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DRAFT

**The Dynamics of Change: The Decentralised Centralism of Education in Singapore
Charlene Tan & Pak Tee Ng**

Abstract

Many countries are introducing major educational changes to prepare their students to meet the challenges in a knowledge economy and enhance the country's competitive edge. This paper discusses recent educational changes in Singapore using the framework of decentralised centralism proposed by Karlsen (2000). The paper explores the dynamics of change in the initiation, content, levels and simultaneity of the decentralisation process in Singapore since 1997. The paper further analyses the ideological roots of the decentralisation policy through a discussion of the tension between the functionalist and liberal forms of education in the Singapore context. The discussion adds to existing literature on the tensions and challenges faced by countries in their attempts to introduce educational changes in their countries.

Introduction

Many countries are introducing major educational changes to prepare their students to meet the challenges in a knowledge economy and enhance the country's competitive edge. A number of writers have highlighted the impact of globalization on educational reforms and the trend towards decentralization in education (e.g. see Green, 1999; Marginson, 1999; Carnoy, 2002; Angus, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2004). Others have discussed how the Singapore government responded to global challenges through recent educational policy and initiatives (e.g. Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002; Vidovich & O'Donoghue, 2003; Koh, 2004; Ng, 2005). But there has been little attempt to analyze the interesting phenomenon of decentralised centralism in the educational policy in Singapore, and the ideological underpinnings that accompany these changes. This paper discusses recent educational changes in Singapore using the framework of decentralised centralism proposed by Gustav E. Karlsen (2000). Through a discussion of the dynamics of change in the decentralization process, the paper explores the ideological roots of decentralised centralism in the Singapore context.

Decentralised Centralism: A Theoretical Framework

Karlsen (2000) introduces the term "decentralised centralism" to refer to the dynamic interaction in the decentralization process. He identifies four arguments for decentralization in Norway, the first one being the belief that decentralization will strengthen democracy by transferring power from central to local bodies. The aim is to bring the decision-making process closer to the people. Secondly, it is argued that decentralization promotes innovation process and school-based development. The assumption is that a decision will be more readily accepted and abided by if the people involved are directly responsible for making that decision. Thirdly, decentralization helps the local school to design programmes and activities

better adapted to the needs of the local community. By establishing a more flexible and locally oriented school, it is hoped that this will have a positive effect on students' motivation and learning, and give them a feeling of belonging and purpose to the local community. Finally, policy makers believe that decentralization is salutary for achieving rationalisation and efficiency. This is made possible through a more market-oriented approach where commercialization and privatization in the field of education are practised.

Karlsen (2000) further distinguishes four dynamics processes in decentralized centralism: the dynamics of initiation, the dynamics of content, the dynamics of levels and the dynamics of simultaneity. The dynamics of initiation refers to the practice where decentralization reforms are initiated from the top by the authorities at the central level but implementation and accountability are local duties. These reforms have often led to new central legislation and regulations and can in reality be a strategy for strengthening central power. Passivity and even resistance have been observed on the local level in response to these reforms. There is also a two-way process between centralization and decentralization in the dynamics of content. The decentralization of content and power to set the curriculum at the local level is the reason for and legitimates standardization and central control. Consequently there is a balance between standardization and diversity of school content and curriculum. The third process for the decentralization process is the dynamics of levels. While there is the decentralization of tasks and administrative responsibility to the local level, this does not necessarily mean a shift of power from a higher to a lower level. In fact, the decentralization of authority from central to lower levels can have a legitimising function for the central level to set national standards and to develop national assessments. Finally, the dynamics of simultaneity rejects the model of decentralization and centralization as waves following and replacing each other. Rather, there is the simultaneous practice of centralization where the central level set central goals and standards for outcomes, and decentralization where the means and the responsibility for implementation are local duties. Paradoxically, decentralization is countered by a good deal of regulatory re-centralization. Karlsen also argues that the rhetoric of decentralization indicates a strong ideological drive toward not one ideological root but rather toward many. For example, there may be elements of both collectivism and individualism where ideological elements in decentralization such as populism and liberalism react against the power of the established elite and advocate more individual freedom.

