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## Making Sense of Methods: What Does Systematic and Intentional Practitioner Research Look Like?

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

I am grateful to Dr. Judith K. Franzak and Ms. Chelsea Tyndall for their assistance in assembling the data set and coding the articles.

## **Making Sense of Methods: What Does Systematic and Intentional Practitioner Research Look Like?**

### ***Abstract:***

*The purpose of this study is to understand what empirical practitioner research looks like, specifically to document and describe the methodological qualities of it. The author used content analysis to examine 74 accounts of practitioners' systematic and intentional inquiry in literacy contexts. Findings offer evidence which can enhance the credibility of empirical practitioner research. For example, practitioner researchers often being their inquiry with a research question or goal, are more likely than not to identify a research design, tend to collect multiple sources of data, and analyze the data in appropriate ways. Less common was attention to trustworthiness considerations. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening the methodological credibility for this type of inquiry and for viewing practitioners as creators of knowledge.*

Practitioner research gained prominence nearly fifty years ago when university researchers and classroom practitioners collaborated on projects and in study groups about classroom literacy practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999b) identified trends in the 1990s which established practitioner inquiry as a persistent and influential endeavor, including more widespread use of it in teacher education and professional development and its increased dissemination in books and journals. Today, there is broad agreement that engaging teachers in the process of knowledge generation through research can improve practice, encourage practitioners to see research as a valuable tool, offer important information about the effectiveness of classroom interventions and the impact of policy on practice, and potentially affect social change (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Rust & Meyers, 2006; Stremmel, 2007).

Furthermore, scholars characterize practitioner research as blurring the distinction between research and practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) resulting in "a boundary encounter" between classroom practice and academic research (Cobb et. al, 2003 as cited in Rust & Meyers, 2006, p. 80). This encounter can bridge the disconnect between these two endeavors and disrupt the de facto hierarchy of people outside the field determining what people in the field should do (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a). According to Schaenen et al. (2012),

teacher research offers a powerful inquiry paradigm, one that can both complement traditional, outsider-driven social science research and check the possible errors and inequitable outcomes which result from educational

policies strictly reliant on the large-scale quantitative research designs currently dominant. (p. 69)

Literacy research has long reflected this broader focus on practitioner inquiry: the teacher researcher movement has roots in the teaching of writing (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Huberman, 1996) and professional organizations, like the National Council of Teachers of English, affirm the importance of teacher research (National Council of Teachers of English, 2017). An analysis of literacy research influential to classroom practice included a nod to practitioner research because of the insights it offers on the complexities of teaching (Shanahan & Neuman, 1997). In reference to practitioner research, Simon and his colleagues (2012) assert, “We believe specific and textured accounts of the epistemic, ethical, and political promise of everyday teaching, learning, and activism are what practitioner research methodology has to offer the field of literacy studies,” (p. 10). Duke and Martin (2011) note teacher research is often concerned with local, rather than global, issues, a statement which reflects a fundamental component to the idea of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a).

In addition to what we know about the increasing prevalence of practitioner research, there is an extensive body of literature examining the impact it has on teachers and their practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Yet, despite this, there is scant empirical evidence about the systematic practice of it. We do not know, for example, what research designs and methodological approaches are frequently employed in classroom or school-based studies. Although some posit teacher research is best suited for qualitative methods (Rust, 2009; Stremmel, 2007), we do not know whether practitioner researchers primarily utilize this, or other, approaches. The lack of evidence about the systematic practice of practitioner research has implications for it as a knowledge-generating endeavor and raises questions about who has the authority to conduct research as well as how to assess its credibility.

