

**Reconnecting teachers and their work.
Mid-career teachers engaging in
qualification-based practitioner research**

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Abstract

There is debate about whether and how educational research has relevance for and is accessible to teaching practitioners. Much literature highlights the value of practitioner-based research approaches as a pathway to engaging teachers more readily with and in research, however, the practitioner research approach is often viewed negatively and is criticised for being too localised and trivial. In addition, there are concerns about the ability of teaching practitioners to undertake valid research and generate new knowledge that might provide value to the wider teaching community. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that practitioner-based research can be beneficial to teachers and teaching, and despite the criticisms and debates surrounding validity and generalisability, the benefits to practitioners of engaging in such learning can go beyond the classroom. Importantly, as identified in a small-scale study in Aotearoa/New Zealand, practitioner research was found to advance the notion of educators as professionals and knowledge producers and had the effect of reconnecting educators to their work as skilled professionals.

Keywords

Practitioner research; critical pedagogy.

Introduction

Findings from a small qualitative research project undertaken in a tertiary education institution in Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand explores the value of practitioner research to mid-career primary and secondary teachers engaging in post graduate studies. The project invited responses from post graduate students engaged in a distance master's level research thesis programme. Students were based in a range of communities and within rural and urban settings. The project was designed to explore some of the benefits and challenges of practitioner-based approaches for mid-career teaching professionals seeking a career based, practice-based qualification. Findings suggest that practitioner research provided an opportunity for teachers to connect with their educational work and communities in a way that was not expected.

Literature Review

Practitioner-based research, highly contextualised and relevant to individuals, often suffers from negative perceptions and can be accused of being too localised and trivial (Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby, 1999). Concerns are also raised about the ability of practitioners to undertake good research and there is criticism in terms of the validity of this type of research (Ooldbekkink et al, 2014) and the robustness of process. Nevertheless, while practitioner research is imperfect (Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby, 1999) literature in the field suggests that it does have much to offer teaching practitioners, namely; for its ability to empower (Kincheloe, 2012) and validate practice; it adds a practitioner voice to the debates surrounding educational change and reinforces the notion of educators as self-regulating professionals, rather than technicians who engage in educational processes (Kincheloe,

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2012; Whitehead & Huxtable, 2016); it can clarify understandings and can enhance practitioner learning (Coleman and Lumby, 1999); and can balance a top down approach to educational change by providing opportunities to engage 'bottom up' findings (Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 2007). Practitioner research can formalise the kind of practice-based inquiry that teachers undertake on a regular basis (Anderson, Herr and Nihlen, 2007) and can engage practitioners in the generation of knowledge in their own field (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2016; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009). Nutley et al (2007) suggest it is also a way to engage teachers in research minded practices beyond an initial study.

Practitioner research is described in a range of ways and ascribed a range of purposes. For some, practitioner research provides a pathway for research which benefits the practitioner in terms of practice goals and also benefits the organisation. Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby (1999) suggest that often individual and organisational goals are 'akin and symbiotic' (p.19) and can represent a paradigm for educational research where 'scientific' objectivity can be blended with the micro-political awareness of an 'insider'. Some suggest that practitioner research falls into an action research or self-study paradigm (Campbell, 2013). Practitioner research may include classroom-based topics, including those that involve students and learning, school improvements, management-based issues, topics relating to mandated change and including curriculum foci or structural and environmental influences (Thomas, 2005). For some theorists, practitioner research can be coded and segregated into types, for example by Gordon (2016) where five types of practitioner research are provided as suited for different scenarios. It is noted that 'inquiry', 'classroom research', 'action research' and many other forms of inquiry are identified as part of the practitioner research family.

Clearly, there are many and various approaches to teacher research and practitioner research, and many discussions about what is and what isn't counted as practitioner research. This paper is not concerned with the sorting or organising of approaches, or in the debates about what is and is not practitioner research nor what is more or less 'proper' research; we will leave such discussions to more knowledgeable researchers. There is, however, an awareness of the importance of clarifying a position for this research and to that end, the aspect of practitioner research that privileges teacher concerns and is focussed on the generation of teacher knowledge is identified as central.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) identify a kind of practitioner inquiry rooted in the area of critical and democratic social theory of the 1970s and 80s where 'teachers as researchers' was conceptualised 'as a form of social change' (p.91). One of the major themes of this approach and the way it is identified is by 'the emphasis on issues of equity, engagement and agency' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009. p.11).

