



Dismantling the ivory tower: **The power of teacher researchers to** **transform teaching and learning**

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The word “research” tends to conjure images of piles of textbooks, dusty archives and dry conversations with some believing that the work of research should remain with academics. Our own experience as teachers and educational consultants makes us see differently, which prompted our urge to disrupt the growing discourse that research is not the business of teachers.

While Hattie’s (2015)¹ view of what counts as research, how it should be undertaken, and the position of teachers in it differs greatly from our own, the purpose behind our research was to explore research as a method for transformation and as a tool for teacher agency.

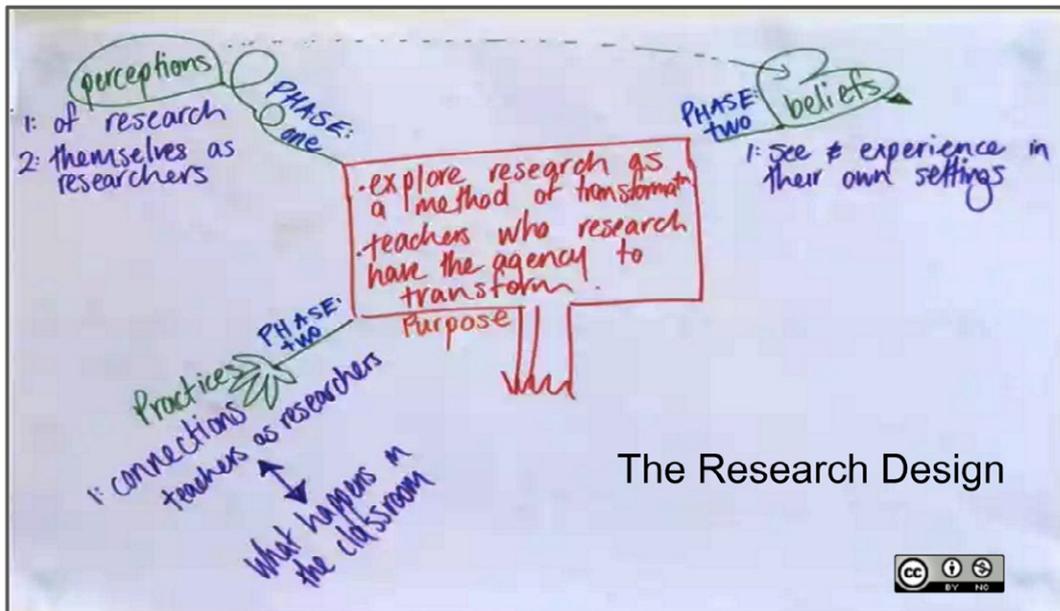


Image source: Image by Suzi Gould, CORE Education, 2016.

¹ Stuart, W. (2015, April) Leave research to the academics, John Hattie tells teachers, TES, Retrieved from <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/leave-research-academics-john-hattie-tells-teachers>

I. Our methodology

This research is a small qualitative study of twenty-eight early childhood centres, primary and secondary teachers' perceptions and beliefs and practices relating to educational research. We acknowledge the limitations of the research and the fact that these findings provide a sample study only, the beliefs and perceptions may not be true of all teachers.

Our research design consisted of two phases, phase one explored teachers' perceptions of research and phase two, their beliefs and practises.

As part of phase one to find out what teachers' perceptions of research and themselves as researchers were we sent out a short survey to teachers. The purpose of the questions and prompts within the survey was to ascertain how teachers viewed this thing called research; how did they feel about it? How did they describe or categorise it? The participants' responses in phase one were utilised to inform the design of phase two focus groups.

