

Seeking for the Unwelcome Truths: Beyond Celebration in Inquiry-based Teacher Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to interrupt the dominant discourse of action research that emphasises the celebration of achievements, paying less attention to the 'unwelcome truths' that can sometimes be revealed (Kemmis, 2006). Building on our work in supporting in-service teacher professional learning through practitioner research in contexts such as the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, we examine the capacity of practitioner inquiry and student voice to contribute to teachers' broader professional knowledge base. Welcoming 'unwelcome truths' requires a robustness on the part of teachers, an openness to the professional learning and growth that can ensue from genuine critique and reflection. Among other things, asking questions of young people in schools can sometimes yield new and challenging insights into school and learning. We draw on examples from our work with schools and teachers to consider what might be done to make these 'unwelcome truths' the basis for the reconceptualisation of practice and catalysts for the ongoing formation of teacher professional identity.

KEYWORDS: Action research, teacher professional learning, teacher identity, student voice

Introduction

The past decade, in Australia and England in particular, has seen a burgeoning of inquiry-based professional learning opportunities for teachers. As action research has been embraced as a preferred approach within programs such as the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP), and the *Learning to Learn* project in the United Kingdom (Hall, 2009), high levels of funding support have been devoted to the development of teacher inquiry as a vehicle for professional learning. As facilitators, academic partners and evaluators, we have been engaged in a wide range of inquiry based initiatives for well over a decade. In this paper we reflect upon this current trend and consider its strengths and challenges in the light of what is for us the framing principle of practitioner inquiry: that it be focused on understanding and transforming practice as an ethical professional enterprise that shapes the quality of the outcomes (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, Mockler, Ponte & Ronnerman, 2013).

Kemmis (2006) has referred to the capacity of practitioner inquiry to engage in the telling of 'unwelcome truths'. He argues that many action research practices currently and popularly employed:

- aim to improve existing techniques rather than question them in any critical manner;
- aim to enhance the efficiency of practices rather than evaluate them in terms of their consequences for the young people in our schools;
- seek to implement government policies in the interests of conformity rather than in a spirit of challenge;

- develop an understanding of the improvement of practice solely from the perspective of the practitioner rather than engaging with the voice and perspective of others involved in practice; and
- are conducted by individuals rather than in open communication with other members of the community (p.460-461).

As such these practices are unlikely to turn a critical eye to practice and bring unwelcome or uncomfortable news of schooling. Our substantive question for this paper asks “How, in current conceptualisations of practitioner inquiry, can the ‘unwelcome truths’ be authentically debated and ultimately acted upon?” We recognise, that in raising this question, we are also constructing a dilemma. Teachers engaging in research on their own practice and developing their own classroom narratives are involved in risky business. They are presented with difficulties when raising tricky questions around not only what happens in their classrooms, but also what may take place in the wider context of the school. They are involved in a web of complex relationships that intersect with the distribution of authority and power within the school. Taking a celebratory stance with respect to their own achievements may eclipse their capacity to confront larger and more intransigent issues.

To make our case we draw upon our experience in a range of teacher inquiry projects, to examine the critical/celebratory dynamic in the enactment of inquiry-based professional learning. We argue that teacher research, despite its appropriation in the name of ‘evidence-based practice’ as an implementation tool, can play a significant role in the shaping of teacher professional identity, through the enactment of inquiry-based professional learning. We point to the particular potential of student voice to operate as a catalyst for teacher professional learning through the seeking and embracing of ‘unwelcome truths’. Indeed, we would argue that there is a mutual benefit in developing student perspectives on matters that clearly relate to them and their learning and reciprocally to the professional engagement of their teachers. Fielding and Moss (2011, p.77) argue for the “egalitarian thrust” associated with a co-enquiry approach where young people can initiate as well as respond to planning and action.

The paper is thus presented in three parts. In the first we explore the context of this discussion through the recent and continued rise of evidence-based practice in education. In the second part we explore the role of critical inquiry-based professional learning in the formation of teacher professional identity. In the third we explore ways in which listening to and acting upon student voice can provide a catalyst for teacher professional learning, pushing ‘beyond celebration’.

Evidence-based Practice in Education: Historical Amnesia?

Evidence-based practice in education has been on the rise for the greater part of the past two decades. Based on a model derived from medical and allied health fields of practice (Hargreaves, 1996, 1997) , visions of evidence-based practice in education have been instrumental in driving educational reform not only in the UK, where this discussion initially manifested, but also in the United States (Cochran-Smith, 2008). On the recent upsurge of evidence-based practice in relation to social research, Patti Lather has

commented, “I see this latest round of re-inscribing the idealized natural science model as an effect of power of a sort of historical amnesia that disavows decades of critique...” (2006, p. 47), and this neatly encapsulates the primary issue we take with it in the context of education.

