

Practice-based educational and theatre research: A scoping review

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Funding information

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Abstract

Practice-based research (PBR) has emerged as a valuable alternative to traditional scientific methods by generating knowledge through practice and enhancing the relevance of research to practitioners. However, knowledge about PBR has largely been developed within disciplinary silos, leading to its limited cross-disciplinary understanding. This paper addresses this gap by analysing 116 PBR studies in Educational Research and Theatre, two fields with very active but separately analysed PBR traditions. Our analysis produces a framework that categorises PBR into four distinct types based on key dimensions: the 'Aim of research' and the 'Model of practice involvement'. The framework reveals discipline-specific patterns, including divergent tendencies in how PBR is utilised across these fields: in Educational Research, PBR is often employed to improve professional practice, whereas in Theatre, it is central to exploring and theorising practice itself. The proposed framework holds potential for broader applicability across other fields, contributing to a more cohesive understanding of PBR as a versatile research strategy.

KEYWORDS

educational practice-based research, practice-based research, practitioner research, scoping review, theatre studies

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the limited cross-disciplinary understanding of practice-based research (PBR). The issue arises because studies on PBR have been developed within isolated disciplinary silos. By examining PBR in Educational Research and Theatre, the paper highlights shared characteristics and discipline-specific patterns.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The study introduces a cross-disciplinary framework categorising PBR into four types based on the 'Aim of research' and 'Model of practice involvement'. It reveals divergent tendencies in the use of PBR across disciplines, offering insights into its broader applicability and enhancing its potential as a versatile research strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Practice-based research (PBR) is an umbrella term encompassing various forms of research conducted by practitioners within their professional environments. This family of research is conceptualised through different expressions such as practitioner research, practice-oriented research, practice-as-research, practice-led research and practice research (Candy, 2006; Castonguay & Muran, 2016; Heikkinen et al., 2016; Nelson, 2002). Practice-based research is also part of broader research traditions like *action research*, which emphasises participatory, real-world problem-solving (Adelman, 1993; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006), *engaged scholarship* approaches (Van de Ven, 2007) and *use-inspired basic research* bridging the gap between basic and applied science (Stokes, 1997). Crucially, PBR is not tied to specific features of research methodology but can employ diverse research designs, including quantitative, qualitative, mixed, and participatory methods, as long as these approaches are aligned with the core principle of generating knowledge by means of practice.

Practice-based research has been adopted across various fields, particularly in the social sciences, humanities and health sciences. Different disciplines, influenced by their unique traditions and cultural contexts, have prioritised various aspects of PBR. For instance, in educational and social work research, the focus is primarily on the involvement of practitioners in the research process (Heikkinen et al., 2016; Shaw & Lunt, 2018) and scholars in those fields tend to prefer the 'practitioner research' synonym of PBR. In these disciplines, PBR is primarily defined by its distinction from *traditional* research, with the key differentiator being the involvement of practitioners who conduct research within workplace settings (Fox et al., 2007). Conversely, in the humanities (primarily the arts), PBR is centred around the use of artistic processes and their outcomes to generate new knowledge (Candy, 2006). Rather than focusing on how PBR diverges from traditional research, the focus is on how research differentiates itself from the standard practice of creating art; the distinction is made between *research* and *practice*. The challenge in this context lies in identifying when the act of creating art transitions from practice into research, with research being defined as something that goes beyond mere artistic practice (Vanlee & Ysebaert, 2019).

Studies on PBR have typically been developed within disciplinary silos, and thus conceptualisations of PBR have been tailored to fit the specific characteristics of each discipline (e.g. Dodd & Epstein, 2012; Furlong & Oancea, 2007; Nelson, 2002). Consequently, existing

theoretical frameworks for categorising and characterising PBR are often tied to these disciplinary characteristics. For example, numerous studies have focused on distinguishing between different types of practice-related artistic research, such as PBR, practice-as-research and practice-led research (Candy, 2006; Nelson, 2002; Sullivan, 2009). However, these frameworks are difficult to translate to other research domains because they rely on the role of creative outcomes in the research process. More versatile frameworks have been developed in fields like social work—for instance, Shaw and Lunt's (2018) distinction between practitioner-led and academic partnerships—but these frameworks have not yet been applied outside the disciplinary scope of their study.

The confinement of knowledge about PBR within disciplinary silos often perpetuates the perception of PBR as a niche approach, limited to certain academic areas. This restricts the ability of researchers and funders to fully appreciate PBR's potential. Scholars have noted that PBR studies often struggle to meet conventional quality standards in research evaluation, putting PBR researchers at a disadvantage in publishing, securing grants and advancing their careers (Ammerman et al., 2014; Furlong & Oancea, 2007; Wyse et al., 2021). Addressing these issues requires studies that view PBR from a broad perspective, recognising it as a versatile research approach adaptable to diverse disciplinary and cultural contexts.

In this paper, we respond to this need by offering a combined, comparative analysis of PBR across two distinct research disciplines: Educational Research and Theatre. These fields, situated within the social sciences and humanities respectively, are particularly active domains of PBR. Previous bibliometric analysis (Lewandowska, 2024) has identified Educational Research and Theatre as leading fields in the production of PBR. The data further indicate a significant increase in the relative prominence of practice-based theatre research over the past two decades. At the same time, these fields are typically examined in isolation.

The aim of our study is twofold. First, we aim to explore and structure the current state of PBR in educational and theatre research, recognising that most studies on PBR tend to be theoretical and only a few are based on the analysis of actual PBR examples. Second, we aim to provide a comparative account of the different applications of PBR in the humanities and social sciences. By examining PBR in these two contexts, we hope to uncover shared characteristics and generate insights that contribute to a more cohesive understanding of PBR as a research strategy across disciplines.

The paper is organised as follows: first, we outline the methodology used, detailing the steps involved in conducting the scoping review. Next, we present the results of our analysis of the selected studies and introduce a conceptual framework for structuring and characterising PBR. Following this, we discuss the implications of applying this framework to the analysis of PBR studies. Finally, we conclude by addressing the limitations of our study and suggesting directions for future research.

METHODS

This scoping review followed the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, which outlines the review process in five stages: (1) identifying the research question; (2) finding relevant studies; (3) selecting the studies; (4) charting the data; and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 24).

