

ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS

Contexts “have powers of determination” and can “prefigure” or “enable or constrain what occurs in them” (Schatzki, 2002, p.62). Furthermore, the social site is such that practices and orders can “cohere, conflict, diverge, scatter, and enable as well as constrain each other” (pp.156-157). The second main category, *Enablers and Constraints*, describes the supporting and hindering factors that teachers encountered as practitioner researchers. This main category is composed of two sub-categories labelled as follows: *Facilitators*, and *Barriers and Conflicting Practices*.

Facilitators

This dimension describes the encouragement, backing and assistance teachers receive in their work as practitioner researchers, additional to the support provided by the central education bureau discussed in the previous chapter.

Singapore

The perception of respondents was that a supportive school management empathetic to practitioner research, teacher capacity in research practices and methodologies, a mentor to guide and provide direction to fledgling teacher researchers, and protected time and off-loading from other teaching duties help to facilitate practitioner research. In addition, it is important that teachers are given recognition and receive tangible rewards for their research efforts. The myriad opportunities for sharing learning within and between schools further acted as a facilitator. Independent schools had the autonomy to put unique structures in place to better facilitate research in their schools.

Support from school management.

A recurring theme was that the support of school leadership is critical to the success of any research enterprise in a school, one superintendent believing it will depend on the “passion” of the principal (B3). One teacher described how “the principal’s support is very important” (D2) while another said it “plays a big part” in “making it easy” (E3) for teachers to do

practitioner research in schools. The support provided by school management must be “tangible” such as showing commitment by freeing up time, emphasized another superintendent (B2). Several teachers agreed, one (C3) saying that commitment can be demonstrated by providing real, concrete support and putting systems in place such as teacher relief and a common protected time.

The VP at the government school with an established culture of research described the support their school management gave teachers:

We try to support them in whatever they require ... based on what they ask for ... [T]hey may ask for someone to go in to help them to video-tape the lesson, or some kind of expert, support ... we may help them to look for some type of consultant outside ... so when they come, we do try to support them. (D1)

A culture of research can only develop in a school if leadership is committed to the idea. A Deputy Dean who believed such an ethos existed in her school attributed this to successive principals having “mind-sets that research is something that is important and is valuable” (C1). A VP similarly described how a “culture of innovation doesn’t happen for no reason”. He states it depends on:

the leadership , the support and the direction by the school leader, the principal. I think if the principal don’t see it as important, nothing will happen in the school... for our school, the leadership is there ... so that is why it can happen. (D1)

Teachers also believe school leadership needs to be open-minded and empathetic to the research interests of teachers. Respondents described a supportive principal as one who is “involved and open to ideas, not restrictive” (D4), allows “sensitive questions as part of the research study” (C5), is tolerant of failure, and encourages teachers to take risks and “try different approaches” (D2). An academic (A1) ventured that some principals have not engaged in practitioner research themselves and therefore do not have the empathy and understanding required to properly support a research enterprise in their schools. Agreeing, a teacher observed that if leaders do not have knowledge of research they will not understand its value “and the value it brings to the students” (D4).

Time.

Without exception, respondents identified time as the key facilitator and, consequently, lack of time as the foremost barrier to teachers doing practitioner research. In the three schools under study, teachers were sometimes provided time through off-loading of other duties or protected time dedicated specifically for professional learning or research activities. An academic (A1) described how “enlightened schools” provide time for teachers to do research while a Deputy Dean (C1) observed that it is important that there is an empathetic leadership willing to create time for teachers to do research in the school, otherwise, “the culture won’t take root, as people will see it as another add-on”. Another teacher cited the importance of a protected, common time where all members of a committee can meet, stating it was essential “we must have common free time” (C3).

The MOE introduced the concept of ‘White Space’ by reducing the teaching workload of all teachers, a trainer from the Teachers’ Network explained, asserting it “is really a plus point” (B4). Schools were given autonomy over how this time was utilized, but commonly it was used for PL focusing on innovation and research. One of the government schools in the study (D) had utilized White Space to introduce the concept of Lesson Study to all staff.

The independent school (C) had the autonomy to put unique structures in place, a teacher (C2) describing how the Research Unit was established “to give teachers more time for research, less time for teaching, if they choose to”. An irony, he observed, was that a teacher choosing to engage in practitioner research might ultimately find they spend less time in their classroom and hence be taken away somewhat from their core business of teaching.

Funding.

Teachers regularly referred to the various MOE initiatives designed to encourage innovation and research in schools, such as TLLM Ignite, and described how schools have flexibility in utilizing the funding made available. Funding commonly was used to purchase resources, including in some instances hardware, or used “to engage an external lecturer or researcher” (C2) to provide “training and advice”. Additional funding was also available to all schools through the Staff Training Branch for teachers “to attend conferences” (B4).

