

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH FOR EDUCATORS

A Guide
to Improving
Classrooms
and Schools

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HAWKER BROWNLOW
EDUCATION

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Preface

We are passionate about improving students' learning and achievement. We are passionate about supporting those whose dedication to students' learning leads them to continually improve what they do to meet their students' needs. It is for all those educational practitioners—teachers, administrators, principals, professional developers, and local and central government officials—that we have written this book. Its purpose is to help them improve the practices for which they are responsible by conducting research that is of immediate relevance to their problems and questions, and is sufficiently rigorous to yield trustworthy information.

We emphasize the importance of conducting research rather than relying only on the research of others because we have learned from our experience of working with schools in New Zealand that sustainable school improvement requires teachers and school leaders to undertake context-specific inquiry into the impact of teaching on the learning and achievement of their students (Earl & Katz, 2002; Elmore, 2000). Each school and classroom is different—there are no silver bullets in education that will work regardless of context. This does not mean that each teacher must invent his or her own approach (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Indeed, the wisdom of others, including that which is found in the published research literature, is essential for good quality teacher research. It does mean, however, that teachers must learn, through their own inquiry, how to adjust their practices in ways that have the best possible impact on the attitudes, understandings, and skills of their students.

What does such teacher research involve? How can teachers research their own practices in ways that improve their own teaching and student learning? We propose problem-based methodology (PBM) as a framework for teachers and school leaders to use to investigate and improve their own practices. The methodology shows practitioners how to examine their own implicit theories—those that determine what they do—to test whether those theories are working as intended and to find out how to improve them.

Problem-based methodology was specifically designed by Viviane Robinson, the first author, for those who wanted their research to contribute directly to the improvement of practice. Her first book on the methodology, *Problem-Based Methodology: Research for the Improvement of Practice* (1993), was targeted at educational and social science researchers rather than practitioners themselves. The book explained why the work of

external researchers was often perceived as irrelevant by practitioners and showed how the research/practice gap could be reduced through the use of PBM.

Because the primary audience of the 1993 book was external researchers, many of its key ideas were not readily accessible to practitioners. In the years since its publication, much work has gone into making these ideas more accessible. Viviane has been teaching experienced graduate teachers and administrators how to use PBM to investigate and improve practices in their own schools and classrooms. The second author, Mei Lai, has also been teaching PBM in her role as professional developer in government-funded school improvement initiatives in urban multicultural school districts and rural schooling communities. Using PBM, she designed and led professional development programs that showed principals, teachers, and administrators how to inquire into the effectiveness of their own practices and test whether or not they were working in the ways they assumed. Many of the practitioner voices that are included in this volume are drawn from the teachers who participated in Viviane's graduate class or in Mei's professional development programs. Every extract from these teachers' reflections has been used with their permission. Where a teacher's work has been published, the published reference is also cited. This book is a culmination of 11 years of working with these practitioner groups. Our goal is to help more educational practitioners investigate their own practices in the interests of better teaching and better outcomes for their students.

POSITIONING THE BOOK

Given the considerable current interest in the nature, status, and purpose of practitioner research, it is important to try to locate this book within this very broad and diverse landscape. The landscape is an unsettled one, the site of numerous controversies about such matters as the purpose of practitioner research, how to judge its quality, whether teachers can be "stand-alone" researchers, and whether, however desirable, teacher research is practically possible (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2003; Labaree, 2003).

This volume will show practitioners how to improve practice by understanding its causes, evaluating it against shared standards of what is more or less desirable, and determining whether and how improvement is required. Our focus on understanding the values, reasoning, and practical constraints that account for current practice, prior to attempting to change it, is central to problem-based methodology. This is an important point of difference between PBM and many approaches to action research. While the latter is also focused on context-specific improvement of practice, it typically does not involve analysis and evaluation of practitioners' theories about the practices in question (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2003). When practitioners' theories are bypassed, improvement is often limited

to changes that are consistent with current ways of thinking. This severely limits the scope for the improvement of practice.

