

*Interchange*

*No 16*

*Professional Development Through Research*

Research and Intelligence Unit

## **Why *Interchange*?**

Research cannot make the decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education in our schools and colleges. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

It is axiomatic that every opportunity should be taken to communicate research findings, both inside and outside the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). Moreover, if research is to have the greatest possible impact on policy and practice, the findings need to be presented in an accessible, interesting and attractive form to policy makers, teachers, lecturers, parents and employers.

*Interchange* aims to further improve the Research and Intelligence Unit's (RIU) dissemination of the findings of research funded by SOED. We hope you will find that *Interchange* is long enough to give the flavour of the complexities, subtleties and limitations of a research study but concise enough to give a good feeling for the findings and in some cases to encourage you to obtain the full report.



The *Interchange* symbol invites you to reflect and respond to an issue or question posed by the research. You may wish to raise awareness by responding to each *Interchange* before reading the adjacent section of text. Alternatively, you may prefer to read the text first then review each *Interchange* to construct a personal summary of the issues.

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# Professional Development Through Research

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*Many people in education advocate the idea of the 'reflective practitioner' — someone who reflects on his or her practice and behaves rather like a researcher. This enquiry-oriented approach might also be applied to staff development. Yet such an approach is unusual; staff development more commonly involves transmitting information, skills and strategies, with opportunities for practice. There is one example within the Scottish system, however, of staff development through research. The Professional Development Initiative (PDI) for educational psychologists was introduced in 1985 as a collaboration between central government and the regional psychological services. This Interchange outlines the background to the initiative, summarising the results of an evaluation by Stirling University, and looks at how the research approach to professional development could be applied to others working in education.*

## **The initiative**

### ***Aims of the initiative***

The ambitious goals of the initiative seek to enable educational psychologists to:

- derive enjoyment and other benefits from investigative approaches;
- be able to step back from their work, broaden their perspectives and extend their knowledge of professional practice;
- pursue research and development, relating directly to local needs, as an integral part of their normal work;
- use research findings to influence local policy;
- develop new approaches and skills through teamwork;
- improve standards in the presentation of reports.

### ***Context of the initiative***

The circumstances into which the PDI was introduced had two important features. First, educational psychologists are introduced to research methods during pre-service training and the profession

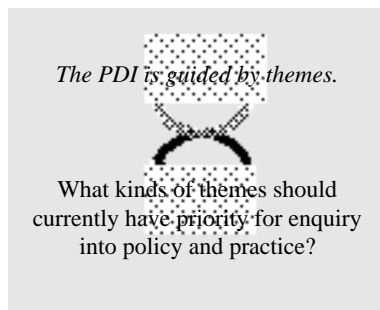


accepts the idea that their day-to-day work should involve enquiries leading to oral or written reports. Secondly, the nature of the psychologists' work — travelling and working alone, with fragmented opportunities for systematic professional development — and a common feeling that their work is not adequately appreciated by the educational community, suggested that educational psychologists might respond favourably to the chance to come together, within and across regions, in a new initiative. The PDI offered that chance. It assumed that research is a legitimate and important aspect of educational psychologists' work; it provided professional support in the form of co-ordinators and residential conferences; it gave prominence to studies relating to local needs; and it promised recognition of the research through publications and dissemination to directors of education and their staff.

### *Form of the initiative*

The PDI programme is tightly structured. A theme is decided annually by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) and Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP). Each regional psychological service is invited by SOED to nominate psychologists and topics within the theme. Participants carry out the work within one year with a strict timetable which includes an introductory conference, preparation and costing of proposals, empirical work or other information gathering, a second conference and writing the report. Guidelines on report writing are provided. During the year two co-ordinators are available for consultation and research support and other input comes from HM Inspectorate and principal educational psychologists. The themes used so far are shown below. Reports on the research within each theme are published annually by the SOED and there is a volume of abstracts of the projects undertaken to date (Duffield, 1993).

