

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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RECOGNISING, VALUING AND CELEBRATING PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

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Practitioner research has become a recognised and legitimate form of professional learning in many professional contexts, and a significant component of what has been identified as a ‘paradigm shift gathering momentum’ in relation to the professional learning of teachers that goes beyond ‘merely supporting the acquisition of new knowledge and skills’ (Vescio et al., 2008: 81). An established research literature demonstrates the contribution its use makes to sustaining educational change, quality improvement and teacher growth and empowerment in school settings (see, for example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014; Mockler and Casey, this volume). In contrast, in early childhood contexts, practitioner research might be seen as an ‘emergent’ practice, and the research literature documenting its use in these settings, while growing, is relatively small. This is both perplexing, given the growth in policy attention internationally to early childhood, and the consequent need to strengthen pedagogical quality and ‘grow’ the profession, and unsurprising, given the often marginal status of the early childhood profession and the increasingly dominant framing of early childhood within human capital discourses (Bown et al., 2009; Moss, 2012). In this chapter, we establish the rationale for the production of this book and its contribution to understanding and exemplifying the important

place of practitioner research in the early childhood field. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the research and policy context of early childhood. This is followed by an articulation of what is understood and implied by practitioner research and its variant forms, incorporating a discussion of its distinctive characteristics and contribution. The final section of this chapter introduces the chapters of the book and discusses their content and contribution under the particular themes of collaborative partnerships, knowledge and knowing, capacity building and transformation and change. These themes were identified by the editors as particularly salient from the research findings of projects described by the chapter authors.

The early childhood policy and research context

Although internationally early childhood is a field of practice with a long and often vibrant history, in many countries its place has only recently moved from existing 'on the margins' to the mainstream of education/social policy and its practitioners accorded recognition of their professional status, as reflected in their professional identity, learning opportunities and pay and conditions. In other places, particularly in majority nations, this recognition is yet to occur, so in many contexts, the recognition of professional status is at best ambiguous. Further, the theoretical framings of early childhood education have historically been rooted in discourses of child development, stage theory and scientific research models, reinforcing notions of knowledge as fixed and universal, and research as something undertaken by more knowing 'others'. Such conceptualisations offer little space and few resources for thinking about practitioner agency and knowledge as contestable and locally situated. Accompanying the increasing prominence of early childhood in government agendas, and the consequent expansion in early childhood services, there has also been a strengthening conceptualisation of early childhood that invokes human capital and regulatory discourses within neoliberal frameworks of accountability, the effects of which are eloquently explained by Moss (2007) and others. These discourses have resulted in increasing codification of practice (Sumsion et al., 2009; Woodrow and Brennan, 1999), proliferating regulatory requirements and increased accountability through standards and competency frameworks (Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2006), resulting in practitioners experiencing what has been described as a 'regulatory burden' (Fenech et al., 2006, 2008; Fenech and Sumsion, 2007a, 2007b). According to some early childhood researchers, these

developments threaten the empowerment of early childhood practitioners, their professional autonomy and suppression of their leadership aspirations (Skattebol and Arthur, 2014), and are reductionist by promoting an understanding of professional practice as the demonstration of technical competence (Osgood, 2006).

These conditions work to ‘technologies’ early childhood professional practice (Dahlberg et al., 2007), and result in the prescription of norms to which practitioners must conform. Osgood (2006, 2010) argues that this puts at risk alternative constructions of early childhood professionalism that acknowledge the relationality and complexity of early childhood work, and in which critical reflection and the practice of autonomous professional decision-making are features. Such divergent constructions of the early childhood pedagogical space have implications for the kind of professional learning made available to the profession. Technician constructions favour professional learning models in which knowledge is perceived as fixed and universal, fostering skill development and compliance, and these reflect the dominant discourse. Alternative models in which early childhood educators are constructed as site-based researchers involved in the production of localised, contextually relevant knowledge experience greater difficulty in gaining traction, and hence attracting funding support and institutional commitment; an aspect of which the authors have considerable experience.

