

Think Piece

Practitioner Enquiry

Kate Wall, University of Strathclyde

Practitioner enquiry is omnipresent in the discourse of Scottish education, and that isn't a bad thing. In fact, cards on the table, it was one of the reasons that I moved north of the border. My previous experience of working in partnership with practitioners across all sectors of the English education system has shown me that it can be a force for positive change – change to teachers' mindsets and working lives, and change to improve outcomes for students (for example, Wall et al. 2010). I am totally convinced that a commitment to professional learning through practitioner enquiry encourages practitioners to take an active position (Stephenson and Ennion, 2012), to have critical engagement with theory, practice and policy (Argyris and Schön, 1974) and gives teachers an informed voice (Beckett 2014; Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis 2005). Such a stance supports teachers in being metacognitive about their practice; to be reflective *and* strategic learners (Wall and Hall 2016). However, there is a lot of confusion around the many understandings of practitioner enquiry that are currently being used in the education community; confusion about both the concept, as well as how it should be enacted.

This think piece, therefore, aims to engage with the concept of practitioner enquiry and explore some of the ways that it can become embedded in practice. I aim to outline my thinking on the topic, exploring what I believe are the core foundations of practitioner enquiry and suggest some key questions that might be useful in developing a practitioner enquiry approach. I hope that these questions, enquiry questions if you want, will be of use in engaging with this way of working and as such facilitate an increased confidence in this thing called practitioner enquiry.

Practitioner enquiry as professional learning

It is now widely recognised that teachers have a significant influence on student outcomes (Hattie, 2008; 2011) and therefore how their professional learning is supported and developed is needful of attention. Research syntheses (for example, Timperley 2008; Cordingley et al., 2015) on the topic have shown that there is a discord between what we know about effective professional learning and the actual practice taking place (Cordingley, 2015). Most teachers can relate to the experience of professional learning about, for example, interactive pedagogy, taught in the most didactic and un-interactive way, and as a result teachers consistently state a preference for having a greater say (Opfer and Pedder 2011). The research evidence, however, says that neither, bottom up or top down models, are particularly effective at having long term sustained impact on practice (Timperley 2008). However this can be mitigated by an explicit link to teachers' perceptions of student need and this is shown to be more likely in a

bottom up approach, ideally linked to a 'teacher enquiry and knowledge building cycle' (Timperley et al. 2009).

In 1904, Dewey first discussed the importance of teachers engaging in pedagogic enquiry to fully engage with processes and outcomes in their classrooms. Since then the concept has been in and out of fashion and more or less tied up with the concept of the research engaged practitioner. Underpinning these debates has often been an assumption that practitioner enquiry will lead to an engagement with research as a means to generate answers to pertinent questions of practice (Nias and Groundwater-Smith, 1988). This could be research-informed and/or involve research processes on the part of the practitioner (Cordingley 2015, Hall, 2009). For many this position naturally involves the participation of university academics to facilitate this engagement (Baumfield & Butterworth 2007; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2004) and Timperley (2008) states an important role for the expert (although not necessarily university-based) in facilitating professional learning and providing critical support.

The current models of teacher practitioner research can be largely traced back to the work of Stenhouse (1975) and as a result over recent years there has been more or less sustained interest in the process and impact of developing a research-engaged teaching profession. Completing a systematic review on the topic, Dagenais et al. (2012) found that practitioners with an inquiry standpoint were more likely to have positive views of research and therefore were more likely to use it to inform their practice. However this link with research as a given of practitioner enquiry is a significant turn off for some, and so how we manage this aspect of practitioner enquiry as professional learning is an important issue. There is something significant about the way that experts, whether colleagues in school, in local authorities, in specialist organisations, or in universities, portray the accessibility and manageability of research in relation to everyday practice.

Key questions

- How often does your professional learning experience start with student need?
- What are your key questions about the learning of students in your contexts? Which one would you prioritise and why?
- How do you perceive the role of the expert in supporting practitioner enquiry?

