

Praxis and the language of improvement: Inquiry based approaches to authentic improvement in Australasian schools

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the notion of school improvement through the lens of praxis as it relates to equity, inclusion and transformation, with a particular focus on inquiry-based school and teacher development. We argue that authentic improvement is a consequence of praxis, and highlight, through examples, key ways that authentic school improvement might be achieved through inquiry within a praxis framework. While many recent policy initiatives related to school education in Australia, and internationally, place emphasis on competitive and performance based mechanisms to drive improvement, the argument in this paper runs counter to these emphases, not in its recognition of the need for school improvement, but in its understanding of how that improvement can be defined, developed and documented. The examples presented illustrate ways in which inquiry-based approaches to teacher professional learning, and teaching practices in classrooms, provide tools for framing authentic school improvement.

Keywords: school improvement, praxis, teacher development, inquiry, professional learning

Troubling ‘improvement’

George Orwell wrote in his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, “Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble” (1946, p.1). He continued by decrying the staleness of imagery and the lack of precision. As an introduction to our discussion regarding the contribution of inquiry-based approaches to improvement in Australasian schools, we see that it is necessary to first ask ourselves two critical and related questions, “what do we mean by ‘improvement’?” and “improvement for whom?” After all, the notorious Scottish land clearances were all undertaken in the name of ‘improvements’. Men, women and children of the Scottish Highlands were disestablished in order to make way for the profitable enterprise of creating vast grazing pastures for sheep. Clearly, burning the crofts and chasing the perceived human detritus to the windswept shores worked for the Lairds, but not necessarily for the crofters. So, is it a step too far to suggest that what works in school improvement may not necessarily work for the consequential stakeholders¹, that is the children and young people in our schools?

In this paper we argue that teacher or practitioner inquiry is an important tool for school improvement, and in advancing this argument, respond to the questions and cautions raised above. In the first part of the paper we delineate what we consider to be ‘authentic improvement’. We make a case for linking authentic improvement to the notion of teacher inquiry within a praxis framework. A praxis framework provides a moral and ethical underpinning for the processes of inquiry and for understanding improvement in educational practice. We then explore some ways in which the

notions of inquiry, praxis and improvement are defined, implemented and understood in educational policy and practice contexts. Certainly developing a praxis framework for inquiry contains considerable challenge. In this paper we present two cases and in so doing illustrate some ways in which a focus on the moral and ethical commitments of praxis can be developed and sustained in policy and practice contexts.

Praxis, inquiry and improvement

We take as our starting point for reconceptualising ‘improvement’ the notion of ‘praxis’; that is, morally informed and committed action of the part of teachers. As Kemmis & Smith (2008, pp.5 – 6) have suggested, the possibilities of teachers having moral agency have been eroded, largely in the interests of instrumentalism that reduces educational practice to “simply...following rules” rather than the “creative thinking, care, compassion and critical consciousness – thinking outside or beyond the rules” that, in their view, characterises praxis. As a corrective we argue that praxis, and the reflection and practice that constitute praxis, is concerned with the transformative; a concept strongly evoked by Freire (1970).

A moral commitment to action is not a new idea; it has long been the impetus for those who wish to “improve” what happens in our schools. Dewey (1916) linked pedagogy to democratic, social goals, and in *Schools of Tomorrow* Dewey & Dewey (1915) argued that testing for improvement was foreign to truly moral activity. They wrote:

Since no one’s performance is perfect the failures become the obvious and the emphasised thing. The pupil has to fight constantly against the discouragement of never reaching the standard he [sic] is told he is expected to reach. His mistakes are constantly corrected and pointed out ... The virtues that the good scholar will cultivate are the colorless, negative virtues of obedience, docility and submission. (p.297)

Improvement then can be understood in relation to the outcomes associated with morally informed teaching practice. Such morally informed practice is likely to lead to outcomes that enable students to build the critical capacities and values necessary for full and active participation in a social democracy. Such morally informed practice is likely to lead to learning outcomes that are equitable for students. Such morally informed practice is also likely to lead to outcomes that make schools and classrooms places in which students are happy and safe. Such outcomes are fundamental to both praxis and to authentic school improvement. Authentic ‘improvement’ in this respect is transformative and is at heart ethical and equitable.

