ENGAGING IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TEACHER PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY: A PRAGMATIC OR NAÏVE APPROACH?

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Practitioner enquiry is variously associated with school improvement, teachers' professional development and educational innovation. It can encourage teachers to reflect on their classroom practice, to gather evidence of students' learning and engagement and to design pedagogical experiments and test their efficacy. For some teachers it is very much a practical approach to practice review or development; in simple terms, it builds on the 'plan, do, review' cycle. For others it becomes more of a conceptual stance; becoming more critically reflective and developing a sense of theorised practice. At one extreme it can ensure that CPD is a bespoke offer which puts teachers in the driving seat, encouraging them to engage intelligently with evidence from multiple sources and enabling creative responses to recognised needs. At another extreme it can become part of a managed system of data driven school improvement, or a response to meeting new and emerging agendas of schools as self-improving systems. At its heart, practitioner enquiry rests on the proposition that those in practice are able to take informed intentional actions, explore their effects and form judgements of their value. This paper will outline principles of practitioner enquiry and consider how it can support the development of teaching and relate to constructs of professionalism and professional learning, alongside evidence of its challenge to school systems which are often perceived to demand convergence of practice and narrowly constructed conceptions of school improvement.

Introduction

This paper offers the author's perspective on *Practitioner Enquiry*, formed through practical and philosophical sense-making over the last 15 years. It thus draws on professional involvement which was initially school-based and is now university-based; personal engagement as a practitioner researcher in both settings, and the experience of designing, teaching and leading initial and continuing teacher education programmes which are rooted in practitioner enquiry. It also builds on the experiences of supervising and supporting school, college and university teachers to engage in practitioner enquiry for academic award, as part of professional development programmes and as partners in funded research projects. This is not a comprehensive survey, nor is it based on new empirical research; it is part personal account and part (non-systematic) literature review. There is an overall intention to consider some of the experiences and outcomes of engaging in educational research and development through teacher practitioner enquiry, and to ask whether it offers a pragmatic or naïve approach to professional learning and institutional development.

Making methodological sense: what is meant by practitioner enquiry?

While practitioner research or enquiry can be deemed to be under-theorised, it does offer a pragmatic approach for educators wishing to undertake systematic practice review or development. In simple terms it builds on the 'plan, do and review' cycle, but with a common expectation of making findings public in some form (Baumfield *et al.*, 2012). It is a relatively naturalistic, and thus authentic, process for those working in complex contexts where demands on practice and levels of expertise shift over time. It is also a model which invites the practitioner to innovate and engage in and with published research (Hall, 2009). Although they were not using the concept of practitioner enquiry (instead, that of action research) Carr and Kemmis make a strong case for locating 'teachers as critical figures in the research enterprise' (p.40). This too is one of the aims of practitioner enquiry; a question might be whether it lives up to this promise.

As the first sentence of this section indicates, it is rather common to conflate enquiry (or inquiry – I am deliberately not entering the same semantic debate as Hall, 2012), with research. Hammersley (2003) distinguishes between research and inquiry through a consideration of alternative motives, concluding that in research 'the production of knowledge is the sole immediate goal', whereas enquiry is 'subordinated to some other [practical or political] activity' (Hammersley, 2003 p.14). If we accept this definition, 'practitioner enquiry' is always the correct term, as it attends to the needs of the practitioner (be they a teacher, lecturer or educational leader) and engages other participants in the relevant education system in which they operate and hope to influence. The boundary between research and enquiry however can be blurred by conceptualising practitioner enquiry as a form of practical research, which Hammersley distinguishes from scientific research using the typology in Table 1 (see below).

