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By Practitioners, For Practitioners: Informing and Empowering Practice Through Practitioner Research

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By Practitioners, For Practitioners: Informing and Empowering Practice Through Practitioner Research

Abstract

The *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* was developed to provide meaningful information and resources for professionals who work with youth placed at risk. In order to further this goal, we are calling on practitioners to communicate directly with their colleagues via the journal. We are especially interested in publishing practitioner reports on effective programs, strategies, or interventions that improve both the practice and well-being of youth. The editors provide an overview of practitioner research, describe three approaches to practitioner research, outline the process for conducting practitioner research, and emphasize the role of practitioner-researchers as agents of change. Resources are provided to assist practitioners in conducting research and in reporting their experiences and outcomes.

Keywords

practitioner research, action research, reflective practice, change agents

By Practitioners, For Practitioners: Informing and Empowering Practice Through Practitioner Research

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While many academics in university settings conduct research in an effort to benefit practice in their field of study, the reality is that not many practitioners in the field actually read peer-reviewed journals (Biswas & Kirchherr, 2015) and that most peer-reviewed articles are written by academics for academics using highly technical language that is “unpleasant to read” and “impossible to understand” (Pinker, 2014, para. 3). The editors of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* desire to avoid this tradition by including articles and resources in each issue that are meaningful and valuable to practitioners.

The mission of our journal is to publish educational articles on how to reduce harmful risk conditions and promote the well-being of all youth, especially vulnerable youth in schools, families, and communities. While we welcome submissions from all who support this mission, the editors want the journal to be a venue where practitioners can communicate directly with their fellow practitioners. To this purpose, one of our submission categories for the journal is practitioner reports. These reports should describe effective programs, strategies, or interventions used by professionals working with youth placed at risk. Any manuscript submitted as a practitioner report should include evidence-based outcomes, any changes made as a result of these outcomes, and suggestions for application of these practices in other settings.

In an effort to increase submissions in this category, we have taken this opportunity in our second issue of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* to further define practitioner research, provide resources to facilitate this process, and describe the potential for this type of inquiry to

empower practitioners and the youth they serve. Note: While most published information about practitioner research focuses on K-12 teachers, there have been calls for practitioner research in other fields where individuals work closely with vulnerable youth including school counseling (Kaffenberger, 2012), social work (Julkunen & Uggerhoj, 2016), and criminal justice (Sullivan, Willie, & Fisher, 2013). Information provided below is applicable to these other fields as well.

OVERVIEW OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

There are multiple overlapping types of research that we are referring to collectively as practitioner research including, but not limited to, teacher research, classroom research, action research, evidence-based practice, and practitioner inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) defined practitioner inquiry as “the array of educational research genres where the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of the study” (p. 503). Durrant (2016) and Ravitch (2014) also emphasized the contextual nature of practitioner research and noted that unlike traditional empirical research, which focuses on generalizability of results, practitioner research focuses on improving the specific results of practice.

Much of the traditional educational research that is conducted and published is external to what occurs in the classroom, and, thus, these generalized, often large-scale, results may not address the specific concerns of (or have no application to) the teaching and learning process within an individual classroom or school setting (Durrant, 2016; Elliott, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for educators to gather evidence

in their own settings to gain knowledge and inform practice with the goal of benefitting the youth they serve. Although generalizability of results is not a goal of this type of research, Campbell (2013) and Durrant emphasized the importance of practitioner-researchers sharing their experiences and discoveries with important stakeholders including students, colleagues, administration, community, and profession. Durrant noted that wider dissemination of findings can benefit colleagues who have not had the opportunity to conduct their own classroom research.

THREE APPROACHES TO PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

It is useful to know there are varying approaches to practitioner research. For example, Calhoun (1994, 2002) described three approaches to action research, which may be generalized to practitioner research: individual research, collaborative research, and schoolwide research. The number of people involved and the purposes served distinguish these three approaches.

One teacher or staff member conducts individual research, and the purpose of this research is to solve a single classroom problem concerning student management, motivation, or learning. For example, a math teacher may seek to solve the classroom problem of a lack of student motivation and learning in math by implementing a small group activity over a period of time. During and after the implementation of the activity, the teacher reflects on the results, makes adjustments for improvement, or discards the activity if improvements are not forthcoming.

