



The BERA Guide to Practitioner Research

Developing Professional Knowledge in
Educational Research and Practice

EDITED BY

Kate Mawson
Claire Haresnape Tyson
Thomas Perry
Joyce I-Hui Chen

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The BERA Guides

Critical Insights into Educational Research and Practice

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Developing Professional Knowledge
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About the Editors

Dr Kate Mawson is an internationally recognised advocate for practitioner research in education, known for bridging rigorous academic inquiry with professional practice. Across a career spanning more than 25 years, she has worked as an Associate Professor in Russell Group universities, post-92 institutions, and both state and independent school sectors. Her sustained involvement in teacher education, from initial teacher training to postgraduate supervision and colleague development and mentoring, underpins her commitment to developing research-literate educators. Holding a Professional Doctorate in Education, Dr Mawson has published widely on practitioner research and evidence-informed pedagogy. Her work foregrounds the role of inquiry as a driver of professional learning and systemic change.

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Dr Thomas Perry is a social scientist, education researcher and educator. He works at the intersection of research, policy and practice, with a focus on generating and applying evidence to address real-world challenges in education. He is Reader in Education Studies and Director of Postgraduate Research in the School of Education, Learning and Communication Sciences at the University of Warwick.

Dr Joyce I-Hui Chen is Quality Enhancement Manager and Centre Manager for Initial Teacher Education. She has been working in different educational sectors for more than 20 years in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom (UK), from primary education to higher education. Her current job role includes initial teacher education, organisational development and teachers' professional development and learning in a general further education college in England. She has undertaken several practitioner research projects over the last 10 years in the further education sector. Her main research interests are FE policies, practice-focused professional development and learning and ethical practice. She is passionate about connecting and collaborating with practitioners across different educational sectors and has been supporting practitioners with research. She has co-founded a research and innovation forum to engage with internal and external colleagues who can exchange knowledge and research.

About the Contributors

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Camtree (the Cambridge Teacher Research Exchange) are a team of academics and practitioners based at Hughes Hall and the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. With many years' experience working with and as practitioners, we are seeking to develop system-level enablers to challenges of sharing and learning from practitioner research.

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Adriane Martini is currently working at a leading independent school in North London as Director of Teaching and Learning, Head of Research and A-level Psychology Teacher. In the role as Head of Research, she conducts academic studies to support the school's pedagogical development, disseminating findings through CPD sessions and publishing an annual research journal with contributions from colleagues, as well as seeking to connect with other researchers across the world. She has just

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Frances-Ann Norton is a practice-focused educational researcher and an artist educator. Her research is influenced by constructivist paradigms in Dewey's experiential learning and Bernstein's Pedagogic Rights. She lectures in art and teacher training. She has given papers at international conferences and has been published in academic journals and book chapters.

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Gina Stafford is a Senior Leader at a large secondary school for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), where she leads on Teaching, Learning, Research, Initial Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development. Currently completing a Doctorate in Education, Gina combines academic research with practical expertise to drive meaningful improvements within her school and in the local community. Gina is a keen advocate of system leadership, championing collaboration and the sharing of best practice across schools and local partnerships. Her belief in research-informed strategies and collective responsibility underpins her mission to enhance life chances for the most vulnerable learners; ensuring every child has access to high-quality, equitable education.

Marianne Talbot is a PhD researcher, investigating the impact of professional development in educational assessment on qualified teachers and their assessment practice. She is an Academic Personal Tutor, a Chartered Educational Assessor, a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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Introduction and Editorial Perspective on Practitioner Research

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Introducing This Book

This edited collection brings together a diverse set of practitioner researchers who offer insights grounded in their own professional settings, challenges, and priorities. At its heart, this book is a contribution to the growing body of work that takes practitioner research (PR) seriously – not only as a methodological stance, but as a way of knowing, acting, and enriching education.

Our aim is to foreground PR as a meaningful, rigorous, and impactful approach to inquiry. Across the chapters, contributors explore the possibilities and constraints of conducting research from within their professional roles, bringing attention to both the richness and complexity of practitioner-led inquiry. In doing so, the book offers a window into the realities of researching practice from within, often with the intention of improving that very practice.

We are particularly concerned with fostering dialogue around three core questions:

- What counts as PR?
- What values and purposes underpin it?
- How can PR contribute to educational knowledge and change?

The chapters that follow do not offer a singular answer to these questions. Instead, they offer a multiplicity of perspectives – shaped by context, role, discipline, and purpose – which, we believe, is both necessary and valuable. We see this diversity not as a limitation but as a hallmark of the field.

Purpose and Ethos

The impetus behind this book was to create a space where practitioner researchers could reflect on their work in ways that are theoretically grounded, methodologically sound, and personally and professionally meaningful. We wanted to create a collection that is both practical and provocative – one that can support others engaging in PR, while also asking difficult and generative questions about its assumptions, boundaries, and contributions.

