<u>**DRAFT**</u>

Contesting Reform:
Bernstein's Pedagogic Device and Madrasah Education in Singapore

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Abstract
This paper aims to highlight the active role played by various pedagogic agents in contesting the state educational reforms for madrasahs in Singapore. Drawing upon Basil Bernstein's pedagogic device, the paper identified the tensions and challenges that arise from the attempts by the state to implement curriculum reforms and the Compulsory Education legislation. The paper argues that the stakes are high in the struggle in madrasah education as the group that appropriates and controls the pedagogic device exercises power in relation to the distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation of the knowledge forms in madrasah education. The lesson from the Singapore experience is that policymakers and curriculum planners need to be cognisant of the power and control wielded by the various pedagogic agents.

Introduction

The issue of the state control over religious institutions is of contemporary relevance in many countries. In promoting a modern educational curriculum, the state tends to focus on universalised models of knowledge and action at the expense of the authority of a transcending tradition (McEneaney and Meyer 2000). This means that classical languages, traditional and ritualised forms of classical history, traditional literary canons, local poetry, literature, religion and other aspects of indigenous culture are marginalised. Accompanying the state reforms are varying degrees of resistance and contestations from educational and religious institutions. Given the relative autonomy of the pedagogic agents, educational institutions might generate profound effects that may block or modify the course of state formation (Wong and Apple 2002). The state reforms are likely to face greater opposition from dominant or hegemonic educational systems in which previous forms are well institutionalised and constrained by traditional testing forms (McEneaney and Meyer 2000). In the case of educational reforms in madrasahs[1] (Muslim schools), it is important to study the phenomenon of various agents contesting, resisting and shaping the reforms along the way. In particular, there is a need to research the divergent voices of the Islamic educators with the madrasahs and other Muslims who are engaged in promoting reform within the madrasah system (Sikand 2005).

Comparing the state educational reforms for Chinese schools and madrasahs in Singapore

This paper aims to highlight the active role played by various pedagogic agents in contesting the state educational reforms for madrasahs in Singapore. Singapore is a multi-ethnic country with more than 4 million residents, comprising Chinese (78 percent), Malays (14 percent), Indians (7 percent) and other races (1 percent). It is also religiously diverse, with the majority of the population being Buddhists (42.5 percent), followed by Muslims (14.9 percent), Christians (14.6 percent), Taoists (8.5 percent), Hindus (4.0 percent), other religions (0.6 percent), and those who profess to have no religion (14.8 percent). Among the ethnic groups, the Malays are the most homogenous with 99.6 percent of Malays who are Muslims. As almost all Muslims are Malays in Singapore, this paper shall focus on Malay/Muslims, and use the two terms, 'Malay' and 'Muslims' synonymously.

It is helpful, at the outset, to compare recent state educational reforms for madrasahs with the pedagogic reforms for Chinese schools in Singapore from 1945 to the 1980s. Wong and Apple (2002) describe how the government tried to minimise the elements of Chinese culture and China-centered content in the Chinese school curriculum; transform the Chinese school curriculum into a Singapore or Malaya-centered one; and unify the curriculum of Chinese schools to be similar to those of other institutions. After a prolonged and tough process of struggle in the 1980s, the Chinese schools finally switched to use English as the medium of instruction and adopted the government-sanctioned curriculum. Will the madrasahs follow the footsteps of the Chinese schools to accept the state reforms for Islamic education? In the author's view, this is unlikely as there are crucial differences between the Chinese schools and the madrasahs to explain why state reforms for the latter are more challenging than those for the former.

First, as McEneaney and Meyer (2000) have noted, there is greater resistance from hegemonic educational systems that are well institutionalised, which is the case for madrasahs as Islamic institutions. While the key issue for the survival of Chinese schools is Chinese language and culture, the focus for the madrasah is religion – a topic that is potentially more emotive and sensitive. That the Malay/Muslim community places great importance on religion is seen in a recent survey where 88 percent of Malays indicated that "It is very important that people know that I am a member of a religion" (Ooi, 2005). In contrast, only 38 percent of Chinese answered 'yes' to the same question. At the same time, the Chinese also place less importance on their mother tongue language (Chinese language or *putonghua*) when compared to the Malays. Only 54 percent of Chinese agreed that "It is very important that people know that I can speak mother tongue", while 81 percent of the Malays answered in the affirmative. It is also instructive to note that the supporters of Chinese schools were mainly Chinese-educated Chinese, and not English-educated Chinese who studied in English schools and worked for the British colonial government. In contrast, the Malay/Muslim community has always been more homogenous and united in protecting and supporting the madrasahs as religious institutions (Tan 2007a; Tan 2008). A related factor for the madrasahs to contest and resist the state reforms strongly is the special role of madrasahs for the Muslim community. The Muslim community sees the existence of madrasahs as "its obligation to

implement fully Allah's commandment as laid out in many verses in the Qur'an, including *at-Taubah: 9:122*"[2] (PERGAS 2004: 358). In other words, the madrasahs are not just educational or cultural institutions (like the Chinese schools), but symbols of the Muslims' religious duty which cannot be compromised.

