Practitioner Researchers: Today’s Children of Mother Courage - What Can We Learn from Them?

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This presentation will consider:

- Lenin's question, as posed by Bertolt Brecht, "Wie und was soll man lernen?" How and what should we learn from Practitioner Researchers?

It will consider a series of Questions:

- What do we and our partners in the field understand practitioner research in education to be?
- How can we learn to listen better to our field based colleagues and what can we learn from what we hear?
- How do we develop, on the basis of our listening, the courage to dispute and resist policies that are an anathema to ethical educational practices?
- How do we resolve the twin and competing desires to celebrate and to critique the outcomes of practitioner inquiry?
- How can we re-conceptualise knowledge and theory building beyond the transient and the trivial? And
- Can practitioner and partnership research be truly reflexive? Can we understand our historical and social contexts when we are embedded within them?
The presentation draws upon:

Brecht’s theory of theatre, by which a play should not be created to cause the audience to only *emotionally* identify with the action before them, but should instead be provoked into rational self-reflection and a critical view of the actions that were taking place in order to learn about what needed to be changed and to act upon the basis of that learning.

Q1: What do we and our partners in the field understand practitioner research in education to be?

In essence it is about achieving deep understanding as a prelude to action; that is to say, inquiring and thinking before taking action - a big ask!
As Lawrence Stenhouse put it:

>For in the end it is difficult to see how teaching can be improved or how curriculum proposals can be evaluated without self-monitoring on the part of teachers. A research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved. (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 165).

Practitioner Inquiry is Costly and Risky Business

>For teachers to plan for, enact, analyse and interpret school practices, with or without academic partners, demands time, intellectual commitment and resources. The academic world, is justifiably concerned about the institutionalisation of practitioner inquiry in education, leading to it becoming no more than a form of in-service teacher education “detached from any emancipatory aspirations” (Carr & Kemmis, 2005, p. 351).
Q2: How can we learn to listen better to our field based colleagues and what can we learn from what we hear?

- Taking an example from *Medicine: How Doctors Think* the following are traps into which we can fall when not listening adequately to each other and the data:
  - rushing to judgment;
  - reaching premature conclusions;
  - being misled by social stereotypes;
  - following established pathways; and
  - being seduced by ‘cognitive cherry picking’.

Example - Learning from Early Career Teachers:

- The official line - behaviour management is the key challenge for early career teachers.
- Lesson study revealed a much more complex picture including - developing a professional identity, learning to work with others, and understanding and acting upon the culture of the school.
Q3: How do we develop the courage to dispute and resist policies that are an anathema to ethical educational practices?

► The Case of the Norwegian Resistance in WW2 - when the underground called on the teachers to resist Quisling’s fascist decrees. Between 8,000 to 10,000 of the country’s 12,000 teachers wrote letters to his Church and Education Department. All signed their names and addresses to the wording. Each teacher said he or she could neither assist in promoting fascist education of the children nor accept membership in the proposed teacher’s organization.

Q4: How do we resolve the twin desires to celebrate and critique the outcomes of practitioner inquiry?

► The trend is to the sharing conference where funded projects share their inquiries in a celebratory mode.
► But what are they sharing and how can we move to a stronger critique without being destructive of goodwill?
Example: Co-writing for Conference Presentation

A paper presented at AARE by Groundwater-Smith, S., Martin, A. Hayes, M., Herret, M., Layhe, K., Layman, A. & Saurine, J. (2006) addressed the uses of mixed methods in a single case, rather than discussing the actual project. In the debate that followed they dealt with a range of questions including quite technical ones around construct validity as well as operational ones in terms of how the outcomes might influence practice. Such an array of questions would have been unlikely in the context of a “sharing conference”.

Q5: How can we reconceptualise knowledge and theory building beyond the transient and trivial?

The most significant indicator of quality (in knowledge production) is learning. Learning emerges as critical to these knowledge processes. Good quality knowledge production is influenced by and responsive to the ability of the different members of the network researchers, practitioners, policy makers, members of voluntary groups to re-evaluate their existing knowledge and learn from the processes in which they are engaged. (Ozga, 2007p. 175)
Relation of Information to Knowledge:

- As Stenhouse reminds us information does not become knowledge until we have estimated the error in it.
- And as Wilfred Carr observes, often theory is no more than the ‘plaything of practice’.

Example: Writing One’s Process of Education

- In which teachers were requested to articulate their ‘process of education’ capturing their beliefs and how these were enacted.
- Inspired by the work of Ted Wragg - academic voices do not always fall into a black hole.
Q6: Can practitioner and partnership research be truly reflexive?

- That is to say can we understand our historic and social contexts when we are embedded in them?
- As Lash 2003 puts it: We may wish to be reflective but we have neither the time nor space to reflect. We are instead combinards. We put together networks, construct alliances, make deals. We must live, are forced to live, in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life chances are precarious. (pp. 51 – 52)
- Can we learn to be defiant against the odds?

So - "Wie und was soll man lernen?"

- As to the ‘how’ I return to my BERA 2006 paper:

  *“In the first of his 2006 Reith Lectures, on the interplay between music and society, Daniel Barenboim argued that in order to make music in concert with others we have to learn to listen to what others are playing. His point was that in a society dominated by individualism there is a need to return to a more enduring and generous collectivism. This can only be achieved when each is prepared to listen and attend to others”.*
"Wie und was soll man lernen?"

There is no simple answer to the ‘what should we learn?’ question. Torn between contradictory demands in a contemporary educational world the need for some kind of moral compass is more pressing than ever. Together, academic and field based practitioners can continue to work to uncover what is ethically possible and strive to attain that goal.