Scientific research	Practical research	
The immediate audience is fellow researchers	The immediate audience is practitioners and policymakers of various kinds, as well as others who have a practical interest in the particular issue.	In addition to the 'enquirer' him/herself, other practitioners and policymakers are the principal intended audience.
The aim is to contribute to a cumulating body of knowledge about some aspect of the world. While lay relevance is still a requirement, this is interpreted in a relatively weak sense, allowing the pursuit of issues that are neither of obvious immediate practical value nor a matter of curiosity for most lay people.	The aim is to provide knowledge that will be of immediate practical use.	The aim is to produce knowledge that has relevance to the field of work of the 'enquirer' and other practitioners in supporting them to re-think or adapt practice.
Findings are assessed primarily in terms of validity; with a preference for erring on the side of rejecting as false what is true, rather than accepting as true what is false.	Findings are assessed in terms of relevance and timeliness as well as validity, with the latter being judged on the basis of lay as well as research-based knowledge.	The findings can be assessed by both professional and academic audiences through contextual relevance and validity rather than wide generalisability.

Table 1. A typology of social and educational research (Hammersley, 2003, p.16) annotated to describe some of the characteristics of practitioner enquiry

For readers concerned with further definitions, we have to accept that the epistemology and ontology of practitioner enquiry as a form of practical research (as a combined body of effort, or in individual cases) is not straightforward. Practitioners' enquiries work across pragmatist, activist and interpretive paradigms; sometimes their own personal practice and its development is at the forefront (which might mean drawing on principles action research), and at other times it is the practices and experiences of others (e.g. colleagues and students) within the practitioner's context which is foregrounded. It is as essential to ask "what is it like here?" in order to ask "should I and can I alter things?". It could be argued then that one of the values of practitioner enquiry is to produce dynamic case studies of educational practice (Robson *et al.*, 2013).

One way of making sense of practitioner enquiry might be through the drive to enquire into the aspects of practice that have 'imposed relevance' (Schutz 1970, p.26, cited in Hammersley, 2004, p.169) as highlighted by opportunities and tensions occurring in practice, perhaps influenced by the policy context, perhaps by the practitioner's direct lived experiences. This is not necessarily in opposition to 'intrinsic relevance'; because imposed relevancies often become increasingly personally interesting as an enquiry unfolds.

Sometimes the term 'practitioner enquiry' is used interchangeably with 'action research', but this is not accurate; the latter is just one category of the former. Practitioner enquiry rarely fits Lewin's original model of action research as a relatively positivist spiral process in which, through iterative cycles of hypotheses, tested out through practical actions in context, and judged for success, the researcher gets closer to solving stated problems (Lewin, 1946). In most educational settings practitioners may seek answers to identified 'problems' (which might not be recognised by others as problems) but inevitably the nature of the socio-cultural and political characteristics of the context, and therefore the nature of problems, shifts; so apparent solutions must remain tentative and subject to critical reflection, framing and re-framing. This locates practitioner enquiry in an interpretive paradigm, with the practitioners' professional practices being 'a lived experience for those involved in educational processes and institutions' (Kemmis, 1993, p.188). Through practitioner research there is an intention to employ practical reasoning, and an ambition to 'transform the consciousness of practitioners and by doing so, to give them grounds upon which to reform their own practices' (ibid., p.188).

Having said this, it is interesting to engage with Hammersley's (2003)

question "is action research a form of research […] or it is a form of action?" (p.170). Research and action may have different philosophical roots, and practitioners and academics may be tempted to separate them out for serving different purposes, but in professional practice there is a role for both and for using each to complement the purpose of the other. We can argue this as long as we believe that professional practice (including deliberate and routine actions) is based on knowledge held by the practitioner, and that this knowledge is augmented through practitioner research supported by critical enquiry into, and reflection on, experience (not through the accumulation of experience alone). Stenhouse (1981) advocated the role of 'teacher as researcher' in the domain of curriculum development and this remains a good, if currently elusive, example of the above.

