

Practitioner Enquiry in East Dunbartonshire Council

An Introductory Guide



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What is Practitioner enquiry?

Have you tried a new strategy in your classroom lately? Have you planned your lessons differently? Are you looking for an alternative approach to dealing with a problem in your school? If your answer to any of these questions is **Yes**, you're already on the way to developing your skills in **practitioner enquiry**. By formalising the process through careful planning, acting and evaluating, you can develop simple changes to the level of worthwhile and effective practitioner enquiry.

Practitioner enquiry is any form of evaluation which includes the following steps:

- identify an issue to be addressed
- look at other resources and/or research literature to identify possible reasons and solutions
- identify and implement a strategy to attempt to improve the issue
- evaluate the changes made.

It is envisaged by the *General Teaching Council for Scotland* (GTCS) that Practitioner enquiry will become an integral aspect of the day-to-day practice of teachers and other education professionals.

Practitioner enquiry "*promotes a process led, capacity building enquiry approach to professional learning and school development*" (GTCS).

For the experienced teacher, regular engagement in evaluation supports professional growth by challenging or 'disrupting thinking' and 'ingrained habits of mind'. Practitioner enquiry helps to create a space to stop and look again at existing ways of working. It is argued by McLaughlin et al (2004) that teachers who engage in such evaluation have 'better understanding of their practice and ways to improve it'. For some teachers, enquiry may promote levels of critical reflection that are **transformative**.

Why should I engage in practitioner enquiry?

The most successful education systems... invest in developing their teachers as reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change.

(Donaldson, 2010)

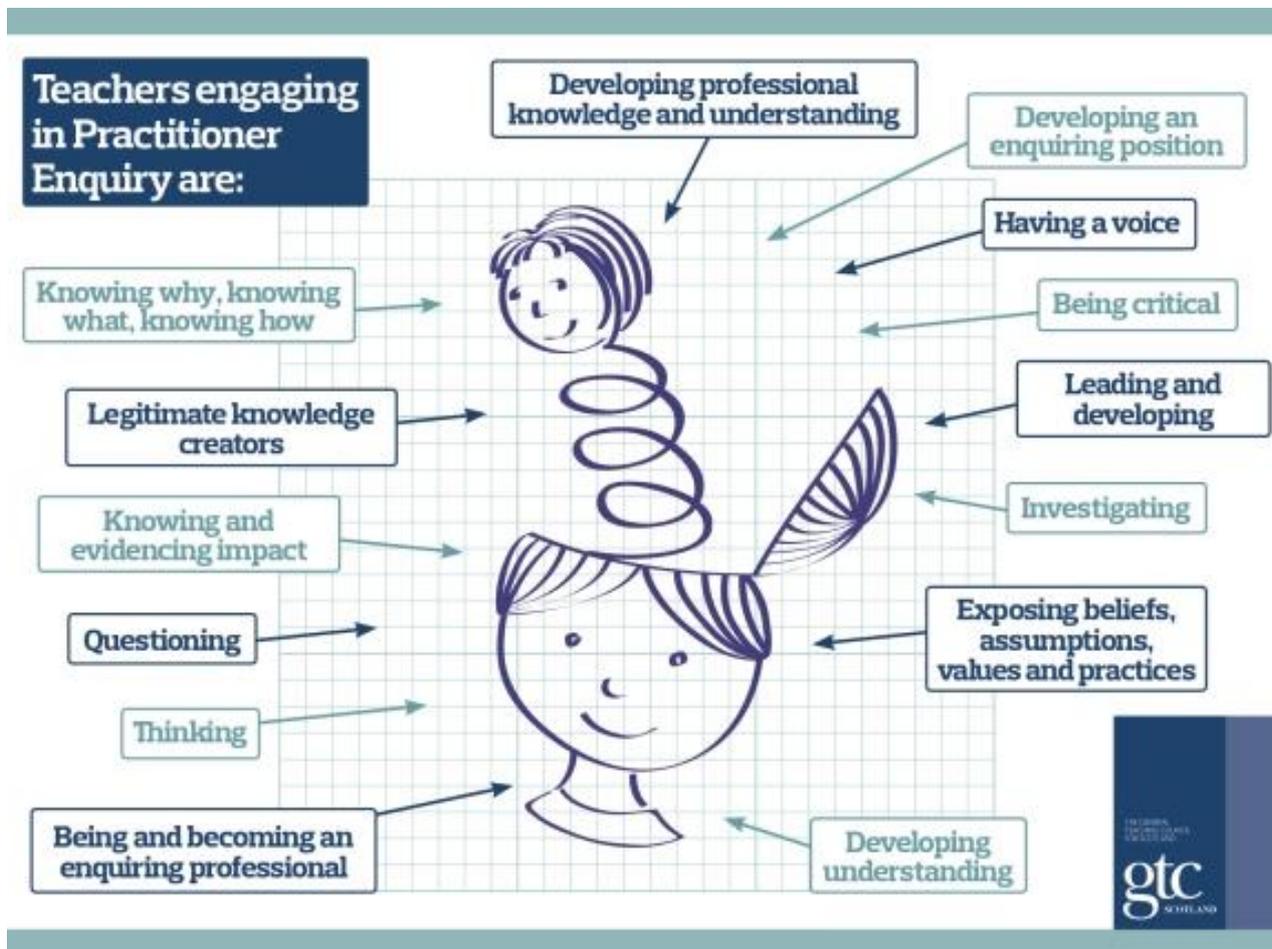
As a teacher, you may have come across curriculum materials or strategies that just don't work well in your particular school or in your own classroom context. Or perhaps you've undertaken some professional development and picked up some tips, only to find that they didn't work for you or your students. Here's how practitioner enquiry can help:

- Practitioner enquiry is **situation specific**: it enables you to examine your own situation and develop your understanding of your context
- It is a **participatory process** and allows for input from all those involved.
- It is **collaborative**. You work with colleagues and other participants to answer your research question.
- It allows for an **ongoing process of self-evaluation** where you appraise yourself and your own performance.
- It assumes that you already have a great deal of professional knowledge and can continue to develop this knowledge and improve your practice.

In addition, the *GTCS* highlights key reasons why Practitioner enquiry is becoming a widely accepted and popular form of **teacher learning and development** within Scotland:

- To empower teachers and encourage them to challenge and transform education
- To provide a way for teachers to monitor and develop their own practice
- To investigate new strategies and initiatives

- To increase their knowledge of teaching and learning thus enabling them to make more professional and autonomous judgements and to enhance their self-esteem and professional identity



The General Teaching Council for Scotland (2016)

Practitioner enquiry supports self-evaluation for improvement planning in East Dunbartonshire schools and centres which in turn is driven by the key priorities in the National Improvement Framework:

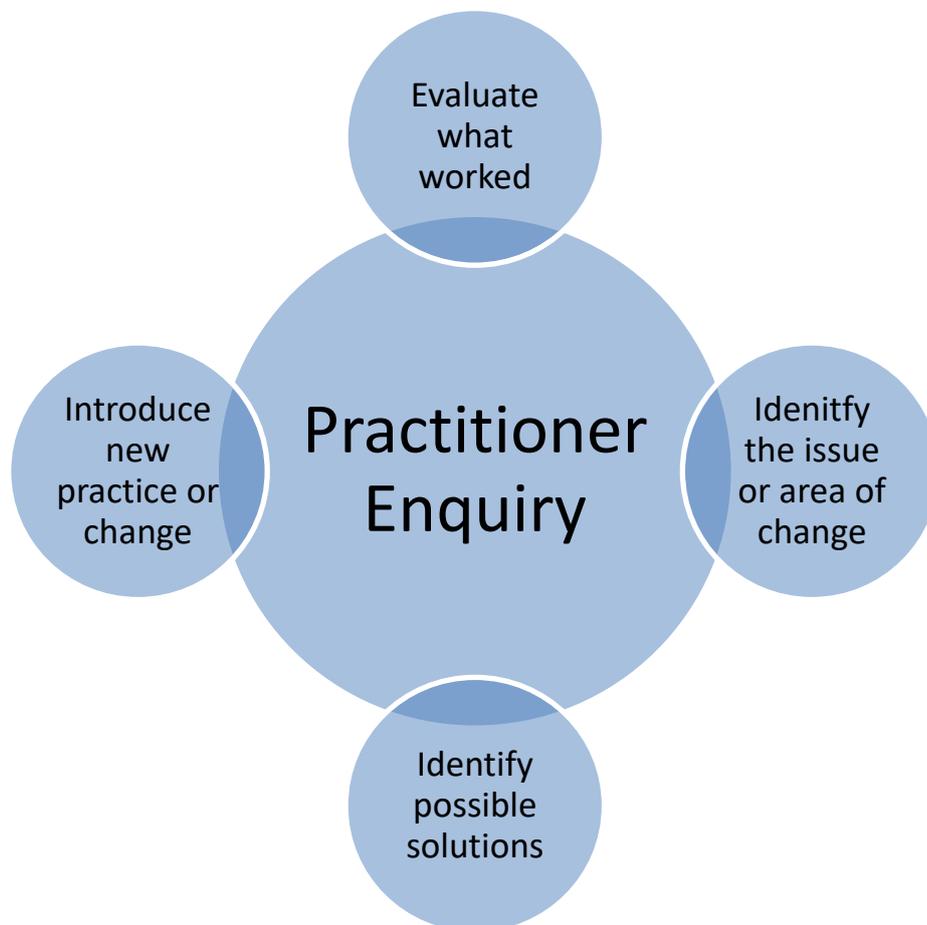
