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Ethics in practitioner research: an issue of quality

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This contribution is set in the context of the burgeoning of practitioner inquiry in Australia, taking account also of various European and North American initiatives, against the background of the notion of action research as an emancipatory project. Practitioner inquiry, under these conditions, requires that the work move beyond a utilitarian function, important as that may be in terms of enhancing practice, and that it develops a greater capacity to critique underlying policies. It will argue that if those engaged in practitioner inquiry, in particular in education, and those who support and sponsor them, are to move beyond a celebratory mode, then it is critical that a set of criteria are developed that may be used to govern quality; both in terms of the quality of the research and the quality of the policies at the local and state levels. The case will be made for developing such a platform founded upon principles of ethicality in the interests of all stakeholders, including consequential stakeholders, that is the students themselves, and will clearly have implications for policy and practice. For us, however, the matter of ethicality transcends stakeholder interests and is a central validation issue. Thus, the contribution will draw attention to the ways in which quality is not only determined by sound research practices but also must be such that ethical principles are manifested in the structures and processes of practitioner inquiry. In this sense ethical research practice is of a substantive rather than procedural kind.

Keywords: *Action research; Practitioner research; Research ethics; Research quality*

Introduction

Practitioner research, in one form or another, has been with us for around a half a century following the initial influence of Lewin (1947).¹ The process has been seen to serve a variety of knowledge interests (Habermas, 1972) ranging from the technical rational interest—how do we solve this problem?, through the interpretive/hermeneutic interest—how do we understand this practical problem?, to the rarer emancipatory interest—how can we locate this problem in a wider social discourse and address it

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such that we enhance the opportunity for participative democratic engagement with it? In this contribution, we wish to explore this notion of practitioner research as an emancipatory project with a critical edge, focusing particularly upon the complex links between purpose, ethics and quality. The contribution thus falls into two parts. In the first, we amplify the relationship between practitioner research as a form of critical social inquiry, while in the second we focus explicitly on ethical dimensions and measures of quality.

We argue throughout that practitioner research, with its focus upon local inquiries designed to address and ameliorate local problems, should necessarily be concerned not only with solutions, but with the conditions that produced the problems in the first place. Furthermore, if practitioner research is to constitute part of the base for the justification of policy and practice, then it is vital that there is a shared, recognizable language that allows a vigorous and well-informed debate. As well, we argue that by adopting a stance that foregrounds ethicality, a dimension of quality that we believe to be missing in the Furlong and Oancea paper (2006, cf. p. 15) then those conditions which may have contributed to various challenges and problems in practices in education are more likely to be revealed and open to question.

As well we address the issue raised by Furlong and Oancea (2006) where they argue that ‘traditionally it has been assumed that there is a clear distinction between the worlds of research and the worlds of policy and practice—that there are “two communities”’ (p. 5). For us, research and practice are indivisible.

Practitioner research as an emancipatory project

Some decade on from Stenhouse’s work in the Humanities Curriculum Project (1975) and Elliott’s in the Ford Teaching Project (Elliott, 1991), Carr and Kemmis’ publication of *Becoming critical* (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) developed the notion of practitioner research as an emancipatory project or what they called ‘a critical social science’. In spite of the impact of these seminal writers and the force of their arguments, at the beginning of a new millennium, there continues to be a dominance of treating educational problems as technical, and thus able to be resolved objectively through a rational assessment of evidence gathered within a positivist research paradigm. The effort of much practitioner inquiry has been to identify what ends can be achieved rather than investigate, in any way, what those ends ought to be. This is well recognized by Kemmis (2004) who has indicated:

The truth is that most of the people it (*Becoming critical*) aimed to challenge and persuade simply continued to do the kinds of positivistic and interpretive social and educational science that they had always done. And they still do. (Kemmis, 2004, p. 2)

