Practitioner's Use of Research to Improve Their Teaching Practices within Extended Educational Provisions

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A central goal amongst practitioners in the field of extended education is to provide high quality extracurricular programs for children and young people. Educational researchers in the field of extended education try and focus on improving the quality and effectiveness of such programs. Although the aims of both practitioners and researchers appear to be the same there is in-fact a considerable gap between practice and research. Monsen and Woolfson (2012) articulate this dilemma with reference to Robinson's (1993) argument when they state: "Researchers often frustratingly say that if only people implemented all their recommendations, then outcomes would improve. Equally, educators and other applied practitioners often ask why researchers and policy-makers do not focus on the problems that they are actually dealing with on a day-to-day basis and offer them something focussed, practical and doable" (Monsen & Woolfson, 2012, p. 134). This gap between 'real world' practice on the one hand and research on the other hand is the starting point of this Special Issue of the International Journal for Research on Extended Education (IJREE).

Some researchers, mainly from the new field of Implementation Science, emphasise the importance of practitioners' engaging with research as part of the process of overcoming the theory-to-practice gap (Hargreaves, 1996; McIntyre, 2005; McLaughlin, 2012; Monsen & Woolfson, 2012). The three papers in this Special Issue explore practitioners' use of research in a range of applied settings from a number of different perspectives. However, all of the papers are focused on the core goal of improving applied practice. In each paper the authors ask whether improvement is based upon a rigorous link between the practitioner and research.

This introductory paper provides a discussion on two areas which are of relevance to the papers included in this edition. Firstly, comparing and contrasting applied practice within extended education and more formal learning contexts. For example, why is practice perceived as being particularly demanding within such settings when compared with more formal learning contexts? Why should it be assumed that practitioners actively engaging with research is important in such settings? Secondly, how practitioners could successfully engage with research is explored. An example from the field of educational and child psychology, namely the Problem-Analysis

Framework is highlighted (Monsen & Frederickson, 2008; Monsen, Graham, Frederickson, & Cameron, 1998; Monsen & Woolfson, 2012).

Some of the Challenging Characteristics of Extended Educational Provisions

In this section extended educational contexts are compared with more formal learning settings (e.g. 'traditional' schools). This comparison highlights similarities and also important differences. The conclusion reached is that practices within extended educational contexts might be perceived by practitioners as being more challenging than those in more formal settings. At the same time the potential of extended education can be a rewarding endeavour for staff and pupils (e.g., out-of-school time, extracurricular and leisure time activities). The challenges described could be re-framed as opportunities to promote positive developments for the children and young people.

Pupils learning takes place within specific contexts and the characteristics of these settings affect learning outcomes (Bäumer, Preis, Roßbach, Stecher, & Klieme, 2011; Rauschenbach et al., 2004). Pupils spend a significant amount of their time within formal learning environments like schools (OECD, 2015). There has been a tendency in the last decade for the time pupils spend in formal education to have increased (for the German context e.g. Fraij, Maschke, & Stecher, 2015).

In addition, several countries have explored increasing out-of-school and extra-curricular learning opportunities as well. Stecher and Maschke (2013) present such developments over the last twenty years in countries as diverse as Germany, Great Britain, Japan, South Korea, Sweden and the United States of America. These initiatives towards institutionalised, but less curricular based education can be recognised in other countries as well (Fraij & Kielblock, 2015; OECD, 2015).

Learning in non-school organisations or during extracurricular school time (both are referred to as 'extended education') is in some ways *similar* to formal schooling. Yet there are some important *differences* between them. The similarities and differences described in the following section were originally conceptualised by Ludwig Stecher and his research group (Kielblock, Gaiser, & Stecher, 2017; Stecher, 2012; Stecher & Maschke, 2013). This information has been further analysed and additional material on how practices within extended educational contexts might be affected by the different features of each setting has been added.

