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DEVELOPMENT AND ENQUIRY PROGRAMMES
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Perspectives on Practitioner Research

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In 1976 I carried out a small-scale enquiry in my primary classroom into children's collaboration in small independent groups. I wanted to know more about the ways in which children explored problems that they had set themselves. Independent group work was becoming something of a 'vogue' at that time (I was teaching seven and eight year olds that year) and whilst I intuitively felt there was educational value in it, this intuition was something of an act of faith. Although I was very curious to know and to improve group work, I was also apprehensive. After all, the children could well have been talking about last night's soap whilst the one industrious child did the work needed to produce the outcome for the teacher.

So, I persuaded some of the children to allow the use of a tape recorder on their table whilst they were working (which they seemed to 'play to' at first but then soon forgot). Recording several group sessions, I transcribed the tapes, analysed the scripts and worked my way towards some personal theory, based on the limited evidence I had, of children's social and intellectual learning in small group work. In the process, I worked with some of the new theories that large-scale researchers were developing at the time. These ideas enriched my own and 'mulched' in to my thinking to deepen the personal theories I was developing.

I had not wanted to sit in isolation in the university library doing a reading-based study (this project was to be my MA dissertation submission). My teaching experience had, I felt, to be the starting point and purpose of the work.

At the time, I had not heard of action research, practitioner research or teacher research. (These terms are often used interchangeably, though I prefer to use 'practitioner research' since it can refer to a wide range of professionals.) In the Masters' course I was pursuing, I had not come across the ideas of Lawrence Stenhouse, who was at that time becoming something of a guru in the field of teacher research (Stenhouse, 1975). Nor had I heard of Donald Schon whose book *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action* (Schon, 1983) was later to become a seminal text and highly influential in the way we came to think about the creation of useful professional knowledge. I was also quite unaware that a whole teacher research movement was beginning to develop in the USA and elsewhere (eg see Hollingsworth, 1997). Nor did I know that the radical ideas of Paulo Freire were being used to develop a form of participatory action research in which communities in Third World countries and elsewhere were working together to seek to improve their living circumstances (eg Ledwith). In seeking to pursue my own curiosity as a teacher, in my own way, about my own pupils' learning, I was unknowingly entering into this rapidly growing slip-stream of research that was enabling communities of practitioners to think and act differently in their work and lives.

For my study I did not do a course on research methods or even open a book on research methodology. (This is not a boast, rather a statement of historical fact, since practitioner research had not hit most UK universities at the time.) Rather, I invented and felt my own way through the enquiry from a position of methodological ignorance. Had I known then what I know now about practitioner research, I could probably have done a deeper and more rigorous study, but the one I did, nevertheless, changed my whole perspective on children's learning. It opened my eyes and mind to children's capacities that I was certainly not accessing in other aspects of my teaching.

I share this piece of biography, not to indulge in a journey down memory lane, but because it illustrates the three main points I want to make in this think piece. My first point is that practitioner research has a central purpose that is practical and professional. It is not isolated from experience or from the judgements and actions of thinking professionals as they seek to improve their daily work. My second point is that professionals do not come to practitioner research with a blank sheet. They come with experience, skill and knowledge that can form the bedrock of the expertise required for good practitioner research. The attributes of a good teacher fit well with the attributes of a good practitioner researcher. These attributes become extended and deepened as one moves from being a good practitioner to being a good practitioner researcher. My third key point is that there is no sacrosanct way of conducting practitioner research. Although there are now many standard ways offered in the literature, there is also room for each practitioner researcher to create his or her individual mode of enquiry. The main requirement is that, however we do practitioner research, we do it with as much validity as we can muster. Let me now elaborate these points one by one.

Practitioner research for improvement

Whilst the main purpose of research is to create new knowledge and understanding for us, to help us know something we did not previously know (Bassey, 1995), the additional and necessary purpose of practitioner research is to try as best we can to put that new knowledge to practical use. The traditional separation in research of new knowledge from its purposeful application to life is, in principle, dissolved in practitioner research. This is not to suggest that the link between what we come to know and what we can do about it in practice is always straightforward.