Search and selection

To identify PBR publications, a search query was developed based on a narrative review of literature and utilising Prophy.Science, an AI-powered platform that provides a network of

concepts based on the analysis of scientific articles. Prophy.Science helps identify concepts related to the target concept (in this case, 'practice-based research'). We selected relevant concepts from the provided list (Table 1). Given the broad nature of our research objective, we conducted the search in one database: Web of Science Core Collection (WoS). This review does not claim to encompass all publications related to practice-based theatre and educational research; instead, it aims to systematically select a comprehensive sample of PBR studies in these two fields and conduct a comparative analysis.

Table 1 presents the full search strategy for the Web of Science database. We incorporated the selected concepts (keywords) in a query and searched the WoS 'Topic' field, which includes titles, abstracts and author keywords. As our study focused on theatre and educational research, we specifically chose papers from these fields. This selection was made using the WoS Citation Topics methodology, developed by Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) Leiden, which categorises research fields based on clusters derived from citations (Traag et al., 2019). We selected relevant fields, categorised in WoS under 'Education & Educational Research' and 'Theatre'. Furthermore, to narrow the results to a manageable amount, we restricted the scope of the study to the period from 2004 to 2023. We also restricted the search to 'Articles' only.

Table 2 outlines the process of study selection. The initial dataset consisted of 753 publications: 575 publications in Education & Educational research and 178 in Theatre. References were downloaded from WoS and uploaded to Covidence, which is an online software tool designed to manage and streamline the process of conducting systematic reviews. Covidence was chosen as it allows two researchers to independently assess the relevance of studies. Duplicates were automatically removed by the software.

Furthermore, two authors conducted the screening and selection of studies based on the eligibility criteria outlined in Table 3, which considered the research method, study type and aspects of study design related to the occupational status of investigators and the role of practitioners in the research process. First, only studies that employed PBR as their research approach or method were included. Studies where the term 'practice-based research' or related terms were used in an unrelated or irrelevant context were excluded. Second, only research studies that reported results from PBR were included. Studies of other types, such as theoretical, conceptual or methodological papers discussing PBR or literature reviews, were excluded. Third, we only included studies carried out by practitioner-researchers or by teams of both researchers and practitioners. Studies conducted solely by academic researchers, where practitioners were either not involved or only participated as subjects (e.g. respondents) without being actively engaged in the research process, were excluded.

To select relevant studies, two authors first screened titles and abstracts of 753 studies. A total of 502 studies were excluded at this stage, mainly owing to irrelevant method or study type. This left 251 articles, which were then read and assessed independently by two authors. Out of the 135 studies excluded at this stage, the majority (60%) failed to meet the criterion requiring practitioners' active involvement in the research process, because their involvement was either absent or unclear. This left 116 studies that sufficiently matched the inclusion criteria. The list of included publications is available in Appendix A.

Data extraction and analysis

Data from all included studies were collected through a systematic registration process and entered into an Excel spreadsheet to provide a comprehensive overview. Variables were derived from research objectives and informed by prior literature, with a focus on: (1) the characteristics of the research approach (e.g. research goals, methods, and participants); and (2) the occupational status and roles of practitioner-researchers. Appendix B provides

TABLE 1 Search strategy for Web of Science.

Concept (keyword)	Citation topic (meso)	Publication years	Document type
'practice-based research'	AND	2023 or 2022 or 2021 or 2020 or 2019	Article
OR		AND	
'practice-based evidence'	Theatre	or 2018 or 2017 or 2016 or 2015 or	
OR	Education & Educational	2014 or 2013 or 2012 or 2011 or 2010	
'practice-as-research'	Research	or 2009 or 2008 or 2007 or 2006 or	
OR		2005 or 2004	
'practice oriented research'			
OR			
'practice-led research'			
OR			
'practice research'			
OR			
'practitioner research'			
OR			
'practitioner-researcher'			
OR			
'researcher-practitioner'			

TABLE 2 Selection process based on eligibility criteria.

1. Records ($n=753$)
Records identified by database search: Theatre ($n=178$), Education & Educational Research ($n=575$)
2. Titles and abstracts ($n=753$)
Titles and abstracts screened based on eligibility criteria (Table 3); 502 studies excluded: Theatre ($n=100$), Education & Educational Research ($n=402$)
3. Full text ($n=251$)
Full texts assessed using eligibility criteria (Table 3); 135 studies excluded: Theatre ($n=35$), Education & Educational Research ($n=100$)
4. Final selection ($n=116$)
Studies included in scoping review: Theatre ($n=43$), Education & Educational Research ($n=73$)

TABLE 3 Eligibility criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Method: studies using PBR as a research approach/method	'Practice-based research' (or related keywords) used in a context not related to the research approach
Study type: research articles, reporting findings of PBR	Theoretical, conceptual or methodological papers focusing on deliberations about PBR, research overview papers or systematic reviews
Design (investigators): studies conducted by practitioner-researchers or by teams of researchers and practitioners	Studies conducted by academic researchers where practitioners were involved as studied population (e.g. respondents) but were not actively engaged in the research process

Abbreviation: PBR, Practice-based research.

a detailed summary of the variables extracted during the review, along with illustrative examples.

During data extraction, it became apparent that some variables needed modification and additional variables needed to be added, necessitating a new round of data extraction. For example, while the initial extraction focused on the occupational status of authors (e.g. practitioner-researcher, researcher) and their roles, further analysis highlighted the importance of distinguishing between participants and co-investigators. Consequently, we added a new variable categorising participant roles. Additionally, the initiator of the study emerged as a meaningful factor, and we incorporated this information to better capture the dynamics of practitioner involvement.

Using the extracted data, we performed a comparative analysis of the studies, employing an inductive approach. Initially, we conducted a comparative analysis on a small sample of papers and gradually expanded the sample size, leading to further re-grouping and re-interpretation of differentiating characteristics. For example, we initially categorised studies based on the methods used. However, this approach proved insufficient as it failed to account for the varied purposes behind these methods. For example, studies using reflective journals could range from gathering personal experiences to exploring complex professional challenges, but the method alone did not reveal the underlying research aim or the depth of practitioner involvement. As a result, we shifted our focus to categorising studies based on their primary research aim. The iterative process revealed two dimensions along which the framework for categorising studies was developed: one focusing on the primary aim of the research, and the other on the model of practice involvement.

