Leading School Improvement, Innovation and Professional Learning Through Action Research: A Policy and Practice Review

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ABSTRACT: Leading a professional learning community and creating a culture of continuous improvement that impacts positively on student learning in schools is a profound challenge. Two major elements of the continuous improvement theme amongst education policy makers are the emphasis on strengthening school leadership together with developing a highly skilled and innovative teaching workforce. A search of Australian education system databases over the past five years has produced an array of strategic policy documents which postulate a direct link between continuous improvement and professional learning including the innovative practices of school leaders and teachers. In this article we (a) survey the literature which examines the nature of policy and practice linkages between leadership, school improvement and innovation, professional learning and action research; (b) identify the influence of neo-liberal ideology on school improvement and leadership; and (c) explore contemporary ideas about innovation in professional learning with a focus on action research. We suggest five key propositions from the literature which are used by education policy makers to support the current imperatives associated with leadership, school improvement, professional learning and action research, and argue that these propositions are central to the policy directions of education authorities and national agencies such as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Finally, we offer our perspective on the debate about the efficacy of professional learning by practitioners through the practice of action research.

Introduction

School improvement and leadership are two themes which permeate the formal agendas of all education systems and jurisdictions across the world. In most education systems, there are
numerous policy statements and strategic imperatives which suggest that school leadership drives educational reform and improvement. In this article we critically examine some of the claims made in the literature about leadership of school improvement and innovation in the Australian context. Within this context, we also analyse how forms of practitioner research such as action research are being promoted by education systems as a methodology for enhancing professional learning amongst school leaders and teachers. We suggest that neo-liberal ideology has played a major role in shaping the policy parameters associated with leadership, school improvement, innovation, professional learning and action research. Our contention is that insufficient attention has been paid by policy makers to the complexities of these relationship parameters, often leading to inappropriate application of action research approaches in professional learning.

In the first half of the article, we examine the influence of neo-liberalism on school improvement policies and practices, with specific reference to the use of national testing as a political policy lever in the continuous improvement agenda. We then examine the literature claims about the influence of leadership and professional learning as the major drivers of school improvement. In the second half of the article, we focus on the policy and practice associated with action research and its uses and misuses within the broader school improvement agenda.

Neoliberalism and school improvement
The continuous improvement theme in schools, through innovation and reform, is one of the global discourses or neo-liberal ideology described by Lingard (2010) which has taken hold of Western democracies in the past few decades:

Globalisation as experienced over the past thirty years or so has been neo-liberal
globalisation, an ideology which promotes markets over the state and regulation and
individual advancement/self-interest over the collective good and common well-
being. (p. 134)

The rise of neo-liberalism and New Public Management (NPM) in education within the context of globalisation is well documented (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2006, 2012; Connell, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Wrigley, 2009). There is agreement amongst these authors that the term ‘improvement’, and near synonyms ‘innovation’ and ‘transformation’, are intrinsically ideological and resolutely apolitical, ‘despite having been raised to a level of enormous political importance’ (Wrigley 2009, p. 64). Other key global themes based on neo-liberal social theory and policies are standards and accountability, teacher quality, competition, markets and parental choice (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2012; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). These global themes are typically reflected in the language of NPN as described by Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014):

Around the world urgent efforts are being made to transform education for the
globalized cultures, economies and politics of the 21st century. International
comparisons of student learning outcomes drive anxious national education systems
towards the transformation (continuous improvement) of schools, national curricula,
pedagogies, assessment and evaluation. Policy for and administration of these
intended transformations is couched in the language of the NPM: targets, key
performance indicators and outcomes. (p. 1)

The influence of neo-liberalism and NPM is reflected in the fact that Australian school leaders and teachers face increased accountability and pressure to raise student performance and standards. The centrepiece of this continuous improvement agenda is standardised testing programs for students such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
(NAPLAN). Justification of national testing programs, such as NAPLAN, is typically based on political claims that measuring and publicly reporting student outcomes will help improve the performance of students, teachers, schools and education systems. However, many of these claims are increasingly being contested (Caldwell, 2010; Connell, 2013; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2011) and comprehensive debates are now devoted to exploring the positive and negative effects of national testing regimes (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016).