What is practitioner enquiry?

This is the million dollar question and it is a difficult one, despite all the thinking outlined above. This is partly because enquiry is about questioning and so proponents of the approach, like myself, are fairly open to a certain amount of doubt and flexibility in the term. I think this is a strength and allows variation and creativity within the related practice; however, it doesn't help with introducing the concept in policy or practice when a little more definiteness would be helpful. For me, the vagueness is an opportunity that allows productive connections with other areas of practice, but these associations can mean that

the core concept of practitioner enquiry becomes an amorphous term that includes everything and anything. It is closely tied up in professionalism, professional thinking and learning, practitioners' engagement in and with research, understandings around a masters level profession, practice based learning, and teachers' voice, and as such, it is can loose its power and be perceived by the uninitiated as unrealistic and challenging to action or something that is already embedded and does not need further focus.

Practitioner enquiry's struggles lie in two dominant standpoints and a potential lack of transfer between the two. On the one hand we have the likes of Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2009) who suggest practitioner enquiry is an epistemological stance, a way of understanding the world and how it is made up. A way of being that is tied up with views of democratic purpose and social justice. As such it is about giving informed voice to teachers in such a way that supports them in improving outcomes for students. By engaging teachers in better understanding the teaching and learning interplay in their context, and enacting and evaluating change as part of communities of practice then practice will be improved (Baumfield et al. 2012). This process of engagement is likely to involve a research process but it is primarily about questioning and looking for answers as part of a general professional commitment to keeping up to date with new developments.

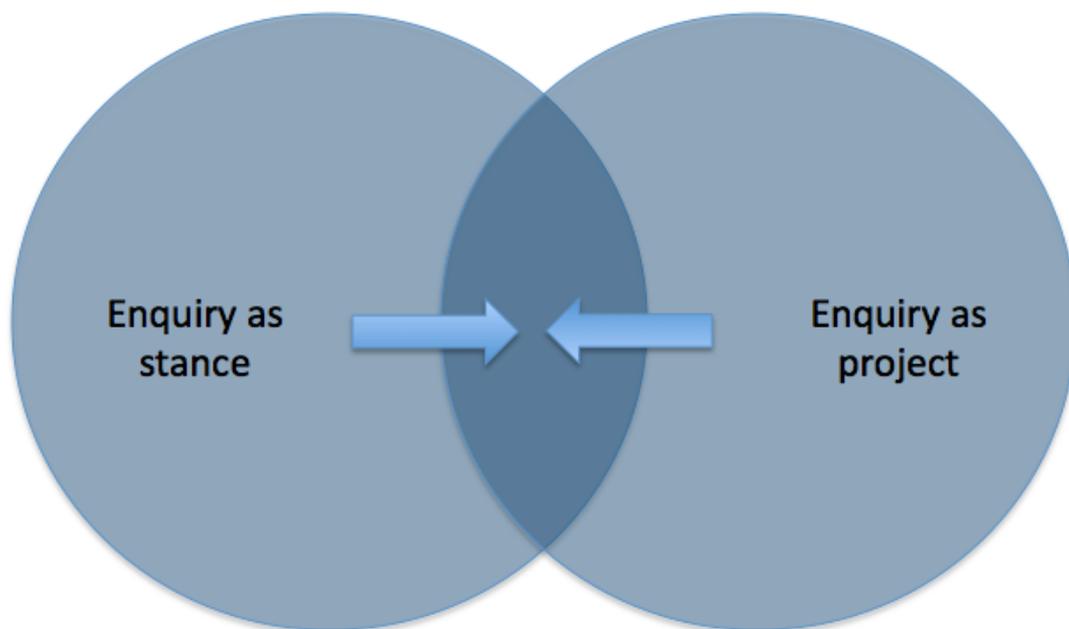
On the other hand, we have a standpoint much more directly associated with research. Menter et al. (2011) defined enquiry as a strategic finding out, a shared process of investigation that can be explained or defended. This can often manifest as a more project based approach to practitioner enquiry and as such could be perceived as more doable in its increased tangibility. One of the challenges here though, is that the popular language of research is dominated by evaluation and as such a scientific understanding of process. As such, it is tied up with conceptions of expertise and academia, and can seem a long way off from the remit of a practitioner in regards knowledge and skill. It can often be seen as something that is finite and therefore not cumulative as would connect more easily to career long professional learning (Reeves and Drew 2013). This increases the likelihood of an individual feeling like they have *done* practitioner enquiry once a piece of research or a project has been completed. For this approach to work then a more practice friendly understanding of research has to be promoted. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The two standpoints are not and should not be put in opposition. That is not the intention here. Indeed, for the experienced practitioner enquirer they merge forming a dynamic interaction between a desire to question practice and a systematic approach to finding out the answers. It becomes a synergetic process of engagement in and with research (Cordingley 2013; Hall 2009) that sustains and informs a world view where the practitioner has agency (individually and as embedded in the professional community: Priestley et al. 2015) with an informed voice on education within and beyond their context (Wall *et al.* in press). How we facilitate an individual in getting to this point and how we encourage the two aspects as complementary rather than oppositional, to access the implied understandings and processes, is something that needs work. In

