

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter explains briefly why Singapore and metropolitan NSW have been chosen for this comparative study. It then provides a brief background and history of the two cases under study explaining how the two communities evolved in terms of management. This helps to describe how context is mediating practitioner research in Singapore and in NSW.

Choice of Singapore and NSW for a Comparative Study

When making a comparison across cultures ‘things’ must be of the same class or order in some way and occur in a spatial and temporal framework of (about) the same dimensions. In true comparison, Macfarlane (2004) states, there should “simultaneously [be] a good deal of overlap and similarity, but also considerable differences ... we need examples of countries which have some deep similarities ... but also very deep differences” (pp.102-109) – much like Singapore and NSW. Both are developed countries situated on the Pacific rim and rank highly in many international comparisons of national performance including public education (e.g. Programme for International Student Assessment). Both have responded to globalisation through moves towards the marketization and decentralization of education with both education systems currently undergoing change and reform. At the same time, there exist sufficient cultural differences between the two, in terms of race, language, religion and history, to satisfy Macfarlane’s conditions and thereby justify the viability of this comparative study.

Furthermore, contemporaneously, the central bureaus in Singapore and NSW encourage teachers in secondary schools to engage in practitioner research as part of their professional development and learning. This study will demonstrate that while many of the experiences of teachers as practitioner researchers are the same, considerable differences can and do occur due to the contexts in which the research practice transpires. The form the research enterprise assumes in Singapore and NSW is unique to each context shaped largely by differences in history, culture and policy.

Description of the Two Sites

Australia and Singapore are both former British colonies: Australia, a commonwealth realm since 1942 and Singapore, a republic since 1965. They are both advanced economies (International Monetary Fund, 2009) and enjoy developed country status as measured by the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Australia has several different state education systems. This study focuses on New South Wales, specifically schools in metropolitan Sydney. As Campbell (2007) notes, Sydney's "great population and significance" suggests its story is "crucial ... in the national context" (p.2).

Sydney and Singapore are major economic centers on the Pacific ring. Singapore is 100 per cent urbanized, has a population of approximately 5.08 million and occupies a land area of 710.3 square kilometres (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). The Sydney Metropolitan Area by comparison has a slightly smaller population of 4.2 million while the urban area is more than twice the size of Singapore covering approximately 1,687 square kilometres (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010b). Race is an important element in Singaporean identity (Sim & Print, 2009, p.710). The ethnic composition of the resident population of Singapore is approximately 74 per cent Chinese, 13 per cent Malay and 9.2 per cent Indian (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). Sydney comprises a cosmopolitan and international population of people from many places around the world, the most common self-described ancestries being Australian, British and Chinese. Asian Australians (self reported ethnicity being classified as Northeast Asian, Southeast Asian or South Asian and Central Asian) constitute about 17 percent of Sydney's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010c).

The School System in Singapore

Singapore is a multilingual island nation "widely hailed as an educational success story" (Dixon, 2009, p.117). It has gained worldwide recognition through its excellent results on international comparisons such as the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), being described as "one of the world's ... most advanced and successful education systems" (OECD, 2011, p.174) and "top of the class" (Luke, Freebody, Lau & Gopinathan, 2005, p.8). The Ministry of Education (MOE) manages and maintains considerable control over both government and private schools. Curriculum development is centralized under the

MOE and political leaders can “wield direct influence” over certain curricula matters (Sim & Print, 2009, p.707). In 2010 there were approximately 170 government secondary schools, including the independent, autonomous, and specialist schools (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010). Singapore also hosts many international and private schools due to its large expatriate community. English is the primary medium of instruction in government schools, all students being required to study a “mother tongue” in addition to English as part of the official bilingual education policy.

Efficiency-based education.

Over the years, education in Singapore has evolved considerably from the inherited British-based system. After World War II there was a political awakening amongst the local populace and the rise of anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments. Following sustained political agitation Singapore became an independent republic on 9 August 1965. At that time Singapore was “an underdeveloped economy with high unemployment” (Sim & Print, 2009, p.706). Facing many uncertainties, the small island nation embarked on a modernization programme which included investing heavily in public education, seen to be a pressing problem at that time. Many political leaders and observers around the world were sceptical that Singapore would thrive (Henry Kissinger cited in Dixon, 2009), it seeming at the time “an unlikely candidate to become a world-class economic and educational powerhouse” (OECD, 2011, p.160). The overriding priority for the government was, and remains, economic growth “where the ability to sustain it legitimizes the centralized state apparatus” (Sim & Print, 2009, p.706).