More than one school staff member—usually a small group of teachers—conducts collaborative research. The purpose of this research is typically to solve a problem shared by a few classrooms. For example, a small group of second grade teachers may collaborate to solve the common problem of how to motivate

and increase the reading proficiency of boys who are currently reading below grade level by introducing the boys to high-interest sports booklets. The collaborative approach follows the same reflective process as the individual research approach but is often more effective because of the sharing of creative ideas, group support, and material resources.

The entire school staff is involved in conducting schoolwide research. The purpose of this research is to solve a schoolwide problem with an emphasis on equitable improvement for all students. For example, the school staff may work together to solve a common problem of how to increase students' essay writing skills by implementing a new writing program. The advantage of the schoolwide approach is that it invites the input of the entire staff and often leads to schoolwide improvements for all students. It has the power to transform an entire school into a professional learning community. Applied on a yearly basis, this approach can empower the staff and result in ongoing school renewal. For a detailed example of how the schoolwide action research approach was applied to help high school teachers improve student reading comprehension, see Calhoun (2002), and for a case study of how this approach was used to help high school teachers shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching practices, see Glanz (2016).

CONDUCTING PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

As the demands on educators have increased, many teachers are resistant to conducting research in their classroom settings as they see this as an additional, time-consuming responsibility (Elliott, 2015). However, Elliott and others (e.g., Binder, 2012; Durrant, 2016) noted that practitioner research should not be viewed as a separate practice; rather, the roles of teacher and researcher should be integrated. Watkinson and Gallo-Fox (2015) also noted that it is important that practitioner-researchers feel their efforts are valued by their supervisors.

The first step to conducting practitioner research is to identify the question(s) to be studied (Kaffenberger, 2012). Questions to be addressed are not derived from research literature; they emerge from professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Ravitch, 2014). Practitioner research can be conducted individually or in collaboration (Elliott, 2015). Both Binder (2012) and Cochran-Smith and Donnell suggested teacher learning communities as a good venue for conversation about important questions related to the teaching and learning process.

Once the question(s) have been identified, it is important to develop a research plan (Kaffenberger, 2012; Ravitch, 2014). While practitioner research is less formal than most empirical research, planning and structure are needed prior to beginning research. Planning includes gaining any needed permissions, developing timeline, identifying participants, determining methods for data collection and analysis, and making plans for sharing of results. Any practitioner research undertaken should emphasize the benefits to the teaching and learning process with a goal of transforming practice (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Kaffenberger, 2012).

Practitioner research aligns closely with many characteristics of qualitative research including self-reflection, multiple stakeholders and multiple data sources, and triangulation (Cochran-Smith, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Elliott, 2015; Ravitch, 2014). Qualitative research allows the practitioner-researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning process in the actual context in which it occurs. This research approach also values multiple perspectives, ensuring that all voices are heard in the data collection process.

Examples of data collection methods in practitioner research include students' written and oral work, interviews with students and colleagues, reflective journals, observational

field notes, and collection of documents associated with the practice under study. Quantitative data relevant to the study, such as student test scores, attendance, and discipline records, can also be used. Triangulation, a validation method that involves reviewing data across multiple sources and perspectives, is employed, and narrative data are coded for common themes and patterns. A list of resources designed to guide practitioners through the research process is included at end of this article.

In addition, it is helpful to review previous examples of practitioner research to obtain ideas about research methods and strategies for future research efforts. Kaffenberger (2012) provided examples of practitioner research that addressed closing the achievement gap and increasing student attendance. Gordon (2016) summarized previous practitioner research on a variety of topics including improvement of the writing curriculum and improvement of student achievement through experiential learning. Li, Kenzy, Underwood, and Severson (2015) collaborated on practitioner research to show the impact of arts-based teaching on students in three urban public schools.

PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

While the original goal of practitioner research was to inform professional practice and improve student learning, it is now recommended that practitioner-researchers also use their findings to effect change within their community and profession. Cochran-Smith (2015) concurred stating that practitioner research should not be a "means to an end" but a "starting place for challenging inequities" (p. 111). This form of inquiry provides an opportunity for practitioners to ensure equity and justice for all youth within the local setting and beyond (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Storm, 2016).