However, practitioner research might be seen as an ideal methodology that responds to the pressures of these contextual features and might usefully contribute to the need to build a more nuanced repertoire of pedagogical practice (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003), the creation of conceptual resources for building local community and pedagogical adaptive leadership capacity (Skattebol and Arthur, 2014; Woodrow, 2011), a better understanding and recognition of the relational and emotional dimensions of early childhood work (Taggart, 2011), practitioners’ willingness to research their own practice (Newman and Mowbray, 2012), and harnessing the well documented ‘passion’ that characterises practitioners’ engagement in the field (Moyles, 2001; Osgood, 2010; Pardo and Woodrow, 2014). At the same time, there is what might be characterised as a current flourishing of research in the early childhood field, particularly within post-colonial, post-structural and post-humanist theoretical frameworks. There are implications emerging for understanding knowledge and truth as fragile, contested and contingent, encouraging the production of locally situated knowledge and suggesting a place for the application of professional learning methodologies that contribute richly textured accounts of local action and their effects and to building local

leadership. A number of writers have highlighted the particular challenges for the field at a time when neo-liberal discourses of accountability and the dominance of human capital framings cut across the new imaginings and social transformational possibilities opened up by this flourishing of intellectual energy. According to Skattebol and Arthur (2014), the current times call for an adaptive leadership characterised by an activist professionalism in order to engage with government agendas and exercise moral judgement. They also argue that Fenech and Sumsion's (2007a, 2007b) empirical study on the impact of regulation on early childhood educators demonstrates the critical significance of the 'level of intellectual resources held by educators and the power they can galvanise in their professional identity' that enables them to forge the alliances and leverage community concerns that will enable them to make strategic representations and practise resistance to the dominant discourse. They make a cogent case that the practice of collaborative practitioner research can develop the kind of capabilities necessary for these professionals.

This new vibrancy in early childhood research, policy and practice to which we have gestured suggests a particular timeliness to articulating methodologies that can resource the further development of the locally activist 'critically reflective emotional professional' (Osgood, 2010: 119). By documenting and celebrating the experiences and achievements of practitioner research(ers) in early childhood contexts, this book provides compelling evidence of practitioner research as an appropriate approach to creating new situated and contextually relevant knowledge about the field and its contribution to growing the capacity of the profession.

The distinctiveness of practitioner research and its contributions

In this volume, practitioner research is used as an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches and methods to field research that are inquiry-based, concerned with gaining greater insight into, and strengthening, professional practice. These approaches have been variously called 'practitioner inquiry' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007), 'participatory action research' (Kapoor and Jordan, 2009), 'participatory research' (Olivier et al., 2009), 'action research' (Elliott, 2008; Noffke and Somekh, 2009; Somekh and Zeichner, 2009), 'applied and practice-based research' (Furlong and Oancea, 2005), 'practitioner research' (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2008),

'teacher professional learning' (Gore et al., 2010), teacher research, self-study, narrative inquiry, or the scholarship of teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). Each carry their own epistemology and methods, and the terms are not necessarily interchangeable. These approaches build from the understanding that inquiry is a stance that researchers take, and in which the social, cultural and historical forces shaping and influencing this form of research are taken into account. Participants in such inquiry work in collaboration with others – university researchers, teachers and community activists, for example. Ethical imperatives are implicitly and explicitly a part of practitioner research and questions arise as to what 'scientific research' is. Critics of the approach, for example funding bodies and governing institutions, claim it is too subjective, unclear and lacking in measures of validity and reliability (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). Proponents, however, all advocate for its strong epistemological and theoretical underpinnings and argue that practitioners who hold significant knowledge from inside practice should be empowered as researchers of their own practice, allowing the most valid and sustainable change to be possible. Such an approach to systematic and intentional data collection, with analysis grounded in the context, holds the strongest potential for meaningful change (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007, 2009). For further reading see Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Cochran-Smith and Donnell, 2006; Green et al., 2006.

The common features of practitioner research are what make it distinctive as a field and include involving practitioners as researchers, usually of their own practice; collaboration between different actors; the local community or sites of practice being the context for inquiry; knowledge being made open for scrutiny and new knowledge being created; a recognition that knowledge of worth needs to be created 'inside' rather than transported in from 'outside' (as in traditional staff development) and for immediate use; practitioners are 'knowers'; critical reflection on the theory–practice nexus; inquiry as an integral part of practice; and inquiry is systematic, intentional and reported (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). Typically practitioner researchers and academic researchers are partners, rather than research subject and researcher (researching 'with' rather than 'about'), often resulting in a transformation of existing relationships.

Advocates for practitioner research, and people who have engaged in this form of research and its variants (academic and field-based), talk of its shared features and assumptions across issues of power, its political nature, the potential to assist real and sustained change, authenticity and 'realness'.

Kemmis et al. (2014: 2) discuss their evolution as researchers in the following way:

We have moved beyond thinking of action research as an approach to research and change which is best represented as a self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting and observing, reflecting and then re-planning in successive cycles of improvement. We re-affirm that the purpose of critical participatory action research is to change social practices, including research practice itself, to make them more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive.

