

Why Make a Commitment to Practitioner Research?

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of *i.e.: inquiry in education*. Let me start by offering a word of thanks to the editors, Arlene Borthwick, Wendy Gardiner, and Virginia Jagla, along with Rob Morrison for his technical support. The development of this journal is the most recent product of the Center for Practitioner Research within the National College of Education at National-Louis University. It is rooted, however, in more than two decades of faculty dedication to helping practitioners (including themselves!) use many forms of research, but particularly action research as a powerful tool to:

- address their own professional growth and learning,
- become better practicing professionals,
- give voice to those they work with and for, and
- make schools better places for teaching and learning.

A dedicated, cross-disciplinary group of faculty involved in the Center's work had a vision of helping practitioners gain increased visibility for their research and this journal is a concrete effort in that direction. They've accomplished this with a little bit of encouragement, a minimum of resources, and a great deal of energy and commitment. I applaud their work and am encouraged by their vision. Here are some of the reasons I think it is so important.

Improved practice takes an understanding of local context to implement successfully. There have been many efforts to improve education. Often these come from the outside schools and are imposed on educators – and frequently imposed in batches. Charles Payne, in his recent book, *So Much Reform So Little Change* (2008), writes eloquently about how potentially useful interventions fail because we continually try to apply such things without understanding and addressing underlying issues that can cause good, well-intentioned people to fail, systems to replicate failure, and resultant “data” from these systems to simply confirm failure, rather than foster improvement. He points continually to the need to better understand the organizational and environmental characteristics that are roadblocks to positive change. Good practitioner

research is grounded in studying professional work with a deep respect for and awareness of its situated context.

Creating powerful paths to success in schools takes buy-in and sustained effort from a committed body of educators within each school. Payne points out the pitfalls of well-intentioned outsiders coming with some “bright new idea that’s going to fix everything” and “...coming to *tell* teachers, not to listen to them, brushing aside teachers’ real-world objections, conveying, in ways subtle and not so subtle, their very real contempt for teachers” (Payne, p. 64). Practitioner research honors educator’s knowledge and asks for a commitment to improve their work and take responsibility for its outcomes. This takes honesty, in addition to effort. Dr. Stringer reminds us in his contribution to this issue of the journal, of the importance of keeping a weather eye on the impact of our “self” on our research so that we accurately hear our students and colleagues, are open to the effects of evidence that contradicts our assumptions, and can change our practices (and ourselves) based on the power of our research.

Sustainable success takes intangible resources like the investment of belief and the development of relational trust, among teachers, between teachers and parents, and between these stakeholders and school leaders. Indeed, Payne notes the study of 210 Chicago schools by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, and its central finding that the quality of these relationships is one of the best predictors of whether a school was improving or not (Payne, pp. 33-34). Dr. Stringer’s advice that if we respect the differing views of other stakeholders (through our actions, not just our speech) and are willing to “confront our own realities,” we may find that the benefits of collaborative practitioner research extend beyond the immediate results of that research to the development of precious personal and organizational resources – collaboration and relational trust. Indeed, well done action research has a track record of serving as a catalyst for community action, based on a growing web of collaboration and trust that is a natural outgrowth of its requirement to honor the local context and local voices.



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Successful change requires that you know why you do things and that you use the artifacts of practice to learn how to continually improve it. Research shows, Payne points out, that “successful districts and unsuccessful districts say they are doing the same things; the difference appears to be in the way they do what they do... It ain’t the thing that you do, it’s the way that you do it.” (p. 190). Disciplined and collaborative action research at the local level can be an

important tool for helping teachers and administrators in schools to “codify and make widely available” (p. 185) their own practitioner knowledge, break down the typical walls of isolation in professional practice, and to study the implementation of curricula and teaching approaches within an appropriately context-sensitive methodology. *And with time as a precious resource, it is important to learn from others who have tried to implement similar practices.* Payne notes that

one of the main impediments to improving instruction in urban schools is the fact that teachers tend to be isolated from one another...It might help if we could invent a process to codify and make widely available the rich body of practitioner knowledge. (p. 185)

In the epilogue of his book, Payne characterizes good schools and good teaching:

Give them teaching that is determined, energetic, and engaging. Hold them [students] to high standards. Expose them to as much as you can, most especially the arts. Root the school in the community and take advantage of the culture the children bring with them. Pay attention to their social and ethical development. Recognize the reality of race, poverty, and other social barriers, but make children understand that barriers don't have to limit their lives; help them see themselves as contributing citizens of both a racial community and a larger one. Above all, no matter where in the social structure children are coming from, act as if their possibilities are boundless. (pp. 211-212)

How do we get to the lived reality of those words? *It takes hard work and reflective practice continually improved on the basis of good evidence.* I am frequently amazed at the resilience of practitioners, despite the many challenges and obstacles they face in trying to do good work. Resilience linked to a commitment to constantly do better work means being willing to take a hard look at one's own work within the deep complexity of its organizational contexts. It also

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takes a willingness and skill to engage in the spaces between that reality and the knowledge available from others who have helped develop a shared knowledge base over many decades of research and practice.

This is tough work, requiring discipline, an understanding of how to do the work, and more than a touch of diligence. In his book, *Better*, Atul Gawande, analyzes how military doctors were able to dramatically reduce battlefield casualties in Iraq, despite limited personnel on the ground and other significant constraints. It was not through new technologies (the bright new idea), it

was through “making a science of performance, to investigate and improve how well they use the knowledge and technologies they already have at hand,” (Gawande, 2008, Kindle location 703-10) in other words, by conducting action research on their practices. The author notes that improvement in outcomes “was only possible through a kind of resolute diligence that is difficult to imagine. Think, for example, about the fact that we even know the statistics of what happened to the wounded in Fallujah. It is only because the medical teams took the time, despite the chaos and their fatigue, to fill out their logs describing the injuries and their outcomes.” This work was necessary so

they could later analyze the patterns in what had happened to the soldiers and how effective the treatments had been. ‘We had a little doctors’ room with two computers,’ [one of the doctors] recalls, ‘I remember I’d see those guys late at night, sometimes in the early hours of the morning, putting the data in.’ (Kindle location 304-11)

While these efforts describe a heroic commitment in the face of undeniably extreme conditions, schools, especially failing schools, can often seem like chaotic battlefields and educators may find themselves exhausted with the intellectual, physical, and emotional demands made upon them in their daily work. Making the additional decision to study one’s own work is a commitment we should honor. We honor that work here by providing public space for it. We hope you will celebrate that work with us, that you will find it useful to your own work, and that you will consider adding your voice to the effort.

References

Gawande, A. (2008). *Better: A surgeon’s notes on performance*. New York: Picador.

Payne, C. (2008). *So much reform, so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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