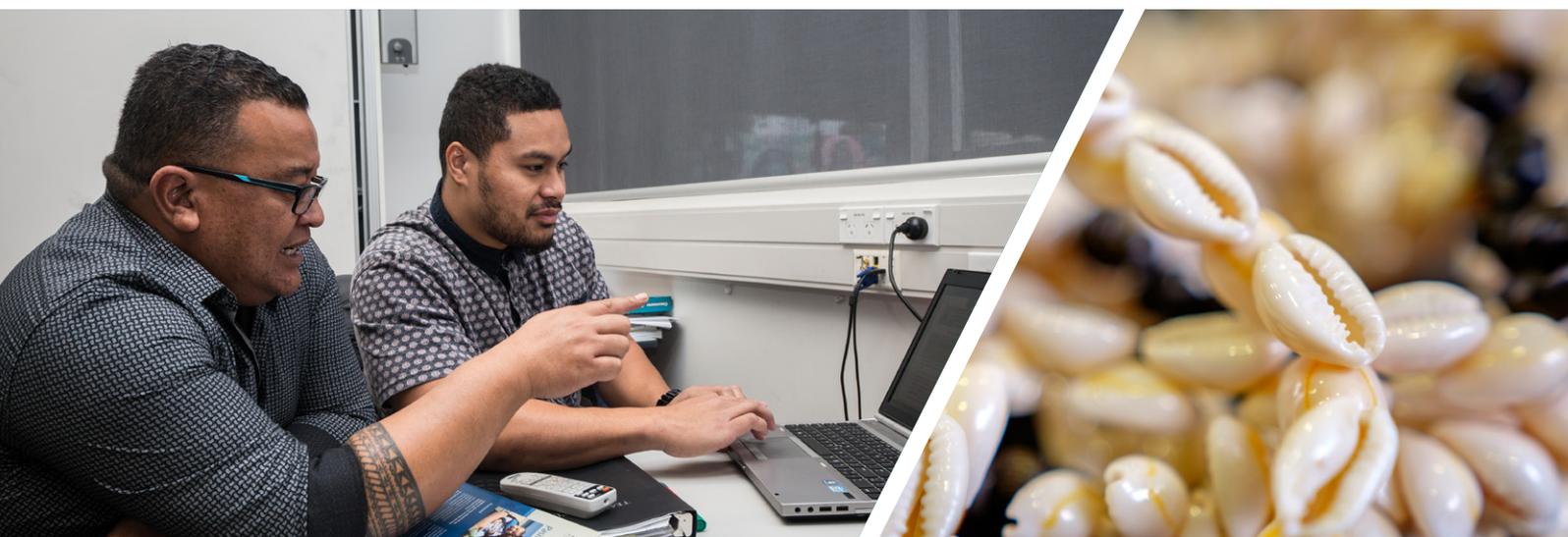
For the second phase of our research, we wanted to hear people's stories, to ensure that our research processes and language were simple, left space for tension and were as human-centred as possible. A Pasifika colleague shared with us Vaiioleti's concept of talanoa, defined as "a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations"², which also guided our research in phase two. With this in mind we looked towards a process which would fully preserve and honour the storyteller's own perspective and understanding of research. This led us to the concept of story hui³, developed by Liz Stevenson as part of her PhD research methodology, which employs facilitative questioning and mapping as tools to make visible multiple perspectives and understandings.

Reflecting upon the recorded conversations we focussed, without limiting our attention in this phase, to two further research questions:

1. How do teachers see and experience research in their own settings?
2. What are the connections between teachers as researchers and what happens in classrooms?

² Vaiiolet T. M. (2006) Talanoa research methodology: a developing position on pacific research, Waikato Journal of Education, 12, 21-34.

³ Stevenson, L. (2015) Story hui, Retrieved from <http://www.storyhui.org>





II. Defining “research”

Our findings uncovered the complexities in defining research with a one-size-fits-all approach. One part of the phase one survey asked participants to select descriptors for what research is and what it is not e.g. creative, easy to understand, practical, attainable, exclusive

One participant wrote “depends” for every option. He said that depending on the context of what was researched and for whom, would change his answer. For example researching how to utilise space in a modern learning environment might be very creative but how many year 11 boys passed NCEA last year not so creative. This was not the only tension that laid within our research.

We found from through our story hui⁴ focus groups that teachers’ heads and hearts were not entirely aligned when they discuss research. The majority of teacher responses were... ‘cautiously optimistic’.

Many of the people from the focus group had both positive and negative comments within their stories. While their head assumed, hoped or told them the research would be relevant, informative and possibly transformational for many of the teachers this was not aligned with their instincts towards research. They wondered if the research would live up to their expectations - if it would provide “aha” moments for their current situation in class. The teachers shared concerns about the need to interpret research - both in terms of language and practical application for their context. They wanted to know if the investment of time, intellect and emotion would be worthwhile before engaging with research. One teacher said “I enjoy it, I get excited, I’m optimistic but then I get let down”.

⁴ Ibid.

What makes research “research”?

Teachers’ perceptions of research and themselves as researchers were also contradictory. In our focus groups we heard teachers describing themselves as researchers, but not naming their work as research.

Teachers’ interpretation of research was varied - they saw it as both practical and theoretical, creative and dry. They saw it as requiring guides or interpreters and also as plain common sense. Their views were very contradictory around what makes research credible, which made defining research challenging.

Our data collection processes exposed further the tensions we had not considered:

- what makes research credible? what is ‘real research’?
- the distinction between ‘academic’ research and what teachers do in the classroom
- the value based on a wide range of research experiences

Another tension existed in our findings between the lenses teachers view research through: either positivist or interpretivist. Positivism asserts that all authentic knowledge can be verified and is based on empirical evidence (positive facts)⁵. Teachers with this viewpoint tended to highly value the outsider looking in.

Interpretivists view the world and research as more complex, socially and culturally constructed where multiple realities can exist⁶. Teachers with an interpretivists viewpoint tended to appreciate the insiders’ research in others words that of other teachers on the ground.