RESULTS

The review identified 116 relevant papers focused on PBR in the fields of Educational Research (ER) and Theatre (T). Through an analysis of the extracted data, a two-dimensional framework emerged, categorising the studies along two key dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The first dimension centred on the primary aims of PBR studies: the purpose they served and the reasons they were carried out by practitioners. We found that some studies were conducted mainly to enhance understanding and advance practice, aiming to improve the quality of the practitioner-researcher's work. In contrast, other studies were primarily focused on investigating research problems and generating new knowledge through practice. This led to the identification of two distinct types of PBR:

- Practice-through-research (PtR)—emphasises exploring, understanding and improving professional practice through systematic inquiry. The primary aim is to refine or develop the practitioner's own practice.
- Research-through-practice (RtP)—focuses on investigating research problems within practice contexts or utilising practice as the primary methodology for knowledge generation.

The second dimension focused on the model of practice involvement, specifically examining the occupational status of researchers—whether they were practitioners, academic researchers, or both—and how practitioners were involved in the research process. This analysis led to the identification of two further types of PBR¹:

- Practitioner-led research (Pled)—conducted by individuals who simultaneously serve as both practitioners and researchers, integrating their practical expertise directly into the research process.
- Collaborative research (CoR)—carried out by teams composed of both researchers and practitioners.

Table 4 presents the classification of studies according to these four identified types. However, it is important to note that these dimensions should be viewed as spectra rather than binary categories. Many studies were situated along the continuum of both dimensions, rather than clearly at one extreme. For instance, in Dimension 1, several studies simultaneously explored the practitioner's own practice while addressing a broader research goal, requiring us to determine which objective was predominant. Similarly, in Dimension 2, the collaborative nature of some studies was ambiguous, as the role of practitioners was not

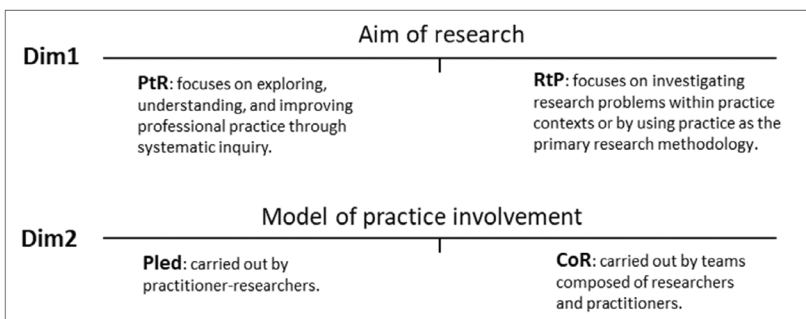


FIGURE 1 Two dimensions of practice-based research.

TABLE 4 Classification of practice-based research studies in Educational Research (ER) and Theatre (T).

Model of practice involvement		Collaborative research	
Practitioner-led research	T	ER	T
Aim of research			
<i>Practice through research</i>			
Attard (2012)	Verma (2020)	Ancess et al. (2007)	Mueller (2022)
Burchell (2010)	Kapadocha (2023)	Armsby et al. (2018)	Bailey et al. (2009)
Chang (2020)	Kapadocha (2018)	Barron et al. (2023)	Cervera et al. (2020)
Convertino (2016)	Hunter (2011)	Bartlett and Burton (2006)	Elswit (2019)
Cui and Teo (2023)	Xian (2022)	Buğra and Wyatt (2021)	Reason and Heinemeyer (2016)
Dryburgh (2020)	Hubrich (2016)	Cardno (2006)	
Fancourt (2013)	Bannon (2011)	Carr et al. (2015)	
Gravett and van der Merwe (2023)	Bell (2018)	McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins (2007)	
Gutstein (2007)	Clarke (2015)	Oolbakkink-Marchand et al. (2014)	
Harrison (2012)	Gattenhof (2015)	Ryerson (2017)	
Hookey (2013)	Lidbury (2019)	Sankaran et al. (2005)	
Huddy (2017)		Song et al. (2018)	
Jasman (2010)		Tezcan-Uhal (2018)	
Karavoltsov and O'Sullivan (2011)		Weish (2012)	
Kibler et al. (2024)		Whitehead and Fitzgerald (2007)	
Lin (2020)		Willemse et al. (2016)	
Lin et al. (2018)			
Martell (2013)			
Martell (2016)			
Moloney (2009)			
Nakamura et al. (2021)			
Reingold (2016)			
Reingold (2021)			
Shannon-Baker (2018)			
Shepherd (2006)			
Spagnuolo and Colket (2016)			
VanSledright (2002)			
Weinberger et al. (2016)			
Xu and Stahl (2022)			
Youngs (2007)			

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Model of practice involvement		Collaborative research	
Practitioner-led research	T	ER	T
<i>Research through practice</i>			
Bieler and Thomas (2009)	Azul (2011)	Applebaum et al. (2021)	Hepplewhite (2014)
Czerniawski (2023)	Bianchi (2020)	Cain (2010)	Heddon et al. (2012)
Dixon and Senior (2009)	Sakamoto and McMillan (2017)	Cain (2015)	Mastrominico (2023)
Fletcher (2016)	Armstrong and Murman (2021)	Cheng and Li (2020)	Liang (2019)
Hanley and Brown (2017)	McLay et al. (2020)	Clayton et al. (2008)	Bouchardon and Lopez-Varela (2011)
Hanley and Brown (2019)	Ehrenberg (2015)	Edwards and Brown (2020)	
Lambrev (2023)	Houtman et al. (2014)	Getenet (2019)	Ashford Hart (2023)
Lin (2014)	Scialom (2020)	Hollingsworth and Clarke (2017)	Sibanda (2016)
Stock et al. (2016)	Lee (2018)	Olin et al. (2023)	Shearing (2019)
Van Veldhuizen et al. (2021)	Mackey (2016)	Salter and Tett (2022)	Tsouvala and Magos (2016)
Vetter and Russell (2011)	McAllister-Viel (2009)	Seehawer (2018)	Yeung Chun Wai (2019)
Wallace et al. (2016)	Merlin (2019)	Soomro (2018)	
Wang (2018)	Munro (2020)		
Yuan et al. (2020)	Spatz (2017)		
Zeivots et al. (2023)	Hopfinger (2018a)		
	Hopfinger (2018b)		
	Saner and Robinson (2019)		

always clearly defined (further discussed in the Discussion section). Below, we discuss each dimension and the corresponding types of PBR in detail.

