A comparative study of Singapore's school excellence model with Hong Kong's school-based management

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine and compare the school excellence model (SEM) approach adopted by Singapore and the school-based management (SBM) approach adopted by Hong Kong. It discusses the implications of such a strategy and the challenges that both Singapore and Hong Kong schools face in navigating a new paradigm of managerialism while satisfying the requirements of quality assurance.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper utilises a comparative approach to analyse the development of educational quality assurance and the movement to decentralise power to the schools in Singapore and Hong Kong. The framework of analysis involves: approach to decentralisation; effects of education marketisation; school leaders, teachers and the profitable use of quality models.

Findings – Both Singapore and Hong Kong utilise a centralised decentralisation approach though with different intent. Education marketisation accentuates the underlying dynamics of fierce competition and accountability through performance indicators. To use the quality models profitably, the main challenge will be for schools to satisfy the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

Practical implications – The comparative study of Singapore and Hong Kong serves as a mirror to other developing countries in understanding how a quality framework coupled with self-assessment and external inspections can lead to changes in the school system, both positive ones and undesirable side-effects.

Originality/value – The first comparative study between Singapore's school excellence model with Hong Kong's school-based management.

Keywords Schools, Performance appraisal, Quality assurance, Decentralized conrol, Asian studies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Singapore and Hong Kong form an ideal pair for comparative education studies. Although Singapore is a sovereign nation while Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region in China, both are small economic powerhouses (part of the four "small dragons") in a corner of East Asia. Both societies have a majority of Chinese population who can speak English. Both have well developed education systems that are constantly carrying out reform.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there appeared to be an international trend in many developed countries in the world to decentralize their education system. It was realized

that large, centralized bureaucracies were not nimble enough to respond to the rapidly changing economic realities. The move was to decentralize decision-making from the central government to the local school level and the sharing of decision-making among the principal, teachers, parents, community members and students at the school level (Levacic, 1998; Raab, 2000).

Thus, there has been a trend of school-based reforms with an aim to enhance education quality, which in turn is expected to maintain state competitiveness in the international marketplace (Chan and Mok, 2001). Examples of such school-based reforms are plentiful. In the UK, the Educational Reform Acts of 1988 and 1993 introduced the reforms of Local Management of Schools and Grant-maintained Schools. In the USA, there were similar reforms of Site-based Management and School-based Leadership. In Australia, the Schools of the Future and Better Schools were also based on a school-based reform approach. According to *School-based Management* published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Abu-Duhou, 1999), many other examples could be found in Europe, Asian and Latin America countries. These examples show that many states have turned to school-based reform as a way to improve education quality in response to globalization and the growth of the knowledge-based economy.

In principle, under this decentralization paradigm, principals, teachers, students and parents have greater freedom and responsibility for school decision making about budgets, personnel and the curriculum so that they can create more effective learning environments for students. However, this can also be a difficult journey and highly political as it involves a shift of power (Fiske, 1996).

Both in Singapore and Hong Kong, the education systems have moved in varying degrees towards a school-based management paradigm. Such a paradigm comes in the wake of a new managerialism philosophy, characterized by economic rationality, marketization and consumerism, enhancing performance through competition, site-based accountability and continuous evaluation and a reduction of direct government involvement in tactical operations while keeping strategic control.

In the case of Singapore, beginning with a highly centralized system in the late 1950s (beginning of self-governance for Singapore), a trend of decentralization began to appear, when in 1982, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that it would like to decentralize educational management from the Ministry headquarters to the schools. The aims were to encourage greater system-level and school-level efficiency and greater educational effectiveness in meeting students' diverse needs. However, the MOE's position was that it would continue to maintain sufficient centralized control and supervision in order to ensure standards and principals would continue to be accountable to the Ministry through regular inspections. Some visible milestones of this decentralization movement were the setting up of independent schools in 1988, the establishment of autonomous schools (these schools receive 10 per cent more in annual per capita government grants than non-autonomous schools) in 1994, and the launch of the School Excellence Model (SEM) for all schools in 2000.

In the case of Hong Kong, the trend of decentralization came into visible focus when the School Management Initiative (SMI) was launched in 1991 to provide quality education to the students (Dimmock, 2000). SMI was renamed as School-based Management (SBM) in 2000. The Hong Kong government made SBM a compulsory policy and hoped that all schools, whether they were the most or the least able

academically, by means of SBM, could improve and raise the quality of education in Hong Kong.

It is under such kind of policy contexts that this paper tries to compare and contrast the School Excellence Model (SEM) in Singapore with the School-based Management (SBM) in Hong Kong, and thus draw some common lessons and insights from their experiences.