There is no doubt that this form of research can be rigorous, complex and slow, is theorisable, and offers no 'easy way out' for researchers, although it renders the research process and relationships more visible and accessible. Experienced researchers in this field note the potential to realign power relationships, in which traditional knowledge–power relationships, such as those that exist between the academy and practitioners, are reconfigured. As a consequence of this experience, practitioners emerge with greater confidence in their ability to 'know' and to 'find out' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). Teachers as researchers can construct a common tradition of understanding and knowledge based on their research and actions (Elliott, 2009).

In this book, the terms teacher research and practitioner research are used interchangeably. Our rationale is that not all of the people working with young children, families and communities are teachers. It is a more complex scenario than in schools where the adults are mostly teachers. Reading the chapters in the book will provide encounters with stories of teachers, educators with other qualifications from the vocational education and training sector, family members and community members who have all participated in practitioner research in some way. Practitioner research is seen as a legitimate method in reshaping this divide between teachers and academics, with one distinction being that teachers are very likely to be involved in some capacity. Like the other methods described here, practitioner research is a deeply ethical undertaking with implications for confidentiality, transparency and truly informed consent during methodological planning and application phases. Teacher/practitioner research is 'grounded fundamentally in the dialectic of inquiry and practice rather than in one particular theoretical tradition and envisions the teacher as a knower, rather than a technician. The dialectic is viewed as an integrated process involving reciprocity, research and practice relationships, analysis, action and theorising' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009: 42). For further reading see Gore and Gitlin, 2004.

Creation of locally situated knowledge

Hegemonic discourses abound in education and early childhood contexts, giving rise to the notion that there is one (typically western, or northern) way of interpreting the world, for example, of being a 'good' teacher, or of providing quality teaching and learning environments. Practitioner research provides the frameworks, tools and processes for investigating these knowledge claims in local sites and can be enabling of the production of new knowledge that is contextually relevant and may differ from the orthodox wisdom. This aspect of local knowledge production takes on heightened significance in contexts of cultural and ethnic diversity and in high poverty and socially disadvantaged communities. Typically these communities experience marginalisation and social exclusion when the institutional policy and practices are shaped only by the hegemonic knowledge discourse. Through the implementation of practitioner research, the subjugated knowledges of minority and excluded groups can be brought forward and used to show how different policies and practices might advance equity, social justice and social inclusion.

Collaboration

Research involving practitioners and academic researchers as partners is now quite widely practised in education contexts (e.g. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007) and health research (Olivier et al., 2009) and has marked a shift in the relationships between sites of practice and the academy. In education contexts this shift is not unproblematic though, either for practitioners or academics.

Invariably, practitioner research, in whatever form it comes, becomes a political act of claiming power and agency for the practitioners, who usually have not had this in the past. There is an important aspect of self-determination involved and an intent to shift the status quo frequently emerges. This can be challenging for schools and universities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2007). Olivier et al. (2009: 13) attribute this to the active participation of practitioners as they 'identify issues and ways of dealing with them' within an enabling methodology that promotes social action. Participants can identify their own community strengths and challenges, engage in dialogue, decide for themselves what is important and what needs to be changed, and engage the wider community.

This is illustrated when Skattebol and Arthur (2014) write about their experience as academic partners in a practitioner research project in Sydney, drawing on the theorisations of Bhabha (1994) to conceptualise the changed dynamics and relationships as a new ‘third space’ in which the production of contextually relevant knowledge can take place, without which this kind of collaboration is often not possible due to the siloing of institutional knowledge and practices.

Variants of practitioner research

Space does not allow the provision of detailed outlines of various methods in this volume, and these are well covered elsewhere (see, for example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). Readers will find variations on a range of practitioner research methods described in detail in each of the following chapters. However, a brief description of two well-regarded variations, action research, and practitioner action research (PAR) are included here.