Similarly, practitioner research that grows out of the aspects of teachers' work that relate to educational power imbalances, is often categorised as emancipatory in terms of its themes of marginalisation, oppressive structures or unethical practices (Kincheloe, 2012). This approach is linked to critical theory. Here, teacher knowledge is driven by a spirit of openness, inquiry, and an investigative spirit, or as Roberts (2008) puts it when relating a Freirean approach to teaching; 'a questioning and critical frame of mind, and a willingness to listen and learn from others' (p.3). Knowledge here is seen as being generated through dialogic, human practice (Roberts, 2008). This view of knowledge and knowledge production draws from the view of teaching as an opportunity to humanise (Freire, 1972) and is increasingly relevant in an educational environment where technical standards work to reduce the complexity of teaching realities and undermine humanising approaches (Kincheloe, 2003). Critical approaches to practitioner research support the view that the specific and contextual have value. This resists the view of practitioner research as too localised and not relevant beyond the situation; for practitioner research has an 'assumption of specificity, that the directly experienced and present situation can be of value and can make a difference' (Letiche, 2018, p. 144).

The view of practitioner research as collaborative and grassroots; practitioner-initiated, locally oriented, community-based and focussed on meaningful change (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) formed the basis of the approach reported on in this paper, where a range of methods and approaches, focussed in a qualitative research base were available to post graduate teacher-researchers. This qualitative critical approach to practitioner research provided a base for postgraduate teaching and the research discussed in the study which forms the basis of this paper.

The study setting

A practitioner-based research-focussed Masters programme that provided opportunities for teachers to a) explore and evaluate their own practice and b) gain a Master level qualification became a site for the exploration of the value of practitioner research as a basis for a qualification and as a site for learning and meaning-making. This small research project sought to garner the experiences of current teaching practitioners undertaking practitioner research as part of a post graduate qualification to better understand the conditions for study and improve and develop the programme further. As researchers ourselves we were interested in gaining insights into the realities and practicalities of the this approach. We were interested in participant views of the work/study interface inherent in practitioner research and in the value and experience of participants own learning as educators beyond the gaining of a qualification. Indeed, the privileging of teacher experience and knowledge lay at the base of the study.

The study was undertaken in a tertiary organisation in urban Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Students were enrolled in the final year of a two-year Master's programme designed for teaching practitioners. Most students were engaged in full time study and had been provided with a government grant providing a year of study on full salary. A minority of students were engaged in teaching part time and studying part time. As teaching practitioners, students came from a range of urban and semi-rural communities and taught a range of levels and subjects. They were all registered teachers. The programme in which they were enrolled was online with one face-to-face weekend on campus undertaken about halfway through the year.

As teaching practitioners, students brought with them a range of expectations and goals. Many goals were very closely aligned to their teaching roles and with the goals of the school in which they were employed. A year of study however, provided them an opportunity to explore and develop beyond the demands of their teaching roles, or the pressures of senior leadership requirements and organisational environments.

Our study was focussed on the following questions:

- What do post graduate teaching practitioners perceive as significant learning associated with using a PR approach for post graduate study?
- What do post graduate students identify as being of most significance in supporting their study?
- How do post graduate students perceive the value of PR as a vehicle for postgraduate study and the development of themselves as educators?
- What improvements do postgraduate students recommend to this PR aspect of the master's qualification?

Invitations to participate in a questionnaire/survey were sent to all students who had undertaken or were undertaking practitioner research-based study in completion of their master's programme.

Thirteen volunteers agreed to take part. This was approximately one quarter of all students invited from the current and previous year during which the programme had been operating. All were

experienced professionals and were from a range of teaching environments, both urban and semi-rural. There was a mix of primary and secondary school teachers. Six respondents were in the age range 20-39, six in the 40-59 and one in the 60 and over age group.

The survey (see appendix) asked participants about their current teaching role and their reasons for undertaking postgraduate study. In part two of the survey participants were asked a range of questions associated with undertaking research. Participants were asked to identify how they initially felt undertaking research into their own practice and to name and explain any significant learning that occurred during their study. The questionnaire sought to draw out significant experiences associated with the undertaking of study and asked respondents to consider significant learning. We were also interested in students views as to how the programme might be improved. The data was viewed and reviewed by the researchers, common ideas and themes were generated based on similarities of ideas. These themes are identified as the main themes in the discussion sections of this paper. As part of the discussion, and as a preamble to the presentation of main ideas from the study, there is an outline of the key challenges and areas of significance associated with working in a critical way with teachers in a post-graduate environment and in this context.

As a qualitative study this work was critically grounded and is linked to the 'teacher-as-researcher movement' (Kincheloe, 2012, p.89). The study methodology has an emancipatory interest outlined by Kincheloe (2012) as that which appreciates the professional wisdom or artistry of teaching as opposed to that which privileges proficiency in techniques.

