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Expanding Our Horizons: Alternative Approaches to Practitioner Research

Many who write about and engage in practitioner research view it as a single concept that calls for the PK-12 educator to follow a distinct set of principles and carry out a particular set of procedures. In fact, there are a variety of types of practitioner inquiry, with different purposes, principles, and processes. My purpose in this article is to describe five different types of research, all of which are viable options for practitioner inquiry, with the most appropriate model for an individual, group, or school depending on organizational context, educational needs, and practitioner preference. Along the way, I will provide real-world examples of each type of research. Many of the examples will come from my own work with practitioners, others from the literature. Since my purpose is to provide an overview of each type of research as its developers intended it to be used, I have chosen successful research for my examples. I will focus primarily on distinct approaches to practitioner inquiry based on each approach's *purpose*; however in the examples I give of practitioners using the various approaches I will include illustrations of research being carried out by teachers, leaders, and teachers and leaders together; with and without outside facilitators; and at the classroom, small-group, and whole-school level.

Pragmatic Research

Pragmatic practitioner research is not identified as such merely because it is practical (as all practitioner research should be), but rather because it is based on the educational philosophy of pragmatism as espoused by Peirce, James, and especially Dewey (Hammond, 2013; Stark, 2014). The dual purpose of pragmatic practitioner research is to solve a concrete problem and to develop new knowledge through the problem-solving process that will improve future practice. A problem is defined as an individual or group experiencing dissonance between the desired situation and reality (Demetrian, 2000).

In pragmatic research the individual or group identifies a problem and acts on the problem by gathering data, reflecting on that data, hypothesizing a solution, testing the solution, gathering data on the effects of the improvement effort, and making necessary adjustments. Consistent with Dewey's philosophy, pragmatic action research connects action and reflection throughout the research cycle. Dewey argued that authentic experimentation, reflection, and knowledge creation require a democratic environment, and research on pragmatic practitioner inquiry has borne this out: schools with democratic leadership have been more successful in their efforts at pragmatic research than those with authoritarian leadership (Gordon, Stiegelbauer, & Diehl, 2008).

Pragmatic practitioner research also embraces the pragmatist belief that one's environment is constantly changing and thus problem solving and the generation of new knowledge must be continuous; in schools that fully embrace pragmatic action research, it is ongoing, with new cycles of action research initiated to address new problems. Pragmatic practitioner inquiry is flexible; beyond the basic principles of pragmatism it is not grounded in a particular ideology or specific research methods. As Hammond (2013) notes, "pragmatism is nothing if not adaptive and pragmatism does not seek to establish an exclusive or rigid framework in which action research inquiry should take place" (p. 614).

Rather, research methods are matched to the school context and the problem to be addressed.

Most of the practitioner research that is described in educational journals and books is pragmatic, most likely because of the approach's long history, emphasis on problem solving, and flexibility. Below I provide brief descriptions of pragmatic practitioner research at the individual, small-group, and school level.

Individual Pragmatic Research

Individual pragmatic research can be viewed along a continuum from simple to complex, with meaningful research being done at any point on the continuum. *Nancy's research* can be situated at the simple end of the complexity continuum. With 34 students in her self-contained classroom, Nancy had become so busy with paperwork, preparing students for the state's high-stakes test, and classroom management, that she had not been providing her students sufficient individual attention. Nancy believed that increasing her individual meetings with students would improve their self-esteem and academic growth.

Nancy gathered data on her focus area by surveying students and tracking time spent with individual students. Surveys asked for student perceptions of the level of individual attention they received, how much individualized time they would like to spend per day with Nancy, and what they would like to do with Nancy during one-on-one meetings. Through her survey, Nancy found that she gave little individual attention to students, they greatly appreciated the individual attention they did receive, and they desired more individual attention. As a result of tracking the attention she gave students, Nancy found that most of the individual attention she did give students was a response to a student question or student misbehavior.

Nancy's action research objective was simple: meet individually with at least five different students each day of the week for the purpose of either individualized instruction or informal conversation. Each individual meeting would last for 5-10 minutes. The cycle would continue until Nancy had met with all of her students, then the cycle would begin again. During the implementation phase, Nancy kept a log of how often she met with each student and the nature of each meeting. Twenty percent of individual meetings focused on informal conversation and "telling stories," thirteen percent on reading together, twenty percent on academic assistance, thirteen percent on playing games, and thirty-four percent on other activities.