Arguments for the Decentralization Policy in Singapore

Karlsen's four arguments for the decentralization policy are applicable to Singapore in her recent educational changes. Before a discussion of these reforms, it is necessary to understand the context in question. Singapore became an independent nation in 1965. The early days were difficult as Singapore struggled to survive. The ruling PAP government, under the leadership of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, put in place a series of pragmatic social and economic policies to attract investments from the international community. Forty years later, Singapore has been transformed into a world-class cosmopolitan city: a country without natural resources yet having one of the highest standards of living; a migrant citizenry from various parts of the world yet living harmoniously. The challenges for Singapore today are different from those faced by the old guard. Firstly, the knowledge age places a premium on knowledge creation and management, creativity and entrepreneurship. Singapore needs to transform itself into a knowledge-based economy. This means putting an emphasis on high technology, training, research and development, and developing people who are constantly learning and innovating. Secondly, Singapore faces a near saturated domestic market. This

means that Singapore has to create external economies with strong links with the domestic one.

The move towards and arguments for decentralisation were stated by then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean. His speech was made during the announcement for the “School Cluster” project which was started in January 1997 as part of the vision for *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* (TSLN). The MOE aimed to encourage more local initiative with greater decentralization of authority and accountability, and a culture of collaboration. Schools are now placed in clusters and given the authority and resources to spot and solve problems. Each cluster comes under the charge of a superintendent who has chalked up a sterling track record as a school leader. Principals are encouraged to think of themselves as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of their schools, and to manage their schools like companies – articulating vision statements, producing results, answering to “shareholders” and “customers”, talking about service, marketing, getting results, and watching the bottom-line. The headquarters is given the role of the guardian of standards to ensure that overall curriculum needs are met and professional training is given to staff. To keep their ears to the ground, senior ministry officials make visits regularly to schools island-wide, explaining policies and gathering feedback from school staff. Mr Teo maintained: “To be creative and responsive, schools can no longer be managed by a centralized top-down approach in problem-solving and in implementing change” (Teo, 1997). He gave the following arguments for decentralization through the school clusters:

The devolution of decision making to the cluster level has allowed resources and expertise to be used according to the needs of schools in the clusters and there is greater responsiveness to the needs of individual schools. Principals and teachers in the clusters have reported that they have been enriched by the high level of collaboration among schools and benefited from shared experiences. This has improved the ability of the schools to meet the needs of their pupils. ... The aim of school clusters and devolution is not just to achieve administrative excellence. More importantly, it is a way to provide schools with the ability to be more innovative and creative in providing education to their students (Teo, 1997).

We can identify the four arguments mentioned by [Karlsen \(2000\)](#) in this speech. There is the belief in transferring power to the local bodies by bringing the decision-making process closer to the schools. The cluster system aims to empower schools to be more innovative and creative in providing education to the students. He adds that resources and expertise should be used according to the needs of individual schools and the students. Finally, MOE believes that decentralization will help to achieve rationalization and efficiency since the schools themselves decide where to allocate their resources and expertise. That MOE is confident of the competence of the individual schools in using existing resources in a more flexible and efficient way is affirmed in another speech by Mr Teo where he said:

Schools are in the best position to decide how to run their school programs based on the students they have and the competencies of their staff. ... We expect to see greater innovation and variety in the programs offered in our schools, especially our secondary schools: schools with strengths and emphases in different fields, schools trying out new ideas in different areas, all adding to the richness of our Education system (Teo, 2000).

The Dynamics of the Decentralization Policy in Singapore

The Singapore government has repeatedly stated its intention to decentralize its power, and move away from a direct interventionist control model to a more remote supervisory steering model. This is to provide the platform for diversity and innovation in the school system. With increased autonomy, school leaders and teachers are empowered to make changes at the school to better serve their students. While forms of decentralization have been observed in the Singapore education system, the current efforts of the government in the education system can be much more accurately described as a form of decentralized centralism. The four dynamics processes in decentralised centralism - the dynamics of initiation, the dynamics of content, the dynamics of levels and the dynamics of simultaneity – are present in the recent educational changes as part of the decentralization process in Singapore.

