

**WORKING IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS**

Two broad themes emerged in the analysis of the data: ‘*The Context in Which Practitioner Research Transpires*’ and ‘*Practitioner Research as Understood and Valued*’. The first theme relates to illuminating the site of the social and is linked to the idea of the prefiguration, conflict and coherence of practices as articulated by Schatzki (2002). The second broad theme is concerned with the way practitioner research is understood (the ‘sayings’), practised (the ‘doings’), and transmitted. It also relates to the concept of forming a critical view of schools and of ‘conscientization’ as articulated by Freire (1974, 1985). The relationship of these themes to the research questions is illustrated in Figure 2. The main categories and sub-categories that constitute these themes are then illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

*The two broad themes, corresponding categories and sub-categories.*

<b>Main Categories</b>	<b>Sub- Categories</b>
<b>The Context in which Practitioner Research Transpires</b>	
Working in Different Contexts and Settings	Cultural Characteristics
	Policies, Programmes and Support
Constraints and Enablers	Facilitators
	Barriers and Conflicting Practices
<b>Practitioner Research as Understood and Valued</b>	
Practitioner Research as Understood and Practised	Definitions of Research
	Teacher Identity and Disposition
	Transmission of Practices
The Value of Practitioner Research	Teacher Facility
	The Pervasiveness of Research
	Effecting Change and Social Good

Results of this study are discussed in this and consecutive chapters according to the four main categories nested under the two broad themes. The main categories are: ‘*Working in Different Contexts and Settings*’, ‘*Constraints and Enablers*’, ‘*Practitioner Research as Understood and Practised*’, and ‘*The Value of Practitioner Research*’. These categories are not discrete or separate entities but closely inter-relate and overlap. Thereby similar issues are

sometimes discussed across categories. Embracing Stake (1995), I do not seek here “to describe fully the case” but rather “seek to make sense of certain observations of the case” (p.76). I then describe and illustrate the various categories and subcategories with excerpts from the interviews in order to present “a substantial body of uncontested description” (p.110).

The following tableau that is presented is necessarily transitory in nature. It describes phenomena, as perceived by respondents, around a particular time (2009 to 2010) when I conducted the interviews with them. Practitioner research occurs within the site of the social as part of a mesh of arrangements and activities, hence the events explained are prone to flux and change over time, as Schatzki (2002) has described, rather than being something fixed, permanent or stable.

The main category discussed in this chapter, *Working in different contexts and settings*, describes the context in which teachers in Singapore and NSW work as practitioner researchers. There are two sub-categories within this category: *Cultural characteristics*; and, *Policies, programmes and support*. This provides the context to help illustrate in further discussion how differences in culture or policy might inform and shape teachers’ experience as practitioner researchers.

### **Cultural Characteristics**

A teacher’s professional development will be shaped by “the identity of the profession” and through “enculturation” (Swet, Ponte and Smit 2007, p.i), culture being defined as the internalized reality, accepted values and norms a group shares (Freire, 1974). This dimension describes the values, beliefs and practices suggested by respondents that are idiosyncratic of each of the two cultures under study, Singapore and NSW.

#### **Singapore**

Results of the study suggest the following are some of the cultural characteristics of the region and the education system alluded to by the academics, policy makers and teachers interviewed. Meritocracy and competition are hallmarks of the Singapore education system.

In addition, many parents are ‘kiasu’, an attitude or behavior which engenders being competitive at any cost. As a consequence of these pressures, teachers often felt constrained to “teach to the test”. The educational landscape has changed considerably over the last 30 years in Singapore with greater autonomy being granted to regions, schools and teachers. It is questionable whether there exists blind obedience to authority, yet there remained a dependency of schools and teachers on their superiors for direction. Although there has existed and exists an emphasis on efficiency and performance and a preference towards a positivist paradigm in research and the presentation of data, professionalization and “upping the capacity” of teachers was a movement in place across the entire teaching force and an evolving and maturing system was evident. Many senior bureaucrats characteristically display a sophisticated grasp of academic issues and research while there is an increasing awareness among teachers of different research methodologies.

### **Meritocracy, competition, and ‘kiasuism’.**

A dominant belief among respondents is that ‘everything in Singapore is driven by efficiency’ and meritocracy is pervasive. One academic noted that because all “teachers are controlled by performance appraisal” (A1) and schools are ranked, both schools and teachers tend to be highly competitive. A teacher (C3) summed up, “It is a competition, in Singapore” and postulated that teachers will likely be interested in research if they believe it will give them a competitive advantage. The DD, CPPU, observed that as schools are all anxious to excel often they “tend to be overambitious in planning proposals” (B1) when tendering for funds to support a research enterprise in the school.

Several respondents unprompted referred to the phenomenon ‘kiasuism’. As explained by one respondent, the term ‘kiasu’ appropriated from the Hokkien dialect and used ubiquitously across Singapore, means “afraid to lose out” (E3), to be competitive at all costs. Parents “are afraid that their children will not do as well compared to other people in society”. One academic explained:

I think the culture of *Kiasuism* is quite pervasive ... [it] is like a competition, we compete among ourselves, and so as a result of this, we do not want to lose out ... it is ... more of the Chinese character, of the ethnic groups. But ... in Singapore, it is so pervasive across the whole country. (A1)

As a consequence of the “*kiasu* syndrome” and pressure from parents, several respondents were of the view that research is often low on the priority list of schools and teachers. In the eyes of parents and the public, the curriculum and results are paramount and this is where schools should focus their energy and effort. A tension exists. Schools and teachers embracing “*kiasuism*” are prone to embrace innovation and research in the belief it might give them “an edge” but simultaneously are stymied by parental expectations.