Education has always been linked to the growth and development of Singapore, particularly in the years following independence (Ng, 2007). “The overall belief that the education system is a prime engine of economy, nation and identity” is shared by most Singaporeans, observes Luke et al. (2005, p.8). There exists a “powerful ideological and cultural consensus” on the national significance of education. Consequently, education is afforded paramount position in the government’s public policy agendas (Mok, 2003). As a young nation in the post-colonial days, Singapore concentrated on mass education to cater to a growing population and provide the manpower to sustain economic growth. The educational model adopted was one of efficiency with an emphasis on standardization and uniformity.

The Singapore government has always engaged in a “prescriptive approach”, emphasizing pragmatism and rationality while tweaking policies as conditions change (Dixon, 2009; OECD, 2011; Sim & Print, 2009). As the promised stability and economic gains materialized, Singaporeans were willing to “more readily” accept government policy and because the People’s Action Party (PAP) has been consistently returned to power since 1965, continuity in education policy has been possible (Dixon).

Compulsory bilingualism was introduced in 1966 in response to political and ethnic pressures. Then following a review, a system of streaming was introduced in 1979 to counter the problem of “educational wastage”. It was determined that students of like-ability would be channelled into appropriate courses of education in order to reduce the drop-out rate schools had been experiencing. Streaming continues to be sustained in 2011 whereby students are placed in different secondary education tracks or streams based on results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

Ability-based education.

Following an economic recession in 1985-86, an Economic Committee recommended education be re-tooled to develop the “maximum potential” of every student. “Creativity and flexible skills” were to be promoted in schools in order to maintain Singapore’s international competitiveness in the global economy (Mok, 2003; Ng, 2007). From 1987 there began a gradual shift towards an ability-driven education in which the general idea was to develop each kind of human talent to its maximum potential. A key initiative of this period was that of greater autonomy for schools with the establishment of the state-funded independent schools and “various categories of schools with specialized curricular missions” (Luke, et al., 2005, p.10). There was a move towards decentralized, school-based management and a diversification of school type (Luke, et al., 2005; Mok, 2003; OECD, 2011).

The promulgation of globalization in the late 1990s necessitated a further rethinking of policy and emphasis. Convinced that the knowledge-based economy requires workers who are more innovative, the aim of education was to allow flexibility and diversity for pupils to develop the skills necessary to compete in the global economy and become useful citizens. There was a paradigm shift towards a focus on “innovation, creativity and research” (OECD, 2011, p.162). The introduction of “Thinking schools, learning nation” (TSLN), first announced by

the Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in July, 1997, heralded a wave of reform in education in Singapore (Mok, 2003; Ng, 2007; Ng P.T., 2008). The TSLN initiative pushed the system towards “a more student-centred, active learning paradigm, with the aim of producing autonomous and independent learners” (Luke et al., 2005, p.10). The MOE wished to produce school-leavers who were innovative thinkers capable of producing “their own solutions” to whatever new problems they may face in an increasingly uncertain future.

In 2002 there was a review of upper secondary/junior college education. Alternatives to the existing standardized examinations were introduced along with greater diversification of the educational landscape. The Integrated Programme commenced in various secondary schools, catering to the top 10% of students, providing the scope to allow alternative curricula and qualifications, such as the International Baccalaureate (Luke, et al., 2005, p.10). In addition, schools specialising in sports, art and mathematics and science were created (OECD, 2011).

From the 1990s all schools were organized into geographical zones and clusters. There are four Zonal Branches, namely the North, South, East, and West, each under the supervision of a Deputy Director. Each zone is further divided into seven clusters with a mixture of 12 to 13 primary and secondary schools in each. The role of the Cluster Superintendents is to develop, guide and supervise the school leadership teams to ensure that schools are effectively run. They also ensure that there is networking, sharing and collaboration among the member schools within the cluster.

Future directions.

The perennial challenge for Singapore, as observed by Luke et al. (2005), is the sustainability of a vulnerable and “geographically small, multiracial and multireligious” (p.25) city state. As a small country with little primary industry and natural resources, Singapore has defined its future as “an information/service/digital economy driven by educational investment and development” (pp.7-8). The latest education reform reinforces the shift from an “efficiency-driven system” to one focused on “quality and choice of learning” (Tharman, 2005). There is a growing recognition that a “one size shoe fits all” curriculum is no longer relevant in meeting the needs, aptitudes and abilities of students (Ng P.T., 2008) with a paradigm shift away from “the didactic, traditional and rote reproductive” model of pedagogy (Luke et al., 2005, p.11). Learning is now viewed as an active process with a focus on developing a “habit

of inquiry” in each child. Schools are encouraged to experiment with school-based curriculum so that their pupils are more engaged in learning.