Leadership for school improvement and innovation

In addition to national testing, two other major elements of the continuous improvement theme amongst education policy makers are the emphases which are placed on strengthening school leadership and building a highly skilled and innovative teaching workforce (Hargreaves, 2011, 2012; Masters, 2012; Moursedh, Chijoke & Barber, 2010). A search of education system databases in Australia at national and state/territory level over the past five years produced an extensive range of strategic policy documents which linked continuous improvement to professional learning and the innovative practices of school leaders and teachers. The latest example is the Australian Federal Government’s report, Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes, which articulates a policy agenda in which teacher quality, school leadership, autonomy and parent engagement are identified as central to a high quality school system (Australian Government, 2016)

Another example is in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals which states:

> Principals work with others to produce and implement clear, evidence-based improvement plans and policies for the development of the school. ... They recognise that a crucial part of the role is to lead and manage innovation and change to ensure the vision and strategic plan is put into action across the school and that its goals and intentions are realised. (AITSL, 2011, p. 10)

This statement identifies a number of aspirational dimensions of the leadership concept and its link to school improvement efforts. For example, it suggests leaders engage in a ‘visioning’ process and that they ‘influence’ others to produce and implement ‘evidence-based’ improvement plans (Bruniges, 2012). A further significant aspect of the Principals’ Professional Standard is that school leadership should incorporate distributed properties as noted in the following admonition:

> While it is acknowledged that principals have a central role, a performance and development culture cannot be driven by one person alone. Leadership must come from all levels, from those with and without formal leadership positions. A truly effective approach is characterised by a shared commitment to improvement and an acceptance that teachers have a powerful role to play in each other’s development, as well as their own. (AITSL, 2011, p. 4)

A synthesis of research evidence from around the world suggests school leadership effects and influences are considered critical for school improvement and are second only to teacher effects in measures of improvements in student learning and development (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hattie, 2009, 2012; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). There is consistent evidence that leaders and teachers who focused their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning had a greater influence on student outcomes, all else being equal, than those who had less of a focus on these activities (Mulford, 2008; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). This finding reinforces:

> the long-standing empirical finding that leadership acts as a catalyst for school improvement, both by initiating change and shaping a coherent focus on learning in schools. ... Specifically,
the relationship between leadership and improvement capacity is best described as one of mutual influence or reciprocity. (Hallinger & Heck, 2011, p. 22)

A significant volume of literature also depicts effective positional and distributed leadership as essential for successful schools and long-term improvement in student outcomes. This has become a central tenet in most of the Western educational jurisdictions, and is driven largely by functional research claims from school effectiveness and improvement literature that have found a strong appeal within government and organisational contexts (AITSL, 2011; Bush & Glover, 2012; Harris, 2008, 2009). The fundamental premise is that the principal cannot lead the school alone, and the division of labour means that others should also be given more active participatory opportunities in leadership practice. A second premise is that effective distributed leadership can only occur when there are capable and strong senior positional leaders who know how to best utilise the strengths and capacities of their staff members. The best senior leaders are depicted as those who create the conditions for distributing leadership through developing the leadership of others and know how to build and maintain strong relational trust practice in their schools (Day et al., 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Harris, 2009, 2013; Mulford, 2008; Spillane, 2006).

We now focus our literature review on the links between professional learning, improvement and innovation, as largely defined within the Australian context.

