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The Emerging Context and Challenge for Practitioner Research

The BERA Practitioner Research SIG embraces educational practitioners as professionals engaged in knowledge generation, decision making, and cooperative and collaborative deliberations.



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Convenors of the BERA Practitioner Research SIG

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OUR MEMBERS

across a range of disciplines continue to actively demonstrate the significant impact of 'insider research' for critically understanding and transforming educational practices. This contributes to BERA's broad aims, including developing and defending an independent research culture committed to open inquiry and the improvement of education.

The prevailing discourse of education, evident over the last two decades and more, is dominated by the rhetoric of standards, outcomes, accountability, and the global marketisation of education. In England, for example, the predominant emphasis is on educational achievement as

measured by international test comparisons with competitor nations. This shows the influence of what has become known as the globalised neo-liberal policy field, as it plays out in the domestic sphere, both nationally and locally.

Practitioner research has become politically viable in the current conjuncture, and across the four nations in the UK, by presenting a bona fide approach to educational inquiry, even in the face of growing criticism against the general quality and rigour of practitioner research. Again in England, the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed much overt support for practitioners to research their practice in their teaching and learning environments. This is thanks to bodies such as the General Teaching Council, the National College of School Leadership, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education, the National Teacher Research Panel, the Strategic Forum on Research

in Education, and the support from (then) DfES's Best Practice Research Scholarships scheme, to name but a few initiatives.

The next decade

The challenge of this next decade will be to consciously locate our work at the interface with policy initiatives that are designed with particular intentions, often narrowly conceived. The 'what works' agenda with its technical rationality, driven by calls for economic restraint, is one policy instance that demands our attention and careful consideration.

Take the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's letter dated 1 March, 2011, to Local Authorities, regarding underperforming schools. The unequivocal message is the 'mission of making opportunity more equal' and the call is for 'relentless, persistent and focussed action', particularly in so-called weaker schools. While the emphasis is on a series of reforms, some provoking much controversy, the focus is on 'what works' and 'superb educational practice'. The preferred strategy is a form of school improvement underpinned by standards, performance

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and raising floor targets in both primary and secondary schools. This will purportedly make a contribution to addressing the challenges facing England: the current economic crisis, the scandal of declining social mobility, and educational decline relative to competitor nations (House of Commons Research Paper 11/37).

Disadvantaged pupils

In schools serving disadvantaged pupils, this politically-motivated focus on action calls for systematic analyses of low standards and concomitant performance. Here we should contemplate the Coalition's intentions, straddling both conservative and progressive agendas, but be alert to over-privileging conservative concerns with national economic performance and how these are being prioritized. Simultaneously, there is a need to tap the concerns confronting practitioners working with disadvantaged pupils from families, whether

British born or immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, many with experiences of intergenerational unemployment, trauma and dislocation. Their concerns become the foci for practitioner research, especially where its critical and reflexive rationality has the potential to facilitate practitioners' collective capacity to address the achievement gap, host informed professional conversations about pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and jointly develop collaborative whole-school-focused interventions.

Future challenges

To counteract the general criticisms frequently leveled at this kind of research, such as lack of triangulation, rigour and validation, the already established networks of learning communities devoted to this work need to be maintained and actually expanded. Fortunately, the BERA Practitioner Research SIG shows no sign of retreating from the challenges ahead, with

membership numbers buoyant from a range of different fields and an increase in the number of abstracts being submitted for entry to the 2011 BERA conference. Likewise we are making international connections with members in corresponding SIGs in the American Educational

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Research Association (AERA), the Australian Association for Research in Education, and the New Zealand Association for Research in Education. Indeed, the AERA Teacher-as-Researcher SIG is keen to encourage abstracts for the 2012 annual meeting in Vancouver. ■

New Book! Just Released! **Becoming a Mathematics Teacher: Identity and Identifications**

Tony Brown and Olwen McNamara (2011)

Examines how aspirant teachers begin to think of themselves as teachers, and about mathematics in particular. The book draws upon contemporary psychoanalytical theory in portraying the identities that teachers come to occupy, and the forms of mathematics with which they identify.

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