### **Teaching to the test.**

A sentiment dominant among respondents is that throughout schools in Singapore there is a “preoccupation with exam results” and schools are “very focused on academic performance” (E3). Some respondents observed that teachers will be reluctant to embrace change, innovation or research “when the exam result is what really matters” (D4) hence a need for systemic change as “right now in Singapore we are still very focused on pen and paper assessment” (E3) and “drilling” students.

One academic (A3) who had worked extensively with teachers on collaborative research projects observed that teachers were “pretty savvy about the fact that both students and parents and therefore eventually principals would complain about your teaching if you weren’t teaching directly to the tests” and hence they felt frustrated and constrained not having the degree of freedom they would like to experiment and innovate. A teacher (E3) concurred stating, “I think parents from all levels are very concerned about academic performance ... [they] are aware of the importance of education, aware in Singapore, you really need your paper qualification to get you a good job”.

### **Continual change and upgrading teacher capacity.**

During the course of the interviews respondents constantly talked about change. The concept of change seems to have been embedded into the psyche of teachers. Perceptions were that there is constant, ongoing evolution and change; that the educational landscape, policy and practice is continually, if not relentlessly, changing in Singapore. One cluster superintendent explained that “Singapore education has gone through a dramatic shift over 30 years” and that “there has been evolution as far as the role of the teacher is concerned” (B3). This

“evolution” involves a move away from the reliance on “teacher proof materials” to more autonomy for schools and teachers “to develop their own curriculum materials”. While in some literature Singapore has been typified as “centralized under the Ministry of Education” (Sim and Print, 2009, p.707), respondents in Singapore perceive that more recently there is a perceptible move to grant schools greater power, autonomy and control.

Consecutively there has been a conscious move to encourage teachers to upgrade their capacity. Human capital is viewed as paramount in Singapore, one academic (A3) explaining, “We don’t have iron ore in the ground. We don’t have sugar or wheat fields or sheep. We have people”. Several respondents referred to “upping the capacity of teachers”, either a need to, or a phenomenon that is in place, one teacher (E1) referring to an “initiative nationally ... to get teachers to be professional”. A cluster superintendent described how over the past 50 years “the quality of teachers has changed quite dramatically” (B3) while the DD, CPUU, observed “an emerging, pattern or trend... of an increasing number of people embarking on a Masters” (B1).

#### **Autonomy for regions and schools.**

A principal sentiment expressed by both academics and policy makers was that schools and teachers have increasingly been granted greater autonomy by the central bureau. This consequently impacts on teachers conducting practitioner research in schools. A cluster superintendent explained, “The MOE can no longer be the master of everything ... There has been a major shift in the ways schools are run ... There is a system where people are given greater autonomy to do things, including curriculum” (B3). Principals are seen as “curriculum leaders” and schools a “learning environment, not just for students but for teachers”. Each school is unique having “its own ecosystem”.

An academic (A2) explained that practitioner research is being encouraged by the MOE: in the effort to have a more ground-up, teacher owned practice. It is really about capacity building, about wanting schools to do things in a way that they are committed to, to develop areas which they will want to further develop. I think that in a bigger context it has to be located within the whole movement to make schools a bit more autonomous, do their own thing and not always have curriculum or practice

dictated by the Ministry. So I think that it is part and parcel of this whole endeavour to build capacity, and to give schools more independence.

However it is debatable as to whether teachers are willing to embrace the autonomy given them. One academic (A1) believes there exists a culture of “following instructions”. He believes that when it comes to the “top down support, bottom up initiative” advocated by the MOE, “the message has been lost” and that teachers do not understand what is required or meant. He further contends that there is “an ingrained culture of relying on manuals and templates”. Such a belief was substantiated by several teachers, one stating “teachers lack courage to take a different approach” (E3). Another, an advocate of practitioner research, lamented that “teachers in research teams shun autonomy and depend on the leader to make decisions” (D4). His colleague observed that Singapore teachers like to “follow recipes. I want to teach the way I was taught, which is the traditional way. Just follow the book” (D3).

### **Compliant and obedient teachers.**

There was contention between respondents regarding the degree to which teachers in Singapore are obedient to authority. One academic believes that it is “an entrenched culture. Teachers can’t say no” (A1). Corroborating this, one teacher believed it best to go “along with an initiative you might not believe in, for the greater good” (D4) while another concurred he would instinctively “take note” of any new policy initiative “and start on it” (C2). But other respondents tended to think that Singaporean teachers perhaps are not so compliant or unquestionably supportive of MOE or government initiatives. A cluster superintendent observed that teachers will often acquiesce but lack conviction. “If they are told that they have to be engaged, they will do it, but what I am saying is that willingness and commitment to make it a successful project is different if you have a top-down approach” (B2). A teacher concurred, “they *will* do [as instructed], but probably not a quality job” (E1). In contrast, several respondents expressed the conviction that Singaporean teachers will be belligerent if they feel it is warranted and simply not support an initiative they don’t believe in or subscribe to.

**A developing awareness of research.**

What emerged from the series of conversations is that in the past schools in Singapore favoured quantitative data. But there is now a developing awareness among teachers of the different research methodologies and many people within the higher levels of the MOE often possess a sophisticated knowledge of research. Respondents were mainly of the view that in Singapore there has long existed a trust and emphasis in research based on a positivist paradigm. An academic stated, “In a Singapore context you need numbers to make your results credible”. She further added that “Schools want results that can be generalized” (A2). This continues largely to be the case although in recent years qualitative methodologies have gained more acceptance and currency. This is particularly so among senior personnel who seem to greatly value qualitative data and research methodologies.

