What is Collaborative Practitioner Research?

Research

Research can be defined as a systematic and critical investigation designed to increase the sum of human knowledge. That implies that the researcher (you!) is finding out something new - not just collecting facts from books and elsewhere, which is what we sometimes tell children is research. The word also implies that the method must be a recognised and accepted approach. Research is not primarily about opinions but about evidence.

Practitioner Research

Practitioners find themselves right in the middle of a situation. They are not an external and objective observer. They are involved, practically involved and emotionally involved. Teachers, as practitioners, care about the children in their care. Their research is not an academic exercise, it is something which is personally important.

Practitioner research is very similar to, but not identical with, action research. Action research is concerned with changing a situation, improving it, practitioner research usually is but may not always be so. However the terms are used ambiguously. Anderson (2007, p.1) defines action research as "action researchers... study(ing) social reality by acting within it and studying the effects of their actions. " This could include outsiders, as Anderson acknowledges, and should then perhaps be termed participatory research. In either case the important point is the stance taken by the researcher. They are not a 'fly on the wall' observer, they are not scientific experimenters objectively measuring variables, they are committed to improving the outcomes for the children through research within their own everyday experiences.

The difference between academic research and action research can perhaps be illustrated by an imaginary example. Suppose a school introduced an analytical phonics method of teaching reading and a researcher from the local university was assigned to monitor its effectiveness. Half way through the project a new head was appointed. She decided to drop analytical phonics in favour of synthetic phonics and, in addition, to develop French alongside it, also synthetically! An academic researcher would just have to give up. An action researcher would have no problems.

Collaborative Practitioner Research

Being collaborative means working as part of a team. Research is often a very solitary occupation. Flies on walls don't make lots of friends! Doing CPR means working together with other people. This team working may take place within two contexts.

Within the school CPR implies involving all the stakeholders. Remember that the primary aim is to improve the outcomes for the children. Who has a stake in that? Obviously parents, obviously other teachers, but don't forget the children themselves. Are there other people who are involved? What other agencies should you be working co-operatively with? CPR means finding a meaningful way of involving all these people. And meaningful involvement means having their opinions and input taken seriously - altering the research as necessary.

The other context is that of collegiality, of the community of fellow-researchers. You are part of a community, use the expertise which is there! This could involve having a critical friend, it could involve taking part in reflective interviewing, it could involve analytical discourse, it could involve talking around problems over coffee. Remember, though, that it also involves helping others in the community; not telling them what to do or trying to solve their problems but being involved - you yourself being there for your colleagues.

References

Anderson GL et al (2007) *Studying Your Own School* Nottingham Sage (2nd ed.) (extracted in Google Books)

The Five Step Model of CPR

There are many models of CPR.   This one is reasonably simple and comprehensive.   Following it is certainly not compulsory in any sense, but it does cover all the main stages that are necessary for a successful CPR project.

Step 1.   Identify the Problem

This step involves identifying the issue(s) of greatest concern, not just to the practitioner but to the whole group of involved people (stakeholders).   This is a reflective process, asking questions like...
- What have we been doing?
- What were the outcomes for the children?   What was positive and what was negative?
- Where should we go from here?

This can be done very informally, talking to, and more importantly listening to, the rest of the group. However, there are also slightly more formal methods of doing this.   One is the reflective interview. Participants pair up, preferably not with friends, and one interviews the other about their ideas.   The role of the interviewer is important, they must not be threatening but they must challenge the other. They do not get involved in discussion and they do not provide any answers.   Their role is to help their partner to articulate their ideas.   After thirty minutes time is called and the roles are exchanged.

Another approach is analytical discourse.   This is effectively a group interview.   One person has to volunteer to be interviewed.   That can be daunting at first, but it is usually also very stimulating. The rest of the group are the interviewers.   They must follow very strict guidelines.
- interviewers can make NO CRITICAL COMMENTS
- interviewers may only ASK QUESTIONS
- interviewers must NEVER OFFER SOLUTIONS

The aim of the process is for the volunteer to be able to say "There, I've fully explained the whole thing to you." and all the interviewers are able to accurately paraphrase the volunteer's personal perspective.   At the end of the interview, there should be a debriefing session when the volunteer is asked "What did it feel like to have the undivided attention of a group of colleagues?" and the interviewers are asked "What was it like to restrain yourself from offering any opinions?"

A further possibility is to have a brainstorming session and then to produce a mind map.   But whatever approach is taken, or a mixture of them, the idea is to arrive at a focus, a situation or an issue.   You then need a reality check.   Ask yourself the following questions...
- Is this what I really want to be taking on?
- Are we all totally clear about what is involved?
- Is this situation within my power to improve?

