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### **BADANIA**

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## **School Principal Leadership and Learning through Practitioner Research: Towards Innovations in Education**

### **Przywództwo dyrektora szkoły i uczenie się poprzez badania praktyczne: ku innowacjom w edukacji**

#### **Introduction**

This paper addresses the role of school principal leadership in creating the innovative learning environments (OECD, 2013; Schleicher, 2015) that support the development of critical practitioner research (Groundwater-Smith, Mockler, 2006; Madalińska-Michalak, 2017). Innovation can be perceived as a key element of the contemporary changes in schools, and leadership is necessary to drive and sustain it (OECD, 2013, p. 18). Innovation in education can take place through either significant changes in the use of particular educational practices or the emergence of new practices in an educational system as a whole or its chosen aspects<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding OECD (2014b) research findings on the innovation in education sector, one can learn that contrary to common belief, there is a fair level of innovation in this sector, both relative to other sectors and in absolute terms. Research showed that within education, innovation intensity is the greatest in higher education: in Europe, higher education stands out in

Taking into account quality in practitioner research from a bottom-up perspective, it is assumed that practitioner research can promote creative partnerships between those institutions in which teachers and academics work in order to support knowledge, creation and quality of teaching.

Considerations on the school leadership and its role in supporting culture for quality improvement in practitioner research are illustrated by the results of qualitative research that was conducted in academic year 2015/2016 among a group of 42 Polish school principals who participated in a post-graduate diploma university program on successful school leadership. The data were collected during focus group interviews with the school principals.

The main aim of this research was to recognize the experiences and the needs of school principals concerning practitioner research, their perceptions on the role of school leaders in supporting culture for quality improvements in practitioner research, and on the conditions of mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of creating educational knowledge.

On the basis of the preliminary findings of the study, the capacity of practitioners' research to be critical and to ask important educational questions for teachers' practice and for knowledge creation, especially in the context of education in Poland, will be discussed. At the same time the study participants' perceptions on the role of school principal leadership and the conditions of mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of educational knowledge creation will be critically considered.

### **The changing context: reforms and expectations towards teachers**

The current setting for teacher education in Poland is partly shaped by shifting social, economic and political circumstances, whether local, national or global in nature. The rapidly changing context of the education system in Poland over the last 27 years has brought about significant changes in the legislation, which has become the basis for introducing important reforms in education and in teacher education. Every new reform, every innovation in

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terms of speed of adopting innovation compared to the economy average as well as the rates in primary and secondary education. While knowledge and method innovation is above average in education in comparison with the other sectors product and service innovation is below average, and technology innovation is at the average sectorial level.

education usually creates new expectations towards teachers and encourages to look deeply at teacher education and to research teachers' educational needs within at specific area.

It is worth pointing out that teachers who work at different levels of education (kindergarten, primary school teachers, middle and high school teachers) in Poland are mainly prepared at universities: they study at the faculty of education (kindergarten and primary school teachers = grades 1–3) or they study in subject departments of Polish universities. Teacher education programs are university based, where scientific content and educational research methodologies enrich the teacher education curriculum. Teacher education, especially at master level, is research-based. It means that it must be supported by scientific knowledge and focus on critical and creative thinking, and cognitive and analytic skills used in conducting research. The entry requirement for permanent employment as a teacher in all Polish middle and high schools is a master's degree. Kindergarten and primary teachers must have at least bachelor's degree.

Salaries are not the main reason young people become teachers in Poland (teachers earn very near to the national average salary level). More important than salaries are such factors as vocation, passion for working with children, possibility of self-realization, desire to work in a profession where there is some place for creativity, autonomy, reflection and constructive criticism (Dróźka, Madalińska-Michalak, 2016).

The new basic principles of the Polish school system were established by the School Education Act of 7 September 1991 (with further amendments). The 1999 Education Reform Act on Implementation of the Education System Reform (with further amendments) introduced a new structure for the Polish school system. In light of the existing law, higher education in Poland forms a separate system and is based on the Higher Education Act of 12 September 1990 (uniform text published in the Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland of 1990, No 65 pos. 385). Higher education is a dynamic and expanding area in Poland, which has seen an almost five-fold increase in the number of students since 1990. The education system in Poland is centrally managed by two institutions – the Ministry of National Education (general and vocational education) and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (higher education). It is only the national educational policy that is developed and carried out centrally, while the administration of education and the running of schools are decentralised.