Ng Eng Hen, the then Minister for Education, stated that as a small city state, with limited resources, Singapore’s strategy is simple. Every educational institution must be “the best in class”. Elaborating he stated:

Our institutions must provide learning that is current, relevant and make a difference to their students, industry and the overall economy. They must enhance their international standing by leveraging on technology and international partnerships. If we can maintain this focus on quality, we will be able to provide more opportunities to help our young people to develop their interests and talents to the fullest. (2008)

Some are critical whether a transformation of the education system can be achieved so easily and readily though. Ng Pak Tee (2008) stresses that system-wide transformation poses a “tremendous challenge” (p.12) and argues that changes in pedagogical practices can only occur if there is an accompanying shift in epistemological beliefs. He also recommends that there be deliberations about assessment practices and entrenched cultures. He believes the “worst enemy of progress and reform” may be the success the current education system has enjoyed (p.13) and that provision must be made to address “deep and subtle issues” (p.14). It “remains to be seen” (p.14) if Singapore can achieve its wide-ranging educational reforms.

The Singapore education system in the 21st century faces challenges that are unique. The policy question is about how to take schooling and education in Singapore to the “next level”. Yet, as Luke et al. (2005) observe, “there are few international prototypes of what such a level might be” (p.8). Confronted with “a dearth” of international benchmarks, Singapore has now entered into an era of system-wide innovation and reform.

The School System in New South Wales

NSW is Australia’s most populous state with approximately 63% of the state’s population based in Sydney. Education is compulsory in Australia and is provided by both government (public) and non-government schools (Santiago, Donaldson, Herman & Shewbridge, 2011). Although Australia became a federation in 1901, responsibility for education remained with each of the six states. The former Minister for Education and Training has claimed that NSW

leads the nation with the “most efficient and best performing public school system” (Firth, 2010). Students in NSW consistently outperform their peers in other states on many standardised tests (Marks & Creswell, 2005) and achieve academic standards “comparable with the highest in the world” (NSW DET, 2010b). The NSW public education system is one of the largest in the world (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.9; Vinson, 2002, p.xxv) with 14.4 billion dollars allocated in the 2010/11 budget for education and training and over 294 thousand students enrolled in 398 government secondary schools (NSW DET, 2011).

The tradition of comprehensive schools.

The NSW school system comprises a kindergarten to year twelve system. Typically, a secondary school, usually called a “high school”, provides education from years 7 to 12, to students aged (approximately) 13 to 18 years. The NSW education system embarked on a surge of reform following World War II. The comprehensive high school emerged as an “educational ‘wave of the future’” (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.1). It was envisioned that such schools would “provide a ‘little society’ in which all the classes might mix in order to know one another and become a united citizenry” (p.30). While providing a general education for a diverse range of students it was envisaged that such schools would make provision for the academically-able, university-bound students as well.

In order to meet the needs of all communities across the state, it was believed that public education was best organized from the centre. Curriculum reform remained for the most part controlled by the central bureau. The state, through control of public examinations and credentials, forced “a degree of coherence over education in New South Wales as a whole” (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.55). As opposed to some other states, NSW has “firmly held to the principle that there should be public examinations and centralized control of the senior school curriculum” (p.127). Policy thinking in 2010 was that the Higher School Certificate “is for all students” and is required to provide a curriculum structure which encourages students to complete secondary education.

Neo-liberalism and free markets.

The tendency for schools to respond to the local character of schooling populations was limited in Australia until the end of the 70’s due to the centralized control that state

bureaucracies exercised over public education. But from the 1970s through to the 1990s, there was mounting criticism of the comprehensive school model, corresponding with the rise of neo-liberal views and an emphasis on the utility of free markets. As Campbell and Sherington (2006) explain, policy-makers believed competition within public schools might be encouraged “by removing regulated monopolies over geographically defined school populations, [and] by increasing levels of autonomy over budgets, staffing, and curriculum in individual schools” (p.2). Schools were encouraged to become more “specialist” and “less comprehensive” in order to appeal to identifiable segments of a market with the stated aim of increasing parental choice in schooling (Proctor, 2008, p.124; Vinson, 2002, p.xix).

