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Globalisation, the State and Education Policy in Singapore

Saravanan Gopinathan

Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of globalisation and educational policy making in the context of a recently developed 'strong state', Singapore. It suggests the need to clarify the concept of globalisation from such concepts as dependency and centre-periphery, and to avoid overly deterministic accounts of the influence of global trends on educational policy making. An analysis is provided of policy initiatives in Singapore between 1979 and 2000 located within state-based imperatives to respond to both global and state-centric challenges.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the world community is experiencing a convergence process, globalisation, that is unprecedented in history. Globalisation is commonly understood to be primarily a process of economic integration in which the owners of capital, financiers and money managers, among others, have been able to overcome the constraints of nation state boundaries to bring about global economic integration. Such has been the reach and size of some multinational companies that they dwarf, and often swamp, the national economies of small and not so small states. An international production system has also emerged. With the movement of capital have come flows of technology and of manpower, a process aided by the second major element of globalisation, namely the convergence of different modes of telecommunication and computer technology that has made the movement of data and information much more transnational and flexible. Other aspects of globalisation include the emergence of environmental and conservation consciousness, and the new cross-border roles of non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund. As a consequence of these movements, some commentators have spoken of the weakening of the power and autonomy of the state due to the erosion of regulatory power of national governments and legislatures, especially over financial matters. As Hirsh (1995) puts it, "the new power at the world's centre stage are the multinational corporations and the increasingly rootless technologies and fi-
nancial elites who run them." Yet others see globalisation as a benign integrating process that is rapidly eroding the distinctions between the economic, political and cultural domains and opening up new possibilities.

How useful is globalisation as a concept for analysing educational phenomena? New communication and computer technologies may certainly be seen as contributing towards the rapid emergence of a global culture understood as the near universalisation of such cultural symbols as the extensive use of English, the spread of McDonalds, Guess jeans, Coca-Cola, Nike, Michael Jackson, Microsoft and other icons of American culture. In so far as education is about the production of identity and meaning, it is to be understood as a cultural process and therefore available for analysis within the context of globalisation.

There is as yet only a limited literature on using globalisation as a concept to understand changing educational processes. How is educational globalisation different from such earlier concepts as neo-colonialism, internationalism, dependency, or centre-periphery? After all the education work of UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the business of educational and cultural entrepreneurs like the British Council, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and the Educational Testing Service, to name but a few, have been in existence for half a century or more. It could be argued that the institutions named above are international organisations in which nation-states have a major interest; global organisations like the International Coalition for Development Action or the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement or the World Confederation of the Teaching Profession transcend national boundaries. While it is clear that earlier conceptualisations, especially of the critical kind, implied a malign intent on the part of the industrialised powerful nations or status groups, and the capitalistic West was seen as the dominant partner in the relationship, it is less clear if this is true of globalisation as well. After all Japan is now a major aid donor, the Japanese education model is widely admired, and technological marvels such as the Walkman, the compact disc, the video camera recorder and electronic games are Japanese in origin.

Globalisation theorists need to avoid the errors of earlier scholars who saw nations on the periphery as helpless and exploited, with little possibility for even relative autonomy, and should integrate into their analysis critiques of such deterministic outlooks (Frank 1978). It is premature to assert the inevitable collapse or subversion of national institutions, let alone the nation state. An important emergent literature on the development of economically strong states in East Asia has detailed non-Western models of socio-economic organisation, schooling and training structures, and national-level purpose and autonomy (Berger & Hsiao 1988). It is also possible to argue, for instance, that Japanese and Korean multinationals have a different relationship with their governments than US multinationals, and that their aims and roles in the global economy may be different. The central place of schooling in the society and economy figures largely in these accounts. Strong states, especially those where education is managed by central authorities, are able to achieve a tight coupling between education and the economy, and thus minimise slippages and make education have a more direct impact on the economy. Globalisation theorists also need to deal with issues linked to the current rights assumptions arising from the Arab oil embargo and Singaporean lead in the global economy. It is important to realise that nation states are not simply colonised by the global media hub. Yen political and cultural...
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sues linked to the current US push for the adoption globally of free-market and human rights assumptions and the increasingly strong and coherent opposition to these assumptions from many East Asian states as evidenced by statements from Malaysian and Singaporean leaders. A culture-based alternative, primarily Confucian in nature, has increasingly been used in East Asia as both an explanatory and organisational variable (Tai 1989). There is also increasing discussion of the contributions that an Islamic worldview could make to the debate about social restructuring.