Teacher inquiry undertaken within a praxis framework, provides a means of achieving authentic improvement of the kind described above. Practitioner inquiry, and the related term action research, in this respect involve questioning, examining and analysing the moral and ethical dimensions of classroom and broader educational practice. Investigations undertaken by teachers can weigh the costs and benefits of action taken in classrooms and be drawn on to inform future action. Given that almost every aspect of classroom practice has an ethical and moral dimension, there is potential for considerable diversity in relation to the focus for inquiry, the knowledge developed through inquiry, the changes to practice that might result from the inquiry, and the ways in which any improvements in practice can be documented and described. Not surprisingly, this diversity poses a number of challenges related to

practitioner inquiry – how and why it is conducted, how the outcomes of the inquiry are reported, and how changes and improvements to practice as a result of the inquiry are documented. The following sections examine two specific cases associated with understanding and implementing praxis oriented inquiry – one concerned with system wide policy and one concerned with curriculum and pedagogical practice. Through the presentation of the cases we examine how such inquiry relates to school improvement.

Inquiry for ‘Teacher Improvement’: Possibilities and Pitfalls in the Policy Context

Our first case, drawn from current education policy developments in Australia, focuses on creating space for inquiry within contemporary expressions of education policy, highlighting the dangers of the tendency of governments and systems to ‘roll out’ inquiry-based teacher professional learning as an implementation tool. We argue here that for teachers and school and system leaders, the focus needs to be on understanding and recognising the spaces within the policy frameworks that allow for praxis to occur, and leveraging these to ensure the growth of praxis through inquiry.

In Australia in particular, practitioner inquiry and action research have a history of use in large-scale projects as a tool for teacher professional development and learning, with a view to school improvement. Elsewhere (Mockler, 2013), one of us has given an historical account of a number of these projects, arguing that increasingly over the period from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, large-scale inquiry-based professional learning was used by governments, both state and federal, in their quest to employ teachers’ work and teacher quality as a political tool. Stephen Kemmis, reflecting on action research two decades after the publication of his and Wilf Carr’s influential work *Becoming Critical* (1986), noted:

Much of the action research that has proliferated in many parts of the world over the past two decades has not been the vehicle for educational critique we hoped it would be. Instead, some may even have become a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling (Kemmis, 2006, p. 459).

While it is not the case that all action research referenced by Kemmis is necessarily a consequence of large-scale projects, nor that all inquiry-based work that takes place within large-scale projects lacks criticality, it is the case that where an inquiry-based approach is taken to school and ‘teacher improvement’, a number of specific possibilities and pitfalls exist.

This observation is particularly pertinent at the present moment because of the recent focus on inquiry as a tool for teacher improvement in Australian schools. The previous federal Government’s National Plan for School Improvement, originally slated for implementation in schools across Australia in 2014, included ‘teacher performance and training’ as one of its key tenets. The recently elected Liberal Government has continued this focus on ‘teacher quality’, announcing in the lead-up to the 2013 election a focus “on how to lift and improve the ability and capacity of current teachers and ensure our teaching colleges [sic.] are producing highly capable graduates” (Pyne, 2013). Indeed, the focus on ‘teacher quality’, and the need to “lift the quality, professionalisation and status of the teaching profession” (Australian

Government, 2014) has been conceptualized by successive Australian governments as a critical element of ‘school improvement’. Implementation of the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012) is one primary means by which this will be achieved, and the Framework requires that teachers engage in the systematic collection of evidence on their practice as part of the ‘performance and development cycle’:

Essential element: Evidence used to reflect on and evaluate teacher performance, including through the full review described below, should come from multiple sources and include as a minimum: data showing impact on student outcomes; information based on direct observation of teaching; and evidence of collaboration with colleagues (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012, p. 6).