Making ethical sense: purpose, participation and pitfalls

Practitioner enquiry is variously associated with school improvement, teachers' professional development and educational innovation. It can encourage teachers to reflect on their classroom practice, to gather evidence of students' learning and engagement and to design pedagogical experiments and test their efficacy. In this context Lofthouse *et al.* (2012) propose three core ethical principles supporting practitioner enquiry. As an educational practitioner, the enquirer should have an allegiance with his or her successive cohorts of learners, or colleagues if the enquiry relates to leadership or management. As a reflective practitioner the enquirer should consider that his or her practice can always be improved and that reflection on it is the focus for improvement. This can be applied to the wider context practice, not simply individual actions. The enquirer should also recognise the strategic priorities of the institution within which they work, not by following them blindly, but by acknowledging their significance and contributing to their interpretation.

These principles constitute a persuasive argument; indeed it could be deemed unethical to engage in changing practices which have the potential to influence educational experiences and outcomes without some form of enquiry. From these broad principles come the more complex issues surrounding the ethics of practitioner enquiry. One problem here comes from the fact that ethics are rooted in values and the ways in which we view the world. Values and perspectives held by different individuals and adopted by different institutions or underpinning systems are not always held in common. For example ethical practitioner enquiry is underpinned by an epistemology which challenges both technical and practical views of education. The technical view of education seems to be promoted by much current policy, and thus dominates the educational infrastructure and public debate. In this view education tends to be seen as a means to an end, and the problem for education is to find the most effective and efficient means. This can be seen in policy decisions at governmental and school level, although is no doubt more or less extreme in different jurisdictions. On the other hand the practical view of education contends that there are no easy solutions to identified problems because each practitioner works in a unique and fluid educational context. This implies that technical solutions or specified interventions will not always have determinable outcomes, and that professionals need to apply practical decision-making, based on their training and experience, to their own contexts in an attempt to influence educational outcomes. This practical perspective again looks for solutions, but from a different source. It would also be one that many practitioner enquirers would be comfortable with.

However, as Carr and Kemmis (1986) reflect, the technical or practical views (taken singly, or in uncomfortable conjunction) beg questions about teacher professionalism, autonomy, why problems exist and how they are perceived, and the role of research

and theory in practice and policy. Perhaps most crucially, the dominance of these views creates the profound risk that 'the 'moral' dimension of education is inadvertently suppressed' (Carr and Kemmis, ibid. p.38). Practitioner enquiry can correspond with this strategic view of education in general; and specifically in relation to teachers' professional learning and development of practice as part of that ecology. Practitioner enquiry takes on ethical dimensions when the practitioner recognises that education has social and consequences (both within institutions and in wider society) as well as being political in that it influences learners' and employees' individual outcomes which affect life chances.

Specific ethical decisions when undertaking practitioner enquiry are influenced by:

- the legal frameworks regarding data protection and human rights (e.g. governing the use of photographic or video images of pupils that might be taken to support data collection);
- the expected and authorised role of the practitioner as employee and how this role relates to the intention they have as an enquirer (e.g. experimenting with pedagogic approaches, or gathering the views of children or colleagues);
- the sometimes apparently conflicting concerns of research validity and reliability with social justice and equality (e.g. the use of control and experimental groups when testing out an innovation that is anticipated to have a positive impact, as yet not proved in that context);
- the demands of an educational timetable forcing teachers to act in a convergent fashion which might compromise the desire of a teacher to trial more divergent approaches (e.g. ten-weekly school-wide tests which negate the prospect of researching the potential of extended cross-curricular project-based learning);
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- the purpose of practitioner enquiry; whether it is being undertaken for an academic award, institutional development, or as part of a cross-school network, which can determine the extent to which the enquiry is made public, who the audience is and therefore the appropriate levels of confidentiality applied to pupils and colleagues and schools;
- the extent to which the enquirer is engaging in practices for enquiry which go beyond the normal remit of the setting which determines the need for informed consent from participants or their parents and guardians, which might include pre-school children or those with special educational needs or other vulnerabilities;
- the potential role of enquiry participants (e.g. learners or colleagues) in helping to shape the enquiry, and to co-own it, or to be involved as mere research subjects.

