

Practitioner Inquiry: Shifting role of teachers from consumers to producers of knowledge

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Abstract

This paper emerges from the preliminary findings of study of a cohort of postgraduate initial teacher education alumni that are now practising teachers. We reflect on the potential of practitioner inquiry in positioning the teachers at the core of the inquiry as the researchers, the potential of practitioner inquiry in steering the teachers to be producer of knowledge rather than consumers of it, and the potential of practitioner inquiry in empowering the practising teachers to direct their own professional learning rather than allow themselves to be passive recipients of generic professional development. Furthermore, we will discuss the reactions of the teachers to an inquiry model specifically adapted to support practitioner inquiries. The assertion being made in this paper is that rather than external theoretical dictation of best practice being imposed on teachers, it is important for practitioners to develop their own understandings of their practice through their own inquiry of what best practice might look like to inform their own teaching and learning context. Essentially, the inward gaze of practitioner inquiry may nurture an informed practice based on actual experiences that is more pertinent to the teaching and learning environment than the interference of any outward 'expert researcher' intervention.

Positioning the Inquiry

While educators continue to advocate for constructivist approaches to learning, current practices seem not to have overwhelmingly detracted from knowledge transmission approaches. Could this be attributed to the notion that how we teach may be an internally learned habit from the way we were taught and that change is difficult because it requires that habit to be internally deconstructed? We aver that practitioner inquiry may be a catalyst for transforming education from the ideology of mastering copious bodies of known content knowledge that are seemingly transmitted from teacher to students, towards a more organic educational experience that could take teachers and learners on a myriad of undefined knowledge producing journeys.

The journey of transforming practice begins with knowing the values, beliefs and assumptions that we hold about what is real, and according to Zepke, Nugent and Leach (2003) transformation is fuelled by our desire to question our notions of reality. This inner gaze on our being is also about having conscious conversations with the self. Reflecting on the context may be the outer gaze from within while reflective practice, according to Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski is referred to as “the journey of structured experiences” (2010, p.141).

These deliberate reflections within structured experiences seem to be well situated in the teaching as inquiry cycle (Figure 1) for New Zealand teachers as advocated for by Ministry of Education (2007). The intention of the cyclic model is to engage teachers in deliberate inquiries about their practice. In this model, teachers determine the focus and importance of the inquiry to the learners, they consider effective strategies to meet the needs of the learners, they consider the reciprocal learning that occurs

during the inquiry, they reflect on the results or impact of teaching strategy its implications for future teaching, and finally they evaluate whether any further changes in teaching needs to occur and what on This may be seen as a transformation of the researcher-led inquiry model to a practitioner-led inquiry.



Figure 1. Teaching as Inquiry Cycle (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.35)

Teachers as researchers shifts the paradigm and positions the teacher at the core of the inquiry. In this role inquiring practitioners may be able to merge what they do as practitioners seamlessly into their inquiry (Robinson & Lai, 2006; Toole & Beckett, 2013). The benefits of practitioner inquiry to the education context have been offered by Conner (2015, p.197) as “an approach to teaching” with the intention to improve “the life chances of young people” and by Robinson and Lai (2006, p. 197) who posit that by the practitioners being at the core of the inquiry they are in the position to make a “discernible difference to the quality of teaching and learning.”

Placing the teaching at the helm of the self-initiated reflective inquiry has the potential to nurture a “liberatory approach to education” (Gilbert, 2007). This liberation may manifest in teachers attempting to clarify their notions, developing deeper understandings of their practice context and building their own capacity through focused inquiries that are relevant. Engagement in practitioner inquiry has also been found to contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning by offering new understandings and insight to teachers (Handscomb & Macbeth, 2003).

Practitioner inquiry has the potential to engage teachers in relevant professional learning rather than generic professional to empowers the teachers’ particularly by allowing them to situate their learning within their practice. The benefits of this situated professional learning as opposed to professional development seems to be consistent with Schon’s (1987) criticism of professional development being offered without a context with the intention of applicability to any practice.

The idea of teacher reflections has been well established in literature since Dewey’s (1910) discourse as a process and a tool to understand one’s teaching. Practitioner inquiry has developed through iterations of reflective practice and in its current form allows practitioners to be part of the education dialogue rather than compliantly implementing the findings of the ‘expert’ researchers. Japanese lesson study also involves teachers researching their own practice within communities of practice (Groves, Doing, Widjaja, Garer, & Palmer, 2013) through discussions.