The madrasahs' resistance to the government's reforms is also strengthened by their control over the testing forms, another factor noted by McEneaney and Meyer (2000). The madrasahs in Singapore are connected to valuable higher educational and employment opportunities both locally and overseas. Muslim organisations in Singapore recognise the religious credentials and employ graduates from Muslim institutions in Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle East and other Muslim countries. Madrasah graduates from Singapore are also able to find teaching positions outside Singapore such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. In contrast, part of the reason for the Chinese schools to cave in to the government's policy to switch from Chinese to English as a teaching medium was that many graduates of Chinese schools were unable to find employment in the 1960s and 1970s due to their lack of competency in the English language. That led to pragmatic Chinese parents sending their children to English schools for them to secure better employment prospects, which resulted in dwindling enrolment in Chinese schools.

Against this backdrop of the status of madrasahs in Singapore, this paper uses Basil Bernstein's concept of pedagogic device to analyse the state educational reforms and the struggle for control among the various pedagogic agents in madrasah education. Such a study is instructive as while a number of writers have used Bernstein's theory to analyse educational reforms (eg. see Stoer and Magalhaes 2001; Wong and Apple 2002; Bonal and Rambla 2003; Sadovnik 2006; Beck 2006), there has been no known application of his theory on Islamic reforms in madrasahs. The research materials for this paper are obtained from literature review; official documents; interviews with madrasah teachers, madrasah students, a madrasah graduate who was also an officer with Majlis Ugama Islam (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore); and interactions with madrasah administrators and Muslim parents in Singapore from 2006 to 2008.

Bernstein's Pedagogic Device

According to Bernstein (1990, 1996, 2000, 2001), pedagogic device serves to regulate the conversion of the official discourse into pedagogic communication. Functioning as the intrinsic grammar of pedagogic discourse, it regulates the production, transmission and acquisition of the school curriculum (Bernstein 2000).[3] Bernstein identifies three rules in the pedagogic device. The three rules which are hierarchically related are distributive rules, recontextualising rules, and evaluative rules.

Distributive rules provide different forms of knowledge and consciousness to different social groups. In this way, distributive rules mediate the social order and regulate the power relationships between social groups. These rules, although produced by the state, are not solely determined by those in power and are always challenged by other contesting forces.

Recontextualising rules regulate the specific form that the pedagogic discourse will take. Through recontextualisation, a discourse is dislocated from its primary context (the original site of production), relocated and refocused to a secondary context to form the pedagogic text. Bernstein further distinguishes two sub-fields in the field of recontextualisation: the official recontextualising field (ORF) and the pedagogic

recontextualising field (PRF). ORF is the field where the state produces and legitimises the official pedagogic discourse. PRF is the field where agents create the nonofficial pedagogic discourse by selecting pedagogic texts and regulate specific pedagogic identities. The ORF includes officials from state pedagogic agencies, consultants from the educational system, specialised departments and local educational authorities. The PRF includes university departments of education, schools, publishing houses and other fields that are able to exert influence on the state and special sites, agents and practices within education (Bernstein 1990).

Bernstein points out that tensions and confrontations take place both within the PRF, and between the PRF and ORF. These could hinder the successful use of pedagogic reform as intended by the state. There are conflicts and struggles among the agents of PRF to control the pedagogic discourses that regulate the production of pedagogic contexts. There are also tensions between the PRF and ORF, especially if the PRF is strongly insulated from the ORF and has a certain level of autonomy over the construction of pedagogic discourses and practices. The discourse created by PRF could potentially impede the official pedagogic discourse produced and legitimised by the state. The stakes are massive in this struggle as the group that appropriates and controls the pedagogic device exercises power in relation to the distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation of complex knowledge forms (Singh 2002). Researchers have observed how attempts of the ORF to colonise the PRF have led to resistance of some pedagogues and teachers (e.g. see Stoer and Magalhaes 2001; Bonal and Rambla 2003).

Finally evaluation rules construct pedagogic practice by providing the criteria to be transmitted and acquired (Bernstein 2000). Evaluative rules specify the transmission of suitable curricular contents under proper time and context and perform the significant function of monitoring the adequate realization of the pedagogic discourse. For evaluation rules to be effective in ensuring the smooth implementation of pedagogic reform, they need to be tightly linked up with the rewards of higher education opportunities, materials, political power, and social status under the control of the state, and not have strong ties with external pedagogic agents (Wong and Apple 2002).