Considering the reforms of education and their results, one can state that the Polish education system has moved from the emphasis on the transmission of information and on vocational education and training that prevailed under communism to an education system that aims to equip its citizens with a more rounded education focused on knowledge construction, and the development of skills and competencies.

The education system has been constructed so that it has to enable learners to adapt to a rapidly changing world, especially the pace and scope of economic, social and cultural change. It was adapted to the provisions of the Constitution and the system reform of the State. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland refers to fundamental freedoms and citizens' rights. It states that every person has the right to education and that education is compulsory until the age of 18. Education in public schools is free of charge. Parents are free to choose schools other than public ones for their children. Citizens and institutions have the right to establish primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and post-secondary schools and higher education institutions as well as childcare centres.

Children's participation in preschool has significantly improved in recent years but is still below the EU average. Poland has achieved one of the best results in Europe in terms of the participation of young people aged 15–24 in education at ISCED 1–6 levels (from primary education to doctorate programmes) and the number of young people holding upper secondary qualifications. Poland is one of the EU's top performers in reducing early school leaving and raising the level of basic skills tested by the PISA survey, including the average level as well as the levels of low-performing and top-performing students. Between 2000 and 2012, Poland made the most rapid progress in the EU with regard to increasing the number of young adults holding higher education qualifications in the 30–34 age group.

International education surveys show outstanding progress in learning outcomes at the end of compulsory education: Polish pupils' achievements at this education level are currently classified in PISA above or at least at the average level among the most developed countries co-operating within the framework of the EU and OECD. It is worth stressing that Poland's PISA results in 2000 were one of the factors impelling reform in schools and teacher education there over the last two decades. In the 2000 PISA examination, Poland's average student score was 479, well below the OECD average of

500 points (OECD, 2001). More than 21% of students reached only Level 1 or below. The PISA 2000 results also showed a real disparity between the educational competencies of students in the general education system and the basic vocational schools. Nearly 70% of basic vocational school students tested at the lowest literacy level. However, thanks to a series of school reforms that began in the late 1990s, Poland has dramatically reduced the number of poorly performing students in the last 10 years and, in the 2009 and 2012 PISA tests, ranked among the top 15 OECD countries (OECD, 2009, 2010, 2014a). Since its first participation in PISA, Poland has been able to increase the share of top performers and simultaneously reduce its shares of low performers in mathematics, reading and science. The average difference in results, between the top 20% and bottom 20%, is 97 points, slightly lower than the OECD average of 99 points.

The above-mentioned achievements of Polish education co-exist with the deep decentralisation of management of the education system and new policies on improving the quality of teaching staff. Repressed before the transformation of the political system, the organisational and financial potential was unlocked after 1989. Most educational tasks at preschool to upper secondary school levels are currently managed by a local authority. The organisational and financial responsibility of local authorities for developing education stimulated local educational ambitions and helped lift the burden of debts regularly incurred to finance educational tasks when these fell within the remit of the governmental administration.

At the level of post-secondary education, especially in higher education, the potential of non-public education was unlocked, supported by the considerable private expenditure of learners and their families. Decentralisation of the management of education has recently been reinforced by the steadily growing autonomy of schools and higher education institutions (HEIs). A policy based on learning outcomes has been introduced in school and higher education in line with the European Qualifications Framework to provide schools, HEIs and teachers with greater autonomy in organisation of the educational process.

In the school year 2009/10 by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 7 October 2009 arrangements within the pedagogical supervision system were put in place. The system existing before 2009 was modified on the basis of regulations of the minister responsible for school education adopted successively in 1999, 2004 and 2006. Pursuant to the Regulation of

1999, pedagogical supervision involved mainly two elements: checking the school's compliance with the requirements concerning its statutory tasks and supporting school staff. The 2004 Regulation introduced the concept of evaluation understood as assessing the relevance and effectiveness of educational activities in relation to their stated aims and with regard to potential improvements. Finally, the Regulation of 2006 provided for compulsory evaluation of educational activities undertaken by schools. However, it did not define clearly any specific tasks for pedagogical supervision or rules and tools for quality assurance as a part of pedagogical supervision. As a result, external pedagogical supervision consisted mainly of checking schools' compliance with the law. It did not focus sufficiently on the evaluation of the quality of their work and it did not provide them proper support essential for improving the quality of education and for the implementation of improvements and development plans.