### **Article Purpose**

The answers to questions about knowledge-generation, researcher authority, and credibility of evidence lie, in part, in developing a better understanding of the methodological processes used in practitioner research. Therefore, the purposes of this study are to understand what empirical practitioner research in literacy contexts looks like, specifically to document and describe the methodological qualities of it, and to depict the characteristics of practitioner researchers. Empirical practitioner research differs from other types of practitioner research in that it involves the systematic collection and analysis of data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) and is intentional and more visible than reflection, a practice teachers engage in every day (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Systematic and

intentional practitioner research follows a design aligned with the practitioner's questions or purpose, documents the procedures of the inquiry, collects data from multiple sources, and employs analytic strategies suitable for answering the research question (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Stremmel, 2007). Across the broad range of forms of practitioner research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020; Stremmel, 2007), there is agreement with Cochran-Smith and Lytle that practitioner research is systematic and intentional (Currin, 2019; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020; Miller & Shinas, 2019; Schaenen et al., 2012; Schroeder, 2020; Stremmel, 2007). These qualities distinguish practitioner research from research conducted by academics or other external researchers on teaching and learning, but also leave it subject to critique about its methodological processes.

In describing the methodological processes of practitioner research, Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) ask whether practitioner researchers are obligated to follow established research traditions of academics, or, is practitioner research to be considered a new genre of methodology? On the one hand, the absence of a formal methodological tradition for practitioner research allows for flexibility in designing studies responsive to the needs of the practitioner. On the other hand, blended methods and an increasing diversity as to what counts as data raise questions of how to establish authority (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Huberman (1996) disputes the idea of practitioner research as a distinct genre claiming instead, empirical practitioner research resembles classic empirical research. He goes on to explain the benefits of established methods as helpful in removing bias (Huberman, 1996).

However, proponents of practitioner research disagree, suggesting the emic perspective is essential to practitioner research. For example, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue the practitioner's examination of her/his own practice takes on a larger significance when a connection is made between the individual's experience and the broader issues of a particular time and place. Also, the insider status of practitioner research is perceived to be advantageous because the data emerge from practice and include the practitioner's own thoughts and actions rather than being presented through the lens of the etic perspective (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992).

This debate, though, is largely theoretical and unsubstantiated by reports of practitioner research. Further, it demonstrates the need for greater clarity about what practitioner research looks like. Cochran-Smith's (2005) account of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education offers a useful heuristic for considering the methodological qualities of practitioner research. The charge for the panel was to analyze and make recommendations about the state of teacher education research; as part of this work, the panel debated whether to include practitioner research in the scholarship it reviewed. Ultimately, the panel

determined, “research design and genres do not unambiguously define rigor” (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 223) and evaluated practitioner research as they did interpretive studies, looking for evidence of clear research questions and discussions about data collection and analysis and the study’s context. This approach to appraising research has merits for resolving the methodological tension about practitioner research. Specifically, examining reports of empirical practitioner research for evidence of systematic and intentional processes will reveal the methodological qualities and can advance the dialogue about the role and contributions of practitioner research.

### **The Current Study**

The discourse about the methodology of practitioner research guides this study’s purpose to understand the research designs and methodologies employed by literacy educators who engage in systematic study of their own practice. Examining a defined scope of published practitioner research allows us to discern whether there are commonalities in how practitioner researchers conduct inquiry into their practice, the types of data they find useful, how they go about making sense of their data, and the extent to which they address issues of validity and trustworthiness. This examination also advances our knowledge about the characteristics of practitioners who take up research concerning their own practice. I deliberately focused on literacy practitioner research because as a field, literacy has an established position in practitioner inquiry; furthermore, as a faculty member in an education doctorate program with a literacy focus, this is the literature I read to help our students develop the skills and knowledge they need to become practitioner researchers. The research questions guiding this study were: what research methodologies and practices do practitioner researchers take up in their literacy-focused inquiries, and what are the characteristics of the practitioner researchers and the contexts in which they conduct literacy inquiry?

### **Methodology**

Content analysis methodology was used to answer the research questions because it involves examining texts for patterns by employing a consistent coding process (Hoffman et al., 2011). Content analysis is an established methodology, common in literacy scholarship; however, it is typically employed to analyze a single journal (Parsons et al., 2020). Recent studies by Parsons et al., (2016, 2020) take a different approach though, and examine multiple journals in order to present a comprehensive understanding of the state of literacy research. Schroeder (2020) also uses content analysis to examine inquiry papers written by preservice teachers. I used content analysis to examine the research questions and designs, types of data and analysis, and considerations for validity and trustworthiness in practitioner research across ten journals. The author biographies included in the publications

provided information about the practitioners who are conducting this research. Since I argue systematicity in practitioner research is important, it seems imperative to make clear how the current study reflects a systematic and intentional undertaking. The next section describes the inclusion criteria and coding strategies used to define the sample and analyze the reports of practitioner research.