Table 1 shows that formal educational contexts are similar to non-formal educational settings in two important ways. Firstly, teaching is explicitly embedded within an organisational structure. Secondly, the individuals implicitly know *what* they are aiming to learn in that setting. They also have an understanding of what function the organisation has. In formal educational contexts pupils are typically aware what they are there for (e.g., to learn and get qualifications), and implicitly what the societal function of school is (e.g., socialisation, Stecher, 2012). In non-formal educational contexts, the individuals have a sense of what the purpose of the organisation is as well. However, they might assume that the context is not as important as 'proper school' (Gaiser, Kielblock, & Stecher, 2016; see also the Certification aspect in Table 1).

Table 1. The specifics of non-formal educational contexts (compared to formal educational contexts).

Formal educational contexts	Non-formal educational contexts	Practical issues
1. Organisation The teaching action is explicitly embedded into an organisational and concrete structure.	No difference compared to formal contexts. →	The organisational structure prescribes (explicitly and implicitly) what practices generally should look like.
2. Intention The individuals 'know' if and what they are aiming to learn and they 'know' what function the organisation has.	No difference compared to formal contexts. →	The children/young people 'know' how formal (in a way how 'important') the context is or not.
3. Certification Success within the curriculum is measured by grades and qualifications which impact on life choices and opportunities.	Achieving grades or qualifications would be a fairly rare/exceptional occurrence. If 'certificates' are given, they do not have the same impact on life choices and opportunities. →	The lack of a formal qualifications based curriculum can lead to a structural 'void' and laisse-faire practices. (*see 2.: individuals know that the context is not formal*)
4. Profession Teaching staff are professionalised to the extent that the organisation (legally) requires it. Exceptions are uncommon.	A heterogeneity of professional backgrounds is more or less possible. In some cases non-professional staff are employed. →	Professionality is questioned by students and other staff. Collaboration can be seen as an additional challenge.
5. Obligation Attendance is compulsory.	Although there might be different attendance expectations usually it is voluntary. →	Heterogeneity amongst students due to individualised attendance patterns. (*see 6.: individuals follow no overarching curricular plan*)
6. Systematisation Learning processes and topics are driven by the curriculum. From the individuals' perspective learning is less self-directed.	The 'curriculum' is much more open for individualisation and more pupil-centred approaches (self-directed learning). →	No clearly agreed curricular or performance standards which practitioners can refer to. (*see 1.: there are some rough guidelines, yet they are not specific*)

Note: This table summarises the similarities commonalities and differences between formal and non-formal educational contexts as it is conceptualised by the research group around Ludwig Stecher (Kielblock et al., 2017; Stecher, 2012; Stecher & Maschke, 2013). The informal contexts are not depicted here. How these aspects affect practices within non-formal contexts is indicated in the grey boxes.

There are differences between formal and non-formal educational contexts. A first difference concerns the **Certification** (see Table 1, no. 3). Formal contexts usually validate the attainment and achievement of its learners. Examination certificates have an important impact on the individuals' opportunities in "further educational contexts and the opportunities in life in general" (Stecher & Maschke, 2013, p. 17). Sometimes in non-formal contexts, the achievement of participants is acknowledged, too. Yet, by definition, these 'certificates' usually do not have the same social status or potential impact on the individuals' life choices. From a learning perspective it could be argued that this might offer an advantage. The absence of formal assessment could provide increased opportunities for self-directed learning and exploration. This has the potential for both adults and pupils to have space to develop creative solutions and approaches. However, the absence of a formative element and a core curriculum might make the pupils feel that the activities in the non-formal program have less importance or value.

