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

Further Reading:

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

Teachers Leading Change—Doing Research For School Improvement, Judy Dur- rant and Gary Holden, 2006

Transformative learning and Identity, Knud Illeris, 2013


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!
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.

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.