As one of us recently argued, what counts as professional knowledge is a much more interesting and complex matter than in times gone by, when it was seen that it was the role of academia and dedicated Government agencies to develop such knowledge and communicate it to the cognate profession (Groundwater-Smith, 2006). In their initial work Gibbons *et al.* (1994) developed our understanding that knowledge

creation is not exclusively a matter for scientists and academics working in institutions but may be socially produced and distributed in the form of what they coined as 'Mode 2 knowledge'. Such knowledge production is concerned with the identification and solution of practical problems in the lived professional lives of practitioners and organizations which are not encircled by the boundaries of single academic disciplines with their many rules and customary practices. It is reflexive knowledge in that it results from a dialogic process as conversations in the field. They posed the proposition that the production of knowledge and the processes of research were due for a radical transformation. They were concerned that the separation between the two was problematic as was the division of labour, where practitioners were seen as responsible for applying the knowledge generated by academic researchers. The very problem identified by Furlong and Oancea (2006). As we have argued elsewhere 'the knowledge that drives professional practice and the "theoretical knowledge" valued by the academy are not mutually exclusive' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2006, p. 107).

All of this is to recognize that in the broader research community there continues to be a debate regarding the worth of educational research as a basis for constructing either policy or practice. Feuer *et al.* (2002) argue strongly for what they term 'a scientific culture of educational research' (p. 4). This they see to be a 'set of norms and practices and ethos of honesty, openness and continuous reflection, including how research quality is judged' (p. 4). To this we would add the necessity that whatever method, it is guided by a series of ethical principles, a concern to which we shall return at a later point. The arguments regarding method, norms and practices certainly can be seen to apply to practitioner research. Such inquiry must be able to stand up to the scrutiny of both the field of practice and the academic community's expectation that it be systematically undertaken and theoretically robust.

Today we are faced, once again, with a regressive stance on what kinds of research should inform educational practice. We need only to look at the Bush policy in the US, articulated through the *Education Sciences Reform Act* of 2002—a policy that is having ramifications across the English Speaking World, including Australia. The view of science written into law by the Bush administration is clearly a positivist one with its exclusive emphasis upon the employment of randomized controlled clinical trials precisely designed to solve those 'technical problems' to which Carr and Kemmis referred and which others see to only be a thin slice of research in such a complex and interactive field as education where the complexities and exigencies of practice do not readily yield to laboratory conditions with their strict and carefully constructed controls.

As Yates (2004) in her powerful account of these and similar developments indicated, a report by scientific experts from the National Academies in the US was less wedded to one particular form of investigation, setting out instead the following principles that all science should follow and which can be applied across the range of social services, not only education:

- Pose significant questions that can be investigated empirically.
- Link research to relevant theory.

- Use methods that permit direct investigations of the questions.
- Provide a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning.
- Yield findings that replicate and generalize across studies.
- Disclose research data and methods to enable and encourage professional scrutiny and critique. (Feuer *et al.*, 2002, p. 7, quoted in Yates, 2004, p. 25)

The international debate concerning research in education is increasingly being dominated by such agenda as that espoused by the Bush Government. It is unfortunate that practitioner research has barely moved beyond satisfying such technical knowledge interests also; ones that we outlined earlier in this contribution. It has been popularized, domesticated and appropriated as an implementation tool instead of as a liberatory social change method with far reaching implications (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2006).

In Australia this is most recently evident in relation to the Quality Teaching Program (www.qualityteaching.dest.gov.au), a National Government Program that aims to extend teacher professional learning in the key areas of literacy, numeracy, mathematics, science, information technology and vocational education and training. Mediated through state-based agencies, in both the Government and non-Government sectors, the conditions for grantees are highly specific with little room to vary from what is required. Thus the iterative cycle of problem identification, reflection, action, problem reconceptualization so characteristic of practitioner inquiry is effectively denied as there is no provision for a critique of any features of the policy itself. The problem is the Government's problem, not that of the practitioner. As Carr and Kemmis put it so powerfully, action research, within their conceptualization, a critical social science:

... not only attempts to identify contradictions between educational and institutional practices, it actually creates a sense of these contradictions for the self-critical community of action researchers. It does so by asserting an alternative set of values to the bureaucratic values of institutions. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 197)

Of course Carr and Kemmis developed their arguments in a different time and space. In the 20 years that have elapsed since their groundbreaking analysis much has changed in terms of the intervention of the state across the world in a variety of different jurisdictions. For example Judah and Richardson (2006) in writing of action research in Canada regard those engaged in state mandated action research projects as occupying a space between 'a rock and a (very) hard place' (p. 65). It becomes important to the state that those stories told in the public domain are the stories that they wish the public to hear, and that these stories themselves are highly performative.