The pedagogic device is the object of a struggle for domination as the group who appropriates the device has access to a ruler and distributes consciousness, desire and identity (Bernstein and Solomon 1999). In other words, those who own the device own the means of perpetuating their power through discursive means and establishing, or attempting to establish, their own ideological representations (Bernstein 1996). The degree of control the state has over the examination system, curriculum, materials and assessment determines the extent to which the state can regulate the pedagogic text. Both external pedagogic agents and internal agents within the PRF and ORF could directly affect the formation, process and outcome of pedagogic reform. This paper shall use the case of pedagogic reforms for madrasah education in Singapore to illustrate how the pedagogic device is fragmented due to external and internal factors.

Background Introduction to Singapore and Madrasah Education in Singapore
Education in Singapore

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the Singapore government has introduced educational reforms to achieve two main objectives: (1) giving the students a common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education and training to prepare them for a knowledge-based economy; and (2) giving them a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore 2000). These twin objectives are the two distributive rules that the Singapore government hopes to realise through various educational reforms. Up to 1955, Singapore was under the British colonial rule and was socially divided along ethnic and religious lines. With self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965, the concern for national economic development and social cohesion, together with the establishment of national identity, was given the highest priority. The government led by the People's Action Party (PAP) introduced a number of educational reforms such as bringing all national secular schools under a common national educational system, introducing a uniform curriculum and locally produced textbooks, and making moral and citizenship education compulsory.

Underlying these educational reforms is the government's technocratic view of education where education is seen as the means to produce a competent, adaptive and productive workforce. According to this view, a strong foundation in mathematics, sciences and languages is crucial for Singapore to ride on the tide of economic boom in a knowledge economy. The overriding aim of educational reforms in Singapore is to equip students to meet the challenges of a knowledge economy and to enhance the economic competitiveness of Singapore. The emphasis on economic imperatives is seen in the launch of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' vision in 1997. This vision aims to develop creative thinking skills, a lifelong passion for learning and nationalistic commitment in the young. The goal is that the people at all levels of society are actively engaging in life-long learning nestled within a national culture of learning.

Schooling for Muslims in Singapore

In terms of schooling, Muslim children could choose to receive full-time education at a secular national school or at a madrasah (Tan and Kasmuri 2007). In other words, madrasahs offer an alternative to secular national schools for Muslim children in Singapore. About four per cent of Malay students receive full-time education at madrasahs. Historically, madrasahs were built by Muslim philantrophists to provide Islamic education for Muslim children and the first madrasah was established at the beginning of the twentieth century. Each madrasah has its management committee whose members are appointed by Ministry of Education (MOE) in consultation with Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS). MUIS or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore was officially established in 1968 as a statutory body to advise the President of Singapore on all matters relating to Islam in Singapore. MUIS is the highest bureaucracy in charge of Muslim matters in Singapore. Under the Administration of Muslim Law Act, administrative jurisdiction over the madrasahs in Singapore was transferred from the Ministry of Education to MUIS in 1996. Although madrasahs are not under the

jurisdiction of Ministry of Education, it is still subject to the provisions of the Education Act as they are registered as private schools with Ministry of Education.

There are six full-time madrasahs offering full-time primary and secondary education, out of which three offer courses up to pre-university level. Although the madrasahs enrol a very small percentage of Muslim students, they are very influential among the Muslim community in Singapore as they are given the mission of producing future religious teachers (*asatizah*) and scholars (*ulama*). Both religious subjects such as Islamic Education and Arabic language, and academic subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasahs. The madrasahs devote different amount of curriculum time for academic subjects, ranging from 30 percent to 60 percent. All the students enrolled in these madrasahs must sit for examinations set by the madrasahs. The examinations are set internally by the individual madrasahs with the exception of secondary 4 examinations as MUIS has instituted a common examination since 1995 (Chee 2006). Besides the examinations set by the madrasahs, some madrasah students have been taking the Cambridge Board General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations for secondary and pre-university students since the early 1970s (Noor Aisha 2006). Full-time students at the madrasahs may apply for admission to overseas Islamic universities or secular universities in Singapore and abroad. With the implementation of the Compulsory Education (CE) in 2003, all madrasah students must sit for the primary school terminal examinations known as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the primary school from 2008.

The State Educational Reform: A Common Curriculum for Madrasahs

As pointed out earlier, the Singapore government aims to realise two distributive rules in its educational reforms through the years: (1) giving the students a common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education and training to prepare them for a knowledge-based economy; and (2) giving them a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion. Here we can see an example of the modern educational curriculum advocated by the state where the focus is on universalised models of knowledge and action (McEneaney and Meyer 2000). This means that 'modern' languages such as English and 'modern' subjects such as Mathematics and Sciences, are privileged over classical languages such as Arabic and traditional knowledge such as Islamic Education.