From the outset, we have treated this as a collaborative and dialogic endeavour. We began by sharing with contributors our editorial perspective on PR – the central section of this chapter – and invited them to respond, reflect, or critique its assumptions and arguments in their own chapters. In this way, the book becomes a conversation: between editors and contributors, between different professional communities, and between theory and practice.

In shaping the book, we also embraced a level of heterogeneity – in both voice and style – that reflects the field’s diversity. Rather than impose a uniform tone or structure, we aimed to honour the situatedness of each contributor’s voice. The editorial process involved read-through sessions, group meetings, and feedback loops that allowed for both individual expression and collective shaping. We resisted the temptation to produce a ‘textbook’ that reduces everything to a single understanding. Instead, we have created a glossary to support readers in navigating the variety of terms used, without insisting on a single, homogeneous vocabulary. In doing so, we acknowledge that PR, like the communities it represents, thrives on difference, dialogue, and contextual meaning-making.

In curating this volume, we were guided by a set of shared commitments:

- To value the knowledge produced in practice, by practitioners, for practitioners and the communities they serve.
- To recognise the diversity of PR traditions, purposes, and philosophical commitments.
- To maintain a focus on ethical, contextually grounded, and reflexive forms of inquiry.
- To highlight both the possibilities and the tensions involved in occupying the dual identity of practitioner and researcher.

We hope this collection serves not only as a resource but also as a stimulus to think differently about the role of practitioners in educational research, and to affirm their place as legitimate, capable, and creative knowledge-makers.

PR: An Editorial Perspective

As the first step in the collaborative process of writing this book, we, the editors, developed and then shared our perspectives on PR as a form of inquiry. Our contributing authors were asked to include their responses and reflections on our perspective in their chapters. This was intended to be a way to create a meta-cognitive level of understanding that we could use to connect with each other and to have useful discussions.

Taking a historical perspective, we can see that over the years, PR has been ‘shaped and reshaped in relation to the era within which it has existed’ (Dana, 2016, p. 1). We have come a long way since Stenhouse noted the reluctance of educational researchers to engage teachers as partners in, and critics of, the research process (Stenhouse, 1985, p. 1).

Currently, there is an interest in ‘close-to-practise research’¹ and Parsons emphasises the central importance of collaboration to the generation of knowledge (Parsons, 2021, p. 1490). While there may be an assumption in CtP that academic knowledge is

separate from practice and can be ‘transferred’ to bring about improvements, it is also possible to create collaborative partnerships where knowledge is shared or exchanged. A common barrier to such work may be differences in epistemological biases and stances, but discussion of these could create more coherence and enrich understanding between parties.

Our starting point is that PR is research done by practitioners for practical purposes. The nature of education means that practitioners deal with the complex, dynamic and messy issues of practical action. A curious and reflective teacher can hardly avoid asking themselves ‘What is happening here?’, ‘What should and can I do to make this better?’, and ‘What will best achieve my aims?’. When that inquiry becomes sustained, self-critical, systematic and/or shared (Stenhouse, 1985, p. 18), we can say it starts to take the form of research (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 103; also see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, pp. 23–24).

Philosophical Worldview

PR is, by definition, closely linked to action and therefore naturally lends itself to pragmatic philosophical positions. Much PR is rooted in the work of John Dewey and the belief that practitioners are both ‘consumers’ and ‘producers’ of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 9). What does Dewey’s pragmatism have to offer us? He provides an account of knowledge and an understanding of the way in which human beings can acquire knowledge that differs from philosophies focused on generalisation, abstraction and representation. He deals with questions of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge within a framework of a philosophy of action. Human action is always the interactions between elements of human nature and the environment both natural and social. This transactional approach (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 10) where reality reveals itself as a result of these interactions allows knowledge to be both constructed and based on reality.

PR has an affinity to but is not limited to pragmatist research philosophy and methodology. Practitioners have the philosophical freedom to embrace other philosophies, including positivist

and constructionist forms of knowledge. The purpose for PR is that research is applied. This allows for pluralism and calls for what Biesta (2020) describes as being pragmatic without being a pragmatist. We are not saying that we should sidestep the debates about the values of different forms of knowledge, that debate is both healthy and necessary and fosters collaborative partnerships, but we are saying that we can consciously avoid taking up a position that is too fixed and therefore self-limiting.

Methodology

There is a strong tradition of PR being framed as action research (Finch, 2022). Our position is that being a practitioner researcher often involves action research but that the role will benefit from engaging with a range of research methodologies and skills. The ability to choose the most appropriate method for the practical problem in focus is consistent with the pragmatic worldview and the variety of hierarchical positions and different roles that Practitioner Researchers may occupy in their institutions.