- Improving attainment and achievement
- Closing the attainment gaps
- Improving children and young people's health and wellbeing
- Improving employability skills and sustained positive school leaver destinations.

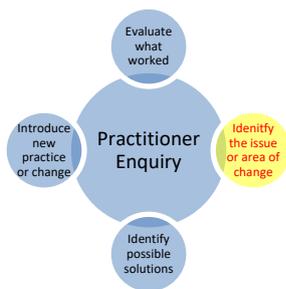
Where will I find the time?

Teaching is hard work. Meeting curriculum requirements, keeping up with changes in technology in classrooms, teaching and preparing new and exciting lessons, marking, talking to parents, supporting well-being of pupils – the list is a long one.

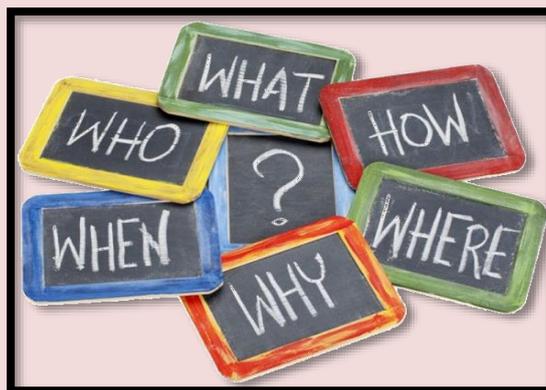
Practitioner enquiry isn't just something to add to your load. It may take a little time to organise and evaluate, but by allowing you to take control and make changes that enable best practice, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

How does Practitioner enquiry work?





Step One: Identify the issue or area of change



The best place to start with practitioner enquiry is you and your learners. Think about what's happening in your classroom or school just now. What are your learners just not getting? Is there an issue that arises again and again?

Practitioner Enquiry isn't about doing evaluation for its own sake. It's about having impact, and so you can choose to work on the issue which is causing you the biggest challenge or you can start with a simple, manageable project - you may not be able to change everything at once, but you can improve a small part.

