

IMPACTFUL PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

THE RIPPLE EFFECT ON CLASSROOMS,
SCHOOLS AND TEACHER
PROFESSIONALISM

SUE NICHOLS
PHIL CORMACK



Contents

1. Practitioner Inquiry: What's the Impact?	1
The Impacts of the Practitioner Inquiry Project	2
The IPI Participants and Their Inquiry Projects	4
The Authors as Inquiring Practitioners	5
Overview of the Book	7
PART I: IMPACTS OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY	
2. Impacts in the Classroom and Other Sites of Practice: "Since I did the practitioner inquiry it's been a real passion"	11
The IPI Survey	13
Seeing with Fresh Eyes	15
Integrating Inquiry Learning	16
Innovations Impacting on the Students of Most Concern	19
The Value of the Student Case	22
Impacts on Roles Other Than Classroom Teaching	23
Conclusion	24
3. Impacts in the School: "It just builds that culture of learning and sharing"	27
The IPI Survey	29
"Good learning just in passing": The Teachable Moment	30
Catalysing Change Through Small Beginnings	32
Changing the Discourse	33
Conclusion: The Spillover Effect	39
4. Impacts on Career Networks: "Going from strength to strength"	41
IPI Survey Findings: Impacts on Professional Profile	41
Networking in Educators' Career Development	43
Conclusion: Career Paths for Inquiring Practitioners	53

PART II: IMPACTFUL INQUIRY PROJECTS

5. The Inclusive Education Project:	
Inquiry as Critical Action Towards More Inclusive Schools	59
Interrogating Inclusion and Exclusion	61
The Dimensions of Diversity Case Study	64
Inquirers as Change Agents	67
A Specialist Teacher Opens Discussion on Inclusive Education	67
Undertaking Inquiry	69
Conclusion	77
6. The Boys' Literacies Project:	
Teachers Exploring Students' Literate Lives	79
Treading Carefully into the Field: Starting Points for the Project	79
Phase 1 – Engaging with Texts	81
Phase 2 – Engaging with Students' Perspectives	84
Phase 3 – Engaging with Practice	89
Conclusion	96

PART III: IMPACTFUL INQUIRY PRACTICES

7. Designs on Research in Practitioner Contexts	101
Research as a “Fumbling Act of Discovery”	101
Principles of Practitioner Inquiry	103
Conclusion	125
8. Analysis in Practitioner Inquiry as a Process of Encounter	126
Encounters with Data: Making an Impression	126
Encounters with Concepts	130
Encounters with the Perspectives of Others: Collaborative Analysis	137
Conclusion	145
9. Conclusion	147
To Understand Impacts, Think Complex Networked Systems	148
Teachers Enact Accountability Through Inquiry	149
Deep, Critical Thinking Is the Engine for Impactful Inquiry	150
Inquiry Develops Impactful Leaders	151
Challenging the Binary Model of Research and Practice	153
Conclusion	156
Appendix: Impacts of Practitioner Inquiry Survey	157
References	165
About the Authors	174

Practitioner Inquiry

What's the Impact?

Teacher research “may be difficult to implement”. This was the cautious statement made in 1978, when the Bay Area Writing Project had just embarked on a first wave of practitioner research collaborations (Gray & Myers, 1978, p. 413). A decade later, reports were coming through about the transformations experienced by teachers when they engaged in classroom-based research. Among these transformations were that teachers “step up their use of resources; they form networks; and they become more active professionally” (Goswami & Stillman, 1987, p. ii). In 1999, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) published a retrospective on the practitioner inquiry movement in which they argued that “the concept of teacher research carries with it an enlarged view of the teacher’s role – as decision maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist, school leader – as well as enhanced understandings of the contexts of educational change” (p. 17). That same year, the “knowledge-creating school” was being advanced as a model for educational renewal that was clearly influenced by the kind of inquiring professionalism that the teacher research movement had been advocating (Hargreaves, 1999).