Capacity of teachers in research methodologies.

Respondents commonly stated that the capacity of a teacher as a researcher is a crucial facilitator, a teacher stating “training and knowledge and really reading up on learning” (D2) helped facilitate her work as a researcher. Teachers might receive PL from sources outside the school, such as via undergraduate and postgraduate training, training as a RA, or working in collaboration with academic partners or consultants. But sometimes they were also provided learning on research methodology and practices in-house. This was particularly evident at the independent school. The chairperson of the Research Unit there observed that “there is some misunderstanding” when teachers undertake research and “we need to make sure that they are doing it right” (C1). In addition to providing “bite-sized” workshops on an “as-needed” basis, textbooks on research methodologies were regularly purchased for the library.

A mentor and a professional body.

Many respondents believed an important facilitator is a good mentor. One teacher researcher described how having an RA or a person experienced in research will “definitely” help to give “clear direction” (E4) while an academic described how an RA was able to develop “a very sophisticated research project because her principal understood research and was able to give her guidance” (A2). Teachers new to research (E2 and E3) spoke about the need for a good mentor for “beginning” teachers. One described how young teachers need a mentor to help craft a research question as they “are not in the position” to craft their own. “We really need guidance. We don't have the knowledge” (E3). The chairperson of the Research Unit at the independent school, a PhD candidate herself, saw “mentoring the Research Unit members” (C1) as an important part of her role. Members of the unit spoke of the importance of a good team leader with a sound knowledge of research methodology who could provide concrete, specific, on-time support, one stating, “Anytime we need help she would help us” (C3). Another teacher expressed the idiosyncratic belief that an “association or grouping of like-minded teacher researchers who can form a professional body” (C2) would help facilitate research in schools.

Recognition.

Recognition was identified as an important facilitator, whether from the central bureau or from the school or in the form of an intrinsic or extrinsic reward. Teachers often perceive the support given to them is indicative of how much the central bureau or school values their work as practitioner researchers. A VP described how the celebration of success is important to teachers, “they have to see ... there’s some kind of recognition ... if you have done it well” (D1). A teacher described how formalizing research in the school through the establishment of a Research Unit “honoured” teachers and the “off-loading” of other duties provided a tangible reward for the research work they do (C1).

Autonomy of independent schools.

Because of its status, the independent school was able to put in place a number of unique structures to support the research effort in the school. This included specifically hiring a staff member with prior research experience, setting up a dedicated Research Unit, off-loading teachers from other duties, specifically Co-Curricular Activities, and assigning a dedicated time for the researchers to meet. Also, as the school has flexibility in staffing ratios and recruitment, the “staff strength allows time for teachers to be involved in research” (C5). The school also had the resources to publish an annual research journal and conduct a research conference.

Forums for sharing.

A number of respondents spoke of different forums for sharing believing these also helped to facilitate practitioner research in schools. This could take the form of “protected time” for professional sharing across a department conducted “every fortnight” or across the school “at the end of the year” (E2). Several teachers also spoke about the benefits of either attending or presenting at national and international conferences.

NSW

Supportive school leadership, provision of time, funding, an academic partner, and a structured professional learning programme, were identified by respondents as some of the facilitating factors for practitioner research. Collegiality, cross-faculty teams, administrative support, a forum for teachers to share ideas, setting targets and receiving timely feedback, also act as facilitators.

School leadership.

A conviction among respondents was that school leadership plays a critical role in facilitating any research enterprise in a school. A NSW AGQTP manager observed, “The quality of the leadership is absolutely critical. And in my view is probably *the* key factor in the success or failure of school-based professional learning” (W3). Likewise, an academic emphasized, while the impetus to do practitioner research might come from the teachers themselves, “they will always need some sort of support to make it happen” (V2).

A teacher from the private school confirmed that practitioner research has flourished there because, “We have a head that sees the value in undertaking research” (X1), while a colleague from a government school described “a senior executive, who are supportive, of the research project and of your approach to research” (Z3). Another teacher related how the school executive “didn’t say no to anything we really wanted” to support a research project (Y4) while others described leadership “tolerant of failure” (X1).

Time and funding.

Universally respondents believed time is a “fundamental” facilitator (Y4) of research. In NSW schools time is generally created through employing casual relief so that teachers might be freed up to conduct their research or meet in a team. Therefore time becomes inextricably linked to funding. One academic described how “it is very difficult to sustain” a practitioner research enterprise in a school without financial support (V3). The two schools in the study, identified as having a tradition of research, had both utilised funds made available through the NSW AGQTP to provide release time for teachers.