We realised the definition of research was not the core issue. There are many shades of research from teaching as inquiry through to large meta research studies and everything in between. There are many different research methodologies grounded in both western and indigenous cultures.

⁵ Larrain, J. (1979). *The Concept of Ideology*. London: Hutchinson. p. 197.

One of the features of positivism is precisely its postulate that scientific knowledge is the paradigm of valid knowledge, a postulate that indeed is never proved nor intended to be proved.

⁶ Neuman, L. W. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (4th Ed.), USA: Allyn and Bacon.



III. “Teacher Researchers” – is this an oxymoron or a paradox?

Our research showed teachers used and carried out research to inform their practise in many ways, and to successfully navigate research three ground principles appeared across our data:

- Understand the language
- Turn theory into practice
- Socialise research

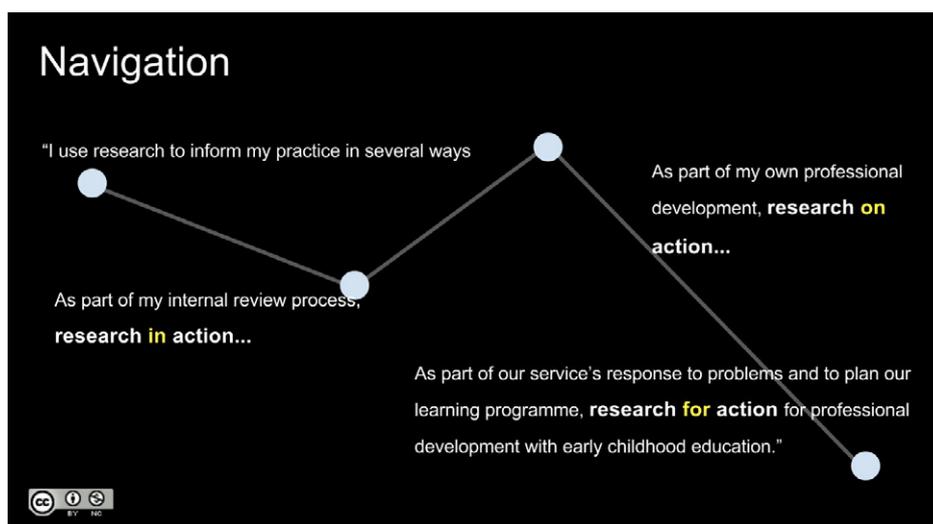


Image source: authors’ visual representation of the quotes and varied ways teachers navigate research within their context.

From our research it became clear teachers must be part of the research enactment equation, as it’s all just ‘academic’ until it has an impact in the classroom. Teachers and leaders both consume and contribute to research. As teachers navigate from theory to practice, they are not merely just consuming the research, they are contributing to it.

The teachers described research as a living thing, as illustrated with the teacher quotes below;

“I would take ...a living approach... it’s about the stories...”

“I think research should lead everything - it should lead what you do in teaching...”

“I read quite a bit of research and at the end, I think, “So what? What should teachers do in the classroom tomorrow to make good use of this research?...”

Teachers give ‘academic’ research its validation by breathing life and meaning into it. They do this by utilising research to create change and make an impact for students and their whānau.

Teachers socialise the research they engage with

Teachers trial research findings in their own settings sometimes even before the full impact of the research is understood. They record half completed inquiries in social media and they experience new ideas. These teachers are contributing from their own contextual research, in other words the research in action, in their own space.

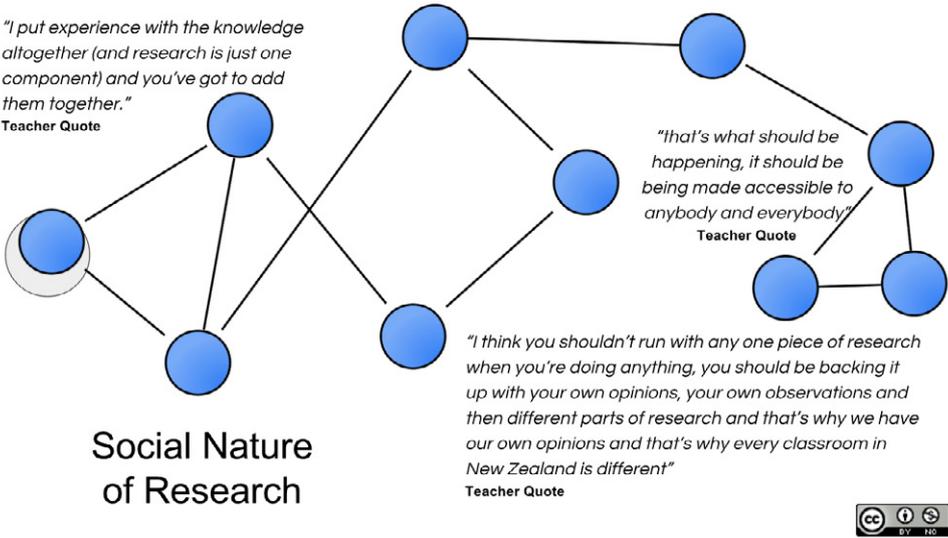


Image source: authors' visual representation of the quotes and varied ways teachers navigate research within their context.