Consequently, since the 1980s there has been a move by the NSW government to replace standard comprehensive schools with a range of specialist schools including junior and senior high schools, selective and non-selective schools so that by the 1990s, the NSW secondary school system contained “a variety of diverse schools” (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.115). In 2011, the public high school options included coeducational high schools, single-sex high schools, central schools, multi-campus colleges, specialist high schools and academically selective high schools (NSW DET, 2010a) with approximately 200 government secondary schools functioning in the Sydney Metropolitan area.

Non-government schools.

Australia has one of the largest non-government school sectors in the Western world and over the last twenty years there have been “public funding and student population shifts towards private and nongovernment schooling” (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.1). Non-government schools include Catholic and Anglican schools, other faith-based schools, and non-denominational independent schools. Although non-government schools receive public funding, they have few limitations placed on them with regard to curriculum obligations and the population they include. Consequently, they exercise more autonomy than government schools.

Traditionally many of the non-government schools have been church-affiliated but now there are also increasing numbers of non-government schools based in communities defined by specific ethnic, national, and religious characteristics. As observed by Campbell and Sherington (2006), due to the neoliberal policy inspired changes in school funding policies,

poorly funded government comprehensive schools are now finding it more difficult to retain students from wealthier and academically advantaged backgrounds (p.162). Although the majority of students in Australia attend government schools there has been a declining percentage enrolling in this sector (Campbell, 2007, p.8). While there has been a substantial movement from all social groupings towards non-government schooling (Campbell, p.17) there has been a middle class “retreat” in particular of both teachers and students from public secondary schooling in Sydney and a “flight” towards the private, non-government sector (Campbell, 2007; Proctor, 2008). In 2010, 66.3% of students in NSW were attending government secondary schools compared with 33.8% of students attending non-government secondary schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a).

Diversity between regions.

Even in a centralised system as large as NSW regional differences exist. This is especially so in Sydney which is the most ethnically diverse region of NSW. Often schools have a different social composition depending on the district and region. Because of the regional diversity in Sydney and New South Wales, the policies generated from centralized governments often play out differently in different regions (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.148). Each region has its own peculiar mix of factors.

There are four different regions within the Sydney Metropolitan area, namely the Northern Sydney, Sydney, South Western Sydney, and Western Sydney regions. Each region, covering a large geographical area, is under the supervision of a Regional Director who can exercise a high degree of autonomy. The schools in each region are then organized into smaller groups, along geographical lines, which tend to follow Local Government Areas (LGAs). Each of these School Education Groups is in turn supported by a School Education Director.

Decentralization and greater autonomy for schools.

Since the 1980s, in response to globalization, advanced industrialized countries have been engaging in reviews of their education systems in order to enhance their national capacity and “competitiveness” (Mok, 2003). Educational policy responses in the West tended to focus on decentralization and school-based management, accountability and testing, teacher quality and the “marketisation and commodification” of education (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban,

2009; Luke et al., 2005; Mok, 2003; Tan, Macdonald & Rossi, 2009). However, although such policies have become the trend “there is no consensus” that decentralization and marketization are necessarily effective (Mok, p.350).

From the 1990s, the Federal Government in Australia has increasingly become involved in shaping the educational landscape through a national schools policy. Campbell and Sherington (2006) observe, “As in other areas of government, the concepts of ‘quality’ and other ‘measurable outcomes’ had begun to enter the policy discourse of education” (p.96).

In NSW, a number of policy initiatives seemed to indicate a commitment by the Department towards decentralization and to devolution to the level of individual schools. In 1988, public schools were formally de-zoned, allowing parents to enrol their children outside their local school district. At the same time, school principals were given greater autonomy. They could exercise influence over recruiting their own executive and teaching staff. Each principal was provided a local budget and given autonomy to allocate resources. More recently, substantial budget increases were given to schools for teacher professional development. Even so, government schools still retain very limited autonomy. There are many administrative rigidities in place meaning schools have little discretionary power (Patty, 2010) and the view of teachers and many administrators is that the NSW DET remains a highly centralised system (Patty, 2010; Vinson, 2002).

Campbell and Sherington (2006) conclude:

Where there have been attempts to decentralize administration or develop decision making at various times in the late twentieth century, there was never any doubt that in the end, it was the state government through its Education Department that controlled public schooling, even if the directions of federal funding programs increasingly constrained many aspects of policy making. (pp.118-119)

Practitioner Research within Professional Learning Agendas

Many education authorities embrace practitioner research as part of their professional learning agenda and as a means of improving classroom practice in schools (Campbell & McNamara, 2009) to the extent that the practitioner research movement has been described as “burgeoning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009b; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005). Carr

and Kemmis (2005) note that practitioner research has become, “A full-grown international movement sustained by a large number of teachers, teacher educators and educational researchers, and supported by numerous educational institutions and research agencies throughout the world” (p.351). I argue that the central bureaus both in Singapore and NSW encourage the notion of practitioner research in schools.

