

INTRODUCTION

This study entitled “Teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers in secondary schools: A comparative study of Singapore and New South Wales” explores teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers, their response to current initiatives, the support structures and barriers encountered and whether practitioner research as it is currently communicated and practised in schools has an emancipatory capacity. This study was conducted in selected metropolitan schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, and in Singapore. Embracing Schatzki and Freire, the study provides a detailed examination and critical analysis of the context and settings in which practitioner research transpires, looking at issues and themes such as culture and policy, to see how these might help to shape teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers.

Aim and Purpose of Study

Through this study I explore the various personal, interpersonal, professional, cultural and political factors that may support, hinder, inform and shape the practice of practitioner researchers in schools in order to gain a better understanding of teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers – that is, what they truly think, feel and believe about being practitioner researchers, rather than the process of practitioner research itself. A cross cultural comparison is made between teachers in NSW Government Department of Education and Training (DET; known as the Department of Education and Communities since 2010) secondary schools and teachers in Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) secondary schools to explore the commonalities and differences that exist between the two education systems and cultures in terms of teachers’ experiences. Where differences do exist, I investigate the settings and context in which the practitioner research transpired, what Schatzki (2002) has referred to as “the site of the social”. Specifically, I examine the ways in which policy and planning, culture, and other systemic differences may have helped to shape teachers’ experiences.

In addition to teachers, I also conducted interviews with academics, department officials, and members of school management to better understand the policy of the NSW DET and the Singapore MOE and studied individual schools’ policies in order to determine whether

practitioner research is perhaps more enthusiastically embraced by management rather than teachers. A qualitative interpretive case study was done and a cross-cultural comparison made.

Contextualising the Settings

The NSW Government DET and the Singapore MOE are two authorities who seemingly encourage the notion of practitioner research in schools. Over the past decade, many NSW state schools successfully tendered for project grants to implement school-based and school-driven action learning within the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools framework as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) (Dinham, Aubusson & Brady, 2008). Action research and Action learning (ARAL) is a “Key Strategy” in the Professional Learning Continuum framework that guides the development of all school staff (NSW Department of Education and Training [DET], 2006). In Singapore, there is a nationwide drive to encourage innovation and research with the aim of appointing a trained Research Activist in every school by 2011. The “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” vision, announced in 1997, and successive supporting initiatives have been significant “in promoting notions of reflective practice and action research” in schools (Hairon, 2006, p.514). It can therefore be perceived that both central education bureaus encourage regions, schools, and teachers to embrace practitioner research as part of their professional learning agenda and in an attempt to improve practice in schools.

It should be noted, that unless the term ‘professional development’ was specifically referred to in the literature, ‘professional learning’ is the preferred term used throughout this thesis. ‘Professional learning’ denotes allowing people to have agency whereas ‘professional development’ implies that people are deficient and there needs to be an external intervention given to them to make them better. In professional learning (PL) teachers take responsibility for the focus of their learning (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009). ‘Professional development’ is only used where it was so expressed in the literature.

Philosophical and Methodological Underpinning

Due to the illuminative nature of this study, I adopted an interpretivist-constructivist philosophy. My interest was in the rich detail that is characteristic of qualitative research data and in describing and probing “the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action” (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008, p.5). Rather than simply report, this study presents a more substantial description. My ontological position is informed by constructivism where individuals take an active role in the construction of social reality and the world can be viewed as a subjective rather than an objective reality. As described by Bryman (2001), “The social world and its categories are not external to us, but are built up and constituted in and through interaction ... social phenomena and categories are social constructions” (p.19).

A qualitative approach was adopted as qualitative research offers “valuable insights into how people construct meaning in various social settings” (Neuman, 2006, p.308). A small qualitative interpretive case study was done. I used semi-structured interviews as the main means to gather data as this technique “is particularly good at enabling the researcher to learn, first hand, about people’s perspectives on the subject chosen as the project focus” (Davies, 2007, p.29) and at capturing the depth and complexity of participants’ experiences. Content analysis of secondary data such as policy statements, evaluation reports and other relevant documents was also used as a research technique to promote rigorous analysis and make valid inferences regarding the process and implementation of practitioner research.

The theoretical underpinnings for this study is informed by a close reading of Schatzki and Freire. Both advocate a critical analysis of context - Schatzki to help understand a phenomenon, Freire to plan action for the future.

Research Intention and Research Questions

The premise I embraced in developing this study was based on the first principle of research as articulated by Bassey (1999).

Research is about trying to make a claim to knowledge, or wisdom, on the basis of systematic, creative and critical enquiry. It is about trying to discover something that was not known before and then communicating that finding to others. (p.66)

The research intention of my study is best described as a research issue as opposed to a research hypothesis or research problem, as defined by Bassey (1999). The investigation “describes an area for enquiry where no problems or hypotheses have yet been clearly expressed” (p.67). Education authorities encourage the notion of teacher researchers as an integral part of teachers’ professional learning but there is no compelling data as to whether teachers themselves value the notion of practitioner research. This study explores secondary school teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers.

