

# Introduction

This book is written for practitioners working in health, education and social care who are undertaking research. Practitioner research is an emerging research tradition. The aim of practitioner research is fundamentally no different from other forms of research in that it is about generating new knowledge. Nor are there unique research techniques attached to it. However, practitioner researchers *are* different as a result of their unique position in the research process. It is this uniqueness that we wish to capture in this book by focusing on its particular strengths, as well as its weaknesses. This book attempts to highlight the very real issues that practitioners face when undertaking research. By doing so it attempts to show the value of practitioner research and how it is critical to the effective development of practitioners.

## ***The Practitioner Researcher***

This book is for practitioners engaged in research primarily in the public sector. The words 'practitioner' and 'professional' are used interchangeably in this book. A practitioner researcher is someone who is employed in a professional capacity but who, as part of their role, is expected to undertake research. With the present emphasis on accountability, evidence-based practice and evaluation, practitioners are increasingly becoming engaged in some kind of research. This research may be about keeping detailed records of a child's progress, evaluating how a service is performing or ensuring service users' views are taken into account when planning developments in services. Such research may be carried out as a specific aspect of the practitioner's role, it may be an additional seconded role for a fixed period or it may be quite hidden from view. The research may be part of a higher or further degree or it may be independent of any academic qualification.

Being a practitioner researcher is not the same as being an academic researcher. The practitioner researcher approaches research and embeds research within practice in ways that an academic researcher cannot.

Fundamentally, we believe that there is a synergy between research and practice for the practitioner researcher in that practitioners engaged in research are more successful practitioners and researchers engaged in practice are more successful researchers.

Yet, the practitioner researchers with whom we work have implicitly and explicitly indicated that their research is seen as less important than that of academic researchers. It is our intention to redress this imbalance and legitimise people's research into their own practice. For example, occupational therapists have a unique and distinct perspective of the world.

Research that seeks to understand and develop the practice of occupational therapy cannot be controlled and directed by a medical doctor or an academic sociologist. This is not to dismiss the contribution of academics from different disciplines. It can offer a different perspective on an issue that opens up, for the practitioners, new ways of developing their practice. However, in this book we want to identify the unique contribution of practitioner researchers.

### ***On Being a Practitioner in the Public Sector***

In the UK, the state both directly, through the government, or indirectly, through local and regional structures such as local authorities and Primary Care Trusts, runs a range of services and agencies. These include the National Health Service (the largest employer in the world) and local authorities, which includes schools and social services. In addition, the state supports directly or indirectly a range of other non-statutory organisations that also employ professionals.

A very wide variety of professionals work in these large public sector institutions. Professional groups usually share a similar perspective, inculcated throughout training, and the culture of their professional associations. However, different professionals often have quite radical differences on the underpinning basis of delivering services to patients, clients or pupils.

One of the key aspects of the government's agenda is to ensure that public services work more effectively. This requires a greater degree of 'joined up' thinking throughout the organisations. This drive is both at the micro level for professionals within services to work more effectively together, and also at a macro level for services as organisations to work together.

Difficulties with joined up thinking within research arise at a number of levels. Most fundamentally they arise because different professional groups work from different research bases, promoting different research methodologies and types of knowledge. Research across the different professions is not joined up and, therefore, research across different agencies is often never connected. In

addition, academic researchers working in different disciplines are encouraged to target their research for particular academic audiences. Practitioner research usually has a focus on the real problems that individuals face. Practitioner researchers have the opportunity to promote research that is joined up and break the academic, fragmented approach to knowledge.

### ***Evidence-Based Practice***

Over the past few years the government has affirmed that there must be a clear link between professional practice and research. This is known as evidence based practice. The development of evidence-based practice has three components. The first, and most important, is that research should provide the evidence on which professional practice is based. The second component is that service delivery will change based on best available research evidence. The third component is that, through evaluation of services, practitioners can monitor the effects of their interventions.

In response to the development of an evidence-based practice culture, practitioners are encouraged, and sometimes coerced, to engage more actively with research. An increasing number of practitioners have a research remit as it is widely recognised that the connection between professional practice and research is best achieved through the development of practitioner research whereby practitioners undertake research into their own practice. If this is to happen, practitioners need to develop the skills and also the authority to research their own practice. This book supports practitioner researchers to fulfil this role.

### ***Our Position***

We work at the University of Essex in the Department of Health and Human Sciences. This is a multi-professional and multi-disciplinary department and we have tried to capture the multi-professional ethos within this text. In writing the text our backgrounds in education, psychology, sociology and nursing kept intervening in our discussions. At first this was an irritation that interrupted the free flow of discussion, but as we progressed we recognised that this represented the 'real world' problems that practitioner researchers face and began to incorporate this debate into our writing.

We have included many examples of practitioner research drawn from our own practice. Whilst we have removed the personal and identifiable details from the examples, each case study represents real debates in which we have engaged with practitioners, students and each other. These case studies highlight the range of issues that face practitioner researchers and illustrate

how practitioner research is still at a developmental stage without pre-formed answers to many of the issues. This book draws together our current understanding as a precursor to further development in the future.