Sometimes the link between knowledge and action can be more complicated than we expect – and we have to struggle with this vexation. However, there is always a practical intent in seeking to create new insights through practitioner research. Indeed, it has been pointed out time and again that the act of engaging in practitioner research can lead to almost immediate professional change, since our perceptions, and often our actions, change the minute we start looking and reflecting (eg see McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, Brown and Jones, 2001). If, therefore, research can be seen as 'systematic enquiry made public' (Stenhouse, 1975) then practitioner or action research can be seen as systematic enquiry made public and practical. 'What distinguishes action research from other forms of enquiry,' wrote John Elliott (1997:25), 'are its transformative intentions.'

Several key theorists of action and practitioner research have also emphasised the moral dimension. This has been represented by many as an orientation towards improving democracy and social justice in the world, be this in classrooms, communities, hospitals and other professional contexts (eg Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Zeichner, 1993, Lather, 1986, Griffiths, 1995). These views suggest that we cannot ask questions of, and enquire into, our work, without facing up to the values embedded in our thinking. For our enquiry to have moral and ethical validity, this is necessary. David Bridges (2003) poses this as a philosophical issue. Whatever model or methodology of practitioner research we adopt, he urges us always to be aware of the philosophical assumptions we are making and to be more self-conscious of their presence. Where values, beliefs and assumptions remain hidden and unexamined, one could argue that the project lacks some philosophical validity. In my group work research, for example, there were questions of a philosophical nature I could, and should have raised, such as the nature of my particular notion of social development.

Key resource one

Griffiths M, 1995, *In Fairness to Children: Working for Social Justice in the Primary School*, David Fulton Ltd, London

My research was, I saw later, predicated on the assumption that collaborative working in which learners exchange, criticise and build upon each other's ideas is, necessarily, a good thing. This might not be a view shared by all, especially those who believe in a more individualistic notion of achievement and success. The same can be said of the taken-for-granted concept of improvement. This is a value-laden word that will have different meanings from different values' perspectives. A practitioner research project that gauges pupil improvement in terms of enhanced test scores, for example, is predicated on the belief that test scores are a valued indicator of educational achievement. For some, this might constitute a definition of education too narrow for their liking. These are philosophical questions of values and beliefs, the presence and examination of which we need to consider if we are to research with validity.

Further, in defining the purposes of practitioner or action research, some have argued for a collaborative approach in which practitioners research with other colleagues to bring about social and educational change. Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998, for example, argued that we can bring about change more effectively if we research as a collective, thereby increasing the opportunities to understand what is going on in our work and, thus, enhance the possibilities for change. We are not trying to change the whole world together. Rather, we are aiming to improve that part of it over which we have some control and responsibility. In doing so we do, in a small sense, have an affect on the world at large. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:17) argued that;

'Changing a whole society or culture is, on the face of it, beyond the reach of individuals. In action research, groups work together to change their language, their modes of action and their social relationships and, thus, prefigure, foreshadow and provoke changes in the broader fabric of interactions which characterise our society and culture.'

Our scope is local, not global, yet in improving our small part of the global in socially just ways, we can contribute towards changing the larger picture.

Practitioner research, therefore, is not seeking generalisations in the way some large-scale forms of research attempt to do. Rather, it is seeking new understandings that will enable us to create the most intelligent and informed approach we can to improving our provision for those in our care. Stenhouse claimed that 'we are concerned with the development of a sensitive and self-critical subjective perspective and not with the aspiration to unattainable objectivity' (1975:157). In accepting the mantle, as researchers, of professional communicators in a more public arena, therefore, we seek to share our research stories with others so that colleagues can, if appropriate, engage with them and relate them to their own work. In this sense, the notion of relateability becomes more appropriate for practitioner research than the traditional research concept of generalisability. This is how the influence of the small-scale, particular project, shared across the profession, can work its way into the larger fabric.

Peter Reason's and Hilary Bradbury's definition (2001:1) draws together these key characteristics of practitioner or action research in a succinct and humane way. They suggest that;

'Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes…It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally to the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.'

