

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

George Gilchrist
January 2015



SCEL

Scottish College for
Educational Leadership

Introduction

This investigation looks at practitioner enquiry approaches to individual and school development and how we might develop these further within schools and systems. Having used these for the last four years in both of the schools I lead, I have lots of personal experience and evidence as to their effectiveness, as well as of the difficulties and challenges. I have also had the opportunity to speak to other school and system leaders about the benefits and the challenges they see in adopting enquiry approaches. There is a lot of national and international evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach and I refer to some of this in my Literature Review below. Both the GTCS Professional Standards (2012) and Graham Donaldson's review 'Teaching Scotland's Future' (2011) advocate the adoption of enquiry approaches for teacher and leadership development. We now have support at a National level from both Scottish Government, who accepted all of Donaldson's recommendations, and the teachers' own professional body, GTCS, and Education Scotland for taking enquiry approaches to professional development. In this investigation I have considered impact for pupils, teachers, schools, schools within their locality and the system as a whole. It is my contention that there are benefits to all in the system, but especially our learners and those who fall within lowest 20% of attainers and achievers. I feel enquiry can enable us to deliver so many national, local and school outcomes, and to achieve this we have to identify some of the barriers to greater adoption, and how we may overcome these.

The Issue

Enquiry approaches to individual professional development and school development have been shown to work and have impact in schools and systems across the world. I have particular experience of practitioner enquiry and its impact for learners. Therefore, I wish to consider three issues:

1. How efficacious is practitioner enquiry?
2. What are some of the main barriers that prevent wider-scale adoption of enquiry approaches within schools and systems?
3. What can be done to overcome these barriers?

Literature Review

There are a multitude of papers, articles and books that look at, or consider, practitioner enquiry approaches to professional and school development. For the purpose of this report I have narrowed these down to three key texts which have influenced my thinking and practice.

'Visible Learning For Teachers' is by John Hattie. (Routledge 2012) As part of his meta-research study, Hattie looked at characteristics found in the high performing teachers and school leaders. Hattie noted that 'the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching. (p14)' He was pointing out that if we wish to improve attainment and achievement for all pupils, then our teachers need to be constantly critically evaluating their own practice and particularly its impact on learning, a central principle of practitioner enquiry approaches to professional development.

Michael Fullan's 'What's Worth fighting for In Headship?'(Open University Press 2008) remains an important influencer on school leaders. There are many key messages in what is a relatively short but deep piece of writing and research. Fullan recognised the rapid changes that had happened across not only Canada but also in other countries in terms of school, teacher and system development. 'The role of instructional leader is far more daunting than people imagined, and cannot be learned through a series of workshops or even through one-to-one mentoring. Learning in context requires that we focus on changing the culture of the school so that educators learn continuously in the setting in which they work (p7).' Fullan continues, 'We have known for a quarter of a century that focused collaborative cultures generate greater student learning.(p18)' We need to collaborate and act collegiately to achieve the best results. Enquiry promotes this. '... the heart of what's worth fighting for within the school is creating deep cultures that work daily on purposeful, continuous learning. (p19)' A word Fullan uses a lot is 'relentless'. We need a relentless desire and drive to improve.

In 2011 Helen Timperley wrote a background paper for the Australian Institute For Teaching and School Leadership. This paper was to help inform the development of a professional framework for Australian teachers and school leaders. She begins her piece with a word of caution, 'It is no longer acceptable for professionals in schools to do their individual best. Rather, it is expected that they will engage collectively with

what is known to be effective in improving outcomes for all students. (p1)' This statement reflects a significant change of focus that is being embraced by many high performing systems, and that is on impacts for all learners. It is no longer sufficient to just be very busy, we need to be busy with a purpose and that is to improve outcomes for our learners.

Timperley goes on to talk about 'adaptive experts' and 'adaptive systems' who are constantly evaluating their effectiveness and adjusting their practice as a result. She notes that 'Engaging in ongoing inquiry and knowledge-building cycles is at the core of professionalism (p6 Timperley 2011). Developing adaptive expertise both requires and provides a strong sense of professional agency (Staber and Sydow 2012). When she looks at the evidence base for some of her arguments she notes that Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) found that when looking at leadership activities and their impact on learning, 'The dimension with at least twice the effect size of others involved leaders promoting and **participating** in teacher learning and development (ES=0.84).(p6)' Not only is it important for school leaders to support professional development of teachers, it is vital that they are actively involved in the process. In a study carried out in over 300 primary schools in New Zealand, teachers and leaders were encouraged and helped to develop self-regulated learning capabilities so that they could take control of their own learning, and develop adaptive capacity over time. It was found that, 'the gains were greatest for the students in the lowest 20% of the achievement band. ...For these students, gains were five to six times the expected gains in writing... and more than three times in reading. (p12)' (Timperley et al., 2010). I am beginning to see similar patterns emerge in my own schools. Timperley mentions the power of individual self-evaluation and the collective evaluation of the group, both are important to individual and school development. We need to have teachers who are reflective, adaptive and able to evaluate the impact of their practice, if we are then to have schools who have robust self-evaluation practices to inform their development.