When we first discussed writing this book we were concerned at the apparent absence of joined up thinking within the public services. We decided that the book would attempt to draw out common themes in health care, social care and education. Many of our colleagues argued that it could not be done. Academic and professional colleagues felt that there was too much difference between the health, education and social care sectors. What we have found in our discussion whilst writing the book is that there is actually a great deal of overlap. The basis of the problems that tax teachers are often also experienced by health and social care staff.

We believe that the practitioner researcher has a significant role to play in the development of our public services. This role is in its infancy at present and this book offers a glimpse at the terrain as it is currently mapped. We find it very exciting that this landscape has very few features drawn onto it. This is a map only in the sense that it provides us with an indication of where the landscape starts and finishes.

This is not a do-it-yourself textbook. The world in which the practitioner researcher operates is so varied that such a book would be too generic and, consequently, of very limited use. What we have tried to do is write a book that encapsulates some of the debates that currently surround practitioner research. We do not offer answers, but instead, the opportunity to engage with the debate, reflect on your own practice and form your own opinions.

### ***Structure of the Book***

There are 11 chapters that address different substantive issues. Each chapter includes case studies drawn from our own experience to illustrate the impact of the theoretical content upon the practitioner researcher in the real world.

*Chapter 1* examines the different research worlds in which practitioner researchers operate and links these with the range of research paradigms used by practitioner researchers. It asks what constitutes good quality research and assesses the potential for combining different research methods in practitioner research.

*Chapter 2* explores how the practitioner researcher's personal and professional background impacts upon the research agenda. It examines different types of knowledge – propositional, process, personal and values-based knowledge. It encourages practitioner researchers to reflect upon and think critically about their practice and the practice environment in relation to their research ideas. Such critical thinking assists practitioner researchers to define relevant theory, and examine the assumptions underpinning practice, within the framework of their research.

*Chapter 3* makes the connection between research and development within organisations. Types of research that support and facilitate development are explored at both an individual (micro) and organisational (macro) level.

*Chapter 4* examines the unique position of the practitioner researcher in terms of conducting evaluative research within their own organisation. It explores the advantages that the practitioner researcher has, particularly their access to the 'shadow side' of organisations. Different types of evaluation frameworks used in both process and outcome research are examined.

*Chapter 5* looks at the strengths and weaknesses of practitioner researchers carrying out research within their own practice. Whilst the practitioner researcher can engage in strategies to clarify roles within the research process, the boundaries between 'practitioner as practitioner' and 'practitioner as researcher' tend to be blurred and unfixed. This chapter links practitioner research to professional development and identifies research as an opportunity for practice development.

*Chapter 6* looks at the concept of doing ethical research and takes a critical stance towards the burgeoning national structures that have been established in the past decade to control research within public services. It argues that there is a need for systems to ensure that all research meets appropriate ethical standards and provides some helpful strategies to support practitioner researchers through the bureaucracy.

*Chapter 7* provides an overview of the research process focusing particularly on getting the research proposal right. It identifies a range of practical issues encountered during the research journey and stresses the need for careful planning at all stages. Strategies to assist with research planning are suggested.

*Chapter 8* examines the role service users have to play within practitioner research and how this role can be facilitated. Establishing collaboration with service users is challenging and it can be difficult to avoid involvement that is tokenistic. This chapter focuses on styles of involvement and how to establish effective engagement with service users as collaborative partners. Issues relating to ownership of research conducted in collaboration with service users are discussed.

*Chapter 9* is concerned with how practitioner researchers present their research and looks at writing the research report. It suggests strategies to assist writing, such as keeping a research diary to ensure that writing up is an on-going process throughout the research. It also encourages the practitioner researcher to reflect upon the target audience to identify the most appropriate form of dissemination of the research results.

*Chapter 10* examines how practitioner researchers can maximise the impact of their research. Incorporating research findings into practice within organisations is complex, but it is equally challenging for individual practitioners to change safe and familiar practice. The advantages of working collaboratively are explored in order to promote joined up thinking.

*Chapter 11* explores how we can facilitate the growth and development of other practitioner researchers. The importance of reflection leading to reflexivity is explored as is the use of supervision to aid development. Techniques for developing reflective skills are discussed as an aid to developing the practitioner researcher.

The final chapter collates our conclusions about practitioner research based on our experience of researching and writing the chapters. It highlights the uniqueness of practitioner research for personal development and its potential to change practice.

We have not identified the real names of people within our case studies, but we do want to acknowledge the significant contribution of all those individuals both to our thinking and to the finished product. The case studies acted as the trigger for writing the book and served to crystallise our thinking about who we were writing for. We have addressed the problems brought to us by practitioners through our own reflection on research and practice and by talking to one another. In that respect the book is a dialogue of the sort of discussions that have taken place in the Department of Health and Human Sciences in the past few years. If we have captured some of the immediacy of that debate then we have achieved our aim.