Ethical aspects

Ethical approval to undertake this study was sought and granted through the institutional research ethics committee. As lecturers within the programme we were keenly aware of our own biases and the challenges this presented to the study. As such we engaged a third party who administered invitations to participate and provided information to participants. The third party also issued and collected questionnaires, anonymised responses and removed all identifying information. The third party provided us with a spreadsheet where responses had been collated. This formed the data for the study.

Teachers as post-graduate students

The challenge to be critical

Several challenges emerged early in the teaching of the programme. These challenges were particularly associated with the critical practitioner research approach presented to students. Suggesting that students might focus on their own practices or conduct an inquiry without an existing hypothesis was especially challenging. Afterall, as pointed out by Kincheloe (1999) those involved in an education system as teachers are entrenched in a system that measures and focuses on the performance of students.

Practitioners had initial difficulty conceiving how they might conduct research that did not measure student achievement. While we encouraged teachers to consider the complexity of educational problems as interpretational and beyond cause and effect, this meant challenging what they knew about educational analysis, research and study. Here we found that encouraging practitioners to go beyond a measurement-based empiricist approach to understand their work required open dialogue and respectful challenge. In many cases this work took time.

Our challenge was to support teachers to 'explore their unique situations to generate not a 'correct approach'... but a dialogue about the teaching act' (Kincheloe, 2003,p.15); to trust their instincts, follow their passion and to consider practice in all its multifaceted complexity, rather than reduce it to a set of achievement data and measurements which are easily dismissed as localised.

The variety of methods available to practitioner researchers also provided a challenge to many practitioners who were expecting a 'paint-by-numbers' formula. Stepping into the unknown, as qualitative research requires us to do, is a challenge, especially for those who are accustomed to planning with a clear set of outcomes in mind. We realised that for practitioner research to be transformative, first practitioners had to trust their own experiences and perceptions, indulge their own curiosities and questions and realise that the questions that arise have value and worth as a basis for study.

Respectful encouragement of teachers own curiosities and hunches became part of the approach we adopted. Careful guidance and questioning moved practitioners beyond an instrumentalist approach of proving the effectiveness of a particular practice to explore underlying tensions or complexities and opened new possibilities for new knowledge relating to and beyond a discrete set of practices. This became exciting and 'nerve-wracking' as students engaged with the challenge to design research which supported genuine inquiry rather than seeking to prove a point. This was an inclination on our part to humanise the process and encourage educators to see value in their own knowledge and experience. For some practitioners and participants in our study this was described as 'freeing'.

Time and planning

We acknowledged to students early on that master's level study and research requires dedicated thinking, data analysis, meaning making and writing. It is a time-consuming activity. We noted that many students were unprepared for this. Where students may in the past have experienced some success in their undergraduate study by cramming for exams or with an overnight haul to complete an assignment, some were surprised at the nature of thesis-based study and the need for a long-term approach.

We found it important to acknowledge the complexities of managing study, work and home, and while these challenges are often apparent when working with adults in education, it was referred to frequently throughout our teaching and in the responses to the questionnaire.

A generosity of spirit

Overall, teachers as post graduate students were motivated, moved and committed to the goals and challenges of their schools and school communities. There were a range of reasons named for undertaking further study and many of these were not associated with gaining a qualification

Taking 'time out' from teaching to gain a deeper insight into their work and to gain evidence to support their teaching decisions or to gain a qualification were identified as important reasons to engage in study. However, respondents also mentioned wanting to 'be better' and 'do better', to 'help students' and get a better understanding of the unique challenges within their schools.

Respondents generally wanted to use the research associated with the qualification to support their schools in decision-making processes in terms of new technologies or to find better ways to engage families/whanau, develop a new and improved peer mentor programme, undertake a new form of whole school professional learning, provide a new mode of delivery, understand the notion of expertise and explore understandings of curriculum from other educators.

Respondents commitments to the work of teaching, their colleagues and schools were clearly stated. For example, "I wanted to help my colleagues and students understand (this topic) in a time of change", and "I wanted to support my colleagues in understanding how (with a small budget) we can use digital technologies", "I wanted to make a difference to my kura (school), whanau (families) and

tamariki (children)” and “to create better access for my community” and “to add to the school culture”.

The purpose of research for this community of practitioner researchers reached further than their own goals and extended to their wider school and community. This research was important to them in terms of its importance to the wider community. Topics of research were deeply imbedded in the context of their own curiosities and goals for their own school community. Teachers in this small study demonstrated that they were absolutely embedded in a context where they were socially, personally and communally connected and where knowledge production was for the communal good.