A superintendent explained that there “is a proliferation of research taking place, across Singapore today” (B3). A VP concurred “the sharing culture is much stronger among the schools in Singapore” compared with “ten years or twenty years ago” (D1). A trainer from the Teachers’ Network (TN) described how practitioner research has experienced rapid growth “within these three years” (B4) while an academic acknowledged an “increasing awareness” (A2) of research. She further typified the Singapore education system as a “maturing system” where some schools are “enlightened”. But she states that there is still uneven acceptance of the notion of practitioner research and qualitative methodologies in particular. Similarly, the DD, CPPU, describes a maturing culture in Singapore where people are “beginning to see things differently, at least at the Ministry level. At the school level, yes, they always wanted quantitative data.” (B1).

One academic (A3) with considerable experience working with policy makers both in Singapore and NSW offered a nuanced view. He believes that bureaucrats in Singapore have a deep “understanding of how different kinds of research answers different types of questions” and a “sophisticated intellectual grasp of the academic issues” in comparison to their counterparts in NSW who have “more bureaucratic savvy”. Singaporeans “are actually much more open” to developing policy based on research but do not wish to make public “research that damages Singapore’s reputation internationally or our reputation as an

educational provider... the political reality about Singapore is the maintenance of its international image” (A3).

## **NSW**

Characteristics of the NSW education system explicitly expressed or alluded to by respondents were that governments change and this can impact policy; and, schools aspire to seek consensus through consulting teachers, and to a lesser extent parents and students. Respondents further believed that teachers’ workloads have increased dramatically, as has accountability, the DET encouraging schools to adopt a data-driven evidence-based approach. The introduction of the Quality Teaching Framework and the NSW Institute of Teachers Professional Teaching Standards has stimulated cultural change in schools. Professional learning funds are now devolved to schools, much of which is allocated to funding release time for teachers. Many believed the state government though was operating under financial hardship. The evolving model of professional learning is school-based, focused on localized needs, and is ongoing, while professional learning resources are delivered on-line. But such a model was not necessarily embraced by all teachers. Furthermore, the DET often functions as a somewhat fragmented bureaucracy.

### **A change of government and criticism of government policy.**

It is commonly assumed by respondents in NSW that a change of government at either the state or federal level is always possible and that such a change might likely impact education policy in some way. As a result of a change of government, a NSW AGQTP manager noted there had been “a different approach to supporting professional learning” (W4) while another cited a “completely different structure... built around a particular philosophy” (W3).

During interviews personnel at all levels characteristically displayed open criticism of governments or policy where they felt it was warranted. Evidencing this, a former manager of the NSW AGQTP believes certain government policies inhibit teacher innovation in schools or classrooms, stating “with the current Federal Government’s view about league tables for schools ... the pressure is on teachers to teach to the test. And that takes time away from more innovative and creative practice” (W3). Secondly, a teacher believed there “is certainly



a feeling” among her colleagues that the recent drive for quantitative data from the DET has sinister undertones and “is being used against people” (Z3).

It was assumed by select respondents that teachers in NSW, beyond being critical as a group, can be “very cynical”. One teacher, for instance, stated “that it would add to the cynicism that exists” if practitioner research were to be mandated, “Because they will think for what reason is it? Why do they want this information? What benefit is it to us? What are they going to use it for?” (Z3). Older, more experienced teachers in particular were often identified as being more cynical “because they’ve just lived through wave after wave of just do this, do that, without any justification, and they have seen all these policy changes become flavours that never went anywhere” (Z1), explained a deputy principal (DP).

A political reality though, cascading to all levels, appears to be “pleasing the boss”. One academic (A3) described how in NSW policy makers “will look upstairs to see what noise comes out of the [Director General] DG’s office or the Minister’s office, because that is the reality that they will need to operate with”. Policy makers in NSW “don’t look at the potential and limitations of different kinds of research” but will do what the Minister wants, whether the “Minister wants numbers, the Minister wants national testing, or the Minister wants state testing”. At a school level, a teacher described how the attitude of the executive towards research has changed over the years and is now less open. “They are more into the making sure that the research that you are doing is going to come up with the results that people in the Department are looking for” (Z3). The academic also noted a “shift in the last ten years” where researchers working with the DET “sign a contract” limiting their “broadcast rights” so that findings might “never see the light of day” (A3), although at the time of this study a policy change means reports are now only withheld where there is an overriding public interest against disclosing particular information.

Another political entity, the Teachers’ Federation, the registered trade union which covers NSW public school teachers, can also impact innovation in the school and classroom in NSW. As observed by one teacher, “The Teachers’ Federation is quite strong” (X2) and can perhaps obstruct government policy if teachers don’t support the change. The Federation can also obstruct change in individual schools. One DP described a situation where “An initiative was announced ... the issue immediately got forced into a Federation meeting, which forced

us to go into meeting procedure arrangements and actually got a result that no one liked. It was horrendous” (Z1).

### **Consultation and consensus.**

The impression projected consistently by respondents was that schools in NSW characteristically seek consensus, primarily through the consultation of teachers, but often through the consultation of parents and students as well. One SED explained that if teachers are not consulted “then there is no ownership of what is happening in the school. And schools are collaborative and collegial and that’s the way they work best” (W1). Both the SEDs interviewed emphasised the importance of “getting kids to talk”, “hearing their voice” and consulting “the parents as well”.

Results implied that teachers expect to be sounded out as part of the decision-making process in government schools. One DP described her school as “incredibly consultative”, stating, “Actually schools are very egalitarian places. You get rapped off over the knuckles by your staff very quick smart if you don’t consult on everything” (Z1). She explained how the experienced, older teachers especially expect “to be consulted on everything, to have input” before change is implemented. She further believes that as teachers are used to exercising certain autonomy, they don’t like to be scrutinised and are not used to being held accountable, assessed or measured. The Director of PLLD observed that until recently teachers tended to operate behind closed doors, in isolation, but there is now a move in place in NSW to “deprivatise” the classroom (W5).