Most practitioner enquiry is undertaken by teachers and school leaders in the context of their workplace and for the purpose of understanding and developing professional practice. In many cases this will involve interventions or actions that teachers and school leaders take responsibility for during the normal course of their employment. Through undertaking practitioner enquiry these interventions and their review and development can be considered through disciplined enquiry with the outcomes made public. This fact alone means that ethical issues related to school and classroom development are being positively recognised and appropriate action taken; but it does illustrate the decisions that need to be made regarding privacy (especially in a world dominated by social media). Gaining an enhanced understanding of, or developing new approaches to, teaching and learning or leadership are part of the routines of professional life; but this does not permit practitioner enquirers to engage in unethical actions.

Making enquiring sense: scoping, scaling and investigating

Many books, chapters and guides (and even more websites) have been published which support practitioner enquiry and action enquiry as forms of practical research, e.g. Hopkins, (2002), Briggs *et al.* (2012), Baumfield *et al.* (2012), Reid and Leat (2014), Mitchell and Pearson (2012). As these demonstrate, much practitioner enquiry involves a mixed methods approach; perhaps because schools are awash with data and many teachers and school leaders also want to enquire into the less quantifiable aspects and outcomes of school life. Gaining an understanding of the individual methods and how to effectively use together (for example as sequenced and iterative methods, or as contemporaneous approaches) is critical for the practitioner enquirer. Other texts position enquiry as one of the suite of tools for professional or institutional development, e.g. McGrane & Lofthouse (2012), Dudley (2014), Burley & Pomphrey (2011), Timperley *et al.* (2007). Between them such sources outline the rationale, the planning of enquiry questions at a reasonable scale, the types of methods that are suited to the nature of the question and appropriate to the context, the role of existing and the need for new data, the means by which it might be analysed once collected and the contribution made to the processes and validation of the outcomes through collaboration and making public.

Some authors, such as Mitchell and Pearson (2012) do a better job than others at locating practitioner enquiry in the scholarly tradition by emphasising its role in developing criticality and the value of engaging with literature. They also make the distinction between breaking this down to 'Research *on* teaching' and 'Research *in* teaching'. This may seem like academic concerns trumping the practical ones but it goes beyond that. Without criticality and an engagement *with*, not simply *in*, research (Hall, 2009), practitioner enquiry runs the very real risk of being seen as a tool for monitoring, auditing or

pushing forward school development priorities which themselves have not been problematised. A current trend is to refer to 'evidence-informed teaching'. Nelson (2014), for example, proposes a model of four contributions to evidence-informed teaching; professional expertise and judgement, classroom context and learner needs, management and pupil data and research evidence. She suggests that teachers can 'draw on, or create, research evidence to help inform decision-making and practice' and practitioner research relies on both.

Making sense of the experience; good days and bad days, contradictions and potential

As already acknowledged, teachers and school leaders have a variety of relationships with, experiences of and perspectives on practitioner enquiry. This is inevitable in a profession and contexts as diverse as ours. For some it is very much a practical and independent approach to practice review or development. It can ensure that CPD is a bespoke offer which puts teachers in the driving seat, encouraging them to engage intelligently with evidence from multiple sources and enabling creative responses to recognised needs; being part of an ecology of teachers' engagement with research as part of the professional development, (Bell *et al.*, 2010). For others it becomes more of a conceptual stance; becoming more critically reflective and developing a sense of theorised practice. This is perhaps that which was imagined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Stenhouse (1981). At another extreme it can become part of a managed system of data-driven school improvement, or a response to meeting new and emerging agendas of schools as self-improving systems; supporting the reductionist technical view of education. As Elliott (2012) worries, teachers as researchers have become captives of outcomes-based education, whose sole role is to establish the means by which they can become more effective in delivering predetermined knowledge outcomes.