practice, I see both sides being used as a way in, but somehow we don't get the connection right and the power of the concept is lost to whole groups in the profession.

Key questions

- How can a balance be struck between the practitioner enquiry project and practitioner enquiry as stance?
- How have you been engaged in practitioner enquiry?
- What is the best hook for the novice practitioner enquirer?



Becoming a practitioner enquirer

I have seen individual practitioners access an enquiry approach from both a questioning orientation and a research one. The former tends to be characterized by individuals who are naturally disposed to ask questions, to want to know and understand more about the world around them. They have a learning trajectory characterized by a constant striving to improve individually and for those living and working around them. It can be quite a solitary endeavor as they are driven by a personal ideology to improve outcomes for children and are fascinated by this process, implicitly seeing that greater understanding will bring positives for themselves as a professional but also for the students that they teach. For this group, the daily grind of school can be a challenge and mean that it is difficult to prioritise their own enquiry against the deluge of other stuff that is the nature of teaching. Additionally, there can be a significant issue of fit between their own interests and the wider school agenda and this can often drive the individual to experience significant dissonance with the system in which they work, as their ideal and real life experience become oppositional (Leat et al. 2015). To ensure that this mindset is facilitated, then looking for access to supportive communities of likeminded practitioners to share their enquiries is paramount; this provides a

means towards greater codification through sharing of experience (practice and research) and enquiry questions. In turn this promotes a more collaborative and strategic enquiry process, embedded by a co-constructed understanding of the knowledge, skills and permissions to be able to effectively find out answers that the individual can be confident in (Baumfield et al. 2012). The community could be within school or via an outside agency (although the latter is problematic if and when that agency moves on), however ensuring that enquiry is not a solitary endeavor and is supported ensures motivation and increased warrant. It also prevents isolated disaffection.

On the other side, I see practitioners roped, sometimes literally, into undertaking a piece of enquiry based research through involvement in a project – via a school research group, university course, a bit of CPD or via a colleague or group membership. The individual might be reluctant at first, but as long as they have ownership of their own enquiry and see the connections to their students' learning (Timperley, 2008) they often become enthused by the way research provides new and improved 'goggles' with which to view their practice. Key here is ensuring that it is not an isolated one off project which stops once the course or group finishes. Practitioner enquiry should be iterative and has more of a cumulative process than a single project approach might encourage. Also the type of research promoted should not feel so removed from practice as to be unachievable or unmanageable within the constraints of a normal working day. Thinking is needed around sustainability, how engagement is maintained once the project finishes, what research support looks like with more limited contact with the 'experts' and manageability within the wider challenges of school life. Generally, there needs to be greater consideration of the question, what does research look like when it is maintained alongside practice.

