

Inculcating Academic Inquiry: Fostering Academic Research Amongst School Faculty

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Abstract: Quality Education - the United Nation's SDG #4 – stresses on the need for ensuring inclusive and equitable education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. These aspects play an integral part in guaranteeing the holistic development of the entire nation's educational landscape. To bring this agenda to fruition, the personal and professional development of faculty needs to be stressed on.

Academic research is an area pursued by educators mostly from the higher education sector. The authors suggest that school faculty - both scholastic and co-scholastic – need to be empowered for research-driven initiatives. Further, there is a need to essentialise the culture of research within the school ecosystem whilst maintaining an equilibrium between research and the daily academic pursuits of school faculty. This will supplement their professional growth, amplify their skill set, open avenues for better employability, and add significantly to the knowledge repository within their field of study.

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4. Quality Education 5. School Faculty

Introduction

Whether we realise it or not, most of us conduct research in our own way almost every day: when we look up a word in a dictionary; when we Google a question; browse through an encyclopedia; or even compare reviews of a restaurant we plan to dine at. Whilst this may not classify as academic research, it still falls under the purview of research because simply put, research is a systematic investigation of an issue.

When one wants to investigate an existing problem; provide solutions to question; explore and analyse general issues; construct or create a new procedure or system; explain a new phenomenon; generate new knowledge; or a combination of two or more of any of the above (Gratton and Jones, 2010), one will lean on research for the solution.

A Reliance on Research

Education extensively relies on academic research by providing a foundation for teaching practices, developing curriculum, and crafting policy decisions (Cohen et al., 2018). Research within education further helps identify approaches to effective teaching methods (Hattie, 2009), develop assessments to measure student learning with precision (Black and William, 2009), and understand how students learn and process what they are taught (Bransford et al., 2000).

Inculcating research in to what is taught and into one's teaching practice helps one not only be a better educator but contributes to the overall enhancement of the institute (Holland, 2023). With holistic and inclusive education as the need of the hour, research helps educators understand the needs of diverse learners (Gay, 2000) and thus develop culturally-responsive teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In summary, Research is the cornerstone of academic pursuits that leads to the advancement in academia. It is imperative to the field as it acts as a knowledge base and reservoir for teaching and learning. By relying on research, educators are apprised with the latest information thus enabling them to make informed decisions so as enhance the teaching-learning process.

Research? What Academic Research?

Whilst research in higher education is dependent on various factors such as programme level, discipline, etc. (Elken and Wollscheid, 2016) research tends to be an innate part of the system be it through the curriculum or amongst faculty.

At the higher education level, having an expertise in teaching is not enough to pursue an academic career (Smith, 2021). Cochran-Smith (2005) claims that educators have a responsibility to engage in research, and this is complimentary to teaching.

On the other hand, school curriculum rarely includes a focus on academic research. Furrther, many educators in higher education systems hail from a background in school teaching and their first-order expertise is teaching (Murray and Male, 2005; Smith, 2011). Their aptitude for conducting research is not always rich. In fact, it may be limited to methodology courses and research which faculty undertook whilst completing their master's thesis... that is... if they have written research-based master's dissertation (Smith, 2021). This indicates that neither school faculty nor students always have a familiarity with academic research.

Through this, one can suggest that to conduct research at the higher levels of education, one must instill an inclination for it during the early years of study itself, hence inculcating academic research at the school level.

Investing in academic research at the school level proves to be not only crucial but also beneficial for both students and faculty. It provides myriad benefits that aids them academically and professionally. The following pages explore the need for inculcating research amongst school faculty, the advantages, challenges faced, and strategies to overcome them.

Inculcating Research at the School Level

It is common for educators from the higher education sector to have a list of academic research papers to their credit, Whilst many school-level educators engage academic research, the extent to which they do greatly varies as opposed to those of higher-level institutions (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2003).

We have already emphasised the imperativeness of the research component in education. Therefore, as Kumar (2018) suggests, even at the school level, research plays an important role in the advancement of various fields including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

From a pedagogical standpoint: According to Guskey (2002), research helps faculty develop a deeper understanding of their practice and subject thus aiding them to refine their teaching methods so as to improve student learning outcomes. It further assists faculty in becoming adept problem-solvers tuned to critical thinking thus equipping them to address complex issues that may arise in the classroom environment (Hargreaves, 1996, 2007).

Research helps faculty develop upon their leadership skills. This not only helps them be better role models for students but also helps them mentor fellow colleagues amidst policies such as the ‘mentor-mentee policy’, and lead professional development initiatives (Lieberman and Miller, 2001).

From a professional standpoint: Research enhances one’s critical thinking and analytical skills (Loughran, 2002). Participation in academic research nurtures the professional growth and development of faculty (Day, 1999). It grants them a mode to stay updated with the latest in their area of expertise and the pedagogical practices. (Borko, 2004; Boote and Beile, 2005). Contributing to the existing pedagogical practices evidently benefits then broader educational community (Shulman, 2004).

Furthermore, research at times requires collaboration. This collaboration with fellow colleagues helps promote a sense of community and leads to knowledge exchange further enhancing the professional development of faculty (McLaughlin, 2003).