Bundled neatly into the ‘what works’ agenda (Biesta, 2007, 2010), evidence-based practice promises a panacea for uncertainty, a suite of decontextualised processes and practices that are ‘quality assured’ to produce improvement, usually in student test scores, a generally accepted proxy for teacher effectiveness.

In a cabinet paper prepared for the British government Haynes, Service, Goldacre and Torgerson (Haynes, Goldacre, & Torgerson, 2012) put forward an argument for adherence to randomised controlled trials as a means of making ‘rational’ policy decisions. Evidence would be systematically collected from carefully structured ‘interventions’, controlling variables such that incontrovertible ‘proof’ of efficacy might be gained. Taking the discussion further into the realm of education, in a report commissioned by British Secretary for Education Michael Gove, Goldacre (2013) mounted a case for educational practices to be measured and compared through the structuring of experimental and control groups. As an epidemiologist he saw no problem with the vastness and diversity of educational provisions across millions of young people being captured by various statistical measures. Even so, those in health practices have questioned the use of the so-called ‘gold standard’ of the randomised controlled trial and suggested that evidence-based practice should be perceived as “multi-faceted, complex and messy, requiring a variety of approaches to aid the uptake and implementation of research” (McKenna, Ashton, & Keeney, 2004, p. 377). Such is the power of ‘what works’, that less than two months after the publication of Goldacre’s 2013 *Building Evidence into Education* report, the UK Department for Education announced the introduction of randomised controlled trials to “drive forward evidence based research” (Department for Education, 2013).

Furthermore, there is a certain irony when the evidence that is collected is conflicting and contradictory. Elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009), writing about professional knowledge production in the context of teacher professional learning in an age of compliance, we have pointed to the ongoing literacy debates with appeals made on the basis of ‘good research evidence’ for one strategy or another for teaching reading. In an examination of over 170 references in a review of research literature it was found that there was negligible overlap between the studies that were cited when employing different paradigms. So that while there is a superficial appeal to the phrase ‘evidence-based practice’ and that it would seem difficult to argue against determining action that is fully informed by carefully structured studies of, *inter alia*, procedures, resources and human capabilities, it remains critical that great care is taken regarding what will count as evidence, who will provide it and in what form.

We turn now to the links between inquiry-based teacher professional learning and the formation of teacher professional identity, building the argument that celebratory approaches can undermine the generative possibilities inherent in these links.

Teacher Identity and Professional Learning

The formation and mediation of teacher professional identity is a career-long dynamic wherein teachers' understandings of themselves in relation to their work and their emergent "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) are impacted upon by the various contexts within which they work and live. Recent research (Mockler, 2011a, 2011b) has highlighted that teacher professional identity is dynamic and shifting throughout the course of a career, and located within a confluence of personal experience, professional context and the external political environment. Furthermore, teacher professional identity is mediated by significant experiences which, located within one or more of these domains, work as catalysts to 'anchor' identity for a period of time. Personal development experiences and circumstances or events which drove teachers to take an 'activist' stance in relation to their work were seen in some cases to give rise to new identity anchors. Professional learning experiences, which can be seen to lie at the confluence of the professional context of teachers' work and the realm of their personal experience both within and beyond the professional setting, were reported by teachers as the most consistently influential on the ongoing development of their professional identity.

A caveat, however, exists here. While those activities generally and traditionally thought of as "professional development", such as attendance at conferences and 'inservice' days had, in a small number of instances, provided a catalyst for movement to a new identity anchor, in each of these cases the activity itself had become a catalyst for rethinking and recasting practice. This was either because of the presentation of powerful ideas which were followed up by the teacher and led to new ways of thinking about education, or by virtue of the formation of significant relationships which had a long-term impact and effect. However, in most cases where professional learning experiences were identified by teachers as significant in terms of the mediation of their understanding of themselves as teachers, these experiences were not related to 'inservice'-type activities, but were more likely to come in the form of mentoring, practitioner inquiry of some kind or school-based professional learning embedded within and related to practice.