Singapore: the School Excellence Model (SEM)

In Singapore, quality education is a strategic investment for the future. According to Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, starting from a low base in education and skills in 1965, when literacy rate was 60 per cent and only 3 per cent of each year's cohort went to university, the literacy rate went up to 94 per cent in 2005 and 20 per cent of each cohort made it to university. Investment in education, thereby enhancing human capacity, underpinned Singapore's economic transformation and growth (Goh, 2005). Therefore, investment in education was, is and will continue to be a key national strategy for economic competitiveness.

Since education is a national strategy, quality assurance in education in various forms has always been actively practised before the launch of the School Excellence Model (SEM). For example, all secondary schools and junior colleges have been ranked annually since 1992 and the results made known publicly through local media. Secondary schools have been ranked on three main criteria. The first is the students' overall results in the national examinations. The second is the "value-added-ness" of the school by comparing the students' examination performance with the score with which they gained entry to the school. The third is the students' performance in the National Physical Fitness Test and the percentage of overweight students in the school.

However, not all parties favour such a ranking exercise. An external review team commissioned by the education ministry in 1997 pointed out the negative aspects of school ranking (MOE, Singapore, 1997). But, despite a number of parliamentary debates about it, ranking continued. Teo Chee Hean, then Minister for Education, explained in Parliament:

> If we do not have ranking, you would ask for it, which is what happened in the United States, in the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions. The parents, taxpayers and Members of Parliament wanted to know how their schools are doing, in relation to other schools in the world... We will be silly to give up ranking, because it is an important tool of accountability for schools. We can rank them on a number of different areas. That I agree. But to stop ranking them, I think it would be to give up a tool of accountability to you, something which our schools and educators owe to you (Teo, 2002).

Most interesting, the minister acknowledged that the teachers did not like ranking:

> Of course, they do not (like ranking). Why would you want to be held accountable if you can get away without being accountable? I have never met a school district where the teacher said, "Yes, ranking is a wonderful thing". But I am surprised that Members of this House should say that we should stop ranking. Because, if we stop ranking, we would have no instrument of accountability (Teo, 2002).

The principle of accountability continued. But ranking was modified to become "gentler" and more broad-based. One major milestone in Singapore's education reform

was the launch of the national vision of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) in 1997. Under this vision, schools in Singapore are now tasked to develop themselves into excellent schools. They are given more autonomy so that they can be flexible and responsive to the needs of their students. Moreover, the government now encourages diversity in the education system so as to create diverse pathways for different sorts of students. Principals are thus encouraged to think of themselves as the CEO of their schools. They are to lead their staff, manage the school systems and produce educational innovations.

To support school-based management while maintaining quality assurance, the way that schools are being appraised has been changed since 2000. For the secondary schools, the ranking system was changed to a "gentler" banding system. But most significantly, all schools today, including primary, secondary and pre-university, are asked to do self-appraisal using the new School Excellence Model (SEM). The way that the SEM operates has been discussed by Ng (2003, 2007). It is worthwhile here to recapitulate some of the salient features to facilitate a comparison of the Singapore SEM with the Hong Kong SBM.

The School Excellence Model (SEM) is a self-assessment model for schools, adapted from the various quality models used by business organizations, namely the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) model and the education version of the American Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model (MBNQA). A conscious effort is made to align the SEM to the SQA so that schools can pitch themselves against national benchmarks for organizational excellence. The SEM aims to provide a means to objectively identify and measure the schools' strengths and areas for improvement. It also allows benchmarking against similar schools, stimulating improvement activities that can positively impact on the overall quality of the school and ultimately the quality of the education system.

The SEM is driven by a set of core values, which defines the purpose and form of the SEM. The core values emphasize the importance of having a purposeful school leadership, putting students first and seeing teachers as the key to making quality education happen. The SEM recognizes the importance of student-focused processes in bringing about sustained results. The SEM also recognizes that results extend beyond the academic achievements. While a school's academic performance continues to be important, an excellent school is one that provides a quality and holistic education. In the SEM, excellent results as those which meet target, are sustained over a number of years and show positive trends. It is premised on the belief that an excellent school does not produce one-off good results.

The SEM framework has two broad categories – Enablers and Results. The Enablers category, which comprises cultural, process and resource components, is concerned with how results are achieved. The Results category is concerned with what the school has achieved or is achieving.

The SEM comprises nine quality criteria against which schools can be assessed (MOE, Singapore, 2000):

(1) *Leadership*. How school leaders and the school's leadership system address values and focus on student learning and performance excellence; and how the school addresses its responsibilities towards society.

(2) *Strategic planning*. How the school sets clear stakeholder-focused strategic directions; develops action plans to support its directions, deploys the plans and tracks performance.

