

EXPLORING PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

In this chapter I present a review of selected literature relevant to a case study on teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers. The review explores four broad areas, namely, definitions of practitioner research, historical perspectives on practitioner research, current practices in practitioner research, and teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers. The selected literature helped to create a focus for the investigation and had implications for the design, conduct, justification and interpretation of the study (Maxwell, 2006, p.28). It has been noted that literature reviews in qualitative research are often presented as though "all the papers had been read and digested before the investigation was planned ... [but] in practice this rarely happens" (Bassegy, 1999, p.86). The process here was iterative. A tentative literature review was undertaken early in the study to gain an overview of the various issues that relate to the topic. It was then developed in more depth and breadth as the study progressed.

The Modern Professional Learning Agenda

Over the last twenty or thirty years, several influential researchers have advanced theories, often with inter-related ideas, that have helped to shape contemporary teacher professional learning agendas. Senge (1990), Palmer (1998) and others variously describe the idea of learning organisations, team learning, collaboration and learning communities, while Stenhouse (1975), Schön (1987) and Pring (2000) emphasise the importance of enquiry and reflection. Stenhouse (1975), Carr and Kemmis (1986, 2005), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) have argued that school-based enquiry and research should be imbedded in the culture of schools. Many of the above ideas have been encapsulated into the professional learning agendas of teachers today, which Handscomb (2002/3) describes as having the following features:

- Tapping school expertise, not importing it
- Developing, seeking out and sharing practice
- Developing communities of practice and enquiry with and beyond the school

Professional learning has moved from a training focus to that of a learner focus (Day, 1999). It has been progressively recognised that teachers need to be ongoing, intelligent learners and

that they learn best from their own classroom experience (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009; McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins & McIntyre, 2008).

Concurrently, practitioner research has been described as a powerful means of investigating educational practices in order to reconceptualise and transform such practices (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2010; Somekh, 2006).

As argued in Chapter 2, both the Singapore MOE and the NSW DET appear to have embraced a professional learning agenda as described above. In both contexts teachers are actively encouraged to investigate aspects of their own practice. The announcement of the 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN) vision in 1997, the launch of the Teachers Network in 1998, and the formation of 'Learning Circles' have been "significant in introducing and promoting notions of reflective practice and action research" in Singapore (Hairon, 2006, p.514). Teachers in response to TSLN recognize they "are the leading change agents" (Yeo, 2006, p.51) and that practitioner research (specifically action research) provides a means to be "critical and reflective" learners constantly reviewing their own actions and seeking improvement (p.51).

In undertaking an evaluation into the effectiveness of practitioner research (specifically action learning), Aubusson, Brady and Dinham (2005) recommended that the DET "continue to support and expand" action learning in NSW schools (p.79). The current policy for schools concerning professional learning states:

State office, regions and schools promote and implement quality professional learning in collaborative and collegial environments ... Learning that connects explicitly to the individual's day-to-day work creates opportunities for sustainable change to professional practice... The implementation of professional learning should use strategies that connect theory to practice and encourage collegial discourse, critical reflection and constructive feedback. (DET, 2004, p.6)

The Singapore MOE appears to have adopted a more comprehensive, if not contrived and autocratic, approach towards implementing practitioner research in schools, encouraging all schools to subscribe to the TLLM Ignite programme by 2011. DET policy, in comparison, tends to be less directive and perhaps more democratic in the sense that schools and teachers are less compelled to necessarily engage in practitioner research, although as illustrated later,

in practice can sometimes be obliged to do so by people in positions of power and influence, such as a school education director (SED). In both systems though, practitioner research has not been comprehensively implemented across all schools. Although strongly encouraged, it is not mandatory, in either NSW or Singapore, for every teacher to undertake practitioner research as part of their professional learning.

It will be established in this literature review that there are both advocates and critics of practitioner research. While practitioner research and its accompanying ideas of reflecting on practice, continual improvement and collaborative learning might not be systematically or comprehensively implemented across all schools either within Singapore or NSW, it would appear that the ideas are strongly endorsed and encouraged by the respective central education bureaus. Hence, it can be argued that such policies are being implemented in a “top down way” (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005, p.10). As the DET and MOE appear to have embraced and therefore institutionalized the idea of the practitioner researcher, it is of interest to explore how teachers have responded to this, what type of research is being conducted in secondary schools, how it aligns with the theory in the literature, and whether it is ‘anything and everything’, as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), or something else. This study also illuminates whether teachers in NSW and Singapore schools encountered some of the same facilitators or barriers when conducting practitioner research or whether their experiences were different and in what ways. Results of the study thus provide an important insight into how context helps to shape teachers’ experiences as practitioner researchers.

Defining Practitioner Research

A “plethora of terms” (Campbell & McNamara, 2009, p.10) has been used to describe practitioner research and it exists in “any number of hybrid forms” (McWilliam, 2004, p. 113). Although there are polemic views, the term ‘practitioner research’ has great mutability and in the field of education is often regarded synonymously and used interchangeably with teacher-research, practitioner inquiry, action research and action learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009a). For instance, Kemmis (2006) uses the terms “practitioner research” and “action research” interchangeably and Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) clarify, “action research, or as we name it practitioner research” (p.3), illustrating the variability of

the terms. Professional learning practices which encourage the notion of practitioner research are “often falsely differentiated” and are “variously described” although “the strategies have a great deal in common with each other” (Cordingley, 2008, p.46).

Some researchers differentiate between these different hybrid forms, making a clear distinction between action research and action learning for instance, while others differentiate between different forms of action research. Some researchers insist that practitioner research must have an altruistic purpose. Kemmis (2006) for instance describes quality practitioner research as not just a matter of technical excellence but “a matter of addressing important problems in thought and actions, in theory and practice ... in and for our communities, in and for our shared world” (p.471). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) argue that practitioner research should be “collaborative in its nature and transformative in its intent and action” (p.7). These issues are explored further below.

Practitioner research is characterised, though, by a focus on research done by practitioners themselves, usually with a view to evaluation and improvement (Campbell & McNamara, 2009). The term has been widely used over the past ten to fifteen years to distinguish it from university-generated research and to highlight the differences in how the research is conducted, represented and reported (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998; Merritt, 2003). A range of purposes of practitioner research are suggested: to serve professional practices (Dadds & Hart, 2001), to improve practice (Middlewood, Coleman & Lumby, 1999) and for meaningful change (Gitlin, Bringhurst, Burns, Cooley, Myers & Price, 1992). Practitioner research benefits teachers by contributing to their growth in knowledge, skills and understanding and links school improvement and teacher professional learning. The characteristics of practitioner research are that it is undertaken by individual teachers or groups of teachers, conducted in the workplace (school), often supported by an external partner (university-based researchers), with the purpose to improve classroom practice, and, results in shared learning (Merritt, 2003).

Defining Research and Educational Research: The Research versus research Debate

In the last 20 years, educational research has broadened to accommodate a variety of developments (Murray & Lawrence, 2000, p.6). A central theme in these newer definitions

of educational research is that of ‘continuous professional learning’ and it is postulated that by engaging into systematic enquiries into one’s own practices the possibilities for improvements in practice are made real. The emergent notion is that teachers should adopt “a ‘researcherly’ disposition” (Lingard & Renshaw, 2010, p.27). They can be and should be both teachers and researchers.