Go no further until you can honestly answer yes to all these questions.

Now you can set the research question. This is the question you are going to try to answer, or a statement of the problem you are going to research.   You may want to ask more than one question, but it is better to do a good piece of work on one question than a superficial study of many questions. The question or problem needs to be clear.   It needs to be soluble - there is no point in asking a rhetorical question or attempting a problem which is obviously beyond you to solve.   You may edit your question as time goes on, but you need to focus.

The final stage of this step is to write up a formal proposal and submit it.   The exact format of your proposal will depend on who it is going to (e.g. a board of governors, or a grant committee, or a course tutor) and they will probably have a format already.   Use it!

Step 2.   **Review the Literature**

This step involves, basically, finding out what other people have already found out. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel. If you are still unclear about why you need to review the literature, take the time to read Stark's 1998 leaflet which is available online.

Firstly, decide on your personal method of note-taking and record keeping - computerised? record cards? backs of envelopes? database? The precise method is not crucial but keeping accurate records of your reading absolutely is critical.

WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP TRACK OF YOUR READING!!!

The key to using the literature successfully is, firstly, to be systematic throughout, keeping a careful record of all you read, including exact bibliographic references. One well-tried method of keeping track of reading is to use a card index file. Each time you find a book or an article which you think will be useful, note it down on a card, remembering to record a full note of the author, etc. Where you have a number of sub-themes to your literature review, you can colour-code the cards accordingly. (You may have an electronic version of a card index system on your computer or you can create a small database for the purpose.)

You should include a few notes for each reference to remind you of the main issues raised by the author(s) when you return to it. For example:

> Millar, R. and Driver, R. (1987) 'Beyond Processes.' *Studies in Science Education*. Vol. 14, pp. 33-62.
>
>   critique of current emphasis on process and materials used,-
>
>   distinctions between 'science processes' / 'the methods of science processes'
>
>   contrast between 'learning science' and 'scientists doing science'.

If you come across a statement which you might wish to quote, or one which you feel sums up the issues well and you might wish to refer to, make sure you write down a full *reference, including the page number.* This will help you to find it again and, if you use the quotation in writing up the study, you must cite the page number.

Eraut M. (1994) <u>Developing Knowledge and Competence</u>. London: The Falmer Press

The only image we are given of the process of learning is that of the gradual accumulation of memories of cases.   *(Eraut, 1994, p. 128)*

Whenever you make a note of a book or article do make sure you have noted down all the information you will need for a Harvard APA style reference later.

Read around the subject.   Collect ideas.   Make a mind map.   Discuss it with your critical friend. Get to grips with the jargon and get clear definitions of words used.   All the time keep systematic notes of your reading.   Use a wide range of sources of information...

- Libraries (but do note that whilst books are important, journals tend to be more current in their treatment of the issues which you might wish to pursue. Unless you are doing a historical study, a good rule of thumb is to go no further back than the previous eight or ten years.)
- Databases (e.g. ERIC / British Educational Index / NAMTA online bibliography)
- Internet - particularly a university portal if you can get access
- Magazines (including 'fugitives' i.e. non-indexed, especially in a Montessori context)
- Theses and abstracts

When you have collected a good representational sample of the available literature, write up your first draft.   It is a good idea to lay it out logically like an essay.   The following suggestions have been adapted from the UW-Madison online *Writer's Handbook*.

In the Introduction

- define or identify the general topic, issue, or area of concern, thus providing an appropriate context for reviewing the literature.
- point out overall trends in what has been published about the topic; or conflicts in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions; or gaps in research and scholarship; or a single problem or new perspective of immediate interest.
- establish the writer's reason (point of view) for reviewing the literature; explain the criteria to be used in analysing and comparing literature and the organisation of the review (sequence); and, when necessary, state why certain literature is or is not included (scope).

In the Body

- group research studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, case studies, etc.) according to common denominators such as qualitative versus quantitative approaches, conclusions of authors, specific purpose or objective, chronology, etc.
- summarise individual studies or articles with as much or as little detail as each merits according to its comparative importance in the literature, remembering that space (length) denotes significance.
- provide the reader with strong "umbrella" sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, "signposts" throughout, and brief "so what" summary sentences at intermediate points in the review to aid in understanding comparisons and analyses.

In the Conclusion

- summarise major contributions of significant studies and articles to the body of knowledge under review, maintaining the focus established in the introduction.
- evaluate the current "state of the art" for the body of knowledge reviewed, pointing out major methodological flaws or gaps in research, inconsistencies in theory and findings, and areas or issues pertinent to future study.
- conclude by providing some insight into the relationship between the central topic of the literature review and a larger area of study such as a discipline, a scientific endeavour, or a profession.