Building on what you know

In not having been introduced to research methodology in a formal way in 1976, my mind was clear to invent a mode of enquiry that was built on what I already knew and could do as a practising teacher. I did not feel disempowered in the face of a welter of research methodology textbooks and approaches as many practitioner researchers do when first entering the field. I have worked with many teachers in past years who, in trying to get to grips with the literature on research methodology, feel overwhelmed by its language, concepts, terminology, skills and processes. It is all too easy, in these circumstances, to feel that practitioner research is something you don't know and can't do. Yet, as professionals we have many valuable personal resources. There are existing attributes that go with the job, many of which are an integral part of being a researcher as well as a practitioner.

Of these existing attributes, a questioning mind is, perhaps, the most important, since first and foremost, research requires an abiding sense of curiosity and interest. We are born as questioning beings. Asking questions, exploring our world and gaining new understanding is our persisting human attempt to gain more control over our existence. This questioning quality is at the heart of research. We need to be curious and baffled by unexplored questions, vexed by what we don't know, keen to see through the mists of our hazy knowledge more clearly if we are to be drawn along by practitioner research. In this, professionals already have within themselves the key quality of the researcher, even though they may not have found time and circumstance to follow through their questioning inclinations in any deep or sustained way.

Further attributes reside in the professional's expertise in gathering and processing necessary situational information in order to do the job well. As actors in the complex situation of the classroom or other working context, we must intuitively use our eyes, ears and analytical abilities to draw in, and make sense of, information about the contexts that we orchestrate. We have to observe, listen, absorb, integrate information, analyse and make judgements as a basis for action. Thus, we try to make sense of complex information about the work place in a way that leads to some practical theories we can use, sometimes in the rapid demands of the here-and-now moment. As Donald Schon pointed out many years ago (Schon, 1983), these are intellectual processes that reflective professionals use daily in order to solve practical problems and cope with the challenges of their work. We may not be self-conscious about them but they are there, embedded in our professional repertoire. Sustained practitioner research has its roots in these gifts. It helps to make them more explicit, more self-conscious. It develops and builds on them in order to expand the repertoire on which we can draw in seeking valid, useable knowledge.

Another vital attribute for research, as well as teaching, is a sense of conviction and passion about the value of our work in the service of others. The sense of care and responsibility that, often, lies hidden and unexamined in the pressures of daily work can have a vital part to play in our commitment to the job. This, in turn, informs our beliefs about the issues that we feel are worth researching. It can also inform our drive to take informed action in order to improve our work in morally and socially just ways. In an action research study I undertook with some teachers with whom I worked in INSET (Dadds, 1995) I discovered how important this passionate side of action research was for some. One teacher in particular, Vicki, had a biographically rooted concern about gender equal opportunities.

Her parents had always been diligent in offering her the same educational and life opportunities as her brothers but she was shocked, as she grew up, to find this was not the case for all – that access and opportunities were structurally denied to many. Her adolescent sense of dismay and outrage stayed with her throughout adulthood and became the driving force for her practitioner research. This led to her gaining permission in her school to study a wide range of curriculum, teaching and organisational practices from a gender perspective. Her passionate concern then drove her to share the findings from her research in whole-school INSET events that led to a whole-school review of gender policy and practice. Her research, therefore, rooted in this biographical passion, touched and changed many lives – both of teachers and pupils.

To have conviction about the human, moral and social value of our work does not, of course, mean to have blind passion. We need both head and heart in passionate research and they must be in dialogue with each other: heart helps us to know what matters; head helps us to see, think and feel our way carefully and thoughtfully towards more enlightened action. Working with caring and honest critical friends can be helpful if we have the courage to invite them to help us to see imbalances between our feelings and our thoughts. Feminist researchers have done much in the last twenty years to help us to better understand the positive role of emotions in research. They have also helped us to explore the myth of objectivity and recognise that examined subjectivity in knowledge creation is not only inevitable but can play a crucial role in seeking a better world of practice.