Practitioner research differs from other more traditional forms of education research because it is undertaken by practitioners as part of their daily work. However, there exists much controversy as to whether this type of activity constitutes ‘real’ or ‘true research’. While some argue that research should remain the province of academics with a sound knowledge of theory, rather than conducted by practitioners in the field, Schön (1987) among others is critical where there is a “separation of research from practice ... a dilemma of rigor or relevance”(p.xi), leaving no room for “reflection-in-action”.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), referring to Berthoff, believe teachers do not need more findings from university-based researchers, but more dialogue with other teachers that will generate theories grounded in practice. Greenwood and Levin (2000) are also critical of the type of research currently often undertaken by universities and insist that social change-oriented research, specifically action research “is the form social research must take” in order to connect theory with praxis. While they acknowledge that some social scientists do integrate practice and theory effectively, they note that the bulk of university-based social research “has a decidedly anti-praxis orientation” (p.86). They see practitioner research, specifically action research, as the “answer to the dilemma” if social research is “to achieve valid results, bring about useful social change, and reconnect universities to the larger society” (p.92).

Stenhouse (1975), Croll (1986), Carr and Kemmis (1986, 2005), Elliott (1991, 1998), Pring (2000) and others strongly advocate that educational research should emanate from the classroom with the teacher as practitioner researcher focusing on learning. Croll discusses the use of classroom observations as a form of qualitative or ethnographic research. Pring believes it is difficult to see how an ‘outside’ researcher making a “brief acquaintance or periodic visit” (p.119) can come to terms with the complexity of the classroom and all the transactions and understandings that occur. Handscomb and MacBeath (2005) state, “The

critical enquiring approach to learning that we foster in children needs also to be reflected in the professional growth of teachers” (p. 17). As summed up by McWilliam (2004, pp. 113-114), advocates of practitioner research see it as: “authentic” because of its proximity to daily work; “ethical” because it invites non-academic “outsiders” to take part in social enquiry; and, giving voice to the voiceless, “amplifying rather than submerging marginal populations and projects”.

Stenhouse (1981) has suggested that it is possible to construct a continuum between an individual teacher reflecting on his or her own practice at one end and a larger-scale, more systematic enquiry at the other end. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have observed that action research has been “designed to bridge the gap between research and practice ... to overcome the perceived persistent failure of research to impact on, or improve, practice” (p.298). While Stenhouse (1975) has suggested a continuum between ‘Research’ (the type of large scale research conducted by academics informed by theory and methodology) and ‘research’ (the type of smaller scale projects undertaken by practitioners), there are some who are dismissive of such practitioner research.

Kemmis (1993), himself an advocate of action research, distinguishes between different types of practitioner research, including ‘technical action research’ which he has described as “amateur research conducted under the eye of university researchers” (p.3). There are others who believe that practitioner research does not really belong to the realm of research at all. Elliott (1991), for instance, has been critical in part of the Stenhouse curriculum experiment. Critics of practitioner research also “bemoan ... the anti-objectivism of practitioner research ... in which the unqualified engage in confirming their own common sense” and often view it as “sub-standard, self-indulgent, or *sans* theory” (McWilliam, 2004, p.114).

In contrast to the extreme view adopted by some, other researchers have adopted a more conciliatory approach. Cochran-Smith (2005) believes that in educational research the role of researcher and practitioner is “blurred” (p. 219). She states that practitioner research “privileges neither scholarship nor practice but instead depends upon a rich dialectic of the two” (p. 221). Raphael (1999), describes two models of teacher research, “practical inquiry” relevant to the teacher’s local and immediate context and “formal inquiry” which contributes to the general knowledge in the field of education. He contends that, “Practitioner research

often blurs these distinctions, at once serving local, practical needs and advancing knowledge in the teaching profession at large” (p.50). He advocates collaborative research where teachers work with other teachers as well as university-based teacher educators to investigate complex problems of both theory and practice, stressing “Rather than define practitioner research as alternative to or in opposition to university-based research on teaching, we suggest a model of ‘learning community’” (p.51).

While there are both advocates and critics of practitioner research, both the Singapore MOE and the NSW DET appear to value it as a form of teacher professional learning. In this study, I take a very broad and open view about what constitutes research, educational research and practitioner research. As the study aims to be exploratory, descriptive and illuminative, I seek to explore what academics, policy makers and teachers perceive practitioner research to be, regardless of whether such notions are supported by the theory; to what extent they value it; and to what extent the findings between the different informants triangulate. Such information will help to address the two main research questions and sub-questions that frame this study and are listed in Chapter 1.

Defining Action Research

As action research is the “predominant and most recognizable” (McWilliam, 2004, p.113) form of practitioner research it is prudent to discuss it in some detail here. While action research can be driven by quantitative data, it is most commonly employed as a qualitative research methodology and like many other qualitative methodologies, there is no one singular definition of it. The notion of what action research is “is a matter of debate, as it has been for the fifty or so years of its history in social and educational research” (Kemmis, 1993, p.1). Cohen et al. (2007) note that action research cannot be “typified straightforwardly” and that it has a “complex and multifaceted nature” (p.297). Kemmis (1997) suggests that there are several schools of action research.

Greenwood and Levin (2000) who advocate action research as a means of connecting theory with praxis in the social sciences define action research as:

Research in which the validity and value of research results are tested through collaborative insider-professional researcher knowledge generation and application

processes in projects of social change that aim to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination. (p.94)

In a general sense, the participants or practitioners (such as teachers in a school setting) of action research gather relevant information and self-reflect on their experiences in order to improve practice for themselves or the organization. Although applicable to a number of disciplines, action research has a particular attraction for the academic and educational communities. Cohen et al. (2007), broadly describe action research in its application to educational research as being:

A powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level ... action research may be used in almost any setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution, or ... a more desirable outcome. (p.297)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), drawing together the different strands of action research, provide an all-encompassing definition:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out ... The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (p.5)

However, there are two ideas enshrined in this definition that might be considered somewhat debatable, that is the emancipatory nature of action research and the collaborative nature of action research. This is explored further below. Essentially though, action research is designed to locate the research process in the hands of the practitioner and is conducted in the field in real life situations, as opposed to being conducted by an academic or outsider who may be somewhat removed from the situation. The research is therefore conducted by 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders' and is therefore participatory. Reflection on the part of the practitioner-researcher on their own work is an essential component of the process and there is a clear cycle of planning, acting and implementing, observing and reflecting. This is

known as the self-reflective spiral. It is also envisaged that action research will result in change and improvement in the local condition or setting that is being researched.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) identify features which distinguish action research from the everyday actions of teachers. Action research is more systematic and collaborative in collecting evidence on which to base rigorous group reflection. It involves problem-posing not just problem-solving, that is, it is motivated by a quest to improve the world not simply to solve immediate or pressing problems. Importantly, action research is not research done on other people, but research done by particular people on their own work. Kemmis and McTaggart also argue that to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life.