This chapter takes the position that relative autonomy exists even in a globalising world, and demonstrates that with reference to major policy initiatives in education. It is important to pay attention not only to global trends but also to national reactions to those trends, and to explore the ‘micropolitics’ of educational decision making as it plays out on a national stage. The data used are from Singapore which in the past three decades grew impressively in economic terms. Singapore is very much a part of the global economic network as it is a major financial, transportation and communication hub. Yet Singapore’s leaders have also made clear the need to preserve political and cultural autonomy.

The Singapore Context

Two features of the Singapore context are worthy of note in this discussion of globalisation and education. The first is that as a small island with no natural resources except a strategic location, Singapore’s survival has always depended on its usefulness to major powers. It attracted colonial interest because it provided a well-placed base for economic penetration; and the colonial experience, 1819-1963, deepened Singapore’s integration into Britain’s economic empire. Although there was political contestation in the 1950s over culture, language and political issues, there was also early recogni-
tion of the value of English as an economic resource. Early planning for transforming Singapore’s economy from an entrepot to an industrial economy in the late 1950s recognised the need for foreign capital, technology and markets. Singapore thus eschewed the ideology of economic nationalism that characterised many postcolonial states. This clear grasp of the need for economic openness to global economic forces still characterises planning in Singapore even though the country is now considered a developed economy with a per capita annual income of about US$20,000. External trade is a major component of Singapore’s economy, and Singapore’s leaders are fond of making international comparisons as a way of benchmarking achievements. In the early 1990s a major societal goal was to equal the ‘Swiss standard of living’. Singaporeans are very proud of Singapore Airlines’ profitability and popularity. Comparisons of the productivity of Singapore’s workforce, of levels of corruption and of political stability are common ways of placing Singapore within the global context, both for its own citizens and for foreign investors.

It follows from the characteristics noted above that Singapore has also had a long history of borrowing educational ideas and practices from other countries. As a colony, metropolitan models and practices were transplanted, albeit in modified form,
into Singapore. Christian missionary societies were responsible for establishing many English-medium schools, and the Queen's Scholarships enabled bright students to travel to Britain to further their studies overseas. With a large Chinese migrant population, Singapore's educational development was also influenced by ideas, teachers, curriculum materials and ideology from China. For much of the nineteenth century Chinese-medium schools in Singapore were patterned on schools in China. Many changes in schooling in China occasioned by the 1911 revolution were also copied in Singapore (Gopinathan 1974, 1985). Islamic *madrasahs* modelled on similar institutions in the Middle East continue to operate in Singapore. In the post-independence period, Singapore sought non-British models of technical training; ideas were also borrowed from Swiss and German experiences. The Economic Development Board, for instance, invited major companies like Rollei, Tata and Phillips to set up technical training institutions in Singapore. At other times the Ministry sent study teams of principals to the USA, the UK and Taiwan to study systems of education with a view to incorporating desirable practices into the Singapore system.

Yet, while Singapore has been an avid borrower, its policy makers have sought to ensure that Singapore is neither swamped by external forces nor in danger of becoming a client-state. Official recognition of the value of English was counterbalanced by the insistence that all students learn a second language, Mandarin, Tamil or Malay (Gopinathan 1974). In the early 1970s, before Singapore became extensively industrialised and urbanised, Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister was spelling out the need to 'remain ourselves' and not end up aping the West. Lee's preoccupation with Singapore's cultural identity was, of course, due to the need to manage skillfully and sensitively Singapore's ethnic and linguistic plurality, and the fact that Singapore had a Chinese-majority population in an area dominated by Malay-Muslim communities. Singapore's leaders recognised early the value of the civilisational wisdom represented by Singapore's ethnic groups. Recognition and affirmation of ethnic cultural values then formed the basis for articulating the boundaries of Singapore's socio-cultural identity (Gopinathan 1988). The strategy was both to value ethnic culture and to point to 'undesirable' elements and features of Western society. This tendency is now more fully articulated, and great emphasis is placed on preserving the family as a core unit of society. Singapore's leaders also emphasise that the Westminster model of democracy is not appropriate for all, and that nations must be allowed to develop their own forms of human rights which take the cultural context into account. Singapore has also aligned itself to the view that the neo-Confucian ideology is a sensible alternative framework for socio-economic and political organisation (Lee 1994).