In the evaluation of their goals, teachers are required to gather evidence from at least some of the following nominated sources:

- evidence of the impact of teaching on student outcomes
- direct observation of teaching
- evidence of the teacher’s impact on colleagues and the school as a whole
- student feedback
- peer/supervisor feedback
- parent feedback
- teacher self-assessment
- evidence of participation in professional learning and teacher reflection on its impact (p.6).

Implementation of the Performance and Development Framework, including the shape of annual teacher review and its links to the above ‘sources of evidence’ is to be undertaken from 2014, but schools have a large degree of discretion in terms of how the Framework will be implemented in their local context. Early discussions with school leaders across Government and non-Government sectors in a number of states indicate that there are likely to be very large differences of approach in different contexts, from highly developmental approaches to those that conceptualise review as a tool for surveillance of teachers and circumscription of practice.

Elsewhere, we have written at length and over a number of years of the potential for inquiry-based professional learning as a vehicle for teachers to reflect upon and improve their practice (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, Mockler, Ponte and Ronnerman, 2013; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Mitchell, Hunter & Mockler, 2010). There are indeed great possibilities for teachers engaging in the processes established in the Performance and Development Framework to use inquiry to support critical reflection and indeed, to individually and collectively use teacher inquiry to develop and explicate their knowledge about teaching. Our concern here lies in the possibility that the widespread adoption of ‘evidence based practice’ might play into the sanitisation and standardisation of teaching practice, or as Kemmis noted in the quotation above, the ‘domestication’ of students and teachers to accepted and conventional forms of schooling rather than work as a vehicle for genuine transformation and improvement of schools.

Lessons from earlier iterations of this work on a large scale through the *Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools for Teacher Professional Development* project, the *Innovation and Best Practice Project* and the *Australian*

Government Quality Teacher Program, suggest that this work is at its best when it focuses on local concerns and issues (local to the school, classroom, geographical location, etc); aims to actively build trust and reciprocity between those involved, including university-based colleagues supporting the work; and has an active commitment to the support of teacher autonomy and responsibility (Mockler, 2013). The danger of the large scale application, whether in the context of the funded project such as those named above, or in the more process-oriented context of the Performance and Development Framework, is that it will shy away from the more critical edge in which the real power of this work lies, in favour of more celebratory approaches which are undoubtedly more palatable and easier to manage, while lacking a transformative intent.

In his 2006 article, Kemmis outlines five categories of what he deems to be 'inadequate action research' (pp. 460-461). Elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2013, p. 63), we have paraphrased them as:

1. That which aims merely at improving techniques of teaching;
2. That which is aimed at improving the efficiency of practices rather than understanding the importance of context and consequence in social, cultural, discursive, and material-economic historical terms;
3. That which is conducted with the sole purpose of implementing government policies or programs;
4. That which does not engage with the voices or perspectives of 'consequential stakeholders' of the research; and
5. That which is conducted alone rather than in open communication with others.

It is possible, although, we argue, not desirable, that the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework could be implemented with its spirit intact but while also committing each of these transgressions. The challenge, if the Framework is to work 'beyond compliance' to support the real professional learning of teachers in ways that make a difference to the learning of their students, will be to ensure that it does not; that rather, school and system leaders understand the rationale for the framework not only in terms of government requirements for school improvement, but also that they understand the significance of inquiry as an authentic approach to teacher learning, and that the conditions for such learning are fostered on both a system-wide and local scale. Spaces for the support of praxis via inquiry-based professional learning exist within the Framework; the challenge for school leaders and others who support and facilitate teacher professional learning is to actively claim those spaces rather than allow them to be shut down or papered over in the interests of compliance or an adherence to narrow definitions of improvement as represented, for example, in a desire to improve teachers' technical skills.

The case that follows provides an illustration of practitioner inquiry conducted within a praxis framework. While the categories outlined by Kemmis, and described above, list the features of 'inadequate action research', the case below articulates components of 'adequate' practitioner research. By adequate we mean practitioner research that enables participants to critically examine their teaching practices and draw on the results of their inquiry to improve their practice.

