Center for Practitioner Research (CFPR)

Concept Paper

In order to begin laying a foundation for the new venture entitled “Center for Practitioner Research” it may be helpful to situate the philosophical and experiential foundations for such a center within educational research. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) note, however that “the language used to refer to practitioner inquiry has varied considerably” (p. 503). Given the broad interpretation of practitioner research, in this paper we situate the concepts of practitioner research within the Vision Statement for the CFPR developed at National-Louis University/National College of Education.

In 2011, the Center for Practitioner Research will affect education through collaborative scholarship that contributes to knowledge, practice, advocacy and policy in education. The Center will be an advocate for practitioner research as an essential form of educational research. The Center’s mission will be to: (1) support, promote, nurture, and celebrate the use of practitioner research as a viable means for the enhancement of teaching and learning in schools and other educational organizations, and (2) encourage collaborative scholarship of practitioners within and across educational institutions.

(CFPR Vision Statement)

We will begin by expanding on our definition of practitioner research, situating it as a viable and important branch of educational research. We will then explore the issues associated with Practitioner Research, describing how the Center can address these issues. Finally, we will discuss ways in which the CFPR will be mutually beneficial to those both in the field and in the academy.

What is Practitioner Research?

The simplest definitions of “Practitioner Research” include the investigator, settings and purpose. The investigator is the practitioner, with the settings as ranging from work to education.
The general purpose is to better align one’s purpose (the investigator’s) with one’s actions (teaching, planning, learning, etc.).

While our focus is in the educational realm, and meant to be understood broadly so as to be inclusive, the definition from many theorists is much more complex. Some argue that “Practitioner Research” stems from the much larger social justice movement within the postmodern paradigms within qualitative research (See, for example Anderson, G. L., Herr, K. G., & Nihlen, A., 2007; Greenwood and Levin, 2003; Hollingsworth, 1999; Kincheloe, 2003). Even when social justice is not a motivating principle, the underlying commonality is the desire to improve upon and develop deeper insights into one’s practice (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Practitioner Research by its very nature gives teachers a voice—in their classrooms, in their schools, and in the profession (Burnaford, G., 2001; Keys, C., 2000; Polemeni, A. J., 1976; Rust, F. & Meyers, E., 2006). Our definition encompasses all of these, as we desire to give teachers and those involved in education a place to share their “voice” with others in the profession and the space to increase coherence between ideals and the expression of those ideals (See, for example, Carter & Doyle, 1996; Chandler, 2004; hooks, 1994; Schon, 1983).

One of many who describe a form of action research planning is Kemmis & McTaggart (2005), who generalize the steps as being change-driven:

- Planning a change
- Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change
- Reflecting on these processes and consequences
- Replanning
- Acting and observing again
- Reflecting again, and so on . . . (p. 563).
Others, such as Day (1999) have definitions that allow broader interpretation within individual practices. “To practice effectively …means engaging routinely in conscious, systematic collection and evaluation of information about these areas and the relationships between them which affect and result from practice” (p. 216). The importance of looking at a variety of definitions is not the particular definition, but rather that the practitioner is the initiator and the user of practitioner research.

Importantly, practitioner research is not limited to schools and colleges of education. Within the center we want to give space and voice to those who are not in the traditional public school Pk-12 or university classroom, but may be involved in education and student learning in other venues, such as performing Arts learning (i.e., children’s theatre groups, the private music teacher, or the community Arts school). Additionally, we recognize that while many define practitioner research as that which results in action in the learning environment, that action may be deep reflection of one’s practice that leads to professional renewal and self-actualization.

**Critical Issues Within the Genre of Practitioner Research**

*Making Space for Practitioners for “do” research*

While Practitioner Research may not be a new idea, for some making space for practitioners to do and share research is a new idea, and one that can have practical ramifications. Some of the problems in the sharing of research are the result of the variety of educational venues in which practitioners do research. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) speak of the problems inherent in the “sequestering of much literature under disciplinary rubrics” (p. 562), resulting in a lack of communication amongst practitioners about methods, results and implications.