Fourth, we have valuable existing insider knowledge of the researched situation that we can use to good effect. What I already knew as a class teacher about the children in my study, for example, helped me to see that the abilities some displayed in small groups were way in advance of my regular expectations. In one or two cases it felt as though I was hearing children I did not know. My existing insider knowledge, set against my new research knowledge enabled me to see that I was underestimating some children and had not been providing good learning opportunities for them to use and develop their communicative abilities. In this juxtaposition of existing and new knowledge lay the opportunity for my learning and the development of my practice.

These then, are some of the professional attributes that practitioners will bring to their research careers and which can be developed consciously through engagement with established practitioner research methods and methodologies. Whilst my ignorance in 1976 was of some advantage I was, nevertheless, limited by not having been introduced formally to research methods and methodology. There was much I could have learned that would have enhanced the quality of the work. In subsequent years I came to realise, for example, that there are limitations and dangers in relying on just one source and type of data (in my case, tape-recorded pupil conversations). Far better to strengthen the validity of your research base by drawing on a broad range of complementary data in approaches such as triangulation. After all, the children in my study could well have raised the quality of their discussion because of the presence of the tape-recorder or because they knew I was paying particular attention to them. I had no other formal sources of data to enable me to know whether or not their achievements were specific to this context. In fact, in my limited and over-enthusiastic way, I did not, at the time, see this as problematic.

Also, in my ignorance, I did not think through adequately the ethical issues of the study. Although I sought the children's voluntary involvement in the research, it did not occur to me, for example, to seek their permission to use their discussions more publicly with other teachers. In time, I came to see this as an almost unforgivable omission in my ethical thinking (what a colleague later called, 'third party, fire and theft'). Much good work has been done over the years by practitioner researchers to identify the ethical complexities in which we need to manoeuvre in order to be respectful of participants' needs and rights in our research processes (eg Zeni, 2001). My study would have been the better for knowing this work, had it been around at the time.

Even though my personal judgements carried me a long way in my research in 1976, I would be cautious about recommending others to enter into the field of practitioner research with the same level of methodological naivety. There are different traditions and philosophies which can be enlightening, even for the novice researcher, and on which one can draw consciously and with judgement. This can bring about a more informed and controlled approach to the many aspects of one's own research that can be empowering. In the next section, I will outline briefly a small selection from some of this established work.

Variety in practitioner research

In their book *Unplayed Tapes: A Personal History of Collaborative Teacher Research*, Fishman and McCarthy (2000) offer a good description of two quite different approaches to teacher research. First, they describe the approach established by Stenhouse in the UK which they see as 'both systematic and self-critical', leading to a process 'which involves established methods of data collection and analysis, peer review and publication' (Fishman and McCarthy, 2000:13). Stenhouse believed that professional knowledge needed to be interrogated, critiqued and validated by the professional community for it to be accorded the status of verified knowledge (see Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985).

Stenhouse was committed, to the careful, systematic building of a case study database, using observations, interviews and other relevant documentation. This case database becomes the focus of analytical interrogation in the search for new explanatory theories about the workings of teaching and learning in the classroom. At the centre of this systematic process are questions that teachers themselves consider relevant to their work (Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985). This approach is in sharp contrast to the dominant forms of university research that monopolised the field of educational research in Stenhouse's time (in the 1960s and 1970s) in which research questions tended to be posed from outside the school by researchers who were not part of the school. In this sense, Stenhouse's work on teacher research was a radical departure in its time.

On the other hand, Ann Berthoff's different conception of teacher research, developed in America, claimed that teachers already have within their stored memory of experience all they need in order to conduct research (Fishman and McCarthy, 2000). In this, she suggests that 'practitioner enquiry is re-searching experiences teachers already have' (Fishman and McCarthy, 2000:13). Teacher research, here, consists of reflecting upon, and re-working intellectually, one's core professional experiences. Further, Berthoff's views about publication differed from Stenhouse's. She believed that teacher research should focus on the particulars of the teacher's own practice and need not have a public audience for dissemination.