Teachers attend conferences and go to research strands so that they can listen to, discuss and learn from research. Beyond those traditional research resources, teachers also tweet and write blog posts about research. As teachers share their findings, data and experiences they contribute to the research conversation and the growth of knowledge and practices. Using technology and social media gives the opportunity to have direct conversations with the researcher and continue to build upon the original research. Technology allows millions of teachers globally to have a voice, test current theories, and design their own inquiries or action research.

Teachers valued research and believed that it shouldn't be kept in an ivory tower - accessible to only a few, with still tensions and contradictions. If a researcher's findings are presented in a blog, they are often not regarded as credible. Traditional mediums for dissemination such as journals are still highly regarded. However, our data showed that these perceptions appears to be slowly changing.

"This is how we kind of segregate, you know, and we kind of keep our little ivory tower. Well I don't think that research should be that, that's what should be happening, it should be being made accessible to anybody and everybody."

Teacher quote



A new pedagogy for research

Being able to discuss, compare, contrast, probe and challenge a researcher’s findings with others online over time, is becoming more of an expectation. Teachers and educational communities seem to be looking for research that is live and living; able to be adapted to a specific context, built upon, taken in different directions, and contributed to. A new body of research is being built from the bottom up. Each person adding their contribution as everyone slowly watches the picture develop.

The teachers we spoke to were aware of the dangers of information or research being skewed by the ‘socialising’ research through social media. An important aspect of this is to keep checking each other, testing and challenging each other, critically evaluating each other’s work.

“...you’ll be able to find something, and probably with the formation of social media, that probably can be twisted and skewed even more so because people take a piece of research that’s not necessarily robust, make it look robust and share it amongst a whole lot of people...”



Image source: authors’ visual representation of the quotes and varied ways teachers navigate research within their context.

iv. Disrupting the traditional perception of research

Diverse perspectives, cultural backgrounds and experiences widen the perspectives of research. When teachers have a problem to solve, there's no ranking of research type for validity - collegial experiences and expert researchers are given equal ranking.



Image source: Image by rabadirkwennigsen, CC-0

The 'ivory tower' needs the village or community of teacher researchers. As teachers navigate from theory to practice, they are not merely just consuming the research; they are *contributing*.

(Three images used to create this one picture the images used are as followed -talk to paula)

Teachers give academic research its validation by breathing life and meaning into it. Teachers are the translators, crossing the enactment gap from theory to practise, implementing the research findings into actions that have an impact in the classroom and improve student outcomes . The 'ivory tower' needs the village or community of teacher researchers. As teachers described it:

"I put experience with the knowledge altogether (and research is just one component) and you've got to add them together."

"But you see we're often quite wary of the ones who are coming from the ivory tower looking down because actually, they don't know what it's like on the ground so that's where some of that classic research actually has very little credibility in the actual field."



V. Conclusion

Teachers see research as valuable if the material is focused by a purpose for practical understanding. They want to see and experience research in their own settings as practical and purposeful - something that can be applied. Teachers seem to prefer bite sized research and varied sources.

Technology is disrupting traditional research. Technology allows millions of teachers globally to have a voice, share findings, data and experiences and contribute to the research. Technology has amplified research and expanded the conversation and application. Modern research pedagogies are emerging. Communities of teacher researchers are being formed with an open access to the ivory tower. This community of teacher researchers are contributing to the data pool both qualitatively and quantitatively. Research is more accessible, more socialised than it has ever been.

However our data showed perceptions of research work can create tensions and does not always align with these modern research pedagogies. We believe teachers' perceptions of themselves as researchers need to be nurtured and grown to develop a curious, rigorous and healthy research communities, focused on improving learning for all.

It seems that a new pedagogy for research is developing, enabled by technology which allows us to connect more easily with our peers and with others ideas. The development and use of technology and teaching as inquiry has enabled growing communities of teacher researchers on global networks to voice their curiosity, probing the academic research for practical uses, and contributing to an organic body of knowledge. Research in a modern world is a living, organic thing which requires a networked community of researchers to create new knowledge and ultimately improved outcomes for all learners.

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Blog: [Dismantling the Ivory Tower](#)

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Image

<https://pixabay.com/en/small-planet-little-planet-village-694842/>

<http://res.freestockphotos.biz/pictures/15/15948-illustration-of-a-small-cartoon-castle-tower-pv.png>



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