Teachers in the private school (X) participating in this study did not seem to share the same degree of autonomy, power or influence enjoyed by their counterparts in the two government schools (Y and Z). One teacher observed:

When you go to your DET schools and speak to people there, the way that they are run is quite different to an independent, private school. In this place, the boss is pretty much the power ... [and can] stop you dead if they wanted to. ( X3)

His colleague believes that autocratic power means it is easier sometimes to implement change. “I think when some things are mandated sometimes even the resistors have to do something (laughs)” (X1).

**Increasing workloads, accountability and a data-driven approach.**

Respondents in NSW believe that the job scope of teachers has grown considerably over the last 30 years or so. Universally interviewees spoke about the busyness of schools and the increasing workload and competing demands placed on teachers. This consequently has an impact on the time teachers can dedicate to enquiring about their own practice. A manager of the NSW AGQTP describes a teacher’s workload as “overloaded [and] overcrowded” and believes schools have become, “results driven” with “external league tables, standardised testing, the publication of exit results ... [etc.]” (W3).

Concurrently, “The department demands more accountability from schools all the time” (Z1), one teacher noting that accountability “has increased enormously” (Y2). Another teacher notes this is especially so “in terms of reporting and assessment” so that teachers are “busier now ... than they ever have been in their lives” (X3) while a third states “everyone is worried about test results now” (Y4).

In tandem with the focus on accountability, many respondents believe there is an increasing dependence, reliance and emphasis on quantitative data. One SED believes “The DET is very data driven” (W2), while a DET manager states, “Increasingly, the policy or the imperative is for schools and teachers to use an evidenced-based approach to teaching and learning”. Concurring, one teacher observed “schools like to gather lots of data” (X3) while another stated:

I have been very concerned that we have had a move in the Department towards quantitative data and making decisions on education based on this outcomes-driven approach to education ... I think sometimes you can get lost in numbers and the numbers are meaningless if you don’t look at what lies behind them. (Z3)

The emphasis on quantitative data dictates the type of research that is conducted in schools, one teacher stating:

I felt freer before, to say, “Look. I need to find out a bit more about this”. Whereas now I am more tentative about that, about going in and floating an idea ... I think the DET has had a shift towards this pushing of quantitative data ... The SED in this area is very, very driven by quantitative data. And the principal here is very linked to the SED and wanting to show that. (Z3)

Additionally, it is believed that a focus on “standardized national data”, which characteristically is collected in “a one-day one-off test”, puts “pressure on teachers to teach to the test. And that takes time away from more innovative and creative practice” (W3).

### **Quality Teaching Framework and Professional Teaching Standards.**

During discussions respondents repeatedly referred to the Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) and the NSW Institute of Teachers (NSW IT) Professional Teaching Standards as having a profound influence on teachers’ work. A common perception was that teachers (operating under the standards) will now need to demonstrate their involvement in some sort of school-based research as part of their on-going professional development. The Director, PLLD, emphasised “the very first piece of work” her directorate undertook was “looking at action research and action learning ... [as a means of] supporting the major changes of the Institute of Teachers implications” (W5).

A DP described how the NSW IT has brought “enormous change” (Z1) while the Director of PLLD explained that teachers now need to look “for evidence in relation to standards ... in order to continue their employment with us” thus “stimulating cultural change” (W5). Some teachers saw the existence of the QTF and the Professional Teaching Standards as encouraging teachers to research and reflect on their own practice, one teacher (Y2) noting, “You have to reflect on your practice, you have to reflect on what you have achieved, you have to reflect on what you do”. Others believed these frameworks would discourage qualitative research encouraging measurement using quantitative data instead.

**Decentralization and the devolution of funding for professional learning.**

Described by Campbell and Sherington (2006) as one of the largest education systems in the world, the NSW DET is divided into a series of regions. One academic likened the DET's ecology to "bureaucratic feudalism" (A3) while another described how "different regions have different takes" (V1) dependent on those in power and control. Since the 1980s there have been moves to decentralize the DET somewhat by divesting certain powers to regions and schools. One example, as described by the Director PLLD (W5), has been the recent devolution of funding to schools for professional learning to "meet local needs".

While the extent to which the DET has become decentralized is contestable, it is also highly contestable as to how much autonomy schools really have over their professional learning agendas. An SED explained that "Each region has certain autonomy in the way it structures its [Professional Learning] PL people and support for schools" (W1) and a professional learning consultant described how "schools have a lot more autonomy than what they used to have in how they spend their professional learning budgets" (V5). But an SED conceded that as funding and accountability are tied together, schools actually have "less rather than more autonomy" (W2). A DP concurred that government schools have limited autonomy over funding as commonly it is "tied to particular areas of education that the government sees as priorities" (Z1).

In NSW schools, funding for professional learning is largely spent on release time. A lot of the money allocated for professional learning, both in the two government schools and in the private school under study, is channeled into paying casual teachers to provide release time for permanent staff to participate in activities. Employing casual teachers is an expensive exercise. "So for a teacher to go to any decent conference, if it's two days, and you have to cover their classes, you're looking at a thousand dollars", explained a DP (Z1). This considerably limits the opportunities for teachers to participate in professional learning activities including time to plan and reflect during the practitioner research cycle.

A pervasive sentiment was that both Federal and State governments are operating under severe financial constraints. An SED (W2) lamented, "We work in a time of really constrained resources, so there is a sense that resources just can't continue, that things can't

be based just around there will always be more money available”. Similarly, a DP expressed, “Unfortunately ... our governments, over the last few years ... have not put much effort into supporting education” and as a consequence, “in every school now, we are just under resourced” (Z1). In contrast, respondents interviewed from the private school taking part in the study felt that resources were made freely available by the school to fund its research enterprise.