(3) *Staff management*. How the school develops and utilizes the full potential of its staff to create an excellent school.

(4) *Resources*. How the school manages its internal resources and its external partnerships effectively and efficiently in order to support its strategic planning and the operation of its processes.

(5) *Student-focused processes*. How the school designs, implements, manages and improves key processes to provide a holistic education and works towards enhancing student well-being.

(6) *Administrative and operational results*. What the school is achieving in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the school.

(7) *Staff results*. What the school is achieving in relation to the training and development, and morale of its staff.

(8) *Partnership and society results*. What the school is achieving in relation to its partners and the community at large.

(9) *Key performance results*. What the school is achieving in the holistic development of its students, in particular, the extent to which the school is able to achieve the Desired Outcomes of Education (Wee, 1998).

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 quality education.

In doing assessment using the SEM, the model requires evidence of:

- a sound and integrated approach for systematic, continuous improvement for all criteria of quality defined by the model;
- a systematic deployment of the approach and the degree of implementation;
- a regular assessment and review of the approaches and their deployment, based on monitoring and analysis of the results achieved and on-going activities;
- an identification, prioritization, planning and implementation of improvement activities;
- a set of appropriate and challenging performance targets;
- a continuous improvement of results over three to five years;
- a benchmarking of performance against comparable schools; and
- an identification of the causes of good or bad results.

During the assessment process, for each of the criteria, the assessor considers how well the above points have been achieved. The better the achievement, the higher is the score. In this regard, assessors are not permitted to score on the basis of their instincts or feelings. The assessment process is explicit in requiring evidence to justify a certain

score. So, even when a school is thought to have performed well in a certain area, if the school cannot provide evidence of this, the model permits only a relatively low score for ad hoc performance. Moreover, to score well, in addition to having explicit evidence relating to a criterion, the school must also provide evidence of continuous improvement. That is to say, the school must conduct trend analysis of the various areas of consideration and an upward trend is required to justify good scores.

The new system stresses the importance of self-assessment as a primary mechanism to drive school improvement. Self-assessment is a comprehensive, systematic and regular internal review of an organization's activities and results referenced against a model of business excellence. Porter and Tanner (1996) maintain that self-assessment is not only a means for measuring continuous improvement, but also an excellent opportunity to integrate total quality management into normal operations. An external team from MOE validates the self-assessment results using the same criteria approximately once in five years. Schools are expected to use the SEM as a holistic developmental and management framework. Instead of merely using the SEM to measure how well the school is doing, the SEM provides a framework for schools to engage actively in capacity building. It helps the school to identify areas for improvement and strengths for the school to tap on for innovation. In fact, Innovation and Enterprise (IandE) is a mandatory strategic direction for schools (Ng, 2005a).

Linked to the SEM is the Masterplan of Awards for schools. There are three 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. The number and type of award achieved by each school is published on the MOE web site.

Hong Kong: school based management (SBM)
Background of school-based management (SBM) in Hong Kong
According to the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) (2000), school-based management (SBM) is the school-based reform measure in Hong Kong and provides "a management framework which is school-based, student-centred and quality-focused" (EMB, 2004a). The principle of SBM is that "schools are not homogenous in goals, practices and effectiveness" (Cheng, 2000, p. 29). That means individual schools have different kinds of students with different educational needs. Hence, each of them is an agency and primary unit of decision making. Each school has to develop its own educational strategy in order to meet each school's own needs and characteristics. This has to be carried out by the various stakeholders of the school, comprising the board of directors, supervisor, principal, teachers, parents and alumni members, since they are familiar with the needs of students and conditions of their own school (Cheng, 2000). Under the SBM, the stakeholders will be given the autonomy and responsibility to make decisions on school operations and development planning, such as allocating

both human and capital resources, delivering curriculum and providing school activities.

This decentralization of power from the central government to the school level is expected to increase educational quality and to improve students' performance (ACSBM, 2000; Cheng, 1996; EMB, 2004a). With the decrease in the controlling power from the state, school accountability and transparency will be increased (EMB, 2004a). Therefore, the SBM is a kind of "bottom-up initiative" of school self-management (Advisory Committee on School-based Management, 2000, pp. 2-4). Also, it is part of an ongoing educational reform for long-term school development "to change schools from the mode of external control management to the mode of school self-management" (Cheng and Cheung, 2004, p. 71).

School management reform since 1991
School-based educational reform to improve the quality of education was first introduced in 1991. Before this, the British colonial government has emphasized quantitative education reform, such as increasing school vacancies, providing more school facilities and expanding the education system in the 1970s and 1980s (Education Commission, 1988 and 1990, as cited in Cheng, 1996, p. 43). However, because of this, qualitative educational improvement, such as enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, has not really been actively promoted during the past three decades of education development (Chan, 2004).

