

Practitioner Enquiry: An Approach to Teacher Development

Midlothian Council Educational Psychology Service

What is practitioner enquiry?

“A system of critically informed reflective analysis” that “allows teachers to understand the context and basis of why they are doing something”

Gillian Robinson, University of Edinburgh, 2013

Practitioner enquiry is characterised by the systematic study of practice. It is about teachers' work and teachers themselves as a basis of research, helping them develop themselves, therefore the practitioner has ownership of their research. Successful enquiry is not just about finding the answer to a question but will deepen understanding by surfacing new questions and ultimately improve learning and teaching.

Literature on professional enquiry tends to use a number of terms interchangeably e.g. reflection, action research, enquiry. Baumfield, Hall and Wall (2013)

describe the practitioner enquiry as the middle ground between action research and reflection. Practitioner enquiry could be a step in a process that begins with reflection and leads to action research or as a trigger to further development through reflection or action

research. In both cases, the most important feature is that the question generated arises from practice.

Career Long Professional Learning (GTCS)

Practitioner enquiry is one of the key elements in the new Professional Standards and in Scottish Education policy. Whilst the term 'practitioner enquiry' is not new to the Scottish education system what is now proposed is distinctly different in three key ways:

- the underpinning principles and aims of practitioner enquiry are stated for the first time
- it is envisaged to become an integral aspect of the day-to-day practice of teachers and other education professionals
- it is being recognised that for systemic change support is required at all levels of the system

**Supporting
Professional
Learning**

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Further Reading:

Action Research in Education, Vivienne Baumfield, Elaine Hall & Kate Walll, 2013

Teachers Leading Change—Doing Research For School Improvement, Judy Durrant and Gary Holden, 2006

Transformative learning and Identity, Knud Illeris, 2013

Visible Learning & the Science of How We Learn, John Hattie, 2014

Visible Learning for Teachers, John Hattie, 2012

Visible Learning, John Hattie, 2009



The Professional Enquiry Process

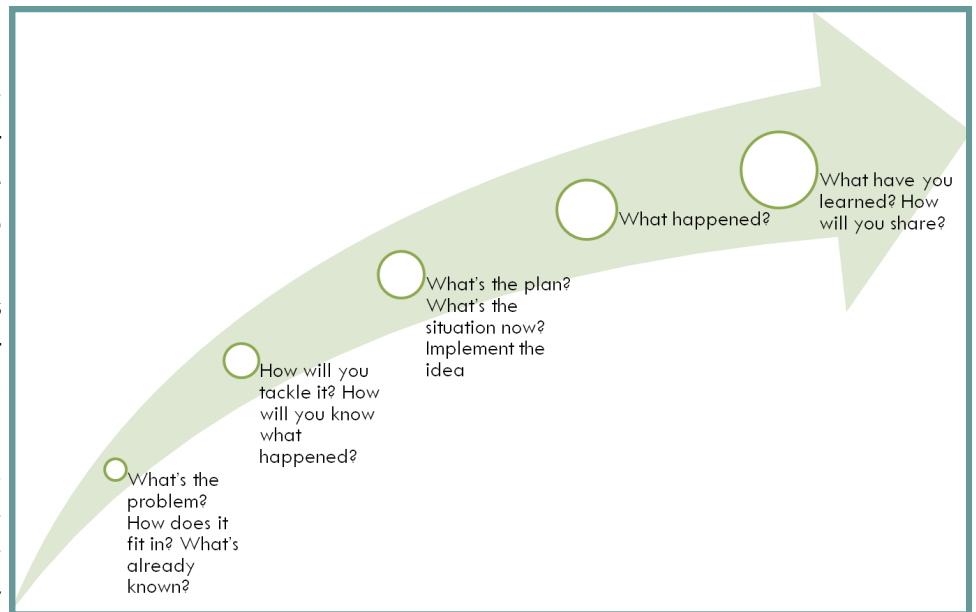
The Stone in Your Shoe

Finding and refining your question is critical. The most important thing is that the question, or stone, relates to something in your classroom; there are bound to be things that bother you or that you don't quite understand. Some questions become more pressing and require further investigation. Your question needs to be something driven by your experience, your context, your learners.

Our questions tend to fall into two types:

- What's going on?
- What happens if?

You might take some time to figure out your question and refine it into something that is answerable and manageable.



What is already known?