The main reasons behind the modernization of the pedagogical supervision system in 2009 included (1) the lack of a uniform, comparable system of the pedagogical supervision across the country, (2) the ineffectiveness and the limited usefulness for improving quality in schools of the previous system and its inability to respond to the pace and scope of changes and educational needs of the society, (3) insufficient efforts taken by schools and their managing bodies in order to improve the quality of education (this resulted in educational inequalities related to pupils' or students' background which pose problems in less developed regions of the country), (4) the need to gather reliable information to design the national education policy and education policies at regional and local levels, and (5) the need to provide pupils and teachers with opportunities for comprehensive personal and social development in line with their aspirations and capacities.

The arrangements put in place in 2009 were aimed at establishing a pedagogical supervision system which contributes to better quality of education on the one hand through supporting the development of kindergartens, schools and other educational institutions, and enabling comprehensive development of pupils and teachers, and on the other hand through supporting the national authorities in developing and pursuing an educational policy based on comparable data on the entire education system. The latest arrangements made up an integrated system of internal and external quality assurance, covering both early childhood and school education, and both public and non-public schools

within these sectors. Nowadays, the system of quality assurance requires at the school level to conduct the research on the school practices. It means that the role of school principals and teachers has been reinforced and they are perceived as researchers and creators of the knowledge<sup>2</sup>. The reform put greater emphasis on collaboration among teachers and other school stakeholders, encouraged teamwork at the schools and building a culture of self-evaluation, which had thus far not been part of the Polish education system. The reform influenced on the organisation of inspectorates as well as the attitudes of important actors in the education system regarding the relevance of data to support internal and external school evaluation.

## Methodology and methods

The qualitative research study was designed to learn about the experiences and needs of school principals concerning practitioner research. Specifically, I was interested in finding out their viewpoints, beliefs and perceptions about their beliefs, opinions, perceptions of the role of school leaders in supporting culture for quality improvement in practitioner research at school level, and to examine the conditions of mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of creating educational knowledge.

The focus group interview as a method of data collection (Sharon, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996) was chosen for the purpose of the research. The method provided the opportunity to capture insight into the school principals' experiences in practitioner research and their needs within this field, and to investigate the participants' beliefs, opinions, perceptions regarding their role in supporting culture for practitioner research at school. I felt that the focus group interview could provide opportunities for school principals to share freely their viewpoints on the complex issue of practitioner research and knowledge creation.

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<sup>2</sup> The system of supervision includes three inter-related elements referred to as forms/mechanisms of supervision: (i) *evaluation* based on uniform requirements laid down in the legislation, which focuses on the quality of education and care and other statutory activities undertaken by schools and other educational institutions – the requirements cover four areas: outcomes of educational activities (performance), processes taking place in a given institution, school environment, and institutional management; (ii) *legal compliance auditing* which aims to check the compliance of educational, care-related and other statutory activities undertaken by schools, education institutions and teachers with the legislation; (iii) *support* for schools, education institutions and teachers in their educational, care-related and other statutory activities.

Data were gathered among 42 participants of the post-graduate diploma university program on successful school leadership in academic year 2015/2016. The school principals were aged between 42 and 55 and they came from two different types of school: primary and lower secondary schools. Their experience in being school principals range between 4 and 15 years, many of them were primary school principals (25).

Regarding the workplace, the study participants were divided into 5 focus group interviews: (i) 3 groups of primary school principals ( $8 + 8 + 9 = 25$ ), (ii) 2 groups of lower secondary school principals ( $8 + 9 = 17$ ). The interviews were audio taped. The transcribed data were analysed, according to the qualitative analysis.

Each interview lasted between fifty and seventy-five minutes. Prior to the interviews, I met with each group of school principals and briefed them on the nature of the interview and its general purpose, explaining that they were free to talk and ask questions. Although they had no prior experience in this kind of group interview, they were very enthusiastic and spontaneous and all readily agreed for recording their discussions.

Group interaction was based on a list of topic questions pertaining to the main theme of the interview. The list included a series of open-ended questions that were directly connected with the main theme of the study. The analysis of the responses to the topic questions was important in identifying the themes and common answers that gave insights into the situations in which participants saw themselves as leaders in improving the quality of practitioner research at their own schools.

At the beginning of the focus group interview the study participants were asked to respond to the question 'Why it is worth conducting practitioner research at schools?' Then, their attention was directed to the issue of their experiences and perceptions of their role in creating the conditions for practitioner research at school. Special attention was paid to the issue of the conditions of mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of creating educational knowledge.

