

Exploring Practitioner Inquiry Among Health and Physical Education Teachers

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Abstract : Existing research suggests that practitioner inquiry (PI) can positively influence teachers' professional learning. Within the context of Health and Physical Education (HPE), however, we know little about the influence of PI on HPE teachers and their students, and HPE colleagues. Aim: This study responds to the research question: in what ways do HPE teachers believe that PI influences their teaching practices, their students and their HPE colleagues? Context and participants: This study presents a case study of a year-long, government-funded teacher professional learning programme called Teaching Excellence Program (TEP) offered by the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. The TEP is intended to advance teacher professional knowledge in a range of ways, including through individual and collaborative PIs. This paper examines the outcomes that ensued from the teachers' individual and collaborative PIs. The study involved seven Australian HPE teachers with varying levels of experience (6–30 years). We employed an exploratory, multi-method case study approach, and data consisted of interview transcript, participant-designed cartoons, and artefacts (e.g. framing a problem of practice and action planning documentation). Findings: Within the broader context of the TEP, PI was identified as particularly engaging for the participating HPE teachers. The HPE teachers believed that engaging in PI: (a) enhanced their own teaching practices; (b) therefore improved students' engagement; and in some cases (c) influenced HPE colleagues' teaching practice. Implications: This study underscores the potential influence that PI can have on HPE teachers when scaffolded and sustained support is available and accessed.

Introduction - Practitioner inquiry (PI) is a multifaceted approach to professional learning that includes, for example, action research, practitioner research, self-study, and participatory action research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). PI is commonly used to capture the means through which teachers, teacher educators and researchers investigate and improve their own practice by considering the cycles of action and reflection in the process of improving their practices (Carr and Kemmis Citation1986; Kemmis Citation2006). The diversity of approaches to inquiry share a common goal of creating ways of knowing and generating practice-based evidence or evidence-based practice (Casey et al. Citation2018; Goodyear, Casey, and Kirk Citation2013) Oliver, Oesterreich, Aranda, Archeleta, Blazera, et al. Citation2015). PI invites educators to investigate their practice, recognising that improving practice is intricately linked to the contexts and power structures shaping teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). In that context, PI positions teachers as agentic generators of knowledge and catalysts for change. Research in Health and Physical Education (HPE) suggests that PI can be a powerful tool to enhance

teaching and learning (Jones Citation2023; MacPhail, Scanlon, and Tannehill Citation2023; Oliver, Oesterreich, Aranda, Archeleta, Blazer, et al. Citation2015; Alfrey, O'Connor, and Jeanes Citation2017). As a process, PI creates spaces for teachers to explore their daily practices, fostering pedagogical change and innovation (Goodyear and Casey Citation2015; Luguetti and Oliver Citation2020; Wrench and Paige Citation2020). The positioning of the teacher-as-researcher can support teachers in connecting theory and practice, providing a platform for reflection, experimentation, and meaningful change in thinking and practice (Freire Citation1987; Jones Citation2023; MacPhail, Scanlon, and Tannehill Citation2023). It also enables teachers to innovate and untangle themselves from historically traditional practices in HPE that may no longer serve them or their students (Goodyear, Casey, and Kirk Citation2013; Jones Citation2023; Oliver, Oesterreich, Aranda, Archeleta, Blazera, et al. Citation2015). Despite some evidence of the influence of PI on HPE teachers' knowledge and practices (Goodyear and Casey Citation2015; Luguetti et al. Citation2019; Patton and Parker Citation2014), limited research has explored the ways in

which teachers view their PI as a means to influence student learning and their HPE colleagues.

Practitioner inquiry: the notion of inquiry as stance:

Across multiple sectors, it is important for teachers to engage in ongoing PI (Salter and Tett Citation2022). PI emphasises active exploration of knowledge creation, critical thinking, and self-directed learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). Rooted in constructivist and critical pedagogies, PI encourages teachers to pose questions, investigate problems, reflect on their findings, and draw conclusions. Importantly, the process of inquiry involves formulating questions, investigation, reflection and conclusion and this process becomes the central focus rather than the outcome of the learning or the product (Newman and Leggett Citation2019; Salter and Tett Citation2022; Schon Citation2017). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (Citation2009) extend this thinking by suggesting PI offers a critical and transformative stance that is linked not only to high standards for the learning of all learners, but also to social change and social justice and the individual and collective professional growth of teachers.

Whilst the value of teacher PI is rarely questioned, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that teachers face in attempting to enact this practice. Research suggests that teachers can struggle to identify as a 'researcher', and they usually face the pragmatic and perennial challenges of time, opportunity and capacity to engage with PI (Newman and Leggett Citation2019; Salter and Tett Citation2022). Enacting PI requires teachers to become reflexive, inquiry-based practitioners. This sees teachers adopt and cultivate an active inquiry stance to systematically investigate their practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). Such an approach means that teachers must be guided on how to critically reflect during the systematic, data-based critique of their ongoing teaching practices and the contexts in which they teach (Schon Citation2017).

