

THE VALUE OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

It is claimed that practitioner research is becoming increasingly valued across different educational systems as a form of teacher professional learning (Campbell & McNamara, 2009). There is criticism, though, when practitioner research is implemented in a “top down” manner (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2005) or employed to focus solely on school improvement rather than to challenge the conditions “which irrationally, unjustly and unproductively constrain teachers’ understandings, their work and their workplaces” (Kemmis, 2011, p.21). The fourth main category constituting the themes that emerged in the data, *The Value of Practitioner Research*, describes the extent to which practitioner research is practised within and across schools, the degree of facility teachers enjoy when undertaking research, and whether practitioner research is practised and valued in a technical or emancipatory form. This main category is composed of three dimensions labeled as follows: *Teacher facility*, *The pervasiveness of research*, and *Effecting change and social good*.

Teacher Facility

This dimension describes the degree of autonomy or freedom schools and teachers exercise in choosing to become involved in a research enterprise and how much influence or power they possess in determining the research topic, focus or interest, the approach or research design, and how the results of their findings might be disseminated and to who.

Singapore

Although the MOE declares its approach towards school-based research and innovation is a “bottom up initiative, top down support” the veracity of this claim was contested by some respondents. There was a belief that schools are often pressured or coerced to engage in research at the behest of cluster superintendents. While certain teachers have an intrinsic motivation and volunteered to undertake research in their schools, for many it was because they were tasked or it was mandated. Teachers were often co-opted to be part of a research group in order that their class be the experimental or control group or so that an intervention could be applied across a broader number of classes or whole level. Rather than functioning as a full participating member of the research process, these teachers often acted as data-

collection points. The degree of facility or control a teacher might exercise over his or her research varied considerably between the three Singaporean schools in the study as did the opportunities to broadcast research findings at national and international conferences.

Top down versus bottom up implementation.

Little consensus existed as to whether research enterprises in schools in Singapore are initiated “top down” or “bottom up”. The DD, CPPU, (B1) described how schools have “enjoyed ... autonomy for a number of years” and how curriculum change is being encouraged through school-based research and innovation”. She insisted that the MOE is encouraging bottom up initiatives, “with top down support ... all the school based curriculum ideas come from the school ... it is all ground up. So it is really their ideas” (B1). She further stated that schools “do have a choice” and “come in willingly”. Many respondents, including academics and teachers, though, believed that once a signal is sent by the MOE, in effect it will be the cluster directors and superintendents, and then in turn the principals, who will encourage, drive and dictate the research enterprises and agendas in schools.

Although school-based research is highly encouraged by the MOE it is not mandated. A superintendent (B2) explained “it will depend on individual schools as to how high they place this as a priority”. His assessment, through his close contact with schools, is that there is a lot of enthusiasm for practitioner research from the ground and that, “We should have allowed this opportunity much, much earlier”. Schools being organized into clusters and zones, he agreed that deputy directors and cluster superintendents can exercise considerable influence over schools and that in some instances these people may use certain forms of practitioner research, such as AR, to establish a cluster identity or niche, which he believed was “a little bit too top down and giving too much direction to the schools”, but conceded it did happen. One academic (A1) confirmed such instances where AR had been mandated across a whole zone or cluster by superintendents. This is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Another academic (A2) also believes that the way policy is stated means that there is a top down imperative for schools and teachers to do practitioner research. As research in schools is effectively made compulsory schools are then compelled to find and nominate a teacher for training as a RA, contrary to the rhetoric that they are given choice, she believes.

Offering a slightly tangential view, two respondents believed it is immaterial whether research is initiated top down or bottom up. One claimed if the MOE introduces an initiative and the principal does not strongly endorse it, teachers are not likely to participate (D2), the other agreeing “sustainability comes from the principal and how willing the school leaders are to put aside resources to support the enterprise” (C1).

Mandated versus volunteered to do practitioner research.

There are various reasons why teachers in Singapore engage in practitioner research. It can be due to personal interest, to satisfy a course requirement or performance appraisal, for career advancement, but for many it is because they are tasked or it was mandated. While in theory schools have a choice as to whether they engage in school-based research and innovation, teachers within a school, where leadership has decided to adopt such enterprises, do not always have the same freedom to choose. One academic ventured “most action research taking place could well be done because they (the teachers) are told to do so” (A1). Recalling his experience working on collaborative research projects with schools, a second academic (A3) described how “the dynamic” of participation commonly involved teachers “being told to participate by their principal or their departmental head”. Often teachers “effectively had not chosen” to be in a project.

A number of teachers described how they directly, or other teachers had been, mandated to undertake research in their school, this being prevalent in the two government schools in the study but not at the independent school. A HOD leading the research enterprise at his school (E) described how teachers who are “good enough to do” research “are identified by HODs” (E1). He conceded certain teachers had been “mandated” to do research and that such an approach is “not always effective” as often these teachers are not “very enthusiastic about doing it”. Corroborating this, a teacher from the school explicated how she was “selected” by her HOD to do research so “took it as another duty I am supposed to do” (E4).

There was debate over the effectiveness of making research mandatory. While many respondents, including those in senior positions, acknowledged that teachers will tend to resist initiatives that are imposed on them, there were some, from middle management in schools and some teachers themselves, who believed that teachers will not engage in

practitioner research unless it is mandated, one teacher stating she would only participate in research “when asked” but “wouldn’t initiate” research on her own (E3).

A more common belief was that research will not work if it is mandated in schools. One cluster superintendent stated, “I think it might even have the opposite effect. Teachers are very busy. They might see it in rather a resentful way” (B2). He believed that teachers will have “no passion” for research if they are “coerced” by the school’s principal. A teacher attested, “If someone is not interested, there is no point forcing them to do it” (C3), while another concurred, it would be “like someone pointing a gun at you” (C5). A colleague thought it important “the rationale” be “communicated very effectively”, otherwise:

If it is forced down your throat, you wouldn’t know why you are doing it, you would not be sold, you would not be convinced, and you would just see it as an extra load... you will not be doing it because you want to find out ... it is just because it is instructions, you have to start on something. (C4)

At the independent school, teachers “were given a choice” to undertake research. “It is optional”, one teacher claimed (C3). All members of the school’s Research Unit had volunteered to join, the Deputy Dean confirmed. “Every one of the unit members were people who had asked [to join]” (C1).

Teachers as data collection points.

As discussed in Chapter 8, teachers involved in a research team sometimes merely served as data collection points. Rather than functioning as a “full participating member” of the research process or “a peer” in a collaborative research project, often in schools “teachers are really people that you are observing as data points... because very often these projects in schools are intervention projects... [and] you have to observe someone out there doing an intervention, so these would be the teachers”, an academic criticized (A2). In the two government schools involved in the study, teachers were often co-opted to be part of a research group in order that their class be the experimental or control group or so that an intervention could be applied across a broader number of classes or whole level.

In those schools where an intervention or innovation was trialed across a number of classes, there was sometimes resistance from some classroom teachers when they were obliged to comply. One teacher (E3) described how her research team wished “to try out” an innovation “with different classes, more classes than we did last year” but found teachers “were quite hesitant” and “not as willing, not as enthusiastic, as we had expected”. Similarly a teacher from another school also faced “resistance” from teachers when requesting they “change some of the things they were doing” so that her team could “look into the effectiveness of that programme” (D3).

Determining the research focus.

The degree of control a teacher might exercise over his or her research can vary considerably. One academic (A2) notes the importance of empathy from the top. She believes that some school leaders and middle managers “bully” the school’s RA, telling them what to do, although they may not have a good knowledge or understanding of research themselves.

The degree of facility teachers were afforded varied considerably between the three Singaporean schools in the study. While the independent school (C) appeared to provide teachers the most choice and say over their research, the school that was new to research (E) seemed to allow the least. The different degrees of autonomy exercised by teacher researchers appeared to be linked to the history and culture of the school. Those schools with a history and an ethos and philosophy of school-based research appeared more liberal and less directive. The school just embarking on research seemed considerably more prescriptive and controlling.

The Deputy Dean leading the research enterprise at the independent school (C) explained that all members of the research team had joined voluntarily and some had been members for several years. Members are given considerable flexibility in deciding their research topics and the focus of the research often arises from a need identified within the subject department or by the teacher themselves. A PhD candidate with an interest and knowledge in research methodologies, the Deputy Dean saw her role as mentoring the teachers in the team. If a teacher was unable to decide upon a research focus then she might suggest a menu of ideas based on the school’s needs, “a variety of probable things that they can look into. They

choose the one they find most of interest to them”, she explained (C1). A teacher in the team (C4) verified, “We were pretty free to do whatever project we wanted to work on”. Teachers would get “a little input here and there” from the chairman of the research team, “and if she is good to go ... we would start doing it”. Another agreed teachers were free to determine the research topic “as long as it related to our department or teaching methodology or pedagogy” (C3).

The teachers in the research unit stressed the importance of teacher ownership and facility expressing the view that research should be initiated from the ground. One (C3) believed that teachers preferred to craft the research questions and were happiest when they related to pedagogy. Another (C4) observed “If it comes from themselves, then I guess they are more positive about it. If it is something that they want to do themselves, something they believe in, then they want to do it”. She compared this with her experience in a former school where the research topic had been imposed and did not “really quite cater” to her class or the students’ specific needs.

In the government school with a history of engagement in school-based research (D) certain teachers, usually those leading the research teams, were provided some facility, although school management still exercised considerable control over the direction of the research. One teacher who headed a research team explained she was given certain “freedom” and “space” but qualified if it was a “big programme that impacts the whole school, then I will have to discuss very detailed with my [Principal] P and [Vice-Principals] VPs” (D3). She elaborated that, “sometimes I might not get 100 per cent to do what I would like to do” because ultimately the topic or focus of the research “is still subjected to approval”.

When teachers work in teams, “we are the ones who decide upon the problem”, a team leader explained (D2). It was common, as described earlier, for the other teachers to function more as objects of study rather than as fully active members of the research team. Ultimately then some classroom teachers ostensibly involved in research had little input or facility in the process. School management approved a topic or intervention determined by the leader of the research team which was then implemented across a number of classes or levels. So far from classroom teachers investigating their localized setting often a blanket

innovation or intervention was imposed on them resulting sometimes in a certain unhappiness or resentment.

Teachers in the school new to research (E) appeared to have the least facility of all. Perhaps a little ironically, the HOD (E1) driving the research in the school acknowledged that it was important that teachers volunteer to do school-based research rather than be coerced but justified that in his school it was felt necessary that teachers sometimes be nominated. He believes that teachers will not elect to engage in practitioner research unless it is mandated. Of the other three teachers interviewed from that school, one had volunteered and the other two had been nominated to undertake research in the school. The teachers mandated to do research appeared to have little facility in determining the research focus. One explained “For my case, I wasn’t the one who initiated it. I was more of a participant ... who was roped into the team” (E3). She also noted that she did not have any involvement in determining how the research funding was spent.

Perhaps due to lack of capacity or confidence, there was evidence in all three schools that teachers were sometimes dependent on the team leaders to set the direction for the research. Because she was “not sure” how “to craft” her own question one teacher divulged she asked the team leader to “think of something for me” (E4). One project leader disclosed how teachers in the research team “more or less rely on you. ‘Can you lead us? Can you give us ideas?’” (D4). Another empathized, “Some of them are fledglings at this ... all this is still a big wilderness ... so they do appreciate, and they are responsive towards... suggestions as to what they can be doing, rather than go barking up the wrong tree” (C1). One academic postulated that teachers in Singapore tend to shun autonomy and having a greater say. “It makes their job easier. ‘Don’t give us loose frameworks’. They really want more like a manual” (A1). Another believes that crafting a research question often is daunting for many teachers, even those trained as RAs (A2).

Opportunities to share.

Although results suggest all teachers in the study had ample opportunity to share research findings internally, within their department and across the school, not all teachers had equal facility to share externally. At the independent school if teachers “volunteer, express interest,

I think that the opportunity is there”, one teacher explained (C2). But at the government schools, where funding to attend national and international conferences is perhaps more limited, “the teachers are nominated” (E2). “In an average government school, for conferences, national ones, every school is entitled to two members of the staff”, one respondent (C1) explained, but if there are several “champions of action research” the school will need to provide additional funding if these people are to share their findings externally.

NSW

Although actively encouraged by the DET, individual schools have the autonomy to decide if they engage in ARAL or any other form of practitioner research. Schools involved in AGQTP projects were constrained by certain requirements although some creatively utilized funding to address broader concerns. Due to accountability pressures it is likely schools, and consequently teachers, will increasingly engage, or be required to engage, in research in a bid to produce data. While some teachers choose, others are mandated to undertake practitioner research. There are also teachers who engage in practitioner research but are perhaps not cognizant of the fact. A common sentiment is that teachers should be given agency or facility over the research focus and agenda, but in practice often they need to work within a framework or set of guidelines or have an agenda imposed on them. One belief is that perhaps teacher agency is overstated.

Autonomy and choice for schools.

One teacher observed that it is often those in positions of influence or power, such as the SED, who will largely influence a school’s research agenda, “They set the direction in terms of what information they want, what the agenda is” (Z3). However, a dominant conviction among respondents was that innovation and change is best initiated at the school level rather than from the central education bureau if it is to be successful or sustained. If teachers “see that it is imposed on them”, reflected one SED, “it is not going to work as well”. She further expounded:

Often the initiatives that come out from the Department [that is, the NSW DET] don’t have that sustainability, because they are imposed, and there is not the local

ownership, and people do not embrace it ... or they will do it, and pay lip service to it, and you are not going to get any lasting change. (W1)

ARAL, is promoted as a form of PL by the DET so that schools have ownership of the initiative or change being implemented. “Where the school has chosen something, and it’s of interest to some of the people in the school, it is more likely to go ahead. Where it has been imposed... it’s not always going to be so well received”, another SED conjectured (W2). Even though the DET encourages schools to engage in practitioner research, specifically ARAL, as a form of PL, ultimately schools have the autonomy to choose whether they do, although the regional SED might exercise certain influence.

All school personnel undertaking leadership training from about 2004 would have completed an AR project as part of their PL and it is anticipated that these school leaders would sustain such practice when appointed to schools, explained the Director, PLLD (W5). In addition, the Professional Learning Continuum, developed by the PLLD directorate, provides a framework for PL programmes and strategies to guide the development of school staff and ARAL remains a key strategy within this framework as of 2011.

Schools opting to apply for funding under the NSW Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) programme were required to develop an action learning project as a mandatory requirement. Additionally they needed to address “certain categories in order to get funding”, explained a PL consultant (V5) placing further limitations and restrictions on them. Although there has been criticism that “action research has been appropriated by programmes” like the NSW AGQTP “as a kind of implementation tool just to get a particular policy up”, one academic (V4) drew the conclusion “it is far more complex than that”. Many schools are creative and utilize such funding and resources to “actually do something that’s a bit broader than what actual government policy is”, she believes.

It was the perception of many respondents in NSW that with the introduction of recent initiatives over the past decade such as standardized testing, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), league tables, the QTF, and the NSW IT Professional Teaching Standards, that there will be increasing pressure for schools and teachers to be more and more accountable. This will in turn result in schools becoming more data and results

driven and will help to fashion both the kind of research and the amount of research undertaken in schools.

Becoming a researcher.

There “are a whole lot of ways” that principals can implement a specific type of PL agenda, explained an AGQTP manager (W3). “Some are quite directive ... others are quite democratic”, she laughed. Teachers interviewed became involved in practitioner research due to various reasons: an intellectual curiosity or orientation, an intrinsic desire for improvement, for accreditation and promotion, because it was a requirement or expectation, or because they were co-opted or mandated (for further discussion please see Ellis and Armstrong, 2011). It also emerged that some teachers engage in practitioner research as part of school work or PL but perhaps are not cognizant of the fact as the nomenclature has not been articulated to them.

The degree of teacher facility varied between the three NSW schools in the study. But even when compelled to participate in a research project, teachers seemed to be given some voice. There appeared to be a desire by school management to reach consensus by involving staff in a consultative process, at least superficially if not authentically. An academic (A3) who has worked extensively with teachers on collaborative research projects in both settings observed that teachers in NSW have “more agency” over their involvement in a research project than their peers in Singapore. When teachers in NSW “find themselves effectively elbowed in ... they would have more ability to refuse to be involved”, he contended. Exemplifying this, the Director of Studies at the private school described how teachers were “identified and invited” (X1) to join research projects, while a colleague confirmed “people can ... say ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (X3).

The two schools identified as having an “ethos and culture of research” (X and Y) both had highly structured systems for driving their research enterprises. Teachers might be grouped into research teams, often under the guidance of an academic partner, or pursue research based on individual interests. While teachers at these schools commonly volunteered or were invited to join, in some instances teachers were effectively mandated to participate in research projects. In school X all teachers from a certain section, “the middle school”, were

involved in a school change process. There had also been “an across the school project” in which “a task” was given to each department “so in a way it was a mandatory project”, the Director of Studies (X1) recalled. In school Y all teachers with junior classes were organised into Teams. Teachers variously described how they “were invited” (X3) or “were volunteered” (Y2) or “were chosen” (Y3) to join a research team and how their involvement “was just fitting in with how the school was run” (Y4).

In the school new to research (Z), members of staff were not explicitly identified as belonging to research teams per se although all teachers throughout the school were grouped into consortiums. These groupings focused specifically on the personal and affective development of students, but did involve curriculum innovation. However, there was no structure specifically labeled research. Rather, the school had been “harnessing the skills of the teachers who we feel are innovating” and providing support the DP explained (Z1).

Teachers sometimes engage in practitioner research without being cognizant of the fact, perhaps because it has not been articulated to them. This might occur in a school where leadership has implemented change across a section or whole of the school, or when change is implemented from outside the school. An SED (W1) described how consultants from the regional directorate providing support for schools often implement AL projects to get changes in practice although it might not be “articulated as that”. A Principal (Y1) similarly disclosed that while many of her teachers engage in practitioner research when working collaboratively in teams she doesn’t necessarily “use those labels”. Although teachers “are using the strategy, they wouldn’t understand that they have used the action research model”.

Determining the research agenda.

Teachers reported it is important “to be given a voice” and be “heard” (X4) and to have facility over the research agenda if they are to feel “valued”. “People will really feel like they own the change that takes place rather than have it imposed from above”, explained one (X4). “I think that is huge”, said another (Z3). “You know what are the issues that you need to find more about because you are part of the place. And from outside they cannot dictate that because each school is so different”.

Often in practice, though, teachers were given limited facility in determining the research agenda, a framework or template being imposed on them. The Director of Studies from the private school explained, “There are some things that are sort of imposed, but the team that is working on the project then has a bit of flexibility” (X1). He elaborated, “We try to future gaze over five years and set priorities for the school... it would suggest where the research projects should be going”. In certain circumstance there might be “some gentle re-direction (laughs)” so that the research project would be “mutually beneficial”. A teacher from the school confirmed that the idea or focus for a research study he was involved in “came from the principal” but the team was given some freedom to determine the direction of the study “within the framework” (X2). The Principal of one of the government schools declared, “I do not dictate. I might suggest things to help guide them but in the end it is their ownership” (Y1). A teacher verified, that Teams “were given autonomy to experiment with things ... although there were a couple of sign posts along the way that everyone had to do” (Y2).

A DP conceded that the executive meeting within her school “operates as a bit of a screening” where ideas proposed by teachers are either “developed” or “turfed out” (Z1). A teacher from that school reasoned, “If your senior executive are not on side with the project to begin with you are wasting your time” (Z3). An academic summed up that while teacher agency in NSW schools “is not illusory ... it is overstated in the terms of the realities of what teachers are able to do” (A3).

There were some teachers who expressed reservations about working collaboratively, feeling that their voice and facility was sometimes stymied. They were circumspect, if not cynical, concerning the facility afforded them, believing the research agenda was imposed on them by school management, an academic partner or outside agency. One described how a “project leader” in conjunction with an academic partner “decided the topic for us”. He elaborated:

There was already a topic in place. So we were just called in and told that this is what you are going to do. So this is the topic. These are the activities you have to do. So everything was already in place. (Y3)

The Pervasiveness of Research

This dimension describes the extent to which practitioner research is practised within and across schools and hence the degree to which practitioner research is valued by school leaders and teachers.

Singapore

A culture of research was not pervasive across schools in Singapore. The level of involvement in practitioner research might best be described as patchy, irregular, or uneven. The extent to which teachers engage in practitioner research will be largely determined by the value cluster superintendents and principals attribute to research. Teachers themselves displayed different levels of passion and different levels of ability. However, the extent to which practitioner research is practiced in schools appears to be growing and evolving.

Across schools.

A culture of research, one academic (A1) conjectured, is reflected through “a spirit of inquiry ... about what is good teaching” and is not yet evident across all schools in Singapore. A superintendent verified that it cannot be claimed that practitioner research is burgeoning in schools, “not exponentially ... we are not at that happy position yet” (B2). “It is a little uneven on the ground”, assessed a second superintendent (B3), a teacher confirming, “It varies from schools ... and a lot is individuals in different schools” (C2).

The academic further asserted that the push for schools to do practitioner research tends to come from the deputy director of a zone or the cluster superintendent. “Every school in Singapore is meant to have their own niche” or unique identity and the deputy directors tend to follow “that kind of discourse also” (A1). Hence, they desire to build an identity or niche for their zone or cluster and will dedicate funds and encourage principals to support the initiative they value. He identified one zone that has “a very formalized approach to action research or practitioner research, probably because of the deputy director, who believes and champions that tremendously”. A superintendent (B2) confirmed that research tends to be encouraged more in one cluster than the next. It may or may not be an “immediate priority of

the cluster ... at this time. So that is where I see that unevenness is likely to come about”, he explained. A second superintendent (B3) agreed, “There could be a situation where the principals in the cluster and the cluster superintendent may believe this is the focus for the year”.

There was a sense among some respondents though that a culture of practitioner research is growing in Singapore schools, if not quite burgeoning. An academic (A2) shared her view that by systematically implementing certain policies and initiatives, such as TLLM Ignite, throughout most schools, the MOE is attempting to make research pervasive. A superintendent ventured, “I think when we are able to put more resources into schools, we will see more of this, but at the moment, I think the engagement at school level is likely to remain at the passionate, individual level” (B2).

Within schools.

While superintendents do exercise influence, ultimately principals have the responsibility for charting the direction of their schools. The degree to which teachers are involved in practitioner research within a school is largely determined by the value a principal places on it. “If the principal has no interest or passion for research and is interested in the school ranking for example” research will be a low priority a superintendent explained (B3).

The extent to which teachers were involved in practitioner research varied across and within the three schools in the study. A shared belief was that the independent schools tended to be more active in innovation and research than the government schools. “We do know that there are some independent schools ... [which] are probably quite far ahead in terms of innovation ... and they have the capacity to do it”, observed the DD, CPPU (B1). The Deputy Dean of the independent school (C) laughed “realistically” there “were not that many teachers in the school ... involved in practitioner research” although the school is building a “critical mass”. Although the independent school has a stronger culture of research than the government school she previously was attached to, a teacher confirmed, “It is not every teacher here who is research-based still” (C4).

At the government school with a culture and ethos of research (D), the “guideline” provided by management was that “every teacher should be involved in lesson study” the VP explained (D1). But he conceded such a target “has not been reached yet due to other pressing priorities”. He further testified, “We have tried out some different teams with different degrees of success. I must say, it’s a trialing process. Not many teams have really completed what they plan to do in the end”. Providing further insight, one teacher disclosed that colleagues sometimes do not understand the research team’s work, “because there are only a small group of teachers doing it” (D3).

At the government school new to research (E), the HOD driving the practitioner research enterprise reflected, “currently I think, not all teachers buy into this” (E1). A teacher (E3) agreed that while school management provides encouragement and support, her fellow teachers take a “sceptical view” and see “action research as something outside their job scope”. She thinks that most teachers do not value practitioner research nor believe it “adds value to their teaching in the class”.

It would appear that teachers value research most when they can see how it connects to their everyday work and classroom teaching. One teacher, tasked to lead a research project by her principal, experienced an epiphany when she realized the work she did as a researcher would “actually ... be very meaningful” to her classroom work “as well” (D3).

At ground level, it would appear the extent to which practitioner research is valued varies greatly between individual teachers. There was no definite consensus among the experts as to the trend. One superintendent (B2) believes that quite a number of teachers have displayed a great “enthusiasm” and passion for research. “I have seen the interest level in individual teachers, so I am quite encouraged by what I see”, he stated, but added, “There are different levels of passion, different levels of ability”.

NSW

Practitioner research has not been systematically embraced by schools across NSW. The degree to which practitioner research was valued and practised varied greatly, both across and within schools. Schools in certain regions tended to be more active than others; yet

practitioner research still only “penetrates little zones”. Change management is often adopted as a strategy by leadership to implement practitioner research and change but enthusiasm for research can fluctuate over time, with profound effects on the sustainability of the research enterprise within a school. Teachers will only engage in practitioner research if they can see a direct relevance and benefit to their work in the classroom. One belief was that practitioner research is being practised more broadly in schools now than in the past.

Across schools.

While increasingly ARAL is being adopted as a PL approach, it is far from being systematically embraced and practised across all schools in the state. One academic (V3) noted that the AGQTP had a limited penetration involving “only ... about 30 schools in a year in NSW”, while another (V2) observed that often it would be “the same school putting their hand up to be involved ... in different projects”. Although many schools are involved in collecting and analysing data “less schools” are involved in “really quality practitioner research”, concluded an SED (W2), while another observed:

I think that there are some schools where people are encouraged to take risks and to experiment with their teaching and are supported by principals... There are other schools where I don't think that sort of thing is looked at because people don't value it or see its importance. (W1)

It was also noted by several respondents that some regions are more committed to research, innovation and change than others. Several respondents believe schools in these particular regions utilize research in order to develop strategies to respond to urgent and pressing local needs. A DP describes how “innovative teaching practices” are prevalent in one particular region, “because it's driven by ... a need to survive and to develop systems and processes... there is a lot more action based research taking place” (Z1). In contrast, another region was commonly identified as “lagging behind” in terms of innovation. Historically, schools within the region have done well academically, and respondents believe there is not the same impetus, desire, urgency or need to engage in research, innovation or change.

While acknowledging the embracement of practitioner research is “of course ... varied” across the state, the Director, PLLD, stated “the degree to which that is happening now,

compared to my experience of it ten years ago is certainly higher” (W5). The Director further added, “the very, very strong data fields that I have are indicating that it is happening much, much broadly than it has been happening in the past”.

Within schools.

While the extent to which practitioner research is practised varies between schools, it also varies within those schools in which it transpires. The Director of Studies at the private school laughed:

There would be some people who would have it built into their practice and would use it regularly. There are other people that would do it when they are involved in a project and there are some people that wouldn't do anything at all. (X1)

Among those schools involved in practitioner research, some had attempted to adopt a more holistic and systematic approach while in others the level of involvement was patchy, uneven and unaudited. In the government school (Y) with a history of school-based research systematic processes had been put in place and sustained over time to ensure all new staff joining the school were inducted into the school's tradition of team-based PL and curriculum development. The other government school (Z) had adopted a more extemporized approach, the DP stating, “We haven't sat down systematically to do a survey of what types of research teachers are doing in the classroom” (Z1).

Some schools adopted a broad-based approach involving a wide spectrum of staff. Others involved only a few selected staff. In some instances classroom teachers did not become involved in practitioner research nor attach much value to it. A teacher observed:

I think that ordinary members of staff who don't have a position of responsibility are so busy that they wouldn't necessarily get involved in practitioner research. And unless there is a project that really excites them, they don't see the benefit of it. (X3)

Many of the respondents in leadership positions described how schools employ change-management theory to implement practitioner research and instigate change. A small group consisting of “early adopters” will be initially recruited into research teams. An SED described how as a principal she had been “strategic” by first involving people in a research

project who “are interested” so as “to get one good one up and going” (W2). The Director of Studies described how his school (X) had adopted a similar approach. “We actually got heads of department to actually work through the model and the hope was that would be used with teachers within their departments. Get-the-leaders-doing-it-first type model” (X1). However, there was considerable variance in how deep ARAL practices permeated into schools. “In some schools it did. In some schools it didn’t. It really depended on the efficacy of the team and how the team then shared that across the school”, an AGQTP Manager (W3) described.

Enthusiasm for practitioner research can fluctuate over time thus impacting the sustainability of the research enterprise in the school. The Director of Studies described how teachers’ participation in practitioner research “varies”. “Some of them do it for a while, then don’t do it, then get involved in another project, so they fire up again” (X1). Academics confirmed that the level of involvement in practitioner research might oscillate, describing how the practice eventually might become engrained in the school culture or at the other extreme die away completely. One described:

Now it might rise up and be very powerful in one part of the school for a couple of years then in the other parts of the school not much is happening, and that bubbles down and the next bit bubbles up, but it comes part of, in inverted commas, the way we do things around here. (V4)

Another recalled how she “was involved in one project ... where there were some really exciting things happening with a cluster of schools”. However, “five years later no one had corporate memory of it because all of the executive had been transferred” (V2). The AGQTP manager (W3) argued that practitioner research is a difficult and challenging form of PL and consequently some schools had “given up” and not sustained the practice because it is “too hard”. She added, “I think that it is not easy, it is not a panacea, it is not an easy option. In fact it is probably one of the most challenging ways of ... structuring professional learning in the school”.

A common belief was that teachers will engage in practitioner research if they can see the benefit of it to them. The same manager asserted, “The ultimate decision a teacher will make is ... will it [practitioner research] be better for my practice” (W3). An academic added,

“Teachers need to see that it [practitioner research] is really relevant to them otherwise time is too precious for them. They have got to see that it really relates directly to their own work and to their own teaching and learning” (V3). A DP agreed that unless practitioner research “helps their kids do better” teachers “are not going to do it” (Z1), while a teacher added, if practitioner research is “seen to be useful and good people will not have a problem with it” (X3).

Effecting Change and Social Good

This dimension focuses on respondents’ beliefs about the extent to which practitioner research might effect change and social good within and across schools. Freire (1974, 1985), and more recently, Kemmis and Smith (2008), remind us that education is not value neutral. Teachers need to be critical of the conditions of education and schooling (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Kemmis, 2011) and might either be ‘operatives’ of the education system or ‘agents’ of change. Through the process of ‘conscientization’ a teacher can contemplate the ‘untested future’ and engage in praxis – action informed by reflection – in order to effect change and social good (Freire, 1974, 1985). Such morally informed, committed action distinguishes critical and emancipatory practitioner research from that which is merely technical or instrumental in form.

Singapore

Although several forums exist for teachers to disseminate their research findings many questioned the effectiveness of such professional sharing. Teachers tended to focus on research that investigated classroom issues rather than broader issues but sometimes were able to effect change across their school. Several respondents doubted whether significant change might be effected “bottom up”. Furthermore some felt that systemic change needs to occur, such as reducing the emphasis on examinations, before teachers can truly innovate.

The impact of sharing research findings.

Respondents generally felt many opportunities exist for teachers to share their research findings. On a more local scale sharing might occur at cluster meetings and on a more global

scale at national and international conferences although sometimes, explained the DD, CPPU, the MOE is “selective”. In addition there have been a number of publications produced or supported by the MOE specifically dedicated to reporting teachers’ research findings. A VP explicated:

When the teachers have some good projects, we can see innovative ideas, and we can also see results, we do then support them to go and present a paper on different occasions, different platforms, depending on the scale of the project. Some may be sent to the MOE level, some may be cluster level, some may even be the national level. (D1)

There was a tendency though to question the impact this sharing might have. A TN trainer summed up, “I know there is a lot of sharing of the research work to other schools at cluster, zonal level and conferences. But what is the impact of that? I don’t think people have really measured” (B4). The VP postulated when schools do “share their findings ... it does create some influence” (D1) as other schools might adopt an innovation and implement it school-wide. While his school “did quite a lot of sharing with other schools”, he disclosed, “probably the influence is very minimum [*sic*]”. A teacher (D2) similarly believed she did not “get to make really significant impact” although she had the opportunity to share her research findings at a cluster level. An academic clarified that the “scope” of the TLLM Ignite initiative is not to introduce “nationwide” change, but rather that “there will be some sharing ... within a cluster or within a group of schools” (A2).

Some teachers were sceptical about the value of sharing. One (C2), while agreeing in theory the idea of professional sharing is good, said in practice he was not “able to learn much” from “research in other schools”. Another (D3) said, after presenting her research, teachers from other schools questioned the generalisability of her findings, believing the approach was not “feasible” in their own setting as the “cohort of students” varied. Yet another (E4) wondered if other teachers would even read a research report or whether “it is going to lie on the shelf”.

An academic asserted that research essentially is a “broadcast medium” hence there is a need for teachers to work collaboratively with academics in order to properly prepare and broadcast findings. Not being trained, teachers do not have “a well developed understanding” of how their research findings might be converted “into a rigorous narrative

... that can systematically inform colleagues ... But they can together tell a story whose convergences will have a broader readership” (A3).

Change within and across schools.

Although several respondents believed practitioner research had the potential to effect change beyond the classroom, few could cite actual examples where this had happened. Results of the study indicate that teachers tend to do research that focuses on the classroom rather than broader issues and frequently believe their inquiries will only ever have an immediate, local impact. A superintendent opined that teachers want “kids to do well” and that will be their focus in their research because it will give “the greatest returns” (B3). A teacher confirmed she has “not thought of such a big picture yet. It is pretty much my classes, my students” (C4). Another reflected, “Even if it [practitioner research] doesn’t impact other people, at least it impact me (laughs) and my students” (D2).

A VP described how practitioner research can change the mind-sets and perceptions of other teachers within the school:

[Practitioner research helps] to change the mindset of teachers, because not everybody is ready to try out new things or accept new ways of teaching, and nothing will work better by providing evidence ... by doing action research and sharing the results with other teachers, probably it will help to make them accept some new initiatives or ideas or ways of teaching or pedagogies (D1).

“Sometimes the research at a subject level does spin off to also school-wide policies” recounted the Deputy Dean at the independent school, citing how the Chinese Language Department had adopted “the four tier approach” one of the school’s practitioner researchers had developed. The teacher herself described how the Principal initiated the approach “across the department based on ... my research” (C3). After presenting her research abroad in the form of a demonstration lesson at a partner school in Shanghai, China, the approach was adopted there. The School Principal of Shanghai Number Three School “told me that my methodology was adopted in Shanghai ... That made me very, very happy”, the teacher recounted.

Effecting change within the central bureau.

A prevailing belief was that it is unlikely that practitioner research could be used to effect change either nationwide or within the central bureau. “Making change in the Ministry ... is very farfetched”, stated one teacher (C5) as “a lot of the time we see policy being made ... top-down”. “If I want to make change that effects nation-wide ... then I have to be up there”, she laughed. Agreeing, an academic said that effecting change across the system “is not a great possibility” (A1) while a superintendent explained “there’s not much scope” for teachers to implement broad change:

Because the problems that they tend to focus on are very much school based, so they are interested in solving those problems, because, it will help them do a better job at school. However, if you have a collection of these people together and they start to share their information, and they start to see that maybe they can have a broader approach, then it is possible, that this could influence upwards... But at the moment I don’t see this yet (laughs). (B2)

One respondent articulated that “ground-up” change “as an idea” to “reverse a policy” is perhaps a romantic notion:

Realistically, to conduct a research of such a scale for it to have enough gravitas, to even be heard, probably means that a lot of support has to be given to this particular group of people who are daring enough to take it on ... I just don’t think at this point in time, given the support that it has, for that to happen, realistically, not as I see it. (C1)

Several teachers believed it is not possible to effect change across the education system or even at a school level unless systemic changes are implemented first. One felt especially constrained by the examination system, feeling Singapore is too “focused on academic performance”. She elaborated:

I feel quite sceptical about this ... in Singapore we are still very focused on pen and paper assessment. And, if we do not move on from here, to change our mode of assessment, I think that it is really hard for any significant change to happen in terms of teaching and learning, because, at the back of our minds we are always concerned with this. (E3)

The DD, CPPU, asserted:

I think that it is probably a little too premature for us to see how teacher as researcher would impact the Ministry. But I think that in the classroom they can change things a lot faster, and, we hope that it will lead to more engaged students, and deeper learning. I think that that is more important.

Offering a tangential view an academic ventured that “transformative research” needs to be undertaken in those places teachers have identified as “tension points” obstructing or impeding change, specifically “the Principal’s office” and the “Ministry of Education”. He states, “Classroom teachers and students are not the only people in the system. I would like to see action research being conducted in curriculum bureaus, in regional offices, that kind of thing” (A3).

NSW

By and large, teacher researchers are provided opportunities to share their research with colleagues within their school. However, there are no formal forums for professional sharing across schools. Avenues to do so are limited and variable. Change stemming from research is more likely to be confined to a faculty although a number of instances of school-wide change were cited. Some respondents believed that ultimately it will be the school principal who will determine which research will be adopted across faculties or broadcast to other schools. There were cases cited where change had been implemented more broadly, across a number of schools and in one instance state-wide. But instances where practitioner research led to broad change and social good were considered to be rare.

Effecting change across the school.

Respondents by and large believed sufficient opportunities exist for teacher research practitioners to share their findings within their schools, although there were some dissenting voices. “We use the staff development and staff meetings where staff report from the Teams ... of what their findings were and what their programme was about”, a Principal reported (Y1). A teacher from that school (Y) confirmed, “Team leaders had meetings” to share ideas across the school which proved to be “very successful” so consequently teachers were “all

privity” to what the research projects were about (Y2). But a teacher from another school (Z) was critical there was no forum or protected time in his school to share professionally. “In intention, yes. Not always in practice”, he claimed (Z4).

The consensus was that practitioner research can have an impact at least across a subject department if not the school. An AGQTP manager (W4) affirmed there “are lots of anecdotal bits of evidence” that practitioner research “is having an influence on teacher professional practice and on student learning”. An SED claimed that it is inevitable that good practices developed through practitioner research will be adopted school-wide because, “People in schools notice whose classes kids run to” (W2). A teacher attested “I have seen some great programmes start from the research that I have done and end up being dynamic parts of the school” (Z3). The Director of Studies at the private school elaborated, “I think that you will get improvement, certainly at the school level. I guess it is something like a gas diffusing. If there is good practice happening in some schools then that can slowly spread out” (X1). A teacher agreed practitioner research has had “a huge impact across the school” (X4). But while acknowledging there are circumstances where faculties “do talk” another SED (W1) suggested that change stemming from research in the classroom is more likely to be confined to a faculty rather than adopted across a school.

Some respondents identified caveats. One teacher (Z2) insisted the research must be relevant and “impact” other teachers before it is likely to be adopted by them. The practitioner researcher/s must develop an effective model which other teachers find useful and beneficial. Another teacher (X2) stated that the research “would have to be driven and fully supported by the principal” and align with the school’s management plan for it to be broadcast and adopted school wide. A third believed that the teacher practitioner researchers need be “honest” and maintain integrity when presenting their findings. They should, “not dress it up ... because it will alienate people. People want it warts and all” (Y4).

Effecting change across other schools and the education system.

Opportunities and forums for teachers to share their findings across schools, as opposed to within their school, tend to be intermittent and infrequent. A teacher revealed “only a limited number of teachers get to attend conferences and sharing sessions” (X4). An SED said

opportunities to share across schools are “quite variable” (W2) while a teacher believed they are “very limited” (Z3). If teachers are doing “fantastic things” it will “spread by word of mouth” but there is no formal forum for teachers to share on such a scale another SED confirmed (W1).

While forums for professional sharing might not be systematically and holistically established across all schools, nonetheless respondents referred to avenues accessible to some. The PL consultant (V5) described how there had been a “big show and tell conference” organized each year for schools involved in AGQTP projects. The NSW AGQTP also issued a “publication ... three times a year” which focused on the “good practice” of three selected schools, a manager explained (W4). A number of institutions have formed a federation called the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, two schools in the study (X and Y) being members. “Meetings are just inspiring ... it’s just fantastic to share ... it’s a great professional body and wonderful to be part of it”, one teacher (X4) declared. The Highly Accomplished Teacher (HAT) scheme recently introduced by the NSW DET works on the hub and spoke model to sustain innovation among schools in a Centre for Excellence cluster one HOD explained (Z2). A primary role of the HAT is to facilitate research and sharing of ideas across this consortium of schools. Furthermore, one teacher functioning as the counselor in her school divulged she can share research findings “with the counselors in local schools because I meet regularly with them” (Z3).

Respondents were able to give a number of examples where practitioner research had resulted in change across several schools. Ultimately, if a teacher is doing “fantastic things” their supervisor will be aware, an SED explained (W1). This will then be brought to the attention of the Principal and eventually the SED for that area. The SED exemplified “I had some people in business studies” who “had a great scaffold ... somebody heard about it, so they went and presented all across the state”.

She further elucidated:

There is one girl who is doing some fantastic things with computers, so we had the network meeting at that school, she spoke and gave a general outline of the program and they could see what was happening in her classroom. (W1)

The SED added, “I think that there are some people that change their practices to such an extent and are outstanding and are demonstrating best practice. And if that information is disseminated, then, yes, it’s got huge impact” (W1). But one teacher (Z3) was critical that practitioner researchers will only be given “all those access points” necessary to broadcast their findings if the research focus “is an area that is considered to be critically important or on the agenda of the Department of Education”.

Academics and the NSW AGQTP managers who had worked with schools on research projects cited a number of cases where practitioner research had resulted in change across several schools. One academic described:

I have seen links established between schools that would never have happened, between primary and secondary schools, secondary schools in clusters ... I have seen action research projects with drama teachers who are often isolated ... collaboratively working in their networks to produce change ... I have actually seen syllabus change occur and curriculum change at Board of Studies level through developments in action research. (V3)

Two of the schools in the study used practitioner research to develop best practice, acting as a benchmark and model for other schools. “We have often had other schools come here to talk about what we do and why we do it”, a teacher explained (X4), referring to the middle school structure the private school (X) had developed. Similarly, the Principal (Y1) of one of the government schools (Y) in the study stated, “We have had people coming in from Central Coast, further away ... interested in the Team philosophy and how it was done”. Visiting schools “go away” then develop and implement “a modified version” of the programme she added.

A teacher (X3) from the private school identified a project on cyber-bullying as “a prime example” of how practitioner research might result in broad change and social good but laughed it “wasn’t intended”. He described how it “started as a little initiative here in-house and has finished up being a programme that has spread statewide by the DET”. The Director of Studies, referring to the same example, elaborated:

Here was someone wanting to protect her students that may be subjected to cyber-bullying and so she investigated it and found a need to communicate to others and it kind of spread out from work that started here. (X1)

But the Director conceded that examples such as the above where practitioner research resulted in profound change and social good “would be a rare occurrence”. An AGQTP Manager (W4) conceded “I don’t know that you’ve got the conditions” to implement change across the state. An SED conjectured teachers are more likely to change “pockets” of the system:

I don’t know that they can change a whole system. But they can change their school; they can change their nearby schools. If they’re part of say a head teacher network, a regional head teacher network, then they can have influence over what happens in other faculties in the region. (W2).

An academic (V2) concluded, “I think that you are much more likely to make changes in your school. But if your school does well enough to attract the attention of others” then change might spread to other schools.

Conclusion

While in theory most respondents believed research should be initiated from the ground up, in practice it was often those in positions of power who set the agenda. Clusters or regions, schools, and then consequently teachers were often pressured to do research. Ultimately, though, the priority practitioner research was afforded in a school was determined by the Principal, he or she functioning as either the main advocate or opponent of research.

The degree of autonomy or facility teachers had over a research project varied considerably. Likewise, the extent to which practitioner research was practised across schools both within Singapore and NSW was uneven and patchy, there being, as described by respondents, “different levels of passion, different levels of ability” and “different degrees of success”. There were some schools where teachers were encouraged to take risks. There were others where they were not.

The focus of most of the research done by teachers in schools was on local, classroom issues. Although teachers often felt stifled by deep seated constraints, many had not contemplated with any degree of rigour how systemic change might be undertaken to circumvent this. Others believed they did not have the power or influence to make the required change. It appeared then that most teachers had not thought “in terms of their liberation” but had adopted an “introjected” reality (Friere, 1974, 1985), acting as “operatives” of the education system rather than as agents of change (Kemmis, 2008).

This chapter, together with the previous three, illuminated the different contexts in which teachers function as practitioner researchers and how practitioner research is understood, practiced, transmitted and valued by them. The following chapter offers a cross-cultural analysis and discussion of these results.