Dimension 1: aim of research

The studies reviewed differed in terms of overarching research objectives, reflecting distinct motivations and purposes relevant to the practitioners who conducted them. Broadly, these studies can be categorised into two primary types: 'practice-through-research' and 'research-through-practice'.

Practice-through-research

Practice-through-research (PtR) studies aim to explore, understand and enhance professional practice through a structured research process. Practitioner-researchers engage in these studies to gain deeper insights into their own practices, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality and understanding of their creative or professional practice. In PtR research, practitioners' immediate experiences serve as a foundation for self-reflection and investigation into the nature of their work.

Studies that focus on exploring practice often adopt an autoethnographic approach, resulting in autobiographical narratives that connect personal experiences with broader theoretical frameworks. In ER, authors typically adopt approaches that align with the 'reflection-on-action' perspective (Schön, 1987), where they reflect selectively on past experiences. Methods such as journaling, autobiographical writing, or poetic expression are commonly used by practitioners to better understand their professional roles and relationships, and enhance their professional growth (e.g. Attard, 2012; Burchell, 2010; Harrison, 2012; Jasman, 2010; Shepherd, 2006).

In T, retrospective reflections are less prevalent, as reflection and inquiry occur on-site and are integrated into the practice itself, a process Schön (1987) describes as 'reflection-in-action'. Unlike in ER, where the interrogation of personal experiences and data analysis follow practice, in T these processes are usually inseparable. An illustrative example is Elswit's (2019) 'Breath Catalogue' project, where choreographer-performers gather and share data related to performers' breathing using wearable sensors and audio recordings. This data collection and sharing occur during experimental dance performances, referred to as 'investigative events' (p. 10). Investigation is therefore not a linear process involving subsequent stages of defining research questions, collecting data and data analysis, but takes the form of 'attentive embodied practice' (p. 9), in which reflection, inquiry and practice are seamlessly integrated and continuously inform each other.

Another form of PtR studies involves practitioners experimenting with new methods, tools or interventions primarily to improve their practice. For instance, Nakamura et al. (2021) implemented boredom regulation sessions to enhance student engagement during English oral communication courses. Similarly, VanSledright (2002), a fifth-grade history teacher, introduced investigative techniques for engaging with historical documents to improve students' historical thinking. In ER, the impact of these new components on practice improvement is typically assessed using instruments such as student interviews, focus groups, or post-intervention questionnaires. In T, such instruments are less commonly employed. For example, Bell (2018), a theatre director, introduced a question-answering technique during performances to encourage interaction between performers and audience members. They collected audience feedback through post-performance questionnaires to assess the pedagogical and experiential value of this interactivity.

Additionally, PtR can be driven by organisational challenges within educational settings, focusing on broader systemic issues. Studies in this category, often found in ER, address overarching organisational themes. For example, Getenet (2019) illustrates how collaboration between researchers and practitioners led to the co-design of a professional development programme aimed at specific classroom issues. Similarly, Cardno (2006) used PBR to tackle an organisational problem by examining and improving curriculum leadership within a primary school, where the senior management team developed and implemented change strategies involving all staff.

Research-through-practice

Research-through-practice (RtP) focuses on investigating research problems within practice settings or by using practice as the primary research methodology. Unlike studies that centre on a practitioner's own practice, RtP typically addresses broader issues relevant to the professional field or to more general social concerns. Practitioner-researchers collect data from a diverse range of sources, including interviews with professionals, reflective journals from students, practitioner case studies, ethnographic video recordings, audience questionnaires, and more.

In ER, RtP is more commonly conducted by university teacher educators, whereas school teachers more frequently engage in PtR studies. Research-through-practice in ER tends to examine educational practice from a broader, less personal perspective, aiming to contribute general knowledge to the field. Although researchers' own practices may inform their research questions, these practices are typically not the primary focus. Popular topics often centre on various aspects of professional practice, such as the formation of teacher identities among pre-service teachers (e.g. Hanley & Brown, 2019; Stock et al., 2016), the challenges faced by teacher-researchers balancing dual roles (e.g. Czerniawski, 2023; Salter & Tett, 2022; Vetter & Russell, 2011; Wallace et al., 2016; Zeivots et al., 2023), factors driving teacher development (e.g. Cheng & Li, 2020; Yuan et al., 2020), and practices related to curriculum development and student assessment (e.g. Dixon & Senior, 2009).

Research-through-practice studies are often based on participants' perspectives, with researchers creating specific, PBR contexts to gather data. While PtR typically involves teachers conducting research within the flow of their day-to-day teaching, RtP may involve the development of new settings, such as communities of practice or consultation groups, to explore research questions. For example, Salter and Tett (2022) invited primary school teachers to participate in a community-of-practice and conduct their own PBR projects. They collected data on the teachers' experiences to analyse the benefits of teacher engagement in team research. Similarly, Olin et al. (2023) involved teachers and teacher educators in a collaborative textbook-writing project, gathering insights from teacher–researcher dialogue meetings to explore identity issues in teacher–researcher collaboration.

Similarly to ER, theatre RtP studies address issues beyond the practice itself, with practice serving as the primary research method. While RtP in ER tends to adopt a more academic approach, emphasising scientific investigation, T studies are generally more engaged with the challenges they address. For example, Liang (2019) and Bianchi (2020) explore the situations of women in difficult circumstances, but instead of maintaining a purely analytical distance, they advocate for more engaged, active interventions. Liang's (2019) theatre workshops, for instance, documented the stories of marriage migrants and older women who had endured adversities like natural disasters. Using a 'docuvention' framework, Liang aimed not only to understand these women's realities but also to amplify their voices. Hopfinger (2018) and Armstrong and Murman (2021), on the other hand, used artistic research to tackle ecological concerns, examining interactions between human and non-human elements (e.g.

stones integrated into performances) or connecting postmodern philosophy with ecological restoration. Their approach underscores the idea that the creative process itself becomes a form of 'ecological action' allowing participants to actively engage with and respond to ecological challenges.