If you're working as a group this may take a bit of discussion and negotiation. Often you'll find that there's a common underlying issue which you can agree on.

Start off with a question, like ***Why do the children in my class...?*** Think about how you could develop that question into something which includes an intervention, like ***What happens when I ...?***

Step 1 Checklist Questions

What level am I working at?

- Individual?
- Section of school or whole classroom?
- Whole school

Have I consulted everyone who should be involved in the process of identifying the issue or area for change?

- Teacher?
- Support staff?
- Parents?
- Pupils?
- Management?
- Other stakeholders?

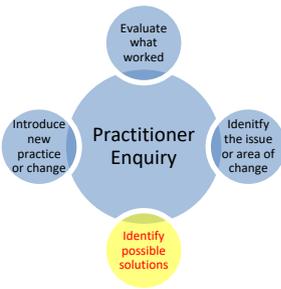
Do management need to be part of the process?

- Is there support for the work being undertaken?
- Is time set aside for sharing information or carrying out the process of evaluation?
- Do you have all the resources or training you need to continue?
-

Are different perspectives or hypotheses about the issue emerging?

- Does everyone agree what the issue is that needs to change?
- Does everyone agree on the underlying causes?
- How will you incorporate different perspectives into the process of enquiry?
-

Am I clear about next steps and who will be involved in the next stage in the process of enquiry?



Step Two: Identify possible solutions

Once you've decided on the issue you'd like to address and how it fits in, it makes sense to try and find out what's already known about this issue. This stage can be more challenging without access to a University library and peer reviewed journals, but there's more out there than you might think. Different ways of accessing materials:

- By searching for the topic in **Google** you may be able to locate recent articles, media coverage or blog posts.
- **Google Scholar** [<http://scholar.google.co.uk>]. This searches books and journal articles and you'll often find that there is a free to download paper, or you can read a section of a book for free. Even if you can't get access to the paper you want, you can always read the abstract which is often enough for our purposes.
- Books from your local **library**
- If you are fortunate you may be able to access **databases** such as Web of Science, Scopus and Eric (Educational Resources Information Centre) that contain an array of peer reviewed journals.
- Through joining and searching **Twitter** you can often read about up-to-date developments in the field and establish a network of teachers who have experience in your chosen research field and approach.
- Your **GTC membership** entitles you to access about 1700 online educational journals through the EBSCO host: <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-update/research-practitioner-enquiry/research/education-journals.aspx>
- The **Cochrane Library** allows free access to systematic reviews on a range of issues related to health on: <http://www.cochranelibrary.com/cochrane-database-of-systematic-reviews/>

When you start, try to use at least three sources. You'll find more and more references as you go along. Remember to keep reading: your research is not confined to one part of the study – it's an integral and ongoing part of it.

If you're working in a small group then this process can be a very rich professional learning opportunity as you all come together with what you have each found out.

Step 2 Checklist Questions

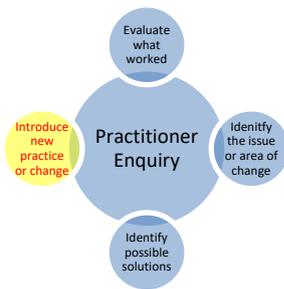
Are we clear about the questions we want answered by the research or resources we have found? What are they?

Can we identify a change or changes in practice or a specific intervention or strategy that could be a solution to the issue we want to address from Step 1?

Does the research help us by suggesting ways to measure change? Are there examples of questionnaires? Observation schedules? Focus group questions?

Does the research detail what aspects of the implementation of the intervention or strategy ensure a positive outcome?





Step Three: Introduce new practice or change

This is probably the stage that you were itching to decide upon at the very start ... *what are we actually going to do?* Before actually implementing the idea there are some key points to consider.

How will you tackle it?