A second difference between formal and non-formal educational contexts concerns the **Profession** (see Table 1, no. 4). Formal educational contexts usually employ trained and qualified teaching staff (although e.g. in the UK there is a move within the Free School and Academies movement to employ non-qualified teaching staff who have other relevant qualifications). In non-formal educational contexts, a greater variety of practitioner backgrounds and experiences can be found. In some cases, these settings employ parents/carers or higher grade students to teach during the extracurricular hours of the German all-day schools (Stecher & Maschke,2013). This heterogeneity of backgrounds could be a potential strength of the non-formal sector. Such multi-professional teams could support pupils more appropriately than homogenous staff groupings (cf. e.g. Böhm-Kasper, Dizinger, & Gausling, 2016). An example might be that the organisation might hire youth leaders who are closer in age to the pupils. On the other hand, collaboration between practitioners with different professional backgrounds can be a difficult task to achieve managerially. Holm (2015) states, "bringing two different professional epistemologies together cannot be expected to automatically result in unification and qualitative change" (p. 44). A hierarchy might emerge (Holm, 2015), with a diffusion of teaching functions and responsibilities (du Bois-Reymond, 2013). The complexities involved in staff collaboration within extended educational contexts is only just beginning to be explored (Böhm-Kasper et al., 2016; Schüpbach, 2016). One idea to legitimate and increase innovative practices within multi-professional teams might be for the individuals to develop a sophisticated professional group self-concept in parallel to a child-centred collaborative process (Kielblock et al., 2017).

Obligation (see Table 1, no. 5) is the third difference between formal and non-formal educational contexts. Within formal educational contexts usually pupil attendance is not an issue because it is a legal requirement. Yet, within non-formal educational contexts attendance is more variable and an important aspect to be considered (Fiester, Simpkins, & Bouffard, 2005). From the perspective of teaching practices the voluntary nature of attendance could be beneficial in the sense of increased students' intrinsic motivation as it is 'their own decision' to participate or not. In addition, less strict and more flexible attendance rules might make it possible for those to participate in the activities who have family obligations and can-

not attend on a regular basis. Yet, extrinsically motivated pupils might find it more of a challenge to regularly attend. From a teaching perspective voluntary attending might lead to variable groups of pupils attending (for example in Gaiser et al., 2016 a homework support program is described which was fully voluntary; attendance ranged from three on one day to 27 on the next). This might make it difficult for the practitioner to anticipate what each day would be like and to plan accordingly.

Fourth, there is a difference between formal and non-formal educational contexts with regard to their **Systematisation** (see Table 1, no. 6). Formal educational contexts have a legitimate curriculum – organisation, method and content is prescribed. For the non-formal educational contexts "organisation, method and content are determined for the most part by the […] person in charge" (Stecher & Maschke, 2013, p. 18). Practices depend more on the individual practitioner, or on the preferences of the children/young people involved, which might be considered to have advantages. Yet, having no (or preferably less) of a prescribed curriculum and approach means that the individual practitioner is often responsible for developing along with colleagues plans to support the pupils in achieving their desired goals/outcomes.

This might be quite a challenge contributing to additional stress and possibly resulting in a lack of a coherent offer to students. In addition, the practitioner has to collaborate with the other stakeholders (teachers, other non-teacher practitioners, parents/carers) in order to develop a teaching and learning plan.

The teaching practices in the extended educational contexts seem to be especially challenging for practitioners. To overcome some of these constraints, colleagues are in a way compelled to ask practice questions and to explore a) strategies to cope with challenging classroom situations, b) ways of maintaining professionalism with regards to everyday practices and multi-agency collaborations, and c) to conceptualise their own 'curriculum' (taking into account the content of the surrounding school curricular and extracurricular activities and in accordance with the explicit and implicit requirements of the organisation).

A way forward to improve teaching practices might be to ask what kinds of information practitioners consider to be relevant and how they will translate this knowledge into effective 'real world' action. A conceptual framework that might support such a transformation process is presented in the following section.

Why a Researchers' Conceptual Stance Might Contribute to Bridging the Theory-to-Practice Gap. The Problem Analysis Framework

This Special Issue argues that improving the implementation and evaluation of evidenced based (or informed) programs within extended educational settings requires the development of practitioner thinking and reasoning skills.

