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The Relevancy and Importance of Practitioner Research in Contemporary Times

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Practitioner research is a long-standing tradition in the field of education, with a rich history of raising teachers' voices in discussions of educational research as well as creating opportunity for teachers to better understand the complexity of teaching and learning. Practitioner research provides a vehicle for teachers to question the educational status quo. Tracing its roots to the work of John Dewey in the 1930s, the practitioner research movement gained popularity in the 1940s through the work of Kurt Lewin and garnered particular attention in the 1950s through the work of Stephen Corey (Adelman, 1993). Since that time, the movement has continued to evolve, being shaped and reshaped in relationship to the era within which it has existed (see, for example, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

As the movement has been shaped and reshaped through the years, it is no surprise that many versions and variances in practitioner research exist and are named in different ways, including action research, teacher research, practitioner inquiry, teacher inquiry, and self-study as well as other traditions that target the practitioner's role in the generation of knowledge from practice. While different traditions exist within the practitioner research movement, the general definition of practitioner research as the systematic, intentional study of one's own professional practice is applicable to each. Common features of this work include practitioner as researcher, community and collaboration, professional context as inquiry site, and professional practice as focus of study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Regardless of the tradition that frames the systematic and intentional study of one's own professional practice or the name that is used to describe it, the overall practitioner research movement is alive and well today. In their extensive discussion of the practitioner research movement, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) note that, "teacher inquiry and the larger practitioner research movement appear to be flourishing in the United States and in many other parts of the world" (p. 11). Because of the health of the practitioner research movement, the time is ripe for the introduction of a new journal that reflects the role practitioner research can play in contemporary times. The purpose of this article is to set the stage for the launching of the *Journal of Practitioner Research* by sharing five reasons the practitioner research movement is particularly relevant and important today. These reasons include: (1) The calling for teachers' implementation of evidenced-based practices, (2) The requiring of teacher education programs to provide evidence of their teacher candidates' impact on K-12 student learning to earn program accreditation, (3) The growing need for robust teacher leaders, (4) The demand for powerful mechanisms for principal professional development, and (5) The increasing complexity of the teacher educator's work.

The Calling for Teachers' Implementation of Evidenced-Based Practices

In this era of high-stakes testing and accountability, the actions and pedagogy that are deemed appropriate for teachers to use have been given heightened attention. Spurred by NCLB, it is broadly accepted that scientific research needs to play a more prominent role in determining teachers' actions and pedagogy, and the construct "evidenced-based practices" has come into vogue. Simply stated by Cook and Cook (2011), evidence-based practices (EBPs) can be defined as:

practices that are supported by multiple, high-quality studies that utilize research designs from which causality can be inferred (such as group experimental, group quasi-experimental, and single-subject design studies) and that demonstrate meaningful effects on student outcomes. EBPs are identified by applying specific criteria (for research design, quantity of research, quality of research, and effect size) to the empirical literature on a practice. (p. 73)

In many contexts today, teachers' implementation of "evidenced-based practices" is being touted as the solution for any and all problems that are facing schools.

Yet, while evidence-based practices can provide teachers with indications of practices that are generally effective, Cook and Cook (2011) warn that EBP should not be thought of as a panacea for a myriad of reasons. First and foremost, "no instructional intervention will work for everyone no matter what its level of research support. In education, causality is used in a probabilistic rather than absolute manner" (Cook & Cook, 2011, p. 77). Human interaction in a classroom does not always unfold in predictable ways. Furthermore, the *identification* of evidenced-based practices are one thing, but the *implementation* of those practices "are another thing all together" (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, and Sugai, 2009, p. 5 as cited in Cook & Cook, 2011). The real world of schools and classrooms are not controlled settings, rather they are wonderfully messy and complicated places, making broad-scale implementation of any practice derived in a controlled setting inherently complicated. Finally, the fact that a practice is evidenced-based is not the only thing a teacher should take into account when planning and enacting instruction. Evidence-based practices should "not trump practical wisdom and common sense ...That is, just because a practice is research or evidenced-based does not necessarily mean it should be implemented in a particular situation" (Cook & Cook, 2011, p. 78). Furthermore, "just because a practice has not been identified as evidenced-based does not necessarily mean it is ineffective" (Cook & Cook, 2011, p. 78).