After each individual meeting, students were asked to complete a short, open-ended feedback form on the perceived value of the meeting. Nearly all student comments on the feedback forms were positive. At the end of the semester, a longer student survey measured student reaction to the individual meetings. Quantitative survey data showed that students perceived more personal attention from Nancy, with positive effects. Open-ended survey responses also were predominantly positive. Nancy concluded that the action research had positive effects on both her professional practice and her students.

Karen's research is located midway along the complexity continuum. Karen teaches fourth grade Language Arts at an elementary school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area. Students at Karen's school are ability-grouped in Language Arts, with an "advanced" (above average achievement) and a "regular" (average and below average achievement) group in each class. The regular group was struggling with their writing, and the focus of Karen's action research was to improve the writing curriculum in order to increase students' enjoyment of writing, confidence in their writing ability, and writing skills.

Karen collected three types of data during pre-planning data collection: data on the quality of student essays, gathered with the aid of a writing skills rubric; scores on a practice test of writing skills distributed by the state; and a writing interest inventory. The skills tests indicated generally poor writing skills across the "regular" group of students. On the interest inventory, students responded to Likert-type scales on their interest and perceived ability in writing. On all items, responses were mixed across a five-point scale but few students rated their interest or ability at the highest level. The inventory allowed students to make suggestions on how the class could be made more interesting.

Karen's action plan included attending four workshops to help her become a better writing teacher, holding individual writing conferences with students on a regular basis, increasing collaboration with the fourth grade inclusion teacher, slowing down her teaching pace, and encouraging her students to share their writing with other students and adults. As implementation proceeded, Karen perceived her students' confidence and enjoyment of writing increasing.

Karen evaluated the program using the same tools she had used for pre-planning data collection. There was a dramatic increase in test scores. The students went from scoring ones and twos (lower scores) to threes and fours (higher scores) on the writing rubric. Based on a comparison of pre-and post-responses on the writing inventory, the students became more motivated to write and more confident of their writing ability, found writing a more enjoyable experience, and became more supportive of each other. Students now were proud of their writing, sharing it with other students, teachers, and the principal. Karen reported considerable professional growth as a result of her action research. She perceives herself as a more successful teacher, and has learned that low achieving students can become high achievers when the appropriate teaching strategies are used. She now realizes there is a need to accommodate all learning styles, and has learned to value data-based improvement.

Daniel's inquiry is an example of practitioner research at the complex end of the simple-to-complex continuum. Daniel teaches in a self-contained classroom at an alternative residential high school established to rehabilitate juvenile offenders. The focus of Daniel's action research was the improvement of student achievement through experiential learning. Initial data collection included administration of the Woodcock Johnson achievement test as well as a teacher-made student survey. The Woodcock Johnson indicates the grade level that a student is working on in English, math, history, and science. The student survey included eight Likert-type questions and three open-ended items on student attitudes about their education. Both instruments administered to

students were used as pre- and post-measures. Additionally, Daniel surveyed parents and teachers on their perceptions of how to best utilize experiential learning in the classroom. After reflecting on the pre-planning data as well as a number of articles on experiential learning, Daniel decided to integrate the school's life-skills curriculum within a long-term project in which students produced, directed, and delivered television news programs, broadcast to the entire campus.

Implementation began with the students researching ideas for video production, and then designing and constructing an actual television studio in their classroom. This included creating a three-dimensional scale model of the studio, purchasing construction materials, and building and decorating the set. The next phase consisted of brainstorming roles and responsibilities, then assigning roles like director, camera person, lighting technician, reporter, anchorperson, and so on. Eventually, ten different activities were underway, including developing PowerPoint presentations, practicing speaking skills, researching news stories, videotaping field reports, and so forth. When students began to review news videos they had produced, they discovered that the quality of their work left much to be desired. The students began to realize they would have to expend more time and energy to produce quality news shows. The quality of the students' work and learning improved. By the end of the semester, Daniel was encouraged by the progress the students were making.

