

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I highlight the major findings and the theoretical contribution of this study and identify areas for future research. First, I revisit the research questions and evaluate the effectiveness of the theoretical orientation in addressing these questions. Second, I restate the key research findings in relationship to the literature and the contributions the investigation makes to the theory. Finally, I discuss the limitations and examine the implications of this study for future research and practice, Crossley and Watson (2003) reminding us of the need for strengthened linkages between educational research, policy and practice.

The most fascinating findings of this study are to be found in the diversity of ways in which practitioner research is understood and practised, shaped by the different contexts in which people function. Additionally, it appears that a gulf remains between the way practitioner research is conceived by academics (with a focus on theoretical concerns) and practised in the field by teachers (with an emphasis on practice), with policy makers – those in the central education bureaus - perhaps occupying a central ground.

Research Questions and Effectiveness of the Theoretical Orientation

This study has sought to explore what teachers think and feel about doing practitioner research; their understanding of policy, their motivation for doing research, the types of research they do, the type of learning and support they receive, the difficulties they face and whether they find the experience beneficial or not. Illuminating how practitioner research is constructed, enabled and constrained may suggest not only what practitioners need do, but also what action the central education bureaus need take to improve practice, the institutions who fund and manage the practice of education being significant “architects ... of practices” (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008, p.61).

As advocated by Kemmis and Smith (2008) the study looked closely at the pattern and fabric of practice in different settings. Adopting Schatzki and Freire for my theoretical framework, a comparison was made between the perception of teachers in secondary schools in Singapore and in NSW.

Two main research questions and four sub questions guided this study. They were:

- To what extent do education policies and cultures shape the type of research that is conducted in schools?
 - Why is practitioner research encouraged in schools?
 - What are some of the policies and initiatives put in place to encourage practitioner research in schools?
- To what extent is practitioner research remodeled in different contexts?
 - 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?

Undertaking a critical study and analysis of context as advocated by Schatzki and Friere provided not only a framework to address the above questions but allowed me to explore in detail the manner in which practitioner research transpired within the two selected cases and the “teleologies and general understandings” (Schatzki, 2010, p.145) that animate the practice. An understanding of the complexities and nuances of the different sites was fundamental in illuminating how practitioner research is understood, practised and propagated, including how it evolved and diversified dependent on circumstances and the dispositions of practitioners. Furthermore, Freire’s theory of conscientization provided a context to examine the extent practitioner research is valued by teachers as a means of effecting change within and beyond their classrooms. Adopting such an approach allowed me to illustrate some of the factors that helped to shape practitioner research, such as policy and culture, and how teachers’ experiences varied across and between the two settings investigated.

Major Findings and Theoretical Contribution

A summary of the main conclusions drawn from the data previously discussed in the findings and the cross-analysis is articulated here. Firstly, the way practitioner research was understood, the ‘sayings’ of the practice, differed widely among respondents, both between and within the two cultures studied. Policy makers from both central education bureaus claimed to have embraced the idea of practitioner research, in Singapore principally to

encourage innovation and research in schools and in NSW as a PL model for teachers, although in both contexts it is perceived that ultimately such action will lead to improved practice in the classroom and school. The primary focus of encouraging teachers to engage in practitioner research in Singapore was to generate greater research and innovation in schools, particularly in curriculum and pedagogy. The MOE wishes to nurture a “more reflective culture in the schools” and teachers as “reflective practitioners” (B1). The motivation or impetus for the DET encouraging schools and teachers to engage in ARAL was to apply what school personnel have learnt in theory to an authentic situation in a local setting.

However, it is evident that policy is not at all clearly or comprehensively articulated in either context. Equally alarming was that across both contexts policy was variously interpreted. Evidence indicated substantial differences between policy as intended or espoused by the central education bureaus, explicitly or otherwise, and policy as practised by school personnel. Practitioner research clearly meant different things to different people.

Often there existed problems of conceptual equivalence. While the academics interviewed generally conceived practitioner research as emancipatory action, policy-makers tended to describe it in a more technical form. Furthermore, academics, policy-makers and teachers’ understandings did not always cohere. There was not always agreement about what is acceptable or not acceptable as a practice (Schatzki, 2005). While difference in understanding could stem from a problem in communicating policy or with the manner in which practices are transmitted and perpetuated, I believe that it was contingent on both these things, as well as differences in the background, training and disposition of the respondents. For one, I would suggest that many teachers are not familiar with the concept of research or practitioner research as articulated in the scholarly literature.