An overview of the educational changes implemented by the government since 1997 is helpful before a discussion of decentralized centralism. The official vision, *Thinking Schools Learning Nation* (TSLN), emerged in 1997 from a strategic review of education by the government. This vision guided subsequent initiatives in the education system and is currently the central guiding vision in Singapore. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister, explained that it was a vision for a total learning environment, including students, teachers, parents, workers, companies, community organizations and the government (Goh, 1997). Thinking Schools is a vision of a school system that can develop creative thinking skills, lifelong learning passion and nationalistic commitment in the young. Learning Nation is a vision of learning as a national culture, where creativity and innovation flourishes at every level of society. To support the achievement of TSLN, the desired outcomes of the education system were re-examined. What the education system aims to develop in a student is summarized in a statement called The Desired Outcomes of Education. Briefly, the students who have gone through the education system have to be creative, entrepreneurial, and have a lifelong habit of learning, able to think global and yet remain rooted to Singapore. They have to be morally upright, culturally rooted, and yet understanding and respecting differences, and be responsible to the family, community and country. They have to believe in the principles of multiracialism and meritocracy, appreciate the national constraints and yet be able to seize the opportunities to excel individually.

A number of educational reforms and initiatives were introduced from 1997 as part of the TSLN vision. At that time, the Ministry of Education (MOE) had found the system overly rigid, resulting in schools waiting for edicts to be issued from the headquarters. The MOE also realised that one size could not fit all. Therefore it was decided that more decentralization in the form of autonomy at the school level should be given so that the schools could be more flexible and responsive to their own needs. Several major educational initiatives followed in the footsteps of TSLN. In particular, an Ability Driven Education (ADE) paradigm was adopted for the education system. Former Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean explained, “ADE vision is all about how we look at each child, at his potential; and how we can develop it to the fullest” (Teo, 1999). The focus is on a diversity of talents, be it in intellect, the arts, sports, and community endeavour. While the MOE aims to help every child find his or her own talents and abilities, it recognizes at the same time that it is unable to tailor its educational programs for every individual. So mass customization is adopted to cater to groups of students with similar needs and abilities.

This is achieved in two ways: greater flexibility and choice in the educational programs, and greater autonomy at the school level which will allow a greater variety of programs across the schools. The former is seen in a variety of different types of schools and programs available in Singapore. There are schools who offer the Integrated Program (IP) where students skip O levels and head straight for the A levels or the International

Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, specialized schools in sports, the arts, and science and mathematics schools. Besides programs for students with a range of aptitudes and abilities, there are also programs for students who need more support. For example, an easier syllabus, the “B” syllabus of the Chinese Language (CL) is open to weaker secondary one students, and the Learning Support Programme (LSP) in all primary schools is designed for students weak in English. Changes are also made to the primary school streaming where weak students known as EM3 students are integrated into the mainstream classes. Weak students in the secondary schools (in the Normal stream) will be allowed to take more subjects or be given more opportunities to cross from Normal (Technical) stream to Normal (Academic) stream. The annual ranking of schools has been replaced by banding in order to present a broader picture of the schools’ performance in academic and non-academic domains. More weight is given to co-curricular activities where traits like resilience, team spirit and resourcefulness are inculcated in the students.

The ministry also acknowledges the need for a judicious mix of national policies and local adaptation (Teo, 2000). Flexibility and autonomy will be given to school principals to admit more students based on the criteria laid down by the schools themselves. This may include both academic and non-academic standards such as artistic or sporting talent. Mainstream secondary schools that can develop niches of excellence can also admit up to 5 per cent of their secondary one enrolment students of their choice. Through a comprehensive swathe of programmes, the MOE hopes to reduce the emphasis on examinations and focus on a holistic education (Tharman, 2004).