There is so much research out there and we are all under pressure to be research informed, sometimes it feels overwhelming. It is important that you make effective and efficient use of existing research and consider

will help towards a solution to your problem. We know there is a lot of information available on the internet, focus on those that share what they have done and those that share their data so you can decide how relevant their work is to yours.

Deciding on an Approach

There are two main types of data: quantitative (number based) and qualitative (word based). As a general principle, quantitative data tends to tell us what happened and qualitative data tends to tell us why this happened. You need to think about which type of data is going to best answer your question.

As a teacher you have access to a wide range of evidence so use this where you can to ensure your enquiry remains manageable. You

could gather evidence through the following sources:

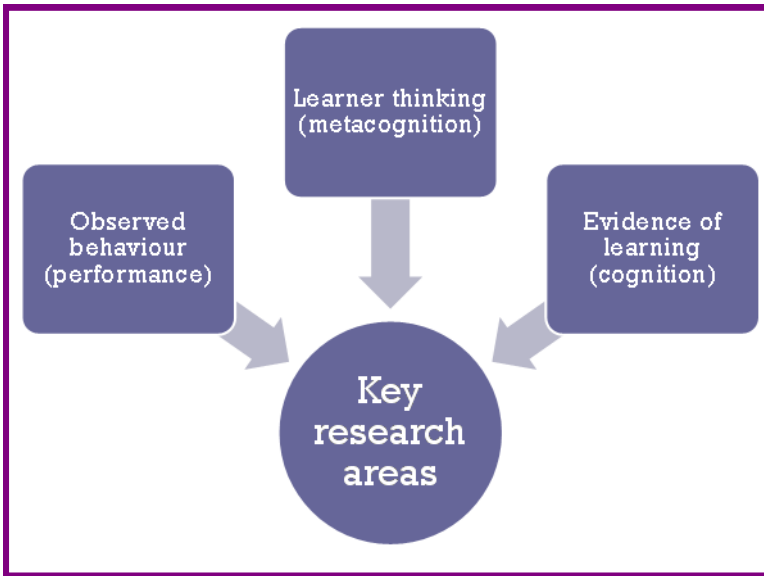
- Traditional research methods
- Data normally collected in schools
- Data from learning & teaching activities
- Data that can be incorporated into the school routine

Visual data

Visual data isn't new but it is only in the last 20 years that it has

been more regularly used in social science research. It has strong links to pupil voice and participatory research approaches which emphasise doing the research with rather than to your pupils. If our goal in improving learning then this seems like a useful way forward. Visual data could be part of your data collection design, the data collection process or the data itself. **Warning:** it is very easy to get carried away!

Taking Account of Pupil Perspectives in Your Enquiry



The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) promotes the rights of children and young people and in particular their right to have a say in things that affect their lives. GIRFEC and Curriculum for Excellence emphasise the role of involving children and young people. Too often this is meaningless and does not lead to action and change for learners. The three most commonly explored areas are the observed behaviour, evidence of learning and pupil thinking and beliefs. Practitioner enquiry is an effective way to allow you to involve your pupils in creating change in your classroom.

Sharing Your Learning

There are lots of ways you can share your practitioner enquiry findings. Think about the main points that emerge from your learning and who needs to know about this. Posters are a great way to share the key messages; info-graphics are increasingly popular and powerful. You can read the example opposite on the GTCS website by following this [link](#).

Practitioner Enquiry: Impact on Practice

Skills, Knowledge and Understanding of Enquiry: methods and data analysis

To meaningfully engage in rigorous practitioner enquiry teachers must know and understand how to gather appropriate data and then how to analyse and make sense of this data. Jennifer looked at a range of data to collect and only through an ongoing process of discussing and thinking about what kind of information she needed and why was she then able to gather audio data of pupil discussions. To properly analyse this data she needed to engage with reading and ask really critical questions, this was supported through critical conversations with university partner and colleagues.

Practitioner enquiry that is embedded in practice demands different and often more creative methods. It is about really understanding this context specific practice and it is not about gathering object context-free data. Audio and video data of pupil interactions is often critical. Visual methods are also really useful and appropriate – not just as a way of gathering data for pupils but as a way of teachers to process, think about and make sense of their data and represent this for others.

Jennifer uses visuals to present her own understanding and arising questions from her enquiry – the notion of children as parrots ‘parrotting back’ what they think teachers want to hear rather than learning through talk.