**Globalisation and the Educational Policy Process**

A basic tenet of globalisation is that, in a rapidly integrating world, dominant ideas and ideologies take on a global character in that they penetrate and/or are adopted by a large number of social groups. These dominant ideas mainly emanate from economically and militarily powerful countries, and their spread is aided by the control of mass media, telecommunications global agendas. In the 1980s Ronald Reagan in the USA and Thatcher, who sought to deregulate and employers. How the UK, with the testing. Educational global education in UK as the government education authority the state had both and involve itself in Singapore's larger socio-political deep ethnic and ling...
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media, telecommunications technology and the political power of these nations to set global agendas. In the last two decades the free-market and anti-welfare sentiments of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, coupled with the collapse of the command economy in the former Soviet Union, have swept the globe. Reagan and Thatcher, who viewed education as captured by state bureaucracies and unions, sought to deregulate and decentralise and to offer more power and choice to parents and employers. However an element of centralisation has been introduced, especially in the UK, with the introduction of a national curriculum and insistence on regular testing. Educational reform and economic modernisation were the major themes for global education in the 1990s. The policy environment changed dramatically in the UK as the government legislated new initiatives, broke the power of unions and local education authorities, and challenged long-settled educational assumptions. Because the state had both regulatory and allocative power, it was able to set the policy agenda and involve itself heavily in areas previously seen as the province of teachers alone.

Singapore’s educational policy environment can best be understood within its larger socio-political context. Singapore society in the 1950s was characterised by deep ethnic and linguistic segmentation. It was poor, had a rapidly rising birth rate, and had few prospects for economic survival. With a dominant Chinese majority it was regarded with suspicion by Malaya and Indonesia; a powerful Communist terrorist campaign in Malaya and evidence of Communist infiltration in the trade unions, schools, cultural and media organisations both in Singapore and Malaya made the British reluctant to give Singapore independence. A school system with four media of instruction (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) mirrored the fragmentation of Singapore society. Political identity was contested terrain, and the agencies of government had little power.

One educational legacy of the British was a segmented school system with deep resentment on the part of the non-English educated. The Chinese-medium schools were largely kept alive through community support which also enabled the Chinese-medium Nanyang University to be founded in 1956. The first major post-war educational report, The All Party Report on Chinese Education, was as much a political as an educational document. In proposing ‘equality of treatment’ it gave legitimacy to the aspirations of the non-English educated, made multi-culturalism and multilingualism core assumptions for the management of ethnic diversity, and led to the allocation of substantial resources in building first an integrated and later a unified national system of education. In the 1960s, and especially after Singapore became independent in 1965, the government propounded a value system that linked bilingualism and ‘Asian’ cultural values as the preferred socialisation mode.

The shaping of a national identity, and the management of ethnic diversity through the education system, was contested. Equality meant not just the provision of resource inputs but the extension of the Ministry of Education’s control over curriculum, educational structure, examinations, teacher qualifications and fitness to teach, and conditions of service. That control was bitterly resented, but the Ministry eventually prevailed. The legacy of a heavily politicised educational policy environment re-
mains to this day. Education remains politically sensitive, and the ethnic dimension in education has led to continuing government oversight in education.

Other features of the policy environment in Singapore should also be noted. Singapore has a deserved reputation for strong, able and corruption-free administration. Its social reconstruction activities in public housing, health care and transportation, are closely studied in other parts of the developing world. Singapore, with a population of slightly over three million, has an airline and airport whose profitability and efficiency are admired. Singapore's leaders, aided by the fact that their political party has been in power since 1959, have a clear political vision — to remain nationally cohesive, independent and economically competitive. There is a belief in strong political and socio-economic institutions working to a common purpose within a framework of aims set by the government, and the government has managed to make the senior civil service prestigious, demanding and authoritative. Careful attention is paid to implementation details, projects are well resourced, and there is an openness to selected 'good ideas' from abroad.

One final feature that distinguishes Singapore is that it is resource rich. It has US$75 billion in reserves, has one of the world's highest savings rates, and has had real GNP growth of about 9 per cent for a decade and a half. The inflation rate is low and there has been substantial asset enhancement, especially in housing. Though income inequality is rising on account of recent economic restructuring, there is little evidence of gross income inequality; rather, even as Singapore eschews the welfare state mentality there is much evidence of redistributive policies. Obviously in such a policy context the capacity to articulate and implement policy with confidence is very different from less fortunate countries.


This section details four major policy initiatives in Singapore that have profoundly altered the shape of the system. These initiatives are the introduction of ability-based streaming as proposed in the 1979 Report on the Ministry of Education, the establishment of independent schools following the 1986 Towards Excellence in Schools report, the establishment of ethnic self-help (education) groups with Mendaki, a Malay self-help group in 1981, and the provision of 10 years' general education as recommended by the 1991 Improving Primary School Education report. As argued in the following pages while the rhetoric may sound globally familiar, the reality is more closely tied to nation-level politics and concerns.