Another significant education initiative was the premium placed on creativity and entrepreneurship. Syllabi, examinations and university admission criteria were changed to encourage thinking out of the box and risk-taking. Students are now more engaged in project work and higher-order thinking questions. The usage for IT in education was also emphasized. Singapore’s Masterplan for IT in Education, launched also in 1997, laid out a comprehensive strategy for creating an IT-based teaching and learning environment in every school so that every student becomes literate in IT skills by the time he or she leaves school. In 2004, the focus shifted to “Innovation and Enterprise” (I&E) which is an initiative that aims to develop an attitude of innovation and enterprise through a system-wide approach. I&E is not centred around creating entrepreneurs or letting students run businesses. Tharman (2004b) explained that I&E is about developing intellectual curiosity, a spirit of initiative, and strength of character. The latest MOE initiative is in rethinking the approach to education in response to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s call to “teach less and learn more”. The objective is to encourage students to learn more actively and independently beyond the formal curriculum. Accordingly, syllabuses will be trimmed, schools will provide more opportunities for students to develop skills in innovation, teaching will be focused on thinking skills, and examinations and assessment methods will be reviewed.

A review of the educational changes rolled out by the MOE shows that there is a strong indication of the dynamics of initiation in these changes. The vision of TSLN, the ADE paradigm and all the policies and initiatives were initiated by the MOE. At the other end, the school leaders are given the local duties to implement these changes and are accountable to the MOE on how they run the schools. In terms of content, there is evidence of decentralization since students can choose different types of schools, programs and subjects to take. However, the syllabuses and national examinations are still set by the government, and schools are still assessed based on the annual school banding system. Similarly, the autonomy given to the school leaders does not necessarily imply a shift of power from a higher level to the local level; the government still sets the national standards for schools through the School Excellence Model (SEM). Finally, one can identify the

simultaneous practice of decentralization with flexibility and autonomy for the schools, and centralization with central goals and standards for the outcomes.

Further evidences of the dynamics of the decentralization process can be gleaned from the School Excellence Model (SEM) introduced in 2000. The SEM is a comprehensive quality management system and is a significant part of the move to embrace a broader notion of success (Ministry of Education, 2000). Schools are now required to do self-appraisal using the new model; this is a break from the traditional school inspections when school inspectors swoop upon schools to vet their operations using measures that are not entirely clear to the schools. More emphasis now is devoted to value-addedness, leadership, staff management and strategic planning, rather than just on academic results. The SEM basically describes an excellent school as one in which the leaders lead staff, devise strategies and deploy resources, all of which are systematically fed into clearly identified student-focused processes for which targets are set and performance monitored and managed. These “enablers” then produce results in staff and stakeholder satisfaction, as well as impact on society, all contributing to the achievement of school results and excellence. In the SEM, results go beyond academic achievements - while a school’s academic performance continues to be important, an excellent school is one that provides a quality and holistic education. Excellent results are defined as results which meet the target, are sustained over a number of years and show positive trends. An external team from MOE validates the self-assessment results using the same criteria approximately once in five years. The assessment process is explicit in requiring evidence to justify a certain score. This means that even when a school is thought to perform well against a particular criterion, the model permits no score without any evidence of this. In addition to having explicit evidence relating to a criterion, a school must also have evidence of continuous improvement through trend analysis.

Closely associated with the SEM is the Masterplan of Awards for schools. There are 3 levels of awards. The first level comprises the Achievement Awards given to schools each year for current year’s achievements. The second level comprises the Best Practices Award (BPA), which recognizes schools with good scores in the “Enablers” category and the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA), which recognizes schools with sustained good scores in the “Results” category. At the apex of the awards is the School Excellence Award (SEA), which gives recognition to schools for excellence in education processes and outcomes. Schools may also apply for the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) just like any other industrial or commercial sector organization. Schools may request for additional external validations, other than the once-in-five-years mandatory external validation, to qualify for these awards.