Evidence is needed to support change, challenge current structure, and influence

policy (Durrant, 2016; Ravitch, 2014). Research conducted by Bersh, Benton, Lewis, and McKenzie-Parralles (2011) found that the act of conducting practitioner research empowered teachers and allowed them to develop their agency. Ravitch (2014) and Elliott (2015) supported the view of practitioner-researchers as agents of change. Both Ravitch and Cochran-Smith (2015) encouraged practitioner-researchers to explore the influence of cultural factors (e.g., race, class, gender) on the perspectives and behaviors of their stakeholders. Campbell (2013) concluded, “If we are going to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classrooms, we need teachers who recognize and know how to raise questions about curriculum, standards, and required testing” (p. 2).

PREVIEW OF ISSUE CONTENT

James C. Jupp’s interview with Christine Sleeter focuses on multicultural education and its translation into classroom practice. Dr. Sleeter, a long-time and continuing contributor to the field of multicultural education, discusses the basics of multicultural teaching, provides advice for new teachers, addresses what White teachers can do to reach students of color, and describes her work with the new movement on advancing the ethnic studies curriculum.

An article contributed by Jason Hutchens, “*GrowingChange: Media Products as Therapy for Adjudicated Youth*,” describes the founding of GrowingChange, a grassroots organization dedicated to improving futures of teenage males in the juvenile justice system. This organization, which first focused on growing and providing food and food-related products to impoverished communities, has expanded to focus on a unique form of therapy incorporating use of art and media. Hutchens reports on how these youth are sharing their experiences through a comic book project and development of promotional videos.

In the next article, Moya Alfonso, Robert Vogel, Akwati Gupta, and Karmen Williams

present their empirical research, “Understanding Forced Sex During Adolescence: An Exploratory Study of Risk and Protective Factors.” This study explores predictors of forced sex among middle school students, and results show several significant predictors of forced sex including cyberbullying, previous dating violence, use of prescription drugs, and identification as a sexual minority. These authors provide recommendations for schools regarding the identification and selection of evidence-based interventions to implement with youth at risk of experiencing sexual violence.

James C. Jupp reviews Christine Sleeter’s novel, *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present* (2015); this fictionalized work follows the personal journey of a White elementary teacher in discovering her own cultural family history and how this information influences her teaching in a multicultural classroom. This book draws upon the four dimensions of Sleeter’s research and also incorporates research of others regarding effective teaching and learning practices of White teachers working with diverse students.

Bradley E. Bunn, a veteran youth worker and self-taught artist living and working in Mid-Michigan, is the featured artist in our *Art Corner*. His artwork in this issue, inspired by the actions of his daughters during the months following their mother’s/his wife’s stroke, focuses on the nature of resiliency found in adolescence.

CONCLUSION

The articles included in this issue of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* discuss challenges that affect youth, allow stakeholder voices to be heard, and offer solutions to transform professional practice. We hope that these pieces will inform the work of practitioners who interact directly with vulnerable youth as well as those individuals who teach and train future practitioners. Please let us know which information you found most valuable in this issue as well as which topics you would

like to see addressed in future issues of the journal. Feedback and/or suggestions can be sent to journal editors at nyarjournal@georgiasouthern.edu.

In addition to receiving your feedback, we also want our readers to consider publishing in the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*. While we welcome submissions that support the journal's mission in all categories (e.g., essays, literature reviews, research articles, etc.), we especially are interested in receiving practitioner reports. As Ravitch (2014) stated,

...that [practitioner research] is where the hope is: in the stories, in the data, and in the evidence that emerges from a more relational, contextualized, collaborative and practice-centered kind of research—not the top down kind of research that is being forced upon many of us—but, rather, the kind that emerges from knowledge and caring about people in a setting, the kind that emerges when practitioners take seriously the responsibility to collaborate with, care for, support, and empower ourselves, our colleagues, and our constituencies. (p. 6)

Any practitioner—considering submitting a practitioner report for potential publication in the journal—is welcome to contact the editors for feedback on a research question/topic, guidance regarding the research process, and tips for writing the report. Please send proposed ideas and/or questions to nyarjournal@georgiasouthern.edu to take advantage of this research and editorial assistance.

RESOURCES FOR CONDUCTING PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

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