The Report on the Ministry of Education (Goh Report 1979)

As noted earlier, the educational response to pluralism in Singapore was the policy of bilingualism, with English as the common link language, and ethnic languages — Malay, Tamil and Mandarin — as second languages. As language and culture policies had been politicised in the 1950s, policy making with regard to bilingualism was often a response to political pressures, to demands for more resources and more curriculum time, and to demands, second language levels and closely cause the policy was

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time, and to demands for equality. To ensure that schools complied with official poli-

cies, second language instruction was made compulsory at both primary and secondary

levels and closely tied to the assessment system. It became apparent in the 1970s that

20 to 30 per cent of pupils were unable to meet the bilingualism requirement, but be-

cause the policy was 'sensitive' few spoke up.

It took the efforts of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Goh

Keng Swee, to declare that many pupils were being pushed out of the system at the end

of grade six due to failure in one or the other language, leading to wastage, and that

secondary school leavers were not sufficiently bilingual. His proposals were for the

introduction of ability-based streaming at the end of grade three and the introduction

of an ability differentiated curriculum and extensions to length of schooling for the

weaker pupils. Pupils were also to be tracked at the secondary level. The government

committed considerable resources to materials development and teacher training to

meet the needs of these pupils. This report heralded the beginnings of what is known

as the "efficiency-driven" phase in Singapore's educational development. Policy mak-

ers claim that streaming has drastically reduced drop-out rates.

Towards Excellence in Schools (1986)

While the Goh report was primarily concerned with weaker pupils, Towards Excel-

lence in Schools was designed to answer the question whether Singapore's best pupils

could be provided with an education that would enable them to provide the leadership

to meet the challenges of an emerging service and knowledge-based economy. As

mentioned earlier, politicisation of education and the need to assert state authority had

led to a centralisation of policy making power in the Ministry of Education. Equality

of treatment had created a more level playing field, but also a numbing sameness in

schools. The first Deputy Prime Minister, and later Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong

spoke in 1985 of the need to give selected schools more autonomy to set fees, hire and

fire teachers, and plan for curriculum enrichment. Greater autonomy was intended to

spark creativity and innovation.

In 1986, the government sent 12 carefully-chosen school principals to study a

number of high quality schools in the US and UK. The report of their study visit, To-

wards Excellence in Schools recommended the establishment of independent schools,

each of which was to be managed by a Board of Governors who would have power to

appoint the principal and hire and fire and offer improved salaries for teachers, set

fees, decide on admission policies, approve major financial projects, and ensure a

challenging and enriched curriculum. As only a small number of schools could go in-

dependent, the Minister for Education promised that innovations and improved prac-

tices would trickle down to the other schools, thus raising the standards of all. He also

announced that as fees were likely to be higher than at state schools, the government

would provide financial aid and bursaries so that no student would be prevented from

attending an independent school due to an inability to pay fees. In 1988, three aided

government schools went independent; and this number grew to eight independent

schools including two state schools. The proposal to free the schools could be seen as

an attempt to provide the leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs that the new economy
would require. However, the policy continued to be considered elitist. In response, the
government set up autonomous schools which would seek to provide high quality
education while changing more affordable fees. By 2000 there were 18 such secondary
schools.

Improving Primary School Education (1991)
In the mid-1980s, Singapore experienced a short but sharp recession. An analysis
showed that while the economic fundamentals were sound, Singapore had an under-
educated labour force in comparison with such countries as the USA, Taiwan and Ja-
pan. Land and labour costs had gone up sharply, and the opening up of China and In-
donesia would cause labour-intensive industries to move out. Clearly the reforms pro-
posed in the Goh and Excellence reports were inadequate to meet the economic chal-
lenge. The school system did not as yet provide the broadly-educated labour force that
would be needed to support the new service and knowledge-oriented industries.

The effective implementation of the proposals in the Goh Report had cut down
attrition, but the system was still pushing up to 20 per cent of each cohort of students
into early vocational training. Vocational trainers, in turn, found these students ill
prepared and poorly motivated for a labour-short economy that provided ample jobs.

The principal recommendations of the Improving Primary School Education re-
port were to postpone streaming by one year, i.e. to grade four, to alter the Primary
School Leaving Examination from a pass-fail to a placement examination, and to allow
almost all students to go on to secondary schools to complete an additional four to five
years of secondary education. The Report accepted the notion of ability differences
and proposed that a new track, Normal Technical, be introduced with a separate cur-
riculum for these pupils. It also proposed that Institutes of Technical Education be
established to cater to post-secondary school leavers.