### **A changing model of professional learning.**

The professional learning model itself has changed over time in NSW. Whereas teachers in the past would leave school to attend workshops, the Director PLLD describes the current model as being school-based learning which is tailored to local needs and is ongoing. Several academics and policy makers described how action research and action learning (ARAL) have been embedded in teacher professional learning for some time. A manager of the NSW AGQTP explained the model of professional development that her directorate designed for teachers “was around an action learning model” (W3) while an academic reflected, “we are seeing it as a norm now, for large programmes, that they are characterized as action research, action learning programmes” (V4). An SED observed that ARAL is “becoming increasingly important because it is being recognized as a very powerful adult learning tool” (W1).

The Director PLLD also described how professional learning resources are now delivered to schools and teachers on-line. She suggested data collected indicate this mode of delivery is popular with teachers. Contradicting this, very few of the teachers interviewed were aware or made reference to these resources and a Principal (Y1) was sceptical about the popularity and viability of such on-line courses and forums among teachers. She believes:

The on-line stuff ... and video conferencing in the future is going to save the department money, because you can sit in the video classroom and talk to your colleagues and talk about practice. But unless you provide time, or unless you put accountability in, which will create negativity ... people are not going to be able to do it.

## **Policies, Programmes and Support**

This dimension describes the policies, programmes and support provided by the central education bureau to encourage and support teachers to undertake practitioner research in their classrooms and schools.

### **Singapore**

Policy makers and administrators strongly believed that education in Singapore is moving from a centralized to a decentralized system with greater autonomy, flexibility and choice being ceded to schools. Change and innovation, supported by research, is encouraged especially in matters concerning curriculum and pedagogy. While policy on practitioner research is not always made explicit in documents, strong policy messages are communicated and cascaded down to schools at milestone national events and a clear vision and direction has been set. The MOE has provided considerable funding and support. A myriad of initiatives and strategies were in place, chiefly under the Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) umbrella, to encourage innovation and research in schools. It is planned that every school will have at least one teacher trained as a Research Activist (RA) and schools have increasingly been provided autonomy to develop innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Although it appeared wide support is given for schools to undertake research, some respondents still felt it was uneven.

#### **Communicating and cascading policy.**

The purview of the 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). The Deputy Director (DD) heading that branch states that while practitioner research is “not explicitly stated in public documents, it is weaved into it” (B1). She explained the practice in Singapore is that policy is “cascaded in speeches” by the Prime Minister, other members of parliament, and senior management from the MOE. Those “who should know” are aware of the landmark occasions to note, such as the National Day

Rally, and recognize the importance, significance and implications of the messages contained in the speeches delivered.

A cluster superintendent (B2) confirmed policy messages are typically communicated in speeches made at milestone events, such as the National Day Rally, Singapore Teachers' Rally, MOE Work Plan Seminar or national education conferences. A vice principal (VP) explained how policy on practitioner research is communicated:

In different occasions, like when we have with dialogue with the directors, or the senior people in the Ministry, they do give us, like, what is the trend of education, and what we should be doing in school, to follow up, to keep up with the changes. So they do mention that we should get teachers to do action research or research. And, in many different initiatives or different programmes from the Ministry, like, for example, [Teach Less Learn More] TLLM ... So, whenever we have these types of programmes, they always give the school like a research project. So, in a way, that also gives the signal that we should go into research. (D1)

Senior personnel interviewed from the MOE believe that a clear direction has been set concerning the role of research in schools in Singapore. One academic agreed that there are "recurring themes in policy documents and speeches" (A2) strongly indicating research is encouraged in schools. One cluster superintendent believes while there might be "uneven implementation" at the moment across schools, "the direction is clear" (B3). The DD, CPPU, explained that the aim of the "TLLM Ignite" and the purpose of practitioner research are for schools to be a lot more purposeful in the way that they improve things in the classroom (B1).

While most informants agreed that the MOE encourages practitioner research in schools, one academic (A1) believed that there is no clear picture regarding who actually drives practitioner research. He believes that the research initiative in schools is driven more by the cluster superintendents than personnel from within MOE head quarters, or "the MOE". If a cluster superintendent does not embrace the notion, schools within that particular cluster are not likely to be actively involved in research.

Several respondents believed that there is a need for clearer communication of policy, one teacher (E2) stating that the notion of the teacher as a practitioner researcher, "needs to be



adequately explained ... MOE needs to do more ... (to) take the opportunity to explain to teachers”. The DD, CPPU, acknowledged, “When you go to the schools you will find that they have different interpretations of what is TLLM” (B1). She was aware that sometimes there had been a lack of clear communication and that “messaging and languaging” were not always clearly communicated “across the spectrum”. She added, “We are looking at it and making conscious efforts to close this gap”.

Even though understandings of the initiatives varied, during the course of interviews all respondents in Singapore tended to adopt the same rhetoric, often referring to key policy phrases and acronyms such as “Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM)”, “TLLM Ignite”, “Future Schools”, “Research Activists”, and “action research”.

### **Funding.**

The MOE has provided considerable funding and support to encourage schools to engage in innovation and research. One academic stated:

The Ministry has invested a lot of money, people and resources towards this end. The fact that they have this whole unit called [Curriculum Policy and Pedagogy Unit] CPPU ... probably attests to that. Within CPPU, you have... a lot of people who work as project facilitators, and they work very closely with the Research Activists to guide them along the whole process... the Research Activists are given time off... some schools also get additional funds [for research]... and they have quite free rein as to how they want to dispense those funds. (A2)

A cluster superintendent (B3) agreed schools have access to considerable funding and the autonomy to purchase resources, including additional manpower or expertise, to support the programmes they might initiate.