There is a need for greater sensitivity to context, as advocated by Crossley and Watson (2003), in order to address some of these problems of conceptual equivalence. On a macro level, this needs to be done between cultures, then on a more micro level, within each culture, if theorists, policy makers and teachers hope to reach understanding and speak the same language. Only then might those within the central authority comprehend what those at the coal face understand and believe.

Furthermore, if a more consistent interpretation of practitioner research is desired, then within both contexts there is a need for clearer, more explicit and effective communication of policy. The “rules” of the practice need to be made “intelligible ... to participants ... via persisting inscriptions” (Schatzki, 2006, p.1869). Concepts and terms need to be articulated and made clear in policy documents. Respondents in Singapore often described a hierarchical structure believing “formal research” is perhaps superior to “action research”, however, the MOE has not articulated which model of research schools are encouraged to engage in. In contrast, the NSW DET has specifically identified action research and action learning (ARAL) as a “key strategy” in the Professional Learning Continuum framework that guides the development of all school staff. Yet still, within both cultures, there was no consistent understanding of the concept of practitioner research, suggesting policy needs to be better broadcasted.

Secondly, the way practitioner research was practised, the ‘doings’, differed widely among respondents both between and within the two cultures studied, mirroring the ‘sayings’. When asked to discuss the work teachers do as practitioner researchers, respondents described a wide range of different activities. Taking a broad overview, there were discernible differences in the way research was understood (sayings) and practised (doings) between Singapore and NSW. In each of these contexts practitioner research could be loosely characterised, hence it can be claimed had been uniquely remodelled, due to differences in policy, culture and other factors. Broadly speaking, in Singapore research was equated with innovation. There was a tendency to favour quantitative data and an experimental design. Research was used mainly to confirm the success of an innovation rather than explore. AR was commonly referred to in conversation but used as a “generic, loose term” (A1). In NSW, a qualitative approach was preferred. There was greater democratic dialogue, consultation, and collaboration. AL has been the predominant model of research due to influence of AGQTP while ARAL is currently the model of PL advocated by the PLLD Directorate within the NSW DET. But to qualify, in both contexts, practitioner research as a practice was constantly evolving and changing. There was an emerging tendency in Singapore to favour qualitative methodologies in order to better illuminate and understand phenomena, and in NSW, towards quantitative methodologies and data due to accountability pressures.

Furthermore, within each of these contexts there was considerable variation. Practitioner research was understood and practised in many different ways, sometimes between and even within schools. While not necessarily intentional or a conscious intervention, practitioner

research has been reinstated as “variant practices” in different school settings (Schatzki, 2005, p.475). Although there has been celebration in the literature that practitioner research is burgeoning, I argue that it occurred across the two settings studied not as a homogenous practice but a series of disparate practices. A universal or shared understanding did not exist, rather practitioner research occurred with different sets of understandings, rules and norms.

Crucially, though, it is perhaps contestable whether some of the practices teachers engaged in and perceived as research might constitute research at all, even though it is acknowledged that research and inquiry exist in a diversity of forms. There were often considerable differences between the way practitioner research is understood and practised by respondents and the way that it is traditionally or characteristically described in the literature. Some of the activities teachers described were not rigorous or systematic in any way, one teacher (Z4) perceiving “conversations” besides the pizza oven as practitioner research. If a research continuum exists, as articulated by Stenhouse (1975), with formal research at one end and informal research at the other, it needs be contemplated, how far does the continuum stretch? The hard question then remains, what constitutes research?

Practices are understood, develop, and evolve contingent on the setting in which they transpire (Freire, 1974, 1998; Kemmis, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; Schatzki, 2005). Results of this study indicated that practitioner research in schools took on different forms, and hence meant different things to different people, shaped by the context in which it occurred (Kemmis, 2008, 2009, 2010; Somekh, 2006).

Thirdly, practitioner research was not perpetuated or transmitted comprehensively across either context despite the central education authorities developing different policies and programmes to encourage practitioner research in schools. Practitioner research was practised unevenly across both contexts occurring in “little zones” (V4), often contingent on the interest of those in positions of authority and power, such as the school principal or regional director. Furthermore, across both settings, it appeared that teachers were not comprehensively trained in practitioner research.

