

BOOK REVIEW

Review of:

Why seek to understand classroom life?: Experiences of the Exploratory Practice Group, by Exploratory Practice Group, Rio de Janeiro (2021), 94 pp. ISBN 978-65-00165-66-1.

http://www.puc-rio.br/ensinopesq/ccg/licenciaturas/download/ebook_why_seek%20to_understand_life_in_the_classroom_2021.pdf.

Teachers as change agents: Classroom research in Sierra Leone secondary schools, by Leh Wi Lan / Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (2021), Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 140 pp. https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Web_Teacher-Research-Book.pdf

Exploratory action research: Stories of Nepalese EFL teachers, edited by Laxman Gnawali, Suman Laudari & Sagun Shrestha (2021). Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA), 182 pp. ISBN 978-9937-0-8710-0. <https://nelta.org.np/uploads///upload/G9ZEun.pdf>

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If I were to carry out an exploratory inquiry related to the three books reviewed below, I would want to understand how it was possible to accomplish the projects described in them, in three different countries on three different continents right before or under COVID-19. The fact that they were completed and the results have recently been published suggests that *life in the classroom* never stops. It also shows that, oftentimes, the difficulties brought about by the global pandemic have led to a higher than ordinary level of teacher resilience (Hiver, 2018). Therefore, beyond looking at the puzzles and problems explored, I would be looking for the ingredients of success...

Even though the accounts of Exploratory Practice (EP) and (Exploratory) Action Research are structured differently in the three books, all of them reflect the exuberance and vitality that can arise from teacher research, the joy of the resulting insights and the learning that takes place. This is especially true of the experiences of the Exploratory Practice Group, Rio de Janeiro (EPG for short). In true exploratory practice mode, the title of their collaboratively authored book is a question, namely, why practitioners should seek to understand classroom life. The subsequent chapters are then structured according to the seven principles of EP (p. 8).

The answer to the question in the title is fairly obvious: we all have spent or will spend a lot of time in classrooms. This, in itself, suggests that the microcosm of our classrooms should be studied under a magnifying glass. But the Brazilian EP practitioners' aims are wider:

To make it possible for teachers and students, in partnership, to discuss life issues, to live together and to learn from the inevitable conflicts that arise, to construct understandings, negotiations, and knowledge together means to go beyond the blackboard. (p. 13)

And so, the stories (developed as part of a project in 2019) describe the experiences of former ELT pre-service teachers who all believe that the quality of life in the classroom is paramount and that "there's no real division ... between 'life' and 'school'" (p. 19). This is important. The Latin phrase *Non scholae sed vitae discimus* (We do not learn for school, but for life) has only been reiterated over centuries because it is often the reverse that is true: school does not prepare for life (in mundane terms, foreign language classes at school do not prepare us for genuine communication after leaving school).

Members of the EPG contend that resolving issues in the classroom requires a deep understanding of the problem at hand. Walewska

Braga's 8th grade students arrived hungry and late for their English class in the morning. She decided to take some snacks and cookies to class and let her students sit in a circle to chat about what was happening and explore meaningful language (labels, nutritional content) and functions, such as expressions for requests. The poster created after working in this manner for a whole year showed that Walewska's students became more ambitious for their 9th year: "We don't want just food. We want food, a chat circle, fun and art!" (p. 23).

This is just one example of how life seeps into the classroom when Exploratory Practice is followed. Another story in the volume deals with how the disconnect between course book units and students' real-life experiences can be handled. The insights then logically (and, for the teacher, bravely) lead to giving students a say in which course book they want to learn from.

The creative use of textbook units can lead to deeply engaging activities. Andrea Wilhelm wanted to understand why her students did not do their homework and used the unit on crime and punishment to set up a community-theatre style session (Boal, 1993) titled "Homework: Innocent or Guilty?" The simulated court hearing involved "a student [who] volunteered to be the defendant accused of not doing homework. There was also a defence lawyer, a prosecuting attorney, a judge and a jury" (p. 51). And the verdict? Click on the above link to the book to find out!

It is sometimes claimed that (Exploratory) Action Research has limited generalisability since this kind of research is necessarily confined to one classroom with a single teacher and a limited number of students, even when these can number – as in the book I review next – as many as 100, while averaging around 40 to 50. Nevertheless, the classroom research reports coming out of Sierra Leone in the book *Teachers as change agents* (covering the period between August 2019 and March 2021) definitely discuss issues that are *of general concern* in a multitude of schools in the Global South, such as the inclusion of girls, the need for changing teaching strategies and the novelty of seeking learner feedback.

What struck me most about the 50 reports included in this volume is how far the Sierra Leonean teachers of English and mathematics involved have moved forward in their professional development. There is certainly a great distance between a teacher that enters a classroom with a cane in their hands and one who seeks feedback from their students. The "frequent use of corporal punishment" (p. 85) might sound astonishing to many readers, but the changes in the behaviour and

teaching techniques of these teachers are all the more inspiring.