While the Report on the Ministry of Education and the Excellence Report were con-
cerned with students at the two ends of the ability spectrum, the system and the politi-
cal establishment had also to contend with persistent Malay under-achievement. The
government’s major preoccupation in the 1960s and 1970s was to pacify the Chinese-
educated and to provide via education better and more equal educational opportuni-
ties. Unlike Malaysia, Singapore’s closest neighbour, Singapore could not afford, with
a Chinese majority, and one which had a history of British-led discrimination, an af-
murative action policy favouring the Malays. All had to advance by merit. The Malays
were handicapped in this pursuit by a variety of familial, cultural and structural fac-
tors. In the early 1980s, Malays were performing poorly at the primary and secondary
school leaving examinations. At the primary level, for instance, only 47 per cent of the
Malay cohort passed compared to 68 per cent for non-Malays. Malays were also
under-represented at the National University of Singapore with only 384 students in
1983. In 1980, the majority of Malays in the labour force were concentrated in low-
income occupations (Lee 1982).
The government's response was to encourage the establishment of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (Mendaki), to involve Malay political leaders and the community in determining the causes of this poor performance and to devise and implement solutions. The Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew observed that a government-run scheme could not achieve a quarter of the results of this voluntary spontaneous effort by Malay/Muslims to help themselves. To finance the community effort, the government not only provided assistance but also amended the Administration of Muslim Law Act to enable Malays voluntarily to contribute 50 cents a month. Similar provisions were made by the Central Provident Fund to enable contributions to be made on a monthly basis to Mendaki.

Perspective at the End of the Decade

The 1990s saw globalisation processes accelerating, aided by the widespread use of the Internet for a variety of purposes including personal e-mail, official communications, delivery of entertainment and an emergent e-commerce sector. East Asian economies also experienced a sharp recession - beginning in 1997, with differentiated rates of recovery as the decade ended. These two developments, among others, accelerated the questioning of the resilience of the education system in Singapore in the context of new demands for economic competitiveness. In retrospect, the previous policy had dealt with structural change but had left curriculum and classroom processes relatively unexamined.

The Singaporean government's reading of the emergent new economy was that it required of school leavers entirely new sets of skills. The emergence of the service sector and a speeding up of market liberalisation for banking, telecommunications etc. and possibilities emergent in a technology-driven economic environment put a high premium on innovation, flexibility, entrepreneurship, creativity and a commitment to lifelong learning. The decade of the 1990s was also the time that governments began to realise the potential of computers to enhance learning by providing access to new information sources, self-paced and often interactive learning, and any-time-any-where learning. Traditional education systems dominated by teachers and syllabuses began to look decidedly inadequate.

The big bang in Singapore's educational reforms was undoubtedly in the 1990s. The entire education system was reviewed, from pre-school education to university admission criteria and curriculum. For the first time university academics and other education personnel, particularly principals, were extensively involved. Though Information Technology (IT) came earlier than Prime Minister Goh's landmark Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) speech in June 1997, and work on the Desired Outcomes of Education had also begun earlier, the reforms can be collectively considered under the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation framework.

Goh Chok Tong said in 1997 that "TSLN is not a slogan for the Ministry of Education. It is a formula to enable Singapore to complete and stay ahead." The Ministry of Education defined its mission as Moulding the Future of the Nation, its vision
as Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, and its goal the Desired Outcomes of Education. The set of goals was an attempt to define the aims of holistic education and to categorise the values, skills and attitudes that Singaporean students should attain at different stages of the education cycle. It was a strong restatement of the need to develop the whole child, and a recognition of the vast range of talents, abilities, aptitudes and skills that students possess. An ability-driven curriculum was to characterise this phase of development. Thinking Schools were intended to meet future challenges, while Learning Nation aimed to promote a culture of continual learning beyond the school environment. The Minister for Education has said that Singapore schools need a much higher threshold for experimentation, innovation and uncertainty where output is not always guaranteed or even expected. The ideal student will be literate, numerate, IT-enabled, able to collate, synthesise, analyse, and apply knowledge to solve problems, capable of being creative and innovative, not risk-averse, be able to work both independently and in groups, and be a life-long learner.