Post-measures provided mixed results, although there was tentative evidence of increased academic achievement and students reported they had more input into their learning activities and enjoyed school more. Daniel concluded that the project needed to be in place for another semester before its effects could be validly measured. He reported learning a great deal during the first semester of implementation which would inform a second action research cycle: students' responsibilities must be broken down into specific tasks, deadlines for completion of tasks must be established, and more time must be devoted to teaching collaborative skills. Although Daniel concluded that revisions would have to be incorporated into the next action research cycle, he was proud of the progress he and his students had made in the initiation of interdisciplinary experiential learning.

Small-Group Pragmatic Research

The pragmatic approach "has a special concern for collaborative inquiry and the generation of intersubjective agreement on the consequence of action" (Hammond, 2013, p. 613), hence it is especially appropriate for small-group research. My colleague Rachel Solis (2015a) provides a good example pragmatic research she facilitated that included elements of both individual and group inquiry. Rachel worked with a group of three secondary teachers seeking to improve their teaching: Lillian, Henry, and Ellen. In an initial group meeting, members of the group shared their educational platforms (their beliefs about teaching and learning), areas of dissonance between their platforms and teaching practice, research topics, and "game plans" aimed at resolving the identified dissonance. Lillian's research topic was improving student engagement, Henry's was increasing student motivation, and Ellen's was improving assessment of student learning. The group members received suggestions and feedback from each other on their platforms, research topics, and game plans.

In later group meetings, the teachers shared reports and reflections on the implementation of their game plans, continued to provide each other feedback and assist each other in revising their game plans, and reflected on the relationship of teaching and practitioner research. In addition to the group meetings, Rachel conducted periodic non-evaluative observations of the teachers to gather data on their improvement efforts and shared those data during individual post-observation conferrals with the teachers. The teachers also discussed the observation data in the group sessions, often for the purpose of comparing teaching behaviors documented by the observation data with their educational platforms and game plans. Additionally, during group meetings the teachers had an opportunity to discuss what types of data they would like Rachel to gather during her next observation.

Rachel reported, “when the teacher participants became aware there was a discrepancy between their beliefs about their behavior and their actual behavior, they were able to begin addressing the conflict” (Solis, 2015b, p. 21). Rachel also concluded that reflective dialogue made the dissonance possible: “By analyzing beliefs publicly, with a facilitator as well as with a group of peers, the teachers experienced the discomfort they needed to stimulate change” (p. 20).

Another topic of discussion in the group sessions was the contrast between the collegial nature of the small group and the culture of the school. The teachers engaged in dialogue about teachers in the school not having time to reflect on practice or collaborate with other teachers, and how teachers were not trusted to make school-level decisions about curriculum and instruction.

The teachers reported positive outcomes from the process. They stated that writing their platforms had reconnected them to their purpose for teaching. While the dissonance created by comparing their platforms to their practice in a group setting was disconcerting, it inspired a commitment to return to their educational roots. The teachers considered the reflective dialogue that took place in their group meetings to be the most helpful aspect of the inquiry process. Regarding their concerns about the school culture, two of the three teachers reported that as a result of their discussions within the group they had begun to engage in discussions about teaching and learning with teachers from outside the group, and the third teacher had committed to opening dialogue with school administrators and collaborating with other teachers. The teachers also had changed their dispositions regarding problems with their teaching and in the school environment; they were now committed to analyzing and solving problems rather than simply complaining about them.

Schoolwide Pragmatic Research

Many view schoolwide practitioner research as a vehicle for whole-school improvement. The example that follows summarizes schoolwide research to address the problem of a low retention rate of beginning teachers.

Over a recent five-year period, the attrition rate at Price Middle School was 30 percent, 46 percent higher than the mean attrition rate for other district middle schools.

The high attrition rate had negative effects on campus morale, student achievement, student discipline, and the continuity and effectiveness of school improvement efforts. For several years an informal and ineffectual mentoring program had been in place at Price. New teachers were assigned mentors, but the mentors were not provided training or support, and interacted with their assigned mentees on an infrequent basis. The school's practitioner inquiry focused on restructuring the mentoring program for the purpose of improving the quality of the induction experience and reducing the attrition rate at Price.