Undertaking research

Initial feelings

The questionnaire invited respondents to consider how they initially felt when first undertaking their practitioner-based studies. Initial feelings stated were enthusiasm, nervousness, excitement or ‘daunted’, ‘unsure’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘apprehensive’, ‘excited and nervous at the same time’.

Significant experiences

When asked to identify significant experiences which occurred during their study, respondents noted that they experienced a deeper understanding of the challenges within their schools. They reported the significance of forming better relationships within the school and with stakeholders, for example, “I realised that management and teachers were working towards the same end, but just didn’t realise it”, and “meeting with former students and interviewing employers (was significant)”, “I formed more positive working relationships with whanau at the school”.

Meeting and working with other post graduate students and supervisors face-to-face at the on-campus weekend was also identified as significant. Here, students problem-solved, asked and answered questions in a forum environment, and generally discussed their on-going study. Workshops provided writing support, guidance on ethics processes, the formulating of research questions and provided lots of open time where students could talk with supervisors. It is worth noting that the on-campus weekend was run as a ‘wananga’, where students and lecturers spend time together engaged in a ‘marae-based’ environment where it is customary to stay on site for the entire weekend.

Support

Some respondents reported the enormous challenge of balancing commitments and how friends and family often didn’t understand how much time they needed to undertake the work required for study at this level. A number of respondents cited the importance of family and friends in supporting them to undertake the qualification.

While the support of the school and school colleagues were important in the undertaking of research based within the school, having a supervisor who understood the realities of school-life and the complexities school life work was seen as vital by respondents. It was suggested by respondents that good supervision required an understanding of the realities of school-based study and the realities of this, their study. For some respondents this aspect was crucial. Indeed, a ‘meeting of minds’ was identified as a vital component for successful completion. Supervision that provided clear guidance to move through what was reported as an early feeling of confusion, being in a mess, or lacking in confidence, was helpful.

A supportive cohort was also seen as important. Except for one on-campus weekend, participants met in a largely online environment however, many students supported each other outside of the formal ‘synchronous’ environment through social media platforms and where they lived in close physical proximity, they tended to form study groups. These face-to-face and online communities were used

to discuss issues and help problem solve. Often problems were common to a number of students and related to technical or process type issues for example ethics committee requirements, forms and layout, dates and deadlines but also balancing and managing families and commitments alongside the demands of study.

Communication

Respondents reported that in most cases school-based colleagues and management were very supportive. Overall, colleagues were willing to be a part of any initiative and quick to respond positively to requests. However, not being present in daily school life provided some challenges in terms of communication. Much communication, they reported, was verbal and in the lunchroom or corridors. Communication by email proved difficult for busy teachers and there were times when the lack of email response really slowed their study down. There was a fine balance between keeping a study moving and not wanting to pressure colleagues.

Significant learning

When asked to identify significant learning that occurred over their study, a range of responses emerged. Significant learning was associated with the topic of research, the research process, and teaching, research skills or education in general. Some respondents suggested that they had a much better understanding of the value of educational research and felt better equipped to critique educational research, others stated they felt more curious about research and ways they could use it to improve their practice, for example, 'I have a better understanding of how educational research underpins what I do'.

The act of research was significant for some who reported significant learning in terms of 'I learnt 'the how' of research', or 'writing, writing, writing' and 'writing at master's is a different level'. For others, the study provided them with a deeper interest in their work and the confidence to speak on topics they had researched.

Topics provided opportunities for significant learning, 'I learnt heaps about collaborative teaching', 'I have a real understanding of the background to my topic'. Respondents also reported better understandings around 'change', 'transitions', 'successful practice', 'curriculum redevelopment'. For one participant the idea that 'things change' and it is important to be 'flexible and adaptable' was identified as significant learning.

A deeper connection to their work was highlighted. Here, respondents stated that they have become 'more interested in my work' or more connected to colleagues, 'I got a deep understanding of where teachers struggles were coming from' and 'it was a fabulous opportunity for me to view both sides – my colleagues and senior management'. Respondents also identified a better understanding of the nature of the educational environment as 'complex' and undergoing 'continuous evaluation and adaptation'.

Respondents identified a range of benefits including those relating to themselves, their practice, their colleagues, their schools, communities and students. For example, 'elements of my practitioner research will be translatable to some other areas for both me and my colleagues', and 'I question my practice a lot more and think more deeply about improving it' and 'our school is already seeing the benefits of the study with more whanau involvement ... there are pathways for them to connect with their children at school now'. For one respondent the main benefit of the study was stated in one word 'reconnection'.