TSLN has four major thrusts: Emphasis on Critical and Creative Thinking, the Use of Information Technology in Education, National Education (Citizenship Education), and Administrative Excellence. Examples of specific changes are the teaching of thinking skills through infusion and direct teaching, the introduction of interdisciplinary project work, the introduction of a school cluster system, an emphasis on schools as learning organisations, changes to teacher education, leadership training to emphasise commitment and values, and the provision of an entitlement of 100 hours a year in-service training to keep teachers up to date and skilled. Project work is now included in university admission criteria, and university curricula have been changed to make undergraduate education broader. New programmes have been introduced to produce manpower for the new industries.

IT’s potential contribution to enhancing learning has been recognised with a commitment of two billion Singapore dollars to provide, in the initial phase, one computer for every five students, and later one for every two students. There is clear recognition that the computer is but a tool, and an emphasis on integrating it into learning and teaching for up to 30 per cent of instruction time. Attention has been paid to rolling out the initiative in phases, ensuring that teachers are trained and that technical support has been provided to schools. All teacher trainees are expected to receive IT in education, ranging between 30 and 50 hours, and a masters programme is also available. Research and Development institutions, e.g. Kent Ridge Digital labs and the National Computer Board, are fully supportive of the IT initiative.

National Education is in some ways a continuation of efforts since the mid-1960s to socialise the younger generation of Singaporeans. What is striking in the present effort is the recognition that globalisation and the opportunities provided in a changing economy will strain the loyalties and attachments of young Singaporeans. The younger generation is increasingly aware of growing global learning and employment opportunities. A reasonable grounding in English, and a reputation for effort and reliability make them good employees. The situation is exacerbated by the government’s commitment to attracting global talent to Singapore to fill skill shortages. The response via National Education is the introduction of activities, both curricular and non-curricular, to meet these and possible A number of efforts to make the most of the existing education system, leaders with great potential and interest in school excellence, culture with an emphasis on the future. Other initiatives have focused very strongly on the A level and the ‘A’

Discussion and Conclusions

How can the potential contribution of the global information and communication technologies to enhancing learning be realised in the context of the global economy? The survival of national education systems depends on an avocational nationalism of interaction with the outside world. At the same time, the need for a coherent and relevant curriculum has led to the introduction of collaborative learning and non-curricular activities. The importance of the use of information technology in education has been recognised with a commitment of two billion Singapore dollars to provide, in the initial phase, one computer for every five students, and later one for every two students. There is clear recognition that the computer is but a tool, and an emphasis on integrating it into learning and teaching for up to 30 per cent of instruction time. Attention has been paid to rolling out the initiative in phases, ensuring that teachers are trained and that technical support has been provided to schools. All teacher trainees are expected to receive IT in education, ranging between 30 and 50 hours, and a masters programme is also available. Research and Development institutions, e.g. Kent Ridge Digital labs and the National Computer Board, are fully supportive of the IT initiative.

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Outcomes of Education and to aide schools should attain at of need to des, abilities, aptitudes to characterise this future challenges, learning beyond the gapore schools need certainty where output will be able to work both non-curricular, to sensitise young Singaporeans to Singapore’s national needs, concerns and possibilities, to make Singapore their ‘best home’.

A number of initiatives, such as the cluster school concept, characterise the effort to make the education system more responsive. The cluster school concept follows upon the establishment of independent and autonomous schools to provide school leaders with greater autonomy and flexibility. These clusters are led by a superintendent and are intended to allow for greater sharing of resources and good practices. The School Excellence Model is intended to replace the external-driven school inspection culture with an internal one in which both process and results are taken into consideration. Other measures being considered by some independent schools include allowing very bright pupils to skip the GCE ‘O’ level examinations and to proceed straight to the ‘A’ level examinations.

Discussion and Conclusions

How can the policy initiatives in education in Singapore be understood within the context of the globalisation of educational paradigms? As noted earlier, Singapore’s survival depends on an openness to global influences, and in the realm of education it has been an avid but selective borrower. Singapore did not indulge in the linguistic nationalism of many postcolonial societies, and because economic and political survival is a major societal project, education came under the control of a strong and able government. Fortunately for Singapore, the government has been able to turn education into a coherent national institution, highly valued in Singapore and seen as relevant. At the same time, the pluralism of Singapore society and the historical and political correlates of ethnicity necessitated close attention to the national implications of policies. This interweaving of the global and the national will be explored below.