As supervisors of practitioner-based inquiries at postgraduate level in the initial teacher education Master of teaching and learning programme, we were interested in exploring the continued engagement of our alumni in practice-based inquiry and its implications for the teacher as a researcher in the teaching and learning context. The study draws from the lived experiences of a group of first year teachers that are alumni of the initial teacher education programme. Through the discourse of practitioner inquiry and our reflections on the experiences of a group of teachers, we offer that teachers are in the position to be producers of knowledge rather than consumers of it.

Research approach

The study employed a phenomenological theoretical framework within the interpretive social science mode of inquiry. Phenomenological human science research endeavours to understand the structure of the human lifeworld as it is lived in everyday situations (van Manen, 1997). The ontological assumption of the study is that there are multiple realities. This assumption is premised in the assertion that human experiences are immeasurable and infinite because each lived experience offers a unique reality to each individual with the potential to offer new knowledge. According to Krathwohl (2009, p. 242) people “act according to the meaning they attribute to things and persons; their reality is socially constructed ... it is necessary to see the world through their eyes.” This is especially relevant in the case of new graduate teachers who are constantly interacting within their new environment, school culture, professional learning community, with their students, and inadvertently in creating new perceptions of reality.

The participants included five first year teachers that are alumni of the first cohort of the Masters in teaching and learning programme. The teachers, identified as Bill, Fred, Rachel, Teacher A and Ken were interviewed separately either at their school or the university. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The researchers read each of the transcripts individually to identify themes and then met to discuss this and identify themes for further discussion in the focus group. In addition, the data was re-analysed and presented in a visual format on the teaching as inquiry template (Figure 2) that was adapted for the subsequent cohort of the programme. This template is an adaptation of the Ministry of Education (2007) model and provides scaffolding for the current Masters in teaching and learning students to engage in inquiries as student teachers.

The focus group was held at the university and attended by four of the five teachers and discussion included a letterbox strategy which involved the teachers responding to major themes identified in the interviews. In addition, a visual representation of the researchers’ analysis and interpretations of the inquiries that surfaced from the interviews were engaged formed the basis for further discussion during the focus group meeting. In addition, the at the focus group session the teachers were invited to structure the second interview. In this way the crossing between the roles of the researcher and the researched was intentional for the teachers to realise that it is their narrative and needed to feel empowered to lead the next phase.