Resources for the initiative come from three sources. First, SOED provides funding from the in-service training budget to cover the co-ordinators' time, the travel and other costs incurred by the



#### *Themes for research covered by the Professional Development Initiative for educational psychologists*

- Provision for special educational needs (1985–86);
- Alternative approaches to children with behavioural and emotional difficulties (1986–7);
- Innovative practice: new roles for psychologists in work with schools (1987–88);
- New demands and new responses: a comparative evaluation of service delivery, Part I (1988–89) and Part II (1989–90)
- Working with individuals and groups (1990–91)
- Professional development and training (1991–92)
- Psychological perspectives on the 5–14 programme (1992–93)

*Resources to support enquiry  
were contributed from various  
sources.*



What kinds of resources are most crucial in encouraging practitioners to undertake research?

researchers and the publication of the report. At least two HMIs devote some time to the PDI. Secondly, regional authorities release time for the educational psychologists — nominally one month equivalent though this is often difficult to achieve, particularly in the more remote rural and island areas. Thirdly, the participating psychologists have to contribute some of their own time to ensure effective completion of their research.

## **Evaluation of the initiative**

However attractive the aims of an initiative, it is important to establish whether they are being realised. An independent evaluation of the PDI carried out by Stirling University Department of Education collected evidence from the SOED, from managers in regional psychological services and from educational psychologists who had participated.

As for any staff development exercise, the initiative was judged by whether:

- the **learning** of the participants had progressed.
- the participants were **motivated** to continue to develop their practice.

For an ambitious initiative of this kind it was also necessary to assess whether there had been:

- an **impact on policy and practice**.
- **gains for the profession** (greater public recognition, improved morale, more publications).

## **Learning**

There was clear evidence that participants had learned. They had been stimulated to ask questions about their own policies and practices, to ‘operate in an enquiry mode’, to collect and analyse data and to open their minds to new possibilities. They appreciated the chance to combine the roles of practitioner and researcher, reinforcing relationships of research to practice. They acknowledged opportunities to acquire the skills of teamwork and research from more experienced people and to apply these in particular areas of interest. They valued the broadening of their own experience, perspectives and knowledge, the intellectual challenge of completing a piece of useful research and the chance to learn ‘about the practice of others [to] develop perceptions of provision elsewhere’.

## **Motivation**

Participants also reported that the project had given them enjoyment, built up their confidence and made them feel more capable; they enjoyed ‘the buzz of it’. The initiative provided the time and the legitimacy for participants to take one issue of particular interest and pursue it in depth. This resulted in high

*Participants learned from the  
experience in a variety of ways.*



What are the different kinds of learning from research that are most likely to benefit practitioners?

*Opportunities to meet with other professionals was especially motivating.*

How can practitioners capitalise most effectively from their interactions with others working in different contexts?

*The initiative had a substantial beneficial effect on policy and practice.*

What mechanisms are needed to ensure that practitioners' research has a proper impact on policy and practice?

levels of motivation to undertake investigations, think out propositions and collect and evaluate evidence. The initiative also helped to build confidence further by counteracting the educational psychologists' feelings of isolation. Opportunities to socialise with other professionals at conferences, travel to see how others dealt with similar problems and receive support from people outside their normal contacts in the region, led to improvements in self-esteem and a readiness to be more forthcoming.

### ***Impact on policy and practice***

Almost without exception, participants could quote examples of the beneficial impact of the initiative on policy and practice in the regional psychological services.

At the level of policy, new-found confidence and knowledge gave educational psychologists the opportunity to interact with service managers more effectively and to influence thinking about policy. For example, in some cases education authority guidelines were changed, decisions about resource allocations or collaborations with schools were modified, new plans were made to develop policy and staff development activities and the participants were able to provide firm evidence for official enquiries into professional practice.

At the level of practice, educational psychologists reported how the research findings had led them to revise and refine the ways they worked with pupils, teachers and parents — replacing reliance on 'gut reactions' by an emphasis on systematic collection of data. They also commented on schools' enthusiasm for building on the psychologist's findings — a welcome sign of partnership. These influences on policy and practice arose from a wide variety of research projects, including those on truancy and exclusion, headteachers' views of psychological services, pre-school behaviour problems, precision teaching and timed materials for slow learners, the BATPAK behavioural approach, early entry to school and the influences of examination conditions on performance.

### ***Gains for the profession***

This impact of the initiative on policy was one indicator of a general boost for the status and moral of the profession. Involvement in research teams had helped the psychologists to feel less isolated and it had given them opportunities to become experts in particular areas (and to be recognised as such by colleagues, teachers and service managers). Because the research was 'useful', and publication made it available to a wider audience, it encouraged a sense of professional achievement. The chance to publish, in itself, created new criteria for career advancement.