In November 1990, the *Education Commission Report No. 4* first highlighted the government's strategy "to seek to improve the quality of the education we provide in our schools" (Education Commission, 1990, p. 3). In addition, in the same year, Education and Manpower Branch (EMB) and Education Department (ED) realized the importance of enhancing schools' quality because "the success of individual quality improvement measures will be limited if schools are not able to draw effectively on the skills, energy and commitment of every member of the school community" (EMB and ED, 1991, p. 1). So, the EMB and ED introduced the School Management Initiative (SMI) scheme as a kind of school-based reform in April 1991 and encouraged all government and aided primary and secondary schools to apply this new management framework to their schools (Cheng, 2000; Cheng and Cheung, 2004; Leung and Chan, 2001).

This school-based reform policy continued under the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) after 1997. As the first Chief Executive of HKSAR, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa pointed out that enhancing educational quality was important for the development of education in the long run. The *Education Commission Report (ECR) No. 7* in September 1997 once again highlighted the importance of implementing school-based reform so as to achieve the educational goal (Cheng, 2000; Leung and Chan, 2001). Under ECR No. 7, which was entitled as *Quality School Education*, SMI was renamed School-based Management (SBM). But the SBM continued the "spirit of SMI" and all government and aided schools were asked to adopt SBM by 2000 (Leung and Chan, 2001, p. 230; Education Commission, 1997).

In December 1998, the Advisory Committee on School-based Management (ACSBM) was set up by the EMB and was tasked to recommend to the Director of Education the SBM governance framework and to identify the roles and responsibilities of those who participate in school management (ACSBM, 2000). This committee consulted the public

on this policy for two months in 2000 and finally recommended that each SBM school should set up a School Management Committee (SMC) and each SMC should include the participation of school leaders, parents and teachers (ACSBM, 2000; EMB, 2004a). These recommendations were approved by the Board of Education and discussed in the Legislative Council (EMB, 2004a). Finally, the Education (Amendment) Ordinance 2004, which presented the governing framework of the SBM, was passed by the Legislative Council on 8 July 2004 and put into operation on 1 January 2005 (EMB, 2004b). Other than the state schools, under the Ordinance, all aided schools, which are operated by School Sponsoring Bodies (SSBs), also have to set up an Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) as a formal legal body for school management, and to inform the Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower before 1 July 2009 (EMB, 2004a, p. 4; EMB, 2004b, p. 1) of its operation.

Quality assessment mechanism under the SBM
In allowing the schools greater management autonomy, the government has to make sure that the schools are responsible to the public in using capital resources effectively and guaranteeing educational quality. Therefore, the EMB and ED introduced the "annual school report" and "school profile" as a kind of systematic measurement on school performance as part of the SMI in 1991 (EMB and ED, 1991). According to the EMB and ED, the annual school report should include the school's aims, as well as the operating plan, with details such as the school annual plan on programmes and activities with their objectives and budgets. The school profile should include information on students' performance and school affairs such as staffing during the previous year (EMB and ED, 1991, pp. 43-46). The schools are required to submit both reports to the ED and the reports are published in public domains such as the internet. This is an accountability mechanism and gives information to the public for parents to exercise more informed school choice.

Later in *ECR No.7* in 1997, the above two reports were positioned as mechanisms of self-evaluation since the SBM was positioned as an "internal quality assurance mechanism in the spirit of SMI" and the SBM schools were required to "set up goals and indicators for monitoring and evaluating quality education" (Education Commission, 1997, p. 20; Mok, 2005, p. 43). School self-evaluation was introduced as "internal quality assurance" process. Self-evaluation is now conducted by individual schools annually to evaluate their achievement against their stated goals (Education Commission, 1997; ED, 2002b). The self-evaluation results have to be reported to the stakeholders and the public through the school annual reports (Education Commission, 1997; ED, 2002b).

However, to increase the accountability of self-evaluation, a Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) was introduced by the ED in the *ECR No. 7* (Education Commission, 1997). The QAI serves as a mechanism for external quality assurance in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each school and to give a direction for improvement through the external inspections (ED, 2002a, p. 1; ED, 2002b, p. 2). This external evaluation makes the school more accountable and responsible towards the government and the public, especially students and parents as service receivers. The QAI was renamed External School Review (ESR) in 2003.

ECR No.7 in 1997 also introduced a framework of indicators for quality assurance. The indicators were put into three categories (Education Commission, 1997, pp. 10-12):

(1) *School context and profile*. Background information on the characteristics of the school, teachers and students.