Administrators and teachers began the action research by gathering a variety of data on the focus area. The educators reviewed attrition rates and reasons teachers gave for leaving Price over several years. Teachers conducted individual interviews with mentors and new teachers, and participated in group discussions on the problem. All of the teachers completed a survey on their perceptions of the teacher retention problems at Price. Based on their data analysis, the educators concluded that the most severe problems experienced by new teachers included difficulties with managing the classroom, delivering the curriculum, planning lessons, using effective teaching strategies, managing time and work, complying with school policies and procedures, and dealing with stress. The practitioners also concluded that the current mentoring program was not working because of inadequate mentor training, a lack of time for mentors to prepare for and engage in mentoring, and low commitment to the program by veteran teachers.

Working together, teachers and administrators designed a comprehensive new mentoring program. The program includes a process for recruiting promising mentors, extensive mentor training, and monthly support sessions for mentors. Mentor assignments are made only after extensive discussion among administrators and mentors concerning "best matches" of mentors with new teachers. A two-day orientation prior to the beginning of the school year welcomes new teachers to the school community and prepares them to begin the year on a successful note. Specific orientation topics include beginning the year, classroom management, teaching and learning tools, teacher evaluation, special populations, stress management, and support available for new teachers. At the orientation, mentors present mentees with "survival care packages" with information and materials they will need at the beginning of the year. The new teachers also are provided suggested lesson plans for the first week of school as well as intensive assistance throughout that week.

Mentors at Price provide ongoing assistance to new teachers throughout the school year, meeting with their mentees every two weeks to discuss mentees' progress and concerns. Mentors provide non-evaluative clinical supervision to mentees, including a pre-observation conference, classroom observation, and post-observation conference. Mentors invite mentees to observe them teaching or arrange for mentees to observe other experienced teachers. Mentors team teach with mentees, or arrange for mentees to team teach with veteran teachers. Once a month, all mentors and mentees participate in a group meeting on one or two topics relative to new teachers' needs. Finally, mentors and mentees attend mid-year and end-of-year banquets in appreciation for the efforts of both mentors and new teachers. During the banquets participants share their successes and celebrate their collegiality.

In their assessment of the first year of the program, teachers and administrators identified a number of factors indicating program success. The number of new teachers leaving Price had been reduced, and many returning teachers cited the mentoring program as the reason they decided to stay. A review of new teachers' lesson plans and observations of their teaching indicated instructional performance on the level of experienced teachers. Students of new teachers were receiving scores on standardized achievement tests equivalent to the test scores of students taught by veteran teachers. Mentors reported that their own teaching had improved as a result of their work with new teachers. More teachers were volunteering to be mentors, including second-year teachers who stated that they wished to provide new teachers the same type of support that they received. Experienced teachers who were not formal mentors reported they were providing informal mentoring to new teachers. As a result of the school's commitment to their professional development, new teachers and mentors were volunteering with increasing frequency to become involved in other school improvement efforts. Finally, the school district identified Price's mentoring program as a model to be emulated by other schools within the district.

Lesson Study

Although the focal point of lesson study is a single "research lesson," it is actually a long-term process with the purpose of teacher development, professional community building, and ongoing curriculum and instructional improvement.

Research lessons are not about perfecting one lesson, but rather focus on developing teachers' ideas and experiences of different approaches to teaching. Research lessons make participants and observers think quite profoundly about specific and general aspects of teaching. (Doig & Groves, 2011, p. 86)

The phases in a lesson study include a group of teachers establishing a general, higher-level learning goal as well as a content-based goal for a unit of study; reviewing and discussing literature on the selected goals; designing the unit, including the research lesson; one teacher teaching the research lesson while the group and other educators observe and gather data; and a meeting of all observers for a post-lesson analysis, with an emphasis on student thought and action during the lesson. In some schools, the post-lesson analysis informs a second research lesson on the same topic taught by a teacher other than the teacher who taught the first lesson.