Our case then is that if there is not some fidelity to the stories that matter to the practitioner but may not be of great account to the state, then there has been a serious omission in ethical terms. For while the interests of the state are undoubtedly of significance, arguably of more importance in terms of the broader critical project are the interests of practitioners and the consequential stakeholders. This term is one that particularly appeals to us in that it recognizes that learners in institutions, be they schools, universities or further education facilities deal with the consequences of the policies and practices of others on a daily basis.

Practitioner inquiry, quality and ethics

Elsewhere we have written of ethics as one of the ‘three basic tests’ of quality for any practitioner research project (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2002). While there has been a significant spotlight shone on the connection between (and indeed, interweaving of) ethics and quality in qualitative research generally over the past 10 years (see Lincoln, 1995; Zeni, 2001; Olesen, 2003; Hilsen, 2006), particularly with regard to feminist and participatory research paradigms, relatively little has been produced relating specifically to the issue of ethics vis-à-vis quality in practitioner research. For example, Eikeland’s writing (2006) is directed not to individual researchers and their practice but to the community of practitioner researchers. He is a Norwegian philosopher who has worked both practically and theoretically with action/practitioner research in both public and private organizations. He draws attention to who is actually included in that community and what they do to themselves and others. As he observed, ‘It becomes clear that the ethical dilemmas experienced depend very much upon from what position the research is done’ (p. 41). Important as his observations are, the missing element for us is the relationship between the ethical dilemmas that he raises and the matter of quality.

Suggestions for criteria for quality are made often in the literature by advocates of practitioner research. For example, in their introduction to practitioner research methods, Altrichter *et al.* (1993) establish four criteria for evaluating the quality of action research. They are:

1. Considering alternative perspectives: *Have the understandings gained from research been cross-checked against the perspectives of those concerned and/or other researchers?*
2. Testing through practical action: *Have the understandings gained from research been tested through practical action?*
3. Ethical justification: *Are the research methods compatible with both educational aims and democratic human values?*
4. Practicality: *Are the research design and data collection methods compatible with the demands of teaching?* (pp. 74–81).

Similarly, Anderson and Herr (1999) have suggested that we consider five validity criteria: outcome validity; process validity; democratic validity; catalytic validity and dialogic validity. Outcome validity refers to the impact that the inquiry has on practice—has it led to a resolution or reframing of the problem? Process validity points to the appropriateness of the methods that have been adopted to the question being investigated. Democratic validity, as the name suggests, refers to the extent that all stakeholders are consulted and engaged in the inquiry. Catalytic validity points to the transformative potential of the research, while dialogic validity refers to the kind of intersubjectivity upon which Stenhouse insisted. It is in relation to the last of these that Mishler (1990) develops his considerable and powerful arguments in that he forcefully puts the case that ‘trustworthiness’ must be a central tenet of research and a sub-dimension that is clearly of importance to Furlong and Oancea (2006). In Mishler’s case trustworthiness applies most critically in medical and mental health

studies, and that such trustworthiness is best tested through ongoing discourse among those who participate in it.

While we agree that such criteria (and here we note that these are two sets of many) are both sensible and effective, we wish to argue here for the intrinsic and fundamental relationship between ethics and quality within practitioner research aiming towards an emancipatory goal. Indeed we suggest a hierarchical relationship where ethical issues form the primary criteria for quality in practitioner research, and the establishment of a number of 'implications for quality' which naturally flow from a framework of ethics. Clearly ethics are informed by values which assemble into a values system. On the one hand, in our view, values are those constructs held by individuals, they may differ from person to person, move towards stability and indeed become habitual; they are personal and influenced by social context. On the other hand, ethics are part of a broader social discourse governing the rightness or wrongness of action, and as such belong in the realm of the collective and the public. We should not confuse ethics with efficiency. In the end, ethics is associated with morality, which again is informed by values.