## Results

The main findings of the research suggest that the school principals found practitioner research to be of a great value to the continuous improvements of the school education. They recognised the capacity of practitioners' research to

be critical and to pose important educational questions for teachers' practice and for knowledge creation. The school principals paid attention to their role as school leaders in creating the conditions for enabling practitioner inquiry leading to change in practice. They would like their teachers to be actively involved in research carried out in cooperation with academic researchers.

Even though, the context of education in Poland influences on schools through an emphasis on test and exam results and on high stakes quality assurance systems (new system of pedagogical supervision), school principals that took part in the presented study paid a special attention to their teachers' professional learning and school change. These principals were especially concerned about the challenging questions about the education of students for their better life. Therefore, they focused on school values, beliefs, pedagogies and leadership. They showed their teachers the importance of opening the school door towards – as one of the principal said – „the real problems of the students”, „to their culture”, „their worlds”. Lower secondary school principals in a very emotional way stressed that it is important to go beyond teaching methodologies and create an inclusive, culturally responsive, emotionally literate learning environment at school. As principals, they try to support teachers in developing effective communication skills with students and encourage a reflective approach to their practice at school.

They expressed their views on teachers' responsibilities in the context of school-based research. They said that “without teachers, school-based research is impossible”, „teacher presence and willingness to conduct research on their own practice is obvious”. However, at the same time some of the school principals pointed out low teacher motivation to conduct the significant study. They noticed that teachers are overwhelmed with the formalities – they have to work on the documents that are evidence of students' achievements and school developments in different areas. School principals talked about various strategies that they used to address this barrier. They mentioned that ongoing support to teachers during the research and the process of implementing the change at the daily school life increased teachers' motivation. Much can be gained from studying the ways in which school principals try to work on such values as trust, respect, sensitivity, appreciation in order to establish and maintain healthy relationships (with and among teachers, parents and students). According to school principals, motivation, commitment and cooperation are crucial to stay the course in school-based research.

In Poland, teacher research has received much attention in the last decade. The popularity of the view that research and teaching are closely related activities has reasonable justifications and benefits. School principals are fully aware that teacher research has a range of impacts on staff, including changes to a curriculum and pedagogy as well as improved confidence, job satisfaction and professional development. They see the value of research-informed practice for teachers, teaching and learning at school. "Through research – as one of the principals said – teachers can understand in deeper and richer ways what they know from experience." They can be seen as learners who reflect on their professional needs and explore the learning processes occurring in their classrooms.

The school principals share the view that school-based research is not the research that can concern the transfer of pedagogical/educational knowledge into practice. Study participants fully supported the importance of the research that is conducted not only exclusively by academics in order to use obtained findings in practical conditions. From the collected data it is evident that study participants are not interested in applying theoretical knowledge into practice. They rather opt for such a knowledge that is connected with practice and embedded in actions. Grundy defined this type of knowledge as: 'Knowledge that is intrinsically connected with practice. This is not knowledge that informs practice, or that has practical intent, but knowledge which is embedded in "praxis": reflective knowledge in and through action' (1987, p. 40).

Data collected on the basis of focus groups interviews proved that for the researched school principals doing research and indeed some of the new knowledge arising from practitioner research may be recognised as relevant to the desired outcome improvement in practice. However, regarding the preliminary findings of the conducted study we can identify some significant barriers that need to be overcome before effective working relationships between school- and university-based researchers can be forged (Lunenberg, Ponte and Van de Ven, 2007).

On the basis of collected data we can state that from a school perspective some of these barriers have their origins in school principals' and teachers' past experiences, while others are based on myths and common misconceptions about universities and academics in Poland. During the focus group discussions school principals stressed out that there are different expectations of research between universities and schools. The school principals see that "academics

are mainly interested in writing the papers for academic journals that many teachers usually do not read” and they are “focused usually on theoretical knowledge and at the same time they are not really interested in such studies that can have a direct application in classrooms”. School principals pointed out that “academic researchers see knowledge creation as the main function of doing research”; “education research is abstract and not relevant to their specific school context”.

On my question: “How we can cross boundaries to close the gap between academics and practitioners?” school principals said that “there is a need to create the conditions for the partnership of universities and schools”. The school principals expressed their needs in developing such partnerships. They mentioned that any form of partnership between university and school in order to create knowledge together should be based on the necessity “to understand that in this cooperation both contribution and learning combine into one process – process of learning”. However, usually “academic rely on their own authority and don’t seem to be willing to be closer to practitioners” or “to build with them the relevant relationships”. The school principals stated that “building relationships between school and university is a really important aspect of a collaborative research partnership”. However, they would like the academics “to look at their school problems from their school perspective” – this might be perceived as very problematic for the developing the practitioner research.

