

DO INCREASED PROFESSIONALISM AND SCHOOL AUTONOMY EXPLAIN THE SUCCESS OF THE WORLD'S LEADING EDUCATION SYSTEMS? MULTIPLE PATHWAYS - THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

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In recent years, the availability of international comparative data on student performance has led to a proliferation of analyses on the developmental trajectories of education systems around the world. In the barrage of published findings emanating from these studies, there is a disconcerting articulation that all education systems, regardless of their socio-cultural and political contexts, will inexorably converge in their developmental trajectories. Two organisations in particular - OECD through its PISA 2012 report, and McKinsey & Co. through its reports on the progression of education systems to 'greatness' - claim two characteristics in particular are associated with system improvement trajectories: these are increasing teacher professionalism, and greater school autonomy. For example, McKinsey & Company in its high profile report 'How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better' argues unequivocally that as education systems progress to 'greatness' (the highest level of development in its four-stage typology), teachers will become more professional and enjoy increased autonomy and decision-making over curriculum and pedagogy to improve student learning, and school principals and leaders will expect more school autonomy over human and financial resources. This paper challenges these assumptions on the basis of the concept of 'naive empiricism', defined as algorithms of simplistic, reductionist assumptions based on data sets and analyses that are inadequate in what they purport to measure. It does so through reference to Singapore, a highly successful education system, according to these measures using international achievement tests.

The paper argues (based on evidence of teacher, principal and system- level relationships and practices) that in the tightly controlled education system of Singapore, rated as 'great' by a McKinsey & Company report on its performance trajectory, that despite reasonably high levels of professionalism, teachers and principals remain largely circumscribed and curtailed in exercising their professional discretion, and that most strategic decision-making power and control over resources remains in the hands of powerful policymakers and bureaucrats. What matters is not so much the degree of teacher and principal/school professionalism and autonomy, as the extent to which practitioners are able to exercise them. Hence, the OECD and McKinsey et al. models of teachers exercising higher levels of professionalism and principals leading increasingly autonomous schools do not fit well as accurate explanations for Singapore's success.

While teacher professionalism and school and leader autonomy do not fit well as explanations for Singapore success, our evidence is that other non-school factors contribute significantly to student performance. Among these are – competent policy makers, tight-coupling and alignment of all parts of the system, and a socio-cultural premium on educational achievement, including intense parental engagement in education and private-home tutoring. Our argument is that International agencies that purport to explain how different education systems achieve success in terms of two educational characteristics - teacher professionalism and school autonomy, while ignoring broader socio-educational-cultural, political and economic factors is illustrative of 'naive empiricism'. Rather, there are multiple pathways to success.