In our view ethicality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for quality. One can undertake studies that are methodologically sound but may employ covert observations (in education it is not uncommon for teachers, as practitioner researchers, to collect data on their students without their knowledge and consent) and thus do not meet ethical validity criteria in that there is no opportunity for members of the community with whom the research is concerned being able to challenge either the observations or the interpretations. The point that we wish to stress is that practitioner research *must* meet ethical criteria if it is to meet norms for quality. At the same time, it is conceivable that enquiries can be conducted ethically, but not engage in sound research principles such as following a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning as outlined by Feuer *et al.* (2002). Clearly the two relate one to the other.

In her work on 'the ethical teacher', Elizabeth Campbell (2003) makes a case for the use of ethics as a primary framework for thinking about teachers and teachers' work generally. Such a framework, she posits, has the potential to provide a renewed sense of professionalism (through providing a focal point for the rethinking of the profession in ethical terms), a basis for renewed school cultures (through using the moral basis of teachers' work as a 'touchstone' for school reform), and a catalyst for renewed teacher education and professional learning. For Campbell, the project of developing ethical teacher professionalism relates closely to the greater project of working towards civil society, through the harnessing of the 'moral purpose' (Fullan, 1993) implicit in the teaching enterprise. In this, she echoes Sachs' (2000, 2003) conceptualization of an 'activist teaching profession', where the aim is to 'improve all aspects of the education enterprise at the macro level and student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community at the micro level' (Sachs, 2000, p. 77).

The notion of ethical teacher professionalism, then, holds a number of important implications for practitioner research and for our discussion of quality therein. In the

first place, it sits well with Lewin's assertion that the defining characteristic of Action Research should be that it is 'research leading to social action' (Lewin, 1946, p. 203), and subsequent conceptualizations of the emancipatory nature of practitioner research such as those discussed at length above. Indeed, the enterprise of practitioner research has a reflexive relationship with the ethical or activist professional in that it both provides a tool for engaging with the larger goal of such professionalism and 'can contribute to the larger political project of creating an activist [and ethical] teaching profession' (Sachs, 2003, p. 92).

To return to Altrichter *et al.*'s criteria for quality in practitioner research, while only one relates explicitly to ethics, it could in fact be argued that all four emanate from a framework of ethics. The first through its call to transparency and triangulation, in our opinion a key facet of ethical operation within practitioner research, the second through the call for 'action' emanating from practitioner research, which is highly congruent with Campbell's notion of the ethical professional, and the fourth through an implicit highlighting of the importance of teacher agency within the framework of practitioner research. Similarly, each of Anderson and Herr's validity criteria embrace ethical principles at their core.

For us ethics is not merely a series of boxes to be ticked as a set of procedural conditions, usually demanded by university human research ethics committees and the like, but is an orientation to research practice that is deeply embedded in those working in the field in a substantive and engaged way. Importantly, it has implications for the matter of working critically. Practitioner research that provides only celebratory accounts may meet procedural requirements, but will fail to address the more difficult and challenging substantive ethical concerns in relation to the wider social and political agenda.

We wish to pose here a series of broad, overriding 'ethical' guidelines for practitioner research, some of which are linked to a traditional conceptualization of research ethics, while others flow from the discourse of the 'ethical professional':

- *That it should observe ethical protocols and processes.* Practitioner research is subject to the same ethical protocols as other social research. Informed consent should be sought from participants, whether students, teachers, parents or others, and an earnest attempt should be made to 'do no harm'.
- *That it should be transparent in its processes.* One of the broader aims of practitioner research lies in the building of community and the sharing of knowledge and ideas. To this end, practitioner research should be 'transparent' in its enactment, and practitioner researchers accountable to their community for the processes and products of their research.
- *That it should be collaborative in its nature.* Practitioner research should aim to provide opportunities for colleagues to share, discuss and debate aspects of their practice in the name of improvement and development. The responsible 'making sense' of data collected from within the field of one's own practice (through triangulation of evidence and other means) relies heavily on these opportunities.

- *That it should be transformative in its intent and action.* Practitioner researchers engage in an enterprise which is, in essence, about contributing to both transformation of practice and transformation of society. Responsible and ethical practitioner research operates in such a way as to create actionable, actioned outcomes.
- *That it should be able to justify itself to its community of practice.* Engaging in practitioner research involves an opportunity cost to the community. To do well requires time and energy that cannot be spent in other professional ways. The benefits must be commensurable with the effort and resources expended in the course of the work which necessarily will require collaboration and communication.