As you've worked through the previous stages you will most likely have come up with various ways of changing your practice or introducing a change in order to meet your desired outcome. Once you've chosen what you will change or your approach, you might need to do some more reading up to get yourself ready for trying it out. If there's someone you know or can get in touch with who has tried it out already, then see if you can meet up with them to learn from their experience.

How will you measure your results?

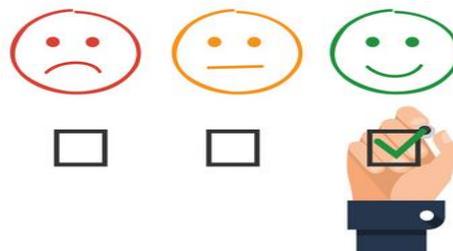
This is about evidence and finding out what happened as a result of change. It's crucially important that the evidence you choose is valid for the issue you decided upon at the first stage. There are a wide variety of methods to gather evidence such as through focus groups, class observations, pupil/teacher/parent interviews, questionnaires or by examining test scores. It is important to decide on a method that suits your chosen approach.

What's the plan?

Don't forget to do the easy bit and actually plan out your enquiry. This is true if you're working on your own, but obviously it's crucial if you're working as a group. Decide when you'll be gathering evidence, when you'll be changing your practice and when you'll be

gathering evidence again. At this stage you might also need to nail down some of the details of the enquiry which you might have glossed over in the earlier discussions. What precisely will you be doing differently in your lessons and when? Who's going to make up that questionnaire and what will it contain? What precisely will observers be doing when they visit a lesson?

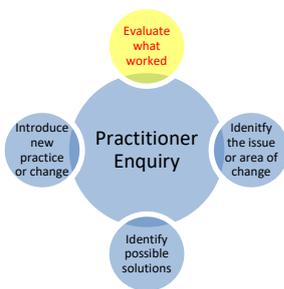
It's now time to **make changes** or **try out your idea**. The length of this implementation phase will vary depending on the enquiry. Anything between a term to an academic year is probably most appropriate. Although you may not have planned to gather any formal evidence during this period, you will at the very least be observing and reflecting throughout. You shouldn't be afraid to change your plan depending on what occurs during this time. If you're working in a group you should therefore arrange the occasional meeting to allow you to exchange observations and thoughts to allow you to pick up on the need for any change. Once again remember that the purpose of the intervention is to implement change which has meaningful impact for you and your learners ... don't blindly persevere with something if it clearly isn't working



Checklist for Step 3

- Is everyone clear about what intervention/strategies/changes are to take place?
- Is everyone clear about their role? Does everyone have the resources/training/information that they need to proceed?
- Is everyone clear about when the changes start and finish?

- Is everyone clear about how the changes are to be evaluated?
- If doing a pre and post evaluation do you have the time set aside and agreed in the plan for collecting data?
- If doing a mid-point evaluation (e.g. observations) has time been set aside and have arrangements been made for someone to carry out that evaluation?

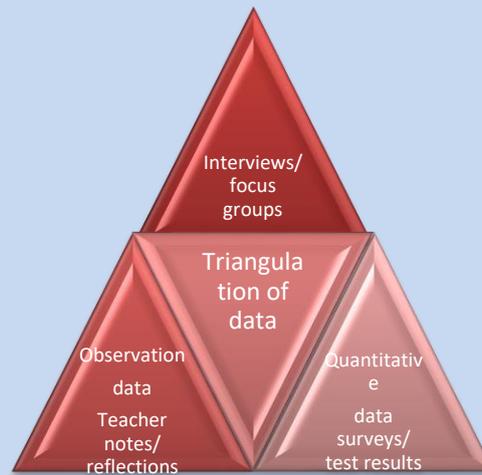


Step Four: Evaluate what worked

Once you've reached the end of your planned intervention period, you now need to repeat your evidence gathering to allow you to evaluate impact. Obviously, it's best if this follows the same process as the first round of evidence gathering, but if something clearly didn't work the first time don't be afraid to change it. For example, if you interviewed individual students in the first round of evidence and they barely spoke, don't be afraid to change it to small focus group interviews instead in order to help get them talking.