### **Autonomy and flexibility.**

In recent years the MOE has provided schools greater autonomy and flexibility in developing creative and innovative teaching programmes and pedagogical approaches. The DD, CPPU, affirmed that schools have been given considerable “autonomy to do what they want” to

develop programmes and strategies “to actually engage the kids” (B1). A superintendent described how “Principals are no longer seen as administrative heads, as it was previously, more now as curriculum leaders” (B3). In addition, as observed by an academic (A2), schools “have quite free rein” in how they dispense funds allocated for their research efforts. The cluster superintendent further stated, “The autonomy is so powerful today, we can do anything ... a lot now, depends on the initiative and the drive of individual principals and teachers” (B3).

In addition, cluster superintendents also “have been given greater flexibility” (B1) as to how they use allocated funds for the group of schools under their purview. One superintendent described how the real support for innovation and research “comes initially from MOE, but, I think, the secondary level of support must come from the cluster, that means the cluster superintendent ... we do have funds that we can use to support such projects” (B2). Many respondents believe the zone or cluster consequently plays an important role for setting the direction and providing support for school-based research. One academic (A1) believed it is the superintendents in certain zones who champion practitioner research.

### **Teach Less Learn More (TLLM) initiative.**

“Teach Less, Learn More” (TLLM) is a policy initiative implemented by the MOE in 2005 in response to the national vision “Thinking Schools, Learning Nations” (for a description see Ng Pak Tee, 2008). TLLM, as described by the Minister of Education, is about the transformation of learning from quantity to quality (Tharman, 2005). It is a pedagogical shift to depend less on rote learning, repetitive tests and a ‘one size fits all’ type of instruction to encourage instead differentiated teaching and the use of innovative teaching approaches and strategies. The DD, CPPU, (B1) explained TLLM “is about engaged learning ... to lead to deep learning” but conceded that schools “have different interpretations” of what TLLM is. She acknowledged this is “a gap that we (MOE) should look into”. She spoke of the importance of the “Top-Down Support for Ground-Up Initiative” outlined by Minister for Education (Tharman, 2005), which underlies the TLLM initiative. However, it perhaps should be noted that very few of the respondents in schools made any explicit reference to this concept.

Introduced under the TLLM policy initiative, the “TLLM Ignite” package is a programme designed to “involve teachers in designing, implementing and studying new or improved learning and teaching approaches” (MOE, 2008; MOE, 2009). MOE provides schools with “a range of support” and funding ranging from \$15,000 to \$40,000 (Australian \$12,500 to \$33,333). Schools applying to join the programme must meet evaluation criteria to be successful. One teacher from each participating school will then be trained as a Research Activist (RA). Schools in the programme are grouped into a network of schools with a similar research focus as part of a “research community of practice”. In 2008, 100 schools, including 47 secondary schools were given support under the TLLM Ignite package (MOE, 2008). The DD, CPPU, (B1) envisaged all schools will have been involved in the programme by 2010/2011. She explained how the MOE has put in place a holistic and integrated framework to support schools participating in the TLLM Ignite programme. To support schools in curriculum consultancy, training and research, CPPU has tapped on education officers with relevant expertise from the different divisions within MOE headquarters and put together customized teams of consultants for each school.

Beyond being involved in “TLLM Ignite”, one of the schools in the study (D) had also been inducted as a “Future School”. A HOD at the school explained that currently “there are only five Future Schools in Singapore ... [but] by 2015, we are going to have 15 ... that’s the target”. Under the initiative schools are given more financial support “to see how we can actually use innovative teaching, methods, approaches, to enhance students’ learning” (D2).

In addition to CPPU, the Teachers Network (TN) is another agency possibly seen as supporting teachers in their work as researchers. Launched in 1998 to support the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” vision, TN was established by the MOE to cater to the professional development of teachers (MOE, n.d.). Although cited in the literature (Hairon, 2006; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) as having an influence on the work teachers do as researchers in schools, respondents from the three schools in this study made little, or no, reference to its influence on them as researchers. Furthermore, there appeared little coordination between the different agencies, the DD, CPPU, (B1) stating, “We don’t have a direct work relationship with Teachers Network... I don’t really know what goes on there”. A trainer from TN (B4) described her role as *facilitating* Learning Circles as opposed to *training* teachers in research methodologies.

### **Research Activists (RAs).**

Each school participating in the TLLM Ignite programme will nominate one teacher to be trained as a Research Activist (RA). The role of the RA, as described by one academic, is “to conduct research” in their school in the form of “one intervention project over the course of one year” (A2). RAs are off-loaded two days a week during the duration of the TLLM Ignite programme (one to two years). They then attend research training and receive guidance from academics and research partners.

It is envisaged RAs will be the “key drivers” of “school-based curriculum innovation” (SCI). Their focus is to implement the planned SCI through “ongoing curriculum innovation and education research”. As summarized by a cluster superintendent (B2), the job of a RA is to get trained “and bring it back to school and see how it filters down to school”. According to policy documents, RAs will be a “multiplier force” and “lead Action Research teams” to “jump start a reflective practice culture” in their schools (MOE, 2009).

However, of the three schools in the study, in only one did the RA drive the research enterprise. The well-established research enterprise in the independent school was driven by the chairperson of the Research Unit, a Deputy Dean, the school not having subscribed to the TLLM Ignite programme. In the government school with an established culture of research, the research enterprise was clearly driven by the Principal and Vice Principal, then secondly by the HOD Curriculum, who coordinated research projects in different departments. In addition the school engaged a number of academic consultants. The RA appeared to play a very subsidiary role in spearheading research and innovation and in training other teachers. She confirmed, “No, I don’t [help to train the teachers]” (D3). In the third school in the study, the RA did lead the school’s research enterprise which was in its infancy.