Quality, however, should not be taken to be an all-embracing term. It requires close interrogation in relation to matters of evidence, concerns regarding purpose and the nature of the outcomes that are produced. If indeed we are concerned with 'quality assurance' with respect to practitioner research, we must attend to all three. In this final section of our contribution, we suggest some key concerns around each.

Quality of evidence

'Evidence' is not an innocent construct. Indeed, laws of evidence, in practice, are rules about kinds of discourse; what discourse is to count as potent and effective and in what form and, alternatively, what is disqualified. The quality of the evidence lies both in its substance and in its argument. We have only to reflect on the 'history wars' in Australia (Macintyre & Clark, 2003) or the case made for the invasion of Iraq on the grounds of the existence of weapons of mass destruction to see how problematic the issue of evidence is.

To further complicate the matter there is the issue of testimony, whose account counts? Laub (1992) in her searing discussion of it with respect to the holocaust indicated that there are three distinct and separate levels of witnessing:

... the level of being witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being the witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being witness to the process of witnessing itself. (Lamb, 1992, p. 75)

It is also the case that new evidence is emerging all of the time. Beliefs about how the body operates, for example, are constantly being challenged by new evidence arising from research, and not necessarily randomized control trials at that.

Our argument in this contribution is to focus on the quality of evidence that is required to transform practice rather than to inform large systems-based policies, after all as Ball (1997) put it:

Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do is narrowed or changed or particular outcomes are set. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, offset and balanced against other expectations. (Ball, 1997, p. 257)

In the end, the quality of evidence, for us, will rest upon the ways in which it has been collected and the purposes to which it will be put—in effect, as we argued above, that it first and foremost meets the ethical tests that we have set out.

Thus, evidence collected under duress, evidence collected covertly, evidence that is not validated by triangulation and evidence that has not been debated, in our view is evidence that is invalid.

Quality of purpose

The issue of purpose is significant within any discussion of quality guidelines for practitioner inquiry, predominantly because of the potential for the 'research agenda' to impact in considerable ways upon the collection, analysis and reporting of data and the outcomes and 'action' of the research itself. In terms of quality of purpose, we see three key tensions at play within the arena of practitioner inquiry, namely:

- The autonomy and freedom of internally fuelled projects *vs.* the lure of external funding.
- Teacher research as a catalyst for improved classroom practice *vs.* whole-school inquiry as a catalyst for school improvement.
- Practitioner inquiry for professional transformation *vs.* 'action research' as a vehicle for compliance.

While we wish not to present these tensions as bi-polar dichotomies, we offer them as real and salient issues within schools and a useful 'way in' to this discussion of the agenda and purpose of teacher inquiry.

Sachs (2003) has written at length of the question of 'whose questions get asked?' in the context of school-based practitioner research:

A central but unacknowledged dimension of school-based research, whether conducted by teachers and academics collaboratively or individually, is the issue of whose questions get put on the research agenda? This issue stands at the core of many successful or failed research attempts. (Sachs, 2003, pp. 83–84)

While her examples are limited to those where an academic-driven agenda has the potential to hijack the practitioner research enterprise, Sachs draws an excellent depiction of the problems inherent in research responding to questions imposed by an outside agenda. Indeed, it is in the realm of this issue that the three key tensions outlined above exist.

The external funding for practitioner research projects such as those which are now common in the UK and Australia in particular can provide opportunities for in-school professional development which would not otherwise exist. There is, however 'no such thing as a free lunch', and teacher researchers can sometimes find themselves caught up in an externally imposed implementation agenda rather than an agenda of personal and community transformation which might otherwise drive the project. The key to navigating this tension, we suspect, is to draw the impetus for the project from the local needs and requirements of the school and teachers while at the same time meeting the requirements of the funding. Such an approach, however, relies on a commitment on the part of the school executive as well as the practitioner researchers to such transformation.