The school principals said that they would like their teachers to be treated by academic with demonstrated respect, sensitivity and appreciation for their time and priorities. So, basing on the school principals opinions, experiences, irrespective of the school conditions, I found that appreciative, interested and inclusive relationships tend to encourage teachers to the studies. In this way, explicitly building a partnership with teachers may draw them into the school as a place of the research and change, and may have a positive effect on agency in the school-based research.

## Conclusions

The focus group interviews with school principals help us to recognize some barriers that they see for practitioner research. And, what is interesting, the study participants mainly pointed out the barriers that are created by

academics. However, one can state that it is not just universities crossing the boundary to collaborate in research and work in schools but schools crossing the boundary to work and perfect their research skills at universities as well. Frederick Erickson, in the third edition of the “Handbook of Research on Teaching” (1986), discussed research collaborations involving academics and teachers and said: ‘A few steps beyond collaborative research involving teachers and academic researchers is for the classroom teacher to become the researcher in his or her own right’ (1986, p. 157). Erickson went on to argue that more teachers need to take on the responsibility of conducting educational research: “If classroom teaching in elementary and secondary schools is to come of age as a profession-if the role of teacher is not to continue to be infantilized-then teachers need to take the adult responsibility of investigating their own practice systematically and critically, by methods that are appropriate to their practice... Time needs to be made available in the school day for teachers to do this. Anything less than that basic kind of institutional change is to perpetuate the passivity that has characterized the teaching profession in its relations with administrative supervisors and the public at large” (p. 157).

The partnership of institutions of higher education/universities and schools based on cooperation consists in increasing the significance of differences and reinforcing the sense of identity, and at the same time in expanding the mutual knowledge about each other and raising the degree of mutual understanding; so that the movement between the two “castles” can take place in a way bringing pleasure and posing a challenge, and can be mutually strengthening (Somekh, 1994, p. 373). Possibility of crossing the barriers, of removing them so that the cooperation between academics and practitioners can start, is based on the metaphor of mutuality (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). The partnership of institutions of higher education/universities and schools emerges from the necessity to understand that in this cooperation both contribution and learning combine into one process.

Van de Ven (2007) shows that business people and academics usually find it hard to discover common areas, to agree on many matters, but that probably they would agree on one thing: they possess completely different ways of perceiving the world and of evaluating it. In reality differences that exist between the practitioners and academics create not so much barriers making their cooperation impossible, but chances for better search for solutions to problems involving both sides. It is hard to give full and appropriate answers

to questions posed by researchers, if the search for this answer is characterized by only one way of thinking. “Engaged scholarship” is such a form of research practice in which one looks at a posed problem from various perspectives: academic’s one, practitioner’s one, client’s one and others. When such a situation occurs, it may contribute to the increase of our abilities to expand knowledge and improve practice.

There is no doubt that searching for possibilities of cooperation between academics and practitioners with the assumption that they are different does not mean that they oppose each other or that they are supposed to substitute each other. Researchers and practitioners, while having different points of view in understanding the problem, can increase the significance of research for practice and personally contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the pedagogical field. During the process of research, teachers have the opportunity to travel outside their environment to seek information and collect relevant data. They can develop relevant research skills: formulating realistic research questions, adopting appropriate procedures for collecting and analyzing data, and presenting the fruits of their research in a form accessible to others. It provides greater opportunities for collaboration and networking between academics and teachers. When teachers are involved in research, their motivation may be boosted and maintained. Through collaborative knowledge building, studies can spotlight transitional trend analysis through human and instrumentation collaboration. To enhance cooperation between academics and teachers the emergence of positive motivation that makes teachers utilize the academic knowledge (recurrence, objectivity, generality, explaining, for example, why people behave in a certain way), establishing pedagogically/ educationally effective contacts of researchers with teachers and establishing the dialogue between researchers and teachers may be necessary.

Many teachers are concerned about time and abilities and still see teaching as a consuming, complex activity which is made even less manageable when research is an additional requirement, even though it is exactly that experience of teaching complexity that makes teachers’ input vital to research and reflection on teaching. Teachers are already overburdened with curriculum requirements, accountability requirements and all the day-to-day pressures of keeping a classroom running and they wonder why they should take on one more thing. This concern is justifiable and understandable; however, it is a misconception that sees research as a separate activity from teaching. For many

teachers, research is an optional extra. Teachers must realize that research is doable because it stems from their own teaching practice. They should become aware of their own practices and the beliefs that underpin them, construct their knowledge and become active participants in research. They must acquire research skills and confidence necessary for disseminating small-scale but high quality research findings, thus making public their knowledge, beliefs and practice. As researchers of their own practice, teachers can discover for themselves how deeply theoretical their work is and has always been. This discovery can position them in a new relation to university theory. Theory is no longer what “they” do at the university, but becomes what “we” do in our classrooms every day.

