

**WORLD'S EDUCATIONAL ISSUES, POLICIES AND  
RESEARCH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: THE  
SINGAPORE'S PERSPECTIVE**

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**BACKGROUND**

Singapore's education system has gone through three phases: "Survival-driven" (1959-78), "Efficiency-driven" (1979-96), and "Ability-driven" (1997-present)." During the Survival phase, the primary focus was on enrolment and ensuring that every child had a school seat. This resulted in schools being built at the rate of one per month and the teaching force doubling, from 10,500 in 1959 to over 19,000 by 1968. The next phase, the Efficiency phase, focused on reducing performance variation across the school system. During the phase, we were highly prescriptive in our teaching. We were textbook-bound and examination-driven. In 1997, Singapore moved from rigid prescription to greater flexibility. In the same year, Singapore launched "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" (TSLN), marking the start of its Ability phase and emphasising a shift in focus toward enabling each student to reach the maximum of his or her potential. This focus on student ability required schools to be given much great flexibility and responsibility for how they should teach and manage their students.

**EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

In line with TSLN, extensive and rigorous educational research took off in Singapore. In 2002, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the establishment of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) to develop a comprehensive research programme that would provide the evidence for evaluating education reforms to date and to enable the Ministry to plan medium and long-term policy interventions. Researchers at CRPP collaborate with educators at NIE, policymakers at MOE, and teachers in Singapore's schools to examine and improve educational

practices. By April 2004, it grew into the largest educational and social science research centre in East Asia, with 100 research staff and over 80 school-based research projects of varying sizes that focus on a wide variety of issues related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, teachers' professional development, and students' characteristics. Apart from CRPP, MOE also funds the Learning Sciences Lab (LSL), the Centre for International Comparative Studies, and the Centre for Arts Research in Education.

Many policy decisions are made often without the reliance on educational research data and evidences so it is heartening to see Singapore's emphasis on educational research. Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition that there can be a great chasm between the concerns of education researchers (often based in universities) and practitioners (educators and policy makers). Practitioners have many real challenges often complex and not easily encapsulated by research paradigms prescribed by university researchers. For educational research to really inform practice and policies there is perhaps a need for a multi-prong perspective to balance the understanding of evidences for policy and practice, developing niche impact and ownership of educational research.

Singapore made a first courageous approach of bottoms-up attempt to proliferate the practice of teachers as researchers. Specifically, TSLN led to successive initiatives that promote "reflective practice and action research" in schools. One of it is the Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) initiative (2005) which encouraged teachers to innovate in teaching and learning so that students would find the process meaningful and enjoyable. One way of encouraging classroom innovation and pedagogical research was through the Research Activist (RA) Scheme introduced in 2006, as part of the larger "TLLM Ignite! Package". The objective of the RA scheme is to develop research literacy among teachers, which enables them to investigate and evaluate their own practices and

curricular innovations. They can then share their research findings and good practices with their colleagues, building among themselves Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in schools.

In September 2010, the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) was set up to facilitate a teacher-led culture of professional excellence. Specifically, a Research and Publication Unit (RPU), was formed to

- promote teacher-led research with the aim of bringing about enduring and systemic improvement in teaching and learning; and
- develop the system's knowledge of issues pertaining to teacher growth with the aim of deepening professional excellence.

Through networked learning, teachers are encouraged to work collaboratively in addressing shared professional challenges, guided by an inquiry protocol to co-create knowledge. They can codify their learning, cascade their research findings to impact beyond their classrooms; and convert (translate) their knowledge base built up over time to improve their classroom practice as one of the hallmarks of a professional.

RPU currently plays a role in building capacity of the teachers through a series of workshops on research, conducted by Master Teachers, and providing support through the Teacher-Researcher Network. The Network connects Research Activists, representatives from Centres of Excellence, Master Teachers, Senior Specialists, and 'knowledgeable others' from the National Institute of Education and the Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS). RPU also encourages the sharing of research findings through a common repository of research work (including papers, literature reviews and scans) to build a knowledge base for teachers.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Investment in educational research should focus on areas where intervention can bring real mileage i.e. the real education battlefield - the classroom. ERAS made a significant move to support action research and facilitate the ideals of research activists. We work closely with RPU and sit on the Teacher-Research Network. ERAS plays an important role in building capacity of teachers as researchers through workshops and conferences, as well as providing professional support for school-based research programmes. Currently, we are looking at ways to increase avenues for teachers to publish and share their research. The challenge to ERAS, as well as other educational research associations is to find an optimal balance between supporting and facilitating research that advance theoretical frameworks which serve to guide our understanding of educational issues and more grounds-up research that examine educational issues for improving practice.