The concept of cascading learning did not appear to have been broadly successful in either context, even though in Singapore considerable resources had been allocated in an attempt to systematically train a teacher in each school to implement innovation and research. Across

both cultures efficacy appeared to be dependent largely on the disposition of those individuals incorporated into and carrying the practice forward (Schatzki, 2005), the “stewards” of the practice (Kemmis, 2010, p. 420). Practices often changed as individuals changed. Practitioner research commonly occurred in schools as “descendant, considerably altered versions” of the practice that was “appropriated at the origin of the organization” (Schatzki, 2005, p.478) or as it was originally conceived and intended in the scholarly literature. Much of the activity described as AR by respondents in Singapore in particular exemplified this.

Furthermore, often the activity teachers engaged in and described as research occurred without grounding in the relevant theory, either around the research topic or methodology. It could be argued in such instances there was no “authentic practice” as the “dialectical unity” of “action-reflection, practice-theory” had been broken apart (Freire, 1985, p.156). Hence, engagement in practitioner research further aggravated the theory-practice divide it was meant to narrow (Carr & Kemmis, 2005). It appeared that teachers did not always adequately understand the research processes or possess the “toolkit” (A3) of the researcher. Hence, it is paramount that teachers be taught the skills to be able to effectively conduct research on their own practice. Teachers can only engage in professional learning that is ongoing, relevant to their situation and structured if such capacity is developed.

Practitioner research appeared to be most effective when teachers and academics worked in collaborative partnerships, academics explicating the theory and expertise. But to be truly effective academics need to coach teachers in practitioner research, explaining the various theories, and the ways in which they are applicable, and how those underpin what they do. Academics need to provide workshops where the literature is translated and made understandable. They must also ensure that the practice is doable by teachers, with the realisation teachers are time poor.

Finally, the potential of practitioner research did not appear to be fully exploited in either context but was limited to being largely practised in a technical rather than an emancipatory form in schools. In contradiction to some of the rhetoric espoused by the central education bureaus, it could be claimed that practitioner research has been initiated in both contexts as a “top down” policy initiative. Partly as a consequence of this, teachers sometimes appeared to have limited facility over the research enterprise they were involved in.

The type of action teachers tended to engage in when conducting research in schools was largely technical rather than emancipatory in nature. It appeared that teachers across both contexts commonly adopted a “fatalistic attitude” (Freire, 1974, 1985) and conducted themselves as “operatives” of the education system rather than “agents” of reform (Kemmis, 2008). While certain constraints to research were common across both contexts, respondents also identified barriers characteristic of the context in which they functioned.

To make deep change, teachers need to perhaps further reflect on the underlying conditions or constraints they perceive as barriers to their practice. Teachers could contemplate future possibilities through a more critical examination of context then act towards achieving them through praxis – action based on reflection – working towards the good for students and for humankind. This might involve, for instance, contemplating action to circumvent a culture of *kiasuism* and pre-occupation with exams or of taking initiative from the top and focusing on efficiency (Hairon, 2006) in Singapore or ways to work around a lack of resources to fund research or limited opportunities to broadcast findings in NSW.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research and Practice

It is acknowledged there are certain limitations to this study. Data collection relied mainly on in-depth interviews supplemented by analysis of policy documents. As teachers were not observed functioning as practitioner researchers it is therefore difficult to verify absolutely if what they say is what they actually do, although data was triangulated from different sources. Additionally, while the investigation helps to illustrate and explain how practitioner research as a practice is understood, transmitted and remodelled in different contexts, it is not intended to generalise findings across either culture. It is recognised that heterogeneity exists within each context. Every school across each state, Singapore and NSW, will have its own culture, values and norms, and it is likely stakeholders will hold a diversity of views. Furthermore, while it is useful to share “lessons learnt” in different contexts the “insights gained are unlikely to lead to universal answers” (Crossley & Watson, 2003, p.102). A further limitation of this study is that it focused on teachers with experience as practitioner researchers. It did not include teachers who have resisted participation in practitioner research.