Cohen et al. (2007, p.302) describe a three-fold typification of action research, Firstly, there is ‘technical’ action research which is designed to render an existing situation more efficient and effective akin to Schön’s (1987) notion of ‘reflection-in-action’. Secondly, there is ‘practical’ action research designed to promote teachers’ professionalism by drawing on their informed judgment akin to Schön’s ‘reflection-on-action’. Thirdly, there is ‘emancipatory’ action research which has an explicit political and educational agenda. The distinction between these three knowledge-constitutive interests has been based on Habermas’s theory (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005). While Noffke (1997, 2009) and Noffke and Somekh (2009) use the ‘Personal, Professional and Political’ dimensions to identify different emphases in action research, Carr and Kemmis (2009) dispute this and argue in favour of returning to the technical, practical and emancipatory distinction. I acknowledge both of the above typifications as valid practitioner research for the purpose of this study.

Participatory action research (PAR).

Participatory action research (PAR) has gained currency in recent years as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups. PAR builds on the critical pedagogy put forward by Paulo Freire as a response to the traditional formal models of education. Compared with other forms of practitioner research, PAR places stronger emphasis on the consequential stakeholders. Atweh, Christensen and Dornan

(1998), for instance, argue that “students, as the ultimate beneficiaries of the educational enterprise, should be regarded as partners in the research process” (p.114) a sentiment also shared by Atweh and Burton (1995).

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) state that PAR “attempts to help people investigate and change their social realities” (p.21) and describe it as “a collaborative process of learning, realised by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world” (p.23). Fals-Borda (1987), who originally coined the term PAR, declares it has the potential to initiate and promote radical changes at the grassroots level “in constructive non-violent ways due to its emphases on awareness-building processes” (p.329). PAR aims to be active co-research by involving all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. “Involving the groups or individuals who are facing a problem in the process of finding a solution embeds the solution in the context, making it more appropriate and more likely to be implementable than a more abstract solution derived by ‘experts’” (Atweh et al., 1998, p.114).

PAR is espoused by its advocates as a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. However, in critically describing a collaborative project involving university lecturers, teachers and students, Atweh and Burton (1995) report that organisation, time, equity, research style and clashing cultures were issues encountered in implementing PAR. They observed, for instance, that “Simply setting up a project, in which researchers espouse democratic procedures ... does not mean that the other participants in the research process ... espouse the same principles” (p.570). Other authors, such as Somekh (1994), also describe the manifest difficulties encountered in conducting collaborative research, stating “the operation of power in the project was a great deal more complex than the literature might lead us to suppose” (p.360).

While I embrace the anticipated ideals of PAR theory, I recognize that in practice these ideals might not be necessarily achievable, due to contextual constraints, some of which are described above. Consequently, other factors identified in the literature which might act as

barriers to PAR and other forms of practitioner research are explored and discussed in some detail later in this chapter.

Action Research versus Action Learning

Action research and action learning are closely related processes (Groundwater-Smith & Ewing, 2010; Dick, 2009) being ‘hybrid forms’ of practitioner research. “They share in common a central commitment to the study of one’s own professional practice ... with a view to improving that practice for the benefit of others” (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p.7). While action research and action learning at times seem almost indistinguishable, they do have different pedigrees and there are some educationists who make a clear distinction between the two. Action learning was developed in the 1940s by Revans (1983) and is a process in which a group of people meet on a regular basis to help each other to learn from their experience. Typically participants came from different organizations where each of them was involved in different activities and faced individual problems. Most commonly the participants were managers.

In the past a clear distinction could be made between the two processes. In action learning, participants drew *different learning* from *different experiences* whereas in action research a team of people drew *collective learning* from a *collective experience*. Over time, however, action learning programs were used within organizations as opposed to between organizations. The use of a team studying a common problem meant that many action learning programs now greatly resemble action research. Some researchers maintain that a distinction remains, stating that AL emphasises the sharing of anecdotal experiences with a small group of colleagues in order to understand or address a school-related issue, whereas in AR the focus is on undertaking research and making findings public (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009; Ewing, 2007).

There has been an “increasing interest and involvement in projects using action learning for school and teacher professional learning in Australia” (Groundwater-Smith & Ewing, 2010, p. 245). Action learning was the approach utilized in many of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) projects to develop teacher knowledge about a quality teaching framework and its implications for the classroom. If action learning is to be viewed

strictly as a process whereby individual members of a set share the knowledge they already possess with the other members of that set, then I would not necessarily regard this research. Rather, this could be viewed as the “assimilation” rather than the “gathering and synthesizing” of knowledge (Campbell & McNamara, 2009, p.20) and possibly a powerful form of professional learning which may lead to improvement in practice. However, due to the mutability of much of the terminology used in the literature, for the purpose of this study action learning is considered a constituent of practitioner research.

The Collaborative Nature of Practitioner Research

There is divided opinion about whether practitioner research should be defined as a collaborative undertaking. There are many who support the idea that collaboration is an essential element of practitioner research. Elliott (1998), for instance, insists practitioner research must be “enacted by teachers collectively ... rather than individually” (p.183) while more recently Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) contend that collaboration is one of the “over-riding ‘ethical’ guidelines for practitioner research” (p.6). This immediately forges a connection between practitioner research and the ideas of team learning, collaborative learning and professional learning communities as propounded by Senge (1990) and Palmer (1998). Cohen et al. (2007) note that within the literature on action research, “there is a strong emphasis ... on action research as a co-operative, collaborative activity” (p.301). Taking a contrasting stance, there are others who believe that practitioner research can be conducted by individuals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009a; Stenhouse, 1975; Whitehead, 1985) and that it does not necessarily have to be done in collaboration with others. Cohen et al. (2007) believe defining action research as a group activity might be “too restricting” (p.301).

Even among those who define practitioner research as a collaborative activity, there is no consensus as to whether collaboration must occur during the entire process or cycle or whether collaboration can be limited to the dissemination of findings and teachers sharing ideas. Furthermore, while some researchers speak about collaboration among a group of practitioners, others, in addition, support the idea of collaboration with ‘outsiders’ such as academics, consultants or other experts. Cohen et al. (2007), reviewing the literature, observe that practitioner research “can be undertaken by the individual teacher, a group of teachers

working co-operatively within one school, or a teacher or teachers working alongside a researcher or researchers in a sustained relationship” (p. 297). As I adopted a broad and inclusive definition in this study, I accepted any three of these approaches described by Cohen et al. as valid practitioner research.

Use of experts.

While several researchers define practitioner research as a collaborative activity, there is not always consensus and clarity as to what role, if any, experts should take when practitioner research is conducted in schools. Stenhouse (1975) advocated the idea of schools collaborating with institutes of higher learning, specifically university lecturers. The action research movement, since, has brought the idea of a critical friend into prominence (Bassey, 1999). Some see collaboration with experts as almost mandatory. Greenwood and Levin (2000), for instance, state that action research is a process where:

Community or organizational stakeholders collaborate with professional researchers in defining the objectives, constructing the research questions, learning research skills, pooling knowledge and efforts, conducting the research, interpreting the results, and applying what is learned to produce positive social change. (p.94)

Some, believing teachers can benefit significantly from an external assistance, argue for specialist mediation (Aubusson et al., 2009; Cordingly, 2008; Hart, 1998). Immediately though, this seems to introduce a number of problems and questions, including the idea of ownership of the research and conflict of cultures (for example, between the school and the university). Cohen et al. (2007) believe that “ideologically, there is a view that those experiencing the issue should be involved in the decision making” (p.301). This however cannot always be guaranteed once teachers begin to collaborate with others. Elliott (1991) who was critical of some aspects of Stenhouse’s curriculum experiment believed there was a danger of the teachers being considered as the mere collectors of other people’s data. In his model he placed the teachers more in the ‘driver’s seat’ so that it was they who formulated hypothesis, put them to the test and clarified the values which underpinned the work. Similarly, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) are critical of “an academic-driven agenda [which] has the potential to hijack the practitioner research enterprise” (p.10).