Action research

Action research has a long and proud tradition in community projects of social change and in education (Kemmis et al., 2014). It is mostly identified as a spiralling cycle containing phases of choosing to change, planning for a change, creating change and sharing the lessons of change. It is based on principles of reflexive adult learning (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009). It is not, however, reducible to ‘public scholarship’, but a process that ‘engages simultaneous understanding of social action as a way to produce reliable theories, methods and knowledge’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 30). Kemmis et al. (2014) claim its strengths lie in rejecting conventional expert-led research; the recognition of capacity by participants at every step in the research; and a participant-led orientation to making improvements in practices. It is not without its critics, however, who claim that it makes few contributions to theoretical and methodological debates in the social sciences. Case reporting is seen to lack sharp intellectual focus and be unlinked to a scientific discourse. Critics draw attention to a lack of integration between solving relevant practical problems and well developed theoretical and methodological agenda (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 30). However, there is considerable resonance in this volume with Somekh and Zeichner’s strong advocacy for action research that, ‘Action research, as a proposition, has discursive power because it embodies a collision of terms. In generating research knowledge and improving social action at the same time, action research challenges the normative

values of two distinct ways of being – that of the scholar and the activist’ (2009: 5). For further reading see Elliott, 2008; Maksimovic, 2011; Mockler, 2007; and Newman and Mowbray, 2012.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

While all practitioner and action research has political intentions to some extent, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is characterised by its political nature and political interests. There is argument that PAR should be returned to its longstanding anti-colonial roots and indigenous traditions from Latin-America where it has a close relationship with critical pedagogy and democratic participatory rights. It recognises that educators, particularly in poor schools, are often powerless, and carries an emancipatory vision (Darder, 2011). It follows the work of Paulo Freire and rests on the assumption that participation in the past has been largely repressed by the state, and needs to move into morally authentic, rather than simulated, participation (Flores-Kastanis et al., 2009). For further reading see Kapoor and Jordan, 2009.

Practitioner research in early childhood contexts: building a repository of practitioner research knowledge

The defining focus for this volume has been to assemble a range of practitioner research projects ‘put to work’ in very diverse early childhood contexts, bringing forward insights related to choices of methodology, implementation and their contribution to practice while rendering understandable the different approaches adopted and how these were inflected in particular contexts. The resulting chapters profile a rich array of approaches to collaborative practitioner research in extremely diverse contexts including urban, regional and remote areas across the northern and southern hemispheres and in different parts of the world (South Africa, Scandinavia, Chile and Australia). While the particular focus of each chapter varies, each one includes a description of the research context, outlines the practitioner research methodology adopted for the project, and highlights research findings, particularly as these relate to the particular contribution, challenges and outcomes of the project. A number of themes emerge from these strands, and it is through these themes that we choose to introduce the book chapters: constructing collaborative relationships, knowledge and knowing, capacity building and transformation and change. Of course these themes are interwoven across the chapters, and what emerges is indeed a ‘rich tapestry’ of practitioner research experiences.

The final chapter is by guest author Dr Nicole Mockler and her research partner Ashley Casey – '(In)sights from 40 years of practitioner action research in education: perspectives from the US, UK and Australia'. Nicole was invited into this book in recognition of her widely respected work in practitioner research in schools over a sustained period and her authorship of highly regarded writings about teacher research in schools. Nicole provides insights for early childhood professionals from this extensive work with practitioner research over many years, and together with Ashley provides insights about its inflection in local sites through the use of an insider/outsider perspective. This reflects the ethos of both the book and also of practitioner research, and contributes to the book's messages of authenticity, collaboration and 'groundedness'. Most of the chapters are co-authored by practitioners and their academic partners, with time taken to establish how these relationships were formed and enacted.

Constructing collaborative partnerships

Across the chapters, the forms of collaboration and the roles of the collaborators are seen to differ according to the context of the different settings and variations in the practitioner research methodology utilised. The importance of deeply respectful relationships to successful research collaborations is powerfully demonstrated in the context of a transnational project, which is the focus of Chapter 2, 'Collaborative capacity building in early childhood communities in Chile'. Here the authors, Linda Newman and Christine Woodrow, from Australia, and Chilean educators Silvia Rójo and Mónica Galvez, describe how challenges to current practices brought about through the intervention of the Futuro Infantil Hoy project were constructively addressed through the development of trusting reciprocal relationships. This occurred through their joint engagement in sociocultural theory, iterative cycles of action research, and new forms of practitioner research involving photostories. The chapter illustrates the growth of these relationships and the blurring and changing roles as the practitioners took on expanded leadership roles within the project as they and the academic partners came together in the joint project of writing the chapter. Similarly, Chapter 7, 'Sustaining curriculum renewal in Western Sydney: three participant views' by Linda Newman, Janet Keegan and Trish Heeley, draws our attention to how roles evolved over the course of the project and lead to the academic partner moving from facilitator to partner and one of the practitioner researchers moving to a leadership role in the context of the Curriculum Renewal Group implemented in a large municipality in Western Sydney. The chapter allows us to see how the experiences in the initial cycles provided a foundation for

evolving a sustained model of enhanced collaboration across the sites of the project. Collaborative relationships are also fundamental to the success of the Sharing Care project in South Africa, beautifully articulated through the voices of the practitioner Mary Janes and academic partner Norma Rudolph in Chapter 6, 'Reconceptualising services for young children through dialogue in a South African village'. Collaborative community engagement also emerged as crucial to the success of this project.