Regardless of the way in, if the issues of ownership, manageability and sustainability are tackled at both an individual and group level, then over time there can be a move towards a more integrated and pragmatic standpoint where useful knowledge is prioritised. It is important to recognise that either way in is perfectly acceptable and neither is better or worse than the other, however what is important is that we reach a pragmatic balance between the two: research is not something that is constantly engaged with, but neither is it switched on or off,. Similarly, a questioning standpoint is not something that should be allowed to drive an individual to distraction, but rather used to contribute to a wider codified dialogue around improvement. Both contribute to a professionalism that combines a striving for better outcomes for children and young people with a set of tools that can be supportive of strategic and reflective thinking around what works and why in any specific context.

Key questions

- How do you identify your practitioner enquiry approach – does enquiry as stance or project dominate?
- How does your institution facilitate engagement with being a practitioner enquiry? Is there a dominant approach?
- What systems and processes can be supportive of practitioner enquiry as stance and/or as project?

- How do you support a pragmatic approach to enquiry that combines stance and project approaches?

Doing practitioner enquiry

In regards undertaking a practitioner enquiry, I have written with Elaine Hall about 3 key principles that underpin an approach (Wall and Hall 2017): autonomy, disturbance and dialogue. However in the context of this piece I am going to add a fourth, connectivity. I will take some time to explore each of these.

The Principle of Autonomy: Underpinning this principle is the firm belief that the teacher know what their students' needs are and have a good idea of what could be done to meet them; they know which questions they want to ask and the closer they are to the needs they see in their classroom the better. It is not coincidence that Timperley (2008) puts connection with student learning as her first principle of effective professional development. However, we would go further than autonomy in relation to the questions asked, in addition, the individual must also have the opportunity to choose the evidence that they think answers their questions best and to decide the point at which their enquiry has ended. They may be novice researchers within the wider scheme of things, but within an agenda that supports creative approaches to evidence then they are the only one who can decide whether they have a convincing answer or not to their question (Baumfield et al. 2012). An agenda which privileges solely scientific and/or evaluatory notions of research is not helpful to this process. As teachers, we have a secure grasp on what pedagogic evidence is enough to take action; we need to use this more and stop thinking that a practice understanding of evidence of learning is so very different from a research one. This thinking should be acknowledged and owned by the individual acting within a wider community (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2004). To undertake this process on your own means no checking of the sense making process, no reflexivity, and so while ownership of the project must by the practitioner-researcher's, this ownership must be located within a wider community of enquirers.

Key questions:

- Who are you doing your practitioner enquiry for? Who says when it is finished?
- How do you privilege your learning about teaching and learning alongside your learning about research?
- What evidence is enough evidence to be confident that you have an answer to your enquiry question?
- What systems are in place to check sense making process and to share your thinking with a wider community?

The Principle of Disturbance: If you are asking relevant questions then the process of trying to answer them is likely to cause extra thinking as the complexity and connections within the classroom become more obvious, and indeed spark more questions. These questions will probably be about teaching and learning, but also about the process and enactment of research. The enquiry

cycle allows practitioners to not only be reflective on practice but also on research. It also allows strategic action, about what to do next and supports calculated risk taking in moving forwards. In engaging with questions in this then successes and failures are inevitable. We need to be cognisant of how we deal with both, but the failures in particular. Arguably we learn more by failing, but communicating this in a 'no fail' education system is challenging and so being able to share within a safe or, probably more importantly, a brave space (to borrow a concept from student voice work, Cook-Sather, 2016) is important. If we embrace the learning then all learners will become more metacognitive as a result of this kind of disturbance (Wall and Hall 2016).

Key questions:

- How do you approach negative findings or disagreement in your practitioner enquiry?
- To what extent are you asking questions where you know or expect an answer?