In the government school (Y) those teachers who had participated in a Team (a research group comprising four teachers from different subject areas) had a slightly reduced teaching load compared with the rest of the staff. The principal explained that the “release time is embedded” so that the research activity “is not taking up their [teachers’] own time”. Funding from the AGQTP made it possible so that teachers “have more time to be released and supported” (Y1).

The private school (X) exercising its autonomy and flexibility had put additional structures in place to support teachers engaging in research. One teacher (X4) explained the school has “a number of staff meeting times allocated, after school”. Teachers were also given “time off class ... to attend focus groups”. Another colleague described how a position might be created on staff for one or two years where a teacher is provided release time to coordinate a special research project (X3).

An academic partner.

Two schools in the study (X and Y) had worked extensively in collaboration with academic partners as advisors or critical friends on research projects. The third school was currently actively seeking suitable academic partners to work with the newly appointed Highly Accomplished Teacher on planned research projects for the year 2010 and 2011. School leaders and teachers spoke very positively about the role particular academics had played in facilitating the research. One teacher spoke about the “expertise” the academic partner provided (X4) while another referred to the partner as an inspiration, stating “just her positive outlook, her aura ... It’s a motivating factor” (Y3). An AGTQP manager described an academic partner as “a critical factor of success” (W3) while an SED summed up, “a good academic partner can be a facilitator. A bad experience with an academic partner can be a barrier” (W2).

Synergy and trust.

Senior personnel and teachers talked of the importance and benefits of working in cross discipline or cross faculty teams to share ideas. One SED explained:

One of the big facilitators of change in schools, especially if you are working in a secondary context, is teachers working in cross-faculty teams. There is a lot of balkanization in secondary schools ... So once teachers start talking cross-faculty, a lot of those barriers are broken down. And one of the key drivers is relationships, being able to build that reciprocal trust around teachers working across a common goal of improving student learning. (W3)

Many teachers spoke about the importance of good working relationships and collegiality. One teacher described how “wonderful people to work with” made it easy for her to do practitioner research in her school (X4) while the Director, PLLD, confirmed, “What our research tells us from our teachers is that what is required is a culture of trust. There needs to be a strong basis for shared enquiry, shared decision making and shared responsibility for learning ... and relationships need to be strong” (W5).

A research focus that is relevant to teachers.

Teachers will only engage in research if they see the relevance of it to their practice. The research focus or topic must relate directly to what they do in their classroom. The Director of Studies at the private school explained how teachers engaged in research need “be able to see the relevance of the process to their professional practice” (X1) while the Director, PLLD, confirmed that what is “really important is making sure that what is being focused on is actually very real and meaningful for teachers that can be directly applied to their classrooms” (W5).

Monitoring and evaluation.

Something “that really encourages people to make their best effort” and facilitates good research is “evaluation of the project, transparency and clear communication”, stated a NSW AGQTP manager (W4). School leaders and teachers spoke of the importance of having targets, milestone checks and timely feedback. A director of studies described how management “were able to set sort of milestones along the way that we held the heads of department to” so that support was provided for a research project using “a sort of carrot and stick approach” (X1). A HOD confirmed having “due dates” was beneficial as “you knew

what you were working towards and by when” (X2). Another staff member (X4) identified the timely and detailed feedback the academic partner provided as very “beneficial” while a principal (Y1) described the importance of “monitoring” the research teams and keeping her “finger on the pulse”. School leaders need to gather “constant feedback” of how the research is progressing. If “you only wait to the evaluation stage it is too late then to pick up the concerns or where it has fallen down”.

A forum within the school for teachers to share ideas.

Several respondents talked about the importance of having a forum for staff to meet and share ideas referring variously to “going for drinks”, or meeting around the pizza oven (installed in the school yard), a large table in the science faculty, or in the middle-school staffroom. One teacher described how the physical environment was “extremely important” in acting as a facilitator for research:

I think that is what makes us unique here. Because we are all here together, we sit, we talk about the girls, we talk about what we are doing, we talk about who we are and what we do, and I think that we wouldn't have that in a different environment, where people are more isolated and departmental. (X4)

One respondent described a former school where staff were “balkanized more than anywhere else” prior to a “large staff room” being constructed resulting in transformational change:

Suddenly, from all being suspicious of each another and resistant, you get people talking, sharing, working together. I have never seen a school more attuned... [It] improved the relationship with everyone within the school. And you get lots more cross-collaborative strategies being implemented. (Z1)

A systematic structure for teacher professional learning.

All three schools in the study had established a systematic structure for teacher professional learning. Many respondents believe this necessary to foster practitioner research in a school. A DP declared:

I think that our [Teacher Professional Learning] TPL structure is the most facilitative factor - the [consortia the school has established], cross faculty teams, our

committees, our executive committee, our executive weekend. These are the things that foster the conversations and discussions, about the work that we do. (Z1)

One teacher believes staff members grow both personally and professionally when leadership provides opportunities for them to engage in research. “The professional growth that you develop ... is invaluable... So the school by providing these opportunities ... is providing support” (X2).