Knowledge and knowing

All of the chapters describe cases in which the research involved a collaborative partnership between the academy and the sites of practice, and several of these showed transformations in the knowledge–power relationships in the partnerships, and the repositioning of practitioners as agentic knowers. This latter point about agentic knowing is most powerfully demonstrated in this volume in Chapter 3, 'Insider Islamic spaces of inquiry: Muslim educators producing new knowledge in Sydney Australia', by Oznur Ayedimir, Fatima Mourad, Leonie Arthur and Jen Skattebol. The chapter describes how a group of Muslim early childhood practitioners in Australia (calling themselves the *Habibties*) adopted practitioner research to investigate how professional identities were constructed and reconstructed by Muslim educators working across Muslim and secular educational institutions under the pressures of Islamophobia. It provides powerful insights into how practitioner research supported them in 'rescuing' and reconstructing marginalised Islamic informed pedagogical knowledge. The co-authors use the term 'epistemic disobedience' to describe the point at which the practitioner research processes enabled the negotiation of dissonance and their resistance to hegemonic and stereotypical knowledge regimes. Reformulating and formalising existing knowledge into new frameworks to support a quality focus was an important outcome from the project described in Chapter 5, 'Developing collaboration using mind maps in practitioner research in Sweden' by Karin Rönnerman. Here the academic partner, Karin, led a collaborative inquiry process in which the practitioners investigated and made sense of their practice through the use of a mind-mapping tool. The tool itself fostered collaboration using action research constructed within a long-standing Nordic tradition of study circles. The chapter details the processes used in developing the mind map in ways that deepened the participants' knowledge of their curriculum practice, in order that it might be changed, and how this occurred is also part of the research presented in the chapter.

Continuing the theme of reclaiming marginalised knowledge through collaborative practitioner research is Chapter 4, 'What is play for, in your culture? Investigating remote Australian Aboriginal perspectives through participatory practitioner research' by Lyn Fasoli and Alison Wunungmurra. The project focuses on remote Aboriginal community perspectives of play and involves children as researchers of their own play to make important culturally relevant knowledge visible-knowledge. It had previously been invisible and seemingly unknowable because of the dominance of hegemonic white knowledge about children's play. Fundamental to the research relationship was also the notion of authentic reciprocity in the relationships so that both Alison, the aboriginal researcher, and Lyn, the white academic, could gain differentiated knowledge and insights from the project. The authors help us understand the fragility of these relationships and the importance of respect and reciprocity in sustaining them.

Capacity building

All of the chapters provide insights into how practitioner research approaches build capacity as knowers and as actors. The importance and outcomes from this are especially highlighted in the context of the appreciative enquiry approach adopted in the South African context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and a discourse of children's rights. The authors present a vivid account of how the appreciative enquiry supported building community ownership of change and how critical this was to improving children's life chances. Chapter 2 about Futuro Infantil Hoy and Chapter 5 about the mind-mapping project also illustrate the capacity building dimension of practitioner research: in the Chile context, practitioners becoming leaders and authors, and in Chapter 5 deeper knowers and thinkers in action research, mind-mapping and collaborating. Chapter 7 also provides evidence of a much more robust professional community in the Curriculum Renewal Group because of the way the project evolved, leadership shifted, and iterative cycles informed the next cycle to be more participative. The sustainability of this project seems well founded now.

Transformation and change

Transformation is a big claim and one that many are loath to identify with. However, the vibrancy of the writing in these chapters provides the reader with a sense that every project contained an element of personal, collective or institutional transformation, or a combination. Reviewing the

chapters, overall, we can sense that each of the authors are powerful advocates for practitioner research, not the least because of the positive changes that its use has wrought.

Conclusions and insights gained

This chapter has charted some of the territory of practitioner research, providing a broad framework for understanding, learning from and enjoying the work presented in this volume, at the same time making a case for why practitioner research has an important place and contribution to make in the field of early childhood research and why it should be more strongly articulated as a powerful methodology for the field to take up. It remains now for readers to engage with the chapters and make their own meanings from the authors' presentation of their research experiences in all their vibrancy, richness and complexity.

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