Hence, with the emphasis evidenced-based practices receive in today's schools, teachers need something to complement and enhance their use of evidenced-based practices. Teachers need something to help them balance the world of scientific research and the real world of schools. Teachers need an evidenced-based practice counterpart. Teachers need *practice-based evidence*.

In contrast to evidenced-base practice, practice-based evidence can be defined as the many forms of data that are naturally generated from the everyday teaching and learning acts that take place in classrooms and schools. These data, when discerned

closely, carefully, and critically over time, become the evidence teachers use to make informed instructional decisions and adjust these decisions on a regular basis. Practice-based evidence is generated through the process of practitioner research, which is quite different in purpose and nature than the experimental research generated by universities that leads to the determination of evidence-based practices previously discussed. Contrary to the types of research done to determine evidenced-based practices, practitioner research does not focus on control and prediction, but rather on “providing insights into teaching in an effort to make change” as teachers work “tirelessly to unpack all of the complexities inherent in the act of teaching to become the very best teachers they can be for every individual student” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 9).

In contrast to the plethora of journals that publish the type of research that determines evidenced-based practices, there exist relatively few journals that publish the type of research that illuminates practice-based evidence and the important role it plays in teaching. The *Journal of Practitioner Research* offers a space for practitioners to share what they have learned from studying practice and report on the practice-based evidence that supports this learning. Such a space is needed to create more balance in the discussions of both evidenced-based practices and practice-based evidence in order to build the much-needed bridge between them.

The Requiring of Teacher Education Programs to Provide Evidence of their Teacher Candidates' Impact on K-12 Student Learning

With the recent 2010 formation of CAEP (The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation), teacher education programs from institutions across the country are ramping up the process of demonstrating proficiency in meeting a new set of accreditation standards. In alignment with the focus on evidenced-based practices in today's schools, these new standards “call upon all educator preparation providers to create a culture of evidence that informs their work” (CAEP Accreditation Manual, 2015, p. 6).

One source of evidence that educator preparation programs must provide is the impact their teacher candidates are making on P-12 student learning. For example, CAEP Standard 3.5 states:

Before the provider recommends any completing candidate for licensure or certification, it documents that the candidate has reached a high standard for content knowledge in the fields where certification is sought and can teach effectively with positive impacts on P-12 student learning and development (CAEP Accreditation Manual, 2015, p. 18).

One potential way to indicate effective teaching and positive impacts on P-12 student learning and development is through practitioner research. While engagement in practitioner research is integrated into many teacher preparation programs across the nation, the quality of the research teacher candidates produce can be increased if teacher candidates have the opportunity to engage in peer-review in the process of publishing their work. By intentionally inviting preservice teachers to write for this venue, the *Journal of Practitioner Research* creates a space for teacher candidates to not only share

written accounts of their research with other practitioners, but to improve their written accounts through the peer-review process. In turn, educator preparation programs are afforded one powerful mechanism to provide evidence of teacher candidates' impact on P-12 learners.

The Growing Need For Robust Teacher Leaders

Across the decades that the practitioner research movement has flourished, the notion of teacher leadership has also emerged as an important construct in the literature (see, for example, Danielson, 2007; Lieberman & Miller, 2005). York-Barr and Duke (2004) defined teacher leadership as “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (pp. 287–288).

To actualize this definition of teacher leadership in schools today, the inclusion of teachers in leadership activities has increased substantially. Specifically, teachers are engaged in job-embedded forms of professional learning (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010) and teachers take on roles such as professional development facilitator and coach (Knight, 2007). Yet, despite the increasing number of teachers engaging in leadership activities and roles to increase student learning and achievement, the tools that help them lead robustly from within the four walls of their classrooms and schools have not been fully explicated. One effective tool for the teacher leader is practitioner research. According to Galluci (in press), “practitioner research can help teacher leaders understand problems of leadership practice, implement supports for professional learning, collect data related to their efforts, and reflect on the outcomes of their leadership work”.