A second issue related to “doing” Practitioner Research is that of enacting the cycle of change and renewal that inevitably follow reflection and action. Due to constraints in school
districts or other institutions practitioners are often limited in the kinds of or the amount of change they can implement. Others are limited by time, and become discouraged by lack of time for planning, action and change. Still others are alone in their settings, not knowing if the questions they conceive of and the changes they dream of are possible.

Collaboration—Our center can provide space to connect with others from across multiple disciplines, as well as space to connect within disciplines, where practitioners become “communities of inquirers,” creating multiple dialogues across contexts that seek to understand the work we do as practitioners. Working in a center can also provide the resources and time that might not be available in individual contexts, by virtue of having more than one person examining a question. Such connections can prevent the issue of Practitioner Researchers feeling “invisible” or “not heard.” Even with varying contexts across disciplines, sharing research can result in “naturalistic generalization” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or a way to share nuances from practitioner to practitioner. Each researcher can find something in another’s work that will resonate within them, possibly resulting in further reflection and continued research.

Valuing Practitioner Research

Empowerment of Teachers— In this era of NCLB teacher self-empowerment is timely and necessary. Freire’s (1970) words resonate loudly as teachers flounder to find their voice and their power. “I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of domination—which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved” (p. 84). Practitioner research illuminates possibilities for teachers to experience and influence change, and to see the results their decisions have on pupil learning. Our center can provide space for teachers and other practitioners to empower themselves to make decisions based on knowledge of their individual classrooms and knowledge of their district, population demographics, and other relevant
contextual constraints. Even as early as the mid-1970’s, educational evaluators such as Polemini (1976) recognized the power such knowledge gives teachers: “To the extent that teacher decisions are supported by teacher research, his or her power is that much increased” (p. 494). Keyes (2000) concurs by saying that teacher research is valued and teachers’ findings “are more valid since the teachers are using data rather than preferences or hunches to guide improvement (p. 6).

Research that is persuasive and authoritative—Mills (2007) states that “research done by teachers for teachers involves collection of persuasive data. Such data is persuasive because teachers are invested in the legitimacy of the data collection” (p. 11). In an era of “accountability” practitioners have a vested interest in ensuring that research about their practice reflects their lives and their contexts. The research process becomes a tool for reconceptualizing their practice (O’Connor, Green & Anderson, 2006).

Helping Teachers Find Their Voice

Learning to be a practitioner researcher in education begins in the teacher education program at National-Louis University (NLU) and the National College of Education (NCE). We support this belief by providing space and mandates for teachers to engage in practitioner research within their coursework. Authors have written about how practitioners become researchers and cite the need to provide support for teacher researchers, advocating for the value of the teacher voice in understanding schooling and school contexts (Brock, Helman & Patchen, 2005; Day, 1999; Rose, 2002).

Theory intermingled with Practice—One way to support this learning by practitioners is to promote the balance of theory and practice in the learning process. We, as higher-education practitioners, need to promote ‘Practitioner Research’ as a viable way to impact education
(Greenwood & Levin, p. 152-153; Pinar, 2003). We can model behaviors that illustrate the use of theory “to focus the inquiry process and justify the choice of questions, subjects, sites, strategies, and methods” (Pitri, 2006, p. 41). “What is needed is the habit of viewing the entire curriculum as a continuous growth, reflecting the growth of mind itself” (Dewey, 1904/1962, p. 19).

Conclusion

We are all learners, and learning from each other. Day (1999) states that “building communities of reflective practice is not easy, for it requires that expectations and traditional practices . . . [be] changed” (p. 228). While we cannot dictate those changes, nor can we force practitioners to engage in changing practices, we can provide space for practitioners to find and lift their voice. We can be a place that is centered within a “core of values guided by a sense of hope and possibility, grounded in a belief in justice and democracy” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 151). All voices must be heard, and encouraged to reflect, grow, and if applicable, change. The Center for Practitioner Research can be that place.
References