The principal starting point for any analysis of education-society relations in the late 20th century must be the economic crisis of Western capitalism, especially in the US and the UK, the two countries whose experiences are most relevant to Singapore. New right conservatism led by Reagan and Thatcher targeted the ideology and institutions of the progressive welfare state as being responsible for big and inefficient government and a lack of economic competitiveness. What was first identified was ‘evidence’ of the erosion of educational standards and of low levels of literacy, numeracy, and general and scientific knowledge, followed in some cases by international comparisons of achievement. Local education authorities in the UK came under attack and were dismantled; power was devolved to parents and the communities, and schools could free themselves from state bureaucracies to be more stringent and responsive. The assumption was that the discipline of the market would improve schools and make them more productive for the economy. In the US, the ideas of Chubb and Moe (1988), gained wide currency. Chubb and Moe had argued that private schools outperformed public schools because, among other factors, public schools were beholden to democratic authority and local politics; they were not free to act in the best educational interests of their pupils and parents.
Singapore’s policy makers could easily identify with these sentiments. Economic instrumentalism was a cornerstone of schooling provision in Singapore, and economic competitiveness was the major national project. The language of rationalisation in the Goh report and the Improving Primary School Education report was the avoidance of ‘wastage’, the need to educate manpower better to service the economy. The extent of under-education in the work-force, revealed in the Economic Committee Report which analysed the mid-1980s recession, shocked many and showed the structural weakness in the system.

However, the policy responses had to take account of national educational realities. The demands of the bilingual policy on less able pupils were identified as the cause of school failure; the policy response was streaming rather than the abandonment of the bilingual policy. And streaming was not in the late 1970s a popular global prescription for educational underachievement. Singapore did not choose in this case to follow British practice of comprehensive schooling designed to equalise opportunities and to make up for the limitations of the home environment.

Another important difference lay in the origins of the centralisation process in Singapore. Singapore’s policy makers were not uncomfortable with the power that Ministry bureaucrats possessed. Centralisation, in Singapore’s experience, was empowerment of a state institution to unify and strengthen education; it enabled both the political and the educational challenge to be met. Apart from some criticism of language policy implementation from the non-English medium teachers’ unions, Union-Ministry relations were amicable. Besides, there was a national system in place, and a vast majority of schools were state schools. Indeed the very best boys’ and girls’ schools, Raffles Institution and Raffles Girls’ School, were state schools.

If the Goh report and the Improving Primary School Education report were principally about improving the quality of the workforce to be more economically competitive, how is the Towards Excellence in Schools report to be understood? It was in one sense also about economic competitiveness, the need in a mass education system to provide for creativity, innovation, and enrichment, and diversifying curriculum options and pedagogic strategies. But there are fundamental differences in the way that decentralisation was implemented in Singapore. There was never any intention to free the whole system, as only the very best schools could apply to go independent, and these schools traditionally drew the best pupils from the primary school cohort. In this sense, it was not about returning schools to the community, as these were not community schools.

McLean & Lauglo (1985), identify several rationales for decentralisation. These are administrative, political, ideological, and financial. The Singapore case is not about the devolution of primary decision-making power in education, nor is it really about privatising education. There is no resource crisis in Singapore education. Indeed the government has made a firm commitment to raise to 5 per cent of GDP the budget for education, which currently stands at about 3.5 per cent. Neither is education seen principally as consumption which must draw upon personal finances. Overwhelmingly, it is seen as investment in scarce human resources.
A case could be made for seeing the move to set up independent schools, and to devolve some decision-making power to boards of management and school principals, as principally administrative and pedagogical in nature. The administrative need arose from acceptance that the top schools in Singapore were stable, high achieving schools with strong school cultures and teaching staff who had demonstrated a capacity for sound educational planning and administration. There was little necessity to regulate their affairs from Ministry headquarters. Without this belief, there would have been no move to deregulate. This conviction was supplemented by the recognition that Singapore needed to enrich the curriculum of its best students, to encourage more creativity and innovation, and indeed to challenge its best students more. It was in this context that policy makers took heed of the literature on school effectiveness, on the role and potential of good school leaders, on the advantages of decoupling schools from excessive central control, and on giving opportunity and responsibility to school staff to raise additional financing to meet the expenses of special programming in the curriculum. The Education Minister at that time, Tony K.Y. Tan, quoted with approval the views of Chubb and Moe but declared that "the authors' conclusions were drawn from their study of schools in America and should therefore not be taken as applying automatically to our schools in Singapore because the two societies are quite different" (Tan 1987).

The policy response to the problems of ethnic under-achievement in Singapore underline the thesis in this chapter that national politics heavily determine the content of local policies. The major political-educational problem of the 1950s and 1960s was Chinese-educated disenchantment with the system, lack of facilities, and poor performance and vocational opportunity. Because of their numerical majority, the problems of the Chinese had to be attended to first; and by the mid-1970s, the Chinese-medium schools were well on their way to being integrated into the system.