Finally, practitioner research fails the 'quality of purpose' test when it is implemented in a 'top down' way which denies teacher agency and is aimed at serving the school or system hierarchy. While practitioner research can be a highly effective and transformative method of developing professional learning for whole school change, we agree with Sachs' assessment that 'first and foremost, the desire to engage in teacher research must be a choice, it cannot be mandated from the top down' (2003, p. 89). Whether the motivation for such 'top down' impetus is merely a benign belief in the power of practitioner inquiry or a more sinister push for compliance and regulation, such efforts are more likely to breed cynicism and discontent than development and emancipation. The key to navigating these tensions, we believe, lies in working slowly, engaging teachers with a will and interest in practitioner research and encouraging them to share their learnings and new understandings with their colleagues, building trust and adding new opportunities for engagement along the way.

Quality of outcome

Given, then, that purposes for engaging in practitioner research in education settings will greatly vary, with some more oriented to an emancipatory knowledge interest than others, how are we to judge the quality of the outcomes? Our first yardstick for making such judgements is grounded in our earlier discussion of ethical practice and the quality of the discourse. As we have already indicated, understanding, in and of itself, is not sufficient. An important outcome is that the knowledge that has been developed is acted upon. Knowledge must be put to good use. There is an interesting parable to be found in Funder's *Stasiland* (2002) where she details the extraordinary lengths to which the GDR went in order to gather information of the doings of its citizens. And yet with all that 'knowledge' it could not predict the fall of the Berlin Wall. Knowing what is happening in education settings is not enough to change them. There must be a will to step into the twenty-first century and rethink schooling anew.

One of the difficulties in achieving such an outcome is the current inclination to celebrate practice rather than develop an authentic critique. 'Sharing' conferences, where participants come to discuss their achievements in such programs as the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program rarely report ways in which the investigations have challenged existing and established policies that all too often govern practice. A significant quality outcome, in our terms, would be one where the education bureaucracy, itself, has the courage and fortitude to listen and attend to critical insights that those working at the 'chalkface' may have. It is unlikely that we shall see any great departure from celebratory accounts while practitioners feel that their critique will go unremarked, at best, or receive negative attention, at worst. Learning about practice through research is a powerful hammer; we must take care that we do not use it only to crack very small nuts.

A quality outcome for well conducted, ethical, practitioner research in the context of education is an affirmation of the scholarship of teaching. In many ways

we see teachers having been deprofessionalized by the KISS principle—Keep it simple, stupid. Too often complex and competing ideas are reduced to ten-minute soundbites. Already there are templates and companions being published to enable teachers to put together strategies to engage students in the kind of higher order thinking advocated as a result of the Queensland Productive Pedagogies and New South Wales Quality Teaching Paper initiatives. In the meta-evaluation of the New South Wales Priority Action Schools Program (PASP), Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis (2003) noted the capacity of teachers to engage in sustained professional conversation and action around practices in some of the state's most challenging schools. The very nature of the program, that gave agency to teachers, created conditions where it was possible, even desirable to work around some of the existing 'roadblocks'.

Conclusion

The conduct of quality practitioner research is in its very nature ethical business. The dynamic which exists between practitioner research and professional practice for educators is such that ethicality cannot be divorced from quality in practitioner research any more than it can be divorced from quality in professional practice. Teaching is or should be moral practice. After all, it is conceivable that one can 'improve' on practices that are unfair and inequitable. One could imagine that a practitioner researcher could become even better at sorting and labelling students through a set of assessment practices that he or she has researched. However for those consequential stakeholders, the students themselves, this could visit upon them incalculable harm. Quality is always troublesome and never easily resolved. It requires of practitioner researchers not only an understanding of the technicalities of research and reflective practice, but an unwavering commitment to ethics and the improvement of the human condition in the context within which they work.

This contribution may be read in two ways: as a discussion regarding a particular lens through which quality in practitioner research may be viewed, that is ethicality; but also as a gentle critique of Furlong and Oancea (2006). For while we find much to agree with in their report, that is after all the basis of this special edition, we also believe that they have not given sufficient prominence to ethicality as a dimension of quality. Certainly, they have attended to ethical issues throughout their study, but in the end it is the technical knowledge interests that they most acknowledge and serve. Taking an emancipatory stance may be a little old fashioned; but it is one to which we strongly adhere and which we hope this contribution strongly defends.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. For a helpful series of essays on action research or practitioner research, both phrases being used interchangeably see Hollingworth (1997).

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