



## Scaling the Peaks of Research

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### ABSTRACT

*For many people undertaking research at Masterate or Doctorate level is a mountain too far. Yet for teachers taking on the challenge of research it can open new doors, invigorate practice and help them learn something about themselves. This article looks at the journey taken by one teacher to conquer the lofty heights of academia and the changes brought about through this journey. The teacher had to face the realisation that people often saw her in a completely different light to how she saw herself. Not only did she find that she had a value to others but that there were also expectations placed upon her which she felt obliged to meet. Yet what became most surprising to her in scaling the research mountain was that her own expectations outshone anything others placed upon her. She found that in pushing herself just that little bit further she began to unlock a belief in who she was and what she could actually achieve.*

*This is my story...*

Undertaking research is not for the faint hearted. It requires focus, dedication, hard work and more time than is possible in any one day. It also requires a little bit of masochism as researchers tend to put themselves under more pressure than any sane person would. However, there are positive spin-offs, not the least of which is the feeling of success – and relief – you have when it all comes together and you finally reach that lofty summit.

A few years ago I began such a journey. Fresh from the success of completing my Masterate degree and full of ideas of where I could take my findings I was intent on sitting down and writing my Doctoral thesis. The first hurdle was realising that this was not as easy as it initially seemed. And then finding that I needed to do a little bit of research to support what I thought I knew. Even reaching the base camp was going to take some effort! To make matters worse – and to indicate what a real masochist I am – I had just taken on a new job, in a new town, at a much bigger school. I had more responsibilities and more to do than previously and something had to give. This time round I didn't even make the base camp, pulling out of the expedition before it even got started.

But I was determined to make a difference and so I tried again. This time around I was more prepared; I had the right equipment, the focus and the desire to get it right. I wanted to be able to improve the lot for teachers by developing an appraisal system that teachers drove, that was focused on a teacher's

individual professional learning, and I was in the perfect place to make this happen – a school in need of change. And I was successful. But the revised appraisal system wasn't the only success in the research process. For me, it was the growth I went through and how this impacted upon my teaching practice.

I have to say that research changes a person; you find out just what you are capable of and develop many strategies for dealing with stresses. You grow as a person. While this growth did not actually help in answering my research questions, it did provide evidence of professional development and learning, a key focus of my research. Undertaking the research allowed me to demonstrate many, if not all, of the Registered Teacher Criteria and gave me control of my practice – partly through the redefinition of appraisal but also through undertaking this journey to help others redefine their practice.

Over the course of the research I was forced to look at myself, my role within the school, and how I was viewed by other teachers. This process made me aware that I am a very different person to the one I saw prior to beginning the research. This was not always an easy process to go through. At times I doubted my capabilities and whether I should even have attempted something that could impact on other people's practice. It would not have been possible in a school where the climate was anything but positive and supportive.

Prior to this research I was a person who 'did' – if it needed doing, it was inevitably me who did it. I saw myself as a teacher, someone who did what they were told and worked hard. Even though I was in a middle management position I had never considered that I had 'power' or that I had influence over others' practice. The first step of gaining Ethics Approval opened my eyes to the fact that I did have power – simply by being in a middle management position. On reflection, I realised that I did 'control' aspects of others' practice through the decisions I made within my department and the advice I offered to people. As this research continued, this level of 'power' increased; I was sought out by teachers for advice and input into performance management issues, including the senior management of the school. It became fascinating to see myself as others do, and to accept that I was more than I initially considered myself to be. Having seen how others see me, I found I had to be that person. I probably always was that person but it took stepping away from myself to gain a different perspective. This can only be done if you are involved in a change process and are open to the possibility of exploring and reflecting on who you are. Research provided me with this opportunity to reflect and, to be honest, I enjoyed the process – mostly! I gained confidence in what I do and in what I believe I am capable of doing in the future.

Research helps you develop in many different ways. Prior to undertaking my study, although confident to 'teach', I was not confident to stand in front of my peers and speak. I have always been too much of a 'shrinking violet' – more comfortable to be hidden in the background and let someone else take the limelight. Undertaking research has not allowed me to do this – and I am delighted that this has been the case. I gained confidence not only in my ability to speak in front of a crowd but also in the realisation that I do actually know what I am talking about. I found that having people trust you to 'know the answers' – even if it is something that needs to be further investigated – did much to lift my confidence. Having other people believe in you helps you to believe in yourself.