### **Identification, Screening, and Selection**

I bound the analysis to a time span from 2007-2017 to reflect current accounts of practitioner research and used a two-stage identification process to select the articles (Holsti, 1969). First, the inclusion criteria for identifying journals was defined: a national audience which specifically includes practitioners, peer-reviewed, and published by either a literacy organization or a journal with an explicit focus on action research. Action research is a type of practitioner research and while not all practitioner research is considered action research, it is reasonable to assume practitioner researchers might select an action research focused journal to disseminate their work. Therefore, they were included along with literacy focused journals.

#### ***Journals***

Applying the criteria resulted in the identification of 19 journals for consideration. The aim and scope for each publication were reviewed and journals which explicitly mentioned practitioners as their intended audience and, in the case of the action research journals, had an explicit focus on education, were selected. This resulted in the selection of 10 of the 19 journals for this study. The name of the journal and literacy organization affiliation (when applicable) are presented in Table 1. Following this, I used an inclusion criteria framework which reflects the qualities of practitioner research to find articles characterized by a purpose of sharing the results of systematic and intentional inquiry.

**Table 1***Description of Sources (n =74)*

Journal	Literacy Organization (if applicable)	Number of Articles
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy	ILA	11
The Reading Teacher	ILA	10
English Journal	NCTE	15
Language Arts	NCTE	6
Talking Points	NCTE	7
Voices from the Middle	NCTE	10
Voices of Practitioners i.e. Inquiry & Action		4 2
Journal of Teacher Action Research Networks		5 4

**Articles**

The table of contents for each issue of the journal from 2007-2017 was reviewed and articles which were clearly not reports of research such as book reviews, regular columns, and editors' remarks were discarded; 1961 articles remained. In the action research journals, articles without a literacy focus were also disregarded. Next, the abstract and author information of every article was reviewed to see if it met the inclusion criteria:

1. Author is a practitioner (if multiple authors, the first author must be a practitioner).
2. The research concerns the practitioner's own practice and was conducted in K-12 school contexts, including after-school contexts.
3. Acknowledgement on the part of the author(s) s/he/they conducted a study. Terms could include *research, inquiry, study*. Using the word *project* without another term (research/inquiry) was insufficient to meet the inclusion criteria.
4. Evidence of data collection and description of the participants.

In 80 cases it was not possible to determine if the inclusion criteria were met from the abstract, and so the entire article was reviewed. Three of those cases required contacting the author (by email) to clarify their professional role at the time of the study. In total, 74 articles by 72 authors met the inclusion criteria. Table 1 also indicates how many articles were included from each publication.



## **Coding**

The data set (PDF files of each article) was imported into NVivo for analysis and a case node for each author with attributes for job title, education level, university affiliation, and teaching level, along with similar information for co-authors, where applicable, was created. The author information provided with each article was used to assign values to each attribute. If the information was not complete (n=39), I contacted the author via email and asked them to share the missing information. This resulted in complete information for all but nine authors.

Thereafter, I developed codes for the categories I wanted to examine: (1) research question, (2) research design, (3) type(s) of data collected, (4) analysis, and (5) trustworthiness. I drew from the methodological literature about reporting social science research and from descriptions of practitioner and action research to develop sub-codes within each category (Duran et al., 2006; Mills, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014).

### ***Research Question***

Research questions provide a focus to an inquiry and guide the selection of design and methods; presenting the questions when reporting research allows the reader to understand the purpose and direction of the study. My primary interest in examining the study's research question(s) was to determine whether practitioner researchers explicitly stated them as such or implied them in the description of their study. During coding, a third code emerged: research goals. In this case, the practitioner researcher presented goals of the inquiry instead of, or in conjunction with, research questions. Examples of this include: "my goal" or "the goals" and when practitioner researchers talked about what they hope to achieve or accomplish.