Barriers and Conflicting Practices

This dimension describes the inhibiting factors or barriers which might prevent practitioner research from being successfully implemented in schools. In many cases, as noted by a respondent, “Barriers and facilitators are two sides of the same thing” (W2). When a facilitating factor is in deficit, it likely will be a barrier. During conversations it was often this dimension which respondents, especially teachers, spoke most vigorously about.

Singapore

Time, an onerous workload and competing priorities were seen as the main barriers to teachers doing practitioner research in schools. Bureaucratic constraints, such as lack of teacher facility in choosing a topic, and deep seated cultural dimensions, such as teaching to the syllabus and the test, were viewed as other barriers. Inadequate training and a lack of knowledge about research posed further constraints. Many teachers found documenting the research a challenge or chore. One teacher reported a lack of cooperation from students was a barrier to doing research, although for others it did not appear an issue.

Time.

The vast majority of respondents identified time as the greatest barrier to teachers engaging in practitioner research, one teacher (C4) citing it as a “main factor” and a “major constraint”. A cluster superintendent observed “‘I don’t have time! I don’t have time!’ is a common refrain” among teachers (B3). Unless time is provided, teachers will “not be so positive” about doing research, one teacher (D2) believes, while a superintendent said “it is not going

to happen” (B3). Time was spoken about in terms of availability of time, alignment of time, or a span or cycle of time.

The perceived shortage of time caused many teachers great anguish. One (C5) described a “contradiction” where teachers spend time on “many other things” except their “bread and butter”. She explained teachers are not given time “to sit down, reflect and improve on your teaching”. Describing her frustration she explained:

I felt that I was doing the same thing over and over again, with different batch of students. I knew that they are different in different ways, that I had to manage them using different strategies, but, yet, I am not able to sit down and come up with something that would benefit them most. So, I find it, stuck. Hey, I’m not improving. I’m doing this again, and again, and again, repeating like an old recorder to different kinds of students, which may not be effective to them. That is what I felt. (C5).

A lack of time can impact on the quality of research done. One teacher noted, “[T]o do a good piece of research, you really need to sit down, spend time thinking through, designing, doing a good research plan” (C2) while a colleague at another school believes much of the research done in schools “is just touching the surface and it is not going in-depth enough” (D4). Although teaching is meant to be “a reflective practice” there was no time for reflection he believed.

In addition to availability, alignment of time also posed a barrier when there was no common time for team members to meet or observe each other’s work. One teacher explained, although she had been slightly off-loaded from other duties to do research, “Sometimes the lesson that I want, that I am interested in observing, doesn’t fall within that period of time that I am blocked out for” (D3).

A third limiting factor was that often research projects need to be completed within a restricted time span. One academic (A2) thought it “an artificial parameter” that research projects under the TLLM Ignite programme “must be completed within one calendar year”. The DD, CPPU, (B1) conceded that often the time stipulated “is too short for researchers to see any positive outcomes or conclusively say the innovation is adding value”. Also, while schools might value research in spirit, they might view it as too time-consuming in practice.

A cluster superintendent observed, “Some schools really have some base-line concerns that they want to deal with, and they might see research as a rather long-term solution, which they might not have the luxury of time to wait for” (B2). His counterpart described such leadership as “not enlightened enough” to understand “delayed gratification” and the need “to invest time to save time” (B3).

An onerous workload and competing priorities.

Intertwined with the issue of time, many respondents spoke about the “onerous” workload that teachers encountered as a barrier to research. One academic (A1) referred to the “heavy workload” and “unending list” teachers “have to accomplish in a day” so that they were constantly “on a fire-fighting mode”. “The curriculum time itself is very packed”, a teacher explained. “There is a lot of ongoing teaching, marking, setting of tests, exams, and you have other administrative work as a form teacher for example” (C2). A cluster superintendent (B2) acknowledged there were “too many committees” and “competing demands” on teachers.

A VP (D1) conceded that because teachers had “targets to meet” research became “a matter of priorities”. A deputy dean also believed there were “many other priorities” that might get “in the way” (C1). While some teachers thought doing research was “a matter of balance”, one stated simply, “Teachers are too overloaded to do research” (C5).

An academic noted, due to their additional responsibilities, “Appointment holders have more constraints to do research” (A2), yet ironically they are often the ones co-opted to do research in schools.

Bureaucratic constraints and deep seated cultural dimensions.