School-university research networks can take on widely varying forms ranging from school-bound research in which individual teachers are mentored by university research experts to a partnership which focuses on research within and between institutions in which all partners are experts, facilitators and critical friends to each other (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). A number of studies have documented the difficulties that have been encountered when schools and universities attempt to collaborate on action research projects (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006; Somekh, 1994; Stenhouse, 1975). Ebutt, Robson and Worrall (2000) have reported the fact that the occupational culture of the two different professional groups differs, and as a consequence, misunderstandings and tensions are likely to arise between academics and teachers. Offering a tangential view, Wigglesworth and Murray (2007) contend that teacher-researchers learn best from colleagues rather than experts.

Making findings public.

A number of researchers (Bassey, 1999; Pring, 2000; Somekh, 1994; Stenhouse, 1975, 1981) believe that an important part of the practitioner research process includes the dissemination of findings to a large critical audience, Stenhouse (1981) defining research as “systematic enquiry made public”. Pring elaborates:

The growth of professional knowledge requires the sympathetic but critical community through which one can test out ideas, question the values which underpin the shared practice, seek solutions to problems, invite observation of one’s practice, suggest alternative perspectives and interpretation of data. (p. 132)

Elliott (1998) is critical of teacher self-evaluation which is “highly individualised and privatised: involving little sharing of data across classrooms and dialogue between teachers about the pedagogical problems and strategies evidenced by it” (p.184).

However, there are instances where teachers sometimes conduct practitioner research as a solitary activity, studying aspects of their own practice in order to effect change and improvement in the classroom, without necessarily sharing their findings with others. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) “concede ... that action research is frequently a solitary process of systematic self-reflection” (p.22). There might be various reasons why teachers do

this. Some perhaps do not possess the confidence to share their findings with others or might believe that their research, with a local focus, will be of little relevance to others. Stenhouse (1975) observed some teachers possessing a “sensitive nature”. There are “psychological and social” (p.159) barriers confronting teachers assuming the role of teacher-researchers and the close observation of one’s professional performance is personally threatening.

In an evaluation of practitioner research in NSW schools, Aubusson et al. (2005) discovered that for many teachers “peer observation was seen as threatening ... (and) the perceived threat had potential to inhibit teachers participating in professional learning” (p.85). They spoke of the “defensiveness” experienced by teachers in some schools.

Over time I have formed the view that research, whether conducted by an individual or in collaboration with others, needs necessarily be made public, that findings must be held up for scrutiny by one’s professional peers. However, as I set out in this thesis to explore respondents’ views, I did not impose this as an operational definition of practitioner research.

The Emancipatory Role of Practitioner Research

Many researchers explicitly state that practitioner research should have an emancipatory role or function. They view practitioner research as an empowering activity. However, often they differ as to the sphere in which the empowerment should occur. One group aligns practitioner research with the professional learning and autonomy of teachers while another believes that practitioner research should be concerned with advancing social conditions and social justice viewing practitioner research as a “political process”. Due to the division that exists on this issue, two camps have emerged within practitioner research, the reflective practitioners and the critical theorists. The reflective practitioners as described by Cohen et al. (2007) interpret practitioner research as “improvement to professional practice at the local, perhaps classroom level, within the capacities of individuals and the situations they are in which they are working” (p.303). For this camp, practitioner research need not necessarily perform a political or social role.

But, for the critical theorists (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), “action research is part of a broader agenda of changing education, changing

schooling and changing society ... empowerment concerns taking control over one's life within a just, egalitarian, democratic society" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.303). It is not just about effecting technical and practical improvement "within the existing boundaries and conditions, but also at changing the system itself or those conditions which impede desired improvement in the system/organization" (p.303). Kemmis (2006), in particular, is critical of action research "conducted solely to implement government policies or programmes ... (which) in the end produces findings that can be justified only by appeal to authority" (p.460). He believes instead that action research should challenge existing modes of schooling. He is also critical of action research that "privileges the voices" (p.460) of the researchers and does not give voice to others involved in the practice under study such as students or families. He advocates action research which is critical, where the researcher has the "courage and conviction ... (to tell) unwelcome truths" (p.461) even if it requires "confronting the powers-that-be" (p.474). Groundwater Smith and Mockler (2005) are critical that practitioner research "has been popularised, domesticated and appropriated as an implementation tool instead of as a liberatory social change method with far reaching implications" (p.3).

Any research or innovation undertaken in the classroom should adopt an ethical stance. However, I feel it is too restrictive to insist that all practitioner research must necessarily be emancipatory or lead to social change in some way, although I consider such ideals to be highly worthy. Rather, it is important and beneficial to draw teachers' attention to Friere's theory of conscientization, or like ideas championed by others such as Kemmis, Somekh or Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, without insisting this is a pre-condition of research. This thesis, though, being investigatory in intent, sets out to explore the extent to which practitioner research conducted in schools leads to wide-ranging change and/or is emancipatory in nature.

The definitions of practitioner research, with their respective qualifications and limitations, found in the literature and discussed above, raised a lot of issues in relation to my study that were then explored. Some of the issues were:

- To what extent have the NSW DET and Singapore MOE embraced the notion of practitioner research?
- Do they advocate and encourage practitioner research in a technical, practical or emancipatory form?

- What form of research is actually being practised in secondary schools?
- Does it fundamentally differ between schools?
- How informed is this research by theory?
- What role do experts play?
- Who has ownership of the practitioner research?
- How are practitioner research, and the corporate memory of the school's practitioner research enterprises, sustained in an evolving school culture?

Such considerations further informed the two main research questions and subsequent sub-questions that framed this study.

Historical Perspectives on Practitioner Research

The popularity of practitioner research in education appears to have peaked and waned at different times over the last 70 years or so. Some researchers (Elliott, 1991; Groundwater-Smith & Ewing, 2010; Kemmis, 1988) attribute the origins of practitioner research to Kurt Lewin and his work on group dynamics (although Kemmis (1993) himself has suggested that much of what has been attributed to Lewin might more correctly be attributed to Moreno). Cohen et al. (2007) refer to Lewin as “one of action research’s founding fathers” (p.297) and say that he once remarked that research that produced nothing but books is inadequate. Lewin was particularly influential in America in the 1940s. This was the era of the Group Dynamics Movement which was concerned with addressing social problems at the time. Lewin had hoped that his work would better the lives of various disadvantaged groups in terms of housing, employment, etc. Lewin himself was likely influenced by his predecessor, Dewey who was renowned for his experimentalist and progressive educational thought (Groundwater-Smith & Ewing, 2010). Dewey’s stages of reflective thinking can be seen to contain the seeds of action research.