A second difference between much practitioner research and PBM centers on how research quality is judged. There is disagreement about whether practitioner research should be judged differently from traditional research, which has as its primary purpose the discovery of generalizable knowledge. The way to judge the research quality of PBM research reflects its central goals of understanding and improving practice. These two goals require a concern for the accuracy of claims about current practice and how it can be improved. There is an ethical obligation for practitioner researchers to be concerned about the quality of the information they use and the validity of the inferences they draw from it. This also applies in traditional research.

The concern for relevance, however, is higher in PBM research than in traditional research because its purpose is to capture what is powerful in a particular context. PBM also recognizes the importance of the interpersonal process through which research is conducted—a process that we characterize as respect. Quality PBM research therefore requires high levels of rigor, relevance, and respect.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized in three parts. The first part lays the groundwork that is needed before undertaking a specific investigation. Chapter 1 makes the case for why practitioners should conduct their own research by showing how the active involvement of teachers and school leaders in investigating their own practices has led to improvements in student achievement in a community of schools with a history of underachievement. In Chapter 2 we explain the main features of PBM and demonstrate how to use PBM to conduct a detailed investigation and evaluation of practice. This process involves understanding and evaluating the theories that shape these practices. Any attempt to improve practice impacts on the aspirations and responsibilities of others. Hence, in Chapter 3, we explain how PBM incorporates an account of the values and skills needed to involve others in the analysis and evaluation of current theories of practice. Chapter 4, the final chapter of Part I, shows how to conduct PBM research in a rigorous manner to improve the quality of information and the quality of the conclusions drawn from the research.

The five chapters of Part II describe how to do a research project. Part II begins with the 40-20-40 rule: a reminder that 40 percent of a project is in the planning, 20 percent in the fieldwork or doing, and 40 percent in the analysis and reporting. These chapters are characterized by a continual emphasis on the decision-making processes required to complete a project that answers one's research questions. There is also an emphasis throughout Part II on the process of doing research, with illustrations of interviewing, validity checks, feedback meetings, and the communication of

research findings in both oral and written form. The chapters in Part II are planning the research (Chapter 5), selecting research methods (Chapters 6 and 7), analyzing information (Chapter 8), and communicating the research (Chapter 9).

In Part III, Practitioner Research and School Improvement, we return to some of the questions we asked in Chapter 1 about the reasons it might be important for practitioners to conduct research as well as consult the research of others. We discuss how the use of PBM in a large-scale school improvement project has contributed to a collaborative culture of inquiry among teachers, principals, professional developers, and university researchers, dedicated to improving teaching and learning through data-based investigation and revision of their own theories of practice. By learning how to do PBM research in their own settings, these practitioners have become investigators of their own teaching as well as critical and informed consumers of the research and ideas of others. Their schools have built some of the capacity and infrastructure needed to enable them to examine critically the links between their own teaching programs and the achievement and attitudes of their students.

The intellectual origins of this book were described in the preface to the 1993 volume, so we will not repeat those acknowledgments here. In preparing this more practitioner-oriented volume, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, who funded much of our work, and to Mary Sinclair and Brian Annan, in particular, who pioneered intensive university-practitioner partnerships in the interests of better approaches to school improvement. We also wish to thank the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and all those teachers and principals who allowed us to use extracts from their reports or their written or oral reflections on their experiences of PBM research. This includes our graduate students in “Research for Educational Practitioners,” who kept asking when the next draft chapter would be ready and who gave us considerable encouragement and feedback. Finally, we give heartfelt thanks to Claire O’Loughlin and Janet Rivers, without whose superb editing and research skills completing this manuscript would have been a great deal more difficult.

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Educators as Researchers

Michelle¹ made it. She beat the odds.

Two years ago, Michelle was a typical child in a poor urban community of primarily ethnic minorities. She was about two years behind the average New Zealand student in reading, and while she made a year's worth of progress every year, she could not catch up to the other students in her age group. Last year, Michelle made 18 months' progress in reading. This year she made sufficient progress to achieve above the national expectations for children of her age.

Michelle was not the only one. In 2002, the average student in Michelle's school was about two years behind the national average for students of a similar age. Two years later, the average student in Michelle's school was less than a year behind the average student. In addition, increasing numbers of schools in her community were helping their students to make similar gains in reading achievement (McNaughton, Lai, MacDonald, & Farry, 2004).