One of the most critical factors research aids in is enhancing one's credibility as a faculty. It augments one's reputation, thus recognising them as experts in their field (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009).

Facing Challenges

Conducting academic research at the school level can be a challenging task for faculty school faculty (Loughran, 2007). As noted by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), faculty members are often faced with time constraints as they have to concentrate on classroom activities, assigning homework, examination correction, etc. This aside, they also have limited resources to conduct the necessary research of interest therefore making it difficult to produce high-quality studies.

The challenge of accessing relevant literature and resources, as highlighted by Higgins and Vallejo (2005), is a major problem especially within the school structure. Schools, unlike universities, often have limited access to academic databases and resources, thus making it difficult for its faculty to conduct thorough literature reviews (Higgins & Vallejo, 2005).

Higher education faculty are within a formal structure that fosters the required training and support to conduct academic research. This may not be so in case of school faculty (Hargreaves, 1996). Obtaining ethical approval for research studies can be a lengthy and complex process, requiring significant time and effort (Bryman, 2008) thus deterring school faculty from investing time in much-required research.

Finally, school faculty may face the challenge of disseminating their research findings. The exposure faced by the faculty of higher education institutions is significantly greater; and as highlighted by Kotsis (2024) research findings of school faculty are often not shared widely, thus deterring to impact policy and practice.

Discussion: From Users to Producers

As stated priorly, engaging in academic research has manifold benefits for school faculty, the students, the educational institute, and the advancement of education. This being said, conducting academic research at school can be a challenging task for faculty, the reason primarily being that research is not part of the bloodstream of school curriculum.

However, by creating an environment that promotes research in schools through the right support, resources and incentives - as stated in the above paper - these challenges can be overcome, faculty motivated, and quality research can be produced. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) stress that research is essential for an educator's overall professional development and should it be encouraged and supported by the school administration.

This would include providing research training and support for teachers, allocate resources specifically for research, and collaborate with external organisations and institutions (Lagemann, 2000). Additionally, schools can establish research centers or clubs, providing a platform for faculty and students to engage in research activities.

Holistic school education not only ensures that students and faculty develop and progress in all areas be it academics, co and extra-curriculars, or personally and professionally. It is imperative that schools create an environment that promotes research.

Faculty need to elevate from being mere school teachers who use research in their teaching to producers of research so as to broaden their professional horizons. In this age of misinformation, reliance on any available information needs to shift to credible information.

These actions that lead to a reliance on research would in turn assist faculty to lead professional development initiatives, be credible sources of instruction, be superior role models and professional mentors to both student and fellow faculty alike.

From Theory to Practicing What We Preach

Whilst we state the above in theory, numerous research initiatives have been undertaken by the S.B. Patil Public School team at Ravet, Pune.

1. **Research Cell:** This involves students, staff, parents and alumni to research and discourse on pressing issues and changing pedagogies.
2. **School Innovation Council:** The council works on Design Thinking and collaborate with higher education institutions (HEIs) under AICTE.
3. **KHOJ - A Faculty Convention on the UN's SDGs (SDG-4):** Standing for a Journey for Knowledge, Hypothesis and Observation, this faculty convention will be a landmark in terms of bringing innovative and inclusive pedagogies on the table for Generation Alpha.
4. **Faculty engage in academic research and action research projects** with the objective of improving the teaching-learning process in classroom settings.
5. **360-degree appraisals** are conducted annually, and with **credit points are allocated for conducting research**. The **Quality Circles** provide the platform for sharing the research findings, analysis, and deliberate on changing paradigms in school education.
6. **Gifted Students Programme:** The programme aims at identifying, nurturing and helping gifted students grasp new skills, engage with complex activities, and set higher performance bars for themselves.
7. S.B. Patil Public School's teaching and non-teaching **faculty regularly participate in conclaves, seminars, conferences, benchmark visits, etc.** to get first-hand information and engage in experiential learning activities so as to enhance the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills of their learners.

Conclusion

Research at the school level is essential for faculty to progress as educators at a time when education is itself in transition. Inculcating the practice of participating in academic research offers numerous benefits, including becoming more adept at teaching, having a credible knowledge base, expanding and enriching one's skill sets, and advancing one's professional development.

Challenges exist but they can be overcome through support, resources, and collaboration. By prioritizing research at the school level, we can foster a culture of academic excellence and prepare students for future success.

Future Scope

The current paper has taken into consideration the benefits, challenges and solutions of school faculty conducting research. By prioritising research at the school level, we can foster a culture of academic excellence and prepare students for future success.

Development in children unfolds in multiple social settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Rogoff, 1990), and for most children, schools act as one of the most important setting. Children spend many hours each year in school, and their school experiences profoundly influence their development. (Alibali and Nathan, 2010). Thus, research-oriented skill sets learned by faculty can not only be passed on to fellow peers but also to students.

It is with this thought that further study can be conducted on the benefits of inculcating research in the school curriculum so that students are prepared for it when they graduate school. With the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education being at 28.4% in 2021-22 (AISHE, 2022), and with the National Education Policy 2020 aiming to increase the GER to 50% by 2035 (PIB, 2020), students need to be prepared to undertake academic research at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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