Bureaucratic constraints and ingrained practices can act as barriers to research and might emanate from the central bureau or at the school level. Schools joining ‘TLLM Ignite’ or the ‘FutureSchools @ Singapore’ programme, for instance, are obliged to implement an innovation, complete a research project, and submit a detailed report within a one year time frame, limiting the type of project that might be undertaken. The central bureau or school management also might exercise control over the research interest, focus or topic, one teacher

explaining there were “certain things the MOE wouldn’t approve” (C5). Schools also imposed constraints, the same teacher (C5) describing how her principal stipulated her involvement in research “should not affect my work in any way” as a condition of a research project being approved.

As described in Chapter 6, a deep seated cultural dimension within the Singapore education system was for teachers “to teach to the syllabus” and “to the test”. An academic (A3) described how teachers felt “frustrated” and “constrained” not having “the degree of freedom” they would like to transform their practice. He observed that the “borderlines were very hard and impermeable”, as far as he could see. Teachers from each of the schools in the study confirmed this. One stated, the “main restriction” on doing research was “the same old syllabus, syllabus, syllabus - we have to finish the syllabus” (C4). Another (E3) noted that while teachers were encouraged to implement different approaches, the assessment mode remains the same. Thereby innovative practices will not take root unless certain systemic change is made.

An academic agreed that some schools “are not change-ready” and “may have to make changes in terms of morale or infrastructure or leadership” (A3) while a VP supported the idea that further change need be made, such as giving recognition to teachers undertaking research, in order to sustain a “rich culture of research” in schools (D1).

Teacher capacity.

A superintendent observed that for most teachers, “Knowledge about research is a barrier”. Teachers “do not know enough about what it is” (B3). Many teachers did say they feel they are inadequately trained to effectively conduct research in their schools.

Teachers generally reported that there was little or no training provided on research during their undergraduate years. “There wasn’t a formal course, how to do it properly and so on, so it was like a trial and error type of thing” (C2). The teachers in the study who had been trained as RAs under the TTLM Ignite programme admitted they lacked confidence and had a poor understanding of research methodology, especially qualitative approaches, and of action research. In some instances the RA did not cascade down what they learnt to others. One

teacher stated the RA “only shared a little bit with me, in terms of the research methodology” (E3). In other instances some of the RAs’ misunderstandings were transmitted to other teachers in the school, members of one research team frequently referring to action research although they displayed little notion of what it constitutes.

Those teachers who had done post graduate studies or who had worked in collaboration with consultants or academic partners appeared to have the most knowledge about research and research methodologies. This was especially so at the independent school where many of the members on the Research Unit had post graduate degrees and shared their collective knowledge. Many of the staff at the government school with a tradition of research appeared to be knowledgeable about Lesson Study, an approach the Principal had purposively implemented in the school.

An academic (A2) had noticed that different people were perhaps more suited to do research. She believed that the quality of the people chosen to train as RAs or be part of a research project was sometimes questionable. A teacher (E3) observed that the tasks crafted by different research teams within the school were not of a consistent quality as the capacity or dedication of the members might fluctuate from year to year.

A challenge or barrier for some teachers was crafting a research topic. An academic (A2) who has worked extensively with teachers on research projects noted that teachers often struggled to find a research question or topic on which to focus. One teacher (E4) in particular described the anguish she experienced trying to craft a research question. At another school, a teacher leading a research project felt team members were dependent on him, asking, “Can you lead us, can you give us ideas?” (D4). The chairperson of the Research Unit at the independent school also observed some members often required a lot of guidance and direction in choosing a research focus.

Some respondents believed research “doesn’t come naturally to teachers” and it is not easy or simple for them to acquire capacity. One teacher remarked that research “is at a higher level” and therefore “more difficult to promote” than other approaches or strategies (C2). Another teacher believed doing research requires a sophisticated knowledge and that undertaking the required tasks such as “the statistical analysis for large volumes of data” is a considerable

challenge for most teachers (C3). She empathised, “I can see their difficulty. They may not do Masters in university. They do not really know the skill”.

Speaking globally, and adopting perhaps a more extreme position, one academic believes that it was perhaps not realistic to expect “teachers to be researchers” with all the “tool kit that involves”. Instead, research in schools “works well” when teachers and academics worked in collaboration. He believed, “Expecting teachers to be researchers, or indeed researchers to be teachers, is to actually minimize the potential value that can be gained from the collaboration” (A3).

Need for documentation.

Both school leaders and teachers saw the need to document research as being problematic for most teachers. A trainer from the Teachers’ Network observed that teachers liked to talk and share but not write or document their activities, stating it was “difficult ... to get the documentation and all that” (B4). A VP also observed teachers would be excited planning and trying out an innovation to “see whether it is effective. But teachers don’t really have that culture to do documentation” (D1). Evidencing this, a teacher stated, “One of the things I face is writing, putting down in words and writing it up. On my own, I always like to try out and do it ... but I didn’t document it” (D2).