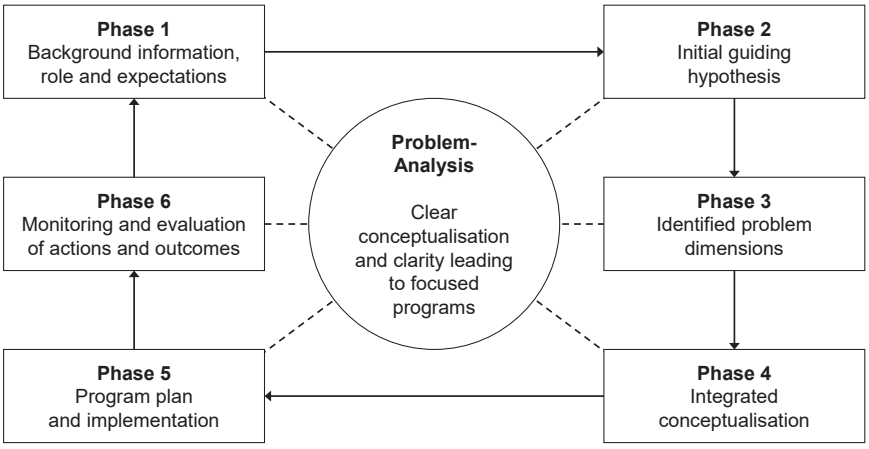
This can be achieved by emphasizing the need for more rigorous and collaborative problem-solving and decision-making processes and practices. Practitioners require the ability to think about complex work related problems in a more structured

manner which stresses the need for them to develop more of a 'new scientist-practitioner' stance (Lane & Corrie, 2006).

The Problem-Analysis cycle as an over-arching executive framework (see Figure 1) fits very much within the new scientist-practitioner model advocated by Lane and Corrie (2006) as it incorporates many of the core features of the scientific method. It also links very clearly with the five phases of research underpinning the translational research agenda within the new Implementation Science movement (e.g., (1). identification of the problem and a critical review of information, (2). identification of both assets and areas of concern, (3). designing and piloting a program, (4). assessing effectiveness, and (5). disseminating outcomes; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994).

The Problem-Analysis methodology from the field of educational and child psychology (Monsen & Frederickson, In Press, 2008; Monsen et al., 1998) is presented as an example of an executive framework within which practitioners (following training and support) can conceptualize the phases of critical thinking involved in the steps of embedding sound research and theory into effective and sustainable applied practice (which actually makes a difference for children and young people and those close to them).

Figure 1. The six phases of the problem-analysis framework.



Note: Adapted from Monsen and Woolfson (2012)

Theories of Action

Effective practitioners think, reason and reach conclusions within specific social contexts. Argyris and his colleagues have argued that it is a vital part of training to actively attend to practitioner's thinking and learning. Their view is that the gap between research and practice partly exists because such thinking and reasoning (the practitioner's 'set of governing variables' or Theory of Action) is not actively

engaged but bypassed (Argyris, 2004; Argyris & Schön, 1974; Kennedy & Monsen, 2016; Robinson, 1993; Robinson & Donald, 2014).

Argyris and colleagues have framed the 'set of governing variables' as Theories of Action (ToA) and these take two forms: *espoused theory* (what the practitioner says the variables are) and *theory-in-use* (the variables that actually guide practitioner action) (Argyris, 2004, 2008, 2010). Identifying ToAs are key to identifying the impact that practitioner actions will have on actual practice.

Uncovering ToAs is not easy and is made especially complicated by (i) the differences between espoused ToA and in-use, (ii) the observation that most people often remain unaware of the discrepancies between the two and (iii) the prevalence of single as opposed to double-loop learning (Argyris, 2010).

'Double-loop learning' occurs when the mis-matches between espoused and in-use ToAs are corrected by examining the governing variables underpinning action in the first place. It is this type of learning that is most likely to increase practitioner effectiveness, as it leads to changes in the underlying principles governing the system, thus ensuring any behavioural change succeeds and is long-lasting (Argyris, 1993a; Robinson, 1993; Robinson & Donald, 2014).