The Principle of Dialogue: Practitioner enquiry is not effective as a solitary activity, but rather it needs an ongoing process of shared thinking and codification against group understandings. By communicating enquiry questions, research tools and processes, and associated reflective and strategic thinking within a wider community then ethical and robust research is more likely. It needs to be part of a wider learning conversation (Lofthouse, 2014). An effective enquiry community is not only supportive but is also appropriately challenging. We know as teachers that learning only comes about if an appropriate level of difficulty is incorporated, although this may be different for different individuals. Practitioner enquiry needs to be underpinned by a commitment to different kinds of expertise and the challenge that come from being exposed to different views and ways of thinking. We need to get used to explaining to just what we did, but also why we did it and how we know whether it worked (or not). This is especially important when it hasn't gone to plan and when there is divergent thinking about an issue. Counter intuitively, communication is *even better* across contexts and experience as it brings a level of challenge and the need to engage critically with alternative understandings (Hall et al. 2010; Carmicheal et al. 2006). It is very easy to unthinkingly take a technique from another P4 class into your own P4 context, however to take an idea from early years or from further education into P4 is more challenging and will automatically encourage teachers to take a more active stance, to ask questions about what will work and why, to engage in enquiry about whether it worked and how.

Key questions:

- What is the balance between individual and community within your practitioner enquiry experience?
- How do you create a community that can be equally supportive and challenging?
- What methods are in place to support practitioners who are feeling this disturbance and to see it as a positive disposition for professional learning?

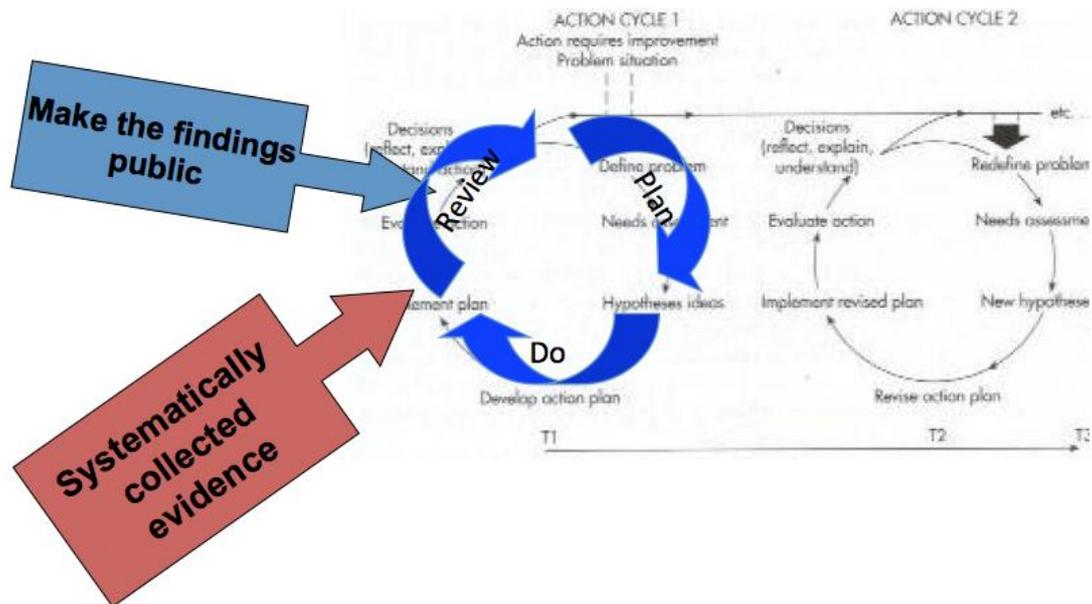


Diagram taken from Baumfield et al. (2012)

