

# **Teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers in secondary schools: A comparative study of Singapore and New South Wales**

**Neville John Ellis**

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for the award of the degree  
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## **Author's Declaration**

This is to certify that:

1. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy degree
2. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used
3. Permission has been given to exceed the word length for this degree
4. No part of this work has been used for the award of another degree
5. This thesis meets the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HERC) requirements for the conduct of research.

Signature:

Name: Neville John Ellis

Date: January, 2012

## Publications and Conference Papers

Publications and conference papers generated from this thesis include the following:

### Publications

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Ellis, N.J., Armstrong, A.C. & Groundwater-Smith, S. (2010). Reviewing action research: From impediments to implementation. In M. Devlin, J. Nagy and A. Lichtenberg (Eds.) *Research and Development in Higher Education: Reshaping Higher Education*, 33 (pp. 279-288). Melbourne, 6–9 July, 2010.

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to illuminate teachers' experiences as practitioner researchers in secondary schools in NSW and Singapore to explore to what extent their experiences are similar or different and how context - such as differences in culture or policy – are factors in shaping teachers' experiences. Practitioner research is undertaken in-situ and thus will look very different under different educational regimes. As Schatzki (2005) and later Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) remind us the “sayings” and “doings” of practitioner research are all mediated by the historical circumstances that underpin them.

Adopting the philosophies of Schatzki and Freire, this thesis explores 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. This interpretive case study offers perspectives from two different academic and educational communities and involved 42 participants, including academics, policy makers and teachers.

Teachers have considerable agency to shape practices and change their immediate classroom practice but function in a world that is largely pre-formed, meta-practices acting to prefigure, enable or constrain practices (Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Schatzki, 2002, 2010). The thesis argues that sufficient differences existed between the two sites explored so that practitioner research was prefigured and remodelled distinctively in each context.

Definitions and understandings of practitioner research varied greatly between respondents within each culture. These definitions and understandings in turn were often inconsistent with extant definitions in the literature, thereby provoking questions about the distinction between professional learning and research. Respondents often did not have sufficient common background knowledge to be able to agree about what practitioner research was in words (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008, p.53). Their “sayings” and “doings” and the way they related to one another were not “bundled” together in a characteristic way (Schatzki, 2002) nor were they “mutually intelligible” (2006, p.1868). Practitioner research occurred across and within the two settings as a series of disparate practices, the two educational bureaus, sometimes even different regions or schools, adopting different research paradigms,

assumptions and orientations. Accordingly, practitioner research was innate to the setting in which it was practised.

But as a broad generalisation, in Singapore, research was often used in schools to confirm the effectiveness of an intervention rather than to explore an issue (Tan, Macdonald & Rossi, 2009) and there was a tendency to favour a scientific or quasi-experimental research design and quantitative data. Interventionist studies were often undertaken “to see if a hypothesis works”. In comparison, in NSW, respondents believed that schools and teachers generally use research to modify and improve local conditions, teachers showing a predilection for qualitative methodologies despite the pressure for them to use quantitative data. Research tended to be used to spawn or produce change rather than to measure it. In summary, in Singapore research was used to *measure* an innovation and in NSW to *generate* innovation, teachers in Singapore thereby favouring a “deductive theory” model as described by Ezzy (2002) and in NSW, an “inductive theory building” approach.

The central education authorities had developed different policies and programmes to encourage practitioner research in schools and practitioner research was transmitted as a practice in a variety of ways. Identity and disposition greatly shaped teachers’ attitudes towards practitioner research acting as either a powerful enabler or constraint. Although teacher capacity was commonly perceived as a significant enabling factor, there was not a homogenous, systematic or comprehensive means for training staff across either teaching force.

It has been asserted that practitioner research is not just a matter of instrumental behaviour and following rules but should be a consultative process where proponents proceed towards consensus about what to do (Kemmis, 2010). However, adopting a critical Freirian perspective (1974, 1985, 1987), it could be argued that in many instances teachers were “silenced” and not “given voice” in that they had limited facility to decide the research focus, especially in Singapore, or limited opportunities to broadcast findings, particularly in NSW.