Discussion

Providing opportunities for teachers in postgraduate research-based programmes to engage in practitioner research has benefits beyond individual teaching practice. As reported on in this study there is also opportunity for graduates to deepen their own commitment to teaching and enhance their ability to engage with their communities. This supports the ideas put forward by Cochrane Smith and Lytle (2009) that such research contributes to meaningful change.

The experiences of teachers as post-graduate students engaging in qualification-based practitioner research was not without its challenges. There are a range of implications that point to our own work. Students required support, reassurance and guidance to grapple with being in a place of uncertainty. In particular, the reported nervousness and unsureness at the start of a study indicates the importance of being closely in touch in the initial stages of development and preparation. Guidance and support with tracking a path through the sometimes-unforeseen parts of a project were vital.

While providing a 'paint-by-numbers' research outline may have quelled some of the initial fears and nervousness, there was a risk of 'cookie cutter' studies that lacked individual meaning. Supporting students to develop meaningful projects required dialogue. This took time. However, it provided opportunities for students to grapple with the meaning inherent in their work, engage with topics that made sense to them and select the best methods to inquire into those topics. This opened the complexities of the work they were engaged in. For several students, the result of this grappling to make sense of their environment represented the most significant learning in their study.

Rather than being inward looking or too local and contextualised in nature (Middlewood et al, 1999) the results of this small study suggests that the local and contextualised provided instead a pathway to wider experiences. As reported in this study, significant learning reached beyond the nature of the initial study and provided an increased understanding of others' perspectives as well as the complexities of the educational environment.

This kind of research approach in post graduate study did appear to clarify understandings in teaching (Coleman and Lumby, 1999), helped to balance a top-down approach (Anderson, 2009), and increased research-mindedness (Nutley, 2007). Findings from the study suggest that participants developed and engaged in increased 'dialogue' about the act of teaching (Kincheloe, 2012). Such learning is significant in a broader educational context. Educators stepped outside of their own practice and thus enhanced their own experience by finding ways to make meaning in and about their work. Practitioners reconnected with the wider consequences of their educational work. This occurred in contrast to the pressure to undertake research based on reducing student experiences (and research experiences) to that which is measurable.

Summary

In summary, by following their own hunches, curiosities and puzzles post graduate students were engaged in a humanising experience presented by Freire (1972) as central to teaching and at the heart of a dialogic approach. Such study provided for broader understandings around the complexities and nature of educational work, it enhanced a sense of community and thus challenged the reductionist and instrumentalist view of knowledge production in education.

Practitioner researchers in this study engaged with their communities, deepened their commitment and reconnected themselves to their work. The implications for this kind of learning takes researchers beyond their own practice and into areas that are not at all trivial.

The data gathered from this small study provides an opportunity to glimpse some of the possible wider benefits associated with mid-career teachers undertaking a critical approach to practitioner

research as part of a qualification. There is further opportunity to extend understanding of the broader benefits of practitioner research by engaging with educators about the ongoing influence of their research experience on their work and as part of their continuing practice.

While small in scale, the study reported on in this paper had a wide geographical reach within Aotearoa, New Zealand and represented teachers as post-graduate students from a range of school-types and backgrounds. While context specific, this study may have value to a wider community of practitioner researchers and educational researchers in terms of highlighting the benefits of a critical approach to practitioner research beyond the classroom. This small study demonstrates the potential of post-graduate study to reconnect teachers to their work. We suggest that this has a far-reaching benefit for the re-energising of school communities.

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Appendix 1. Survey/Questionnaire

Project Title: Practitioner Research and Practitioner Postgraduate Study

Your teaching level and subject area _____

How long have you been teaching? _____

What formal qualifications do you hold? _____

In what area of the country do you live? _____

Study Goals

- 1) Why did you undertake post graduate study? (select all that apply)
 - a. To improve your teaching practice
 - b. To gain a qualification
 - c. For promotion purposes
 - d. To learn more about education/teaching
 - e. To enhance my career chances
 - f. Other _____
- 2) Please say more about your choices above?
- 3) In the beginning what were your main goals in undertaking this qualification?
- 4) Did this change as your study progressed? How?

Research experiences

- 1) At what stage are you in your study?
- 2) What was your initial feeling of undertaking research in and around your own practice?
- 3) What significant experiences occurred during your research/self study?
- 4) What would you change about your experience if you could?
- 5) Did you feel supported in your endeavour? By colleagues? By supervisors?
- 6) What would you suggest would likely have improved your experience?
- 7) What advice would you give to others undertaking a similar experience?
- 8) What would you say is the most significant learning you experienced?
- 9) How did this occur? Describe who and what was involved?
- 10) Any other comments?