Another significant figure in the development of practitioner research is Stenhouse who greatly influenced the teacher-researcher movement. This movement was largely focused on curriculum and responded to Stenhouse’s ideas that teaching should be based on research and that research and curriculum development are the preserve of teachers. Stenhouse (1975) is critical of the practice where curriculums are developed in a “laboratory” setting and then

implemented across schools so that development and evaluation remain two separate functions (p.71). Instead, he argues that “curriculum study should be grounded in the study of classrooms” (p.75) and that this is best done by teachers in the field working in consultation with researchers. His central idea is that all teachers should engage in an ongoing, continuous process of reflective questioning and constructive criticism of their own practice and argues the importance of teachers engaging in inquiry learning, discovering and learning through investigating a problem. He envisages a tradition of curriculum research and development where teachers and research workers work in partnership in a spirit of co-operation (p.208).

The notion of the teacher as a researcher and reflective practitioner emerging from school initiated curriculum reform spearheaded by Stenhouse in the 60s and 70s then became prominent in teacher education courses during the 70s and 80s, Elliott (1993) describing how the ‘teachers-as-researchers’ movement was sweeping through faculties of education across the world more than two decades ago. The ideas developed by Stenhouse were further championed by people like Elliot (1991) and Carr and Kemmis (1986) in the UK, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) in the USA, and Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988) in Australia

Kemmis (1993) described the advocacy of practitioner research in the early nineties as such:

There have been several waves of advocacy for educational action research, each, in one way or another, shaped by the climate of its times. There is now a variety of traditions of educational action research, each with its own potential and limitations, and, increasingly, with its own literature. And each, one supposes, is more or less suited to the distinctive cultural and historical conditions under which it evolved. (p.1)

Writing more recently, Carr and Kemmis (2005), recognize that practitioner research has become “a full-grown international movement”, but lament that often it has become “an institutionalised model of in-service teacher education ... detached from any emancipatory aspirations” (p.351). They however remain optimistic about the notion of practitioner research, stating:

We would continue to portray action research as an idea that, as it passes from one historical context to another, has to be reinterpreted and reconstructed so that it can

continue to offer practical and realistic ways of realizing its emancipatory aspirations through critical reflection and transformative action. (p.355)

In recent years in Australia, researchers such as Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) and Ewing (2007) continue the tradition established by Lewin and developed by Stenhouse, Elliot and others, advocating the importance and place of practitioner research in education.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler champion a “fundamental relationship between ethics and quality within practitioner research aiming towards an emancipatory goal” (p.5). They list a series of ethical outlines for practitioner research, including that it should be collaborative in its nature and transformative in its intent and action (p.7). Ewing, whose ideas have helped to shape state government policy, in particular the NSW Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) programme (NSW DET, 2007), highlights the importance of practitioner research, action research and action learning as “tools for deep teacher professional learning” (p.1) and the importance of creating a culture of inquiry in schools.

Current Practices in Practitioner Research

Over the last twenty years practitioner research has begun to enjoy increasing recognition internationally as a form of professional learning by teachers and for teachers. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005, 2007), Campbell and Groundwater-Smith (2007) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009b) describe a burgeoning interest in practitioner research, Kemmis (2006) expresses surprise that action research has become “widespread to the point of faddishness” (p.459), and Carr and Kemmis (2005) note that practitioner research has become, “A full-grown international movement sustained by a large number of teachers, teacher educators and educational researchers, and supported by numerous educational institutions and research agencies throughout the world” (p.351). A volume and variety of practitioner research has been conducted by teachers and academics, Campbell and McNamara (2009) attributing this “proliferation” to accountability pressures, a search for evidence of improvement, and an increasing emphasis on continuing professional learning. Paradoxically, this appears to have resulted in an emphasis on the instrumental or technical rather than an emancipatory form of practitioner research.

Boog (2003) notes that “a variety of action research approaches have developed along divergent theoretical pathways” (p.426) while Boog, Kuene and Tromp (2003) concede that “there are many possible definitions of action research” (p.419). But they note that “most models of action research are designed as a cyclical process of researching, learning and putting what is learnt into practice” (p.420) and share important characteristics. Dick (2009) observes that while interest in AR “continues to grow” the boundaries are “becoming fuzzier” (p.424), while Barber (2006) claims AR “seems to have lost its way” (p.72). It might then be surmised that AR appears to be ‘diffracting’ rather than converging as a practice, as defined by Schatzki (2002, 2005).

Carr and Kemmis (2005), although advocates of practitioner research, are critical of the way it is “now being practised and understood” (p.351) arguing that “action research itself has fallen victim to the very theory-practice dualism it was intended to resolve” (p.351). Further, they believe that “the assumption that teachers should exercise autonomous professional judgement has been profoundly undermined” (p.350) and that the idea of human emancipation that they underwrote “is regarded as obsolete” (p.353). Carr (2005) notes a “discrepancy between the theoretical accounts of the role of action research ... produced by Stenhouse and Kemmis, and its institutionalized practice” (p.338).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) observe that in the United States, “teacher research has become prominent in teacher education, professional development, and school reform at the national, state, school district, and individual school levels” (p.17). They further note that paradoxically, “as it is used in the service of more and more agendas and even institutionalized in certain contexts, it is in danger of becoming anything and everything” (p.17). Although practitioner research has experienced enormous growth in current times in the US, Cochran-Smith (2005) believes that there remains competing agendas. On the one hand there is general agreement that it is valuable for the improvement of the individual’s own practice and professional learning. On the other hand there is “sharp critique and even dismissal of this kind of work in many policy and research contexts” (p.221). Criticisms are that the findings are biased, there is a lack of separation between the researcher and what is being researched (p.221), and that it is not rigorous research as it does not offer generalisations across contexts (p.223).

Ponte (2008) presents a continental European perspective on practitioner research. Believing much contemporary action research lacks substantial quality and has become too procedural, she advocates that action research should be based on ‘Pedagogeik’, an integrated framework consisting of a series of specialisations, sciences and domains, which provides a means of guiding children, in order for the research to be relevant to the development of children. Ponte argues that different pedagogical perspectives, either explicit or implicit, will have a strong influence on the quality of action research in terms of the issues that are raised, the knowledge that is constructed and the actions that are taken to transform the practice.

While it might be seen that practitioner research is mushrooming globally, simultaneously it is acknowledged that practitioner research might adopt different forms in different contexts. Somekh (2011) and Somekh and Zeichner (2009), for instance, note that action research practices are commonly remodeled in local contexts when used to support educational reform. Somekh (2006) speculates that a practice evolves dependent on context and the “values and culture” of the group involved. Although there is expansive research on practitioner research, action research in particular, this tends to focus more on the processes and outcomes. Some studies have been undertaken to explore specifically how practitioner research as a practice might be remodeled in different contexts (e.g. a meta-study by Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), but these are limited.

In Singapore, Tan, McDonald and Rossi (2009) have asserted that research in schools is primarily used to “confirm” the success of an innovation as opposed to investigating an issue, attributing this mainly to historical precedents. Hairon (2006) has illustrated that deep seated cultural, social, political, economic and historical dimensions, such as “taking directive and initiative from the top” and a culture of “productive efficiency” could pose serious constraints to the success of action research in Singapore schools (pp. 516 -18). Somekh and Zeichner (2009) postulated that a new form of practitioner research will likely emerge as a result of such contradictory principles and practices.

This study, then, sets out to explore in detail how practitioner research has been remodeled across two different contexts, Singapore and NSW. The thrust of this research was to investigate the type of activity teachers participate in and deem to be practitioner research, what they understand it to be (sayings) and how they practice it (doings).