The Singapore government has expressed concerns that the madrasahs may not be able to help their students achieve the above two objectives. Unlike national secular schools which focus on the teaching of secular subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science, the madrasahs' priority traditionally has been the teaching of Islamic subjects for their graduates to be religious scholars and leaders. The government questioned whether the curriculum time allocated for secular subjects is sufficient to equip the students with the knowledge and skills for a knowledge-based economy. Coupled with the limited curriculum time is that compared to secular national schools, the madrasahs are not as well-equipped in terms of resources, facilities, qualified teachers and materials to help their students excel academically (Noor Aisha and Lai 2006). This has led to a disparity between the academic performance of Muslim students studying in national secular schools and those in madrasahs. 60 percent of Malay students in national secular schools from Primary 1 went on to take the GCE "O" level examinations compared to 35

percent from the madrasahs between 1996 and 1998 (*The Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998). 29 percent of Malay students from national secular schools went on to either the polytechnics or junior colleges compared to 9 percent from the madrasahs (*The Straits Times* 5 Sep 1999).

Adding to this worrying trend is the report of high drop-out rates in madrasahs: 71 percent in 1996, 60 percent in 1997 and 65 percent in 1998 (Chee 2006). Moreover not all graduates of the madrasahs proceed to further their religious studies in Islamic institutions and become full-time religious teachers and scholars. While official statistics from all the madrasahs are not available, research done at one madrasah in Singapore shows that between 20 and 40 percent of graduates from that madrasah from 2002 to 2005 proceeded to Islamic institutions after their GCE 'O' level examination. This means that the majority of graduates opted for secular courses in state national schools, polytechnics and private educational institutions.

Applying Bernstein's pedagogic device to madrasah education in Singapore

A number of tensions and confrontations have arisen in relation to the recontextualising rules and evaluating rules which challenge and thwart the state control of the pedagogic device. The government's realisation of the distributive rules is fragmented by both internal and external pedagogic agents. In the recontextualising field for madrasah education, the official recontextualising field (ORF) comprise mainly the government leaders, MUIS, and other committees linked to the government, while the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) comprise the madrasah trustees and management officials, religious teachers, religious scholars, and other Islamic organisations.

Within the recontexualising field, the madrasahs are registered as private schools and therefore are not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, unlike national secular schools. Hence they have the autonomy to determine its own curriculum and assessment. Although the Administration of Muslim Law Act was passed in 1966 for MUIS to control the madrasahs, the Act was not enforced due to the limited authority of MUIS and resistance from the madrasah leaders. Kadir (2004: 364) notes that MUIS officials she interviewed "admitted that they had very little power and authority over these schools". A former MUIS officer who was interviewed by the author asserted as follows:

> These madrasahs were established in the 1920s, 1930s, etc. way before MUIS itself was established. They are independent entities since that time, so I guess it may be difficult to let go of this independence to anybody, and especially the government. One major fear is that the whole philosophy of the madrasah would be diluted if not lost altogether and their madrasah have to follow what is decided upon by MUIS which may not have the same philosophy as theirs (interview with a former MUIS officer).

Throughout the years, the PRF for madrasah education is strongly insulated from the ORF, and enjoys a certain level of autonomy over the construction of pedagogic discourses and practices. Given this arrangement, the discourse created by PRF could potentially impede the official pedagogic discourse produced and legitimised by the state.

Adding to this is the nature of the evaluation rules for madrasah education. Unlike national secular schools where students must sit for the national terminal examinations at the primary, secondary and pre-university levels, madrasahs set their own examinations for their students. There are also strong ties with external pedagogic agents which are overseas Islamic institutions. Madrasahs in Singapore have special arrangements for their students to gain entry to Islamic institutions such as the Al-Azhar university in Egypt, KUSZA in Trengganu, JAIPETRA in Kelantan, and other higher institutions in Malaysia, Indonesia and the countries in the Middle East (Mukhlis 2006). This means that the rewards of higher education opportunities and social status for the madrasahs are not under the control of the state. Given the autonomy of PRF and the disunity of evaluation rules, it is difficult for the government to control and discipline the pedagogic text. With an Islamic educational system that is well institutionalised and constrained by traditional testing forms, the state is likely to face stronger resistance from the madrasahs.

Further fragmenting the pedagogic device and hindering the actualisation of the distributive rules is the popularity and increased enrolment of madrasahs in Singapore from the 1980s. This increased enrolment was aided by a worldwide Islamic resurgence especially in North Africa and the Middle East. In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 students enrolled in the various madrasahs but the number rose to 464 students in 2000. Overall, the total enrollment in the six madrasahs increased from 1,612 students in 1990 to 4,000 in 1999 (*The Straits Times* 23 Aug 1999). This figure does not include many other Muslim students; in some cases, almost half of the applicants had to be rejected as the madrasahs do not have the capacity to take them in (Noor Aisha 2006). There are also about 350 (3.5 percent) Malay Primary 1 students who left the secular national schools to join the madrasahs every year (*The Straits Times* 18 Jun 1999).