The lesson here for those engaged in leading and providing teacher professional learning opportunities, whether school-based or otherwise, is that these experiences can be deeply formative and sustained in their impact on teacher professional identity where they themselves provide a catalyst for rethinking and recasting practice. Furthermore, we would argue that by engaging in intersubjective deliberation whereby the beliefs and perceptions of individual practitioners are held up for challenge it is more likely that the "unhappy" stories may emerge (Groundwater-Smith et al, 2013, p.157). This suggests that a celebratory approach to action research, for example, is not likely to hold as much potential for teacher development and formation as an approach which seeks to welcome some 'unwelcome truths' and in doing so give rise to the kind of dissonance that often precedes a determination to rethink dimensions of practice. As Marion Dadds (2003, p. 288) reminds us:

[In practitioner research] we may be entering into processes by which we deconstruct some basic, historically rooted views of ourselves. In such processes our existing images of the professional self will be challenged, questioned, re-thought and re-shaped in some degree. These processes are necessary if change and development are to occur and self-study is to lead to new learning. We cannot escape them, nor the discomfort they may bring if we value our commitment to professional development.

Teacher Identity in an Age of Compliance

Elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009) we have discussed at length the impact of cultures of compliance and accountability on the teaching profession and education more broadly. In recent work, Sachs and Mockler (2012) have suggested that these performance cultures frame and impact upon professional practice for teachers to the extent that they give rise to a number of competing 'preferred' professional identities. Their argument is that developmental performance cultures, such as those represented by pedagogical frameworks (among them the NSW Quality Teaching framework), can give rise to teacher professional identities formed around teacher autonomy and change agency. Conversely, regulatory performance cultures (represented by most manifestations of teacher standards) and measurement performance cultures (represented in the push toward standardised testing in Australia and elsewhere) respectively give rise to teacher identities formed around notions of teacher as technician and compliant professional. To return to the model of teacher professional identity formation described above, these discourses emerge initially from the dimension of external political environment but also infuse teachers' professional contexts. The competing identities they give rise to place teachers in a difficult position, where the key challenge is to remain outward-looking and engaged rather than to withdraw into isolation and individualism.

Action Research and Celebration

Voltaire is attributed with saying "doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd". A measure of doubt is hard to maintain when engaging with action research where celebration arising from certitude is affirmed. A feature of action research for school teams, such as within the various action research initiatives funded through AGQTP, has been the built-in opportunities for participating teams to share their professional learning through metropolitan and regional conferences. These conferences, usually highly engaging and enjoyable, have rarely provided the kinds of counter narratives that might contribute to a more radical and rigorous set of possibilities for change and reform. However, we argue that it is possible to interrupt the current expectations that teachers will, as a form of defence, adopt a celebratory stance in their discussions of the work that they have undertaken in the name of action research. We acknowledge that it is neither palatable nor pleasing to uncover difficult and often debilitating obstacles. Sometimes it is more comfortable to live with what Gillham (2000) has called 'positive illusions'. Nonetheless, optimism and hope can be engendered by welcoming and facing some of the very real challenges to what may seem at times teaching's impossible task.

To illustrate our case we shall turn briefly to examples of studies where some difficult truths have been uncovered and have been ultimately welcomed as forming a basis for action. The first of these are studies where young people themselves were participative in the inquiry process and have been active agents in the promulgation of the results. However, before considering these studies we need first to address some of the challenges and difficulties associated with promulgating student voice.

Student Voice and Unwelcome Truths: The Case for Consulting Young People

In considering the case for consulting young people there are many sources of divergence among those who have an interest in listening to their voices. Beale (2008, p. 159) has identified the key areas within which a range of stakeholders variously conceptualise the participation of young people in developing policies and practices, these being:

Questions relating to *why* children and young people are or should be participating, secondly *how* they might or should participate and, thirdly, *what* they are participating in.

Beside these considerations the various models that emerge are themselves problematic on another front. Adults who consult young people are themselves driven by a range of motivations and may seek to manipulate participation in line with their own purposes and beliefs about political processes and democracy (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). Fielding & McGregor (2005) have identified three standpoints that they believe offer some explanation, these being: neo-liberal, emancipatory and post-structuralist. Briefly, the neo-liberal standpoint emphasises the ways in which young people can be consulted about their learning and conditions for their learning in order to contribute to increased learning outcomes and attainments in the interests of school improvement. The emancipatory agenda is seen as one that has the potential to liberate young people from the current individualistic trends towards personalisation and customisation of learning, while not necessarily problematising what learning itself might mean, or indeed the spaces in which it might occur. The post-structuralist standpoint takes up matters of relative power, both within the adult and peer group communities, and the ways in which it is exercised (Bragg, 2003).

Regardless of the standpoint, it is generally agreed that improvement in engagement in learning can come about when the views of young people, are systematically collected and interrogated. Mitra (2004), writing of the school context, has argued that where students have agency, a sense of belonging and are recognised as competent they gain a stronger sense of their own abilities and build awareness that they can make changes in their schools, not only for themselves, but also for others. In the past, even in the school sector where attendance is compulsory, the young people themselves are either not consulted at all, or are, at best, treated only as a data source. Raymond (2001) has suggested that there are three further steps that can be taken: *discussion*, where young people are active respondents; *dialogue*, where they are co-researchers; and, *significant voice*.