The research process itself has also taught me much. At times it was extremely difficult. At other times it was a source of great satisfaction. I regularly doubted my ability to complete the task, whether I had actually gathered any data at all, and if I did have data, would it mean anything? Irrespective of having been warned this could be the case when I first started the research, I believe you always feel that it will happen to someone else and not you. These feelings are part and parcel of the research process, and are overcome with time away from the data to clear one's thoughts or by sheer perseverance and pushing through the barriers – both actions I completed on a number of occasions. You also find help and support in a wide variety of places. For me, working with an amazing group of research participants who made me think clearly about what I was doing certainly helped beyond expectation. I found that they tended to ask me questions that helped me focus and that made me think outside the square for alternate solutions. This helped with both the research process and the final outcomes. It also helps to have a strong support person at home – research is never a path you travel alone.

Going through the research process you also learn a lot about human nature, especially that not everyone sees things the same way. Dealing with the variance between and among teachers and their ideas of what 'should' be the case required patience and further self-change. I had to become much more accepting of views that opposed my own; however, this acceptance allowed me to gather data that was both balanced and honest. I learned that people progress at different speeds and that this too needs to be accepted – rushing people will not make it happen any faster, no matter what the issue or activity. I also learned that people are amazing; they are supportive and encouraging and, at times, in awe of what I was attempting (comments such as 'I couldn't do what you are doing' demonstrate this), which I must admit was a rather good feeling. It makes you feel that you really are making a difference and that people are inspired by what you are doing. There is also a feeling of immense satisfaction when you can see something is working. The first time this happened for me was when I was holding a PD session for the Heads of Departments (HODs). I expected resistance and had come armed with a whole range of justifications for what I was about to ask them to complete. However, I was amazed and hugely gratified when the HODs asked *how* to achieve the set goals rather than *why* they should be achieved. This was a huge step forward, a tipping point in my research, and I really felt that I was getting somewhere – the peak of the mountain really wasn't that far away! The second instance came when analysing the survey data to discover changes where I hoped there would be changes – it is such an amazing feeling when something actually works!

My research has indeed been a voyage of discovery and the benefits of study are huge. Your brain starts working again, you become more passionate about learning and about your subject area and this flows into your practice. It also keeps you in touch with what you are expecting of your students. It has allowed me to transfer my own learning directly into my classes – in a modified version, of course. My students learned how to reference sources accurately, how to develop research skills and what an abstract is. This latter, you may think, is not really relevant at high school level, but it has taught my students how to summarise their work in a very succinct manner and pull into this only the very key pieces of information. Each time I related to my students

something I had learned it was possible to see them soak this up and file it away for future use.

The biggest thing I have passed on is a passion for learning. My students see that I still study and what better role model can there be for lifelong learning than a teacher who learns. And always, I set up the expectation that they can achieve exactly what I did – I am not an exceptional person, I have just worked hard. They see this and it makes a difference.

The school also benefitted from my research. We now have an appraisal system that meets our needs both from a compliance position for the Ministry of Education but also for individual teachers and their professional learning. And, yes, it makes me feel good. I really feel I have made a difference not only for my students but for teaching in general – and this is such a huge buzz.

So while the journey to the top of the mountain is full of hidden crevasses and vertical cliff faces, it is possible to get there, no matter what your experience in mountain climbing/research is. Small steps, plenty of support people and a belief in yourself are the key factors that will help you scale these lofty heights. And the pay-off is huge. You *can* make a difference and you *can* make things change. Above all else, you grow as a person and have a renewed focus in teaching. When you get there, stop and look around – the view from the mountain top is great!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

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Dr McKenzie is now the Principal at Collingwood Area School in Golden Bay.

She has spent a number of years studying through Massey University as an extramural student, culminating in her Doctoral degree in 2012.

While looking into her next foray into study, she is enjoying some 'family time' and reading books other than research texts!

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