### ***Research Design***

A description of the research design identifies the logic of inquiry and the rationale for the subsequent selection of methods and procedures (Duran et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2014). Research designs were coded with the term or terms used by the practitioner researchers. The terms "teacher research" and "practitioner research" were used similarly by the authors and so one code was created to encompass both terms. Coding was not mutually exclusive; therefore, if a practitioner researcher indicated more than one design, it was coded for each type.

### ***Type of Data***

Data collection in social science research is varied, and, particularly in teacher research, must be appropriate and accessible, responding to the idiosyncratic nature of inquiry into one's own practice (Mills, 2018). Here again,

each of the types of data practitioner researchers collected in their studies was coded.

### ***Analysis***

Because data analysis in practitioner research can look quite different from traditional social science research (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), three sub-codes were used: qualitative, quantitative, and classroom assessment practices. While the first two sub-codes were used to identify instances where practitioner researchers referenced specific qualitative and quantitative analytic strategies, the latter sub-code, classroom assessment practices, captured accounts of data analysis where practitioner researchers described analytic approaches common and appropriate in teaching and learning.

### ***Trustworthiness***

NVivo's text search query function was used to identify how practitioner researchers addressed issues of validity and trustworthiness with the following terms: trustworthiness, validity, reliability, generalizability, member, consistency, depend, triangulation, bias, and thick.

### ***Consistency in Coding***

I collaborated with another faculty member and a graduate assistant to establish inter-rater reliability and to evaluate the applicability of the codes. We selected four articles to review and code, and then we met to compare our codes. At this point, some of the categories were expanded to reflect codes derived inductively: *focus groups* to type of data collected and *descriptive statistics* to analysis methods. Once we achieved consistency in our coding, the faculty member and I proceeded to read and analyze the remaining articles. Throughout the coding process we met regularly to discuss questions we had about the coding process; we also had our graduate student randomly select and code 13 articles, and then check them against our coding to ensure we maintained consistency.

## **Findings**

### **Characteristics of Practitioner Researchers and their Professional Contexts**

There were 72 authors across the 74 studies examined. Sixty-six of the practitioner researchers who conducted research of their own practice were teachers (Table 2). The remaining scholars were literacy coaches (5); one author's position was unspecified. The vast majority of these individuals possessed, or were working toward, advanced degrees. Thirty-five of the practitioner researchers reported being students at a university; four were adjunct instructors.

**Table 2**  
*Characteristics of Practitioners and Professional Contexts*

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	n
Job Title	
Classroom Teacher	66
Literacy Coach	5
Unspecified	1
Education Level	
Bachelor's	3
Master's	32
Doctoral	29
Unspecified	8
University Affiliation	
Student	35
Adjunct	4
None	32
Unspecified	1
Teaching Level	
Early Childhood	2
Elementary	32
Middle	17
High School	21
Gender	
Female	59
Male	13
Co-Author	
Yes	28
No	44
Co-Author's Affiliation	
K-12	10
Higher Ed	18
Co-Author's Education	
Master's	7
Doctoral	20
Unspecified	1

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n = 72

The majority of studies were conducted at the elementary level (32); however, many occurred in middle (17) and high schools (21) as well. Most studies were sole-authored, but when scholars did collaborate, they were more likely to do so with someone from higher education (18) than colleagues in K-12 contexts (10). Twenty co-authors hold doctoral degrees.

### **Methodologies in Literacy Practitioner Research**

#### ***Research Question***

Among the reports of practitioner research examined in this study, 43 explicitly stated research questions such as, “This study was designed to answer the following two questions: 1. How can visual arts projects demonstrate higher level reading comprehension skills? 2. Can visual arts assessments in reading be a rigorous alternative to traditional assessments?” (Shoemaker Holdren, 2012, p. 694) (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
*Research Question, Design, and Data Sources*

	n
Research question	
Explicitly stated	43
Implied	8
Goals	24
Research design	
Unspecified	31
Specified	43
Practitioner or teacher research	21
Action research	18
Case study	6
Ethnography	3
Mixed methods	2
Participatory action research	2
Experimental	1
Formative	1
Single-subject	1
Data Sources	
Class Activities	
Student Work	38
Classroom based assessments	19
Standardized assessments	15
Discussion	13
Teacher-student conference	5
Surveys	25
Discourse	
Student interviews	16
Focus group	5
Teacher interviews	5
Researcher records	
Reflective journal	15
Field notes	6
Anecdotal notes	3
Observations	16
Recordings	
Audio or video	20
Photographs	3
Other	1

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Coding across categories was permitted; numbers may not sum to seventy-four.