It is clear in the SEM that the initiation comes from the top and power still rests with the MOE. The government still carries a great responsibility for achieving national outcomes and providing high value for public money. Therefore, the diversity that it hopes to develop is the diversity of means, not ends. Given the national economic strategies, the functioning of the schools must be correlated to the goals of national, social and economic development in Singapore. After all, the vision of TSLN is economy-driven: to prepare and equip students in Singapore to meet the demands of the knowledge economy. The SEM stresses on accountability and standards since the systems of performance indicators and quality assessment ensure a greater degree of accountability and responsiveness to central control. Therefore, what the schools are facing is a trend of centralization within a decentralization paradigm. Therein a paradox lies: the more the decentralization of tactical matters, the more the centralization of strategic directions. The government wishes to maintain and promote high quality education on the one hand, and to empower schools to be flexible enough to diversify and innovate on the other. This is not easily achieved for both the government and the schools. There is also the dynamics of simultaneity where both decentralization and centralization take place. On one hand, the government attempts to decentralize power, give

autonomy and devolve responsibilities to the schools. On the other hand, there is a risk of declining educational standards once government controls are lessened. That is why a robust quality assurance system is needed to insure against the loss of control and facilitate authoritative communication and managerial scrutiny (Watkins, 1993; Ng, 2003).

The Ideological Drive in the Decentralisation Policy in Singapore

In an era of decentralization, students are exhorted to have dreams, to unleash their creativity and to be daring to experiment and take risks. Schools are encouraged to think out of the box and find their own paths and break frontiers. But in reality, the centralization paradigm is still very strong. The Singapore experience is consonant with the observation that decentralization involves practices which appear similar to those under the more centralised approaches they have supplanted (Levin, 1997, quoted in Karlsen, 2000). Various tensions and challenges surface due to the contrasting, contradictory and ambiguous factors in the decentralisation process (Karlsen, 2000). The tensions faced by Singapore students can be gathered from a recent published study on the students' perceptions of recent educational changes in Singapore (Ng, 2005a). Two observations can be made from the findings on the tensions faced by the students as recipients of the decentralization process. First, there is a tension between welcoming the decentralization policy, and resisting the changes that come with it. While they appreciate the strong leadership of the government in initiating the changes, they resist the top-down non-consultative approach. There appears to be a sense of passivity and uncertainty in the students as they wondered whether they are able to cope with the changes. The second tension concerns the conflicting mindsets the students have towards learning. While the students voice their approval for a more flexible and diverse form of education, they are still pressured to be exam-oriented in a system where academic performance prevails. Even so, the overall impact of the change on the students was positive. While this is a good sign, the danger is that the lack of visible resistance decreases the need to improve the way that change has been managed. Below the surface, under-currents may continue to erode the students' passion about learning, whilst a mirage of a "problem-free" change process is maintained.

There appears to be an inherent tension faced by the Singapore students in the decentralization policy. Embedded in the decentralization process in Singapore are competing ideologies and contrasting views of education. As recipients of the decentralisation policy, the students in Singapore found themselves caught between the horns of the functionalist view of education (where academic talent and ability matter the most) and the liberal view of education (where both academic and non-academic talents and abilities are valued). This echoes Karlsen (2000)'s observation that the rhetoric of decentralisation indicates a strong ideological drive toward not one ideological root but rather toward many. To further understand the ideological aspects in the decentralisation policy in Singapore, it is necessary to take a closer look at the prevailing ideology in Singapore.

Writers such as Vasil (1984), Chua (1985), Quah (1990), Tan (1995), Hill and Lien (1995), Ho and Gopinathan (1999) and Ho (2000) have identified pragmatism as the ruling ideology of the government in Singapore. Policies are made and put forward as hard-headed choices which may seem unfavorable at a particular time but they are accepted as they achieve societal efficiency for the common good (Tan, 1995). The government is able to justify these pragmatic implementations by reaping the results as promised in terms of economic growth and political stability (Quah, 1990). This pragmatic slant is seen in the functionalist view of education in Singapore, as mentioned by a number of writers (Chew,

1998; [Gopinathan, 1980](#); [Tan, 1994](#); [Yip, 1997](#)). Then Minister for Education Tony Tan expressed the link between education and economy:

One of the key factors which must guide our education system in future years must be to ensure that our education system remains relevant to the type of economy in which our children will have to find employment when they leave school ([Tan, 1986](#)).