The Principle of Connectivity: Practitioner enquiry becomes more doable when we see the productive connections it has with normal teaching and learning practice. When it is not something else to fit onto the long list of things to do. This means we have to look for bridges and associations that enable a more pragmatic, manageable outlook. For example, the enquiry cycle fits on to the plan-do-review cycle, core to how we teach, and, while I am not recommending research on every lesson, it is relatively simple to see how a lesson might be scaled up to include a research element (see diagram above based on Stenhouse's (1981) mantra of systematic enquiry made public). We need to see greater connections between the understandings of evidence that we use in teaching and learning, Schools are evidence rich and as teachers we use a wide range of evidence all the time to assess students' progress and outcomes. Why can't we use that evidence within our enquiry projects? In addition, when thinking about quality, then we need to be more confident in translating how we think about the effective pedagogic tools that we know work (in capturing children and young peoples' learning and perspectives) to thinking about tools for engaging in research (Baumfield et al. 2012). Teachers set themselves high standards of 'warrant' (Dewey 1938/1991) – they know what evidence is good enough to support next steps for themselves and their students., but we are shy at translating this thinking about what works and why to the world of research, and yet from my perspective it is too similar not to be a productive synergy. Similar connections can be seen between how teachers learn and how students learn (it is not coincidence that enquiry-based approaches are also useful in classrooms), how we support student voice and teacher voice (the spaces, tools, dispositions and cultures), and how we support teachers' and students' metacognition. These different aspects should be interconnected and complementary. A practitioner enquiry frame can help bring them together (Wall and Hall 2016)., but also be seeing them as connected it makes a practitioner enquiry feel more doable.

Key questions:

- How transparent are you about being an enquiry (learning/ metacognitive/voice) role model to students?
- How close are the feedback loops between your enquiry and development of practice?
- Do you practice what you preach (with enquiry based learning/ problem solving/ learning)?

Developing a practitioner enquiry orientation

Practitioner enquiry's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness: its fit with normal practice and being a professional. There are two key commitments that I think mark the practitioner enquiry process as something different; that add value. These were highlighted by Stenhouse (1981):

- The commitment to engage with the enquiry process systematically including a clear rationalization of what is 'good' evidence (recognizing the need for understandings of evidence that emphasize fit for purpose and practice links); and
- The commitment to share the process and findings with a wider community (with flexibility around who this community might comprise).

To ensure that a practitioner enquiry approach is appropriated then we need to ensure that practitioners are engaging with these two commitments, and their productive overlap. There needs to be a variety of overlapping networks for professional learning operating at different levels of the education community and for different purposes. To enable these communities to run successfully alone and in combination then we need clearer communication of the diversity of research traditions available in education and how they link to practice and being research engaged. We need to value this difference and celebrate it, rather than seeing oppositional models. A bridge is needed between the research, policy and practice notions of evidence and tools for enquiry, with greater thinking around commonality rather than difference. A productive question being what is enough evidence to warrant action and how does this vary across contexts.

Developing an enquiry orientation is about individuals and systems. It is important that practitioner enquiry is not seen solely as the domain of classroom teachers, those who are early in their career or have not been promoted, with associated judgements of hierarchy, expertise and emerging professionalism. We need to see practitioner enquirer as something to be embedded system wide, with enquirers visible at all levels of the community from senior school and local authority leaders, to CEOs of education organisations, to policy makers and academics and to children and young people. Each one exemplifying a commitment to systematic enquiry made public. This may seem a bit pie in the sky, but the organisations I see who are most successful in implementing an enquiry approach do so at all levels with the senior leadership team leading by example, engaging in research and making public their learning, successes and failures, in a community that includes all learners. Listening to all individuals, whether novice or experienced as equal and experts in their own enquiry, and as having an informed voice to be listened to. This fundamentally underpins the

democratic purpose part of Cochrane-Smith and Lytle's practitioner enquiry as stance (2009). Until we have levelled out these variations in commitment then hierarchical assumptions around who should be engaged in practitioner enquiry, what is 'good' research, who should control professional learning and where expertise lies will remain entrenched. Without a more systemic operationalisation of practitioner enquiry then it will remain as pockets of engagement or as tokenistic, on/off, activity that is more about accountability than authentic engagement with improvement of learning outcomes.

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