In contrast, 24 of the studies did not include a research question but made statements implying what the question might have been. Sometimes, these statements were straightforward, allowing one to surmise the question guiding the inquiry as in the following: “I decided to collect data systematically in order to examine the efficacy of PBL for providing integrated and relevant instruction of a standards based curriculum,” (Martelli & Watson, 2016, p. 14). At other times, the implied question was less clear, illustrated in this example, “As I launched into a systematic inquiry of my own practice, I began to implement dialogue journals, looking especially at how they worked with my upper elementary diverse language learners,” (Bader Salcedo, 2009, p. 441).

Eight practitioner researchers substituted an explicit question with a statement of their research goals or what they hoped to achieve. One article offered both an implied question and goal: early in the article, the practitioner researcher wrote, “I chose to adopt mixed-methodology to assess whether opportunities for authentic learning increased during the Romeo and Juliet major project,” and later, “Another goal of the action research was to ensure that students exhibited accountability for their own learning,” (Gorlewski & Greene, 2010, p. 93).

### ***Research Design***

Forty-three of the articles reviewed included statements about the specific type of research design guiding the practitioner’s inquiry (Table 3). Of these, practitioner or teacher research was the most common design identified (n=21), followed by action research (n=18). Practitioner researchers also used case study, ethnography, participatory action research, experimental, and single-subject designs, though these were much more infrequent. There were 10 instances where practitioner researchers indicated using more than one type of design. In all of these cases, the design was identified as either practitioner or teacher research or action research in addition to another design: PAR, formative, case study, mixed methods, or ethnography. The remaining 31 articles did not include a statement about the research design.

In some cases, practitioner researchers referenced the methodological literature when specifying a design. A few of the practitioner researchers who did this offered explanations such as, “Both Smith (1978) and Merriam (1998) defined a case study as the study of a bounded system, ‘a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries’ (p. 27),” (Kelly, 2016, p. 532) and “This research is rooted within the practitioner inquiry paradigm, which asserts a unique

epistemological research position in which all stakeholders are regarded as ‘knowers, learners and researchers’ (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42),” (Broderick, 2014, p. 200). However, a more common approach when practitioner researchers cited methodological literature was to simply include a parenthetical reference. Overall, a greater proportion of studies did not include a reference when specifying the research design.

### *Types of Data*

Practitioner researchers described rich and varied types of data (Table 3). The average number of data sources was 2.8, but 40 practitioner researchers collected three or more sources of data. Fifty-one reported gathering more than one type of data. To facilitate analysis of this category, I organized the codes into multiple parent nodes including class activities, surveys, discourse, researcher records, observations, recordings, and other sources with appropriate child nodes as sub-categories.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequent type of data practitioner researchers reported collecting came from a rich array of class activities. Class activities were further categorized as student work (n=38), classroom assessments (n=19), standardized assessments (n=15), class discussion (n=13), and teacher-student conferences (n=5). After student work, practitioner researchers most frequently used surveys (n=25) for data collection. The survey instruments aided the practitioner researchers in understanding student interests, motivation, friendships, and learning or knowledge. In one instance, a practitioner researcher reported surveying school staff.

While class discussions occurred as part of regular instructional activities, practitioner researchers also reported conducting more formal focus groups and interviews. This type of data was characterized as discourse and included 16 instances of interviews with students, and five instances each of interviews with teachers and focus groups with students. Researcher records were also common sources of data; nearly one-third of practitioner researchers reported using either a reflective journal (n=15), field notes (n=6), or anecdotal notes (n=3). One practitioner researcher took anecdotal notes and kept a reflective journal. Sixteen practitioner researchers used observations as a data source.