Teachers' Experiences as Practitioner Researchers

It appears that many of the studies which describe teachers' experience as practitioner researchers have not been conducted by independent researchers as "disinterested research" as described by McWilliam (2004, p.115). Frequently reports are authored by participant observers, such as a team leader or an academic who has worked collaboratively with a school, the voice of the participant-investigators being used to give legitimacy or loan verifiability to the study. One possible danger in this, suggested by Stenhouse (1975), is that in teaching, "success is reported publicly but problems, difficulties and failures are features of private rather than public experience" (p.196). This tendency is described as 'publication bias' by Rothstein, Sutton and Borenstein (2005). Furthermore, despite the profusion of research on practitioner research, there is little work which focuses specifically on "an affective dimension, that is, researchers' feelings about their research" (Akerlind, 2008, p. 28). Few studies explore what teachers' feelings are about their experience as practitioner researchers and whether they see practitioner research as a worthwhile endeavor and something they would sustain. Consequently, in this study, I have described and analysed teachers' experience as practitioner researchers, including the affective dimension, adopting the stance of "disinterestedness" while transparently reporting my relationship with the data.

Some of the main themes that emerged from the literature on teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers include: the benefits teachers gain through engaging in practitioner research; some of the facilitators and barriers teachers might face; and the ownership or facility teachers have in determining the research focus or agenda. Following is a summary of these ideas.

Perceived Benefits of Practitioner Research for Teachers

The purposes for engaging in practitioner research in education settings will greatly vary (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007). While schools and teachers might engage in practitioner research for professional, personal and political reasons (Capobianco, Lincoln, Canuel-Browne & Trimarchi, 2006; Noffke, 1997), often it is essentially "because they want something to improve or ... to do something better" (Aubusson et al., 2009, p.88).

Some of the benefits schools and teachers gain through engaging in practitioner research include: development of professional skills and understandings; linking school improvement with teacher professional learning; greater confidence and self worth; increased awareness of classroom issues; a move towards more learner-centred classrooms; better congruence between theory and practice; a change in values and beliefs; higher levels of collegiality; a return of excitement and enthusiasm about teaching; teachers' work being validated; and, perhaps most significantly, improved classroom practice and student outcomes (Aubusson et al. 2009; Cohen et al., 2007; Ewing, 2007; Merritt, 2003). Furthermore, in "explicating locally existing tacit knowledge" practitioner research produces knowledge which is more relevant and helpful to teachers than knowledge created by research institutes (Enthoven & de Bruijn, 2010).

Facilitators and Barriers to Practitioner Research

A teacher's experience as a practitioner researcher will be shaped by the various supporting and hindering factors he or she might encounter. Furthermore, such factors might act to "prefigure" practitioner research as a practice (Schatzki, 2002) by "constraining and enabling it" (p.44-45). In this study, the term 'facilitators' is used to refer to the supporting or enabling factors and the term 'barriers' to refer to the hindering factors. Often facilitators and barriers are the contrasting positions, states, or views of the same phenomenon, that is, they constitute opposite poles. When a facilitator is in deficit then this will generally act as a barrier. So for instance, if an empathetic and supportive school leadership acts as a facilitator to practitioner research, then likely an uninterested and unsupportive management team will act as a barrier.

Stenhouse (1975), more than thirty years ago, was able to identify and describe a comprehensive list of what some of the barriers might be to curriculum reform and research in schools, through his own conjectures and by citing the conclusions of other researchers. Many of these factors still apply in a contemporary context. While teachers might appear resistant to change, Stenhouse noted in fact it could be something else, such as a lack of skill and knowledge, lack of materials and equipment, a rigid school timetable, lack of time (an important resource for innovation), lack of facility (i.e. power, authority or influence), and "gaps", for example, between the teacher and resources such as experts, theories or research

findings. Barriers to innovation, according to Stenhouse, can occur at the individual, internal or external level and be personal, interpersonal, professional, political or cultural in nature. This typification is used to loosely organize the discussion that follows.

Personal dimension.

Stenhouse (1975) believes that the main barriers to teachers assuming the role of teacher-researchers “are psychological and social” (p.159). The close observation of one’s professional performance is personally threatening and the social climate in which teachers work (i.e. generally in isolation) is not always supportive or conducive. Another problem is that of non-acceptance, either of the purpose of research or the teacher’s own role. Teachers often expect to receive evaluation, criticism and feedback from experts, not self evaluate (p.161). Personality could present another barrier as some teachers will not be confident enough to undertake self-evaluation (p.164) while others are unable to be self-critical and find it difficult “to stand back from their work”. Aubusson et al. (2005) verified this in a study of practitioner research in NSW schools noting that teachers sometimes lacked the confidence “to be self critically reflective of their classroom practice” (p.27). Some teachers prefer to “retain their current safety in isolation” (Aubusson et al., 2009, p.64).

Stenhouse also refers to psychological conflicts where individuals cannot see the incentive for change. Practices which are deeply embedded in a person’s consciousness through experience require strong and persistent effort to change. Teachers in particular have a propensity to resist change, education often being labeled “the most resistant profession” in terms of its ability to embrace change and envision the future (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Comu, 2003, p.134). Hence, real change involves “uncertainty, anxiety, conflict and sometimes a sense of loss” (p.144). Introducing change takes time and energy “which are often in short supply in a busy school” (Aubusson et al., 2009, p.11).

Interpersonal dimension.

Stenhouse (1975) noted that there is a need for collaboration between teachers if practitioner research is to be successfully implemented in schools. There is also a need for understanding and sensitivity between teachers and external partners when working collaboratively. A

“research climate” needs to operate where all participants communicate with a certain sense of clarity, precision and certainty. Ewing (2007) also sees collegiality as “crucial” and that it is important to create “opportunities for teachers ... to work within and across stages, faculties and schools” (p.5).

For practitioner research to be effective, teachers need to be passionate and committed to working in teams (Aubusson et al., 2009; Capobianco et al., 2006). However, it cannot be assumed that teachers will naturally be able to function effectively in teams, training and guidance from external sources often being necessary (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Tensions sometimes arise within a school faculty. Those who feel excluded from the research enterprise might show resentment (Aubusson et al., 2009) while those included can be ostracized by their colleagues as a result of engaging in research and publication (White, 2011).

Ewing (2007) also believes that external experts must learn to work “WITH teachers ... recognizing and affirming the teachers’ knowledge and helping them to build new ideas and possibilities” (p.5), advocating academic partners be active participants in practitioner research teams. However, it is noted that the orientations of academics and teachers tend to differ (Cohen et al., 2007). Due to differences in the professional culture of universities and schools tensions can often arise when academics and teachers work collaboratively on research enterprises (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Ebbutt, Robson & Worrall, 2000; Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006; Somekh, 1994; Stenhouse, 1975). Many teachers, though, see much value in working with academic partners, often viewing such partnerships, for instance, as validation of the importance of their work (Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006).

Professional dimension.