Partnerships for Inquiry and Improvement: Everybody Counts

Our second case, illustrated by a study conducted through the New Zealand Council for Educational Research national project, The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI)ⁱⁱ, focuses on the potential of transformative partnerships between teachers and academics to support improvement, through asking ‘hard questions’ and challenging accepted orthodoxies and taken for granted practices. Here we argue that collaborative and critical partnerships can support improvement within school communities to the benefit of all stakeholders.

The study *Everybody Counts: Reimagining Health and Physical Education* (Petrie, Burrows, Cosgriff, Keown, Naera, Duggan, & Devich, 2013) was undertaken within the TLRI. A noteworthy feature of the initiative is the encouragement given to academic researchers and field based practitioners to work in concert with one another. Thus the study is an example of research and innovation that straddles the academy and the field of practice. Susan Groundwater-Smith, one of the authors of this paper, encountered the study during her appointment as visiting professor at Waikato University where she has a responsibility to facilitate practitioner research.

The investigation reported here asked two fundamental questions, 1) what are the characteristics of health and physical education (HPE) teaching and learning in primary schools and classrooms?; and 2) how do teachers take up, adapt and deploy innovative approaches in HPE, and with what effects on student learning? With respect to the second question the implicit intention was to improve teaching and learning practices for all. But this has not always been so. Typically, HPE in New Zealand primary schools has emphasized games, sport, fitness and the prevention of illness and unwellness. The result has been that for some children the experiences have been positive and enhancing and for others a time when they have felt marginalized and disengaged. As 3(2013, p.5) reported:

Children as young as five are developing distorted body images, with some measuring their waists, watching their weight and believing that they won't get married if they are fat. And there is concern the very schools they attend are fuelling the problem.

Given the international media-driven moral panic that proposes that the ideal body image is slim and fit and that there is no place for those who do not conform; such as the heavier child, the uncoordinated child, the child with a disability, then it is not surprising that those who do not match the stereotype often become the targets of bullying and exclusion (Gard & Wright, 2005). Critical comments may come not only from peers but also from teachers in schools where athleticism is recognized and esteemed.

The ‘improvement’ task facing the project team was how teacher researchers and academic researchers might co-construct a means of developing an HPE curriculum that provides young people with a more positive and meaningful set of experiences. The task was to “reimagine” what an inclusive and respectful HPE curriculum might look like and how it might be enacted. This required the school-based practitioners to have insight about the diversity of their class members and to develop plans, in concert with the academic researchers, which would create new pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. Knowing students well as a precursor to providing a sound HPE curriculum experience is claimed by Burrows and McCormack (2012) as essential.

The teachers sought to develop strategies that by-passed the elite and competitive nature of sport and to attend to body movements and core skills, for example, balance, accuracy and coordination and which gave the young people a sense of agency in deciding what and how they would undertake activities.

The study followed a series of phases: *a reconnaissance stage* where the teacher researchers and academic researchers worked collaboratively to examine and document the macro and micro factors that shape and influence teaching and learning in HPE. This phase included an audit of the ways in which the media constructs body image and healthy living; as well as current school practices. The teachers and academics were alert to the ways in which ideas about body image and health are being manufactured in the media and are having a negative impact upon young people (Wright, Burrows & Rich, 2012). The second phase, *expanding repertoires and reconstructing practice* developed as a conversation between the partners as they uncovered their varying perspectives and experiences. The third phase involved *trying out and exploring possibilities*. Here teachers set out to develop small interventions that they would share with each other. The final stage has been to *extend the learning to the broader community*, designed to provide for dissemination and sustainability – a phase that continues beyond the life of the funded project.

Throughout the project, children in the teachers' classes were actively engaged as they considered what it is to be accepted by and accepting of others; to feel more confident to participate in a wider range of movement experiences; what it is to act in health promoting ways; and to think critically about their world. HPE was no longer conceptualised as an add-on in the curriculum, but was embedded in the day to day functioning of the classes.