In RtP theatre studies, artistic practice serves as the primary research method rather than the research focus itself. For example, Tsouvala and Magos (2016) demonstrate how dance acts as a catalyst for self-discovery and personal growth. Through the physical practice of dance, participants may reassess their self-concepts, reduce stress and gain insights into their identities and what matters to them in relation to others. Similar to ER, T studies often extend artistic inquiry beyond the artist's perspective to include participants' viewpoints. Ehrenberg's (2015) study, for instance, involved multiple dancers to identify shared elements in their embodied practices, collecting phenomenological reports to explore the kinesthetic awareness that emerges from the collective experience. In a related vein, McAllister-Viel (2009) investigated the interactions between students and their public environment, revealing how these interactions shape their understanding of social processes and psychological effects. Theatre RtP research can thus be compared with RtP in ER, as both use practice as a means to generate knowledge. However, while ER leans more towards developing practice recommendations, T places a stronger emphasis on theoretical exploration.

Dimension 2: model of practice involvement

The distinguishing feature of PBR is that it involves practitioners in the research process. However, the models of this involvement vary and may be broadly categorised into two types: *practitioner-led* and *collaborative research*.

Practitioner-led research

In Practitioner-led (Pled) studies, individuals who occupy dual roles as both practitioners and researchers lead the research process. These practitioner-researchers combine their professional work with academic inquiry, often conducting research within the same environments where they practice. In the context of ER, this typically involves school teachers conducting research within their classrooms or university teacher educators who integrate research with their teaching responsibilities. In T, practitioner-researchers might include theatre actors who are also educators or those pursuing research within their professional practice, such as through a PhD programme.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Pled is the diversity of research settings. In ER, research predominantly occurs within the confines of schools and universities, where the focus is on educational practices and pedagogical improvements. However, in T, the research environment is much more varied and site-specific, spanning from traditional theatre spaces to unconventional venues such as community centres, heritage sites, public spaces (parks, streets, beaches, etc.), studio laboratories, art schools and universities. For example, Hunter (2011) used the orangery within Bretton Hall mansion as a site for performance to explore how this space becomes an active participant in the performative act. Similarly, McAllister-Viel's (2009) project takes place at Namdaemun, an open-air market in Seoul, where participants observed and recorded the vocal practices of street vendors and, later, tested vocal techniques in a local park near university. This environment provided a dynamic space for understanding how voices are used in public, outdoor settings.

Despite the absence of formal co-investigators, practitioner-led research is far from a solitary endeavour. Both Theatre and Educational Research are inherently social fields, where practice typically involves interaction with others—whether they be students, fellow actors, audiences or other participants. Unlike some domains of fine arts, such as painting, where research might be conducted in relative solitude (see, for example, Glade-Wright & Scotcher, 2019), theatre and educational research are embedded in social contexts that require the presence and participation of others. However, in practitioner-led research, these others—students in EER or actors and audiences in T—generally serve as participants or objects of study rather than as co-investigators.

In ER, participants are often university students, school teachers and school students, with less frequent involvement from groups like university teachers, adult learners, parents, school leaders, researchers and university administrators (see Table 5). Research involving university students and school teachers as participants often focuses on the professional development of pre-service and in-service teachers, addressing issues such as the enhancement of professional skills (e.g. lesson design, managing moral conflicts) (e.g. Convertino, 2016; Gravett & van der Merwe, 2023; Weinberger et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2020), exploration of professional identities and roles (Moloney, 2009; Stock et al., 2016; Vetter & Russell, 2011), and the integration of research-based learning as a tool for teacher development (e.g. Czerniawski, 2023; Lambrev, 2023; Wallace et al., 2016; Zeivots et al., 2023). Similarly, studies involving school students frequently evaluate teaching methods in the classroom, such as using art to teach religion or improving students' self-assessment capabilities (e.g. Fancourt, 2013; Fletcher, 2016; Gutstein, 2007; Lin et al., 2018; Martell, 2013; Reingold, 2016, 2021; VanSledright, 2002).

In T, the main participant groups involve performance practitioners, university students or members of local communities (see Table 5). For example, Hopfinger's (2018) study about intergenerational performance ecology involved children and adults performing together,

TABLE 5 Participants and co-investigators.

Discipline	Participants	No. studies	Co-investigators	No. studies
Educational Research	University students	21	Teachers	19
	Teachers	18	University teachers	6
	School students	16	University managers	3
	University teachers	6	Cultural managers	1
	Adult learners	1		
	Parents	1		
	School leaders	1		
	Researchers	1		
Theatre	University managers	1		
	Performance practitioners	6	Performance practitioners	10
	University students	6	Researchers	6
	Local communities	3	University students	1
	School students	2		
	Children	2		
	Audience members	2		
	Teachers	1		
Researchers	1			

while the researchers guided and reflected on their interactions. Similarly, in Liang's (2019) study on marriage migrants and older women, local community members participated actively, while the researchers contributed through theoretical analysis and practical involvement. In Spatz' (2017) study of methodologies in artistic research, performance practitioners were engaged in embodied practices, such as movement improvisation and song-action, which were documented and analysed by the researchers.

The design and methodology of Pled vary widely, but there is a strong preference for qualitative approaches. In studies without participants (15 in ER and 27 in T), reflexive practice techniques like reflective journals, storytelling and autobiographical narratives are common (in ER), as are laboratory practices (in T). When participants are involved, qualitative techniques include interviews, participant observations, open-ended questionnaires, focus groups and workshops, as well as analysis of materials such as classroom artefacts, studio footage or participant-produced texts like reflexive essays, diaries and self-assessment sheets. Occasionally, mixed-method designs are employed, combining qualitative methods with quantitative tools, such as evaluation surveys or standardised test scores, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Collaborative research

Collaborative research (CoR) is distinguished by the active collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners. This collaboration involves practitioners—who may not be professionally engaged in academic research—actively participating in various stages of the research process, including conceptualisation, data collection, analysis and even the co-writing of papers.