The VP believed that if research was not properly documented then the learning remained a personal thing and would not be shared across the school thus impeding what good research is all about.

Lack of cooperation from students.

While an academic (A3) who has worked collaboratively with many schools on research projects described Singaporean students as “eminently compliant”, one teacher cited lack of student cooperation as a barrier to research. He stated, “some of them just don’t want to give feedback” feeling they had been compelled “to participate and all that” (E2), this idiosyncratic response helping to illustrate that teachers’ experiences were not always consistent across settings.

Insufficient compensation.

Although teacher researchers were provided certain support by the central bureau or the school some felt it was not sufficient compensation for the additional work involved. The Deputy Dean (C1) at the independent school revealed that even though some teachers were off-loaded from other duties to do research they still needed to cope with an onerous workload and competing demands:

Research, is probably one of the ways they (school management) look to drive the school forward, but there are also many other priorities, being the vibrant school that we are, and all these priorities need time and effort. And so, yes, granted, that we have some off-loading and support, but admittedly, I would say, that the job specs that we have in our school is perhaps a little bit more challenging compared to your average neighbourhood school.

Conflicting practices.

Often practitioner research conflicts rather than coheres with other practices as frequently evidenced in the above. As described by one academic, “after a couple of months”, teachers would realise that conducting research is something “they have to manage with other duties” (A2). One teacher described “if you are conducting research ... you have to fight, to compete” (E2). Often “The research committee meetings conflict with the department meetings” (E1) and doing research “takes time away from other areas” including the “commitment” to “teaching” (E3). Another teacher related, “because there are a lot of constraints, like time-tabling, scheduling... we had to work around... By the time you work around this constraint, that constraint, it’s not as what I would like it to be” (C4). A VP described how often “the energy and the interest” in research “will die off a bit” as teachers have “many other things to take care ... So not many of the research projects are really 100 per cent completed” (D1).

NSW

Barriers to practitioner research included leadership lacking commitment, proficiency or skills, the energy and commitment required to undertake the process, and the huge workload

of teachers. A lack of time, though, was seen as the most critical problem. In addition, lack of funding, schools being data driven, lack of teacher capacity, and finding a suitable academic partner or working with an unsuitable one, were cited as other barriers.

Leaders lacking commitment, proficiency or skills.

While a strong, inspirational leadership empathetic to practitioner research was viewed as a facilitator, conversely, leadership lacking a commitment to research was seen as a barrier. Practitioner research is not necessarily encouraged “across the board”, an SED observed, because it depends on the “leader’s thinking ... It is still very leadership dependent” (W2). A DP opined that often “our senior executives in schools” do not feel that “paying attention to educational research is worthwhile. There is too much cynicism. It is very sad” (Z1).

One view was that many school leaders may not be proficient at leading a research enterprise in their school. A PL consultant venturing “a wild generalization” believed “the leadership and executive in schools is not skilled enough themselves” to lead a research enterprise because they do not have the “vision to do that and the experience” (V5). She warned that school leaders with the required skills were rare:

When you look at school principals across the state, for a lot of them ... professional learning is not their strength. And to set up [professional learning] PL in schools, first of all, you have got to have a lot of clarity yourself. You have to have a lot of experience yourself. You have got to fund it. You have to lead people ... And I don’t think that the skill base is there to do that in schools at the moment. (V5)

Another significant issue is a change of leadership if “the new principal doesn’t have the ownership or commitment to the project that the previous one had” an AGQTP manager noted (W4).

The commitment required.

A common perception was that practitioner research is a big commitment, requiring a lot of time and effort on the part of the school and teachers. While many teachers might be enthusiastic at the start, it was often reported that they were not able to sustain the energy

required to see the project through to its end. Intentions did not always translate into realizable action. One academic related how “50 per cent” of teachers he was working with that semester “found it too taxing to actually complete action research projects” (V3) but understood that they “are grossly over worked” and “barely have time for anything, let alone the reflective cycle”. A PL consultant described why it was sometimes difficult to complete practitioner research in schools:

I just think it takes a lot more energy to get teachers involved, because it is a big commitment. You know, it’s slower. You have to go to a lot of meetings. You’ve got to really work with people. You’ve got to invite people into your classrooms, maybe. It’s much more challenging. (V5)

A DP concurred, stating, “If you do this kind of research, it takes time” (Z1) while teachers themselves described doing practitioner research as a “huge” investment of time (X3) and “incredibly time consuming” (X2).

Relentless change and unmanageable workloads.

