronger IB research-school relationship would be of great assistance here and is something that should be developed as a strategic plan during 2007.

There were differences between researchers and non-researchers in terms of concerns and needs which reflect their research interests. Again non-researchers need to be encouraged to look at research in whatever level they feel appropriate. Research support needs to be aimed at developing interest in individuals and groups within schools engaging as action research, academic studies, school improvement schemes, and other areas of investigation. There is a strong probability that non-researchers do not have an interest in research and it is important that individuals or institutions are not coerced into becoming research-orientated if there is no obvious gain.

Research was often seen as a separate activity, not part of schoolwork. The important issue here is to realize the inclusiveness of research and that there are many reasons why research is being done in an institution. Research in schools does need to be promoted and supported at all levels so that all staff can benefit from it. It is critical that it does not become something that only those pursuing higher degrees or working with universities do. The lead needs to come from the school and those working in it focusing on the ownership of the process and outcomes. Schools need not be just test beds for external academic research.

There is often a lack of knowledge of the practical benefits of research in schools and the IB. Therefore, there needs to be greater promotion, marketing, and communication throughout the IB to demonstrate that research is a powerful force for assisting in the development of schools, learning, and individuals. It is also important to provide the ability for schools to research into aspects of IB programmes so as to inform the IB of needs, challenges, and the critical evaluation of programmes, assessment, and

professional development. There is a limit to what the IB can do because of the large number of schools and diverse needs. Therefore the IB should look at promoting and supporting school-based enquiry to inform its own development.

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