Practitioner research calls for courage to face emerging social problems. School principals’ leadership play an important role in improving quality of practitioner research in different ways – ways that were indicated in this paper.

Short-sighted educational policy becomes something of an obstacle in increasing the quality of functioning of schools. Thanks to practitioner research, teachers, as researchers of their own practice undertaking in cooperation with academics critical reflection and making efforts to understand their own practice and its context, can change their own practices and support work of their schools, as well as contribute to development of educational knowledge. Practitioner research can assist in concentrating not on a “gap/distance” between academics and practitioners, but on a space/sphere between them, the one that links academics and practitioners – this sphere is education. By forming the sphere/space that links them, academics and practitioners can act in order to co-create educational knowledge and change educational practice.

Using research findings for better learning can be helpful for the creating the quality education for every child and at the same time for fostering a culture of learning throughout the school and developing teachers’ professionalism. Creating and sustaining the conditions for innovative learning environments in schools in their particular contexts with a special focus on innovation through developing practitioner research within professional learning communities requires from school principals to be engaged in inquiry about the nature of learning, learning environments, and networks in their own schools, and beyond them.

School principals need to facilitate teachers in learning how to learn together, how to work with academics so as to develop collaborative and

shared mental models and meanings that bind them together in a learning community. The key emphasis is on learning together, sharing and creating innovative practices that encourage everyone in the school community to be effective learning resources for each other.

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł wpisuje się w problematykę przywództwa, innowacji i uczenia się dla jakości edukacji szkolnej. Zasadnicza uwaga skoncentrowana jest na roli przywództwa dyrektora szkoły w tworzeniu i podtrzymywaniu innowacyjnych, uczących się społeczności, które wspierają rozwój krytycznych badań praktycznych. W artykule przyjęto założenie mówiące o tym, iż badania praktyczne mogą promować kreatywne partnerstwa pomiędzy tymi instytucjami, w których nauczyciele i naukowcy współpracują ze sobą, by wesprzeć budowanie wiedzy i jakość nauczania. Artykuł prezentuje wybrane wyniki badań, w których zastosowano wywiady fokusowe prowadzone z liderami z kilku szkół w Polsce. Głównym celem poszukiwań badawczych było rozpoznanie doświadczeń i potrzeb dyrektorów szkół, biorąc pod uwagę badania praktyczne, ich postrzeganie roli lidera szkoły we wspieraniu kultury dla jakości w badaniach praktycznych oraz warunków wzajemnego udziału naukowców i praktyków w społecznym procesie tworzenia wiedzy pedagogicznej. Uzyskane wyniki badań poszerzają wiedzę na temat roli dyrektorów szkół i ich przywództwa w tworzeniu innowacyjnych, uczących się środowisk, które sprzyjają wzajemnemu udziałowi naukowców i praktyków w budowaniu wiedzy pedagogicznej oraz odsłaniają bariery osłabiające budowanie tej wiedzy poprzez badania praktyczne.

**Słowa klucz:** badania praktyczne, przywództwo, szkoła, dyrektor szkoły, innowacyjne środowisko uczenia się, jakość uczenia się, naukowcy, profesjonalne wspólnoty uczące się

**Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to contribute to the literature on leadership, innovation and learning for quality of school education. The special attention is paid to the role of school principal leadership in creating and sustaining the innovative learning environments that support the development of critical practitioner research. It is assumed that practitioner research can promote creative partnerships between those institutions in which teachers and academics work in order to support knowledge creation and quality of teaching. This paper presents chosen findings of a study that involved interviews with a number of focus groups involving school leaders in a number of Polish state schools. The main aim of this research was to recognize the experiences and the needs of school principals concerning practitioner research, their perceptions

on the role of school leaders in supporting culture for quality improvements in practitioner research, and on the conditions of mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of creating educational knowledge. Findings direct our attention to the role of school principals and their leadership in creating the innovative learning environments that are favorable for mutual participation of academics and practitioners in the social process of educational knowledge creation.

**Keywords:** practitioner research, leadership, innovative environment learning, quality of learning, teachers, academics, professional learning communities

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