Discuss your draft with your supervisor and/or critical friend.   Then write up the final version.

Step 3.   Collect your Data

This step is the heart of the process.   The central point is that the data you collect should be compelling evidence, enough to convince even the entrenched sceptic who has been doing things the same way for years, sees absolutely no reason to change anything and whose motto is "If it ain't bust, don't fix it."   And there are plenty of those in the educational world!

That means that your data should be reliable.   Of course, you are dealing with individual people in an individual setting, so your data will necessarily be individual and even subjective.   That does not, of itself, make it unreliable.   But you do have a responsibility to make your data as reliable as possible.   One way of doing that is to use a process Webb et al. (1966 p. 56f) called 'triangulation.' They developed the method to reduce uncertainty in social measurements.   It involves collecting evidence from three different 'windows', i.e. from three independent sources.   This gives a much fuller perspective on the subject being investigated.

So what sources of data are there?   Sagor (1992 p.31) classifies these under 3 headings...

Existing data	This might include looking at portfolios of pupil's work (or their Learning Journey accounts), school records and, of course, the literature review (and don't forget the possibility of building on other students' CPR).
Tools for capturing *everyday life*	These might include diaries, logs, journals and videos; but also work shadowing and observation schedules, and possibly rating scales.
Tools for questioning	These might include interviews (face-to-face, or telephoned, possibly recorded - but only with foreknowledge and permission granted), surveys (based on interviews perhaps, or written or electronic), tests and possibly (but probably unlikely) experiments.

When you have chosen the 3 methods, you should investigate the methodology of each. Questionnaires are particularly problematic as it is so easy to ask a biased question.   Don't let that put you off, but read round the subject and work through the issues in your group.

Please remember that confidentiality is a big issue.   Before collecting any personal data, the subject *must* be told what is being recorded, why you want it and what you will do with it.   They must also be told if it will be rendered anonymous or not.   When you have explained this clearly, you must obtain informed consent (and in the case of a child, you need consent from *both* the child and the primary carer).   If data is being collected from within a setting, then the principle of the setting must also be asked for their permission and co-operation.   Failure to obtain all necessary consents (and document it) may lead to your final report being rejected.

Step 4.   Analyse and Present your Data

Now you must analyse your raw data.   As Sagor (1993, p.10) put it, if collecting data is the heart of the process, data analysis is the soul.   It involves looking systematically at all the data collected and identifying patterns and/or trends.

One approach is to use a data sorting matrix.   The first stage is to 'sift' the data.   Sit down, in your collaborative group, and together skim over the data picking out significant points or interesting ideas.   If several people come up with a point, or several are particularly interested in a point, note it down.   You should aim for 3 or 4 themes.

Then construct the matrix.   There are various way of doing this, use a spreadsheet if you are computer-literate.   Possibly better is to use sheets of A4 paper.   Lay these out, on the floor, in the form of a table.   You will need one column for each theme already identified.   You will need one row for each data window used (presumably 3).   Put headers on each row and column.   Finally add a row for the final summaries.

	Parents intervening with the phonics	Pressure to read sooner	Cartoon style fantasy books
The questionnaire			
Snapshot observations			
Feedback on the 'Unique story' forms			
Summaries			

Now go through the data in more detail, noting down everything which is relevant to those themes - whether it confirms your ideas or not.   If new and important themes come up, enlarge the matrix. Finally, write down a summary from all the data windows for each theme.

You have your summaries, how can you present the results most clearly?   If they are numerical then a graph would be good.   Do you have percentages? If so a pie chart can be useful.   Any sort of chart is more memorable than a list of comments.

5.   Plan the Action(s) to Take

The whole point of CPR is to work in a team to improve one's personal and group practice. Therefore it would be incomplete unless actually put into practice.

Depending on the time scale, and the terms of reference for your study, you may include - in your final report - just the action plan, or the action plan and a brief account of its implementation, or (better still) the plan plus an account of its implementation plus an evaluation, or (best of all) all of that plus a revised action plan.

The report itself should follow a set pattern.   There are minor variations to this and details should be forthcoming from your course tutor.   Do follow the pattern though.

Once the project is complete and the report written, that is not an end to things.   Nothing is perfect. The project should be the first step of a process of continual scrutiny and improvement.   Reflect on what is happening.   Re-evaluate its outcomes.   Refine the group's practice.

Then reflect again...

References:
Sagor R. (1993) *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* Alexandria VA, Assoc. for Supervision & Curriculum Development
Stark R. (1998) *Practitioner Research: the Purposes of Reviewing the Literature within an Enquiry* Edinburgh, SCRE Spotlight 67
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