There was a general sense that the profession had gained a higher profile. The focus on the research role of psychologists had led to

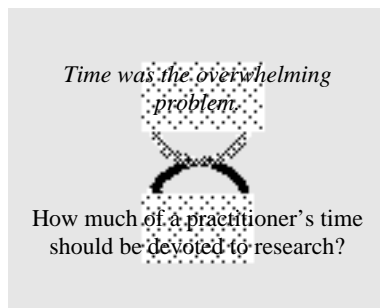
partnerships with schools and interactions with HM Inspectorate. The co-ordinators of the initiative attained a national perspective on a variety of issues and had opportunities to relate to other public services. Those most closely involved with the initiative were developing a view of psychologists as a group familiar with current literature, expecting to be involved in the systematic study of their practice and taking an explicitly enquiry-oriented approach to their work.

## Problem areas?

It is rare for an independent evaluation to find that so many of the aims of a project have been achieved in the eyes of those involved: participants, regional services and central government. Certainly there were few problems. Those of most concern were, first, the constraints of time and, secondly, the efforts required of the educational psychologists over and above their normal commitments. Psychological services had problems making even 20 working days available over the year and in any case, a well executed and reported project required more than 20 days. The educational psychologists gave readily of their free time and appreciated the support they received from co-ordinators and HMI. There was, however, a hint of resentment that the SOED gave little recognition for the time those involved in the projects had gladly given, and some suspicion that the SOED was getting research on the cheap. It could be argued, however, that the educational psychologists were unaware of the great deal of time and effort put into this initiative by HMIs to sustain its highly structured form and ensure the success of the scheme. That their commitment is to staff development and not to cheap research, has been all too evident.

Although the initiative was seen as good value for money, there were concerns about hidden costs to the regional psychological services and a lack of awareness on the part of senior members of the directorate of the quality of the research and potential of those involved to comment helpfully on matters of policy. The directorate's priority is the implementation of centrally determined plans, rather than the development of an understanding of why things are the way they are in the education service. In the light of this, the principal educational psychologists recognised the value of the SOED input, and felt that without the stimulus from HMI, an activity of this kind would have little chance of success.

The evaluation did identify weaknesses in the dissemination of PDI material. Although the dissemination conference was valued as an opportunity for educational psychologists to display their wares, the range of people attending was regarded as limited. Furthermore, the absence of a bulletin or newsletter (with summaries of the studies designed to reach schools, social work departments and health boards) was regretted and it was suggested that the lack of publications in refereed journals led to academic researchers being



unaware of, or undervaluing, the programme of research.

Interviews with people without experience of the programme might have thrown up more negative views. Certainly, the only respondent who seriously questioned the initiative's value was the one who had had the least association with the initiative.

Involvement in the research studies seemed to generate increasing enthusiasm; individuals became ambitious to extend it to cross-cultural and cross-national research and some used devious means to stay with the programme over the years despite official attempts to ensure that the benefits were spread across as many educational psychologists as possible.

## **Application to other contexts**

Do other aspects of education have something to learn from this initiative? Could staff development for teachers, education managers, HMIs and others successfully adopt a collaborative research approach? To address this question one has to consider the likelihood that other groups will respond positively to such an initiative, what opportunities there are for collaborative activity and what priorities and constraints operate in different parts of the educational community.

### ***Educational psychologists***

Training for psychologists involves a familiarity with research methods and it endorses an enquiry approach to interactions with children and schools. While general principles may guide the work of the educational psychologist, there is little sense of looking for recipes to lead all children to a common pattern of outcomes. The emphasis is on finding ways of understanding the individual child in his or her environment.

The chance for collaboration will attract those whose work can be solitary and involve travelling. Intellectual stimulation from a secure group of other adults, tangible products from research and recognition of these achievements will offer an incentive. Relationships with HMI and co-ordinators offer support and structure rather than inspection or audit. The balance of power is maintained because the educational psychologists have control of the research; they will become the 'experts' and have new knowledge to offer the other professionals.