Conversely single-loop learning essentially leads to superficial changes in behavior that are symptoms of the variables underpinning a particular system. This type of change may deal with one problem situation but because the core principles governing the system are not changed, the issues manifest themselves elsewhere or the change does not last. Research methodologies that provide a framework for not only uncovering both the espoused and in-use ToA but also provide structured approaches to the enhancement of practice are therefore of significant benefit. (Those interested in gaining more information on this related area are referred to Argyris, 1993a, 1993b; Owens & Valesky, 2015; Robinson, 1993; Robinson & Donald, 2014; Robinson & Lai, 2006).

The Problem Analysis Framework as an Aid to Developing Critical Thinking

Within the Problem-Analysis methodology a key assumption is that the ill-structured 'real world' problems of applied practice (with which practitioners are routinely involved), can be seen to involve a complex set of conceptual tasks and interactions between the practitioner, others and the context. Such interactions involve the conscious (and unconscious) management by the practitioner of a range of high order cognitive tasks, including information-processing, problem understanding and hypotheses-testing as well as interpersonal efficacy (see Theories of Action). The outcome of this process is a comprehensive formulation of a real world problem or dilemma that is jointly developed with problem owner(s), thus leading to a more focused and effective program.

Table 2. The problem-analysis framework – as applied to practice.

Framework to guide thinking and action according to phase	Practical issues
1. Background information, role and expectations *First*, clarify the problem situation or practice dilemma and check out who needs to be involved to solve it. *Then*, clarify your own role and brief with the key persons involved. *Then* formulate clear initial performance target(s).	Sometimes difficult to perceive a problem *as a problem*. A reflective stance is a prerequisite for the initiation of the thinking cycle.
2. Initial guiding hypothesis *First*, generate tentative initial guiding hypotheses in the form of '*If-so-then-what*' propositions. Draft an Interactive Factors Framework (IFF)[1]. *Then*, collect systematically objective information, which supports or dis-confirms your initial guiding hypotheses. Methods to do this might be observe environmental and social aspects, consult records, collect and examine work samples, ask colleagues, communicate with the child(ren), interview parents/carers, search the internet, read studies and so on.	Challenging to conduct these investigations because it demands training in exploratory methodologies. In addition, the practitioner never knows how many guiding hypotheses are enough (saturation).
3. Identified problem dimensions Based on the analysis of the information collected: Identify the various dimensions of the problem situation. Integrate supporting data and evidence under each conceptual dimension by clearly arguing why the particular dimension is problematic. Such an analysis provides a framework for organising and evaluating the mass of information collected.	This step needs elaborate analytical skills. Managing the inherent uncertainty within this task (there is no 'right' solution) might lead to practitioners' confusion.
4. Integrated conceptualisation *First*, formulate (an) integrating or linking hypothesis(ses) which outlines a 'causal relationship' between the identified dimensions of the problem situation, including argued priority ones. *Then*, use the IFF diagram to clearly indicate how program strategies might impact upon the priority problem dimensions.	Although this seems to be an empirically driven process, theoretical/conceptual knowledge is clearly involved in this phase.
5. Program plan and implementation *First*, share the 'working' conceptualisation (including reasons and IFF) with the other relevant stakeholders and reach a shared understanding of the problem situation through discussions, including the child/ren/young person. Use the IFF(s) to structure the discussion. Revisit the initial performance targets (see Phase 1) and fine tune these in light of the outcomes of investigations, assessments and conceptualisation (problem-analysis). During discussions make sure that the performance targets finally agreed are as *SMART*[2] as possible, and that they are clearly linked to possible programs/interventions. Draw on relevant literature, including previous (effectiveness) studies to justify program decisions. *Then*, guide the discussion towards the details of implementation: the who, what, when, where, recording, monitoring, and review arrangements.	To plan a program or an intervention is a complex task. The collaboration with other stakeholders can be difficult. Especially if a conceptualisation should be reached together. In addition, to use relevant literature etc. for justification needs the skills to find, understand and utilize such material.
6. Monitoring and evaluation of actions and outcomes In preparation for reviewing the implementation make sure (is it relevant/appropriate) that both qualitative and quantitative data have been sampled to inform an evaluation of the effectiveness of the program. Jointly evaluate with all stakeholders the effectiveness of actions and the current status of the problem situation and what the next steps might be.	To conduct an evaluation (and present it with reference to the effectiveness of the program) needs extensive methodological knowledge and skills.