In Singapore there has been a nationwide drive to encourage innovation and research. More autonomy has been given to schools in an effort to encourage more innovation (OECD, 2011). The “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” vision, announced in 1997, and successive supporting initiatives have been significant “in promoting notions of reflective practice and action research” in schools (Hairon, 2006, p.514). The “Teach Less Learn More” (TLLM) initiative, first referred to in a speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during the 2004 National Day Rally (Lee, 2004), was officially launched in 2005. Essentially it is about transforming student learning from an emphasis on quantity to an emphasis on quality (for a description see Ng P.T., 2008). The MOE has committed substantial structural and resource support hoping to achieve such transformation through pedagogical advancement and innovation, the Singapore government being characterised by a “willingness ... to invest considerable resources in education” (OECD, 2011, p.165).

The purview of the recently formed Curriculum Policy and Pedagogy Unit (CPPU) is to spearhead and support the conceptualisation, development, and implementation of effective learner-centred pedagogies in schools and to facilitate professional learning and sharing on pedagogical and assessment issues (MOE, 2010). This includes the roll out of “TLLM Ignite”, one initiative under the TLLM umbrella. Schools embracing TLLM Ignite can apply for substantial funding to support innovation and research in the school. Each school nominates a teacher to be trained as a Research Activist (RA) to lead the project. It was envisaged that every school will have adopted the programme and have a trained RA by 2011. The Singapore Minister for Education has described the MOE’s approach as a “bottom up initiative, top down support” (Tharman, 2005).

In NSW, the current professional learning agenda for teachers has largely been shaped in response to recommendations made in the Vinson Report (2002) (also known as the First Report) which encouraged and underwrote practitioner research, in particular, action research / action learning (ARAL). The report asserted that professional

development is a “career long task”. There needs to be continuous development of teachers’ professional competence, developing patterns of professional collaboration around teaching and learning so that teachers work with other teachers “within and across schools to devise and evaluate new pedagogies” (p.xii). The authors advocated the idea of “reflective practitioners” (p.35), emphasising the value of professional development taking place in practice environments so that it is “part of an everyday process of improvement that takes place in its natural setting” (p.16). They maintained that “bottom-up ownership of pedagogic reforms is crucial” (p.38)

In addition to promoting a type of collegial professional development across schools, the Vinson Report also supported the establishment of an Institute of Teachers, the establishment of a Professional Development Committee in each school, and an “increase in the per capita funding for professional development” (p.15). As a response to the report there were “substantial budget increases for teacher professional development” (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p.128).

Over the past decade, many NSW state schools successfully tendered for project grants to implement school-based and school-driven action learning within the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools framework as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) (Dinham, Aubusson & Brady, 2008). In addition, as part of the Middle Years Action Research Projects, \$750,000 was invested across the state to establish projects that provide innovative solutions at the school level (NSW DET, 2009b). Action research/action learning (ARAL) is now listed as a “Key Strategy” in the Professional Learning Continuum framework that guides the development of all school staff and is “used across all stages of the Professional Learning Continuum” (NSW DET, 2009a).

The Professional Teaching Standards developed by the NSW Institute of Teachers in partnership with teachers from around NSW, and first published in February 2005, will likely further impact teachers doing research in schools, especially in future years. It is now explicitly articulated that teachers need to demonstrate their involvement in some sort of school-based research as part of their on-going professional development (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2011).

Conclusion

The MOE and DET are complex organizations. As both are divided into different regions which are granted a degree of autonomy, it is understandable there might be different interpretations of policy. Many advocates of practitioner research are critical of how it is implemented in schools in a “top-down” fashion or is currently practised and understood (Carr & Kemmis, 2005). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005) are critical that practitioner research has been “appropriated as an implementation tool” (p.3) while Kemmis (2006) is critical of action research “conducted solely to implement government policies or programmes” (p.460). Furthermore, there can be strong resistance to policy messages implemented in a top-down fashion (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Cordingley, 2008; Dyer, 1999; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Somekh, 1994). So while it appears that policy-makers within the MOE and DET might value the notion of practitioner research, it is not clear whether it is indeed embraced and valued on the ‘coalface’ by school leaders and teachers. This research issue is investigated here.