So, how have these improvements been achieved? A key factor has been the active involvement of teachers and school leaders in ongoing school research—that is, practitioners as researchers inquiring into their practices with the aim of making sustainable improvements in teaching and learning in their schools.

And that is the purpose of this book—to help you, as teachers and school leaders, to improve the practices for which you are responsible by

1. Not her real name.

conducting research that is of immediate relevance to your problems and questions, and is sufficiently rigorous to yield trustworthy information.

There are three important elements to this purpose. First, the goal is to help teachers *conduct* research rather than just consume the research of others. Teachers usually treat research as something that is done by outsiders who come into their workplace with an idea of what to study and then collect data, analyze it, and write a report. The school then decides whether or not to use the research. In this traditional model, those who produce research and those who use the research are two different groups of people, doing very different jobs.

If you think about researchers and practitioners as different groups, you reinforce the idea that teachers react to the research of others rather than generate it themselves. If you think about “researcher” and “practitioner” as different *roles*, however, then you can see how these roles overlap, and how teachers can be both.

The first goal of this book, then, is to show you how to develop your research skills so you can add the role of researcher to your repertoire. While much can be learned from the research of others, we argue that there are also considerable advantages in learning how to become producers of research rather than just consumers. Becoming a producer of research can mean working alone, such as when a teacher decides to systematically observe how a child plays with other children. It can also mean working with groups of other teachers or partnering with external researchers and professional developers when there is a need for additional resources or specialist expertise. Whether teachers work alone or with others, adding the role of researcher to their repertoires will help them become better teachers.

The second goal is to help you do research that is *relevant* to your problems and questions. Teachers are often skeptical of the relevance of others’ research to their own settings because of the highly contextual nature of practice. They wonder whether a particular research study will be useful in their classrooms, where the students may be quite different from those involved in the original study. They want to know whether the research takes into account the complexities of what *they* are up against in *their* particular settings. Many teachers believe that published research makes a limited contribution to the understanding and improvement of educational practice because it bypasses rather than engages with these complexities. This book presents an approach to doing research that takes seriously the complexity and particularity of practice.

Our third goal is to help you do research that not only speaks to practice but is also sufficiently *rigorous* to provide a trustworthy basis for making decisions about how and what to teach. This is an ethical and professional matter, because the decisions of teachers and administrators affect the lives of children. These decisions need to be based on quality information rather than unchecked impressions.

In this book, then, we present a methodological framework for conducting research that is relevant to your work, is rigorous, and is

respectful of those whose practice is being studied. We show how this framework can be applied to the various phases involved in carrying out research that has the power to improve practice.

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

While it would be unrealistic to expect teachers to pursue substantial research in the course of their full-time work, we believe there are good reasons why a research role should become a more important part of teachers' professional lives. Perhaps the most compelling reason lies in the nature of good teaching. Good teaching is reflective, based on high-quality information, and constantly improving. It is these very qualities that provide the significant common ground between the roles of teacher and researcher. The following two scenarios illustrate what we mean by this common ground.

Story A: Low Reading Scores

Lisa, an assistant principal of an elementary school, is concerned about the low reading scores of the children in the first-grade classes. Her teachers have told her for years that when the children come to school they are not ready to begin learning because they lack the necessary prereading and social skills.

How do you think Lisa should address this issue?

Story B: A Request for Funds

A staff member asks for money to purchase an expensive resource kit for his math program. As usual, funds are tight, but the staff member insists on the importance of the resource.

How do you think the department head should decide whether to approve the expenditure?

It would be easy for Lisa, the assistant principal in Story A, to accept the views of her staff and continue to offer a program that teaches pre-reading skills for the first six weeks of the year. After all, her teachers have always believed strongly in the idea of "readiness to learn." But how do the teachers know that the students are not ready to learn to read? Is it good enough to delay teaching reading on the basis of the unexamined beliefs of these first-grade teachers?

Similarly, it would be easy for the department head in Story B to accept the view of her staff member and purchase the math resource. After all, she has a good relationship with the staff member and wants to support his enthusiasm. But is staff enthusiasm an adequate indication of the value of the resource? What is the staff member's enthusiasm based on? Is it good