

# The Transformative Power of Taking an Inquiry Stance on Practice: Practitioner Research as Narrative and Counter-Narrative

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Within the ever-developing, intersecting and overlapping contexts of globalization, top-down policy, mandates and standardization of public and higher education, many conceptualize and position practitioner research as a powerful stance and a tool of social, communal and educational transformation, a set of methodological processes that generate local, contextualized, stakeholder-driven data upon which more critically informed decisions, strategies, policies and initiatives can be cultivated, shared and made public. I feel honored to have been asked to write this commentary, which seeks to do two things; the first is to introduce a new practice for this journal in which each issue includes a central article or commentary intended to be generative for readership (academia, K-12 education, policy makers, parents, and students) and the second is to make clear the value and import of practitioner research for:

- (1) Generating local, practice-based knowledge that is deeply contextualized and meaningfully embedded in a specific milieu;
- (2) The construction of practice-based narratives that can be viewed and engaged with as a counter-hegemonic way of thinking about and approaching theory-research-practice-policy connections and integrations;
- (3) The development of individual and collaborative research projects that push against traditional expert-learner dichotomies which can serve to re-inscribe power asymmetries and support structural oppression;

- (4) The transformative possibilities of local research that works from decidedly relational, contextualized, person-centered and equity-oriented perspectives and methodologies;

- (5) Contributing to an understanding of the methodological approaches that help practitioners cultivate the knowledge, skills and dispositions that support and generate taking an inquiry stance on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009).

The two goals for this piece – creating dialogue and inquiry across communities while foregrounding the generative nature and value of practitioner research within and across fields – are connected and together speak to the changing nature and roles of research within and across multiple fields. In the remainder of this piece I share current conceptualizations of practitioner research, and discuss the central role of practitioner research in the broader context of an inquiry stance.

## Conceptualizing Practitioner Research

Practitioner research is a methodological approach that allows for theory-research-practice integrations through the development of systematic research procedures and practices that foster critical reflection and action in the context of professional practice. Practitioner research constitutes a range of systematic, inquiry-based research efforts that are directed towards creating and extending professional knowledge, skills, ideas and practices. In practitioner research, questions emerge

from practice and then practitioners design research studies to collect and analyze practice-based data that respond to these questions within their organizational or communal contexts. Practitioner research is undertaken by practitioners who seek to improve our own practice, and perhaps that of our colleagues, through the purposeful and critical examination of and reflection on aspects of our work, of the experiences of our colleagues and constituencies, and of institutional cultures, policies, and practices that shape these realities. Such systematic examination is designed to increase awareness of the contexts that shape professional actions, decisions, and judgments, enabling practitioners to see our practices anew, to recognize and articulate the complexities of our work, and the values and choices at the core of professional practice.

Practitioner research enables practitioners to engage in structured inquiries that are directed towards knowledge generation; it helps practitioners to gain formative insight into what concerns or confuses us, what aspects of practice are most challenging and rewarding, about our roles as supporters, advocates, collaborators and change agents, about the parameters, possibilities, and constraints of our work settings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Practitioner research offers possibilities for illuminating and improving practice and influencing policies in a data-driven (in a reframed and more critical sense of that term) way that has the possibility to both inform and empower professionals. Finally, practitioner research can serve to professionalize practitioners in ways that enlighten and embolden us as individuals, as colleagues, and as educators or service providers. It is important to note that practitioner research spans across fields, with some of the most notable contributions coming from the fields of education, nursing, counseling, psychology, social work and occupational therapy.

As a former school counselor, teacher and counselor educator, and as someone who has engaged in community-based applied educational development research and in teaching practitioner research with an array of school, community, not-for-profit and corporate leaders for over 15 years, I believe that local, site-based research that focuses on issues of equity and various kinds of organizational learning and improvement is the promise for meaningful, sustainable organizational change and innovation. Practitioner research, when constructed critically, can allow for opportunities to work against the ways in which current policies, practices and norms (explicit and implicit) can serve to disempower and constrain people and organizations, and the practitioners and stakeholders within them, from engaging in the kinds of critical thinking, engagement and learning necessary for the development of a strong sense of agency for individuals and groups working within systems.