Respondents commonly spoke about teachers being “grossly overworked” and “snowed under” due to relentless change and a constantly increasing workload, thereby inhibiting practitioner research in schools. A DP graphically described the current situation:

They (teachers) are so snowed under. I have never been through such a period of change as we are going through now. The current rate of change – and I talk to people in every school – is killing teachers. Teachers are just being killed at the moment. (Z1)

Accountability and documentation in particular “take up so much teacher time”, the VP believed, while “the whole technology thing has been very demanding on teachers” (V5), the PL consultant added. As teachers were “run ragged all the time” often their “core business gets swept aside” one teacher observed. “They don’t want to be doing extra things... They are just sick and tired of it” (Z2).

Another teacher verified that practitioner research was subjugated by other demands because teachers “are doing more and more” and there has been “a lot of change”. Weekly meetings

were taken up with information pertaining to new initiatives, consequently practitioner research has “fallen by the way side” (Z4).

Time.

Unequivocally respondents identified lack of time as the most critical barrier to practitioner research, an AGQTP manager stating it is “the biggest issue to this type of work” (W4). One academic described how practitioner research “takes time” and “time is very difficult to find in schools” (V2) while a principal more bluntly stated “unless teachers get time” they are “not going to be able to do it” (Y1). First and foremost, respondents spoke about a shortage or lack of time. They also described how the alignment of time could pose a barrier, or there might be an insufficient span of time for a research cycle to take place or show results.

Reading the literature and documentation often was an issue for teachers undertaking research because “there is a fair bit of information ... and you don’t have time to read it”, explained one (Z4). Teachers “are time poor and they’re paper rich” (Z3), a colleague likewise described.

Often it was difficult to find a common time when members in the research team can meet. “Finding a common time when teachers could come together” was “one of the biggest difficulties” an academic experienced (V3). “Once you have got more than one person meeting you have conflict of time” (W3), an SED observed. This challenge was further compounded when trying to find a time for different faculties or sections of a school to meet, “a mismatch” causing “problems” planning a whole school PL session, a director of studies recalled (X1).

When schools applied externally to fund a research undertaking the designated milestone markers and timeframe might not logically connect or dovetail well with the school’s calendar. Describing a project funded through the NSW AGQTP, a director of studies remarked, “the time frame they set, the one year project ... doesn’t quite fit with how a school works” (X1). A colleague agreed “time and context” was a barrier to research “because all schools have times of year where it is just horrendously busy, sometimes mad” (X3) and externally imposed requirements and expectations do not always mesh. Some

respondents also believed that the one-year time frame imposed for the completion of certain projects limited the type and quality of research that is done.

Although “off loaded”, some teachers were of the perception they were not sufficiently compensated for the additional work and time they invest in a research project. One teacher recalled:

[Management] didn't say no to anything we really wanted. If we wanted to buy chicken wire, or you know, all that was provided. I mean the only thing, is like all these things is - more time. We would have given up more time, of our own time, than the project allowed for. (Y4)

Lack of funding and challenges employing casual relief.

Funding was critical to finance casual relief so that teachers may be released from class to spend time on practitioner research. “The main cost is the release time. The casual relief” (Z1), explained one VP. A lack of funding therefore became a barrier to either implementing or sustaining practitioner research. A manager from NSW AGQTP believed practitioner research cannot “occur” without funds to support teachers. Otherwise schools “are actually asking teachers to do a heck of a lot of things in their own time. And they've already got a lot of things to do” (W4). Some teachers believed they received little real support from their school in terms of funding, resources, or training, one teacher describing the support provided as “nil” (Z3) another stating teachers need do research in their own time because “there is no money left” (Z2).

“Finding casuals” was a challenge, one principal (Y1) said, even if funding was available. An academic conceded “it is not always easy to find relief teachers who can fit straight into a programme” while a teacher believed employing casuals “is disruptive, because you have to prepare lessons, and the kids, sometimes they don't work well with casual teachers, and it becomes a problem” (Y3).

A tendency towards quantitative data.

As discussed previously, there was a widespread perception that the DET expected schools to be data-driven and measured through standardized testing. As a result, schools taught to the test and tended to shun research and innovation. Also, quantitative was favoured over qualitative data. A manager from the NSW AGQTP viewed this tendency as a barrier to practitioner research:

We are results driven - external league tables, standardised testing, the publication of exit results, the school certificate, the higher school certificate - because you are teaching to the test, particularly with the current Federal government's view about league tables for schools. (W3)

Furthermore, some teachers believed school leadership sought data simply to satisfy the central education bureau as opposed to using research to explore issues. One teacher was of the opinion:

We have got some ... people here who are very keen on research and data being used to enhance the opinion of some members of the Department towards them, and I don't get terribly involved with their research because I don't see the value in it. (Z3)

Lack of teacher capacity.