Most of these students left the secular national schools not because they felt marginalised in mainstream educational institutions, but because of religious and pragmatic reasons. First, there are students who have been attending part-time Islamic education organised by the mosques or private Islamic organisations and have excelled or showed interest in Islamic study. With the support of their parents, these students prefer to receive full-time Islamic education in a madrasah to become religious teachers. There are also students who have repeatedly failed in the mainstream schools because they are unable to cope with the academic demands in these schools. Historically, the Malay students have been lagging behind the other ethnic groups in terms of academic performance in national schools (Tan, 2007b). There are also students who manifest behavioural problems such as misconduct or drug-taking while studying in mainstream schools and their parents choose to place them in a madrasah with the hope that they will change after imbibing Islamic moral values. From the government's perspective, however, these students who opted out of the secular national schools would not have the quality education necessary for good jobs and the social skills to integrate well into the social and economic system (Mukhlis 2006).

The introduction of a common curriculum

In an effort to actualise the two distributive rules, the government took steps to control the pedagogic discourse in the recontextualising field for madrasah education. In 1999,

then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong highlighted the high dropout rates of madrasahs and expressed his concern that madrasah students may not be ill-equipped for a knowledge based economy (*Berita Harian* 24 Aug 1999). He suggested that it is better for Muslim parents to send their children to secular national schools and attend part-time madrasahs or weekend madrasahs. From the government's perspective, the madrasah's focus on religious education, with Islamic Theology, Islamic Jurisprudence, and Arabic as major subjects, means that their students would not be able to acquire the critical foundation skills such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Information Technology that are necessary in an economy that favours knowledge workers (Mukhlis 2006). This stand is unsurprising as the modern educational curriculum propagated by the state underscore universalised models of knowledge and action at the expense of classical languages, traditions, rituals and literary canons (McEneaney and Meyer 2000).

The government also expressed concern that the madrasahs are not preparing their students to realise the second distributive rule. By studying in a purely Islamic environment surrounded by Muslim teachers and friends, the government questioned whether the madrasah students have the common educational experience to be part of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community. This issue has been raised since the 1980s when the government repeatedly asked the Muslims to be 'part of the mainstream' (Noor Aisha 2006). In 1993, then Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier-General (BG) George Yeo, noted that "the concern was whether those who were educated in Muslim religious school all along, from Primary One would later share a common outlook and attitude with other Singaporeans" (*The Straits Times* 30 Aug 1993, quoted in Noor Aisha 2006: 76). Then Minister of Education Teo Chee Hean also questioned whether Muslim children who opted out of secular national schools to join the madrasahs are able to learn integrate into society by cooperating and competing as part of the Singapore team (*The Sunday Times* 28 December 1997).

The struggle for control over the pedagogic discourse between the PRF and ORF is illustrated in the project by MUIS to introduce a common curriculum for the six madrasahs in 2001. MUIS announced that it will spend S$8 million to produce a new curriculum for use in the six full-time Islamic religious schools from 2002. MUIS explained that the new curriculum ensures that madrassah students can survive in today's highly competitive world and be forward-thinking religious leaders or professionals in another field of their choices (Albakri 2006). Special attention is devoted to the strengthening of the teaching of English, mathematics and science in madrasahs so as to equip Muslim students with the life skills needed to get ahead in a competitive environment (*The Straits Times* 10 March 2006). This project aims to produce the syllabi, textbooks and materials for 12 years of education from primary 1 to pre-university 2, involving 156 book and 72 teachers' guidebooks at a total cost of S$7.3 million. The target is for all primary 1 students in madrasahs to use the prescribed materials based on a common curriculum from 2008. Instead of Arabic, the medium of instruction in the madrasahs will be English. The curriculum reform represents the government's resolve to limit the autonomy of the PRF by controlling the curriculum, thereby having access to the distribution of the consciousness, desire and identity of the Muslims in madrassahs.

Responses from the madrasahs

The madrasah trustees and management officials responded by augmenting their control inside the PRF. Five out of six madrasahs rejected the MUIS' proposal, stating that they would not follow MUIS' curriculum (*The Straits Times* 10 March, 2006). They objected to the use of English as the medium of instruction and insisted on continuing to use Arabic as the medium of teaching (*The Straits Times* 14 December 2002). They pointed out that doing so is consonant with the main goal of madrasahs to prepare their students to further their studies at Islamic universities overseas. They added that they will use the religious curriculum and textbooks prepared by MUIS only as supplementary materials, and teach in both English and Arabic - English for PSLE subjects and Arabic for religious ones. The attempts of the ORF as represented by MUIS to colonise the PRF had led to resistance of the madrasah trustees and management officials who are the main agents of the PRF.