The two-page reports in this book are all laid out in the same manner, starting with the teacher's background and context and ending with a 'What I Learned' vignette. The teacher-researchers provide concise details of the three cycles that they have carried out and present the results or findings using simple tables and graphs. What transpires from the reports is the systematic way the teachers went about their classroom research by using the *human resources* available to them even in isolated schools in the countryside. They asked their principals and colleagues for advice and initiated conversations (focus group discussions) with their students to find out the underlying causes behind the problems they chose to explore.

It is at this point that we can return to the eternal issue of homework. One of the maths teachers, Nelson Tamba Jimissa, wanted to motivate his students to do their homework, since they either did not do it, or could not do it correctly. Based on the questionnaire that 30 of his students filled in, it became clear that "though teachers endeavour to give mathematics homework to pupils, many pupils do not do it due to various other life commitments and home situations that leave them with little or no time to do their homework" (p. 129).

Ultimately, with more than 220 teachers participating in similar school-based research projects, the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) seems an initiative that will probably result in improved English and mathematics learning achievements. In the process, teachers have become change agents, first and foremost because they changed themselves.

As opposed to the concise Sierra Leone research reports, the volume published by NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association) comprises fairly detailed accounts of 15 Exploratory Action Research projects. The editors have chosen to present the stories in a way that I find somewhat disjointed. At the beginning of each story, there are "pointers for pondering", followed by interposed questions that ask readers (possibly, other classroom practitioners) to reflect on the previous passages or predict the outcomes. This layout gives the volume more of an appearance of a course book and breaks the natural flow of the text, but I acknowledge that it might be a useful didactic tool that helps beginning teacher-researchers to design their own research projects. The samples of students' work and the images of the often crowded classrooms provide authenticity,

while the Appendices usually offer enough detail for replicability.

As one would expect, Nepalese English teachers also struggle with students not submitting their homework or handing it in late. Jenny Rai wanted to understand why homework causes palpable stress for her students. She could see their “frowning faces” (p. 38) when she gave them homework and was concerned that they may not like the subject. This proved to be a false assumption. The responses given by students regarding their attitude to homework also showed that, as is often the case, they do not question the fact that homework is important, but many of them find it difficult to complete. Moreover, it also turned out that students do not have a lot of free time, because teachers of all the other subjects are also giving homework and, more often than not, students have no one at home to help them. As a result, Jenny Rai changes the way she gives homework and, along the way, she changes her attitude as well: “I changed from just simple teacher to helper or supporter of students in solving their homework problems...” (p. 46).

Coming back to my own puzzle about how it was possible to conduct extensive teacher research and then disseminate the results right before or under COVID-19, beyond teacher resilience there have been other factors at play that seem crucial to me. One is partnership and collaboration, such as the support provided by the British Council and three universities for the Brazilian Exploratory Practice Group. The education improvement programme in Sierra Leone was funded by UK Aid and had the backing of Cambridge Education and the country’s Education Ministry. The publication of Exploratory Action Research stories in Nepal was supported by the Hornby Trust as well as the country’s exceptionally active English Teachers’ Association (NELTA). The dissemination of the results has been undoubtedly aided by the fact that all three volumes are freely downloadable.

Another factor is that the teacher research activities were facilitated by local actors, such as school principals and administrators. This implied providing resources (access to books and the Internet, photocopying facilities, etc.), and also a readiness to effect seemingly small changes (for example, moving a classroom away from a noisy canteen or modifying the timetable to better accommodate language classes), which then had a

measurable positive impact.

Finally, one must reflect on the sustained, high-quality mentoring, both in the case of the Sierra Leonean and the Nepalese experience. In Sierra Leone, an international teacher research expert collaborated with four national teaching and learning experts to set up a network of School Support Officers (SSOs), whose crucial role at school level has been acknowledged by almost every teacher taking part in the programme. The Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) in Nepal started in 2017 and resulted in the training up of dozens of local mentors, which has provided sustainability to teacher research ever since the scheme started. As for the Exploratory Practice Group in Rio de Janeiro, their activities started while its members were pre-service teachers and they then stayed together to share their in-service experiences, providing ample support and peer-mentoring for each other.

The fact that these books all came out in quick succession in 2021 proves that resilient teachers and teacher-researchers are able to overcome extraordinary difficulties when their projects are provided with appropriate funding, institutional support and carefully scaffolded mentoring (see Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018, especially Chapter 2). It also shows that Exploratory Practice and Exploratory Action Research have truly come of age. Classroom practitioners are carrying on with their research and sharing their findings without claiming to have discovered anything earth-shattering about second language acquisition in general.

Instead, as members of the Brazilian Exploratory Practice Group state explicitly, they aim at something else: making the quality of life in the classroom their top priority.

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