Furthermore, we are reminded that practitioner research should not merely generate knowledge of the world but aim to effect social change and good so as to achieve a better, more just world (Freire, 1974, 1985, 1998; Kemmis, 2010). As might be expected, the

teachers involved in this study, displayed an awareness of the larger world in which they function as teachers; the mesh of practices or meta-practices that enables and constrains possibilities for action in education. However, often they stated or implied they were perhaps powerless to effect change at this meta-level. It would appear that many teachers had adopted a “fatalistic” approach. Respondents citing the need for systemic change appeared to stop at this point and did not contemplate “the untested feasibility, the constructable future” (Freire, 1985, p.154) or embark on “praxis” as described by either Freire (1974, 1985, 1998), Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008), or Kemmis and Smith (2008).

Results of the study indicated that teachers tend to lock themselves into the technical aspects and an instrumental approach to research, which is viable in its own right, but limited. They were not so much interested in the kind of interpretive, hermeneutic knowledge interest, where one is trying to actually understand the phenomenon that is being explored, or an emancipatory or liberatory knowledge interest. The type of practitioner research largely undertaken by teachers as described by participants tended to focus on a teacher’s immediate class or school. It appeared that teachers had become sensitised to their local situations, able to look only at their local environment, but perhaps not able to look at macro issues. Or perhaps they had not contemplated with any rigour or determination the meta-practices that enmesh their own practices. Essentially, there is an order of actions, intentions and “acceptable ends” within any practice (Schatzki, 2009, p.39). This thesis argues that the “ends” that are acceptable to teachers, such as technical improvement in classroom practice, are perhaps deficient for Kemmis or Freire, who desire social justice and an emancipatory outcome.

The thesis concludes by noting that the potential of practitioner research remains to be fully actualized. Recommendations suggest that: policy on practitioner research needs to be more clearly and coherently communicated across the teaching spectrum with models of research being more explicitly stated; teachers should also be provided with more comprehensive and systematic training in practitioner research; and greater emphasis should be put on the bridging of cultures and traditions to foster an enhanced interchange of ideas, insights, understandings and dialogue among all involved in practitioner research. Perhaps, then practitioner research may become successfully embedded into the culture of education process and practice and support educational transformation in both Singapore and NSW.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

### Generic

|            |                               |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>AL</b>  | Action Learning               |
| <b>AR</b>  | Action Research               |
| <b>HOD</b> | Head of Department            |
| <b>IT</b>  | Information Technology        |
| <b>KPI</b> | Key Performance Indicator     |
| <b>MEd</b> | Master of Education           |
| <b>P</b>   | Principal                     |
| <b>PhD</b> | Doctor of Philosophy          |
| <b>PL</b>  | Professional Learning         |
| <b>TPL</b> | Teacher Professional Learning |

### NSW

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>AGQTP</b>  | Australian Government Quality Teaching Programme             |
| <b>ARAL</b>   | Action Research and Action Learning                          |
| <b>DEC</b>    | Department of Education and Communities                      |
| <b>DET</b>    | Department of Education and Training                         |
| <b>DP</b>     | Deputy Principal   |
| <b>NAPLAN</b> | National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy          |
| <b>NSW</b>    | New South Wales  |
| <b>NSW IT</b> | New South Wales Institute of Teachers                        |
| <b>PLLDD</b>  | Professional Learning and Leadership Development Directorate |
| <b>QTAL</b>   | Quality Teaching Action Learning                             |
| <b>SED</b>    | School Education Director                                    |

### Singapore

|             |                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>CPPU</b> | Curriculum Policy and Pedagogy Unit  |
| <b>DD</b>   | Deputy Director                      |
| <b>LEAD</b> | Learning EDvantage Propriety Limited |
| <b>MOE</b>  | Ministry of Education                |
| <b>NIE</b>  | National Institute of Education      |
| <b>NTU</b>  | Nanyang Technological University     |
| <b>NUS</b>  | National University of Singapore     |
| <b>PSLE</b> | Primary School Leaving Examination   |
| <b>RA</b>   | Research Activist                    |
| <b>SCI</b>  | School-Based Curriculum Innovation   |
| <b>TLLM</b> | Teach Less Learn More                |
| <b>TN</b>   | Teachers' Network                    |
| <b>VP</b>   | Vice Principal                       |