The title of the project reflected the shared ethos that drove it. *Everybody Counts* (EBC) is in marked contrast to the notion that often prevails in HPE, that 'one size fits all'. As the team expressed it, the EBC approach to HPE "supported them to identify learning first and then determine what activities would best support students to progress toward the desired outcome" (p.7). In their discussion of findings the team reported:

Children's ideas and voices have substantially informed the shape and substance of teachers' work in HPE in this study. In one class, a collaborative consideration of what "being active" meant in their own and others' lives generated questions about what thinking, people and movement skills would enable them to be active in different contexts. Drawing on this analysis, the children then collectively determined what their specific learning foci would be across a year (e.g., balance, aiming and accuracy, coping with different emotions). Centering children's views meant that HPE classes looked and felt very different for teachers and children. Health education was woven across the course of the school day—rather than delivered as a series of one-off topics— and was consistently responsive to children's changing needs. Movement contexts seldom contemplated previously by the teachers were drawn on in response to children's self-identified learning needs and desires (e.g., dance, circus skills for exploring balance activities). (Petrie et al, 2013, p. 7)

The processes employed were in relation to a sustained and ongoing investigation and interruption of current HPE discourses on body shape and the oppressive values often contained within such discourses. We argue that this study

then is illustrative of a transformative partnership between school-based and academic researchers that seeks to ‘improve’ practices that have hitherto been taken for granted. Indeed, it flew in the face of conventional wisdom regarding the ways in which health and physical education should be conducted. We believe that it provides evidence of an enterprise that has been underwritten by courage and persistence and an example of praxis as morally informed action. The evidence for improvement is found within the collective testimony of the participants in the project. Furthermore the innovative work is already being taken up in sustained way across a wider community in Australasia through publication, dissemination and demonstration and can be seen as a strategy for creating viable alternatives to conventional practice.

Discussion and conclusion

Many of the recent policy initiatives pertaining to school education in Australasia, and internationally, place emphasis on competitive and performance based mechanisms to drive improvement. The argument in this paper runs counter to these emphases, not in its recognition of the desirability of genuine school improvement, but in its understanding of how improvement can be defined, developed and documented, and how that improvement can be achieved. We argue that practitioner inquiry undertaken within a praxis framework provides a means by which teachers can carefully consider the moral underpinnings of their work, build and extend their teaching knowledge, and develop classroom practices that are ethical and equitable for all students. The transformations that can emerge as a result of practitioner inquiry, be they teaching practices and/or outcomes for students, are crucial forms of what we term ‘authentic’ school improvement.

Language and definitions are important in relation to our argument regarding inquiry-based professional development and school improvement. As our first case illustrates, much large scale professional development policy uses the language of teacher inquiry to underpin approaches to teacher professional learning and is seen as a means of improving teacher quality and hence outcomes for students. As we detailed earlier, there are many ways in which varied forms of practitioner inquiry can improve practice. Policy that recognises inquiry as a form of teacher professional development has considerable potential. However in this paper we raise concerns about such policies when they have a very instrumental focus – that is they become tools for accountability rather than tools for professional learning and growth, or as Kemmis (2006) argues the policies serve to ‘domesticate’ teachers and their work. While ‘improvement’, narrowly or technically defined in terms of increasing efficiencies, might well emanate from such efforts, the transformative dimension that we argue is integral to authentic improvement is typically absent from such instrumental efforts.

We are not suggesting that accountability and professional learning are mutually exclusive. We do however argue that the outcomes from inquiry based professional learning constitute important forms of school improvement. That said, documenting the relationship between professional learning, classroom practice and improvements to student learning outcomes is difficult (Hill, Beisiegel & Jacob, 2013). In the case of practitioner inquiry there are a number of reasons for such a difficulty. The scope and scale of the inquiries may be small and limited in terms of data collected and analysed over time. The outcomes of inquiry may be known by the teacher and others in the school, but not necessarily documented, collated and disseminated to a wider audience. Likewise, and as noted in the first case, it is not uncommon for the

outcomes of inquiry based professional learning to be ‘celebratory’ accounts of practice, rather transformations of practice.