The notion of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009) foregrounds the role that teachers can play, both individually and collectively, in generating local knowledge, re-envisioning and theorising practice, as well as interpreting and interrogating the theory and research of others. For Cochran-Smith and Lytle (Citation2009), inquiry as stance means that PI forms habits of mind or worldviews intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. In that sense, teachers who undertake PI aim to explore and understand the intertwining concerns of practice and inquiry, emphasising reflexivity – acknowledging and grappling with one's biases and assumptions. It advocates for teachers to take responsibility for these biases in both personal and institutional contexts, actively challenging them within collaborative and service-oriented relationships (Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). This approach views inquiry as a platform for reflective educational, political, and cultural engagement, fostering personal and professional growth while cultivating

an inquiry driven approach to practice.

Research context: the TEP programme: The TEP, which is a one-year programme designed to advance professional knowledge and practice for teachers from government, Catholic and independent schools in Australia, was launched in 2022 with a pilot cohort of 250 teachers. There are six key interconnected components of the TEP, which are:

- (a) Teaching and learning in and across the disciplines;
- (b) Implementing a responsive pedagogy;
- (c) Embedding PI and understanding impact;
- (d) Activating dispositions for excellent teaching;
- (e) Enhancing collaborative expertise; and
- (f) Promoting teacher agency. As part of TEP, teachers engage in various learning activities including 'Conference Days' and 'Discipline Days' (discipline-based workshops).

They also participate in cross-sectoral and cross-discipline Learning Communities, focusing on both improving pedagogy and engaging in PI projects. Master TeachersFootnote2 lead the Discipline Days, facilitate the activities within the Learning Communities, and provide feedback to the teachers on their PI projects, fostering professional dialogue and peer learning among the teachers. There are two PI projects within the TEP:

- (i) an independent PI; and
- (ii) a collaborative extended PI.

These two practitioner inquiries focus on a self-identified problem of practice that the teachers wish to explore further and entail an examination of teaching methodologies, the intricacies of student learning processes, and the cultural and contextual dynamics within learning environments.

The TEP inquiry cycle scaffolds the process of conducting an inquiry into practice. Supported by Master Teachers, teachers engage in each phase of the cycle and participate in dialogue and collaborative problem-solving related to emerging challenges. The cyclical process involves identifying and selecting problems as opportunities for new learning. While problem identification is a starting point for PI, new, connected problems will likely emerge during the inquiry. Problem-finding and solving enable deep thinking and learning. They are catalysts for strategic action and for improving what teachers do

Methodology: This study is drawn from a larger project in which researchers evaluated the TEP throughout the year 2023. In the large project, the researchers collected documentary data and interviews with TEP organisers and HPE teachers. The larger project was guided by collaborative evaluation principles (O'Sullivan Citation2012; Rodríguez-Campos and Rigoberto Citation2012) where key TEP organisers were engaged during each stage of the evaluation process. This study focuses on the HPE teachers' perspectives, and is presented an exploratory, multi-method case study. The case study presented here is embedded in real-life situations that allowed us to share in what ways

HPE teachers believe that PI in the TEP programme impacted their teaching practices, their students and their HPE colleagues.

Participants: In 2023, thirteen HPE teachersFootnote3 were accepted into the TEP programme. Participants for this study were drawn from this field and included seven HPE teachers from different sectors (Government, Catholic, and Independent)Footnote4 and levels (Primary and Secondary) of education We invited all 13 HPE teachers to be part of the study and seven teachers accepted.

Data collection and analysis: Data were collected via three qualitative methods, which were:

Two semi-structured interviews with each of the HPE teachers. The first interview occurred in the middle of the year, and we asked questions about the teachers' backgrounds, previous experiences regarding PL and questions about the individual PI. The second interview occurred in November 2023 and focused on the impact of the TEP programme and questions to the collaborative PI. Artefacts generated through the PI. We collected all teachers' artifacts in the TEP including framing a problem of practice and action planning documentation, and their self-evaluation of impact. Cartoons. Four of the seven HPE teachers agreed to explore their PI in more detail via cartoon co-creation. During the second interview with participating teachers, they were invited to reflect on their PI more deeply and identify critical incidences within their inquiry that influenced their professional learning experiences, and this impacted their teaching practices, students, and in some cases colleagues.

Conclusion: Fundamental to the notion of inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberation. In considering PI as stance, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (Citation2009) invite us to consider the pivotal role of teachers as teacher-researchers, in generating localised knowledge, reconceptualising and theorising practice, and critically engaging with the theories and research of others. Viewing PI as stance entails adopting a 'habit of mind' or worldview aimed at challenging the inequities entrenched in the educational status quo

(Cochran-Smith and Lytle Citation2009). In our study, the HPE teachers – positioned as agents of change – suggested that engaging in multiple cycles of inquiry supported them to (a) shift their teaching practices, including more student-centred pedagogies; (b) therefore influenced students' experiences, particularly by increasing their engagement in HPE; and in some cases, (c) influenced some of their HPE colleagues. In this discussion, and in response to the research question, we now critically examine the influences of the PI on the participating teachers, their students and their HPE colleagues. The findings of our research align with a body of literature that underscores the influence of PI on HPE teachers' practices. Teacher approached this shift in unique ways for instance, Rosie focused on creating inclusive spaces to foster social inclusion.

References:-

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