More than a decade on, we feel it is important to continue making such arguments. Indeed, it has been humbling to us to gain a renewed appreciation for the innovative and groundbreaking work of the stalwarts of teacher research (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993; Elliott, 1978; Freeman, 1998; Kemmis, 2006; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). We are also very mindful of the foundational thinking of pioneers such as Berthoff (1981), Stenhouse (1985) and Schön (1983). All these thinkers and doers have been influential on our own work as inquiring practitioners and supporters of practitioner inquiry.

It was as inquiring practitioners that we initiated the Impacts of Practitioner Inquiry (IPI) project in 2008. The University of South Australia had been for some time a hub for passionate teacher educators, drawn from schools, who had integrated practitioner inquiry into a succession of graduate programs and collaborative research projects. We want to acknowledge these colleagues by name: Marie Brennan, Mike Chartres, Barbara Comber, Bill Green, Rob Hattam, Lyn Kerkham, David Lloyd, Helen Nixon,

Impacts in the School

“It just builds that culture of learning and sharing”

This chapter will discuss the ways in which educators’ participation in practitioner inquiry had impacts beyond their own learning and their own students’ outcomes. Whether through the exercise of formal leadership or collegial influence, as a planned program of change, or through opportunistic teachable moments with peers, the ripple effect was felt in their schools. We will argue that the effectiveness of these teachers as change agents was shaped by their experience of practitioner inquiry. We will suggest that this was, to some extent, a function of the ways in which inquiry communities built skills for participation in complex adaptive systems.

Over the past decade, we have seen a shift in ways of understanding schools and other institutions away from hierarchical models to complex systems or networks (Snyder, 2013). A reliance on top-down power structures of imposed school accountability has been identified as a limiting factor in achieving improvements in student learning outcomes (O’Day, 2002). The pace of societal and technological change has also driven an argument for re-conceptualising education and schools in terms of complex adaptive systems (Snyder, 2013). In this new view, “we understand schools not as bureaucracies or as hierarchies but as communities or ecologies” (Poeter, Badi-ali, & Hammond, 2000, p. 162). Educational change, from this perspective, requires negotiation of “organizational structures, norms, practices, and patterns of social relationships [and] how these organizational features are connected to the broader social and cultural environment” (Anagnostopoulos, Sykes, McCrory, Cannata, & Frank, 2010, p. 340).

Educational reform by its nature requires change at every level and throughout schools (Fullan, 2006). However, top-down, compliance-oriented accountability systems have had limited effects on schools’ organisational cultures (Reilly, 2009). Unless teachers’ hearts and minds are engaged, it is all too possible to pay lip service to, or actively subvert, reform efforts. This can apply even when a reform involves implementing practitioner inquiry at a whole-school level. Indeed, evidence points to the difficulty of enlisting entire staffs into the practice of inquiry. Looking for schools in which this had been achieved, Berger and

colleagues found them to be few and far between (Berger, Boles & Troen, 2005). The three cases they eventually settled on included only one school in which every member of the teaching staff and the leadership were active researchers as part of their normal professional practice. In another school, the principal attempted to mandate inquiry for all teachers but faced a revolt, forcing it to become a choice taken up by just half of the faculty. The third case had a small subgroup of active teacher researchers whose work was known only to members of that group.

Perhaps the problem lies in thinking of a school as a single entity into which a change will come in a singular way. Network and ecological models are changing how we think of schools and thus of the process of change (Fullan, 2004, 2006; Poeter, Badialia, & Hammond, 2000). Reporting for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Snyder (2013) summarises this view as “a new lens that focuses on the complex interactions of the actors within educational systems and subsystems, creating a broader view of educational systems as a holistic organism” (p. 6).

School accountability drives have not always paid sufficient attention to this. O’Day (2002) conducted a close examination of school-based accountability in a Chicago school district. She argues that one of the dilemmas of such movements is that “The school is the unit of intervention, yet the individual is the unit of action” (p. 295). In a bureaucratic hierarchical model of systemic change, an individual is not considered a significant unit. Indeed, as O’Day (2002) notes, the Chicago reforms “offer[ed] few incentives for individuals to improve their practice” (p. 312). From a complexity perspective, however, individual actors and particular events can have significant effects on the larger system. That is because, according to this theory, systems emerge as a result of interactions between individual agents and adapt in response to feedback passing continuously among members of the system (Snyder, 2013).