There is also the struggle for control over the pedagogic discourse within the PRF. In 1995, MUIS formed a Curriculum Development Committee comprising representatives from the madrasahs to review the curriculum for madrasahs, and develop a new one. But a group of madrasah trustees and management officials formed a Joint Committee on Madrasah (JCM) in late 1999 as an independent committee to discuss the reforms in madrasahs. Although JCM initially included representatives from all the six madrasahs, the representatives of two madrasahs left the committee due to "differences with the other members on how to approach the challenges facing madrasah education in Singapore" (*The Straits Times* 14 December 2002). Out of the six madrasahs, only one, Madrasah Al-Irsyad, will follow the standard set by MUIS, including the use of English as the medium of instruction. The debate also attracted at least one Muslim organisation which further fragmented the PRF. Mr Alami Musa, chairman of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) supported the decision of the five madrasahs that it was not necessary that all madrasahs follow the same curriculum and that diversity was healthy so long as it was underpinned by a common philosophy (*The Straits Times* 14 December 2002). The failure of MUIS to get all the madrasahs to follow a common curriculum stems from the lack of control it (as well as the government) has in the recontexualising and evaluation rules. As long as the madrassahs are linked to the recontextualising field in Islamic universities which are external pedagogic agents, the government will find it difficult to limit the autonomy of PRF.

The State Educational Reform: Compulsory Education Legislation

Besides the Islamic reforms introduced by the government through MUIS, the government also attempted to control the pedagogic discourse through the Compulsory Education (CE) legislation. The events that followed from the discussion on CE again illustrate the conflicts and confrontations in the struggle over the access to and control of the pedagogic device. The government noted in 2000 that although only about 3 percent of the age cohort is not enrolled in national primary schools, it is concerned that these children are not being equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to be productive citizens in the knowledge-based economy (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000). The rationale for introducing CE is to promote the twin objectives of education mentioned earlier. The committee notes:

These two objectives are still relevant today. Indeed, a common, basic core of knowledge and skills is of even greater importance in today's context, given that we need to provide our children with a strong foundation for further education and training in a KBE. With globalisation, it is also critical to educate our young to be global players without losing their sense of belonging to Singapore (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore: 7).

Although the CE was meant for all children and not just Muslim children in Singapore, its timely implementation helps the government realise the two distributive rules for the madrasahs. Under the Compulsory Education Act enforced from 2003, all children must complete the mandatory six years of primary education in national secular schools which are under the Ministry of Education (MOE). All children will sit for Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of six years. Parents who fail to enroll their children in primary schools shall be subjected to counselling, mediation, fines and, in the extreme case, a jail term. As the madrasahs are not classified as national secular schools, CE, if implemented as planned, would mean that the madrasahs would no longer be allowed to accept primary students from 2003. The government has publicly assured the madrasahs that the government has no intention of closing down the madrasahs, and that they could still accept students from the secondary level onwards, and continue to offer part-time religious education to all Muslim children. From the government's perspective, this is a preferred option as the government leaders have repeatedly voiced their dissatisfaction over the low academic standards and high dropout rates at madrasahs. Tan (2002) avers that the major impetus behind the decision to impose compulsory education was the government's desire to address the rising madrasah enrolments:

It is tempting to think that the major impetus behind the decision to impose compulsory education was the government's desire to address the rising madrasah enrolments. … Even though the relative numbers of Malay/Muslim students enrolling in madrasahs constituted only a small percentage of the Malay/Muslim age cohort, the prospect of most of these students not successfully completing secondary school and subsequently being unable to secure jobs in a knowledge-based economy must have proved alarming to the top political leadership. The ongoing Islamic revivalism at both national and regional levels, combined with the growing popularity of madrassahs despite their obvious inferiority to secular schools in terms of such measures as examination rates and physical facilities, must also have worried the PAP leaders (Tan 2002: 13).

Responses from the madrasahs

Given that all the six madrasahs have been offering primary education to Muslim children and that they see themselves as the custodians of Islamic faith to the Muslim community, the madrasah leaders contested the government's plan. The madrasah leaders turned to MUIS as they hoped that MUIS, as the highest bureaucracy representing Muslim matters, would represent their interests to the government. Such a move, if successful, would enable the PRF to avoid a confrontation with ORF by using MUIS – a statutory board representing Muslim interests – as the mediator. MUIS proposed two major

proposals: if the madrasahs were exempted from CE, they should place a greater emphasis on academic subjects taught from an Islamic perspective, or they could be converted to a government-aided school, managed either by MUIS or a Board of Governors, that would prepare students who wish to opt for madrasah education after Primary 4 (Noor Aisha 2006). Both proposals were rejected by madrasah leaders who wanted to maintain the status quo of providing full-time Islamic education to children from primary 1 onwards.