Much of the more general literature on participation, irrespective of whether we are considering decision making in schools or settings beyond education, has drawn upon the early work of Roger Hart (1992) with his ladder of participation that progresses from manipulation, decoration and tokenism through to increasingly child initiated and directed studies where the outcomes are directly influential on adult decision making. This model has been adapted by Shier (2001) where he argues for a tool for practitioners, enabling them to explore different aspects of the participation process. Shier identifies five levels of participation: children are listened to; they are supported in expressing their views; their views are taken into account; they are involved in decision making and finally, they share power and responsibility for decision making. A helpful addition to the work of Hart is that Shier takes each of these levels and identifies what he calls “three stages of commitment” (p. 110), namely: openings, opportunities and obligations. An *opening* occurs when the person or persons working at that level has made a statement of intent to function in that way; an *opportunity* occurs when the needs are met that will allow the operation to take place; and an *obligation* is established such that the given level of participation becomes built into the system. While Shier understands that there are various criteria for appropriate levels for young people of different ages and abilities to engage he argues “in practice adults are more likely to deny children developmentally appropriate degrees of responsibility than to force too much responsibility on them” (p.115)

Indeed, Burke and Grosvenor (2003) have presented us with an uncomfortable truth when they write : “There is a history of not attending to the expressed experience of children within schools; everyday neglect in this sense has become institutional” (p.1). While, in the main, it is true that schools rarely consult their students and take them seriously it is the case that there are schools in Australia where there have been systematic policies and practices that have enabled students’ voices to be heard and have even given students agency in designing, investigating, analysing and interpreting learning.

It is important to understand, however, that merely asking students their opinions is not sufficient if they are to be authentic advisors in evaluating programs and projects that have been designed for them. Fielding (2004) in his analysis of the very real difficulties in consulting young people, reminds us of the range of practical concerns that we must address if we are to move forward in giving them that significant voice to which Raymond (2001) alluded.

(We need to) resist the constant pull for either ‘fadism’ or ‘manipulative incorporation’ ...Fadism leads to unrealistic expectations, subsequent marginalisation and the unwitting corrosion of integrity; manipulative incorporation leads to betrayal of hope, resigned exhaustion and the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo (Fielding, 2004, p. 296).

He asks a series of penetrating questions; among them:

- How confident are we that our research does not redescribe and reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the status quo?
- How clear are we about the use to which the depth and detail of data is likely to be put? Is our more detailed knowledge of what students think and feel largely used to help us control them more effectively?
- Are we sure that our positions of relative power and our own personal and professional interests are not blurring our judgements or shaping our advocacy? (pp. 302 – 304)

In further work addressed to determining under which conditions students should be consulted Bragg & Fielding (2005) ask questions, in line with Beale (2008) about who is speaking, who is listening, what skills are available, what are the attitudes and dispositions, what kinds of systems and organisational culture prevail, what action is possible and how can this contribute to a more desirable future; while Wood (2013, p.2) reminds us that not all young people have the same 'participatory capital' to feel comfortable and confident to make a contribution. It is in the light of this literature that we present these initial cases.

Welcoming the Unwelcome: Listening to Student Voice

As early as 1983 Jean Rudduck was arguing for changes in teaching and learning strategies informed by student perspectives and that students themselves should have voice in how such change might be undertaken. Some two decades later the NSW Department of Education and Training invited one of us to work alongside teachers to consult with young people in two settings, one primary and one secondary, to elicit from them what they understood teacher learning to be and how it made a difference to their own learning in the classroom. Undertaken as part of the earlier mentioned AGQTP project *Leadership for School Based Professional Learning*, in the course of this project, at the request of the action research team, the academic partner facilitated a focus group interview with students in each of the two schools.

Students at 'Bowling Primary School' and 'Penlington Girls' High School' were asked to reflect on their teachers as learners, and to share their answers to the following questions:

1. What skills and attributes do you think your teachers should have?
2. How do you think teachers might learn these skills?
3. Think of a time when you have noticed that one of their teachers had learned something new: how did it make a difference to your own learning?
4. When your teachers attend seminars, meetings, or courses, does it make a difference to the way they teach?
5. What kinds of things would you like your teachers to learn?

While students in both schools found it difficult to pinpoint times when their teachers had noticeably implemented new teaching and learning strategies as a consequence of a professional learning experience, they were very clear in their expression of the preferred skills and attributes they thought their teachers should possess, and the kinds of things they would like their teachers to learn.