As mentioned earlier, the *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* (TSLN) vision was driven by the pragmatic need to re-align the educational system in Singapore in response to global economic realities. Former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that “[b]y judiciously investing to educate our young to become thinkers and learners, we will maximize our chances and secure our future” ([Lee, 1997](#)). The objective of an Ability Driven Education (ADE) is in tandem with this economic objective of education. Then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean stated: “By making our education more Ability Driven, we hope to better develop each of our students to his full potential, so that he will be ready to face the challenges of the New Economy” ([Teo, 2002](#)). An ADE aims to inculcate in the students national values and social instincts so that they will be committed to the nation and actively contribute their talents for the good of the society ([Teo, 1999](#)). Even creativity is valued because of its utilitarian function. Commenting on the importance of arts education, then Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Education Hawazi Daipi said that “[c]reativity will be the core of Singapore’s economic life and a crucial ingredient to enhance the competitiveness of the nation” ([Daipi, 2004](#)).

Such a functionalist view of education is contrasted with the liberal view of education commonly practised in Western liberal democratic societies. Under the liberal model, education centers on the intrinsic value of education for the individual ([Oakshott, 1972](#); [Peters, 1973](#)). A liberal form of education aims at the cognitive emancipation of the individual through increased knowledge and understanding ([Bailey, 1984](#)). It seeks to develop citizens who are capable of forming authentic convictions about the life they regard as most worth living ([Puolimatka, 1997](#)). Individuals are encouraged to deliberate, judge and choose on the basis of their own rational reflections ([Carr, 1995](#); [Stolzenberg, 1995](#)). A liberal education is also committed to “respecting the rationality and autonomy of its individual members as well as the potential of those characteristics where they have not actually developed” ([Callan, 1985](#), p. 9). Concomitant values like individualism, neutrality and rational autonomy are widely accepted in Western liberal societies, but are less favorably embraced in Asian societies that emphasize communitarian values ([Tan, 2004](#)). In this respect, the deregulation of the government in liberal societies to promote diversity and choice in schools is consonant with the individual right to make choices for oneself. A considerable volume of literature has been devoted to privatising measures in social policy in Western liberal societies (e.g. see [Dowding, 1991](#); [King, 1987](#); [Plant, 1984](#); [Self, 1993](#)).

The decentralization policy in Singapore has led to the tension between the functionalist view of education and the liberal view of education. It is instructive to note that there has been three phases in the history of education in Singapore ([Chen, 2000](#)). The first phase was “survival” phase when the aim was to produce trained workers in the early years of Singapore’s independence and industrialization. The next phase, “efficiency” phase, fine-tuned the system through measures such as streaming in order to produce skilled workers for the economy in the most efficient way. The current paradigm, ADE, aims to equip and prepare students to meet the challenges in a knowledge economy by taking into consideration their individual abilities and talents. There is a discernible shift under ADE from the pragmatic (functionalist) to the educational (liberal) worldview when students are exhorted to enjoy their learning, maximize their potential, unleash their creative juices, fulfil their hopes and dreams, and stand out from the crowd. This process of self-directed discovery, reflective

inquiry, and personal emancipation invariably leads to a greater desire and expectation for one's aspirations to be fulfilled. Usually, these aspirations will go beyond social and economic advantages (what is pragmatic) to more intrinsic aspects like the joy of education, the pursuit of personal happiness, and even the purpose of living (what is educational). This is exemplified in the findings of the Singapore 21 Survey that revealed that "having a happy family" was the most popular definition of success among young people. This was followed by "doing well in one's job or studies" and "being knowledgeable and well-informed" (Teo, 1998). This is not to suggest that extrinsic rewards like economic gains are no longer significant. In fact, another survey shows that the young people in Singapore regard personal advancement and high material expectations as more important than the aspirations to pursue one's interests and develop one's talents and abilities to the full (ibid.). The apparent contradictions between the findings in the two surveys point to the quandary faced by the young in Singapore – the pragmatic need to be economically advantaged on the one hand, and the deep-seated desire to find personal fulfillment on the other. This tension is further amplified in an ADE. It was not as acute under an Efficiency-Driven Education where the functionalist perspective was unmistakable. Under the old paradigm, the students and other stakeholders in education were aware of the overtly utilitarian aim in education, that is, to produce skilled workers for the economy in the most efficient manner. In contrast, students in an ADE paradigm are encouraged to go beyond their academic capability to actively explore their non-academic talents and abilities, and be enterprising, innovative and adventurous.