### ***Teachers***

Much educational rhetoric suggests teachers too should be reflective and adopt a research stance, and that this should characterise in-service training. For example, what we know about how children learn implies an approach of this kind: teachers should be exploring the ideas their children bring to the classroom and testing ways of encouraging them to evaluate those ideas, and



*Some aspects of teachers' lives  
are not designed to promote  
enquiry.*

What are the conditions which  
would encourage teachers to carry  
out research on their practice?

more established ones, against the available evidence (that is, a constructivist approach). In practice, however, teachers work within a framework of guidelines and certification with common attainment targets. Such targets reflect centrally made decisions but not necessarily the actual patterns of individual children's learning. This system implies that teaching is the offering of the right stimulus in the right way so the pupil responds (learns) appropriately (that is, a behaviourist approach). This provides little incentive for staff development in the form of enquiry. The priority is to acquire, usually via transmission from others, an appropriate repertoire of stimuli and strategies.

An enquiry mode of staff development might promote greater professional satisfaction for teachers and more effective teaching; satisfaction because teachers would control the project and focus on those areas or problems most salient for their teaching; more effective teaching because the enquiry approach leads to improved understanding of problems. Collaboration could be readily arranged; indeed there have been instances of teachers working with educational psychologists on the PDI projects. Teachers are grouped in a variety of ways — in departments, schools, professional subject associations and so on. They also are well-used to association with HMI, though less commonly, perhaps, with equivalents of the psychologists' co-ordinators (college or university academics might fill the role). On the other hand, this familiarity with others might work against collaboration in research. There is a taken-for-granted agenda among, say, teachers in a department, or between teachers and HMI, which seldom includes research. Another difficulty is that teachers, unlike educational psychologists, are rarely familiar with the methods of social science research.

### ***Educational managers and HMI***

The main background of educational managers and HMI is in teaching. Increasingly they see teacher education (pre-service or in-service) as a means of ensuring that minimum levels of clearly defined competences are acquired. 'Competence-based' models for management are also dominating thinking; the focus is on developing and implementing policies that serve public accountability in ways as simple and straightforward as possible. The notion of the reflective practitioner is frequently stated, but does not feature in the detail of guidelines.

Working in teams is a familiar approach, but, as just as with teachers, the collaboration rarely has an enquiry orientation. The reflection involved is likely to focus on how to persuade others (particularly schools) to behave in ways consistent with national or local policy, and on making judgements about how well this has been achieved. This sits well with competence-based models but not with research.

In principle, it should be possible to include reflection and research

*Education managers' priorities  
often rate research fairly low.*

Under what conditions could  
research be seen to be of central  
benefit to senior decision-makers?

in a competence scheme. In practice, this does not happen. The recently published SOED *Guidelines for Teacher Training Courses* (1992), for example, assert a commitment to the reflective practitioner but the list of competences is entirely presented in language which assumes we already know how they are to be achieved and it is simply a matter of teachers and teacher educators applying themselves to the task.

Management training, which many education managers and HMI have undertaken, does not emphasise research; for example, there is evidence that MBAs tend not promote research skills. Teachers may, indeed, gain more familiarity with research by following MEd courses than the education managers with their MBAs. Because the stress in management is on efficient decisiveness, and on strict audit-type accountability, the atmosphere is often not one in which research, with its lack of focus on a single 'best practice', is eagerly welcomed.

## **In conclusion**

The experience of educational psychologists with this initiative suggests that staff development based on local research and development could lead to greater understanding, professional satisfaction and more effective policy and practice in a variety of sectors of education. There are, however, two major differences between, on the one hand, educational psychologists and, on the other hand, teachers, education managers and HMIs. First, there are familiarities with research methods that can be taken for granted among educational psychologists but not the others; this would have to be addressed either within the staff development scheme or (for future participants) in pre-service teacher education. Secondly, despite widespread support for the concept of the reflective practitioner, in reality there are barriers to this approach. The more closely the substance of curriculum and teaching is directed from the centre, the less well it sits with an enquiry approach to development. Perhaps the lee-way for educators to do their 'own thing' within national guidelines, and the possibilities of interpreting teaching competences in novel ways, will encourage innovative ideas about what counts as professional development.

## **Further reading**

Duffield (1993). *Professional Development Initiative. Summary and Index Volume*. Edinburgh: SOED.

Scottish Office Education Department (1992). *Guidelines for Teacher Training Courses*. Edinburgh: SOED.