Lewis (2009) described a science lesson study carried out by fifth and sixth grade teachers in Komae Elementary School, near Tokyo, Japan. The general goal the teachers decided upon was to develop "students who value friendship, develop their own perspectives and ways of thinking, and enjoy science" (p. 97), and the content goals were focused on how levers work. In the lesson chosen as the research lesson, the teachers wanted the students to discover the difficulty of lifting heavy objects and to think about how to make that task easier, to extend their thinking by discussing their ideas with others, and to conduct experiments safely and cooperatively. The lesson plan called for the students to attempt to lift a 220-pound bag of sand. First the students would work

individually to develop plans to lift the sand bag, then students with similar plans would be grouped together to attempt to lift the bag.

One member of the fifth and sixth grade team taught the lesson and the entire school faculty and school administrators observed the lesson. Each observer was assigned a group of students to observe. The observers took detailed notes on individual students' levels of participation, what the students discussed, the actions they took, changes in their thinking as their efforts to lift the sand bag succeeded or failed, and the extent to which groups shared ideas. Observers also took photographs of key events in the lesson. In the post-lesson discussion, the observers shared the data they had gathered, which served as the basis for discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the lesson in relation to both the general and the content goal. Notes on the post-lesson discussion as well as lesson artifacts such as the lesson plan, photographs, and student work were included in a research lesson report.

A number of researchers have studied the effects of lesson study on teachers. Lewis (2009) concluded that research lesson study at Komae and other schools in Japan and North America has resulted in improvement of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, increased collegiality among teachers, and development of teachers' personal attributes. Howell & Saye (2016) found that lesson study fosters shared knowledge of teaching and a professional culture. Lieberman (2009) concluded that lesson study breaks the norms of individualism, presentism, and conservatism typical of traditional school cultures.

Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), who developed the appreciative model, based it on three propositions: the need to move beyond the problem-solving approach, the notion that organizations are socially constructed realities, and the power of new ideas as a force for change. Some key concepts underlying appreciative inquiry (AI) are stakeholder participation, narrative, discourse, and building on existing strengths (Bushe, 2011). AI is both a set of principles and a process. Its five principles are:

1. *The constructionist principle*: reality is socially constructed, and a team or organization can co-construct a better reality through collaborative inquiry and collective articulation of a better future.
2. *The principle of simultaneity*: inquiry and change cannot be separated. Inquiry is intervention.
3. *The poetic principle*: the team or organization is like a book with many stories. Which stories to focus on is up to the team or organization. It is best to focus inquiry on positive rather than negative stories.
4. *The anticipatory principle*: If the team or organization creates a positive vision of the future, it will tend to move toward that vision.
5. *The positive principle*: the organization or team and the inquiry process should promote positive images, experiences, social bonding, joy, and celebration (Bushe & Kassam 2005; Evans, Thurton, & Usinger, 2012)

The four primary phases of AI are the discovery, dream, design, and destiny phases. The *discovery phase* involves participants discussing what they value most about their team or organization, their work, and their colleagues. The *dream phase* consists of participants envisioning a better future. In the *design phase* the group plans for a better future. The *destiny phase* calls for participants to construct the better future (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001).

Colleague Lyn Crowell was a member of a group of educators in a seminar I led who facilitated AI with groups in separate educational settings. The stories of the appreciative inquiry led by Lyn and other members of the seminar have been published elsewhere (Breslow, Crowell, Francis, & Gordon, 2015), and here I provide a brief summary of Lyn's work with a group of instructional coaches in a large urban district. In the *discovery phase*, the team split into pairs and partners interviewed each other about a time they were excited about their work as coaches. This activity led the coaches to begin thinking about a common dream they would articulate in the dream phase.

In the *dream phase*, the coaches moved collaboratively toward an agreed-upon research focus. New coaches were joining the group the following year, and the current coaches wanted to support the novice coaches in their new roles. The instructional coaches' *design* for supporting new colleagues had three components, including providing Moodle as an information source for the new coaches, designing professional development opportunities for the novice coaches, and creating a team mission statement so the mission could be shared with the new colleagues as part of their induction.