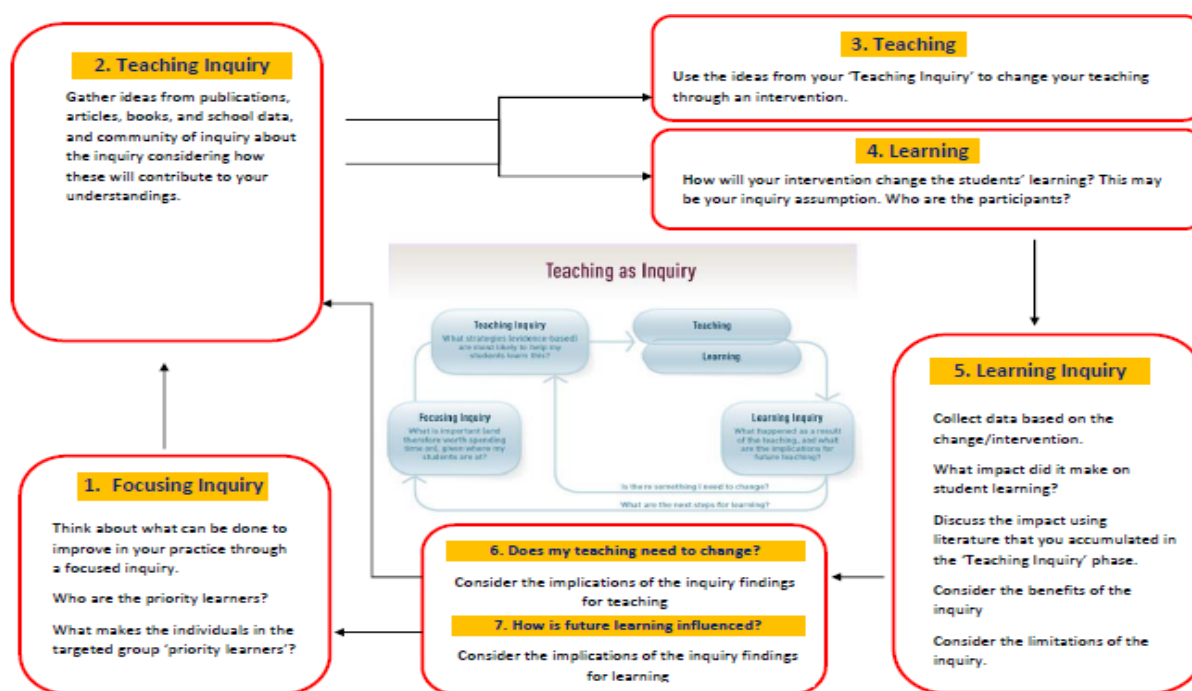


Figure 2. *Teaching as Inquiry Model (adapted from Ministry of Education, 2007)*

The inquiring practitioners

The context of each teacher's practice may offer understandings of the inquiries that they had engaged in about their practice and a brief overview of their stories. Fred is a new entrant teacher with a class that started with 7 students was expected to subsequently increase to 11 students. Ken is a teacher of a year 5/6 composite class of 28 students, however with cross-grouping he has a year 4 mathematics class of 22 students. His mathematics class is the second highest in mathematics ability. Rachel is a teacher of a year 3 class with 28 students. Teacher A had only been in her a year 1/2 composite class environment with 18 students for 3 weeks prior to the interview. Bill is a teacher in a year 3/4 composite class of 25 students.

Beginning teachers, in this case first year teachers, are often pre-occupied with inquiries associated their role and how to organise the classroom space for learning. The teachers in this study, felt that setting up their teaching space was essential for effective classroom practice and did not see this as an inquiry. As Fred states that she had been occupied with *the delivery side of things and at the moment I think for me it's a natural process of knowing what I need to find certain things out*. For Ken knowing about *what the school does and about things like setting up the classroom* were important. Rachel's practice began with *establishing relationships and routines...accessing Passover data to the purpose of grouping students, where the reading resource room was and how to use the colour wheels for reading in the first two weeks*. Teacher A saw her immediate goal as being very ... *structural at the moment. So I'm looking at how my children behave in class*. Like the other teachers Bill's immediate focus seemed to be on writing *reports and issues with particular students*. Evidently the focus of each teacher's initial inquiry seemed to emerge from aspects that were seen to be relevant to their particular context (Thomas, Tiplady & Wall, 2013).

While for the teachers, inquiry was viewed as a natural process of their practice, they offered a range of responses about what they thought practitioner inquiry encompassed. For Ken, inquiry is about being *forced to actually think about what you're doing and to be critical of yourself. For me that's so important as a teacher that you just keep on analysing what you're doing. I think growth is continual*.

To Rachel practitioner inquiry was viewed as a *crucial element* to learning and by *looking into your practice and reflecting on it* one is able to *improve it...* without it she felt that she *wouldn't be an effective teacher because I wouldn't be trying to improve my practice*. Teacher uses inquiry as a means to cast a retrospective reflective on her practice about *what went wrong or what went badly* to inform future planning. Bill described practitioner inquiry as *basically investigating, with the other teachers in the school, how you can improve your teaching* within a collaborative environment of shared knowledge. This notion aligns with Alterio and McDrury's (2003) assertion of professional learning being more effective from discussions with others. For the inquiry to be meaningful, there seemed to a desire for it to be needs based and in small manageable chunks as suggested by Fred, *everything is brand new...but I can only do bits at a time ...then build on that*.

From the letterbox strategy when asked about to how they would define teaching as inquiry the four teachers that attended the focus group session offered the following anonymous responses:

A mindset of always wanting to do the best by your children, continually seeking to improve your teaching so they can improve their learning. But it involves all aspects of school, e.g. management, behaviour, home lives, not just academic achievement

On-going cycle of awareness of students' needs. What can help them and what I (the teacher) need to do to get them to the point they need to be with their learning

Looking into your teaching practice – either moment in time / after teaching lessons. Reflecting on what went well, what didn't go so well. Why didn't it work? How could my teaching be adapted to meet my students' needs? Where could I seek advice / information to enhance my teaching?

Learning new things as a group. Discovering, discussing, trying things out, reflecting and tweaking, sharing learning among everyone.

When asked to respond to how their practitioner inquiries impacted their own practice, the anonymous responses suggested that the teachers were mindful of their own learning. These responses are reflective of the inner gaze of an outer context within what Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski refer to as “the journey of structured experiences” (2010, p.141).

Being Conscience of my gaps in knowledge and how to fill them; knowing when I need to ask for help.

Weighing up advice and conversation with colleagues, always asking “what's going to help me and my tamariki?”

Helped me to improve my own teaching practice – work out what's working and not and what I can do to improve in order to help my class

Doing extra learning (that I could see was needed) has started to improve learning for my class

My need for improvement and realisation that further learning is required has got another teacher doing a course with me.

I have been able to share how I document the TAI cycle with other teachers to help them documents their own TAI cycles

Enhanced my teaching skills. Learnt how to adapt my teaching to meet students different learning needs; benefitted my students.