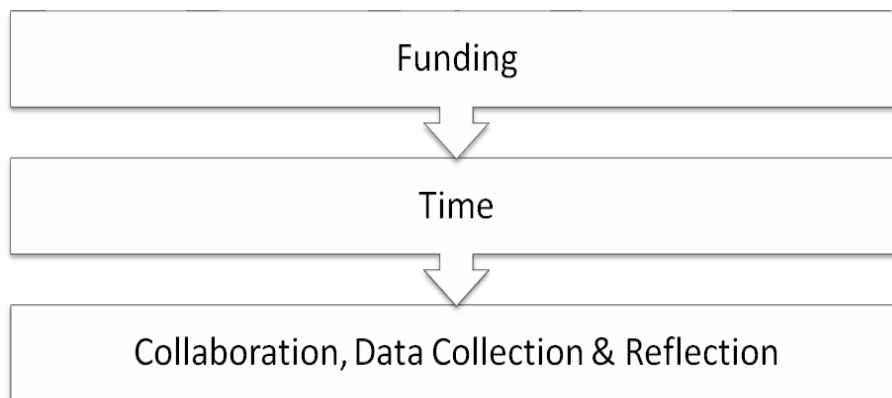
Stenhouse (1975) identifies several theoretical and methodological problems that teachers may face as practitioner researchers including a need for time, a need to develop “a general theoretical language” (p.157) and the need for a professional body. He acknowledges there are “problems in the economy of time which probably exclude all but the most energetic teachers from such work” (p.157). Other researchers also note that teachers need to be provided time to test new teaching methods if professional learning is to be effective

(Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Although time is the “key condition” to the success of practitioner research (Aubusson et al., 2009, p.53), ‘not having enough time’ is a perennial problem which continues to stifle practitioner research in schools (Neapolitan, 2000), further aggravated by the “audit culture” which now prevails in many education systems around the world (Somekh, 2011, p.116).

In a Singapore context, the extra workload and the need to document research have been identified as “chores” when teachers do lesson study (Fang, Lee & Haron, 1999) and a shortage of time the “biggest challenge” to (pre-school) teachers undertaking practitioner research (Ebbeck, Yoke & Yim, 2011, p.359). Evaluations of action learning enterprises in NSW schools also revealed time was the most critical factor to the success of the practitioner research enterprise (Aubusson et al., 2005; Ewing, 2007). A hierarchy emerged. Funding is essential in order that time can be made available so that teachers can collaborate, collect data and reflect on their practice, as illustrated in Figure 1. Aubusson et al. (2005) concluded that “Money buys time” (p.21). Funding must be found to provide substantial time to release teachers from normal classroom teaching (Aubusson et al., 2009) and where there is lack of funding, “school leaders must use allocated resources creatively to enable the process to continue” (Ewing, 2007, p.4). The DET has adopted a challenge and support approach where they challenge teachers to rethink practice. To ensure that teachers are not marooned in self doubt, they are provided some support in terms of scaffolding, evidenced in the devolution of professional learning funds and the on-line, on-time resources that the PLLD directorate provides.

Figure 1.

A hierarchy of the critical facilitators for practitioner research in NSW schools.



Time constraints mean that teachers functioning as practitioner researchers commonly need to prioritise. For instance, one school team described how it became “a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul” in order to do practitioner research (Aubusson et al., 2005, p.30), while many teachers do not have the time to write up their practitioner research in a publishable form, with or without a co-author (White, 2011). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) state, “Engaging in practitioner research involves an opportunity cost to the community. To do well requires time and energy that cannot be spent in other professional ways” (p.206). Adopting a Schatzkian lens (2002, 2005), it can be claimed that in such instances practitioner research as a practice tends to conflict rather than cohere with other teaching practices.

Teachers often feel threatened by theory believing it is “something they cannot apply or use in relation to their practice” (Elliott, 1991, p.45) and tend to use their own experiences rather than either literature or research to effect curriculum reform (Rosendahl & Rönnerman, 2006). Teachers commonly perceive research as something “alien to their experience ... which is done in laboratories” (Somekh, 1994, p.373), the term itself belonging not to them but to the discourse of the academy. Additionally, they tend to identify themselves as reflective practitioners rather than researchers (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Furthermore, the skills and abilities needed to undertake practitioner research are “not naturally present in all teachers” (Enthoven & de Bruijn, 2010).

Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks (1998) reported that difference in views and confusion by participants as to what constituted practitioner research were some of the “issues faced” by a group of teachers involved in a practitioner research enterprise, some not knowing “what PAR is” (p.12) even after being in the project for over a year, while Neapolitan (2000) found there was a lack of widespread understanding of practitioner research within the education community. In consideration of the above, it is relevant and beneficial that this study comprehensively explores how practitioner research is understood (sayings) and practised (doings) by teachers across two different settings.

Stenhouse (1975) asserts that schools need to support teachers for change and innovation and that resources, including staffing, teaching materials and buildings (p.166), must be made available. On a broader level, he suggests that a professional body with a helicopter view is

also necessary to pull together all the material generated by teachers (e.g. case studies) and analyse it for general trends.

Political dimension.

Political factors relate to the balance of power in relationships, especially in a group or organization. Stenhouse (1975) refers to power conflicts as a potential barrier to innovation, as major innovation often results in a redistribution of power. Elliott (1998) perceives school-based practitioner research as essentially an “oppositional activity which generates conflict between administrators and teachers” (p.184). He declares, “There is no neutral standpoint for research: one either serves the interests of the oppressors or the oppressed” (p.184), echoing Freire (1974, 1985, 1998) and fore-shadowing Somekh (2006) and Kemmis (2008).

Questions have been raised about the ownership, power and the democratic rights of practitioner researchers and research participants, when the research is mandated from above, involves an expert such as an academic partner or advisor, or is otherwise constrained by an outside agenda (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Elliott, 1991, 1998; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005, 2007; McKernan, 2008; Somekh, 1994). Academics sometimes have the tendency to “hijack” a teacher’s research agenda distorting and constraining “the development of the reflective practice they aspired to promote” (Elliott, 1991, p.15). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) warn that “teacher researchers can sometimes find themselves caught up in an externally imposed implementation agenda rather than an agenda of personal and community transformation which might otherwise drive the project” (p.207). They further caution that a ‘top down’ impetus is “more likely to breed cynicism and discontent (rather) than development and emancipation” (p.208).

Ewing (2007) believes that the school executive needs to be actively supportive of the practitioner research project “whether or not executive members are part of the team” (p.3) while White (2011) adds that principals “must champion but not own the teacher-research” (p.321). Furthermore, because of its autonomous nature, practitioner research will more likely succeed in schools where there is distributed leadership (Aubusson et al., 2009, p.29).

Ewing (2007) further asserts that teachers must be regarded as professionals, actively responsible for their own learning, and that it is imperative that ownership and responsibility of the project are delegated to the project team. Others also agree that teacher researchers must be given ‘collective authority’ over the research agenda if practitioner research is to be effective in schools (Capobianco et al., 2006; Goodnough, 2011; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005) and that participation in any research enterprise should be voluntary (Aubusson et al., 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2008).

Cultural dimension.

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, practices and attitudes of a group of people. Stenhouse (1975) believes at a school level that parental and social opinion including putting pressure on schools to perform (p.167) and low morale within certain schools, will be impediments to the successful implementation of practitioner research. Stenhouse (1975) also refers to value conflicts as a potential barrier, as major innovation necessitates change and likely a new set of values. Elliott (1991) likewise believes a barrier to innovation comes from “the failure of the innovators to free themselves from the fundamental beliefs and values embedded in the culture they want to change” (p.48).