Note: Developed by Monsen to support teaching at University College, London. For more detail about the model itself please refer to Monsen et al (2008, 2012, In Press).

1 The IFF Diagram is based upon the Causal Modelling Framework developed by Morton and Frith (1995). The Interactive Factors Framework (IFF) aims to represent what is known about a particular problem situation at a given point in time. It aims to present a 'snapshot' of the problem situation via a visual representation of the information collected.

2 Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time limited.

All those joining to solve 'real world problems' are seen as being involved in an active inquiry-based process, as 'meaning-seekers' and 'problem-solvers'. This view is informed by both theoretical models of how experts and novices go about solving complex and ill-structured real-life problems, and associated research looking at the constraints of human working memory, cognition and information processing systems (Monsen & Frederickson, In Press).

Table 2 details each of the six phases involved in the Problem Analysis cycle. As it is depicted, there are a range of issues for colleagues to consider. First, practitioners need to deploy analytical skills and adopt a reflective stance throughout the problem solving cycle (see Table 2, no. 1). In addition, the practitioner needs skills and knowledge in exploratory methods (see Table 2, no. 2) and access to relevant research/literature, (see Table 2, no. 4). Besides these analytic and applied research skills practitioners need to cope with uncertainty as they move through the thinking cycle (see Table 2, no. 3) and skills to effectively collaborate and jointly problem-solve with others (see Table 2, no. 5). There is also a need for skills in evaluating programs to successfully complete the problem-analysis thinking cycle (see Table 2, no. 6).

Finally, it is important to stress that collaborative research involves a partnership between researchers and practitioners. Each contributing important skills to clarifying dilemmas of practice and working towards solutions that are proportionate and doable. This means that both partners need to do things differently.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In the first part of this paper it was argued that programs in extended educational contexts are challenging for practitioners for a range of reasons. As a result, colleagues are compelled to ask questions, and conduct small scale inquires to overcome these challenges. Their professionalism may be under scrutiny, and collaboration with other practitioners presents additional complexities. Voluntary attendance produces varying sized groups of pupils with different backgrounds and experiences (and knowledge). Coping with these problems depends on the individual practitioners' resilience as there is no specific guidance to tell them what to do. These context-specific challenges affect practitioners' practices and pupil outcomes.

In the second part of this paper the importance of practitioners being encouraged to adopt a problem-solving framework (e.g., Problem Analysis or similar) to guide both theoretical thinking and action was stressed. Thinking is made explicit, and thus open to inspection, validation and challenge. Adherence to explicit frameworks is not an indicator of a lack of experience or competency, but rather an approach which ensures intellectual rigour and accountability, and enables practitioners to be intentionally reflective.

All arguments presented in this paper support the hypothesis that practitioner's use of research within a critical thinking framework is necessary to improve their teaching practices. It also stresses the need for research partners to make their research accessible to practitioners. All the practical issues described (regardless of

whether they are a result of the context (Table 1) or of the attempt to bridge the theory-to-practice gap (Table 2)) demand practitioner's use of research to enable them to adopt an applied researcher stance.

Future directions might be to a) embark upon collaborative research partnerships between university based researchers and applied colleagues, b) provide training and support in thinking frameworks such as Problem Analysis – which includes an exploration of participants' Theories of Action, c) set up collaborative training courses and seminars in core research skills so that practitioners are more research literate (in the sense of a 'new scientist-practitioner'), and d) make research papers more available and accessible via web based partnerships and for researchers to be more informed about the practitioner context. Some of these strategies are currently being used to support teachers in countries such as UK and USA. It is time to expand these efforts to other practitioners in the extended educational sector and to other countries as well.

These combined strategies might contribute to bridging the 'research-practice' gap and develop and enhance underlying theories of action that otherwise could hamper the development of effective applied practice.

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