The *destiny phase* was carried out throughout the following school year. The mission statement was shared with the new coaches, and collaborative discussions of the mission statement were held periodically throughout the year. Moodle was made available to the new coaches, who were able to access it for technical forms and professional articles as well as for a blog for posting questions and writing reflections on their daily work. Two ongoing professional development opportunities were offered to the new coaches, one on coaching for addressing diversity and the other on cognitive coaching. The team members also supported each other throughout the school year through such activities as sharing and discussing books and articles on coaching.

The team's self-evaluation of the appreciative inquiry was ongoing and consisted of reflective writing on the progress of the appreciative inquiry by all team members; collection and review of artifacts such as agendas, summaries of team discussions, and team work products; photos documenting various team activities; and feedback from the new coaches who received support.

Collaborative Autobiography

As stated by Lapadat (2009), "In collaborative autobiography, co-researchers cycle through sequences of oral and written interaction to express, witness, understand, and ultimately act on their own and others' autobiographical narratives" (p. 958). Collaborative autobiography has roots in memory work, which is "Explicitly feminist in its aims and epistemology" (Lapadat et al., 2010, p.79). Collaborative autobiography also incorporates

constructivism, as individuals construct their personal reality and understanding of self through reflective writing; and social constructionism, as participants join together to construct a collective reality. A critical element also is present, as participants engage in self-critique and also critique factors in their personal history and work environment that contribute to the work situation they are examining. And the simultaneous focus on social, biographical, and psychological contexts as well as present, past, and future denotes a postmodern dimension.

My associate Titus Brown and I worked with a group of teachers and school administrators engaged in collaborative autobiography. I facilitated the group, and Titus carried out a case study on the project (Brown, 2015). The group used a modified version of a collaborative autobiography process described by Raymond, Butt, & Townsend (1992). Each phase of the process began with individual reflective writing and then shifted to a group meeting in which the educators shared and discussed their writing. The focus of Phase 1 was on the participants' current work context. In Phase 2 the educators reflected on their current practice and concerns about that practice they wished to focus on. Phase 3 provided opportunities for the educators to reflect on their past personal and professional lives, and how past experiences affected the situations they had chosen to focus on. In Phase 4, the participants critically assessed the content they wrote about in the first three phases and projected a "preferred future."

The focus of the research in our example was educators' job stress. Teachers and administrators reported similar causes and effects of stress. Interestingly, other adults rather than students were reported as causing the participants' stress: for administrators, teachers were a source of stress; for teachers, administrators caused stress. Educators from both groups agreed that the unprofessional behaviors of some other educators were responsible for much of the participants' stress. Both teachers and administrators revealed that, at times, parents of their students caused the educators' stress. Another source of stress was a conflict between how the participants wished to behave and how they actually behaved. Ineffective communication with colleagues was yet another source of stress. Finally, a great deal of stress was caused by district, state, and federal systems, including the bureaucracies at all three levels, high-stakes testing, and teacher evaluation systems.

The educators also engaged in reflective writing and discussion on the *effects* of job stress on their personal and professional lives. They perceived a number of health problems to be related to stress, including, for example, high blood pressure, poor diet, drinking too much alcohol, stomach ulcers, and sleep problems, and for one of the participants, a stroke. The educators also reflected on perceived emotional effects of stress, including feelings of marginalization and low self-worth. The participants reported that the stress they experienced led to less communication with colleagues and diminished the quality of their relationships with family and friends.

After their reflective writing and dialogue on the job stress they were experiencing and its effects, the teachers and administrators shifted to reflection on their life histories (going as far back as childhood), and how life experiences affected the types of work stress they experienced. The educators wrote about and discussed family members, teachers, and

friends who had significant impacts on their personal and professional development, as well as critical life events that significantly changed their lives for better or worse. Examples of critical events included family events (e.g., physical abuse, parents' divorce, parental sacrifice), school and college experiences (e.g., being mentored by a teacher, being criticized by a professor), and world events (e.g., the 9/11 attacks). All of the participants identified ways in which their life histories had affected their perception of and reaction to stress, and all of them shared how surprised they were at discovering the strong connections between their past and present.