As a counterpoint to the above concerns, the Everybody Counts project described in this paper, provides an important illustration of practitioner inquiry within a praxis framework that is transformative. The outcomes associated with the Everybody Counts project are ones that we suggest represent authentic improvement. The practitioner inquiry enabled teachers and their university partners to develop critical knowledge related to the content and methods for teaching health and physical education. That knowledge was drawn on to inform and change the ways in which that subject is taught and learnt. The inquiry in this case had genuine meaning for the ‘consequential stakeholders’, that is the participating teachers and their students. A number of important factors facilitated inquiry and improvement in this case – a policy environment that supported teacher inquiry, the varied resources associated with a research grant, the partnership between schools and universities, the deployment of a range of research methods, and the reporting of findings. Moreover, in this case there was the scope and willingness to ask and respond to ‘hard questions’ in relation to a curriculum and pedagogical problem that had meaning for the participants in their work contexts. In this case it was the asking and responding to hard questions that provided the moral and ethical underpinning of the inquiry and the transformations.

The ideas raised above have been drawn on to develop a model for authentic school improvement. Figure 1 highlights that authentic school improvement is located at the confluence of teaching practice, practitioner inquiry, and the outcomes of that inquiry. These components of the model are represented in the three inter-connecting circles. As part of praxis each component is connected to the other. Teaching practice drives and is driven by practitioner inquiry. The link between these two components is morally informed action. The processes of practitioner inquiry result in a set of findings that can provide measures of improvement and/or be drawn on to improve teaching practice. The inquiry findings inform teaching practice when they have meaning for the stakeholders – be they teachers or students or the wider school community.

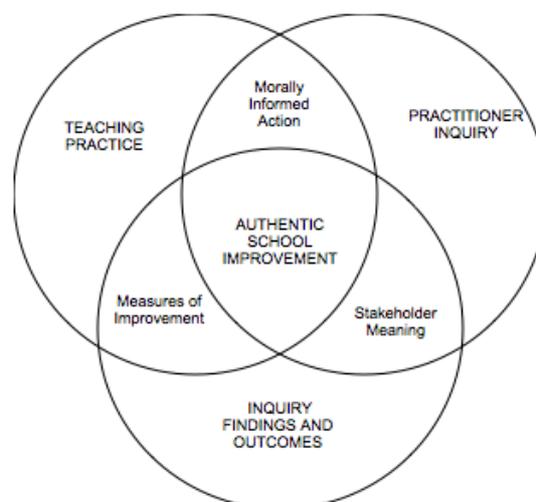


Figure 1 A praxis model for authentic school improvement

The model is dependent on a definition of praxis as morally informed action; the development of practitioner inquiry conducted within a praxis framework, that is concerned with investigating matters of moral import within school contexts; and the outcomes of inquiry that inform teaching practice in ways that lead to ethical and equitable outcomes for students. The evidence for improvement in the model of practitioner inquiry advocated in this paper lies in participants' refined understandings of their practice and associated changes to practice that are concerned with ethical and equitable outcomes for students.

The implementation of such a model for authentic school improvement at scale, and/or in depth, is difficult. As this paper has demonstrated there is a need for strong conceptual frameworks, coupled with the policy will and resources that enable school-university projects such as *Everybody Counts* to be developed and sustained. There is clearly much advocacy work required to promote such models. One area in which we believe there is considerable potential for development, and that will support such advocacy, is the dimension of the above model related to the *findings and outcomes of inquiry* and the *measures of improvement*. Documenting and disseminating the findings from practitioner research in ways that inform both professional learning policy and teaching practice is one of the most difficult parts of practitioner inquiry, but one of the most important in terms of promoting and sustaining morally informed transformations within schools and classrooms.

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ⁱ Groundwater-Smith and Mockler have used this phrase a number of times (e.g. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, (2009). They acknowledge that it was first employed by the then Queensland Board of Teacher Registration to connote the fact that students in schools bear the consequences of the decisions of others.

ⁱⁱ The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) is a research fund aimed to improve educational outcomes by linking educational research to practice. NZCER has been contracted to manage the TLRI programme on behalf of the Ministry of Education. The initiative is sector-wide and covers all sectors of education including early childhood, school, and tertiary. Information about the initiative and all the funded projects is available from the TLRI website: www.tlri.org.nz