The RAs in both the government schools believed they did not have a strong knowledge of research methodologies and were confused about certain concepts. Although both frequently referred specifically to action research both said they did not have a good understanding of what it was. Significantly, one of the RAs admitted she perhaps did not have the disposition to lead innovation in the school stating she was not willing to change her “mode of thinking” preferring to “just follow the book” (D3).

**Developing the capacity of teachers as researchers.**

Respondents commonly spoke about “upping the capacity” of teachers in a general sense and specifically as researchers. There was consensus more avenues are now available to teachers to train as researchers compared with the past and that the provision of training is continuing to develop and evolve. One teacher (C2) explained that “there were no real structured training for teachers on how you go about doing research” during his graduate training. An academic (A2) noted how there are now many incentives for teachers to upgrade and undertake research and that under the “Professional Development Continuum Model” teachers are partially sponsored to do further study.

**Wide but uneven support.**

On a national basis, it would appear there is a wide range of support through different sources available to schools and teachers to undertake practitioner research. However, some respondents suggested this support might be “uneven”. While acknowledging that the MOE has invested a lot of money, people and resources to encourage innovation, research and change in schools, one academic (A2) believes that teachers don’t always get the necessary support from school leaders or middle managers, such as heads of departments (HOD). Therefore the research efforts across schools were very patchy. She noted that some RAs are given a lot of support within their school, while others none.

**NSW**

The NSW DET had no clear or coherent policy on practitioner research. Rather it was embedded in different programmes and initiatives, thereby policy was implicitly communicated. The professional learning agenda has evolved in recent years in NSW and the emerging model is one of school-based action research and action learning. Professional learning funds have been devolved to government schools but many school leaders and teachers believed the funding was insufficient. Teachers were not systematically trained in practitioner research so tended to rely on their basic or post-graduate training or experience working with an academic partner. The PLLD directorate was planning to provide on-line training specifically focusing on action research commencing 2010, though many questioned

the viability of this mode of delivery. Sharing of learning between schools tended to be sporadic and the teachers' perception was that there is no formal forum for them to share their research with others.

**Policy implicitly communicated.**

Although certain policy documents issued by the NSW DET, such as the Professional Learning Continuum encourage the idea of practitioner research in schools, a clear, coherent and explicit message is not always communicated from policy makers to school leaders or from school leaders to teachers. Academics described the DET as a fragmented bureaucracy with no clear policy on practitioner research. One academic said that it was "hard to talk about the DET as one global mass" (V2) while another described the DET as a "complex beast" (V1) with many different arms and perspectives. At a regional level, vision and direction is often communicated incoherently. "Different regions have different takes" (V1).

Senior personnel within the DET conceded that policy on practitioner research was not explicitly stated. Rather, practitioner research is embedded in different programmes and initiatives and implicitly communicated or cascaded down. A NSW AGQTP manager described how the DET has programmes "across a whole range of directorates having some sort of evidence-based practice" (W3). As explained by an SED, principals and schools come to know about practitioner research, specifically action research and action learning, as "It's embedded in good practice" (W1). A teacher also expressed the view that policy on practitioner research "is not explicit but it is implied" (Y3).

An SED explained it is made "very clear" that schools "should be accountable" through the production of "quality school data" which requires "some skills in evaluation or research" (W2). A manager also described how teachers who had been involved in AGQTP projects were encouraged to observe each other teaching and keep a record of their reflections, "what we would understand as action learning" (W4). However, the manager states, "I am not aware that the department actually has a policy which talks about action research, or research in classrooms or practitioner research as such".

Encapsulating the issue the Director, PLLD, stated that while there is not a specific policy on practitioner research:

The fabric and the understandings that underpin all of our professional learning programmes are certainly framed on the basis of action research and action learning... If you are looking for a policy that says, “Thou shall do this”, you won’t find it. If you are looking for support materials that say, “This matters most in your own learning”, you will find it. And so that’s our action research action learning framework. (W5)

### **The emerging model of professional learning (PL).**

A professional learning consultant described how the professional learning (PL) agenda has evolved in NSW in recent years.

[A]round about five or six years ago, the orthodoxy seemed to change in New South Wales, in the Department, and the line was, “Well this is not a sustainable mode of professional learning, and what we really want is school-based action learning teams. We want people working in teams because it builds leadership density and has a lot of flow on to the school. And we want more sustainable modes of learning”. (V5)

The Director PLLD (W5) emphasized that from 2010 greater significance will be attributed to practitioner research as part of the professional learning agenda in NSW government schools. In particular on-line resources are being developed by her directorate so that teachers might gain a better understanding of, and be encouraged to further engage in, action research in their schools. On-line on-time learning and action research and action learning are key strategies in the PL Continuum.

A principal explained that there is now often a “requirement” that teachers attending a professional learning course be required to do some sort of action research action learning component. “I have seen a shift coming in ... and that has been happening for the last five years” (Y1). The PL consultant was also of the perception that there is “a big push ... at central policy level” (V5) to further encourage practitioner research in schools, the Director PLLD confirming, “One of our new programmes ... [has] taken a complete focus on action research action learning” (W5).

The PL consultant further believes that while “there has been enough stuff happening at Principal’s conferences and deputy principal’s conferences” for school leaders to appreciate and embrace the emerging model of professional learning, “For the rank and file, that change takes longer (laughs)” (V5). Teachers often still equate professional learning with in-service courses and do not have a good understanding of practitioner research models. She observed:

I still notice in schools, a lot of people still talk about in-services. That’s the mental model. “If I’m engaged in professional learning, I am attending a course”. And they use this language, “in-service course”. When you talk about action-learning or team-based research, quite a lot of people are mystified by what that means. There is no clarity, in people’s minds. I don’t think. And I don’t think the models have really been made explicit. (V5)

Some teachers though demonstrated an awareness of a change in the PL model, one teacher stating, “I think, the DET is pushing us to do research” where resources are provided and shared on-line as a form of “self-directed learning” (Y3).