The nature of collaboration in ER can take multiple forms. A common model is researcher-initiated studies, where academic researchers typically spearhead the project and recruit practitioners to contribute to PBR initiatives. For example, in several identified studies, practitioners were invited to design and implement their own classroom PBR projects, each aligned with a general research framework provided by the academic researchers (Cain, 2010, 2015; Cheng & Li, 2020; Clayton et al., 2008; Hollingsworth & Clarke, 2017; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2014; Ryerson, 2017). In Cain et al.'s (2015) study, secondary school teachers were tasked with incorporating research findings about teaching talented students into self-designed PBR projects, illustrating a collaborative yet researcher-led approach. A more collaborative version of this model involves a closer partnership, where the structure of PBR projects is less predefined, allowing the design to evolve more organically. This was observed in studies that engaged teachers in workshops, group meetings or communities of inquiry, facilitating the sharing of experiences and mutual support among teachers conducting PBR in their classrooms (Armsby et al., 2018; Buğra & Wyatt, 2021; Carr et al., 2015; Olin et al., 2023; Salter & Tett, 2022; Sankaran et al., 2005; Seehawer, 2018; Soomro, 2018; Tezcan-Unal, 2018; Welsh, 2012; Willemse et al., 2016).

While researcher-initiated studies are predominant, a smaller number of studies have been initiated either collaboratively or by practitioners themselves. These studies typically adopt a bottom-up approach, focusing on addressing real-life issues faced by practitioners rather than solely answering academic research questions (Ancess et al., 2007; Applebaum et al., 2021; Barron et al., 2023; Bartlett & Burton, 2006; Cardno, 2006; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007; Song et al., 2018; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007). Such studies are often characterised by a strong orientation towards solving practical problems, with the role of researchers shifting to that of facilitators who provide research training, supervision and ongoing support. For instance, Barron et al. (2023) created a researcher-practitioner partnership that used a networked improvement community approach to develop a computer

app for teaching middle school students about growth mindset, leading to improved student motivation and academic performance.

The roles of researchers and practitioners in these collaborative studies can vary significantly. In some cases, practitioners act as both co-investigators and participants, simultaneously contributing to and being studied within the research. For example, Soomro's (2018) study involved teachers collaborating with the researcher within an exploratory practice framework, while also being the subjects of in-depth interviews to examine the impact of PBR on their professional learning. In other studies, collaboration involves distinct roles for participants and investigators. For instance, in the study by Applebaum et al. (2021), researchers worked alongside early childhood educators to examine Jewish children's attitudes towards Israel. Data were collected from children (participants) by their teachers (co-investigators) and subsequently analysed collaboratively with researchers, who provided guidance and facilitation throughout the process.

In T research, the main participants are performance practitioners, primarily dancers and actors, although some are visual artists and designers. In the 'Black Rock' project (Shearing, 2019), artists collaborated with researchers to convey the physical and psychological sensations of mountain climbing. Similarly, the M A P project (Mueller, 2022), which involved artists from the performing arts, game design and creative writing, created an interactive poetic experience exploring time, space and human interaction during COVID-19. Hubrich's research (2016) highlights the role of artists as co-researchers in redefining musical interpretation through interdisciplinary practices. Several other studies emphasise the involvement of co-researchers from community theatre, particularly in addressing social issues. For instance, Hepplewhite's research (2014) focuses on marginalised groups, using theatre to explore empowerment and social change. Ashford Hart (2023) and Sibanda (2016) further illustrate how participatory theatre fosters community resilience and tackles socio-political challenges. These collaborations ensure that research remains rooted in creative practice, addressing complex issues through artistic expression.

Additionally, some CoR theatre projects involve scholars from various disciplines, enriching interdisciplinary research. In Bailey et al.'s (2009) study, for example, dance practitioners teamed up with e-Science researchers to develop new methodologies for choreographic research. Similarly, interdisciplinary teams in the M A P project and Cervera's study (2020) integrate technology and social change through theatre methodologies, demonstrating how diverse disciplines can collaborate to address complex challenges.

Four types of practice-based research

The classification of studies along two key dimensions has resulted in the identification of four types of PBR: practice-through-research—practitioner-led (PtR-Pled), research-through-practice—practitioner-led (RtP-Pled), practice-through-research—collaborative research (PtR-CoR) and research-through-practice—collaborative research (RtP-CoR).

In practice-through-research—practitioner-led (PtR-Pled) studies, the research is conducted by practitioner-researchers who integrate research activities into their professional work. These studies are driven by the practitioners' desire to gain deeper insights into their own practices, with the generated knowledge often having direct practical relevance. For instance, Lin et al. (2018) conducted a study as a secondary school teacher in Taiwan, where dissatisfaction with their own English as a Foreign Language teaching methods led them to develop and implement metacognitive learning strategies. The study involved a reflective process on the implementation of these strategies and their impact on students' learning outcomes.

Research-through-practice—practitioner-led studies (RtP-Pled), on the other hand, are led by practitioner-researchers who explore research problems within the context of practice or by employing practice as the primary research method. While these research problems may relate to specific practices, they frequently address broader research topic and from a broader, less personal perspective and aim to contribute general knowledge relevant to the profession. In these studies, practitioner-researchers collect data from a diverse array of sources, including interviews with professionals, practitioner case studies, ethnographic video recordings or questionnaires from audiences; for example, Lambrev (2023) explored how community-based learning can enhance teachers' professional competencies by conducting interviews with participants involved in group consultancy projects.

Practice-through-research—collaborative research (PtR-CoR) involves partnerships between researchers and practitioners, where the research is typically initiated collaboratively or by the practitioners themselves. These studies are focused on addressing problems that are closely tied to practice, with researchers taking on the role of facilitators who provide research training, supervision and ongoing support. For example, Reason and Heinemeyer (2016) conducted a collaborative study as part of a creative partnership between York Theatre Royal and York St John University. This study involved organising storytelling workshops incorporating drama, music and fine art to tackle challenge of how the practice of storytelling can reshape traditional hierarchies in art and knowledge that are maintained by institutions such as theatres, schools and universities.

Lastly, research-through-practice—collaborative research (RtP-CoR) involves a collaboration between researchers and practitioners, where the projects are typically initiated and designed by the researchers. Practitioners are invited to participate as co-investigators and, in some cases, also as participants, contributing their practical insights while actively engaging in the research. For example, Hepplewhite (2014) initiated a study involving practitioners in participatory theatre. She recorded the practitioners at work, using these recordings as a stimulus for follow-up dialogues between the practitioners and researchers. During these discussions, both parties reviewed and analysed the recordings to build knowledge around the complexity of decision-making in participatory theatre.