(2) *Process indicators*. Five domains, namely "school culture and ethos", "school-based management", "teaching and learning", "personal growth and development of students" and "liaison with external bodies".

(3) *Output indicators*. Two domains, namely "perception of teachers, parents and students of the relative progress made by students" and "students' performance in major educational domains".

This quality assurance framework is currently adopted in the schools' self-evaluation and the external QAI/ESR. However, refinements were made along the way. In 1998, quality indicators were re-named performance indicators. Certain domains in each category were also regrouped. The framework was made more comprehensive to include four domains with a total of 29 indicators.

Currently, the process indicators category comprises three domains, namely Management and organization, Learning and teaching and Students' support and school ethos while the output indicators category focuses on student performance (ED, 2002b, p. 3). The underlying theory is that the three domains of process indicators interact with one another to provide the necessary conditions for quality education and contribute directly to student performance, which measures school effectiveness (ED, 2002b, p. 4; refer to Figure 1).

Comparing SEM and SBM

A comparison between the SEM and the SBM in various significant areas suggests that there are many similarities in what the two governments are trying to do and yet also subtle differences in their motives and approaches. While both the SEM and SBM have been launched for a number of years within their own education systems, there are still teething issues to be addressed and refinements to be made, both in policy and in practice.
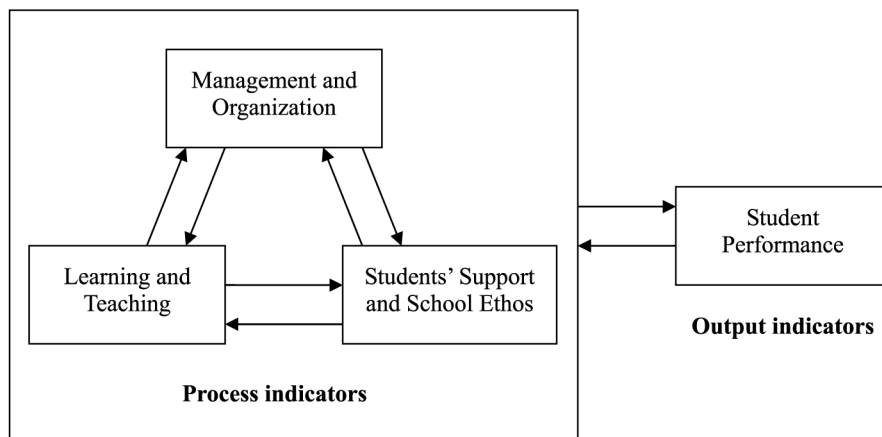
Figure 1.
Interacting relationships of process indicators and output indicators

Source: EMB (2000, p. 4)

A centralized decentralization approach

Both governments have stated their intention to decentralize their power, moving 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. The theory is that with increased autonomy, school leaders and teachers are empowered to make changes at the school to better serve their students.

However, both governments are known to be more pragmatic than idealistic. Decentralization is for efficiency and effectiveness for educational reform. It is not to devolve power so that schools become truly autonomous and can act independently of state direction. In fact, this is a post-Fordist style of governance (Smyth, 1993) which allows the government decreased involvement in direct policy implementation without decreased control in policy direction (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). This means that the schools now need to find their success in a market system with the government controlling the system parameters. Both governments are practising centralized decentralization, though in different ways and for different motives.

In Singapore, education is a strategic and pragmatic investment for national survival. Calling it the most precious gift that Singapore could give its children, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that education was one of the top national priorities for the next phase of the country's development and it is "the most effective strategy which will enable us to survive and to thrive in a changing world" (Lee, 2006). Education reform is not only an answer to international economic challenges but also a way to deal with domestic social economic challenges. Lee (2006) said:

> Our income distributions are stretching out – the higher incomes are doing well, the lower incomes having more of a struggle. It's a problem around the world, but it's a problem which for us, we must solve through education. How? By ensuring that all the students have a good system and a good education, get the best chance to have the skills and end up on the upside of the income divide, end up able to look after themselves, able to do better than their parents.

To do so, this "good" system must move beyond a "one-size-fit-all" model so that this will be a "more diverse landscape, one where there are many different schools with many different systems all good in their own way" (Lee, 2006). Therefore, behind the initiatives of education innovation, diversity and decentralization are pragmatic concerns about national survival and economic well-being. Education decentralization is first motivated by a centralized national agenda.

Moreover, the Singapore government carries a great responsibility for achieving national outcomes and providing high value for public money. So, 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, hence the need for a robust quality assurance system. Such a system insures against the loss of control and facilitates authoritative communication and managerial scrutiny (Watkins, 1993). Systems of performance indicators and quality assessment ensure a greater degree of accountability and responsiveness to central control.

