

# Chapter 1

## From Collaboration to Transformation: Practitioner Research for School Librarians and Classroom Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

*As part of educational reforms, educators are increasingly expected to gather and interpret data, implement initiatives, and analyze outcomes. Practitioner research offers a framework for conducting school-based inquiry; consequently, it can be an instrumental part of educational change. Due to its focus on local contexts, collective knowledge, and critical reflection, practitioner research can foster collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers. This chapter explicates the core features of practitioner research and discusses new findings from a three-year study of digital literacy conducted by a high school librarian and an English teacher.*

### INTRODUCTION

The development and implementation of educational reforms can be an extremely complex and multifaceted process. While teachers are primarily responsible for enacting reforms, they may be excluded from the developmental process (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Elmore (2004) explains, “Teachers are seldom asked to judge if a new curriculum translates well into the classroom, nor are they often asked to participate as co-designers of the ideas in the first place” (p. 38). While reforms might position teachers as simply the executors of

plans and objectives, scholars suggest that teachers’ local experiences and practices significantly influence the implementation process of reforms (Coburn & Turner, 2012).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that the tendency to exclude teachers from designing and analyzing education reforms is changing. In particular, they posit that educators are increasingly expected to gather and interpret data as part of initiatives focused on school achievement. For school librarians and classroom teachers, this offers a powerful opportunity to engage in sustained collaboration and to investigate how new tools,

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strategies, and resources work in schools. Technology, in particular, calls the traditional relationship of educators and learners into question (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Since library professionals are considered experts in information literacy and digital literacy, they are poised to collaborate with teachers to integrate technology into the curriculum (Bishop & Larimer, 1999).

In this chapter, I consider: How can practitioner research foster collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers? In what ways can practitioner research promote technology integration in K-12 schools? To answer these questions, the first aim of this chapter is to highlight the core features of practitioner research. Through its focus on local contexts, collective knowledge, and critical reflection, practitioner research provides insight into how teachers teach and how students learn. Moreover, the process of conducting practitioner research offers teachers and librarians a framework for engaging in sustained collaboration and critical discussion. Librarians' involvement in practitioner research is important in order to both generate new knowledge and to transfer this knowledge to the field of librarianship and information science (Hall, 2010).

The second aim of this chapter is to investigate the process of engaging in practitioner research related to media and technology in schools. According to Lewis (2007), technology integration demands that teachers acquire new orientations to time, space, and design. She adds that veteran teachers as well as pre-service teachers are often uncomfortable with this shift. Lewis (2007) states, "Popular technologies are to be used and shared out-of-school. To do so in school challenges the materiality of what it means to be a teacher, in their minds" (p. 235). Consequently, practitioner research can act as a framework for librarians and teachers to collaboratively and reflectively implement technology in schools.

As a high school English teacher, I worked with my school's librarian to conduct a research project on digital literacy, poetry, and pedagogy

(Curwood & Cowell, 2011). Over the course of three years, we jointly designed, implemented, and reiterated a digital poetry curriculum. We examined how our pedagogy and our professional relationship changed as a result of our collaboration. I gained technical expertise and digital literacy skills while my colleague increased her knowledge of the English curriculum. Notably, our collaboration served as a catalyst for other teachers in the school to partner with our librarian to design and implement technology-enhanced learning opportunities for students. This chapter draws on new findings from this study to offer insight into practitioner research.

## **BACKGROUND: PRACTITIONER RESEARCH**

What is *practitioner research*? Practitioner research is an umbrella term that encompasses many genres and forms of research, including action research and reflexive inquiry. At its core, "the practitioner is simultaneously a researcher who is continually engaged in inquiry with the ultimate purpose of enriching students' learning and life chances" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. viii-ix). Contrary to the view that research is only conducted by outsiders, such as university-based researchers, practitioner research values local knowledge about local practices. As such, it challenges traditional assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice. Booth (2002) argues, "Librarians are regarded as experts at searching for evidence to support the practice of other professionals but are very unlikely to do the same for their own practice" (p. 56). Consequently, practitioner research offers librarians as well as teachers a way to investigate their role within the school community.

The use of the word *practitioner*, rather than teacher, is intentional and emphasizes the role of multiple people within the educational community, including school librarians, teachers, teacher

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