Stenhouse notes the important role the head of the school has as a change agent. He or she can elect to either endorse conservatism or innovation. Curriculum development might not realize its full potential if either a consultant leaves the scene and a replacement has not been groomed, there is a lack of transfer of what has been learnt (between teachers, or between departments, or between schools) or there is a lack of adequate structures for communication and support so that innovative practices do not spread and survive.

As noted above, clashing cultural perspectives sometimes occur when academics and teachers attempt to work collaboratively. Furthermore, there can be strong resistance to policy messages especially when top-down forward-planning models are used (Dyer, 1999). Teacher acceptance behavior is critical to the success of any innovation. In education systems, such as in NSW and Singapore, where the notion of the teacher-researcher has been implemented (or at least, strongly advocated) in a top-down fashion, teacher-acceptance of policy can be seen as crucial to the success of that policy. Carr (2005) observes that teachers

often regard educational theorising as an “esoteric ‘ivory tower’ enterprise unrelated to their professional needs” (p.334), a belief, that if embedded in the school culture, could result in resistance to change and innovation and be antagonistic to the idea of practitioner research. Ewing (2007) identifies as critical “tenor” in the workplace context. There must be a climate of trust to allow teachers to “question, take risks and respect different points of view” (p.3), if practitioner research and a professional learning community are to function.

In Singapore schools, Hairon (2006) argues, action research projects are initiated top-down instead of bottom up. While the perennial problem of time shortage, and a lack of rigour and lack of sustainability are some of the “superficial” constraints that might hinder a successful practitioner research enterprise, deep seated cultural, social, political, economic and historical dimensions pose more serious constraints. In a NSW context, Carter (2008) believes a culture of enquiry, collaboration and professional dialogue needs to be carefully nurtured by school leaders as practitioner research is “not a ‘natural’ state for secondary schools” (p.81).

The facilitators and barriers above that have been identified or alluded to by various researchers helped to inform and guide my study, in particular, in crafting certain questions within the interview schedules. This study illuminates whether teachers in NSW and Singaporean schools encountered the same facilitators or barriers as listed above when conducting practitioner research or whether their experiences were different and in what ways.

Relevance of Schatzki and Freire

The literature describes how the popularity of practitioner research has peaked and waned since its earliest incarnation in the 1940s. Some variations of practitioner research, such as action learning and action research, have tended to morph over the years while the professional learning agenda of teachers has moved from a training focus to a learner focus. This substantiates both Freire (1985) and Schatzki’s (2001, 2002) claims that the world and society is dynamically ‘in the making’ and that that any practice is transitory, dynamic, temporally evolving and transmutating.

Furthermore, Somekh (2011) and Somekh and Zeichner (2009) argue that practitioner research adopts different forms in different contexts, while Hairon (2006) suggests that deep-seated cultural, social, political, economic and historical dimensions have shaped the way action research is practised in Singapore. This again aligns with both Friere (1974) and Schatzki (2001) who portend that practices will likely be transformed when they are adopted and adapted in a new setting or context. Schatzki argues that people appropriate and impose practices differentially due to their varied environments and “The results of their choices and appropriations is that certain practices are selected and successfully spread, while others are not selected and either stagnate, disappear, or are never implemented” (p.359). A fundamental aim of this study is to determine the extent to which practitioner research has been remodeled across the two contexts studied.

Pre-figuration, as defined by Schatzki (2002), is how the world channels forthcoming activity and can be equated with the notion of constraint and enablement. A range of constraining and enabling factors, or facilitators and barriers, to practitioner research were identified in the literature. These occurred at the individual, internal or external level and were personal, interpersonal, professional, political or cultural in nature, time being identified as the most critical factor. Following, I investigate whether the teacher practitioner-researchers described in the study encountered similar factors to those documented above or whether their experiences were different and how.

There were instances cited in the literature on practitioner research where phenomena ostensibly cohere. Links were made between: school improvement and professional development; educational research and continuous professional learning; and, teaching and researching. Examples where practices might conflict included: clashing cultural perspectives between academics and teachers; and, educational theorising versus the professional needs of teachers. This supports Schatzki’s (2002) claim that practices and orders constrain and enable each other. “When practices interact so as to sustain one another, they can be said to cohere. When the interaction is not mutually sustaining, the practices conflict”, Schatzki states (p.170). This thesis further explored how some of the various practices that “crisscross and interweave” (p.87) with teachers’ work as practitioner researchers constrain and enable each other.

Schatzki further describes how a practice over time might either “coalesce” or at the other extreme divide into “two or more different practices” or even disappear altogether (2002, p.84). Various definitions of practitioner research prevail in the literature, Kemmis (1993) declaring it a “matter of debate” (p.1). Practitioner research is described by a plethora of terms (Campbell & McNamara, 2009) and exists in a number of hybrid forms (McWilliam, 2004) some researchers being critical it has become ‘anything and everything’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Cordingley (2008) alternatively argues that practitioner research is in fact the same practice but variously described and wrongly differentiated. This study investigated in detail whether practitioner research transpired as a homogenous practice or a set of disparate practices across the two contexts studied.

Schatzki (2002) explains how meaning and identity are labile phenomena and can alter with context, circumstance, and changing events and that “people’s self-understandings ... [might diverge] from the identities attributed to and foisted on them by and through others” (p.47). The literature cites instances where disposition and personality sometimes pose a problem to the success of a research enterprise in a school. Those involved often view their identity and roles differently, some not considering practitioner research as either valid or valuable. It was also argued in the literature that practitioners must be given ownership and responsibility of the research project, be active members, and not become collectors of other peoples’ data (Elliott, 1991; Ewing, 2007; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). This aligns well with Freire (1974) who argued that people should be active participants as opposed to mere spectators in society. If a person is to be an agent of change, Freire asserts, those with whom he or she works cannot be the objects of his or her actions. If a change agent “cannot perceive this, they will succeed only in manipulating, steering and ‘domesticating’”, Freire argues (p.114).

Freire (1985) also claims that schools often function as agencies of social, economic, and cultural reproduction. The forms of domination thereby need to be decoded, challenged and transformed. This aligns well with those in the literature (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005; Kemmis, 2006) who argue that practitioner research should be an empowering activity which is transformative in its intent, changing either the system itself or those conditions which impede desired improvement in the system. This study consequently investigated teacher facility within the research enterprise and the extent to which practitioner research

was employed as a liberatory social-change method across the two contexts explored – Singapore and NSW.

Conclusion

Although there were some polemical views expressed in the scholarly literature, the general notion that practitioner research bridges the theory-practice divide through practitioners engaging in praxis aligns with Freire's philosophy that there needs to be unity "between practice and theory, action and reflection" (1985, p.156). Those who argue that practitioner research should be a collaborative activity (Elliott, 1998; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005) and adopt an emancipatory stance (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fals Border, 1987) further allude to an allegiance with Freire who championed social praxis as a liberatory movement to "free human beings from the oppression that strangles them" (p.125). I adopted a very broad and inclusive definition of practitioner research for this study to investigate the extent to which teachers' understandings converge as well as align with extant definitions in the literature.

This chapter gives an overview of some of the literature that helped to inform the collection and analysis of data for this study. The methodology and methodological stance that was adopted is discussed in some detail in the following chapter.