Table 6 displays the distribution of papers categorised along two key dimensions within the fields of ER and T. Figure 2 offers a visual comparison of this data, mapping the percentage distribution of studies in ER (blue) and T (orange) across four distinct types of PBR. The data reveal a clear tendency in both ER and T towards practitioner-led research, with collaborative research being less prevalent. Specifically, Pled accounts for 62% of studies in ER and 65% in T, while CoR is less represented, at 38% in ER and 35% in T. This suggests a similarity between the two disciplines along the Pled–CoR dimension. However, a notable divergence is observed along the second dimension: while educational scholars predominantly engage in PtR, with 63% of studies falling into this category, theatre scholars show a preference for RtP, representing 63% of studies. This inverse relationship—PtR at 63% in ER compared with 37% in T, and RtP at 37% in EER compared with 63% in T—indicates

TABLE 6 Comparison of practice-based research in Educational Research (ER) and Theatre (T).

	Educational research				Theatre			
	Pled		CoR		Pled		CoR	
	N	% of ER	N	% of ER	N	% of T	N	% of T
PtR	30	41%	16	22%	11	25%	5	12%
RtP	15	21%	12	16%	17	40%	10	23%

Abbreviations: CoR, Collaborative research; Pled, practitioner-led research; PtR, practice-through-research; RtP, research-through-practice.

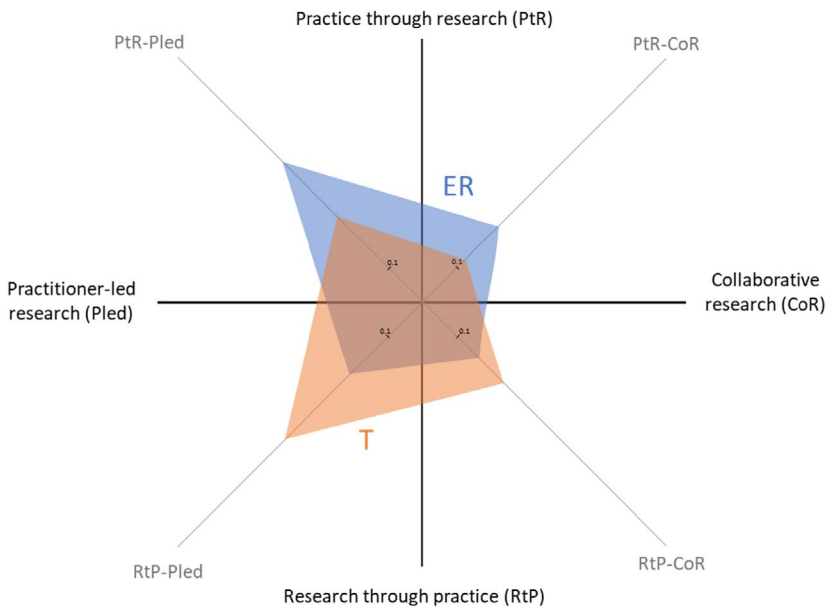


FIGURE 2 Types of practice-based research in Educational Research (ER) and Theatre (T).

significant differences between the two disciplines regarding their approach to PBR along the PtR–RtP dimension.

DISCUSSION

This scoping review of 116 PBR studies in Educational Research and Theatre revealed two key dimensions—aim of research and model of practice involvement—and identified four distinct types of PBR. Although previous research has individually addressed these dimensions as features of PBR—such as Candy's (2006) conceptualisation of PBR based on the primary focus of research and Shaw and Lunt's (2018) exploration of practice involvement models—this study contributes by integrating them across fields. Our study demonstrates that these two dimensions can be effectively combined to create a cross-disciplinary framework for analysing PBR, suggesting that PBR shares common characteristics across disciplines, even when applied in different contexts.

Furthermore, using this framework to compare disciplines revealed discipline-specific patterns in the applications of PBR. Our results indicate that practitioner-led research is more prevalent than collaborative research in both Educational Research and Theatre. This finding aligns with the existing literature, which suggests that establishing research-practice partnerships can be particularly challenging owing to various factors, including cultural and political differences between the work environments of practitioners and university researchers (e.g. Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Guerrero-Hernández & Fernández-Ugalde, 2020). Such partnerships require aligning differing research priorities, timelines and working practices, which can create significant barriers to collaboration. Additionally, prior studies have suggested that practitioner-led research is more common in the social sciences disciplines, such as social work, whereas collaborative research is more typical in clinical and health research (Shaw & Lunt, 2018), where collaborative efforts are more frequent, possibly owing to the need for large-scale studies that require diverse expertise. Our study supports this

pattern by confirming the higher prevalence of practitioner-led research in a social science discipline like education and extends this observation to the humanities, as seen in the arts.

While our results show that both ER and T exhibit similar tendencies regarding the model of practice involvement, they reveal inverse tendencies when it comes to the aim of research. Specifically, educational scholars tend to favour PtR, whereas theatre scholars are more inclined towards RtP. This divergence probably stems from the distinct roles that PBR fulfils within each discipline. In ER, PBR is one of several methodologies employed within the field, predominantly used by practitioner-researchers who seek to better understand and improve their professional practice. In this context, PBR serves as a tool for enhancing practice rather than a primary means of investigating broader research questions, which are often addressed through other, more established methodologies within the discipline.

In contrast, within Theatre, PBR often constitutes the core research methodology, reflecting the discipline's inherent nature as a practice-oriented field. Theatre is generally regarded as a form of practice rather than a traditional research domain, which necessitates the use of PBR to explore and answer research questions. In this way, PBR in T is not merely a method among many but is central to the discipline's approach to generating knowledge. This fundamental difference explains why T scholars are more inclined towards RtP, as it aligns with their need to investigate and theorise practice itself.

These findings highlight the nuanced ways in which PBR is integrated and valued across different disciplines, influenced by the unique demands and traditions of each field. Our framework not only offers a lens for analysing PBR in educational and theatre research but also holds potential for broader applicability across other disciplines. For instance, in social work, where practical interventions are key, practitioner-led research may dominate, while in architecture and design, collaborative models might prevail due to the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate technical expertise, creativity, and stakeholder engagement. In the medical and health sciences, where PBR often intersects with clinical practice, this framework could aid in differentiating between research that seeks to improve clinical practice (PtR) and research that uses clinical practice as a means to generate new knowledge (RtP). This distinction could help clarify the roles of practitioners in these studies and ensure that their contributions are appropriately recognised and utilised.