In the last phase of the collaborative autobiography the educators took a critical look at their work lives, and what they had and did not have the power to change. This critical appraisal led to the participants writing and dialoguing about their preferred futures. One commitment that all of the educators made was to have more balance in their lives among work, time with family and friends, rest, exercise, and recreation. To create this balance, all of the participants decided they needed to improve their work management through such strategies as better prioritizing, clearly defining timelines for task completion, limiting interruptions, and developing systems to manage time eaters like email and phone calls. All of the educators also established the goal of better communication with colleagues. Another common goal was to recognize the difference between aspects of their workplace that they could influence and those they could not, and to focus their time and energy on the former.

The educators who participated in the collaborative autobiography reported a number of positive benefits. All participants said they now viewed their jobs, their profession, and themselves in a new and broader perspective. The educators stated that their reflective writing in the project became a type of therapy. The writing enabled self-reflection that in turn increased their self-awareness. The participants discussed how important reflective writing about their past life had been to the overall reflective process. The educators found the group dialogue to be equally beneficial. They learned from discussing each other's reflections that they had much in common regarding the stress they experienced at work and the effects of that stress. In this sense, listening to other members read their reflective writing was actually a form of self-reflection in its own right. The participants believed that the group sessions—with the trust, mutual encouragement, and collaboration present in those sessions—created a true environment for growth and development. The educators believed that the collaborative autobiography had given them strategies to avoid stress in the future and better cope with stress they could not avoid as well as the self-confidence to carry out those strategies. Finally, the participants said that their involvement in the research had given them more empathy for other educators experiencing stress. In particular, the administrators in the group said they had increased their empathy for teachers, and the teachers reported that they increased their empathy for administrators. All of the participants stated that in the future they would strive to avoid being the cause of undue stress for others.

Equity Research

Equity action research is intended to address one of the central problems of the American educational system:

When compared to their white, middle-class counterparts, students of color, of low socioeconomic status, who speak languages other than English, and with disabilities, constantly experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources. (Brown, 2010, p. 2)

The dictionary defines equity as being fair and just, but Scott's (2001) *systematic equity* for K-16 education is much more informative:

Systematic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. (p. 1)

Teachers and administrators are carrying out a variety of equity research in schools. Jacobs, Yamamura, Guerra, & Nelson (2013), for example, discuss 11 equity research studies carried out by practitioners, including research intended to address gaps in English language arts, math, science, reading, and discipline. Equity audits, once done by external experts who produced massive technical reports, have become a focus of practitioner research (Groenke, 2010). A model for an equity audit developed at California State University Fresno includes audits at the school (teacher and instructional quality, programmatic, and achievement), subgroup, and at-risk student level (Gordon, Oliver, & Solis, 2015).

Researchers have found that one key to increasing equity in schools is for educators to build supportive, culturally responsive relationships with other educators, students, and parents (Jacobs, et al., 2013; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). The example I provide below is one in which Rosa Peña (2009), a principal in an urban elementary school, sought to document the dispositions and behaviors of teachers who built supportive, responsive relationships, and to use her research as a basis for professional development for all teachers in the school.

Rosa's school served a student population that was 99 percent racial and ethnic minority, 94 percent low SES, and 34 percent limited English proficient. In her review of state and district student achievement data, Rosa saw gaps between the students at her school and students at schools that served predominantly white, middle class students. In her observations of classroom teaching and teacher-parent interactions, she determined that some teachers were not as culturally responsive and supportive as they could be. Rosa's research, which included teachers, students, and parents, sought to determine what supportive, responsive teacher-student relationships looked like, in order to share insights gained from the study with all of the teachers at her school.

Parents, students, teachers, and members of the support staff were asked to nominate teachers at the school who were culturally responsive to and built supportive relationships with their students. Rosa next conducted non-evaluative classroom

observations of the nominated teachers to gather data on their instructional practices and, in particular, on their relationship building with students. Based on her observations, Rosa invited three of the teachers she had observed to participate in the next phase of the study. To draw a clear line between the research and teacher evaluation, Rosa decided not to conduct any formal evaluations of the participating teachers during the year in which the research took place.

Rosa and the three teachers engaged in multiple semi-structured interviews in which the teachers discussed their classroom environments; how they motivated students to learn; how they defined and enacted culturally responsive teaching; how they developed strong personal relationships with their students; and the impact they sought to have on students' personal, social, and academic development. Also, Rosa and the three teachers engaged in many informal conversations, especially after critical incidents that involved one of the teachers engaged in relationship building with one or more students.