Ongoing research needs to include teachers who have resisted participation in practitioner research to provide insights into their perspectives, including any possible apprehensions they

might hold regarding this type of research. Further research could also investigate the effectiveness of the key initiatives introduced by the central bureaus to encourage practitioner research in schools. In Singapore the research could explore whether embedding RAs in every school encourages greater involvement in innovation and research in schools, and in NSW, whether teachers embrace the concept of on-time on-line learning and a PL model that incorporates ARAL.

A further area where more research could be pursued is an investigation into the sustainability of practitioner research in schools. As respondents reported, as there has not been enough long term work, there is little data on sustainability. It would be beneficial to study whether teachers, once inspired, continue to practice AR over time. If the teachers do not then it would be useful to explore the factors that contributed to the change. Additional research might determine whether the ‘sayings’ (understandings) and ‘doings’ (actions) that constitute practitioner research in Singapore, NSW, and other settings are converging or perhaps fragmenting as a practice according to Schatzki’s (2002) definition. It could also examine how education bureaus and schools might better construct “practice architectures” as described by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) in order to foster and sustain practitioner research in schools. Finally, further research might determine how a critical consciousness could be better fostered in teachers throughout the profession.

In conclusion, I will highlight what I believe to be the implications for policy and practice flagged in this study. Policy on practitioner research perhaps needs to be more clearly and coherently communicated across the teaching force with models of research being more explicitly stated. Key terms and concepts need to be defined and operationalised so that everyone might share a common language and understanding while working towards the same teleo-affective goals.

Teachers need to be provided with adequate tools to be able to research their own practice. They need to be more comprehensively and systematically trained in practitioner research during both their pre and post-service training. To this end, academics functioning as teacher trainers could further role-model the use of practitioner research in their teaching and work. Furthermore, academics functioning as research partners should provide training in a format that teachers can manage. In the first instance, teachers need be provided with simple literature in the area and with workshops that deconstruct, explain and scaffold processes.

Clear links need be made between research and teacher practice so that practitioner research becomes embedded in the work teachers do.

Lesson study could be further explored and utilised by schools as a viable form of practitioner research and as an effective means of studying and improving classroom practice as respondents reported this approach has much potential. In addition, schools and academics could explore further opportunities to work collaboratively on research projects, respondents overwhelmingly stating that school-based research works best when such collaborations occur. However, academic partners need be cognizant of the problems and challenges teachers face and the degrees of freedom they have to engage in some kind of modifications and transformation of their work.

Teachers need strive to develop a heightened critical awareness of how meta-practices might act to constrain their work both as educators and researchers. As Freire (1974, 1985) and more recently Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) describe, teachers then need to contemplate emancipatory action in an effort to overcome any injustices that might exist and thus help to nurture a more inclusive institution. Examination of the world needs to be ongoing and continuous in order to effect deep change and transformation.

The central bureaus and regional supervisors need to foster networks and have connected conversations to enhance greater awareness of the way practitioner research is understood and practised in different settings to encourage greater dialogue between different traditions of theory, research and practice in education as advocated by Kemmis and Smith (2008). Alternatively, teachers might mobilise their own research teams and forums to confront the “silence” as described by Friere (1985) that some respondents perceive is currently imposed on them.

Finally, there needs to be a more effective bridging of cultures and traditions so that there is an enhanced interchange of ideas, insights and understandings and more substantial dialogue between all involved in educational research and development. Enhanced cross-cultural dialogue as described by Crossley and Watson (2003) will foster greater cultural and context sensitivity and understanding and so there is greater conceptual clarity of concepts and terms across different contexts.

Conclusion

It is envisaged that this thesis, through publications and reports, will contribute significantly to the understanding of practitioner research and the discourse surrounding the extent to which it is remodeled, as well as valued, in different contexts, as part of the professional learning agenda for teachers. This thesis is also a valuable resource for researchers in this area because it adds to the previously limited literature on teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers. The study has provided a detailed examination of teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers in secondary schools across two different educational systems with reference to the theories of Schatzki and Freire. In illuminating the findings it is anticipated that some of the conceptual differences that currently exist between academics, policy makers and teachers might be eliminated. While the study acknowledges that practitioner research has great potential to effect meaningful innovation and change, currently it penetrates only 'little zones'. A lot more work needs to be done if practitioner research is to become comprehensively embedded as part of teacher practice – both in Singapore and NSW.