Professional learning for improvement and innovation

It seems self-evident that the aim of teacher professional learning is to improve teacher effectiveness and the quality of student learning in the classroom. Research on school effectiveness and improvement has identified clear connections between professional learning and school improvement with professional learning considered a key driver in educational change and improving student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005; Timperley et al., 2007). Hattie’s (2009, 2012) influential meta-analysis research found that teachers account for 30 per cent of the variance in student achievement and that teacher professional learning has an effect size of $d=0.51$ on student achievement. These findings strongly indicate that teachers do have a positive effect on student learning and that expert teachers can make a difference. We acknowledge that linking teacher professional learning with improved student outcomes in cause-effect relationships can be problematic, however, it is widely recognised that teacher professional learning and growth is essential for student achievement and school improvement (AITSL, 2012a, 2014a; Cohen & Hill, 1998; Mayer, 2011; Timperley, 2008, 2011). Consequently, all education systems and schools are focusing more effort and resources on improving the quality and effectiveness of teachers.

Other literature links school improvement to innovative practices. Hargreaves (2012) suggested that innovation in schools and classrooms has increased in response to a range of pressures which include: greater school diversity, specialisation, decentralisation, autonomy, parental choice of schools, lower level of parental satisfaction with state schools and expanding application of ICT in schools. Caldwell (2015), in calling for a transformational approach to school improvement, advocates for a new framework that energises and embeds innovation in schools. His framework identifies a number of dimensions for innovation including leadership, governance, personnel, curriculum, learning and teaching and community engagement. The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) claims that innovation in education ‘… drives improvement either incrementally by advancing existing processes or more radically by introducing new practices’ (OECD, 2014, p. 3). CERI
has posited that innovation in education can be measured and that having such measures can improve education policy and practice.

In synthesising the literature on improving leadership for innovation, continuous improvement and professional learning, there is a recurrent theme of teacher inquiry approaches to drive the change and improvement agenda. At a national level, this is evidenced in the Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (PL Charter) (AITSL, 2012a) and the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (P&D Framework) (AITSL, 2012b). The PL Charter encourages continuous and classroom embedded learning and concludes that the most effective professional learning involves individual and collaborative research which incorporates informal dialogue with peers (AITSL, 2014a). AITSL also sponsored the Innovation Grants Project (IGP) which profiled 16 Australian schools, professional associations, networks and organisations ‘which engaged in action research projects focused on innovative professional learning, performance and development within their context’ (AITSL 2014b, p. 2). From the IGP, the authors identified a range of conclusions which they suggest are aligned with the key characteristics of dynamic and effective professional learning and performance development cultures as articulated in the PL Charter and P&D Framework.

AITSL advocates for an action research approach towards professional learning and suggests that teachers should be supported to analyse and evaluate their existing knowledge and practices in relation to student outcomes and to identify aspects of their practice they would like to develop or change. Reflective teacher inquiry has also been linked to promulgating innovation, school reform and continuous improvement in other major Western education systems (Chapman & Sammons, 2013; Hopkins et al., 2011; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014).

Action research for school improvement

Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell and Mockler (2016) have noted the number of large scale practitioner inquiry and action research projects that have been used as catalysts for teacher professional development and learning with a view to school improvement. At present, the preference for action research as a vehicle for school improvement is visible in a number of Australian state and territory professional learning policies and initiatives (AITSL, 2014a; Kimber, 2013).

The preponderance of action research is likely attributable to the recognition of its capacity to support adult learners in authentic, meaningful and personally relevant learning experiences. Rather than traditional ‘dropping and dipping’ forms of professional development for teachers, action research seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to participants (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Action research can be understood as a form of professional learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). It aims at ‘improving practices by or in cooperation with practitioners’ (Tesch, 1990, p. 50) while Koutselini (2008) concluded the approach is ‘an effective means for producing an emancipatory change in attitudes and practice of both researchers and teachers’ (p. 47). Dick (2001) suggested the participants involved must value the changes that stem from action research. Rather than large-scale change however, action research is concerned with change on a much smaller, micro level (Denscombe, 2003).