Leadership, time, value and practitioner enquiry as professional learning

Time is always a critical factor. Engaging in enquiry as a core activity of teachers work is only just starting to emerge. Teachers are busy and inundated with numerous initiatives, strategies and ongoing work. Even when enquiry is legitimised as a worthwhile activity, as it was in this school for this teacher, it must become an integral part of professional learning with time allocated to allow colleagues to meet and discuss and for data gathering to happen. Jennifer faced a number of challenges and although the school as a whole valued enquiry and specific time was allocated to enquiry teams, there were still difficulties in negotiating time to engage in the depth and detail amongst all the other priorities, including parents’ rights, reporting, part-time hours, and engaging in other CPD events which were seen as somewhat separate and disconnected from enquiry. It is really important that SMT are working with teachers to help ensure, through PRD processes, that all professional learning can be connected, meaningful and embedded in practice – this would allow more time to focus on developing understanding and knowledge through the enquiry process. This also requires SMT to be courageous and prioritise what is important in their school for their teachers, rather than falling under the pressure of initiatives being driven externally and priorities set externally.

Impact: Jennifer's story

This extract is taken from one teacher's (Jennifer) poster enquiry. This section focuses on her reflecting on her analysis of transcripts of pupil talk. For Jennifer this led to the realisation that the depth of talk she had assumed/hoped for was not happening in her class and potentially strategies such as the use of 'success criteria' were inhibiting and limiting learning rather than actually supporting or facilitating learning. This depth of reflection demonstrates well the level of thinking about learning emerging from the analysis of data. It also shows the questions this then raised for the teacher about pupil learning and talk. In groups, this inevitably will lead to further enquiry about talk for learning in cooperative groups.

For Jennifer it would appear that the immediate impact from this enquiry was on her own understanding and questioning of practice. It was on her professional learning, which will ultimately lead to an impact on practice and pupil learning as she has begun to question and unpick specific practices she no longer believes are appropriate or promoting learning in the way initially assumed.

There are no measurable outcomes or solutions arising from this enquiry, instead questions are asked about learning and teaching. This will likely lead to further enquiry and investigations into talk for learning which can then lead to transformed practices.

To understand and explain how children use talk as a tool for thinking and learning.

My original question was "How do I know they know?" But through my practitioner enquiry research my thinking moved on to a more developed inquiry focus (see above).

I feel that this type of approach, where I provide children with a specific structure and clear instructions, could inhibit open discussion... There are some elements/different ways that the children are interacting with each other and they are generating their own discussion. Sometimes discussion happens at a point of disruption or when the children are uncertain of how to proceed, other times it happens naturally when they question meaning or content... How can I facilitate disruption to promote discussion? Are there more positive ways to promote discussion without causing disruption? How can I facilitate disruption that promotes a type of talk that enables children to learn? How will I do this, what will I say? Should I encourage children to challenge each other and ask for evidence? Should I encourage children to justify their answers?

Dispositions: The teacher-as-learner

Jennifer showed a willingness and commitment to begin to question her own understandings and practices and to use theory and research to make sense of and raise questions about learning and teaching. This takes courage and resilience. It is a challenge and requires risk taking.

Content, subject & pedagogical knowledge: Understanding learning is at the core of enquiry

An essential part of the enquiry process this teacher exploring her own knowledge and understanding of learning. In particular the focus shifted to understanding 'talk for learning'. This involved engaging in reading and theoretical perspectives about talk and her subsequent questioning of practices, including the taken-for-granted practices such as setting success criteria. And how this was helping facilitate learning – or not.

Structure, support & Challenges: It is an uncomfortable and slow process.

The focus of this enquiry evolved as the teacher started to engage with reading, thinking about her practice and as she was starting to look at pupil learning. It was a complex process that had to be flexible to respond to her shifting understanding and changes in context.

Culture/Ethos: trust and collegiality

1-1 critical conversations were an important aspect of the development of this enquiry and for that to happen trusting relationships with colleagues and external partners need to be nurtured and a collegial culture developed and sustained.

Trust is critical: trust in self, trust in the process of enquiry, trust in external supporting colleagues, trust in immediate colleagues.

Top Tips

- Find a friend - having a 'critical' friend to support and challenge you.
- Practitioner enquiry is a way of being not a thing you do or an extra task to be done.
- Your focus needs to be on learning and teaching and be driven by you.
- Make it manageable.
- Start from where you are - be honest.