Adopting Mixed Methods Research (MMR) is also common as it allows the PR to choose from both qualitative and quantitative methods, utilising those tools and methods that best suit their inquiry. By remaining in a state of neutrality in the ‘paradigm wars’ (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14) and taking a pluralistic approach PR can conduct more effective research especially in interdisciplinary and complex situations.

Typical responsibilities that we have been able to identify from our own experience, reading and engagement with the BERA SIG community² include:

- Developing a methodology and philosophical worldview as a basis for research in one’s own practice.
- Acknowledging and giving voice to the different perspectives that are operating within an institution.
- Embedding ethical research practices within an institution.

- Upholding academic integrity and academic honesty in a community and in personal practice.
- Supporting colleagues to become critical and reflective in their practice and/or research.
- Measuring, describing, and evaluating the impact of what is happening in an institution.
- Building outward facing links with academic institutions and the wider research community.
- Communicating and sharing results with the students, staff, and parents.
- Publishing and disseminating research to the wider community.
- Contributing to the professional development of colleagues and students by sharing and fostering research skills and research knowledge.
- Being aware of the educational research landscape and how different organisations or institutions hold differing views on implementing what works.

Ethics, Power, and Positionality

Power is an important consideration for PR, in terms of the legitimacy and resource for different forms of research in education and in terms of how the practitioner researcher is situated in and interacts with their immediate and wider community. A practitioner researcher may be working at leadership level, as a classroom teacher or a teacher trainee. As well as their hierarchical position in their own context, practitioner researchers occupy a ‘third space’ (Ostinelli, 2016, p. 542) between the worlds of academic knowledge and practical knowledge. This requires them to acknowledge and value differing forms of evidence ranging from individual experiences and local understandings to wider, more universally accepted findings from educational research. The ability to think critically about the utility of both forms of knowledge is a key skill for conducting research that has both impact and rigour.

There is also a need to think critically about ethics and values and adopt a consonant form of research practice. The distinction between procedural ethics (what researchers are told by HEIs that they need to do) and ethics-in-practice (what researchers do in the field) is an interesting point that we invite you to explore. PR is also connected to values that are inherent to the role of practitioner and that these need to be explicitly acknowledged. ‘Living with the consequences of research makes practitioner researchers more conscientious about values in relation to current research participants and the future impact of their work’ (Fox et al., 2007, p. 197).

PR as Unsettled and Evolving

With this clarification of our own understanding of what it means to be a Practitioner Researcher, we offered an opportunity for our contributors to respond with their own viewpoints and their critique of our vision of PR that is substantially rooted in a pragmatist worldview. ‘The role is underpinned by reflexivity that comes from the proximity of the practitioner to the field of research’ (Fox et al., 2007, p. 196). Reflexivity recognises that there is a continuous exchange between the researcher, the researched and the research which is fundamental to the action research. As such, reflexivity should be incorporated into the research in a systematic and rigorous manner.

Our view is that it is a dynamic and evolving role that reflects the changes to the profession and discipline as well as the unique requirements of each context. Today, some of the shared characteristics include collegiate relationships between practitioner researchers and participants; emancipatory practices; and the transformational agency of practitioner researchers. It is our hope that the different contributors to this book will illustrate many of these characteristics and bring them to life for us.

Concluding Thoughts: Themes and Trajectories

This book is intended as both an invitation and a challenge: an invitation to engage with the richly varied practices of PR, and

a challenge to take seriously its potential to shape educational thinking, policy, and practice from within.

Across the chapters, our contributors examine PR from multiple vantage points. The book is structured around four key themes that emerged from our editorial conversations and the submitted chapters – themes that we believe offer a coherent yet expansive way to explore the field.

- **Section 1** addresses *the field of PR and its associated worldviews*. Here, contributors grapple with foundational questions about what PR is, why it matters, and how different philosophical and methodological positions influence the way we do and understand this work.
- **Section 2** explores *identity, power, and positionality*. These chapters examine what it means to research from within – negotiating roles, relationships, and responsibilities. They foreground questions of legitimacy, agency, and the ethical tensions that arise when the researcher is also a colleague, leader, or learner in the field they study.
- **Section 3** focuses on *professional learning and the sharing of skills*. These chapters illustrate the ways PR can foster collaborative cultures, build capacity, and support the development of research-informed practice. They highlight how research can become a shared endeavour, embedded in professional communities.
- **Section 4** turns to *research knowledge and research quality, including ethics*. Here, contributors consider the standards by which PR is judged, the diverse forms of knowledge it generates, and the ethical imperatives of working in ways that are both contextually sensitive and methodologically rigorous.

Throughout the book, readers will encounter examples of research that is both deeply embedded in professional settings and shaped by broader theoretical and ethical concerns. We hope these chapters provoke critical engagement, spark new questions, and inspire further research by and with practitioners.

This book does not attempt to define PR once and for all – nor should it. Instead, we hope it offers a map of a rich and