The rejection of MUIS' proposals by the madrasah leaders is unsurprising as both proposals entail them giving up their control over the pedagogic discourse and practices for Islamic primary education. Putting a greater emphasis on academic subjects and allowing the madrasahs to be managed by MUIS or a Board of Governors also mean a loss of autonomy and power in the production, recontextualising and reproduction fields. When the Muslim community perceived MUIS' inability to meet their demands, an organisation of Islamic religious scholars and teachers, Persatuan Ulama dan Guru Agama Islam Singapura (PERGAS) took the lead to challenge the government. They openly opposed the government's decision, and issued press statements to protest against CE. They argued that the Muslim community perceived the government "to have initiated yet another 'sinister' motive of ultimately 'eradicating' the madrasah as an Islamic Educational Institute" (*The Straits Times* 14 December 2002). They stressed that the madrasah "has been with Muslims for centuries and is so dear to us" and that "any future proposal seen as undermining this institution would certainly invite negative reaction" (PERGAS, 2004, p. 361). The unexpected and strident response of PERGAS also encouraged heated exchanges in Cyber Ummah, a website maintained by PERGAS. Other pedagogic agents including academics, educationists, parents, students and other members of the public joined in to oppose the CE legislation and proposed alternatives. Some even criticised the Malay/Muslim Members of Parliament for not speaking up for their fellow Malay/Muslims – an act that is uncommon in a country characterised by citizens who are politically passive.

Responses from the state

Alarmed at the unprecedented public display of opposition and the potentially explosive nature of the religious issue, the government conducted several rounds of closed-door meetings with the madrasah leaders and Islamic teachers. That led to a temporary solution to the controversy where it was decided that Malay/Muslim children attending madrasahs will be exempted from the CE Act for the time being. While Muslim children could remain in madrasahs and not be forced to attend national schools, they must still meet the minimum standard set by the government in 2008. The benchmark for madrasahs is pegged at the average PSLE aggregate score of the Malay pupils in the six lowest performing national schools in the EM1 and EM2 academic streams, based on the ranking of the performance of their EM1 and EM2 Malay pupils in the PSLE of the same year. Initially, the government announced that madrasahs who fail to meet the benchmark from 2008 will not be allowed to accept any primary students the following year; their students will be posted to another madrasah that meets the PSLE benchmark, or be transferred to a secular national school. The government also caps the total annual Primary 1 intake of Singapore citizens in the six full-time madrasahs at 400. It states that

this is to enable the madrasahs to focus on making the necessary adjustments in their curriculum and allocation of teaching resources to meet the PSLE benchmark (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000).

But the government seems to offer more conciliatory moves recently: it was reported that it has now allowed madrasahs that meet the PSLE benchmark twice in a three-year period from 2008 can continue to take in Primary 1 pupils (Zakir 2007a). MUIS has also announced plans to support the madrasahs with funds, teachers, administrative systems and management teams, with the assurance that the madrasahs will "retain its unique identity – staying in charge and staying separate even as they specialise and work together" (Zakir 2007b).

In response, the madrasah administrators still view the government's attempt with some degree of reservation and even suspicion. There are perennial concerns from the Muslim community that the emphasis on academic performance due to the CE Act will add to the strain of madrasah students who have to cope with both academic and religious subjects. Interviews with thirty madrasah students in 2007 reveal that most of them are generally stronger in religious subjects than academic subjects, and they find juggling both religious and academic subjects a big challenge. Feedback from madrasah teachers also shows that they find it difficult to switch from using Arabic and Malay to English as a medium of instruction (Tan and Kasmuri 2007). However, not all educational stakeholders within the Muslim community view the government's overture negatively. There are madrasah teachers and parents who welcome MUIS' assistance in developing the madrasahs in terms of the curriculum, administration, finance, teacher training and student learning. But what they all wish, in the words of a madrasah graduate who was interviewed, is that "they all would like to see that the madrasahs were to hold true to their own philosophy of an Islamic education and to do so, is by making sure that madrasahs are allowed to continue to exist as independent entities".

Conclusions

Using Basil Bernstein's pedagogic device, the paper identified the tensions and challenges that arise from the attempt by the Singapore government to implement curriculum reforms through MUIS and the Compulsory Education (CE) legislation. The madrasah leaders succeeded in rejecting MUIS' proposal to adopt a common curriculum as MUIS could only persuade but not coerce the madrasahs to accept the proposal. The disunity within the PRF is also seen in two madrasah representatives refusing to join the Joint Committee on Madrasah (JCM), and in one madrasah choosing to fully adopt the curriculum proposed by MUIS from the start. In the case of the CE legislation, the madrasahs succeeded in obtaining an exemption but at a price. To prepare their students to meet the minimum performance benchmark by 2008, it is likely for the madrasahs to review their curriculum and increase the curriculum time for secular subjects.