In addition, practitioners encounter enquiry in a variety of ways. Some, for example, come to it through Research Lesson Study (Dudley, 2014), others through the establishment of teacher learning communities in school (with the acronym TLC which offers the delightful image of teachers providing tender loving care to their teaching), and others because they engage with university academics and researchers. Here at Newcastle University, for example, this potential for engagement comes in at least three forms:

1. working towards a university award at Master's level (both PGCE and MEd) which has practitioner enquiry at its methodological basis;
2. being a teacher researcher participant in a funded project (such as the Learning to Learn evaluations, Wall *et al.* (2010); or
3. being part of less formal networks in which some participants engage in enquiry to develop their understanding of the shared interest (such as our enquiry or project-based learning networks, Leat *et al.*, 2014b).

Given these variations it is not surprising that opinions on practitioner enquiry vary, and that even those relatively committed to it as an underlying professional activity have good and bad days in relation to it.

In their recent literature review on teachers' views on research engagement, which contributed to the BERA/RSA Inquiry into the role of research in teacher education (BERA-RSA, 2014), Leat *et al.*, (2014b) concluded that teachers' research engagement improves their working lives, gives them new perspectives and makes them more sensitive to students' experiences of classrooms. However there is a conditioning effect on working and thinking where the pressure to meet exam targets is intense. It is difficult to overestimate this factor. (Leat *et al.*, 2014)

This perhaps reinforces Hammersley's (2004) concern of action research as a contradiction; much of the 'action' that teachers are expected to take is determined and directed by the wider education system, articulated through school management as a result of the pressure to perform well in league tables and inspections, and thus is largely out of the hands of the teacher in terms of decision-making. If actions can be only infrequently flexed or developed there is not much scope for enquiry that is designed to change them. In addition, if the culture of performativity (implicated by targets, measures, and publication of data) (Ball, 2013) drives action then the only form of enquiry which might be deemed permissible is that which is orientated towards collecting data to feed the resulting self-surveillance and rigid improvement planning that results.

Practitioner enquiry supports the development of teaching and relates to constructs of professionalism and professional learning. A key tipping point can come when practitioner enquirers are part of, or form, professional learning communities. These are not guaranteed to function unproblematically and, as discussed by Watson (2014), it can be the paradox of shared values and school vision which threatens these and 'supresses possibilities for change' (p.27). Despite this, if practitioner enquiry can be recognised as a form of practical research, we can conceptualise it as potentially enabling and encouraging teachers to engage with a body of knowledge, become active in knowledge creation, and to undertake enquiry as social practice; and it is this social practice that perhaps has the greatest added value because it prompts and supports the others.

Finally, it is possible, but not again not inevitable, that sustained engagement in practitioner research can support the development of *phronesis*; a Greek term sometimes translated as practical wisdom wisely used in context, 'the ability to see the right thing to do in

the circumstances' (Thomas, 2010, p.23). Imagine an education system in which professionals, individually and collectively, had the disposition to act truly and justly according to their values and moral stance. It might help us to counter the influences of policy-makers and quangos who determine so much the daily experience of learners and teachers, and school leaders.

Conclusion

I conclude this paper with some of my colleagues' comments on their experiences of supporting teachers and school leaders in practitioner enquiry / research (prefaced by one colleagues' reflection on her personal experience as a practitioner):

> My own experience of practitioner research - as a teacher - is that it changed my life and re-established my desire to continue to work in education!' *Hanneke Jones, recently awarded a PhD for her research into Philosophy for Children*

> … the confrontation between orthodoxy and individuality is particularly evident. *Elaine Hall*

> Practitioner enquiry […] makes student teachers use, reflect on, and develop research and theory through their own practice, so that theory and practice are seen as dialectical and feeding each other.' *Hanneke Jones*
> 'I have always been struck by how much angst we release and also how many bits of wisdom are generated, because the teachers slow down, often talk to students or other staff, try something different, read, reframe'. *David Leat*

At its heart, practitioner enquiry rests on the proposition that those in practice are able to take informed intentional actions, explore their effects and form judgements of their value. In our dissertation handbook we use the following bullet points as a call to arms:

- Show originality in the application of knowledge,
- Understand how knowledge is advanced by research
- Respond to complex issues systematically and creatively
- Show originality in tackling and solving problems.

Perhaps these represent the elusive promise of practitioner enquiry.

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