What these three texts demonstrate is the power of teachers looking closely at their own individual practice, and the practice of their colleagues, and how they impact on learning. When teachers, and systems, adopt such approaches their learning and their practice becomes truly transformative. Most importantly, the impact for all their learners is positive and helps raise their levels of attainment and achievement. Change becomes the norm and the currency of career-long professional learning, and this change is deep, systematic and embedded in practice. Hattie emphasises

the power of teachers being learners of their own teaching. Fullan speaks of the importance of leadership in building a collaborative and collegial culture. Timperley demonstrates the importance of teachers having a clear purpose, which is to improve learning for each student, and how teachers should take responsibility for their own learning. She sees this very much as a professional responsibility and disposition that will benefit all learners.

They all identify a few key fundamentals that need to be in place for enquiry approaches to have greatest impact. First, all recognise the importance of collaboration. Fullan points out how it is no longer acceptable for teachers to remain isolated in their 'silos' of closed classroom doors, the currency of collaboration should be accepted by all. Second, all require each individual to look closely at their own practice and its impact on learning in a *relentless way* and which *is informed by data and evidence*. Third, they all recognise the importance of professional dialogue and critical consideration of issues around learning and pedagogy. Fourth, every one of them also recognises the importance of school leadership, how leaders need to support and be actively involved in such development and how they need to create a culture which supports enquiry and innovation. This all chimes with my own experiences of practitioner enquiry, especially the power and impact when teachers themselves enquire into, and discover insights about, their own practice.

Barriers to adopting practitioner enquiry and overcoming them:

There are a number of barriers as to why practitioner enquiry might not have become more widespread, but I would like to consider what I feel are the three main ones, and how we might address these.

Firstly, there is still a lack of understanding, and a level of misunderstanding, around the term 'practitioner enquiry' at all levels of the system. Some are still not aware, others think they have an understanding, but really don't, and some think it is another 'thing' or fad which they are being asked to embrace. This problem of mis-perception can be easily dealt with through professional development and partnership working. Many individuals and organisations are presently working to develop understanding and awareness: this needs to continue and be developed further. Timperley identifies 'professional learning as core school business (p14)' and one of the key principles of high quality professional learning. She notes that there is 'little evidence to support

the idea that students benefit when teachers develop generic leadership or teaching strategies independently of a direct focus on their students. (p15)' Fullan, and others, have shown how schools and their leaders can lead and promote system change by engaging at local and national levels. All of us have a role to play here as system leaders and we should recognise and activate this responsibility in suitable ways.

Secondly, we have the problem of busyness. All schools and systems I know are very busy and are engaged in massive change agendas. Schools are incredibly busy, as are the teachers within them. A common lament by teachers and heads is that they are too busy at the moment to think about something else. I agree with them. Fullan talks about 'initiativitis' which he describes as 'the tendency to launch an endless stream of disconnected innovations that no-one could possibly manage. (p1)' Too many do not focus on sustainable embedded impact for learners as a result of all their busyness. It is a contention of mine that schools and their leaders need to step back from all this busyness and take stock, in order to give them the time and space to reflect on what they are doing, where they are heading and what is the impact for their learners. Fullan recommends development should be context focused and 'requires that we focus on changing the culture of the school so that educators learn continuously in the setting in which they work.(p7)' This is the central tenet of practitioner enquiry. Hattie requests that we promote 'a change in the way in which we think about our role, and that we engender high levels of collaboration, confidence and commitment to evaluating our impact on students. (p168)' Schools and their leaders will need support to do this from local authorities.

The third aspect, where we really need to reframe and change our attitudes, is professional development. Everyone needs to embrace career-long-professional learning in its fullest sense. We all need to recognise the power of internal professional development, which reflects and is sensitive to the local context, and how we can best support each other to develop and grow our practice. Everyone needs to see professional development as something that is done by you, not to you. Helen Timperley considers effective professional development should 'include both the engagement of leaders and teachers, together with changes in practice and improved outcomes for pupils.(p4)' She also recognises the importance of such engagement and changes to practice becoming embedded and sustainable within schools -'Adaptive experts are constantly evaluating the effectiveness of their activities, (p6)' How many schools are currently able to answer positively if they are asked about this?

Embracing enquiry approaches is not a simple fix. It is complicated and messy but we should understand and embrace this. I finished a talk recently with this thought. 'It's our choice. Keep doing what we have always done, and getting what we've always got, or dare to be different to bring about improvements for all?'

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References

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