Looking at the actions of individuals or specific events or practices can provide a way to understand how complex systems, such as educational systems, are behaving. In this approach, the analyst will “focus in on the specific node of interest and then explore its sphere of influence rather than only the node itself or the entirety of the ecosystem” (Snyder, 2013, p. 15). Anagnostopoulos and colleagues (2010) did this when they focused on the impacts of National Board–certified teachers in their schools. These teachers were seen as examples of “carriers”, actors who “transport new organisational forms across and within organizational fields and sectors [and] shape whether new forms take hold” (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2010, p. 340). Thus, it is necessary to conceive of schools in terms of interactions among individuals while at the same time attempting to shape the context so that these interactions are productive for the goal of education. Fullan (2004) puts it this way:

The Inclusive Education Project

Inquiry as Critical Action Towards More Inclusive Schools

The Impact of Practitioner Inquiry investigation asked participants to nominate what they considered to be the “most impactful” inquiry they had experienced. The Inclusive Education Project was selected by some as their “most impactful” inquiry. This project aimed to make a change in the way that students with a range of differences were thought about and educated. The project’s scope encompassed students whose differences could in any way present difficulties for the system in terms of ensuring participation, access to opportunities and achievement. Thus, differences of ability, race, language, behaviour and social class were all considered in relation to the including and excluding processes of education.

The project was initiated and strongly supported by a senior manager in a state education unit responsible for the provision of support to students with a range of special needs. This manager believed strongly in the importance of advanced study and regularly funded teachers to undertake graduate programs. These programs had previously been in relation to specific disability categories such as autism and hearing impairment. The decision to shift some PD resources away from specialist areas and into inclusive education was a significant move. It reflected a drive to engage the system as a whole in addressing both barriers and enablers to student participation and achievement. This project brought together 25 educators from diverse sites of practice, including mainstream schools, specialist schools and units and from early childhood through secondary school. The group represented classroom teachers, school leaders and administrators. It was hoped that the project would have a ripple effect throughout the system.

The program was designed from the outset to be inquiry focused. This reflected in part the influence of the inclusive education movement in the United Kingdom, which had made school-based inquiry a key strategy in challenging practices of exclusion and working towards more inclusive schools. Among school reform movements, inclusive education has been distinguished by unusually strong support for teacher research as a central

strategy in policy implementation. This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom, where a school research network was established in 2000 by the government's Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research program (Howes, Booth, Dyson, & Frankham, 2005; Howes, Frankham, Ainscow, & Farrell, 2004). This network of 24 schools across three local government areas was established to address barriers to the participation and learning of students with special educational needs, who had been included in mainstream schools under the inclusive education policy. The network's action research program was intended to generate knowledge for the whole education system, with the aim of improving the participation and achievement of these students.

A key tool in the United Kingdom-based inclusion research movement was, and continues to be, the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). This tool is a form of survey that can be used by schools in analysing the existing conditions for inclusion, planning for change and evaluating the success of interventions. The index has three major sections: (1) creating inclusive cultures; (2) producing inclusive policies; and (3) evolving inclusive practices. As this sequence suggests, an inclusive school culture is viewed as the foundation on which policy and practice rest. Each of these sections has a list of themes and indicators. For instance, under "creating inclusive cultures", the first theme is "building community" and the indicators listed are as follows: everyone is made to feel welcome; students help each other; staff collaborates with one another; and staff and students treat one another with respect (Booth & Ainscow, 2000).

The Index for Inclusion is based on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990, 2013), which argues that disabilities are best thought of as contextual impairments. That is, whether a personal characteristic serves as an ability or disability is strongly influenced by the environment. This view has been significant in shifting research on inclusion into schools. In contrast, knowledge production in the field of special education has been the province of psychological and medical research. For schools, coming to grips with the social model of disability has meant focusing attention on how aspects of schooling (spatial, social, cultural and curricular) might function to both enable and disable.