Interestingly, writers have attributed this in-built tension to the ideology of pragmatism itself. Chua (1985) asserts that affluence arising from pragmatism opens up the avenues of choice and individual preferences. The pragmatic tendency in Singapore has unwittingly made Singaporeans more individualistic. Quah (1990) observes that the system of meritocracy in education is regarded as a ladder for upward social mobility, and the selection and promotion of the best and brightest in the public sector. However, "the focus on doing well in examinations, the emphasis on paper qualifications, and the special treatment given to the 'scholar' civil servants have certainly reinforced the appeal of individualism among Singaporeans" (Quah, 1990, p. 93). Hill and Lian (1995) point out that centrifugal strains are created when pragmatic goals are achieved; this is due to people desiring more individualized forms of gratification which cannot be satisfied under the rationalized environment of everyday life. They add that these individualistic goals will become even more accessible and keenly sought when the individuals obtain greater economic success. This trend towards greater individualism also poses a challenge for the government who hopes to promote communitarian values in the students. In fact, the government has introduced National Education (NE) in 1997 to inculcate in the students national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future by fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans. It involves students knowing the Singapore story, understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, and embracing the core values of the Singaporean way of life. Once again, we can see competing ideologies at work. On the one hand, the students are encouraged to develop their individual talents and abilities in an ADE. On the other hand, they are told to put community before self in NE. Such contradictory messages in the rhetoric of decentralization is to be expected in the decentralization process where there is a drive towards more than one ideological root (Karlsen, 2000).

Conclusion

In a global and borderless economy, regions, such as cities and states, are powerful players in the economic game (Ohmae, 1995). Hong Kong, Taiwan, Shanghai, Catalonia and California are examples of regions where work gets done and real markets flourish. These “region-states” have the right size and scale to become the true natural business units. In this respect, the Singapore Inc. edges out because Singapore is both well poised as a region-state and enjoys the political sovereignty of a “nation-state”. While the competitive strategy of many region-states and nation-states has been the provision of more and cheaper physical resources and labor, a powerful competitive strategy is emerging. This strategy is about learning and innovating. At the core of development of these cities and nations is an explicit commitment to learning and innovating to sustain economic activity through various combinations of lifelong learning, innovation and creative uses of information and communication technologies (Larsen, 1999). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising for the Singapore government to introduce decentralization in response to the demands of the new economy. Recent educational changes in Singapore provides a case study of the dynamics processes of the initiation, content, levels and simultaneity of the decentralization process. This paper explored the dynamics of change in the initiation, content, levels and simultaneity of the decentralization process in Singapore since 1997. The paper further analyzed the ideological roots of the decentralization policy through a discussion of the tension between the functionalist and liberal form of education in the Singapore context. The discussion adds to the existing literature on the tensions and challenges faced by countries in their attempts to introduce educational changes in their countries.

More changes in the decentralization policy have been introduced by the government in recent times. In the process, the prevailing tensions and challenges will continue to be strongly felt. For example, the MOE has just announced that the Singapore Sports School - a specialized school to nurture talented sportsmen and sportswomen – will have the discretion to admit foreign students up to 20 per cent of its enrolment (Tay, 2005). This decentralization policy, however, has added to the tension between welcoming foreign talent and resenting their presence. Commenting on this policy change, a Singaporean wrote: “I share some parents’ concern that the inclusion of more foreign students could mean Singaporean children being deprived of their rightful place” (Tan, 2005). In an age of “hyper-competition” (D’Aveni, 1994), it is likely that the Singapore government will continue the decentralization policy by introducing more changes, fine-tuning the existing practices, and responding to any concerns and challenges that may arise. In this light, Karlsen (2000)’s observation that decentralized centralism allows for continuous adaptation within a highly complex and pluralistic society seems to be an apt description of Singapore.

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