The efficacy of this approach is premised on the understanding that professional learning and performance development will be most effective when it takes place within a culture
where teachers and school leaders expect and are expected to be self-directed active learners. Research also confirms that effective teachers and school leaders reflect on, receive feedback on, and improve their performance and pedagogical practice, and by so doing, improve student outcomes (AITSL, 2014a; Dempster, Lovett & Flickiger, 2011; Hattie, 2009, 2012; Hattie & Clinton, 2011; Timperley, 2008, 2011). Reeves (2008) found that when teachers are given the opportunity to engage in action research on a sustained basis and in a collaborative environment:

- … there is often a direct and measurable impact on student achievement, behaviour and educational equity;
- … their professional practice affects that of their colleagues; and/or
- … effective professional practices are reinforced and repeated by both the teacher researcher and with those teachers who are influenced by them. (p. 8)

An array of international research indicates that effective teachers and leaders are taking greater ownership of their own professional growth. The notion of teaching as being ‘research informed and research informing’ and that teachers should adopt a ‘researcherly disposition’ has been posed by Lingard and Renshaw (2010, p. 27). This implies that teachers and leaders are valued as researchers in their own right and suggests they are able to engage in activities that make transparent and visible their professional practice.

School practitioner research has generated a range of conflicting viewpoints about its value and efficacy in educational contexts. A number of criticisms have been raised with regard to the benefits and practice of action research undertaken by teachers. For example, Hattie critiqued the notion of teachers as researchers by asserting that this type of practitioner research ‘does not make any difference to the quality of teaching’ (Stewart, 2015, p. 1). Ellis and Loughland (2016) identified major challenges to teachers undertaking action research, including insufficient time, an over-crowded curriculum with major assessment pressures and inadequate training or research expertise. These latter challenges and pressures are associated with the increased accountability that Australian school leaders and teachers face to raise student performance and standards as part of the neo-liberal school performance agenda identified earlier.

**Concerns about the ‘Misuse’ of Action Research**

Notwithstanding the popularity and efficacy of action research for change and improvement, several writers have cautioned against neo-liberal policy which they argue has contributed to ‘inadequate action research’. The argument is that action research has the potential for use as an implementation tool for government policy rather than primarily a vehicle for expansive professional learning and generative partnerships (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Hardy, 2012; Kemmis, 2006). Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015, pp. 58-59) strongly critiqued the role of neo-liberal ideology and argued its policy manifestations ‘increasingly encourage teachers to conceptualise their work in terms of what can be easily measured and quantified, and tend to value those things above the more complex, human dimensions of education practice’. They also suggested that practitioner research has been used as an ‘implementation tool for education policy on the part of governments, including the appropriation of “action learning” as a softer option than action research or practitioner inquiry’. One example of this situation is provided by Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) in describing the Australian Government
Quality Teacher Program (2000-2013), specifically one of its major iterations in the state of New South Wales, Quality Teacher Action Learning.

Kemmis (2006, pp. 460-461), an advocate for critical action research as a ‘transformation of education’, outlined five categories of what he termed ‘inadequate action research’. These included projects which are:

- designed merely for improving teaching techniques;
- aimed at improving the efficiency of practices rather than understanding the importance of context and consequence in social, cultural, discursive and material-economic historical terms;
- conducted with the sole purpose of implementing government policies or programmes;
- not inclusive of the voices or perspectives of ‘consequential stakeholders’ of the research; and
- conducted alone rather than in open communication with others.

According to Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell and Mockler (2016, p. 84), it is possible that the AITSL P&D Framework could be implemented in Australian school systems with ‘its spirit intact but while also committing each of these transgressions’. They supported the notion of teachers and school leaders as the core of improvement efforts but argued for a reconceptualisation of improvement. They advocated the development of an ‘authentic model of improvement’ founded on reflective teacher inquiry within a praxis framework. This model of school improvement rejects the neo-liberal perspective and provides a counter-narrative to the focus on competitive and performance-based mechanisms that dominate the drive for continuous improvement.