Therefore, what the Singapore government hopes to develop is a diversity of means with an accountability of ends. The functioning of the schools must support the national, social and economic strategies, hence the emphasis on accountability and standards. Therefore, what the schools are facing is a paradox of centralization within a decentralization paradigm – 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 a subtle and delicate balance for both the government and the schools.

In Hong Kong, the same is happening. Education reform is seen as a way to meet economic challenges. The SMI/SBM initiative aims to enhance educational quality and encourage school-based innovation. However, under this paradigm, the Hong Kong schools are also facing a paradox of centralization within a decentralization paradigm in the state's pursuit of educational quality enhancement. Firstly, it is true that the authority in many areas of school operation is delegated from the EMB and ED to the stakeholders in the school. Under this decentralization paradigm, schools have greater autonomy in deciding resource allocation and plan curriculum and activities according to the needs of their students, thus making the application of the SBM framework more effective and improving efficiency of school operations, in accordance to the SMI's goals set in 1991 (EMB and ED, 1991, p. 3; Cheng, 2000, pp. 30-31).

However, this decentralization of authority to the schools is also the main government policy to increase school accountability (Leung, 2001). The SBM centralizes the schools back to what the government wants to achieve in education system to support state direction. Through the centrally determined indicators of school performance used in School Self-evaluation and QAI/ESR, the government has set up a driving force for individual schools to heed a centralized agenda to improve school operations and students' achievements. At the same time, accountability and transparency towards the government and general public, especially students and their parents, are increased.

The Hong Kong education system has always been a mixture of centralization and decentralization – centralized in terms of the curriculum and the examination structure, but decentralized in terms of the operation of schools. Traditionally, most schools in Hong Kong are operated by religious (for example, Christian churches) and other non-governmental organizations, known as school sponsoring bodies (SSBs). So instead of a decentralization of power, the SBM in Hong Kong can in fact be interpreted by some to be a re-centralization of power under the guise of decentralization and quality assurance. Now, with the SBM with its associated quality assurance models and inspections, the power of strategic direction has shifted away from the SSBs to the government instead! From this angle, the SBM movement has allowed the government to re-centralize authority (regaining of control of the schools from the SSBs) and shift the operation of schools to a model in which it has control of. In fact, the Catholic Diocese, one of the main SSB in Hong Kong, filed a writ against the government, claiming that parts of the Education (Amendment) Ordinance 2004 were unconstitutional (Tong, 2006). The church claimed that the new system of school management diminished its role as a school sponsor in providing financial and advisory support, setting a school's mission and vision and monitoring the school's operation. One of the leaders of the Church indicated that "the church would have no choice but to abide by the reform if it lost (the case)" but it would "try its best to fight for exerting its rights as a school sponsoring body" (Tong, 2006).

So, for Singapore, decentralization is for the purpose of promoting flexibility and innovation within schools and centralization is for ensuring that schools are held accountable for ensuring that all students are achieving results. For Hong Kong,

centralization is for strategic control and decentralization is for efficiency in exercising that control while allowing schools operational autonomy with given parameters!

Education marketization and the effects of competition
The idea of education marketization is to use market forces as an efficient instrument to allocate educational resources to serve public interests, by allowing services providers to compete for the education pie and thus motivated to "raise their standards of performance" and to "hold themselves accountable to the public" (Chan and Mok, 2001, p. 30). Both in Singapore and Hong Kong, education marketization is changing the education landscape so that multi-suppliers, rather than "monopolistic provision by a single supplier", are competing in the market of educational services (Leung and Chan, 2001, p. 232). The implementation of SEM/SBM in Singapore and Hong Kong respectively hastens the pace of educational marketization. An interesting observation is that while the official rhetoric has always been that the SEM/SBM is to bring about quality education for the students, the students have hardly been consulted in the process (Ng, 2005b).

The advantage of marketization is the belief that competition and school-based management lead to quality improvement. In Hong Kong, the annual school plans and inspection reports are published in the public arena. In Singapore, although the inspection reports are not published, the MOE web site shows the number and types of awards that each school has won over the years. This gives parents and students information to make informed school choice. Schools will have to improve to win "customers" like any commercial organization.

However, because schools' operating results are now publicly available and scrutinized, schools have to compete even more fiercely or face declining enrolment and eventual close-down. Such fierce competition may come with side-effects. According to Tan (2005), it is highly contestable whether fostering competition does improve the quality of education for all students and promote greater choice and diversity for parents and students. Indeed, the competition among schools does not take place on a level playing field. Whether in Singapore or Hong Kong, non-prestigious, non-academically selective schools are simply unable to compete effectively with well-established, academically selective schools. The former are caught in a vicious cycle: because they are unable to attract high academic achievers, their academic results fall far below those of the well-established schools. This in turn means that they remain unable to attract high academic achievers. In fact, because information about their low standing is widely available, parents and students will shun them.

Competition can lead some schools to "play it smart" – focus narrowly on those outcomes that are relevant for the assessment system and that may be useful for attracting students and parents. For example, there has been press coverage of how several reputable secondary schools have decided to make the study of English literature optional rather than compulsory for their graduating students. This is because English literature is perceived to be a subject in which it is difficult to do well during national examinations (Tan, 2005). Even in physical education, some schools have over-emphasized preparation for the National Physical Fitness Test at the expense of the acquisition of skills in sports and games, simply because this test is part of the key performance indicators, a phenomenon that was publicly acknowledged by the Minister for Education in 2005 (Tan, 2005).

Using narrowly defined performance indicators to establish "school accountability" has added pressure to many schools. Instead of promoting choice and diversity, heightened inter-school competition and rivalry may have the opposite effect. It is difficult to foster cooperation among schools when the various school principals are vying with one another to boost their schools' standing in the education marketplace. Indeed, instead of a mission to educate the next generation, the real mission may be to outdo another school.

Therefore, the challenge to quality education in school is go beyond the form to the substance. In such competitive societies as Singapore and Hong Kong, the quality models and its accompanied KPIs and awards may yet be another platform for inter-school competition. Some form of competition and benchmarking is healthy but too much of that will make the quality models an exercise in developing evidences instead of a real drive for improvement. There is a danger that schools may "play to the rules" instead of "play to the spirit" (Ng, 2003).

For example, while the SEM provides a framework to approach school excellence systemically, it is possible to score reasonably high on the SEM by "distributing the work" so that each unit of a school takes a portion of the SEM and tries to undertake projects to score high on the individual category. However, the problem is that while the SEM allows reasonably high score based on evidence in each category, there is no guarantee that the initiatives add up and synergize in a coherent whole. While MOE has made clear that the SEM is for self-assessment and improvement, the validation exercise is in reality also a form of control and scrutiny – hence the importance of a good score. This is a dilemma for school leaders (Ng, 2003).

School leaders, teachers and the profitable use of quality models

In some ways, with these quality models in place, schools are increasingly running like a business corporation. In both Singapore and Hong Kong, the policy is already in force. But are school leaders and teachers prepared for such a role in practice? The profitable use of quality models to benefit actual business strategy and operation is a skill not abundantly found even in the commercial industries.

Schools now need to prepare a three to five year vision and development plan, and an annual school activity plan; while every department also needs to prepare an annual program plan with a budget included. Evaluation should be conducted and follow-up actions carried out afterwards. School leaders now have to be systems thinkers, champions of change and leaders of teachers and students. Some may adapt quickly enough but others may struggle in the transit.

In this regard, strong leadership is seen as the key for schools to find their direction. In Singapore, the Education Minister called principals to "take ownership of change" and "personally push the envelope in education and press on with what you believe to be right" (Tharman, 2005). In Hong Kong, in the 1997 *ECR No.7*, the EMB also pointed out the importance of raising professional standards of principals, so that they have "a strong sense of mission, appropriate personal attributes, adequate academic and professional qualifications" (Education Commission, 1997, pp. 35-36). Strong leadership is expected from members of the SMC, principals and senior teachers who are responsible in handling the management of human resources, finance and curriculum in schools (ACSBM, 2000, pp. 3-5).

In both Singapore and Hong Kong, there are programmes to prepare the schools for the implementation of quality models. For example, in Singapore, the School Appraisal Branch of the MOE sets up training workshops and clinics for schools to level up the skills of school principals and teachers in meeting the demands of the SEM. In Hong Kong, the "School Management for Principals" (SMP) programme developed in 1998 trains primary school principals in response to the implementation of SBM in 1999.

However, training is but one part of the issue. The more critical part of the issue is the changing role and responsibility of school principals in meeting this new managerialism paradigm (Cranston, 2002). Principals will have to start functioning like chief executives of large corporate organizations (Cranston, 1999; Ng, 2003). Principals now require more managerial skills to deal with increasing organizational complexities. Both Singapore and Hong Kong principals would face the following tensions (Cranston, 2002):

- Managing the balance between being a good manager of the school in terms of its budget, resources and accountability requirements while maintaining, or attempting to maintain, a role as the educational leader of the school for the professional staff.

- Managing and responding to the system demands for accountability and documentation in a context where the rhetoric is that schools are supposed to operate with enhanced autonomy and responsiveness to local needs.

- Maintaining a focus on learning outcomes for students amidst considerable change and managerial duties, which often take the principal away from a focus on teaching and learning.

Trying to delegate decisions to and empower teachers in a culture where some teachers are reluctant to accept change and take on greater or changed responsibilities. In fact, according to Chapman and Boyd (1986) and Weiss and Cambone (1994), such quality models may make demands on teachers that are outside their usual sphere of interest and competence, and thus some teachers are not willing to distract their time and energy from teaching to administration-oriented decision making. Some principals may thus feel an increasing sense of isolation.

Indeed, nowadays, there is now "much more to teaching than meets the eye", as one ex-teacher in Singapore articulated in the local newspaper forum (Liew, 2005). Gathering evidence for the many performance indicators is a daunting process for many teachers, as Lam (2006) in Hong Kong wrote:

> The school I am teaching is going to have ESR in the coming September and we are now working hard to gather evidence for the 80 components of the 29 performance indicators. It's really a hard time and we discover that we are like secretaries or clerks working in a commercial company instead of a school. During the three-day visit, the external reviewers need to observe lessons and each reviewer has to shadow one student for a whole day. They also need to interview teachers and even janitors. How accurate and objectives are the judgements made? How well do they know about the school from the documents and the three-day visit? Is it possible to determine whether the school can provide quality education when all these are done?

It is almost certainly true that this new appraisal system will add on to the operational load of the schools. Schools will be required to get their information management and

analyses up to standard fairly quickly to satisfy the needs of the appraisal. Whether in Singapore or Hong Kong, many schools will have to implement the SEM/SBM in the midst of developing and delivering richer education programmes. The challenge is to embrace the SEM/SBM as a system to enhance educational quality rather than a distraction to the teachers in their fundamental business of teaching and learning.

In both Singapore and Hong Kong, an acute issue is the measurement of the desired outcomes of education. Some educators will argue that quality models can work well for the industrial and commercial sector because the bottom-line of dollars and cents is clear and measurable. But are such quality models really suitable for an education context? For example, it could also be argued that such quality management models could not take into account the softer and finer aspects of education that is embedded in human relationships rather than in systems and processes. It is difficult to fully quantify or capture evidence of the love, care and role modelling of teachers in their everyday lives. But it is in this softer and rather tacit aspect that lies the noblest and most precious of education. Therefore, there are cultural issues unique to the education field that has to be addressed in adapting business models to the management of schools (Ng, 2003). Moreover, can a poorly performing school indeed turn itself around using these quality models? Can a school really inspire its staff and students by aiming for excellence according to the quality criteria? Would a "back to basics" message pegged at the right developmental stage of the school have been easier to motivate the struggling teachers (Ng, 2003)?

If power is to be given to the schools, perhaps schools also be given the freedom to decide its own standards of excellence, instead of benchmarking against the criteria set out in a pre-determined model. In Singapore, this may actually come true as a centralized agenda, at least for the top schools in Singapore in the first instance, as Prime Minister Lee looked to the independent top American schools as possible models. These schools "set their own curricula and they issue their own certificates. And (they are) independent . . . these schools have established long traditions and high reputations so that they have the freedom to do what they believe is right and maintain those standards and be something special" (Lee, 2006). In Hong Kong, the government has not indicated such intentions but the verdict of the court case started by the Catholic Diocese may prove to be a major influence on the direction that the SBM reform may take in the future.

Conclusion

Both Singapore and Hong Kong are facing similar challenges in the international economic arena and both have chosen to adopt a new managerialism philosophy and decentralize power in their education system to meet the economic challenge.

Both the Singapore and Hong Kong governments are pragmatic governments. For Singapore, decentralization is for the purpose of promoting flexibility and innovation within schools and centralization is for ensuring that schools are held accountable for quality education and results. For Hong Kong, centralization is for strategic control and decentralization is for efficiency in exercising that control while allowing schools operational autonomy with given parameters. Definitely, SEM/SBM has brought about change in the education system and forced the pace of school-based reform to meet new economic realities.

However, the experiences of both Singapore and Hong Kong also suggest common lessons for other states to note. While the notions of "quality education", "school excellence" and "school autonomy" are laudable aims, on closer inspection, the underlying dynamics of fierce competition and accountability through performance indicators also mean that the very notion of "educational excellence" may be compromised. While education decentralization can potentially be a powerful platform for change, the main challenge will be to satisfy the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

What will be profitable is to have a longitudinal research to examine and compare the impact of the SEM and SBM on school practices and culture in Singapore and Hong Kong respectively. The information generated through the research will provide both policy makers and researchers a better understanding of how a quality framework coupled with self-assessment and external inspections can lead to changes in the school system, both positive ones and undesirable side-effects.

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