Additionally, Rosa conducted multiple interviews with students selected from each of the three teachers' classrooms and those students' parents. The interviews with students and parents were conducted in the families' homes. The student and parent interviews included questions about the teacher's classroom environment; how the teacher showed the student and parent she cared for the student; if and why the student felt safe in the teacher's classroom; how the teacher helped the student learn; if and how the teacher was interested in the student's life outside of school; the nature of the personal relationship between the student and teacher; and how the teacher contributed to the student's personal, social, and academic development.

Rosa conducted additional observations, including videotaping, of the teachers selected for the in-depth phase of the study. Rosa also observed the three teachers during student-teacher-parent conferences and at grade-level and faculty meetings. The teachers in the study were asked to keep daily journals of their efforts to promote positive environments for and relationships with their students. Rosa reviewed the teachers' journals, and also gathered and analyzed various artifacts that might shed light on the teachers' cultural responsiveness, like notes to parents and students. Finally, Rosa took photographs of classroom activities and interactions that would help her and others to better understand the teachers' culturally responsive, relationship-building behaviors.

Analysis of the research data revealed that responsive, supportive teacher-student relationships are developed through care, mutual regard, personal conversations, and open and honest communication. Moreover, supportive teacher-student relationships develop in interaction with the classroom, school, and community context. The inquiry also revealed that responsive, positive relationships lead to the students' personal, social, and academic development.

The research caused Rosa to reflect on her own leadership and how she could better encourage and support other teachers at her school to develop the types of culturally responsive, supportive relationships with students the three teachers in the study exemplified. With input from the three teachers she had been working with, Rosa designed

a professional development program for all teachers at her school intended to increase awareness of their own cultural identity and their students' cultures; understand the need for teachers to develop culturally responsive and supportive relationships with their students, parents, and the community; and acquire the knowledge and skills to develop such relationships.

Conclusion

With all of the options to choose from, how is the teacher, educational leader, group, or school to choose an approach to practitioner research? First, educators should become more familiar with the different approaches. Table 1 summarizes the purpose, appropriate levels, principles, and process of each approach. The purpose of the research, although it might be described in very general terms in the early stage of planning, is an important criterion for approach selection. The preferences of the educator or educators who are going to carry out the research also should be considered. The capacity of the researchers to carry out a particular approach, the capacity of the facilitator (if there is one) to support the research, and the resources available all should be factored into the selection of the research approach. Regardless of the chosen approach, broad predictors of success are the commitment of those who are going to engage in the research and of school leadership; initial professional learning on how to do the research; structured time to carry out the research; and ongoing feedback, continuous support, and organizational recognition of both the research and the researchers.

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Table 1
Alternative Approaches to Practitioner Research: Purpose, Levels, Principles and Process

	Pragmatic Research	Lesson Study	Appreciative Inquiry	Collaborative Autobiography	Equity Research
Purpose	Research concrete problem while developing new knowledge	Development of teachers, professional community, curriculum, and instruction	Building on the positive to co-construct a better reality	Write, reflect upon, and act on autobiographical narrative	Transform systems and individuals to provide the greatest learning for all learners
Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual • Small-group • Schoolwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-group • Schoolwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-group • Schoolwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual <i>and</i> small-group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual • Small-group • Schoolwide
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine practice and reflection • Cyclical • Democratic environment • Flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect deeply • Share knowledge • Long-range view • Focus on student thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructivist • Simultaneity • Poetic • Anticipatory • Positive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual and group reflection • Attend to social, biographical, and psychological • Attend to present, past, and future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity • Capacity building • Responsiveness • Relationship
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify problem • Gather data on problem • Hypothesize solution • Test hypothesis (implement action plan and gather evaluation data) • Repeat process as necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set higher-level and unit-content goals • Research literature • Design unit and lesson • Teach and observe • Post-lesson analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discovery • Dream • Design • Destiny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on present context • Reflect on a present situation • Reflect on past and its effects on present situation • Reflect on preferred future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critique level of equity • Professional learning • Relationship building • Develop responsive environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment

