

## **How a “Top-Performing” Asian school system formulates and implements policy: The case of Singapore**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the paradox inherent in the “top-performing” yet tightly controlled Singapore education system. As government controls have increased in complexity, existing policymaking conceptual heuristics in accounting for centre-periphery relationships appear inadequate. It argues that more direct government control is being replaced by “*steering through paternalism from close proximity*”, reflecting a more subtle centre-periphery relationship in an Asian context.

**Keywords:**

Asian, high-performing, education, policy-making, steering

**Introduction**

Singapore’s school system has been consistently described as “top performing” and “world leading” (Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010). Its students have continued to excel in international achievement tests such as TIMSS and PISA, and the country has been ranked highly worldwide in terms of innovation and economic competitiveness (Dutta, 2012; Schwab, 2011). Admittedly, the PISA and TIMSS measures of these achievement outcomes are limited to mathematics, science, and reading scores and additionally do not include the acquisition of a myriad of soft skills that students are generally thought to need in the modern economy – hence their significance can be overstated. Nonetheless, like Finland and other “high performing” Asian systems, it is undeniable that Singapore has attracted international interest seeking *the* “formula” for its academic and economic success. In an era where education and school system reform is seen by nation states as fundamental to their economic competitive advantage, the globalized economy has created its counterpart of globalized educational competition (Dale, 1999).

“Performativity” (Carnoy, 1999; Ball, 2003) – the obsession with effectiveness and efficiency - thus applies not just at the school, district or national level, but increasingly at the international and global level, too. It is given added impetus by agencies such as McKinsey&Co, which have begun to bracket school systems into

sequential phases of development and maturity (Barber et al., 2010). Hence, Singapore's school system is recently described as having moved to the "good to great" phase on its school improvement journey (Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber, 2010). Only one step remains – namely "great to excellent" – an "exalted" stage so far only attained by Finland. Apart from student outcome data on international tests, the phases of educational development recognized by McKinsey&Co and the location in and movement of school systems through them, is based on the nature of government policy interventions, and school leader and teacher skills and responsibilities concomitant with each phase. Indeed, results from a recent McKinsey&Co study (Barber et al., 2010) on school leadership involving a survey of experts, policymakers, and more than 1800 school leaders across eight high-performing school systems worldwide, affirm that the quality of school leaders is the second most important school-level influence on student outcomes. Furthermore, the findings of the McKinsey&Co study – for Singapore as for other 'high performing' systems - showed a remarkable consistency in that school leaders of such school systems spend more time (than their peers in other systems) on instructional leadership, that is, developing their teachers, interacting with students, and networking and supporting fellow school leaders in teaching and learning. These school leaders are also prepared to meet both current and future demands. Acknowledging the strategic influence of school leaders, and in understanding the trajectory of the Singapore school system through its various phases (Gopinathan, Wong, and Tang, 2008), the question prompted is, "How have government interventions and educators' levels of skills and responsibilities changed in Singapore over the past half century since its independence?"

According to the McKinsey&Co report, systems in the least developed phase - from “poor to fair” - are characterized by less skilled educators and tight centralized control over teaching-learning processes in order to drive further improvement in a concerted way, while minimizing variations across schools and classrooms. In contrast, at the other end of the development spectrum, systems moving from “good to great” feature more highly skilled educators, and provide looser guidelines on teaching-learning processes since peer-led creativity and innovation provides the impetus for raising performance (Mourshed et al., 2010). Teachers and leaders are regarded as fully fledged professionals with clear career paths. It follows that attainment of the highest stage of “great to excellent” moves “the locus of school improvement from the centre to the schools themselves; the focus is on introducing peer-based yet system-wide interaction, as well as supporting system-sponsored innovation” (Mourshed et al., 2010: 20). In other words, for school systems to move towards “greatness” and “excellence”, they are characterized by ever higher degrees of professionalism and school self-management.

This portrait of Singapore education as a “good to great” system conveys an image of a highly professionalizing body of teachers and leaders, exerting increasing amounts of peer-led creative, school-based initiatives. By implication, one would expect the concomitant role for the government to be more restrained, exercising fewer controls. As a description of Singapore educational policy and of the school system, it is not readily reconciled, however, with the established, stereotypical account of the patterns of power and influence that have characterized Singapore education since its independence. Conventionally, policy-making in Singapore is seen as anti-pluralist, excluding of stakeholder involvement, with the government’s role described as pragmatic, paternalistic, and controlling (Neo and Chen, 2007; Trocki,

2006). As Ng (2010) states, the education system has always been a critical vehicle for supporting the socio-political agenda and especially economic strategies of the island state since independence in 1965. In revamping the education system going forward, the need to introduce more diversity and innovation into the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment seems compromised by the government's continuing need to maintain power and control to ensure the system serves the nation's economic, political, and social interests.

Achieving this delicate balance is not unique to Singapore. It has led to the notion of "decentralized centralism" (Karlsen, 2000) where governments still maintain strong control while giving educational institutions greater administrative autonomy. In return for greater scope to customize policy implementation at school level, there is greater onus on schools to report and account for their managerial processes and measurable outcomes, such as student test data, to the centre. In similar vein to Karlsen, although reversing the terminology, Ng (2010) describes this trend as "centralized decentralization", seeing it as "a new trend of centralization within a decentralization paradigm" (p. 284). Furthermore, the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) frequently uses terms such as "greater school autonomy" and "bottom-up initiative with top-down support" in policy speeches and documents, indicating their preference for schools to take initiatives and for the MOE to support them.

Our contention – captured in the aim of this paper - is that as the policy process has become more complex – especially in terms of center-periphery relationships, the concepts we use to define and understand the patterns of power and influence - such as "centralized" and "decentralized", "autonomy", "top-down, bottom-up", and even "steering from a distance" - are increasingly under-powered and

imprecise heuristic tools. In some ways they are little more than clichés. There is, consequently, a genuine need for a more refined lexicon that authentically captures the subtle nuances of center-periphery relations in contemporary educational policy-making.

This paper aims firstly, to illustrate the complexities and subtleties of the policy-making process with reference to Singapore as a case study of a high-performing Asian school system. Second, in understanding Singapore policy-making, it argues for a more holistic approach to policy analysis than simple reliance on descriptors of patterns of power and influence, and suggests a perspective predicated on philosophical-socio-cultural values as a complementary explanatory device.

In focusing on the context of policy-making in Singapore, a tangential aspect of our argument is that policy-making occurs within the specific conditions of a socio-cultural context (Dimmock and Walker, 2005). Previous models and perspectives of policy-making are dominated by Anglo-American scholars, who have long enjoyed hegemony over dominant concepts and theoretical analyses. Unsurprisingly, their work reflects a values-laden position - usually, the tacit or explicit acceptance and/or advocacy of a version of what they perceive to be superior “Western style” democracy and pluralism. In Singapore, the socio-political configuration with its attendant values system is distinctly different from Western notions of democracy. In particular, although Singapore has a one-Party government (the People’s Action Party – PAP), the Party is enlightened and responsive to the wishes of the electorate through its close networks and outreach into constituencies. In turn, the smallness of the country and close proximity of the government to the electorate contributes to the effectiveness of policy-making by the elite bureaucracy working alongside elected ministers. The social capital that the bureaucracy enjoys mitigates the probability of

poor decision-making. Hence, although the bureaucracy may have served only one political Party since independence in 1965, the risks of partiality – in the Western sense – are not evident.

This paper comprises four sections. The first section provides a brief profile of Singapore's educational system viewed in the context of its unique socio-political context. The second section traces the evolution of its educational system across three distinct phases from independence to the present day. The subtleties embedded in what appears to be decentralization in the latest phase are discussed in the third section. An alternative philosophical-socio-cultural perspective to understanding educational policy-making in Singapore is examined in the fourth section. The final section draws implications regarding the need to contextualize policy-making within the prevailing philosophical-political-social-cultural values of society, an argument we illustrate with reference to Singapore. Indeed, we argue that an authentic understanding of educational policy-making in Singapore - and possibly other Asian systems - needs alternative concepts and heuristic devices to complement those conventionally used by researchers in the Anglo-American world.

### **Background to the Singapore school system**

Singapore's population has grown from 1.8 million in 1965 to 5.1 million in 2011. It has 360 state schools, with only about 20 of these independent. As a city state, its origins date from 1965 when the island sought independence by breaking away from Malaysia, although it had finally ended a long period of British colonial rule in 1959. As an island state, Singapore's population is urbanized and densely concentrated – hence the relatively small number of schools and their uniform size – the average for primary and secondary schools being 1,500 and 1,300 students, respectively (Barber et al., 2010).

Singapore's political system is described as authoritarian, pragmatic, rational, and legalistic (Neo and Chen, 2007; Trocki, 2006). Its power structure is highly centralized, relying on top-down control with tight constraints on civil liberties. Economic growth and political stability has been maintained by the paternal guidance of one political party, namely the PAP, which has been in power since independence. Singapore is not administered by politicians, but by bureaucrats in a meritocracy where power is gained through skill, performance, and loyalty to the nation and its policies (Sharpe and Gopinathan, 2002).

Traditionally known as a "top-down, command and control" centralized system, Singapore schools are tightly governed by the MOE (Dimmock, 2012). Although small, the system is divided into four zones – North, South, East, and West - each of which has a deputy director in charge. Within each zone, schools are grouped into clusters of mixed primary schools, secondary schools, and/or junior colleges; each cluster is under the supervision of a cluster superintendent, and comprises between 12 and 14 schools (Sharpe and Gopinathan, 2002). Principals of each of the schools in a cluster are accountable through their superintendent to the MOE. For a small system closely controlled by the center, the cluster structure provides a strong local base enabling the MOE to filter policy downward; superintendents to work closely with, monitor, and appraise individual principals and their staff; and schools in a cluster to share resources and good practices. Singapore students have performed at or near the top of international achievement tests in mathematics and science (PISA and TIMSS) for many years, justifying the system's rating as one of the best performing in the world (Mourshed et al., 2010).

The tightness and alignment of the school system – hence its efficiency and effectiveness - is explicable through its smallness and tri-partite structure, comprising



the MOE, 360 schools and the National Institute of Education (NIE), through which every teacher in the system is trained. NIE teacher preparation programs dovetail closely with the MOE's policy priorities, as does NIE's increasingly important educational research agenda, funded by the MOE. The Singapore government's total expenditure (both recurrent and development) on primary, secondary, and pre-university education in FY2009/2010 was S\$4,924 million or about 2% of Singapore's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This compares with the typical Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) figures of 5.5% of GDP in Nordic countries, and approximately 3% in Japan, Luxembourg and the Slovak Republic (OECD, 2010). Singapore's relatively low proportion of GDP spent on education is more than offset by its efficiency in using financial resources – due especially to its having few, but uniformly large schools concentrated in a small urban area.

### **Singapore's educational policy landscape since independence**

It is perhaps a truism that national policies reflect endeavors of a nation's leadership to address imperatives confronting their country at different phases of national development (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Gopinathan, 2007; Gopinathan and Deng, 2006; Gopinathan, Wong, and Tang, 2008; Mourshed et al., 2010). In this light, an examination of key policies in the Singapore context necessitates an understanding of the socioeconomic circumstances and broad goals of key policies aimed at addressing these imperatives and challenges in different phases of educational development. Three such phases have been recognized: the survival-driven (1965-1978), efficiency-driven (1978-1997), and ability-driven (1997-present) phases.

### ***Survival-driven education***

After achieving independence in 1965, Singapore had to build its economy from scratch, abandon its hope for a common market in Malaya following separation from Malaysia, and cope with the impending withdrawal of British forces in 1971, and the oil crisis of 1973. There were high levels of unemployment among its largely unskilled population. Singapore leaders were also mindful of the threat of communist elements infiltrating into workers' unions and Chinese-medium schools, and racial tension. Consequently, the broad goals of the Singapore government during the survival-driven phase of educational development were to educate the population swiftly and build a disciplined and cohesive society – aims most effectively achieved through centralized educational policy-making (C. Han, 2009; Tan, 2007).

Accordingly, educational policies focused on enabling every child to have an opportunity to be schooled to achieve basic levels of literacy and numeracy. A record large number of schools were built and the teaching force expanded correspondingly from 10,500 in 1959 to more than 19,000 in 1968 (Mourshed et al., 2010). These schools were uniform in physical infrastructure, curriculum, staff profile, and administration. Principals functioned as “supervisors of routine tasks” (p. 247) defined by the MOE in schools that accepted large student enrolments but faced a shortage of administrative support staff (Gopinathan et al., 2008). To enable existing teachers – most of whom were lowly skilled – and large numbers of newly recruited teachers to deliver the curriculum, the MOE introduced a teacher-proof curriculum, common syllabuses and attainment standards, for all schools.

### ***Efficiency-driven education***

By the late 1970s, Singapore's concern shifted to how efficiently the educational system could meet the needs of the economy – the so-called efficiency-driven phase

of educational development. At that time, the system was accused of failing to produce the talents and skills regarded as necessary for a high quality workforce to support a vibrant capital-intensive, high value-added manufacturing industry (Carnoy, 1999). There was also an additional impetus for educational improvement as Singapore experienced its first economic recession – in 1986 - since independence. Consequently, the primary goals of educational policies at the time were to reduce performance variation system-wide and improve the quality of education in all schools.

To this end, educational processes in curriculum and assessment were further standardized to ensure uniformly high standards. This standardization process culminated in the creation of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) in 1980 with the overarching responsibility of supervising teaching of a mandated uniform curriculum in all schools (Gopinathan and Deng, 2006). The MOE also issued various instructional handbooks on administrative processes to principals for strict compliance. In 1981, it introduced the 252-page *Principal's Handbook* providing guidance and directions on policies and administrative procedures required for the daily operations of a school (MOE, 1981). Furthermore, various key programs in educational management were launched to help equip principals with the necessary managerial skills in running schools (Lim, 2007). Principals were expected to function as line managers tasked to faithfully and efficiently implement the MOE's policies. Furthermore, the MOE mandated annual school evaluations to ensure that schools were efficiently run according to policy prescription.

The MOE also experimented with school-based autonomy via the independent and autonomous schools' initiatives for a small number of outstanding state schools to innovate and diversify from the late 1980s onwards (Ng, 2005, 2010). It retained

control over strategic and professional domains while these schools enjoyed autonomy in less important areas. With the increase in decision-making autonomy in schools, in 1996 the MOE finally closed down the CDIS that had become gradually irrelevant.

### ***Ability-driven education***

In 1997, educational development in Singapore entered a new phase with the declaration of the nationwide vision of “*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*” (TSLN) by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (C.T. Goh, 1997). By the late 1990s, Singapore found itself increasingly reliant on technology-driven industries and finance and service sectors – a phenomenon associated with its emergence as a knowledge-based economy (Dimmock and Goh, 2011). This third and present phase is thus called the “ability-driven phase”, as policy-makers envisaged that the workforce needed new sets of competencies and skills beyond strong academic foundations, especially after the onset of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997.

Educational policies in the ability-driven phase were designed to increase quality, choice, and flexibility in the educational system, with the hope of enabling students to develop their talents and compete in the new economy. First, the MOE devolved some decision-making responsibilities from headquarters to schools. For example, the MOE announced in 2005 that secondary schools had the flexibility to use non-academic criteria in student selection, allow academically able students to sit for examinations earlier than their peers, and exempt these students from intermediate examinations (Shanmugaratnam, 2005). It also implemented the school cluster system to facilitate collaboration and support within moderately sized communities of schools in 1997 (Sharpe and Gopinathan, 2002). However, as schools enjoyed more autonomy in decision-making, they also bore greater responsibility for accountability

based on student performance, as epitomized in the launch of the *School Excellence Model* (SEM) in 2000 and *Master-plan of Awards* thereafter (Ng, 2003, 2007). The SEM explicated both critical “enablers” and “key result areas” on which all schools were expected to concentrate for effectiveness and report on their progress to the MOE annually. Schools were also subjected to external validation once every five to six years. The *Master-plan* recognized schools annually for their innovative processes and achievements.

Second, transformative pedagogies were implemented in schools, following the launch of TSLN in 1997 (Ng, 2008b). “*Thinking Schools*” epitomized a more process-focused learning environment in schools, while “*Learning Nation*” underscored the culture of lifelong learning beyond formal schooling. TSLN was reinforced by the MOE’s mission (“*Molding the Future of Our Nation*”), *Desired Outcomes of Education* (DOEs) summarized the aims of holistic education, and the “*Teach Less, Learn More*” (TLLM) initiative aimed at getting educators to reflect on why, what, and how they taught (Gopinathan, 2005; Ng, 2008b; Sharpe and Gopinathan, 2002). In realizing the DOEs in TSLN, the MOE sponsored a raft of curricular innovations across schools (Dimmock, 2011; Gopinathan and Deng, 2006). Primary and secondary schools could develop their own niche programs. Secondary schools had the option to offer new subjects to students. Specialist schools catering to the needs of secondary students with non-academic interests were also started. Outstanding secondary schools could exempt their top students from the “O” Level examinations so that more time could be used for learning instead of preparing for assessments (Gopinathan and Deng, 2006).

Third, there was a movement toward the professionalization of school leaders and teachers. School leaders were exhorted as “chief executive officers” - rather than

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instructional leaders – and they were expected to take school-based initiatives within policy guidelines. Hence, formal leadership training was designed to equip them with requisite competencies and skills to manage schools as learning organizations (Ng, 2008a). The MOE also stepped up its recruitment and development of teachers. An appraisal system launched in 2003 and known as *The Enhanced Performance Management System* (EPMS) required all education officers to set their work targets in key result areas and develop competencies and capacities as part of professional development (MOE, 2003). Provisions were made for three different career tracks (leadership, teaching and specialized), and teachers were expected to select a track after consultation with their leaders. In recognition of the professional status of teachers, senior positions within the teaching track have been introduced - such as Principal Master Teachers, Master Teachers, Lead Teachers, and Senior Teachers. In 2009, the MOE mandated the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools to encourage collaboration among teachers within and across schools (MOE, 2010a). These PLCs were complemented by the establishment of the Academy of Singapore Teachers and six centers of excellence for professional development to enable teachers to discuss and share innovative teaching methods (MOE, 2010a).

Lastly, there has been a proliferation of philosophies cascading from the MOE to school leaders and teachers. First, the *Philosophy for Educational Leadership* for school leaders comprised four interrelated principles, namely that educational leadership is anchored in values and purpose; inspires all towards a shared vision; is committed to growing people; and leads and manages change (MOE, 2008). The second set of philosophical explications, *Ethos of the Teaching Profession*, is a collection of different philosophical declarations related to teachers' professional practice (MOE, 2010b). These declarations included the *Philosophy of Education*,

*Teachers' Vision, Teachers' Pledge, and Teachers' Creed*. The third set of philosophical explications – the DOEs - seeks to establish a common purpose for educators. All these philosophies were purportedly a culmination of shared values and thinking among educators, past and present, in the teaching fraternity. Hence, school leaders and teachers were expected to constantly reflect on and have regular conversations about, these philosophies, which were to guide them in their professional conduct and activities.

Mapping the educational policy landscape from 1965 to the present through its three phases reveals just how intertwined is education with the economic and social needs of Singapore society, as defined and controlled by the state. Such mapping is also essential to an understanding of the evolving nature and form of center (state) - periphery (school) relations, the focus of the following section.

### **Evolution of MOE control: From “direct” to nuanced “steering from close proximity”**

Gopinathan and colleagues have consistently maintained that the MOE adopted a centralized approach to the formulation and implementation of policies in the first two phases of educational development in Singapore (Gopinathan, 2007; Gopinathan and Deng, 2006; Gopinathan et al., 2008). Inarguably, the MOE relied on numerous direct policy levers to meet socio-economic imperatives confronting the educational landscape in Singapore’s early years of nation-building. These policy levers, invariably reflected and ensured the hegemony of the MOE over policy, and were exercised by means of mandates, standardization of curriculum and assessment, managerialism in the role of school leaders and handbooks to guide them, and predefinition of criteria and operational procedures to be used in implementing policy.

In contrast to the early phases of educational development, an increasingly more subtle and less direct top-down approach to the formulation and implementation of policy has emerged during the present ability-driven phase (Gopinathan, 2007; Gopinathan and Deng, 2006; Mourshed et al., 2010). The MOE for example, has allowed some schools to practice school-based decision-making, instituted the school cluster system to improve two-way communication between schools and MOE headquarters, and given various degrees of autonomy to schools, depending on their performance – the higher their performance, the greater the degree of autonomy. In the process, various neo-liberalist ideas and practices have percolated through the educational system (Burchell, 1996; Ng and Chan, 2008). These neo-liberal elements - comprising elements of managerialism, economic rationality, competition, performativity, site-based accountability, continuous evaluation, and a reduction of direct government involvement - influence primarily the tactical operations of schools although they do not impact the marketization of the school sector anywhere near as much as they do in say the UK and USA.

Notwithstanding an increasing degree of school autonomy in the current educational landscape, a close examination of the relationship and interactions between the centre (MOE) and periphery (schools) suggests that the MOE's tight grip on schools has not loosened; if anything, it has strengthened, albeit indirectly and subtly. This observation supports Lingard's (1993, 1996) contention that the role of the state in a decentralized system has not at all diminished; rather it has become more multifarious, complex, subtle, and some may even say, competitive and contradictory. Using powerful metaphorical language to describe the role of the state, Marceau (1993) refers to the centre as increasingly "steering from a distance". Our analysis of current Singapore educational policy-making suggests the MOE exerts its influence



on schools in at least four nuanced ways that are markedly different from the outright central control of earlier phases. They enable us to claim that the Singapore MOE is also increasingly “steering” the system’s policy trajectory, although not from a distance – a point that will be discussed later. Each of the four ways can be thought of as strategies, and they are elaborated below.

***Strategy 1: “Bounded autonomy”***

In its experimentation with neo-liberalist educational policies, the MOE has been judicious in granting various degrees of autonomy in decision-making to schools (Gopinathan, 2007; Mok, 2003). Despite the introduction of the first “independent” schools in 1987 and “autonomous” schools in 1994, there are still less than thirty of such schools out of a total of 360 schools, in Singapore today. The number of private schools is even fewer. Furthermore, the MOE maintains its control and influence over the independent schools through the *School Boards (Incorporation) Act* of 1990 (Chan and Tan, 2008). This Act provides for the MOE to approve, vary, and even revoke governing board constitutions in independent schools. In the extreme case of a revocation, the Minister of Education can appoint the Director-General of Education to take over the mantle of running the school.

The MOE also imposes limits on the scope of decision-making autonomy that different schools can enjoy (Chan and Tan, 2008). For instance, all schools are required to uphold key policy tenets such as meritocracy, the use of high stakes examinations, bilingualism, the use of the English language as the only medium of instruction (except for mother tongue languages), and secularity of schools emphasizing racial and religious harmony in their practices (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; C. Han, 2009; Shared values, 1991; Tan, 2007). However, juxtaposing these guiding principles - by which schools have to abide - with their relative autonomy in

decision-making is not necessarily contradictory, insofar as the former are not overwhelmingly detailed and cumbersome (Aglietta, 1979). This is borne out in the following discussion which explicates further strategies by which the MOE exercises nuanced control and influence.

***Strategy 2: Shifting the locus and changing the form of control***

Apart from limiting the scope of decision-making autonomy schools can enjoy, the MOE has devised other means of control and influence to achieve overall policy congruence in the system. Ironically, one of these strategies is to shift the locus of control from headquarters to schools. Previously, policy directives were communicated downwards to schools from the MOE hierarchy for strict compliance. In the new strategic interplay, the MOE now introduces policies that are conducive to schools exercising self- and peer sanctioning, and self-regulating behavior (Ng, 2010). The use of SEM, for instance, as a quality self-validation tool obliges schools to focus on “enablers” and key “outcomes” deemed by the MOE to be desirable and compatible with important system-wide policy priorities (McKenna and Richardson, 2009). Schools must channel their scarce resources toward improving their SEM scores as they are subject to rigorous external validations. The *Master-plan* (McKenna and Richardson, 2009) is another case of the MOE exercising nuanced control and steerage. Schools are expected to continuously strive to excel in learning domains pre-determined by the MOE, as explicated in the *Master-plan*, in order to achieve system-wide endorsements for their programs. It is a futile effort for schools to pursue a trajectory of self-perceived strength that is not ratified in the *Master-plan* since they must attract sufficient students to gain viability and MOE funding. Notwithstanding the exchange of information by word of mouth, school choice among parents and students - though restricted in Singapore - is often made on the basis of publicly

available information on school achievements posted on school websites and displayed prominently on publicity banners decorating school compounds. Taken together, it can be said that SEM and the *Master-plan* constitute effective tools of “performativity” (Ball, 2003) by which the MOE controls and influences schools. Viewed in this light, the MOE appears to be less interested in “de-regulation” than in creative “re-regulation” (Ball, 2003: 217).

The mode of control has also changed in form from impersonal bureaucratic instructions and guidelines imposed by the MOE to alignment via high professional expectations regulating the fraternity of school leaders and teachers collectively. Through powerful processes of induction and socialization, school leaders are acculturated into an “MOE default” position on matters of policy expectation in regard to the directions in which schools should be led and managed. This is evidenced firstly, and most overtly, through the *MOE Corporate Values* – integrity, a focus on people, a passion for learning, and the pursuit of excellence – that are enshrined in policy “text” and “discourse” (Ball, 1993, 1994; Bowe, Ball, and Gold, 1992). These tend to be subliminally adopted and internalized by school leaders, as is the *Philosophy for Educational Leadership*, which espouses leadership anchored in specific values and purpose, inspires a shared vision, and commits to growing people and to change. Second, these values are reflected through milestone leadership development programs at the NIE through which all aspiring principals must graduate (Ng, 2008a). Third, the MOE priorities are captured in the competencies that teachers are expected to demonstrate according to key result areas predefined by the MOE in the EPMS developmental-cum-appraisal system (MOE, 2003). Fourth, the MOE’s mandated implementation of PLCs in all schools also binds teachers to engage in professional exchange of ideas and sharing of resources on pedagogical, curricular,

and assessment strategies among themselves. PLCs afford checks and balances from within the fraternity, under the overarching facilitation of school leaders, on the types of innovative interventions that are considered positively by the system. Taken together, these interventions must meet, and are designed to promote MOE-endorsed principles such as meritocracy, racial and religious harmony, and primacy of country before self (C. Han, 2009; Shared value, 1991; Tan, 2007).

School leaders are also under pressure to be effective leaders since teachers are obligated to report on their leadership and influence in the annual SEM self-validation exercise. Furthermore, all schools must submit the SEM report to the MOE at least every two years. The biennial school climate survey conducted in all schools also provides another important avenue for teachers to report on their school leaders and general school culture. The MOE takes the results of the survey seriously, analyzing them, and providing principals with their school own reports in comparison with those of other schools across the entire educational system. In this way, school leaders' cognitions and practices are inevitably shaped by teachers' expectations and needs. These checks and balances serve to regulate school leaders' behavior and ensure that they make professional decisions to serve teachers' professional needs and students' learning needs.

Borrowing Hargreaves' (2000) typology of the evolution of teacher professionalism, teachers in Singapore may be conceived as having progressed from the pre-professional age in the survival-driven phase of educational development, through the age of the autonomous professional, to the present age of the collegial professional in the ability-driven phase. It is precisely the strong professional culture of collaboration and peer influence in the age of the collegial professional that the MOE is using to galvanize the fraternity to achieve the MOE's broad policy intents,

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and which forms the basis of the McKinsey&Co's conclusion that Singapore is in the "good to great" phase.

### ***Strategy 3: Redefining points of leverage***

The third significant change in control and influence strategy pertains to the MOE redefining the points of leverage so as to achieve its policy objectives. In the past, the MOE relied on direct and overt ways of controlling the behaviors of school leaders and teachers. For example, all policies and administrative procedures by which school leaders were expected to abide were enshrined in the *Principal's Handbook*. More recently, however, the MOE is relying on covert influence strategies, such as expecting schools to align their programs to meet the MOE's espoused DOEs in order to realize the TSLN vision. School leaders are expected to imbibe the values underpinning leadership explicated in the *Philosophy for Educational Leadership*. These principles are reinforced in professional discourse in meetings at various levels - school, cluster, and the MOE.

Similarly, teachers are rallied to embrace the comprehensive *Ethos of the Teaching Profession* - a culmination of views and perspectives of a large segment of the teaching fraternity – prepared, approved, and disseminated by the MOE. This ethos comprises a set of core beliefs and tenets that are expected to inform teachers' professional practice (*Philosophy of Education*), aspirations that they should possess (*Teachers' Vision*), professional standards that they should uphold (*Teachers' Pledge*), and exemplary practices and tacit beliefs endorsed by the system (*Teachers' Creed*). Taken as a whole, the plethora of philosophical explications is indicative of the MOE's change in strategy toward influencing school leaders and teachers cognitively and affectively at a subliminal level with the aim of ensuring adherence to its policy trajectories. It is a mode of " 'hands-off', self-regulating regulation"

(Aglietta, 1979: 101) or steerage at the most fundamental level of cognitions and affect – all circumscribed by key government documents (text) and values and outcomes that are the basis of professional discussion and mediation (discourse). If this constitutes a version of the neo-liberal way (Rose, 1996), it is a distinctly Singaporean form of educational policy-making and of neo-liberalism.

***Strategy 4: “Personalizing” the hierarchy***

In addition to shifting the locus and changing the form of control in order to maximize points of leverage, through the introduction of school cluster system, the MOE has “personalized” and thus moderated perceptions of the otherwise vertical and impersonal organizational hierarchy. Before the introduction of the cluster system, school leaders could only interface with the MOE policy-makers and officers at select platforms and through formal communication channels. This model of interaction changed with the implementation of the cluster system in the late 1990s. School leaders now report to cluster superintendents who also have the responsibilities of disseminating the MOE policies, channeling feedback on policy implementation from schools up to MOE headquarters, advising schools on their developmental trajectories, facilitating sharing and collaboration among schools, and developing leadership capacities (Sharpe and Gopinathan, 2002). These myriad responsibilities provide cluster superintendents with different options to engage and influence school leaders. Furthermore, each cluster superintendent only supervises a relatively small number of school leaders (from 12 to 14 schools), compared with the former period, when the MOE was expected to interface with each and every school leader in the entire system. From the schools’ perspective, school leaders are able to identify more closely with the cluster superintendent than an impersonal MOE headquarters.

Consequently, the MOE is able to ensure greater alignment between school practices and headquarters' policies.

### **Toward a socio-cultural explanation of leadership and policy-making**

Notwithstanding the above description of the circumscribed autonomy of schools in the latest phase of educational development, Singapore is synonymous with progressive and excellent student performance on international achievement tests. It is credited with efforts to implement transformative teaching and learning processes aimed at preparing its citizenry for the knowledge-based economy (Dimmock and Goh, 2011). There are high levels of efficiency in resource allocation and usage, and impressive returns to investment in education (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed et al., 2010; The Straits Times, 2011). Most importantly, Singapore students have consistently outperformed peers from other advanced economies in international comparative assessments. These successes and innovations may appear to be inconsistent and out of keeping with the traditional pejorative expectations of a classic educational bureaucracy – maintenance of the *status quo*, resistance to change, insensitivity to changing contexts, risk-averse, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and poor achievement outcomes (Bardhan, 2002; OECD, 2001a, 2001b).

In endeavoring to understand this paradox, it is first necessary to identify the unique characteristics of leadership and policy-making in Singapore beyond the notions of centralization, decentralization, and “steering from a distance”, which as we have already claimed, appear increasingly inadequate descriptive and explanatory terms. To this end, Ho (2003) asserts that Singapore policy-making is best explained using a relational model premised on strong reciprocal relationships and accountabilities between politicians and citizens, between citizens and bureaucrats, and between bureaucrats and politicians. Nonetheless, we argue that even this model

does not explain why the Singapore government enjoys moral legitimacy in leading – overtly or covertly - from the top. It also does not tell us why schools are continuously willing to defer to the MOE leadership and accept circumscribed or “bounded” autonomy.

To understand the baroque nature of leadership in Singapore, we need to take cognizance of the larger socio-cultural context from which policy-making emanates, particularly the influence of Confucian values and axioms governing relationships in an interdependent Asian society. Indeed, Singapore’s government leaders have repeatedly alluded to the primacy of salient Confucian values in the city-state (Shared values, 1991; Tan, 2007). These values are underscored in Singapore’s shared national values and the curriculum through *National Education* (NE) messages in schools (MOE, 2011; Shared values, 1991). The endorsement of these values is also widely credited for the Asian economic miracle. It has been said that while citizenship education in England’s schools means learning about politics, in Singapore, NE means learning about values.

In particular, the emphasis on normative power differentials between different pairs of dyads in Confucian culture may explain why there is the continued reinforcement of the vertical distance between the ruling elite and the ruled. Promulgated as the *Five Cardinal Relations* – comprising ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger sibling, and friend-friend – individuals are expected to live up to expectations associated with their roles, especially with regards to their dyadic partner (Bond and Hwang, 1986; King and Bond, 1985). In this paradigm, the ruling elite is expected to be benevolent and caring toward their subjects while the latter are expected to respect and defer to their masters. This reciprocity constitutes an unspoken social compact in society and influences the



nature of interactions among different individuals. Hence, we can appreciate the legitimacy of the Singapore government (i.e., ruler) exerting a controlling hegemony over schools (i.e., subjects). This hegemony is manifested as subject centralization in the earlier phases of educational development before 1997 and later as subtle, nuanced “steerage” in the ability-driven phase. Nonetheless, unlike despotic and self-serving hegemonies, leadership in Singapore has particularistic characteristics in that it is strong and directive, yet caring, considerate and moral in its dealings. Farh and Cheng (2000) elucidate that this paternalistic form of leadership achieves legitimacy because the authoritarian nature of leadership is accompanied with expectations of morality and benevolence. Comparing the ruler-subject relationship to that between a father and son, Chen and Farh (2010) metaphorically describe the reciprocal relationship as follows:

“Like the father in a ... family, the superior ... is expected to lead morally by example, maintain authority and control, provide guidance, protection, and care to the subordinate; like a dutiful son, the subordinate, in return, is obligated to be loyal and deferent to the superior.” (p. 602)

Hence, although paternalistic leaders may assert strong authority and control over subordinates and demand their unqualified obedience, they demonstrate superior moral character and integrity, and a concern for subordinates’ well-being. Concomitantly, the latter feel the need to respect and defer to leadership, and experience gratitude and obligation to reciprocate the kindness shown. In the Singapore context, it is a societal expectation that the government upholds the highest standards of professional and moral conduct, and formulates and implements educational policies that best serve the country’s needs. In this way, armed with the knowledge that the MOE leadership is forward-looking and not self-serving, schools are willing to conform to policy dictates from the MOE. Three important qualities of the leadership exercised by the Singapore government which are reflected in its

policy-making are discernible: high levels of professional competence, pragmatism and care for the citizenry, and the sponsorship of change in pursuit of the national interest. Each of these is now elaborated.

### ***Competent leadership***

In its recent publication, *Capturing the Leadership Premium*, McKinsey&Co attribute the success of high-performance educational systems to the quality of school leadership and the quality of teaching (Barber et al., 2010). While this may be considered sufficient for explaining the success of schools in de-regulated systems, we aver that the critical need for quality leadership goes beyond schools to the highest level of policy-makers and senior bureaucrats, especially in Singapore. This is partly explained by the relative absence in Singapore of pluralist checks and balances found in Western democracies – and the added trust that thus needs to be placed in honest and enlightened politicians and bureaucrats. Indeed, Singapore places a huge premium on the recruitment and management of competent and motivated government ministers and senior bureaucrats (Ho, 2003). Underscoring the contributions of the leadership elite (limited to comparatively few in number), Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, cautions that "If all the 300 were to crash in one Jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate." (Lee, 1998: 315).

To ensure commitment and prevent corruption, the government pays extremely generous salaries to motivate its political appointees and senior bureaucrats. There is also a deliberate policy to rotate office-holders and inject new blood into the government regularly. Furthermore, there are high expectations of the bureaucracy. Senior civil servants are expected to understand the socioeconomic and political environments, anticipate the consequences of their actions, and rise above party politics to act in the best interest of the country.

The preoccupation with getting the best individuals for leadership transcends government leadership to shape the selection of school principals and teachers (Ng, 2008a). Besides the normal appraisal, teachers undergo different levels of identification and assessment to ascertain their potential to be effective school leaders. It also helps that being a small, compact educational system, the MOE and existing school principals are very familiar with teachers who have demonstrated their competence and consistently shown potential for future school leadership. This proximal advantage minimizes the risk of erroneous judgment of teachers' leadership potential and subsequent wrongful appointment of teachers to the principal-ship. With attractive salaries and bonuses, career opportunities, and other work benefits, the system is also able to attract the top 30% of each graduate cohort to join its teaching force. With the support of a coterie of high quality teachers, the MOE is able to continuously introduce a flow of initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes in the ability-driven phase of educational development.

### ***Pragmatism***

The second quality characterizing Singapore's paternalistic leadership relates to the principles guiding policy formulation. In the quest for the maintenance of peace and its survival in an otherwise potentially hostile Southeast Asian environment, Singapore's leaders have repeatedly emphasized the need for pragmatism in policy-making (Ho, 2003; Ng and Chan, 2008). In the process, citizens are urged to put community and national interests above their individual rights and to emphasize consensus over dissent – characteristic hallmarks of Confucian philosophy. Principles such as meritocracy, academic credentialism, bilingualism, and racial and religious harmony strongly undergird educational policy in Singapore (C. Han, 2009; Shared values, 1991; Tan, 2007).

In regard to meritocracy in particular, educational policies are designed to level the playing field so that students can learn and develop according to their potential (Tan, 2007). For example, all schools are staffed by well-trained and qualified teachers, equipped with enviable state-of-the-art facilities and infrastructure, and supported with generous budgets, regardless of the socioeconomic profiles of their students. Promotion of students from one level to another, allocation of students to different streams in schools, student admission criteria for secondary schools and junior colleges (grades 11 and 12), and disbursement of educational awards to students - are all strictly merit-based. The use of meritocracy to allocate resources and support learning appears to have borne fruit. System-wide statistics provided compelling evidence of the state of social mobility in the city-state (The Straits Times, 2011).

### ***Sponsor of change***

The third leadership characteristics explaining the success of Singapore's educational system lies in the leadership's advocacy and support for diversity, innovation, and teacher professionalism. In realizing the need for innovation and enterprise, the Singapore Public Service Division launched the *Public Service 21* (PS21) initiative espousing a client-centered, market-driven approach to administrative reforms in the civil service (PS21 Office, 1996). The twin objectives of PS 21 were to imbue in civil servants the value of service excellence – emphasizing high quality of standards, courtesy, and responsiveness - in meeting the needs of the public, and promoting an environment which supports continuous improvement for greater efficiency and effectiveness (Ho, 2003).

The endorsement of service excellence and continuous improvement from the highest echelons of government has culminated in a plethora of innovative initiatives

and policies in the educational sector, as exemplified by the establishment of independent and autonomous schools in 1987 and 1994 respectively, TSLN in 1997, TLLM in 2004, EPMS in 2003, and PLCs in 2009. Alluding to the complex interplay between policy-makers and implementers, – or more conceptually, what Ball and colleagues term analysis of policy as text and as discourse (Ball, 1993, 1994; Bowe, Ball, and Gold, 1992) – the MOE undertakes consultations with school leaders, teachers, parents, and industry partners in the process of formulating policies based on its sensitivity to perceived needs. The involvement of stakeholders takes place through a myriad of platforms. For instance, the MOE consulted a wide cross-section of stakeholders in the review of the implementation of NE in 2007 (MOE, 2007). These stakeholders comprised school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and representatives from non-government organizations. Recommendations from the review committee subsequently informed the trajectory of NE policy for schools.

The three qualities described are illustrative of a paternalistic style of leadership in the Singapore educational system. This paternalistic characterization appears more apt and culturally informed as an explanatory descriptor of educational policy-making in Singapore than simple categorical notions of centralization or decentralization. It deserves reiterating that this brand of Singaporean paternalism is not synonymous with the notion of totalitarian, despotic political control exerted by a political and bureaucratic leadership that is obsessed with the interference and curtailment of the rights of the population so as to serve its selfish interests. On the contrary, it is characterized by an unspoken social compact between Singapore's political and bureaucratic leadership and schools that the former will pursue enlightened policies - predicated on enshrined principles of meritocracy and incorruptibility introduced by Lee Kuan Yew and other founding fathers - that serve

the best interests of the nation. This obliges schools to trade off some of their autonomy for the larger good of all in a collectivistic society. As Chang (2011) puts it:

Every five years, the party seeks the people's mandate, when that has been given, as it has been in every election over five decades, the leadership governs decisively, with lightning speed and an iron hand. The voters do not ask too many questions nor agitate for populist policies; they are asked to trust as a placid citizenry. In return, the Government promises to stay un-corrupt and make decisions for their best long-term interests. For five decades now, this has been the Singaporean social compact.

Paternalism as an indigenous conceptualization of leadership provides an explanation of the educational landscape in Singapore where schools are generally willing to accept the overall leadership and governance of the ruling elite. Indeed, in contrast to the typical approach of governments “steering from a distance” as seems the case in many Western democracies with neo-liberal educational systems (Marceus, 1993), the most compelling description of Singapore educational leadership and policy-making in its current phase of development is “*steering through paternalism from close proximity*”. The propitious effects of MOE’s proximal steerage is made possible because of the nexus of intimate working relationships among the different stakeholders – the MOE, school clusters, schools, and the country’s monopoly teacher training institute, the NIE – in Singapore’s small, compact educational system. Furthermore, the reciprocal and close partnership between the center-periphery, that is, the ruler (MOE) and ruled (schools) – is regarded as both synergistic and productive. Indeed, the worldwide admiration and recognition for the Singapore brand of education attests to the efficacy of paternalism in leadership and policy-making in a characteristically Asian context.

## **Conclusion**

Our exegesis of leadership and policy-making in the Singapore educational system has illustrated how the MOE has exerted its control and influence over schools either directly through top-down centralized policy-making in the earlier phases of educational development (before 1997) or through “*steering through paternalism from close proximity*” in the current ability-driven phase (after 1997). Significantly, despite this unwavering desire of Singapore leaders to exert control and influence over schools, a distinctive and highly effective educational system has evolved over less than half a century. Indeed, the Singapore brand of education and particularly its policy-making differs from that found in educational systems in other first-world, especially multi-party Western democracies. In such Western democracies, general elections often lead to changes of governing party, with attendant and concomitant changes of educational values and ideology underpinning government policy. In contrast, educational policy in Singapore has been under the control of one political party (PAP) since 1965. Consequently, Singapore leadership and policy-making has become renowned for its consistency and coherence; for an evolutionary rather than capricious or radical approach to policy-making; for a sensitivity to the social and economic interests of the people; for its awareness of the need for geopolitical security, nationhood, and non-partisan pragmatism; for its ingenuity in local adaptation of international best practice; and finally, for the dominant role played by an enlightened bureaucracy in the whole policy-making process. Undoubtedly, these qualities have created significant public value (Moore, 1995) in the city-state’s educational processes and outcomes, thereby benefiting students and providing a distinctively different way of making policy in comparison with Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

In reconciling the paradoxes between this high level of neo-conservative control and high performance normally associated with a neo-liberal educational system (Apple, 2004), we have argued that a paternalistic model of leadership as a conceptual apparatus affords an appropriate understanding and account. This model recognizes the importance of socio-cultural contextual influences that shape leader-subordinate dynamics and relations. It provides a plausible explanation of why - schools are willing to defer to an enlightened leadership in policy-making so as to achieve synergies and positive educational outcomes – whether center-periphery relations are top-down, or more nuanced through MOE’s “*steering through paternalism from close proximity*”.

We contend that this paternalistic model of leadership is a more useful heuristic device - compared with notions of centralization, decentralization, and “steering from a distance” - in enabling us to better understand the subtleties of the center-periphery relationship in Singapore education. It begs the question of how generalizable it is as an explanatory model of policy-making for other East Asian Confucian societies, namely China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. As a case in point, western critics of developed Asian education systems often claim a connection between their directive governments, an over-reliance on formal teacher-centered curricular and pedagogy, and the consequent lack of creativity and innovation among students. However, Biggs and Watkins’ (1996) – while agreeing that the Chinese teacher demonstrates a heavy reliance on didactic teaching, and the Chinese student on rote learning – go on to argue that such an approach is invariably culturally-based: that is, the Chinese teacher and learner sees rote learning as the necessary prior step to subsequent manipulation of the data and higher-level cognitive skills (including creativity) rather than as an end in itself (Dimmock, 2000).



Nonetheless, it is true that the Singapore MOE – indicative of other governments of developed Confucian societies - is keen to promote more creativity among students, as members of its prospective future workforce. Lim (2012) for instance, reports that while Singapore schools have become global role models in terms of consistently high test results, the MOE now wants to move beyond this to cultivate creativity and ‘holistic education’. The Singapore Minister for Education in a 2012 speech claimed that education is less about content knowledge and more about how to process information. Schools will be given more leeway to come up with creative ways to teach the syllabus (Lim, 2012). Paradoxically, it may be that strong Asian governments – such as Singapore’s - direct schools to assert more teacher and school-based initiatives – thereby illustrating the applicability of the paternalistic leadership model espoused in this paper.

The issue of connectivity between directive Asian governments, over-reliance in schools on teacher-centered forms of pedagogy, memorization and rote learning methods leading to a lack of creativity – is further complicated by evidence for Confucian societies generally showing that they score highly in international comparisons of innovation and competitiveness vis-à-vis other non-Confucian countries worldwide. For example, in the Global Innovation Index 2012 compiled by *INSEAD* and the *World Intellectual Property Organization*, Singapore (3<sup>rd</sup>), Hong Kong (8<sup>th</sup>), Japan (25<sup>th</sup>), China (34<sup>th</sup>) were ranked highly out of a total of 141 economies worldwide (Dutta, 2012). Similarly, in the Global Competitiveness Report (2011-2012) by the *World Economic Forum*, these same Confucian societies were ranked highly amongst 142 economies globally (Singapore 2<sup>nd</sup>, Japan 9<sup>th</sup>, Hong Kong 11<sup>th</sup>, Taiwan 13<sup>th</sup>, Korea 24<sup>th</sup>, China 26<sup>th</sup>) (Schwab, 2011). At the risk of simplification, it may be argued that paternalistic leadership, premised on Confucian

heritage as a common cultural denominator, has at least played a propitious role in contributing to the overall positive performance in these societies. Interestingly, this performance provides contrary evidence to detractors that top-down systems *per se* may compromise creative and critical thinking (McCreedy, 2004). It has to be acknowledged that there is considerable variation among the performances of Confucian economies – although all of them tend to have excelled. To the extent that variations exist, they may be attributable to indigenous differences in governance systems and policies, and qualitative differences in the degree of application of the paternalistic leadership model amongst these different Confucian societies. Consequently, with regards to the external validity of the model, we wonder whether this paternalistic style of leadership can reconcile the tension between Asian governments' imperative to maintain strong central control and the realization that many 21<sup>st</sup> century educational reforms are founded on more autonomy for schools and teachers going forward. This tension will be a key future issue confronting the governments and peoples of Singapore and other Confucian societies.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the efficacy of paternalism in Singapore to date, one cannot but wonder if the tacit requirements of paternalistic leadership – namely, that it is honest, competent and caring with a goal of pursuing policies in the best interests of the nation - can continue to be met in the future. The answer surely lies in the degree to which there is societal agreement on what constitutes the nation's best interests. Alignment on this question is more likely in times of economic growth and prosperity – such as Singapore and most of Asia is presently experiencing. However, some questions loom over the horizon as Singapore traverses the fifth decade of its nationhood. Can the Singapore government continue to attract competent and motivated people to fill its ranks in leadership renewal? Can it bridge the gradually

increasing social inequality between the “haves” and “have-nots” (Apple, 2004)?

Lastly, how will the social compact between the leadership elite and citizens be contested in the face of growing democratic calls from an educated citizenry for their voices to be heard? Admittedly, these are difficult questions for Singapore’s leaders and its style of policy-making that will require answers (Han, Zuraidah, Chua, Lim, Low, Lin, and Chan, 2011), as Singapore continues its journey from “good to great” and on to the ultimate phase of educational excellence.

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