Consider how you can be sure that your conclusions are fair and accurate? Involve a critical friend – someone whose opinion you really value. He or she can help you look at your work differently. Consult colleagues or your validation group to help you check your data and make judgements about your report.

The evaluative evidence you gather can be something as simple as peer observation or a reflective discussion but if your evidence includes data from different sources then the evaluation is strengthened.



Once you've gathered the second round of evidence it's tempting to stop there...especially as you're probably now completely snowed under with other sorts of work demands. However, whether working on your own or in a group, you need to sit down at the end and find out what you've learned. Some useful questions to consider at this point:

- Did you manage to impact your desired outcome in any way?
- In what ways have your learners changed?
- What worked and why?
- What didn't work and why?
- How will you do things differently?
- How well did your enquiry planning work out?
- How useful were your methods for gathering evidence?
- Did your forms of evidence let you see what you wanted to see?
- What have you learned yourself?

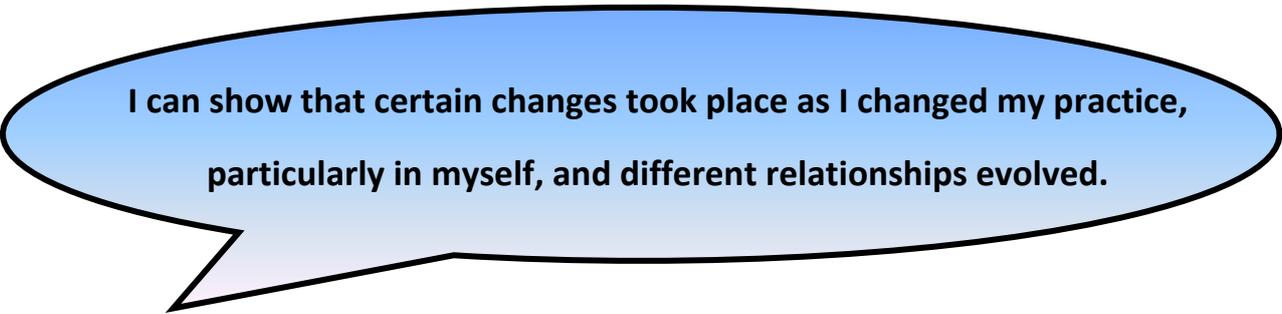
Checklist for step 4

1. Has all the information been gathered?
2. Is it clear how the data gathered should be analysed and presented?
3. Can any conclusions be drawn about the process, impact or outcomes of the CPE?
4. Have decisions been made about sharing the evaluation with others? When will this happen? Who will be the target audience and how will this be shared?

Remember that practitioner enquiry is empowering – it allows *you* to change the way you teach. You can continue to make changes all the time, and continue to grow as a professional.

How will you share your results? Could they be useful to others in your school/community/nationally? Present your findings to others – you can give a talk, do a presentation at a conference, publish a paper or participate in on-line teacher forums.

Jean McNiff (2002) sums up the process like this:



I can show that certain changes took place as I changed my practice, particularly in myself, and different relationships evolved.

Teachers engaging in practitioner enquiry offer a number of benefits to the teacher as an individual, the school and wider educational community. This is about promoting a process-led, capacity building, enquiring approach to professional learning and school development. It advocates practitioner enquiry as a key approach to addressing school, local authority and individuals' priorities and aims to improve practice and raise attainment.

(Quote from GTCS website)

How do I find out more?

The educational psychology service has produced this introductory guide which sits alongside the workbook designed to support Autism Advisers 'Collaborative Practitioner Enquiry Workbook'.

Your link educational psychologist will support and advise on practitioner enquiry in your school and newly qualified teachers have also participated in training.

Key References

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