Practitioners leading the field? Supporting practitioner involvement through research in the *Skills for Life* sector

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This paper reflects on the experience of developing and supporting the practitioner-led research initiative (PLRI) within the government funded National Research and Development Centre (Hamilton and Wilson, 2005; Hamilton *et al.*, 2007). My role has been as an academic advocate with strong links to practitioner communities in ALNE over a long period of time. This enables me to compare and contrast my experience of working with the PLRI with other settings, especially the voluntary network, RaPAL. I aim to pull out some of the key factors that appear to enable or constrain practitioner voices, their ability to develop ideas about the work they do and to produce and shape public knowledge about literacy learning.

For the first time in 2001 the government in England funded the *Skills for Life* (SK4L) strategy for Adult literacy, Numeracy and language (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Large sums of public money were allocated and ambitious targets set to improve basic skills in the adult population up to 2010 (DES, 2001). The targets were aimed at specific groups of adults and were tied to outcome-related funding based on a national test. Along with close auditing and inspection of programme quality, as in other areas of public policy at this time, led to a 'high stakes' target culture. Core curricula in literacy, numeracy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) were developed, based on the National Curriculum in schools. Teachers, many of them part-time and sessional workers in FE or community-based programmes, were viewed as inadequately trained. The informal, practice-based knowledge accumulated over many years by experienced teachers was seen as of little value. A specialised qualification structure and professional standards were created for them.

The orthodoxy of ‘evidence-based’ policy was pursued strongly in this under-researched field and the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) was one of the agencies set up to fill the gaps and to generate knowledge that could guide teacher action. Within the core curriculum, the new test of achievement and the model of teacher training, the dominant view of knowledge was positivist: expert facts needed to be transmitted to both teachers and learners in order to enhance practice and learning. Professional development was seen as acquiring and applying new, externally generated, expert knowledge. Such a view runs directly against some of the key assumptions and epistemological goals of practitioner research, which focuses on legitimising and supporting the collaborative construction and shaping of practice-based knowledge by teachers themselves (Lytle and Cochrane-Smith, 1993; Middlewood, 1999)

One of the underpinning strategies of the NRDC was to build research capacity, reflective practice and career development through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in the centre. This commitment presented the opportunity for a funded initiative in practitioner research. However, it should be clear from the description above
that the policy environment within which this opportunity arose, also set up some tensions and contradictions that the PLRI had to negotiate.

To analyse this experience I draw on a ‘deliberative policy analysis’ perspective (see Fischer, 2003). This approach asserts that much of the policy implementation process goes on through ‘deliberation’ - argumentation and paperwork negotiated between actors at all levels. Opportunities for deliberation are determined in part by the formal consultative spaces that exist and partly through informal networks. The terms in which debates and discourses are framed act to exclude certain groups and affect the agency that key players are able to exercise. It is within these spaces that practitioner research in SK4L was positioned and the strength of practitioner voices regulated.

The SK4L strategy framed research in particular ways and the culture of accountability and high visibility for all funded activities reduced risk-taking. Overlaid on this context were the processes of obtaining the funding from the NRDC and writing the project guidelines for applicants. These were very carefully drawn to anticipate the wide range of proposals that we might receive. In contrast to organizations like RaPAL which have always tried to widen the definition of what counts as research, the PLRI began by drawing boundaries around what could be funded and accepted in the context of NRDC activities and inevitably defined research as specialist space apart from practice. Proposals needed a good deal of organization and thought ahead of being funded, and this favoured groups who were already collaborating in some way, automatically excluding many other practitioners with an embryonic interest in research.

The PLRI projects were chosen through an open competition, with national bids for £10,000 per project1. This was comparatively generous resourcing, especially the funding for practitioners’ time. The nature of the funding affected the motivation for becoming involved. Unlike RaPAL where practitioners already interested in research come together to find out more and to hear each others experiences in kind of solidarity network, the PLRI groups came forward because of the money available, may not have thought about ‘practitioner research’ before and have quite traditional ideas about what research is.

The process of selecting projects shapes them still further: successful projects had to address a broad theme already decided by the NRDC. The chosen projects needed to align with NRDC agendas more generally and to complement one another. The NRDC’s priorities thus acted as a powerful filtering overlay to the work that practitioners proposed.

In working with these projects we balanced between developing practice, theory and practical research skills. There was a great opportunity to align practitioner research activities with the NRDC’s broader research programme but this was only patchily successful (numeracy and IT were good examples). An interested and sympathetic consultative group was a positive support to the initiative as was the simple device of paid conference participation for the practitioner researchers. These wedged the door open, but making links with other researchers and maintaining the visibility of the initiative took constant attention. Where academics did offer their support, the hierarchical relations between academic researchers and practitioners were apt to intervene especially as these were reinforced by the policy research culture.

There were struggles and dissatisfaction with tensions between the relative value of process and product in practitioner research along with inappropriate expectations of the outputs as compared with large-scale funded research. Creative ways of expressing practitioner and learner voices in dissemination and publication were to some extent
explored but we were constantly drawn back to the traditional norms of academic research publication with its emphasis on written formats. These stripped away the detail and innovation of practitioner approaches to communicating findings. Contentious issues of timing and speed of feedback arose since the NRDC had a long process of clearance that passed through several institutional layers as far as the central strategy unit. The issue of appropriate peer reviewers for project reports was also difficult to resolve.

The PLRI set out with ambitious aims to affect the field in the longer term and to enhance prevalent discourses of research, by strengthening networks, embedding the findings and an enquiry stance within organizations. The impact study carried out at the end of the initiative suggested that while practitioners as individuals had been strongly and positively affected by their experience of research, it was much rarer for organizational change to result and the new networks created by the initiative were fragile.

Like all policy initiatives, there were contradictions in the aims, unintended consequences and shortfalls between the aims and the outcomes of the PLRI. On the positive side new models of support were developed and tested and the practitioners directly involved experienced a range of lasting benefits. On the negative side the PLRI had little effect on organizational practice. It opened only a small deliberative space in which to challenge dominant discourses of research and issues about the communication of findings remained unresolved. It experienced low sustainability as the funding that flourished for the 5 years of the SK4L policy wave receded. Ironically, whilst RaPAL often feels so vulnerably positioned on the edges of policy and organizational power, it scores highly on these last three counts as committed and critically sophisticated practitioners steer it through changing policy conditions.

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