It takes some courage for teachers to ask young people about their experience of school and to truly open themselves to their responses. Not all the outcomes of this small study proved to be comfortable for teachers, for it is possible to identify a number of practices that not only assist students in the classroom; but also those that make it difficult. To select only a few observations does not do credit to the richness of the responses, nonetheless, let us just take one or two from each of the schools. Children at Bowling Primary school cited, among other things that they wanted their teachers to:

- Distribute questions (don't always ask the same person);
- Have variety;
- Be stimulating; and
- Pay attention to everyone.

While students at Penlington Girls High School pointed to teachers needing to learn to (among other things):

- Be more approachable;
- Make learning fun;
- Be more motivating;
- Have more realistic expectations; and
- Be less grumpy.

These responses suggests that these are real issues for the students and that they are well able to be what Fielding (2008) names as agents of adult professional learning when thought provoking exchanges between students and teachers can take place.

Flutter (2007, p. 353) has indicated that “many teachers remain nervous of pupil voice approaches and often lack experience of the techniques required”. We would add that it will be necessary for teachers to feel that they can welcome and act upon some of the unwelcome truths especially when they try to understand professional practice from the perspective of the students, as discussed with such passion by Kemmis (2006). To return briefly to the notion of the anchoring of professional identity, we need to be mindful of the ways in which teachers' identities might be challenged or disturbed by these uncomfortable truths, and consider ways in which ‘safe spaces’ might be formed to allow such challenge and growth to take place. Indeed, for some teachers whose identity is fixed in a positional mode, that is one that feeds on their status and authority, it may be that consulting students could well be considered subversive, undermining that very power that they see vested in their role as the teacher.

McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck (2005) point out, among other things, that those young people who have experienced most success in school learning tend to be the most articulate about what helps them to learn, whereas “those from whom teachers most need to hear are those whom it will be most difficult to consult” (p.167). The late Jean Rudduck and Michael Fielding (2006), both of whom have had a long record in enjoining teachers to listen to their students, thoughtfully and respectfully, also have concerns about the ways in which ‘student voice’ has been appropriated and used as a means of judging ‘good schools’ within a regime of inspection, that is they are contributing to the well-

established neo-liberal agenda. They believe that the longer term survival of taking account of the views of young people is to build the practice into a “coherent and secure school-wide foundation for the work” (p. 229); in effect to undertake a genuine obligation to it in terms of Shier’s (2001) concerns regarding commitment. This view is further supported by the work of Cockburn (2007) and Cook-Sather (2010).

Where action research or practitioner research approaches are used as tools of implementation, a necessary measure of the ‘success’ of the project itself is the ‘success’ of the implementation. This leads to a situation where celebration is more or less a necessary outcome, as to be less than celebratory would imply a failure of both the project and the implementation, an outcome not to be desired by schools themselves nor the governments and bureaucracies that support and fund them. While we do not deny that some professional learning will doubtless ensue for individual teachers involved in such projects, this is a very different matter to engaging in practitioner inquiry for the purposes of delving beneath the surface to consider some of the messy dynamics of schooling on a local level that are less to be celebrated and more to be problematized, re-thought, and improved upon. An inquiring approach to teaching and learning has the capacity to be transformative – for those who engage in the enterprise (whether teachers, students or other community members) as well as for the consequential stakeholders who do not. At its best, practitioner inquiry opens the door to professional formation and (real) development, contributes to local knowledge production, stimulates teachers’ curiosity about learning, and fosters dynamic, collaborative learning communities. While celebration is undoubtedly a desirable element within this process, a more vital ingredient is a willingness and capacity to critique, to work with ‘unwelcome truths’ and register genuine professional discourse and reorientation of practice as the true measures of success.

Conclusion

In his penultimate Reith Lecture Edward Said considered the basic question for the intellectual, “how does one speak the truth?”. As an alternative to the intellectual acting as a professional who employs the discourses of the academic insider he proposed that it would be useful to have “the attitude of an amateur” that rests upon concepts of justice and fairness. He concluded:

Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial...(Said, 1994, p. 100)

It is perhaps the case that there is a practice-based habit of mind that leads us away from critique and toward celebration. Celebration, while undoubtedly more comfortable and less emotionally and intellectually taxing than critique, rarely leads on its own to the kinds of professional learning that improve schools and learning for the students within them. The challenge for teachers engaged in inquiry-based forms of professional learning (and also for those of us who support them in this learning) is to constantly and

deliberately re-orient ourselves toward authentically debating and acting upon our “unwelcome truths”.

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