Concurrent to the emergent PL model, the NSW AGQTP has been terminated. Over the past decade, many schools in NSW, both state and private, successfully tendered for project grants to implement school-based and school-driven action learning as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP). There was divided opinion among respondents as to the impact the closure of this programme will now have. There were some who believe that there will be a natural momentum, teachers formerly involved in the programme sustaining their work as practitioner researchers with a consequent influence on other teachers. There were others that believe that the programme had a limited reach and impact in the first place. But there were several who thought that it was an important source of funding and a lot of research projects will simply no longer be able to be funded or function as a consequence of the programme’s demise. Furthermore, several teachers when describing their experience as practitioner researchers spoke about involvement in various AGQTP projects. Many had gained their knowledge and learning of practitioner research there.



**Government funding.**

Overwhelmingly respondents spoke of the importance and necessity of funding to support a school's research enterprise. The Director, PLLD, explained that the DET "made the decision that professional learning is actually best articulated at the point of the school ... (W)e have actually devolved every cent that we have of professional learning funds, discretionary learning funds, to schools, and they make the decisions" (W5). While the two SEDs interviewed were of the belief that sufficient funds are devolved to schools to support PL, this was not the perception of the school leaders or teachers interviewed. Most felt funding was woefully inadequate while some bemoaned the fact certain sources had been discontinued over the years, a DP recalling that "the most successful work that I have ever done was through a grant the government used to have, that I want to see reinstated, called the WIBS grant, Within and Between Schools Grants" (Z1).

Many respondents referred to the Australian Government Quality Teaching Programme (AGQTP), a federally funded programme administered in NSW by the NSW DET, as an important form of support for schools doing practitioner research. An SED stated that AGQTP funding tended to be "the big ticket money" and that "lots of schools use it to get something done" (W2). Two of the schools in the study had received funding and support through the programme on several occasions, the private school embarking on a myriad of research projects, many subsidized through this programme. Typically funding was used to pay for casual relief so that teachers had time to meet to discuss and undertake research. A perception among some was with the cessation of the NSW AGQTP in 2010 there will be less support for schools to undertake practitioner research. One principal surmised that action research and action learning, "will disappear again. It has had a short impact for a period of time but then we don't have the time to sustain it, the money", and without the funding "these things can't continue in schools" (Y1).

Ultimately, whether the devolved PL funding is channeled into encouraging practitioner research in schools will depend on "how many principals have you got who believe in it. Because unless the leader at the top believes in the vision, you are not going to get it happening", explained one principal (Y1).

### **Providing training for teachers as researchers.**

There appears to be no formal or systematic support in place by the central education bureau to train teachers as practitioner researchers. Although the Director, PLLD (W5), described a number of on-line resources available to support teachers as action researchers-action learners, there was dispute over how viable these are. She claimed feedback collected indicated these resources are well utilized by schools but a principal (Y1) said from her experience teachers rarely have the time or inclination to make use of such on-line resources. She specifically stated that although many teachers enthusiastically sign up, few actually complete any modules. None of the teachers in the study referred to these on-line resources. Teachers seemed to depend on what they had learnt during their undergraduate or post-graduate training, or rely heavily on the guidance provided by academic partners or consultants. Teachers collaborating with academic partners spoke very positively about the experience and the guidance and support they had been given in doing their research work. Some seemed to suggest, though, that they remained dependent on the partner and did not possess the confidence or knowledge to undertake further research on their own without this support.

Within schools, very little training is provided to prepare teachers as practitioner researchers. Describing the exposure teachers receive, the Director of Studies (X1) at the private school related, “We’ve run the odd workshop in our staff professional development programme. We’ve made the books available (laughs) and a bit of mentoring too”. At the government schools, teachers were arranged into consortia or ‘Teams’ but were dependent on their colleagues for guidance and support. One teacher summed up, “I am just a working Joe like everybody, don’t have the methodological background, I just have the interest” (Y2).

### **Forums for sharing learning.**

The perception of many respondents is that schools in NSW work in silos and are somewhat isolated. A teacher (Z3) stated, “I think that we can be too insular, and that can be a problem. I think, in the research that I have been involved in, and what I have seen happen here, you are doing it within that silo”. Many spoke of the importance of having a forum where teachers can meet to share ideas and research findings between schools. The Director PLLD

described an online forum that is being further developed by her directorate which she believes provides such a platform and is well utilised by teachers. However, none of the other respondents in this study referred to this.

Individual respondents referred to an array of different forums, such as the Quality Teaching Action Learning planning conferences, education conferences, and workshops or sharing sessions organised between groups of schools, informally or perhaps more formally by the region. But participation in such forums was extremely ad hoc. Many lamented the fact there was no formal or systematic means of disseminating research findings between schools to which all teachers might subscribe. An SED (W1) confirmed this to be the case. A DP earnestly described how marking of the national exams currently provides the best vehicle for professional sharing, that “There is no better place for teachers to learn, how to teach better” and that the DET is about to make the “biggest mistake” by bringing “collaborative marking” to a close (Z1).

### **Conclusion**

Results suggest culture and policy possess considerable agency within the complex ecologies that pre-figure or shape the work teachers do as researchers in schools. While both central education bureaus espouse particular approaches to professional learning and practitioner research, policy was not always explicitly stated or coherently communicated, perhaps thereby impeding somewhat the transmission of these practices as originally conceived. Individuals were not necessarily made familiar with the different “rules, ends, projects... germane to the new practice-arrangement bundle” (Schatzki, 2005, p.475).

The following chapter explores additional factors that might cohere or compete, and thereby pre-figure, teachers’ work as researchers in schools, further illuminating the different contexts in which practitioner research transpires.