Berthoff's approach implicitly suggests that research is a form of professional conversation between our practice and our reflective powers – mind interacting with experience. In this, it bears some resemblance to other approaches to practitioner research (eg Rowland, 1984; Mason, 2002). Of particular interest here is Susan Hart's methodology. Susan developed a carefully structured approach with practising teachers which she called 'innovative thinking' (Hart, 2000). In contrast to the Stenhousian approach, which involves shaping a specific research focus or question and gathering all the case study data around this, Susan's approach takes daily classroom events that puzzle or disturb the teacher as the starting point for enquiry (Hart, 2000:10) such as that of a child appearing not to understand the point of a lesson. Susan's approach offers five enquiry 'moves' (Hart, 2000:10) that enable the practitioner to examine and test out his or her own analysis and interpretation of a situation.

The five moves support the teacher in:

1. **making connections** – making connections between what is happening for the child and the provision in the wider learning environment
2. **contradicting** – challenging his or her existing assumptions about the child by seeking an alternative interpretation
3. **taking a child's eye view** – trying to see the world from the child's perspective
4. **noting the impact of feelings** – recognising the teacher's own emotionality in the situation and the effect on judgements that are being made
5. **postponing judgement in order to find out more** – checking that judgements about the child are based on adequate information

In this approach, therefore, it is the practitioner's existing thinking about the child's learning – how the teacher constructs a professional view of the child, for better or worse – that becomes the focus of enquiry. Since it is these teacher constructs that may shape educational experiences for the child, it is vital that these must be developed in socially just ways. Susan offers a clear rationale for this approach. She writes, 'the process of thinking through teaching is one of the most important sources – if not the most important source – of teachers' power to make a difference to children's learning' (Hart, 2000:3). Further, she points out 'how important it is, in fairness to children, that we take time to review and reflect on judgements made about individual children and their learning, especially when these reflect negatively upon children's qualities and abilities' (Hart, 2000:2).

Key resource two

Mason J, 2002, *Researching Your Own Practice: The Discipline of Noticing,* RoutledgeFalmer, London

Key resource three

Hart S, 2000, *Thinking Through Teaching: A Framework for Enhancing Participation and Learning,* David Fulton Ltd, London

Another group of action researchers in the UK (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002; McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996) have shown, through structured methods and questions, how practitioner research can help us to identify our educational values and then to explore whether or not we are living by them in our professional practices. These colleagues have argued that we are all susceptible, as humans, to espousing values that we do not always apply to our living practices – that we are, in that sense, 'living contradictions'. Their methodological approach encourages us to explore and see these contradictions and hopefully, as a result, bring our practices and values more closely together. By publicly documenting the learning journeys we undertake in the process we are offering not just practical educational theories but also 'living educational theories' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002:4), since our accounts are stories of the insights that emerge from our real life experiences. In doing this, we make ourselves publicly accountable by showing, through careful documentation, how our research leads to improvements in education.

In a different style, postmodernist approaches to practitioner research have brought a healthy questioning of the notion that we can ever find certain truths about our work (eg Brown and Jones, 2001). As we ask questions and explore, our perceptions keep changing. Our very self is undergoing transformations such that coming to know is a continuous process that can be open to scrutiny and critique. Postmodernism, therefore, cautions us against accepting fixed truth. Rather, it invites us to be constantly open to various and alternative interpretations. Postmodern practitioner research methodologies reflect this position by adopting a continuing questioning and interpreting process, rather than fixing closure on research questions and conclusions at the beginning and end of a single action research cycle.

Doing it my way

Some practitioner researchers feel more comfortable and empowered by adopting tried and tested models. Others feel constrained by preconceived views. The challenge is to be aware of your own strengths and dispositions as well as knowledgeable about what others can offer, and then to utilise all this as well as you can in the research process.