The research question has been described as “the engine which drives the train of enquiry” (Bassey, 1999, p.67). It sets the immediate agenda for research, indicating where data might be collected and establishes the “boundaries of space and time” within which the study will operate. For this study, the over-arching questions are:

- To what extent do education policies and cultures shape the type of research that is conducted in schools?
- To what extent is practitioner research remodeled in different contexts?

From these two questions, a number of sub questions were generated:

- Why is practitioner research encouraged in schools?
- What are some of the policies and initiatives put in place to encourage practitioner research in schools?
- What are the similarities between teachers’ experiences between the two different education systems?
- What are the differences between teachers’ experiences between the two different education systems?

Most of the data was based on semi-structured interviews, the main sample group being teachers who have experience as practitioner researchers. A cross-section of experts was also interviewed to triangulate findings. This included academics and a consultant expert in practitioner research, as well as policy makers and administrators from the MOE, Singapore,

and the NSW DET. Data was also gleaned from other sources. This included some documentary research, whereby various policy documents such as research and evaluation reports, speeches from government officials, the MOE and DET professional learning websites, and OECD publications were studied.

By undertaking a cross-cultural comparative study, results revealed to what extent teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers varied within and between settings and where differences did exist, the factors that may have shaped and caused these to occur. The study thereby illuminates how context helps to shape teachers' experiences. My personal experience of working with secondary schools both as a teacher and in school management in Singapore and NSW over a 30 year period means that I am able to speak with "some authority" (Crossley & Watson, 2003, p.26) about two education systems and cultures in this comparative study, having developed an insider perspective or "instinctive feel" for what makes each society "tick".

In its simplest form, practitioner research can be conceived as research done by practitioners on site. Its fundamental aim is to improve practice. There are multiple traditions of practitioner research, as described by Zeichner and Noffke (2001) and practitioners commonly adopt eclectic methods. Practitioner research is the umbrella term for many practice-based research activities undertaken by practitioners and in broad terms is generally constituted as research initiated from the ground up, which is continuous and ongoing, focusing on local issues.

In this study, a broad and open view of practitioner research was adopted. The inclusive definition of the practitioner-researcher offered by Loughran, Mitchell and Mitchell (2002) was embraced. They typify teacher-researchers as "practitioners who attempt to better understand their practice, and its impact on their students, by researching the relationship between teaching and learning in their world of work" (p. 3). Throughout this thesis practitioner research is conceived as "an umbrella term for [the] many practice-based research activities undertaken by practitioners" in the field of education (Campbell & McNamara, 2009, p.10). Where used specifically in the literature, explicit terms such as action research or action learning are used. The various models of research that I deem to constitute practitioner research, including action research and action learning, are discussed

in further detail in Chapter 4. I acknowledge that different definitions of practitioner research, action research and action learning exist and that these definitions describe a wide range of activities.

Research Process

The research process was conducted in an iterative fashion, continuously moving back and forth between reviewing the literature, collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data and organizing and writing the final report.

Semi-structured interview schedules were designed for interviews with different groups, viz. secondary school teachers, members of school management and experts in practitioner research such as academics and NSW DET and Singapore MOE officials.

A tentative literature review was conducted early in the study to provide an overall picture of the various issues relating to the topic. Themes and issues emerging from the theory were then used to inform the planning of the interview schedules. At the same time, a study and analysis of relevant documents, such as policy statements, was done. The various informants were interviewed according to the initial sampling frame. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were made then analysed using techniques borrowed mainly from thematic analysis. As the research progressed and tentative themes emerged, I borrowed loosely from grounded theory, interviewing additional informants whom I believed would provide a different perspective and greater depth to the study. For example, an interview was conducted with an academic somewhat critical of action research who had worked closely on various collaborative research projects with teachers both in Singapore and NSW as it was felt that this could offer an alternative viewpoint with interesting insights. Data was then reported using *in vivo* terms and verbatim extracts from participants in order to best describe the setting and situation and to interpret the case as a whole. A more in-depth literature review was conducted relevant to the themes as they emerged during the course of the study.

Benefits of the Study

Practices transform in place and time (Freire, 1974, 1998; Kemmis, 2008, 2009, 2010; Schatzki, 2005). Likewise, practitioner research is remodeled in different contexts (Somekh, 2006, 2011; Somekh and Zeichner, 2009), it being impossible to consider practitioner research a monolithic practice in the face of its widespread and far-flung development (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009a). While there is an abundance of literature on practitioner research in education, little of this explores in depth or detail how practitioner research is remodeled in different contexts. The exception lies in the work of a few individuals, such as Bridget Somekh. At the same time, despite the profusion of research on practitioner research, there is limited research on the affective domain, that is, what respondents think and feel about their experience as researchers (Akerlind, 2008). Studies on practitioner research tend to valorize or romanticize the research experience, highlighting the success that can be achieved through this form of professional learning (White, 2011). A further limitation is that much of the research is authored by participant observers rather than conducted by independent researchers.