Limitations and future research

Our study's methodology, while rigorous, has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, using the WoS to search for studies in ER and T has certain drawbacks, particularly owing to the limited coverage of Social Sciences and Humanities research in international bibliographic databases (Kulczycki et al., 2018; Sivertsen, 2019). Nevertheless, we selected WoS owing to its capacity to conduct comprehensive and standardised literature searches across a wide range of disciplines, which was essential for our interdisciplinary study.

Another limitation lies in the study selection process, particularly in deciding whether to exclude studies based on the criterion that they must be conducted by practitioners. This criterion proved challenging to apply consistently, as the role of practitioners and the occupational status of researchers were not always explicitly clear. Often, determining whether a study met this criterion required a thorough reading of full texts to identify if practitioners were actively engaged in the research process. Even when practitioners were explicitly described as co-investigators, their contributions were not always reflected in authorship or acknowledgements, making their roles less visible. This issue is not unique to our study; it is a recognised challenge in research investigating practitioner–researcher collaborations using bibliometric data (Chang, 2017; Fujimoto et al., 2015).

To mitigate this ambiguity, we adopted a conservative approach, excluding studies where there was uncertainty regarding the practitioner's involvement. While this approach ensured a higher level of confidence in the included studies, it may have inadvertently led to the exclusion of some relevant research.

Furthermore, our reliance on keywords related to 'practice-based research' in our search strategy posed additional limitations. The term 'practice-based research' is employed in diverse ways across various contexts, and does not always align with the definition of PBR used in our study. A significant number of studies were excluded during the full-text screening stage because they did not meet the criterion of active practitioner involvement. This highlights a broader issue within the field: the inconsistency in how PBR is labelled and defined. Researchers may label their work as 'practice-based' or 'practitioner research' even when practitioners' roles are limited to participants or subjects of the study, rather than active collaborators. Conversely, some PBR studies may not be explicitly labelled as such, leading to their omission in systematic literature searches.

Based on these limitations, we offer recommendations for future research. Firstly, we encourage authors to provide clearer and more detailed descriptions of the research process and the specific roles of practitioners in their studies. This transparency would enhance the reliability and validity of studies claiming to be practice-based. Secondly, in contexts where the roles of researchers and researched individuals are blurred, as is often the case in PBR, it is crucial for researchers to disclose their positionality and role within the study. This practice is exemplified by several studies that included reflective accounts of the researchers' involvement and positionality (e.g. Czerniawski, 2023; Seehawer, 2018; Shannon-Baker, 2018). Furthermore, future research could enhance the comprehensiveness of similar reviews by incorporating a wider range of bibliographic databases, such as those recommended by Sivertsen (2019).

CONCLUSION

Practice-based research has become increasingly popular, yet there is still a lack of studies that examine PBR across different research fields. In this comprehensive scoping review, we analysed 116 studies from education and theatre research, developing a framework that categorises PBR studies into four distinct types. This framework allows researchers to compare approaches, explore the complex relationships between practice and research and identify patterns specific to each discipline. As PBR continues to grow and expand into new areas, having a systematic way to analyse and compare its applications across fields will be essential for advancing both knowledge and practice.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The research leading to these results received funding from the Excellence Initiative—Research University Program (University of Warsaw) under grant agreement no. 501-D203-20-5004310.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval was not required for this study.

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Endnote

¹Dimension 2 aligns with the categorisation proposed by Shaw and Lunt (2018), who classified practitioner research in social work based on the occupational status of researchers. We have adapted their labels—retaining ‘Practitioner-led’ and modifying ‘Academic Partnerships’ to ‘Collaborative Research’—to fit our framework.

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How to cite this article: Lewandowska, K. & Bojnarowicz, M. (2025). Practice-based educational and theatre research: A scoping review. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4127>

APPENDIX A

A.1 | References to included studies

A.1.1. | Included studies (n = 116)

Educational Research studies are denoted with '[ER]' and Theatre studies with '[T]' at the end of the reference.

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APPENDIX B**B.1 | Variables extracted from included studies**

1. Metadata	
Authors, year, title, journal, issue, pages	
2. Variables	Examples
Practice-based research approach (as stated in the study)	Practice-based research Practitioner research
Study summary	This study examines how professional learning groups (PLGs) can support pre-service teachers in developing practitioner inquiry skills to enhance their classroom practice. Drawing on data from student feedback, it highlights the potential of PLGs to address challenges in preparing teachers to engage in research and foster a culture of continuous learning in teacher education
Study aim	To explore how a collegial peer observation model can enhance mutual professional growth and foster learning and collaboration among faculty members
Researcher's (author's) occupational status	Practitioner-researcher (mathematics teacher conducting their PhD research)
Methods	Semi-structured group interviews with schoolchildren, based on a pre-written script allowing for focused yet flexible conversations between the practitioner-interviewer and the children. Children also participated in a series of exercises referred to as 'elicitation' (e.g. drawing, analysing objects from Israel, etc.)
Participants (type)	University students (fourth-year Bachelor of Education students)
Participants (tasks)	Participants (students) completed community-based group consultancy projects as part of their preparation in a professional education practice programme. They then answered open-ended questionnaires on how the course's conditions enabled or constrained the development of practitioner-research practices
Participants (role) (passive/active/dual)	Passive: participants were the subject of the study/Active: participants acted as co-investigators/Dual: participants acted both as subjects and co-investigators
Co-investigators (type)	Teachers (secondary school) NA (no co-investigators involved in the project)
Co-investigators (tasks)	Co-investigators (mid-career and experienced English language teachers) acted as members of the consultation group. They also provided reflections on observed classes, which were analysed by the author alongside transcripts from the consultation group meetings
Practitioner involvement (general)	Co-investigators, no participants/Participants, no co-investigators/Co-investigators are participants/Co-investigators and participants
Study initiator	Researcher(s)/Practitioner(s)/Collaboratively
Co-investigator acknowledgement	NA