Given the political context, raising the issue of Malay under-achievement was a risky political gamble. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, when he addressed the first Mendaki congress in 1982, provided statistics and an analysis of the educational problem of the Malay community. He pointed to the alarming consequences of such under-achievement. He noted that many Malays did not make it to the university, and that for the interim they must be encouraged to stay in school, put in more effort, and go on to vocational institutes and polytechnics.

This singling out of an ethnic community for detailed analysis of shortcomings has few parallels elsewhere. Concerns about ethnic under-achievement are felt in many countries, but it is rarely feasible to deal with them in such an open manner by political figures. The pattern reflected an aspect of the policy environment and political confidence that was essentially Singaporean. Equally interesting is the fact that after detailing the problem and promising assistance, the government told the community to organise itself to solve the problem in a holistic way and to plan for the long haul. Lee urged the community to build up an organisation which could tap the altruistic and charitable impulses of the Malays.

The self-help strategy, which has now been extended to the Indian and Chinese communities, arises from the view that the state should tap actively into community
sentiment and resources, and that the individual and the family must expend effort on education. In the Western model, community involvement is a way of reducing the state’s burdens, and of lowering expectations of the state’s capacity to solve problems. It is primarily driven by the state’s declining legitimacy and financial crisis. In the Singapore context, the state is strong and has the financial resources. Community involvement is based on the belief that the family and community are proper and necessary instruments for ensuring success.

The decade of the 1990s witnessed more major changes to the education system. They should be seen as a continuation of efforts made in the mid-1980s and in 1991 to ensure that the education system remained relevant and responsive. The Economic Committee’s Report in 1998 underlined the need for flexible and innovative workers – the independent schools initiative and the Thinking Schools programme could be seen as an early response to that need. As globalisation pressures intensified, the need for more radical reform in the education system became more apparent. One could identify one trend in which Singapore’s reform strategy was similar to pattern elsewhere, and one trend in which it was different.

Several commentators (e.g. Dale & Robertson 1997; Gordon & Whitty 1997; Mok 1999), have noted the emergence of quasi-markets in education, referring to efforts to introduce business-style competition among schools, to provide more choice to consumers of education, and to commodify education as a product to be ‘sold’ to students from other countries. Singapore also has reforms that may be characterised as quasi-market in the way in which independent schools are allowed to set their own fees and by allowing the ranking of schools on the grounds that this would lead to more informed choice. As in the UK, developments brought both decentralisation, as in the independent school concept, and the continuing power of ministry headquarters in setting directions, initiating, driving, and resourcing the reform effort.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the reform effort was the high level of resourcing provided to implement the initiative. In many developed countries, education reform has been seen as making the system more cost-effective and less of a drain on the national budget. Many governments see education as consumption rather than investment, and thus adopt user-pays policies, outsourcing educational services and allowing the private sector to run schools. Singapore, given its limited resources, has always seen education and training as a vital investment and indispensable for economic growth. Huge sums continue to be spent on school rebuilding and upgrading IT infrastructure, teacher training, and teacher professional development. Thus while strategies may look seemingly alike, the objectives and motivations are largely influenced by national histories and needs.

The thesis of this chapter has been that while there are clear globalisation trends, especially in the economy and technology, the nation state is still a powerful actor on the world stage. Thus even as educational paradigms and ideas take on a global character, the factors that determine educational policies are essentially national in character. This is so even in a country as extensively interconnected to global forces as Singapore. National leaders see value in the discipline of the free trade system, but they are determined in the sphere of culture and values to resist undesirable global

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References

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t expend effort on any of reducing the to solve problems. financial crisis. In the es. Community in- proper and neces-
education system. 80s and in 1991 to re. The Economic roactive workers - nme could be seen ified, the need for t. One could iden-tificate elsewhere, & Whitty 1997; in, referring to ef-fide more choice to be 'sold' to stu-dent characterised as set their own fees lead to more liberalisation, as in the headquarters in . A high level of re-entrants, education less of a drain on rather than in-volved services and al-located resources, has susceptible for eco-and upgrading IT ment. Thus while are largely influ-
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trends. Education policy making as a cultural exercise is thus an excellent site for in-
vestigating global-national tensions.

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This article discusses the education system in Singapore between 1987 and 1995. It explores the interactions between higher education and the issues in Singapore, focusing on the context of university administration. In 1987, the ruling representative of the Democratic Party of Singapore began the process of forming a new government. The reform in the sector of higher education has been significant, and some institutions have been devolved to uniform associations. This chapter examines how the political restrictions on higher education have affected the transition context in university administration.