This timely study is designed to ameliorate some of these short-comings and was undertaken as “disinterested research” (McWilliam, 2004, p.115). Practitioner research is “alive and thriving ... all over the world” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009a, p.37) and has been incorporated into the professional learning agendas of many education systems. In a climate where there is increasing emphasis on teachers undertaking practitioner research as part of their professional learning, in-depth exploration of the ways in which practitioner research is understood and practised by teachers become important. This investigation attempts to illuminate the phenomenon, to raise important observations and questions, and to offer some tentative responses to and conclusions about the research issue. Such information is valuable to both academics and policy makers, addressing both theoretical and practical concerns. It also helps to elucidate problems of conceptual equivalences by offering different world views and cultural perspectives about the practitioner research process in education.

It can be argued that practitioner research has been institutionalised in schools in Singapore and NSW in what Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) describe a “top down” manner. Several researchers raise questions about an externally imposed implementation agenda

(Elliott, 1991, 1998; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005, 2007; Somekh, 1994) and often there exists a conflict between ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theories-in-use’ (Schön, 1987, 1995) - essentially what people say and what people do. So while a central education bureau may espouse enthusiasm for the idea of practitioner research, in practice there could be a number of inhibiting factors (real or imagined) that prevent a classroom teacher from successfully engaging in or sustaining that activity.

There is no convincing data on whether teachers themselves value the idea of doing research in their own classrooms or schools as a means of improving practice. This study explores what teachers think and feel about doing such research, specifically their impetus and reasons for engaging in school-based research, their feelings about the experience, and whether they found the experience beneficial or not. It explores teachers’ thoughts and feelings in response to “top down” implementation agendas on practitioner research and whether their affective experiences vary across different contexts and settings.

The findings of this study make a valuable contribution to one area on the knowledge of practitioner research that perhaps has been somewhat overlooked or neglected. Results from this small case study give an insight into teachers’ perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, advantages, as well as the disadvantages, of practitioner research and any barriers to effective implementation that might exist. Eisenhart (1998) asserts that:

Interpretivist-oriented reviews of educational research can serve a worthwhile purpose by capturing insights that startle readers out of mainstream complacency about educational issues, suggest how and why various educational contexts and circumstances inform particular meanings, and reveal alternative ways of making sense of educational phenomena. (p.397)

At the same time the study provides a comprehensive description of how practitioner research has been remodeled within the two contexts studied. In advocating a reconceptualisation of comparative studies in education Crossley and Watson (2003) emphasise the need for increased attention to differing cultural perspectives on policy priorities, especially qualitative forms of research “that engage with a diversity of stakeholders and cultures at the grass roots level” (p.138).

Reasons for Doing the Study

As Bassey (1999) rightfully notes, “One of the reasons for doing any kind of research ... is that one has personal interests and concerns about the subject of the research” (p.90). He further adds that all research reflects a partisanship which derives from the social identity and values of the researcher and argues that it bodes well if polemical statements are provided somewhere in the study.

Exploring teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers connects directly with passions, interests and experiences I have had for a long time having worked in education for over 30 years. During that time I have been actively involved in research in various guises, as an MEd student, authoring and co-authoring journal articles and conference papers, conducting research for school improvement, or in leading research teams as Chairman of both the Research and Development Committee and the School Excellence Model Committee.

I have always been intrigued by some teachers’ passion about research and the indifference of others. I have also been intrigued by the impediments to research and circumstances that support and facilitate research in schools. I am particularly fascinated by the feedback from teacher practitioner-researchers, how they truly felt about the experience, the positive, the negative and the in-between. Did different teachers have shared or similar experiences? Could they sustain the activity? Were the experiences of teachers in one setting similar to teachers in another setting, or did the environment have a large role to play? What sort of support were they given? Was funding provided or time allocated?

Overview of Chapters

In chapter one I have given a brief introduction to the research study. Chapter two provides a background and description of the two sites while chapter three presents the theoretical framework that I have embraced. Chapter four presents a review of other selected literature which is important and relevant to this study while chapter five discusses in some detail the methodology and methodological stance that was used. The findings of the study are then presented in chapters six through to nine. Chapters six and seven describe the different contexts in which practitioner research transpires while chapter eight and nine focus on how

practitioner research is understood, practised, transmitted and valued. Chapter ten subsequently offers a cross-analysis and discussion of the two cases. Chapter eleven completes the study providing a summary of the major findings and conclusion.