Enhanced my content knowledge

Making me more aware of ipad apps and how they can help children with their writing

After the written responses were posted into the letterbox, the teachers were presented with the visual compilations of what was perceived to be inquiries that were extracted from the interviews. The reaction from the teachers was very positive, particularly with the realisation of that they were engaged in numerous practitioner inquiries at once and the opportunity to share their experiences as a cohort. Rachel and Fred felt that the representations were actual evidence of their inquiries without them being conscious of them, as captured in Rachel's words... *like Fred's is good because it's like an actual thing. I feel like mine sort of happened without... like I haven't consciously tried to go through these stages... I didn't think I was really doing teaching as inquiry, and so I can see how it all fits together and it's really helpful in that respect.*

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the teachers were engaged in multiply inquiries that could be identified within the teaching as inquiry model. Bill seemed to have been engaged in a school-wide inquiry that was focused on e-tools for writing including two students in his class. His inquiry collaborations included whole staff professional development, and discussions with his mentor teacher. Teacher A's inquiries included behaviour management, structural/classroom organisation, mathematics focus for future planning, a new student with no conversational English language, and a school-wide focus on writing. Her inquiry collaborations included talking to the team leader, mentor teacher and other colleagues, and past teachers of the students. Rachel's inquiries included developing classroom routines, writing, reading, and addressing the needs of a new student with emotional needs. Her inquiry collaborations included talking to colleagues, observing other teachers, speaking to family members of students, and having discussions with support staff. Fred too, had a few inquiries underway and these included letter formation and the associated fine motor skills development, and the need for children to engage in independent work during reading. Some of Fred's consultations included researching writing programmes, using previous experience, having conversations with colleagues and the wider community.

For Teacher A, the visual charts *quite helpful because it helps to give you sort of... because we have to do this cycle for our stuff at school and I think I wouldn't have known even where to start with it. So it helps to give me something that I can then write down.* Fred also felt that feedback from the researchers about the inquiry that she had been doing was useful to be shared with her colleagues, *I found when I emailed through my template and then you emailing me back the questions on the bits that I needed to think about that was really helpful.*

In spite of the positive views expressed by the teachers about practitioner inquiry, they were also clear about some of the associated challenges. One of the most compelling challenges that was mentioned by the teachers was need to document their inquiries and not being able to do so because of the overwhelming demands of being a beginning teacher. This was evident in Fred's comment about not, *knowing how to document it* [the inquiry], Bill's comment about, *needing more discussion time*, and Teacher A's challenge of feeling *overwhelmed*. Bill also mentioned the challenge of *dealing with conflicting messages*, as suggested by Bill. The idea of conflicting messages was also a challenge experienced by Rachel when, *consulting too many people*. In addition, Rachel warned that when inquiry focused on an individual or small group practitioners need to, *be mindful of the other students*.

Although this paper captures the initial stage of the research, it has provided us with the rich narratives lived experiences of a group of first year teachers as inquiring practitioners. In addition, the study has re-established mutual relationship the teachers and the researchers. The teachers are keen to use the data from the study as evidence of the engagement in inquiry in their portfolio towards full teacher registration, in turn their narratives give us the researchers an understanding of how our programme may be adapted to better meet the needs of our students when they are employed as first year teachers.

Closing comments

By exploring the lived experiences of our alumni student as first year inquiring practitioner, we have not only acquired preliminary understandings of their self-directed inquiry experiences, but we seem to have rekindled a bond between the teachers and the university. This bond seemed to have emerged through our visual compilation of what we perceived to be their inquiries that surfaced from the initial interviews.

The narratives of teachers strongly point to practitioner inquiry as informing their practice which is not unexpected given that their inquiries are overwhelmingly focused on in understandings their role as teachers, classroom organisation, and behaviour management. Consequently, in spite of the transformative element as discussed by Zepke, Nugent and Leach (2003) associated with practitioner inquiry has not been made explicit yet, the willingness of these teachers to engage in inquiry and apply new learning to their practice is consistent with the sentiment expressed by Robinson and Lai (2006) who speak such teachers as having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Being new to their profession they saw practitioner inquiry as a necessary part of being an effective teacher and contributing to their professional learning. This sentiment mirrors the findings of Lieberman (2007) who found that enquiring about one's own practice has the potential to inform practitioners about areas for improvement, as well as being part of the teaching and learning discourse. Consequently, these understandings of one's profession through a deliberate self-initiated inquiry is anticipated to empower the teacher as a researcher. This empowerment also extends to teachers producing their own knowledge from their own practice-based inquiry to inform and transform their practice rather than trying to manipulate generic research for the purpose of compliance. These challenges add to those found by Thomas, Tiplady and Wall (2013).

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