Concluding Comments

From our reading and distillation of the literature pertinent to leadership of improvement and innovation in professional learning through action research, five propositions have emerged.

First, continuous school improvement has become a universal feature of all Western education systems with the dominant policy discourses and organisational practices based heavily on neo-liberal social theories and new public management (NPM) principles. In a climate of continuous improvement and provision of evidence-based learning outcomes, school leaders and teachers face increased accountability pressures to raise student performance. A significant part of this school improvement and accountability agenda is providing evidence of outcomes arising from classroom instruction through pupil assessment. Indicators of academic progress and outcomes provide evidence of improvement to external audiences and afford insights and feedback for participants, which assist in developing further plans to address improvement. A recent example of this accountability for improvement approach is provided in the first annual report, Queensland: A State of Learning (School Improvement Unit – SIU, 2016) which outlines extensive evidence of continuous improvement and reform in nine major domains of the Queensland state schooling system.

We do not want to suggest improving the quality and delivery of teaching and learning is unimportant however we are concerned about the potential for knee jerk reactions of education departments. This can result in poorly planned action research programs that do little to support teachers in developing deep understandings about action research processes, what constitutes data or evidence and how projects should be reported. A related concern is
with departmental directives to conduct research projects around perceived current national
issues of crisis (i.e. declining literacy and numeracy results on NAPLAN tests) thus stifling
the professionalism of teachers to identify their own contextually bound and authentic
research projects.

Our second and third propositions are linked to the critical importance of leadership as a
major asset in driving school improvement and innovation in learning for students, teachers
and other staff. We note from research evidence that positional leaders such as principals who
regularly engage in pedagogical leadership practices with their teachers can have a profound
influence on the learning outcomes of students. We have cited research indicating that
positional leaders act as a catalyst for school improvement, both by initiating change and
shaping a coherent focus on learning in schools. Thus the relationship between leadership and
improvement capacity is best described as one of ‘mutual influence or reciprocity’ (Hallinger
& Heck, 2011, p. 22). Another significant feature of reciprocity in school improvement is the
influence of distributed leadership practice. A broad consensus of international research
indicates a number of essential features must exist in any education facility in which claims
are made about the existence of a distributed leadership approach. One of these essential
features is ‘relational trust’ which acts as a catalyst in the reciprocal relationship between
leadership and improvement by creating the basic social fabric with which members of the
school community, including positional leaders and teachers, can initiate and sustain their
professional practice (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Ronnerman, 2016; Harris, Caldwell &
Longmuir, 2013). We suggest that further collaborative research is required with Australian
school leaders and teachers to verify the claims made about the influence of distributed
leadership in school improvement.

In regard to the fourth proposition, we have also established from the literature that there
is a clear evidentiary link between leadership, professional learning and innovation. This is
another universal theme in all of the policy statements of education systems examined in this
review and has become a major focus in the work of AITSL. As we read the various policy
statements, a claim consistent with the ‘mutual influence’ relationship emerges suggesting that
leadership drives school improvement and innovation in professional learning. Our work with
system and school leaders and teachers in Queensland, Australia partially confirms this claim
but there is also a need to seek greater clarity and knowledge on the creation, enacting and
evaluation of the evidence supporting the claim.

Our final proposition arises directly from the positioning of practitioner inquiry and
action research as major tools of professional learning in systemic school improvement
agendas. We agree with other writers cited herein that the proliferation and endorsement of
action research approaches have been premised on various principles that do not always build
a culture of self-directed, inquiry-based sustainable practitioner praxis. Whilst we believe a
strong case exists for viewing teaching as a ‘research informed and research informing
profession’ (Lingard & Renshaw, 2010), our experience has been that as a profession,
educators need to improve the dissemination of their activities beyond the confines of their
own work contexts. We recognise that the university sector and professional associations have
an important role to play in encouraging teacher researchers and school leaders in making the
outcomes of their practitioner inquiry visible in the broader educational community.

References


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