Practitioner researchers collected data from class activities and interviews, and I categorized them as such. However, I also felt the need to distinguish them in a separate category, recordings, because they represent a recognition of the importance of preserving data in situ. Data were preserved through audio and/or video recordings by 20 practitioner researchers; three took photographs. Finally, in

one case, practitioner researchers gathered data which did not fit within the other categories: Sallee and Rigler (2008) examined parent communication documents.

### *Analysis*

Classroom assessment practices for student work can reveal the evidence needed for answering research questions situated in practitioners' contexts: in this data set, 64 of the practitioner researchers used some form of classroom assessment practices for data analysis (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Data Analysis and Trustworthiness Considerations*

	n
Data analysis	
Classroom assessment practices	64
Patterns or frequency tallies	24
Summarize learning or perceptions	23
Pre-post tests	12
Formal qualitative	12
Formal quantitative	6
Trustworthiness considerations	17

Coding across categories was permitted; numbers may not sum to seventy-four.

Most common were describing patterns or frequency tallies (n=24) and summarizing students' learning and perceptions (n=23). For example, "...75% of the sample said they believed that..." (Francois, 2015, p. 69), and "Table 2 documents five types of discourse identified from the transcribed audio recordings of partnered readings as well as the occurrence of each type of discourse," (Tomczak, 2014, p. 7). In the following example, the practitioner researcher summarized students' perceptions *without* specifying absolute values, "Two open-ended statements asked students to describe the best and worst aspects of PBL. Students responded that the best aspects of PBL included having choices, learning that was real/ authentic, challenging work, using technology, and working together," (Martelli & Watson, 2016, p. 14).

The third most common classroom assessment practice was to compare pre- and post-results from either surveys or assessments (n=12). One example of this was, "The improvement was most visible for six out of the ten students. For example, Student #3 started the study with 30 total points on the first assignment and finished the year with a 50 on the last assignment, reflecting a 66% improvement for that student," (Juana & Palak, 2011, p. 6). Other analytic strategies



included the use of rubrics (n=6), formative assessments (n=5), informal assessments (n=3), creating graphs (n=5) and observation checklists (n=1).

Though substantially less common, there were also instances where practitioner researchers reported using advanced quantitative or qualitative analysis practices either in conjunction with classroom assessment practices or as the sole method. These occurrences were identified when practitioner researchers named a specific analytic approach and/or cited methodological literature. Just six practitioner researchers applied formal quantitative analyses, with all but one using some type of mean comparison test (t-test, Wilcoxon); in the other case chi-square analysis was used.

Twice as many practitioner researchers identified advanced qualitative approaches than quantitative approaches. There was also greater diversity in the strategies they chose. Constant comparative, discourse analysis, open coding, multimodal, grounded theory, and In Vivo approaches were used by the practitioner researchers in their inquiry.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Analysis of practitioner researchers' attention to validity and trustworthiness considerations identified a variety of ways 17 of the studies addressed trustworthiness (Table 4). Five practitioner researchers referred to interrater reliability to ensure consistency in scoring as illustrated here, "Following the readers theatre performance, we examined and coded the data independently, then came together to discuss themes that emerged within our codes," (Lahurd et al., 2007, p. 5). Two other practitioner researchers mentioned the importance of having reliable methods for collecting data, and in one case, a teacher from another classroom came to conduct observations, presumably to reduce bias.

Although 51 of the studies reviewed included more than one data source, only nine practitioner researchers specifically mentioned this strengthened their findings. In some of these cases, practitioner researchers explained how they looked across their data sources without specifically mentioning triangulation; for example, "The Developmental Reading Assessment 4–8 (DRA) confirmed data collected from observations and interviews," (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2007, p. 41). However, there were five instances where this was not the case. In this example, the practitioner researcher used the term triangulation and provided a reference to the methodological literature: "Using Webb's method of triangulation (Hubbard & Power, 2003), I used my teacher journal, transcripts from two book discussions, and transcripts from student interviews to validate (or not) my reoccurring themes," (Dallacqua, 2012, p. 371).