We are all individual learners in this business of researching into our practice. It may well be that the quality of our practitioner research rests, in part, on the confidence we have to name and apply our own personal strengths and talents to this end. In a project Susan Hart and I conducted with practitioner researchers, we discovered that this is exactly what they did in order to make their practitioner research work to best advantage. They did not let predetermined methodologies constrain their views of how to conduct their research. Rather, they found creative ways to 'do it their way' in order to be true to their preferred learning styles and what they were seeking from their research. Joe Geraci, for example, found that he had a talent for narrative reporting and so wrote up his research on autism in children in a most engaging conversational way (Dadds and Hart, 2001:49). This accessible style followed and mirrored the storyline that had directed his project. It has engaged many teachers (and some classroom assistants) as a result and, thereby, can be said to have high levels of communicative validity.

Key resource four

McNiff J with Whitehead J, 2002, *Action Research: Principles and Practice,* RoutledgeFalmer, London

Liz Waterland has an admirable strength and interest in writing fictional literature so she reduced all her data on children's experiences of starting school into a fictional narrative that represented all the issues her research raised (Dadds and Hart, 2001:121). In its fictional story form, the research offered the opportunity for the researcher, and her readers, to enter empathetically into the child's world view in an attempt to imagine, as well as one can, a small child's experience of starting school. It is, maybe, only when we can change places emotionally and intellectually with the learner in this kind of way, that we can see schools and classrooms in beneficially new ways. This process of changing places can be a strong catalyst for deep analysis and change. Liz's research can, therefore, be said to have high levels of empathetic validity.

Ros Frost is something of a painter and found that visual representations helped her to understand her experiences more fully. So she developed a very pictorial research study using a sustained metaphor of a train journey to deepen her understanding of the issues she was exploring in her progress back from high levels of classroom stress as a teacher to new confidence and success. The start of her project offers a very vivid, emotive insight into where her journey began and gives the work personal and human authenticity:

'I feel overwhelmed, detached, dizzy, they're coming at me, I wish they would go away, I'm past my point, I can not stay here any longer, I want to get out... (I stay)…I need to get out…I must stay…(I stay) …nothing is more important as getting out of here…RIGHT NOW. I get to the staff room as a colleague takes my class over. I cry…I sit……. I think……How am I ever to get back in that classroom again?'

(Dadds and Hart, 2001:13)

Many have identified strongly with the experiences that Ros had the courage to share publicly. This gives her research a good deal of professional validity.

End thoughts

One day, we may well move out of an era of compliance and delivery in England to one in which teachers' informed professional judgements are recognised by policy-makers as having a more significant place in the educational process.

Judyth Sachs' new concept of teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003), developed for such an era, places sound teacher judgement, rooted in sustained practitioner research, at its heart.

Yet, research-based work demands much of professionals, for practitioner research is a challenging and exacting undertaking. It demands open-mindedness, courage in the face of self-critique and public sharing, emotional fortitude in dealing with uncertainty and profound change, spiritual energy in sustaining curiosity, compassion and the eternal search for new, improved practices. Those who take this journey demonstrate the highest levels of professionalism in using and developing these qualities. They offer innovative role models for others and help to build a new climate for responsible and accountable professionalism.

Key resource five

Dadds M and Hart S, 2001, *Doing Practitioner Research Differently,* RoutledgeFalmer, London

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Reflective Questions

Use the questions below to reflect upon your reading of the think piece and consider implications for your practice.

Please use the space provided on the following pages to record the outcomes of your reflective activity.

Pause for thought...

...What skills and attributes do you already possess as a practitioner that will support your role as a developing researcher? Represent these in a mind map, or other diagrammatic form. Examine your mind map and from it identify those areas in which you feel you would like, and need, to develop.

...What are some of the key ethical challenges that you face as a practitioner researcher? Begin to construct a written ethical code of conduct for yourself and colleagues. What research practices could you adopt that would help you to face these challenges?

...In conversation with a colleague or critical friend, map, in a visual form of your choosing, your prime educational values. Identify those that you think you try to prioritise in your work and implement with some degree of success, as well as those that you have difficulty in putting into practice. Identify and area you would like to prioritise in practitioner research study. How would you research it?

...Of the approaches to practitioner research mentioned in this think piece, which ones seemed to make most sense to you in relation to your preferred ways of thinking and learning?

Reflective notes

Pause for thought...

Reflective notes

Pause for thought...

Reflective notes

Pause for thought...