One can observe in the CE controversy the struggles and confrontations that took place between the PRF and ORF. The plan to introduce the CE legislation by the government and the two proposals by MUIS (part of ORF) were rejected by the madrasahs (PRF) as this will entail a loss of control over pedagogic discourse and practices. Throughout the controversy, MUIS was placed in an awkward position; on the one hand, it is an Islamic organisation set up to represent and guard Muslim interests. On the other hand, it is a statutory board that reports to the government and carries out

government-linked initiatives. Given its dual status, it appears that MUIS was regarded by the Muslim community in the CE issue as part of the ORF rather than PRF.

Another interesting observation is that unlike the case of MUIS' attempt to introduce a common curriculum in madrasahs, the various agents in PRF in the CE debate were solidly united in opposing the government's plan. When one analyses the temporary solution in CE, it appears that such an arrangement has helped the government gain more control over the pedagogic device. In terms of recontextualsing rules and evaluation rules, the government has managed to regulate them to move closer towards realising the distributive rule of equipping the Muslim children with the basic knowledge for a knowledge based economy. The outcome of the CE issue has made the PRF less insulated and lose some of its autonomy over the construction of pedagogic discourses and practices in madrasah education. The agreement that the madrasahs must meet the minimum performance benchmarks for PSLE in 2008 means that the madrasah leaders now have less control over the pedagogic texts. They now need to place greater emphasis on academic subjects - English, Mathematics and Science – to ensure their own survival.

The example of Singapore is instructive as it demonstrates the determined efforts by the government of a multi-religious country with a Muslim minority population, to reform the madrasahs through various state-initiated measures. At the same time, the Singapore example demonstrates the tensions, resistance and contests that resulted from these reforms that thwarted and modified the educational reforms initiated by the government. The Singapore experience shows that madrasahs are not passive and monolithic schools being shaped by these reforms, and that there is a plurality of voices among the madrasah leaders, Islamic teachers and other Muslims in the society. The stakes are high in the struggle in madrasah education as the group that appropriates and controls the pedagogic device exercises power in relation to the distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation of the knowledge forms in madrasah education. The lesson from the Singapore experience is that policymakers and curriculum planners need to be cognisant of the power and control wielded by the various pedagogic agents. For the official pedagogic discourse to be successfully recontextualised and reproduced, sustained support from and negotiation with key players are needed. Given the divergent voices from and disunity within the PRF, it is important for the government to recognise and welcome particular voices that are supportive of the official pedagogic discourse.

The state educational reforms in madrasah education in Singapore provide a useful illustrative example of similar Islamic reforms that are taking place in other parts of the world. Like Singapore, the madrasahs in many countries today enjoy a high degree of autonomy and insulation from the government. With Islamic revivalism and continual threat of terrorism from radical Islamist groups, many governments in countries with Muslim population have announced plans to control and regulate madrasah education. As in the case of Singapore, tensions, conflicts, resistance and confrontation among the various pedagogic agents will accompany these state reforms. The degree of control the state has over the examination system, curriculum, materials and assessment in the madrasahs will determine the extent to which the state can regulate the pedagogic text for Islamic education in that country.

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Notes

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[1] Madrasah means 'school' in Arabic but it is commonly translated as 'Islamic religious school' or 'Islamic school' in Singapore and other parts of the world. However, Douglass and Shaikh (2004) aver that a madrasah should be understood as a 'Muslim school' rather than 'Islamic school' to indicate "the goal of living up to the standards of Islam, rather than implying its achievement" (p. 8). It should also be pointed out although the plural form for 'madrasah' is 'madaris' in Arabic, this paper adopts the English plural 'madrasahs'.

[2] The verse (Qur'an: at-Taubah: 9: 122) states: "it is not desirable that all of the believers take the field (in time of war). From within every group in their midst, some shall devote themselves (instead) to acquiring a deeper knowledge of the Faith (li-ya-tafaq-qahu fid-deen), and (thus be able to) teach their home-coming brethren, so that these (too) might guard themselves against evil." (as cited in PERGAS 2004: 358)

[3] This paper only focuses on Bernstein's rules in the pedagogic device as they are directly relevant to the topic of this paper. But it should be noted that Bernstein has expounded on other aspects of the pedagogic device. For example, he identifies three main fields of the pedagogic device: the field of production, recontextualization, and reproduction. The field of production where knowledge is produced takes place mainly in institutions of higher learning and private research organizations. The field of recontextualisation involves the selective appropriation of a discourse or part of a discourse from the field of production and a principle of re-location of that discourse as a discourse within the recontextualising field (Bernstein 2000). The field of recontextualisation is located largely in state departments of education and training, curriculum authorities, specialist education journals, and teacher education institutions. The field of reproduction usually takes place in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling institutions. When there is strong insulation within each field, there will be weaker identifications between fields but specialist identities of agents, agencies and discourses within each field. For more details, see Bernstein (1990, 1996, 2000, 2001).