Two practitioner researchers discussed ways they tried to eliminate their own bias from influencing their research and another used member checks with her students to corroborate her findings. One article included a brief discussion about the internal and external validity of the study.

### **Discussion**

Proponents of practitioner research point to the contribution it makes to knowledge about teaching and learning, but others call for greater methodological clarity to realize this potential. Yet, this debate is not substantiated by research findings. An important step to advancing this conversation is to document the systematic and intentional methods used in empirical practitioner research. To do this, I conducted a content analysis of ten journals published over a ten-year time span of this type of inquiry in literacy contexts.

This study offers evidence to resolve the methodological tensions and enhance the credibility of empirical practitioner research in several ways. First, the finding that nearly 85% of the authors hold or are pursuing advanced degrees suggests practitioner researchers are qualified to do this type of work. Presumably then, advanced degree programs offer coursework and possibly practical experience in research design and methods, and this is likely true to some extent at the undergraduate level considering recent revisions accreditation standards for teacher preparation programs. Of the three authors in our study who indicated their education level as a bachelor's degree, two of them had co-authors who are university faculty (Beach & DiCarlo, 2016; Lipstein & Renninger, 2007). In addition to the two aforementioned studies, 16 practitioners co-authored their article with university faculty; interestingly, in five of these collaborations the practitioner did not indicate any affiliation with a university suggesting such partnerships are not confined to degree programs.

Furthermore, through a systematic analysis of the research methods used by practitioner researchers I find evidence for several criteria outlined by Anderson and Herr (1999) who proposed standards for evaluating the validity of this type of inquiry. For example, process validity is demonstrated by triangulation for data collection and obtaining multiple perspectives; evidence of catalytic validity is shown through researcher records kept during the research process; and because these authors chose to submit their work for peer review and publication and also because over a third of the articles are co-authored, dialogic validity is established. If practitioner research is to be accepted into the diverse landscape of methodologies, we must be able to discern its quality (Duke & Mallette, 2011). The practitioner researchers' detailed accounts of the research processes they engaged is an important first step to accomplishing this.

The findings of this study support the idea of teachers as knowledge creators, not just consumers (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). All of the articles in the data set establish a focus for the research with over half stating either a research question or goal for inquiry. Practitioner researchers are engaging in this work to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning; it is an active process whereby they identify an area of concern and then devise a plan for collecting and analyzing information. The decision by the practitioner researchers in this study to pursue public dissemination of their inquiry suggests a desire to share their emic perspective and scholarship with others, thus broadening the knowledge base dominated by research conducted by those outside of the classroom. The rich variety of data sources and the focus on classroom assessment practices to make sense of their data, implies practitioner researchers are leveraging their professional skills to improve their practice in specific and contextualized ways. This improvement is not possible if practitioners only consume knowledge. To be responsive to the needs of their students, practitioner researchers must create conditions for studying what happens in classrooms and schools, and in doing so, they also produce new knowledge for the field. It also suggests the need for more attention to describing and understanding the methodological processes so they become recognized as a trustworthy knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Hiebert et al., 2002).

### **Recommendations**

This section offers recommendations for advancing practitioner research considering the findings. They are intended to strengthen the reporting of systematic and intentional practitioner research, which in turn can lead to a better understanding of this type of scholarly inquiry, resolve the methodological tensions, and encourage others to engage in this work.

#### **Practitioner Researchers**

Recommendations for practitioner researchers include explicitly detailing the research process and seeking a research mentor. First, is the need for practitioner researchers to make the inquiry process transparent for readers by clearly describing the systematicity and intentionality of their research. Providing this level of detail serves several purposes:

- Removes uncertainty about the methodological processes in practitioner research which jeopardizes its credibility as knowledge generating;
- Establishes practices and processes common in this type of inquiry permitting others to adopt them and;
- Allows readers to evaluate the degree to which findings may be relevant to their own professional context.