The promise of practitioner-driven research is that the learning emerges from local, situated inquiry, the kind of inquiry that leads practitioners to engage in evidence-based practice—in a reinvigorated sense of that term, meaning that it is grounded in our own contexts, practices, and settings. And, from my experience, that 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 knowing 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. Clearly, the imposition, flavor-of-the-month approach to organizational change is not working. And

it does not work because it does not deeply consider and do justice to “the wisdom of practice” (Shulman, 2004) that practitioners cultivate within our practice over time. And so we need practice-based research that can speak to what is useful, relevant and meaningful in specific contexts and with specific populations in ways that are deeply contextualized and person-centered and that speak from, and to, our deep knowledge and understandings born out of our years of paying careful attention as we continue practicing what we do (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ravitch, 2006).

There is incredible range and variation in the types of and approaches to practitioner research. *Perspectives on Urban Education* hopes to explore the unique and shared aspects of these contexts and projects and will examine, one approach at a time, why differences and similarities in context and methods are valuable and important to understanding practitioner research at this historical moment, to widening multiple and intersecting fields, and to opening dialogues that validate, inspire, support, push back, invite, and critique existing policy, research, and modes of practice that serve to control and constrain communities and organizations. The Journal seeks to open up practitioner-driven and practice-based spaces within and across fields as well as to engage us in explorations into the value and transformative possibilities of local knowledge construction.

### **Practitioner Research as a Central Pillar of Taking an Inquiry Stance on Practice**

**B**ecoming a reflexive, inquiry-based practitioner does not simply require occasional self-reflection or exposure to outside research, it requires that practitioners systematically investigate our own practice, that we adopt and cultivate an active inquiry

stance on our practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As Lytle (2006) states,

The notion of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) foregrounds the role that practitioners can play, both individually and collectively, in generating local knowledge, re-envisioning and theorizing practice, as well as interpreting and interrogating the theory and research of others. The work of inquiry in/on practice involves making problematic current arrangements of practice, the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used in various educational settings, and the roles practitioners play in facilitating change in their own work contexts. (p. 2)

Taking an inquiry stance on practice requires that practitioners develop and refine our understandings of the role of reflection in our practice, and further, that we view inquiry as an ethic of our everyday practice as well as a fundamental aspect of our vision of ourselves as professionals; it means that practitioners must be committed to our own processes of self-reflection and the continual investigation into, and systematic, data-based critique of, our practices and the contexts – both macro and micro – that shape them. An inquiry stance on practice translates into more person-centered, systematic and proactive approaches to empowering and advocating for one’s constituencies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Ravitch, 2006; Ravitch & Tillman, 2010). Such practice seeks to resist the current confines, norms and challenges of practice – and the contexts in which such practice is carried out – in a number of ways. As McLeod (1999), writing about the uses of practitioner research in counseling contexts states, “The practitioner

researcher develops a relationship with the research literature and research methodologies which...transfers effectively into the counseling setting itself. He or she is no longer defined and controlled by dominant cultural narratives or knowledges, but is more able to resist them and find alternative voices" (p. 1). This holds true for practitioners across fields and contexts, that is, that knowledge both of and in (and also from and to) practice serves as a counter-narrative to dominant cultural knowledge and normative narratives and therefore supports counter-hegemonic professional engagement.

To be clear, taking an inquiry stance on practice is a central and vital concept in the realm of practitioner research but these terms are not analogous; rather, they are complimentary. Taking an inquiry stance on practice reflects as it engenders a particular attention to one's practice and a view of oneself as an agent of that practice. This kind of stance pushes against more normative and hierarchical notions of knowledge and can lead to the formation of critical counter-narratives that speak back to grand narratives of groups and communities that are formed within (and perpetuate) deficit orientations towards under-resourced communities, communities of color, communities in "developing countries," and educational/community practitioners broadly defined. To do so, I argue, an inquiry stance needs to be grounded in practitioner research so that there are rigorously collected and analyzed data that support these counter-narratives.

The iterative relationship between taking an inquiry stance on practice and engaging in practitioner research is an important one to consider. Taking an inquiry stance on practice can be viewed as an overarching, ideologically based professional stance in which practitioners situate ourselves as inquirers engaged in an ongoing discovery process through which we view and approach

ourselves as active learners engaged with various stakeholders in the co-construction of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I view practitioner research, the methodologically grounded approach to deep and rigorous engagement in the taking of one's inquiry stance, as a way of operationalizing that stance methodologically so that inquiry is supported by data that one generates in relation to the specific domain of inquiry itself. The cycle of practitioner research begins with a question or problem of practice and grounds the inquiry process in the identification of a guiding research question, the development of an appropriate research design that guides the collection and analysis of data as it stems from and speaks back to guiding theory, grounding the process of broad inquiry in a specific study through a systematic and rigorous empirical process. This research process is recursive, iterative, reflexive, and discursive. It requires research knowledge, skill and an understanding of what constitutes data and rigor in research. Practitioner research can include a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches – the questions guide the choice of appropriate methods as the practitioner(s) work to map methods onto questions and respond to those questions with data that we ourselves generate. Practitioner research can be conceptualized as:

- (1) A research approach with a set of research methods that generate data upon which transformative actions can be based;
- (2) An organized empirical process that engages practitioners and other stakeholders in the collaborative development and posing of fundamental questions that support authentic practice and drive change;
- (3) A process by which data are generated

to develop counter-narratives that can be positioned as critical counter-forces to the powerful neo-liberal winds, that is, to make arguments grounded in data for other ways of thinking and doing that push against expert-learner dichotomies; and

(4) An approach that seeks to critically understand the macro and micro sociopolitical contexts that shape practice and research in/on that practice (e.g., hegemony, structural discrimination, social location, relational dynamics, positionality).

In critical approaches to practitioner researcher, practitioners seek to explore the multiple, intersecting layers – cultural, contextual, positional, relational, political, historical, institutional – of complexity in professional practice, engagement and settings. This kind of research often brings to the forefront issues of culture (including race, social class and gender), power, authority, and hegemony in terms of how social location and positionality influence people’s meaning-making processes, perspectives, behaviors, and interactions. Practitioner research seeks to locate sets of concerns about aspects of both practice and inquiry with a central goal of understanding the role of reflexivity in research, of taking responsibility for one’s biases and assumptions and how they play out institutionally and interpersonally, and for actively challenging these biases – and the social, intellectual, political, and institutional milieux in which they are shaped – in relation to colleagues and those with whom we seek to collaborate and serve. Practitioner research locates inquiry as a site for reflexive educational, political, and cultural work, personal and professional learning, and for the development of an inquiry stance on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). Practitioner research can help practitioners to cultivate a working sense of, and approach to, inquiry as an ethical stance on practice and an ongoing commitment to a process that engenders reciprocal transformation

and dialectical growth (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Framed and approached in this way, practitioner research has the power to be transformative at the institutional, communal, interpersonal, and individual levels.

### **Exploring New Possibilities: Emerging Conversations in Practitioner Research and Urban Education**

**I**t is exciting that *Perspectives on Urban Education* is putting greater emphasis on practitioner research from a variety of fields, sources and engagements. The Journal hopes to examine in future issues: (1) the relational, temporal and contextual influences on practitioner research as these intersect with researcher positionality; (2) conceptual framing and research design issues; (3) the development of research questions, conceptual frameworks and collaborations and their direct influence on research processes; and (4) the macro and micro socio-political contexts that shape participatory research projects and the relationships that constitute them. These are only some of the thematic areas that this new line of inquiry will address and engage as it seeks to engage readers and authors in conversations about the generative tensions in this work.

I feel proud to be able to write this piece from an institution that so values practitioner research, that sees and supports the inextricable links between theory, research, practice and policy and that builds on the work of thought leaders in the field of practitioner research such as Dr. Susan Lytle, whose impact at PennGSE and on the field of teacher and practitioner research is immeasurable; that has doctoral programs like the Mid Career Doctorate in Educational Leadership, the CLO Program, and the Executive Doctorate in Higher Education Management; programs that place a primacy on practitioner research as formalized mode of research for educational leaders. I write as a proud member of the PennGSE’s Board

of the Ethnography in Education Research Forum, which is in its 35th year and is run by GSE Professor Nancy Hornberger as a community of practice with a strong focus on practitioner research; I am delighted to be in a place where so many faculty members support, teach and inspire our students to engage in practice-based research of a variety of types and approaches.

As Paulo Freire (1970) stated: “For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). It is in this spirit – of invention and re-invention born through iterations of inquiry-based critique and inspiration – of the restlessness and impatience of those of us who know that there are voices yet unheard, knowledges yet unvalidated, ways of being yet unsupported and that it is our individual and collective responsibility to generate opportunities and conditions for the public sharing of and engagement with marginalized epistemologies and experiences; of enduring hope and demand for a connected, authentic and person-centered range of inquiries that seek to more fully understand and engage critically with the human condition, that practitioner research becomes a locus of knowledge generation, equitable, stakeholder-generated change and true social transformation.

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