A further barrier to practitioner research was a lack of teacher capacity. Respondents suggested that: it took a long time for a teacher to acquire capacity as a practitioner researcher; most teachers did not have sufficient capacity in this domain; many teachers might not have the opportunity to develop their capacity; and even in schools where there was a critical mass of people expert in research, this could be quickly eroded due to staff attrition and movement. A DP cautioned most teachers did not have the capacity to systematically research their own practice using ARAL strategies because, "Most of them have not been trained in this" (Z1). A PL consultant described how it took time to accumulate capacity. "I'm talking about time as a long term commitment and also the mode of learning. It is not straight forward". Teachers need to "experiment", "collect a lot of data", analyse it, while concurrently developing "the skills to do that" (V5).

A SED described a case where research capacity was lost in a school due to staff movement:

They had a base of very, very experienced teachers and that's how they organized their professional learning and they also had university links where people came and worked with the school. Now, they lost a lot of their critical people so they are now having to build up that expert base again. (W1)

The challenges of engaging an academic partner.

Many respondents agreed that the best quality research came from schools when teachers worked in collaborative relationship with academics. However, while schools might desire to work with an academic partner, many found difficulty locating and securing a suitable person. An SED explained, "It is very difficult to find someone who is willing to come in. There's no formal way of finding an academic partner" except "through hearsay" (W1).

While a good academic partner could help to facilitate research in a school, as discussed previously, "a bad experience with an academic partner can be a barrier" (W2). Recalling a particular experience an SED described an academic partner who "did nothing. It was a waste of time. And a waste of us paying the money" (W1). Furthermore, teachers could sometimes show resistance to academic partners entering the school unless a relationship and trust was built. "It is about developing trust", emphasized one academic (V2).

Conflicting practices.

Practitioner research often conflicted with the other practices in which teachers engaged. One teacher noted a lot of teachers engaged in practitioner research "manage by not doing as much lesson preparation as they might (laughs)" (X3). Another described how school management withdrew their support for a research project when they thought it was impacting on the teacher researchers' work in other areas:

A couple of the principals from DET schools started to get annoyed, even though they had signed a release... they were questioning the teachers leaving and having to attend meetings... they were starting to withdraw their support and that influenced the teacher involvement and enthusiasm... towards the end they were starting to say, "Oh, look. You are out of the school too much". (X2)

A DP stated that “teachers’ focus is on getting through the syllabus” and they would “resist” doing practitioner research if it meant time was “taken away from the classroom” (Z1). A teacher agreed that “most teachers ... are run by curriculum ... and have very little time free to do anything else” (Z3). Offering a more philosophical and nuanced view, a colleague stated:

The irony of all this is, if you want to professionally develop to help that particular class, or outcomes, or teaching practice, etcetera, you’ve gone away from that teaching practice and that class in order to learn it, in order to do something else and you think, “Well hang on. What’s happened here?” That’s the ironical thing. (Z2).

Conclusion

Any practitioner research enterprise in a school occurs within a network of other practices, or as Kemmis has described, within a “meta-practice” (2008). These various practices can cohere or conflict (Schatzki, 2002), thereby acting to pre-figure or shape the way practitioner research is understood and practised by teachers. Strong, empathetic leadership, time, funding, and teacher capacity were essential in facilitating practitioner research across both contexts. These factors, when in deficit, then acted as barriers.

It also emerged that doing practitioner research requires a considerable investment of time in the enterprise – so that teachers can first learn how to do practitioner research and then to undertake a study. An irony exists. As teachers became more involved in practitioner research, along with the myriad of other activities and responsibilities they are already compelled to undertake, increasingly they were taken away from their core business or “bread and butter”, having less time to spend focusing on their classroom teaching. These different practices hence constrain rather than enable each other. Consequently, much of the teacher research undertaken, as described by respondents, was somewhat superficial, teachers being too “overloaded” to really investigate an issue in any significant depth or breadth.

Furthermore, across both cultures, it was commonly believed that innovative practices will not take root unless certain systemic change is made, for example, moving away from an exam-oriented education system in Singapore and making available more funding for school-based research and forums for sharing research findings in NSW. As established in Chapter

3, teachers can choose to become “encultured” by the education system in which they function (Somekh, 2006, p.179) or form a critical view of schools (Kemmis, 2008). The extent to which teachers develop a critical consciousness of the world in order to effect meaningful change as described by Freire (1974, 1985) and Kemmis (2008, 2009) is accordingly investigated in Chapter 9.

This and the previous chapter illuminated the different contexts in which practitioner research transpires in Singapore and NSW, identifying characteristics of policy and culture that might help to shape a teacher’s experience as a practitioner researcher. Other factors that might act to prefigure practitioner research, the constraints and enablers as perceived by respondents, were also illustrated. The following two chapters discuss how practitioner research is understood, practised, transmitted, and valued by teachers.