The need for methodological clarity might seem daunting, and practitioner researchers should seek a research mentor to help with this. In this study, 35 practitioner researchers were students at a university and of those, ten had a co-author who was a university faculty member. University faculty are in an excellent position to serve as a research mentor and assist practitioner researchers in navigating the reporting and publishing of research. Since some practitioner researchers may not have access to a university-based mentor, another source of research mentoring is to ask the journal editor what support they offer to practitioner researchers. In some cases, journals offer detailed guidelines for preparing a manuscript. For example, the *Journal of Teacher Action Research* lists several questions and topics to address in a paper. Research mentors should:

- Share information about research designs best aligned with the practitioner researcher's questions and goals;
- Provide guidance in collecting and analyzing data;
- Discuss appropriate measures of validity and trustworthiness and;
- Suggest venues for dissemination, including local, regional, and national presentations and publications.

### **Schools of Education**

Other ways teacher preparation and advanced degree programs can support the development of practitioner research pertain to coursework and instruction in academic writing. Coursework should emphasize the value of practitioner research along with how to conduct it. This can be accomplished by having students read and critique reports of practitioner research for methodological rigor and by providing opportunities for practical experience trying it. There is also a need to teach practitioners how to write reports of systematic inquiry, share information about journals which publish practitioner research, and mentor students who are interested in submitting an article about a research study. Because systematic inquiry is different from teacher reflections or opinion pieces also prevalent in practitioner journals, it is important for university faculty to guide students in understanding different genres within practitioner publishing.

### ***Journals***

The future of practitioner research is as dependent on practitioner researchers sharing their work as it is on journals demonstrating a strong commitment to publish it. Indeed, among this sample of ten journals either specifically identifying practitioners as the intended audience, publishing accounts of practitioner research, or doing both, only 74 articles met the criteria for inclusion in this study. To establish a robust role of practitioner research in education, we

must see more accounts of it, and so I say to journal editors, encourage practitioner research! Provide guidelines which are user-friendly and reflect the reality of practitioner inquiry. Journals might also publish articles about aspects of the research process. For example, *Voices of Practitioners* published an article about posing a research question (Stremmel, 2018). Offer mentoring through the process so authors receive clear instructions on how to strengthen the methodological reporting. When a practitioner researcher publishes an article in your journal, ask them to serve as a research mentor or reviewer for other submissions of this type of inquiry. Cultivate an editorial team who understands practitioner research and is committed to advancing it.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations which should be considered when evaluating the findings. First, similar to other studies using content analysis (Parsons et al., 2016, 2020), this study is limited to the specific journals analyzed. Because I was interested in knowing about practitioner research in literacy, I restricted the journals to those with a specific literacy focus and to action research journals with an explicit focus on education. Undoubtedly, there are accounts of practitioner research in other journals, an examination of which might confirm or challenge the findings in this study. Second, selecting articles to meet the inclusion criteria was complicated because the distinction between reports of systematic practitioner research, and accounts of classroom practices, units of study, and pedagogical recommendations was not always clear. It is possible some authors may feel their articles were reports of practitioner research but were not included in this data set.

Too, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2011) explain their framework for “inquiry as stance” as a way of knowing rather than as an isolated project. The focus of this study, however, was on the methodological processes practitioner researchers take up in their own inquiry, and as such, it is not possible to discern whether the studies in this data set are bounded events or represent an ongoing commitment to understanding practice. Also, because the data set only includes articles published in papers, we do not know how representative this body of work is to practitioner research in literacy as a whole. Finally, unless information was missing, I relied on the author biographies provided with each article to describe the practitioner researchers and did not independently verify this information.

### **Conclusion**

This study represents a first attempt to understand what practitioner research in literacy contexts looks like and who is conducting this work. The intention is to contribute to the discourse about the methodological processes used by practitioner

researchers in order to resolve some of the tensions concerning practitioner research as knowledge-generating, researcher authority, and the credibility of this type of inquiry. The documentation and description about the ways in which practitioner researchers conducted their literacy studies is evidence of systematicity and intentionality. It identifies methods and practices common in practitioner research and permits consideration of the similarities and distinctions from other empirical research. Through its recommendations, this study provides guidance to practitioner researchers and their mentors for continuing this work.

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