The *Journal of Practitioner Research* offers a venue to make teacher leadership more visible as it unfolds as practitioner research, creating the opportunity to launch a rich international discussion on the ways engagement in practitioner research can enable teachers to engage in increasingly robust leadership efforts. Such a dialogue will serve to expand definitions and understandings of both the roles of teacher as leader and teacher as researcher, with the ultimate goal of raising teachers' voices in a profession that is currently under intense scrutiny and attack. Hence, there could never be a better time to introduce a new journal, dedicated to the voices of practitioners and the knowledge they generate from within the four walls of their classrooms and schools.

The Demand for Powerful Mechanisms for Principal Professional Development

As the construct of *teacher* leadership gains traction in schools today, attention must also be given to *principal* leadership. Principals, no less than teachers, need effective models of professional development to grow and develop as school leaders. Knowing the potential practitioner research holds as a mechanism for leadership development, many school leader preparation programs across the nation have woven graduate students' engagement in practitioner research into their curriculum to allow aspiring principals in these programs “to explore the empirical realities of their workplace and to reflect on these realities in light of current trends in the field and exemplary practices reported in the literature” (Sappington, Baker, Gardner, & Pacha, 2010, p. 252-253).

While many aspiring principals engage in practitioner research as a part of their graduate school preparation to enter school administration, Mitgang and Gill (2012) call attention to the importance of ongoing support for principal development:

Getting pre-service principal training right is essential. But equally important is the training and support school leadership receive after they're hired (p. 20).

To address the call for principal professional development after being hired, engagement in practitioner research by principals is growing as an option in many districts today (see, for example, Dana, Marrs-Morford, & Roberts, 2015).

As principals engage in practitioner research to better understand their own administrative practice both during their initial administrator preparation programs and into their careers as practicing administrators, the publication of what is learned from their studies holds great potential to contribute knowledge to the field of administration. Yet, the field of educational administration offers few journal outlets in which the practitioner research completed by principals is published. By inviting research completed by principals, the *Journal of Practitioner Research* fills a void that both captures and celebrates the knowledge constructed by administrators in and from practice.

The Increasing Complexity of the Teacher Educator's Work

One of the reasons practitioner research is significant to principals and teachers is because of the highly complex nature of the work school administration and teaching demands. Practitioner research provides one way to untangle the complexities of administration and teaching, and gain valuable insights. Just as complex as the work of principals and teachers is the work of teacher educators. Recently, Cochran-Smith (2012) described the growing complexity of teacher educators' work as including:

Curriculum development; program evaluation; recruitment and admission of students; participation in professional and state-level accreditation reviews; establishment and maintenance of fieldwork sites; supervision of fieldwork experiences for teacher candidates in school and community settings; supervising and mentoring student teachers; providing professional development for experienced teachers; teaching courses with fieldwork components; collaborating with school-and community-based educators; providing career advice about teaching and other roles in schools; working in professional development or partnership schools; and developing, administering, and evaluating professional assessments (or assessment systems) for teacher candidates. (p. 100)

Just as for principals and teachers, inquiry can serve teacher educators well. Cochran-Smith (2003) elaborates:

The course of the professional career is substantially enriched when inquiry is regarded as a stance on the overall enterprise of teacher education and when teacher educators inquire collaboratively about assumptions and values, professional knowledge and practice, and the contexts of schools as well as higher

education, and their own as well as their students' learning. (p. 7)

Similar to the field of educational administration, there are relatively few teacher education journal outlets in which the practitioner research completed by teacher educators is published. By inviting research completed by teacher educators, as well as the next generation of teacher educators who are using inquiry during doctoral study to better understand their roles as teacher educators (Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey, & Dana, 2015), the *Journal of Practitioner Research* will complement the limited publication outlets for teacher educator self-study.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to introduce the *Journal of Practitioner Research* by situating the journal's inaugural edition in contemporary times. In doing so, five present-day matters practitioners are confronting and the role practitioner research can play in addressing these matters were named: (1) implementing evidenced-based practices, (2) documenting impact on student learning, (3) enhancing teachers' leadership abilities, (4) developing powerful mechanisms for principal professional development, and (5) addressing the increasing complexity of teacher educators' work. Regarding these and other pressing contemporary matters facing educators today, this journal will not simply be shaped by the times in which it exists, but will make an important contribution to the ways the practitioner research movement is shaped and defined in the future.

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