The inquiry movement associated with this inclusion model strongly emphasised collaboration and collective reflection as a means of producing change at the level of school cultures. Within this process, differences were to be acknowledged and worked with, rather than smoothed over to achieve consensus. Research leaders argued:

[S]ocial learning is effectively facilitated through a research-like orientation, whereby differing perspectives are encountered rather than ignored or overlooked, in a process which quite explicitly sets out to raise questions and disturb preconceptions. (Howes et al., 2005, p. 135)

Designs on Research in Practitioner Contexts

Any practitioner who has studied research in an academic setting will be familiar with the importance attached to research design. Whole disciplines are built around particular assumptions and practices to guide those who work in the field about the questions they can ask, what counts as data and the interpretations they can deploy. An influential manual on design in educational research defines design as a series of rational choices that follow from “the philosophical assumptions the researcher brings to the enquiry” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The models of inquiry that result from such rational choices are described as “types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design” (Creswell, 2014, p. 12).

RESEARCH AS A “FUMBLING ACT OF DISCOVERY”

In our experience, such rationalistic ways of conceptualising research design have little utility for practitioners. Indeed, some argue, they have little utility for any researchers, as Hamilton (2005) notes in his critique of most handbooks produced to guide teacher research:

*[R]esearch is always a fumbling act of discovery, where researchers only know what they are doing when they have done it; and only know what they are looking for after they have found it ... The arguments in the *Handbook for Teacher Research* have been produced through a process of reverse engineering. The final product – a “successful research project” – is dismantled and its elements are re-assembled according to the routines of efficiency currently accepted in the handbook, cookbook or textbook genres. (p. 288, emphasis in the original)*

If research is so messy, what is the point of research design? Though research is not the linear process outlined in many handbooks or manuals, it is vital to have a plan and a sense of the purpose for the proposed research that can, and should, be adapted in principled ways as the research unfolds.

It is possible for a research design to take account of the messiness of the research process and establish a map of the decisions made through the process. Having a design means that different aspects of the research can be addressed in the order that makes sense, revisited as needed and, importantly, provided with a kind of audit trail of decisions made. What makes inquiry “research” is that it is “designed”. Another way of saying this is that research is *systematic* inquiry made *public* – a useful framing from Stenhouse (1975), who strongly influenced those who developed early forms of practitioner research (see, for example, Skilbeck, 1983). This distinguishes it from reflection or curiosity, which often quite appropriately remains private and ad hoc.

Practitioner contexts and practices have some special attributes that strongly affect the way research can be designed and conducted. First, practitioners are researching their own contexts and practices. They cannot, therefore, use traditional views of objectivity or distance to demonstrate that their own interests aren’t influencing the research. Of course, there are advantages to this (discussed below), but from a research design perspective, it is very difficult for practitioners to start with theory or pure ideas, as they are always/already in the thick of the action (Schön, 1983). This means that practitioners inhabit a different kind of philosophical space from those described as the ideals of scientific inquiry. Both practically and ethically, their decisions are driven by the need to act in the here and now and to do the best possible job they can, given their current circumstances and context (Noffke, 2008). Action and decision are simultaneous, not linear and involve complex and recursive revision and reaction.

Practitioners use their own history of involvement in practice, their day-to-day experience of a context and their interactions with other practitioners to guide what they do. Kemmis (2005) emphasises the way practitioners are involved in a kind of public practice of reflexivity, learning from others, connecting with their own work and accounting for the way the world around them changes.

Such practices of reflexivity are a resource for a crucial element of practitioner inquiry, which is *mindfulness* in the research process. At its most basic, mindfulness involves the interruption of life as usual, so that what usually goes without saying is examined, thought and talked about. Garth Boomer (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992), a champion of teacher power and leadership in curriculum in Australia, described design in this way and incorporated it into a theory of learning. For him, “Classrooms without learners with designs are classrooms where you will observe mindless training as opposed to education, which requires presence of mind” (cited in Green, 1999, p. 61). This presence of mind, for Boomer, involved learners (and he very much included teachers in this) in practices of *imagining* how to solve problems and forming *conscious* intentions to work towards solutions. He said: “‘Design’ embodies a classical theory of