Introduction: School Leadership and Educational Change in Singapore

Pak Tee Ng and Benjamin Wong

There is great interest internationally to understand the success of the Singapore education system in the light of its strong and consistent results in international tests, such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. Singapore ranks consistently among the top few countries for Reading, Mathematics and Science (OECD 2014). Interestingly, while some might have previously attributed the good results to rote learning and memorisation, the results of PISA 2012 have offered a different complexion to the issue. When students were assessed on twenty-first-century skills such as problem-solving and flexibility in thinking, Singapore once again performed well (MOE 2014).

Notwithstanding its success, the Singapore education system is changing to help prepare its students for the more complex and demanding socio-economic environment of the twenty-first century. It continuously evolves to ensure that their students are well placed and well prepared to meet the emerging demands of a knowledge-driven global economy (MOE 2010; 2013). Under the 1997 umbrella vision of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN), many initiatives were subsequently launched. These included National Education (NE), a four-phased ICT Masterplan and the Teach Less Learn More (TLLM) reform. These, and many other initiatives, reflected the system's transformation to shift the focus of learning from quantity to quality (Ng 2008).

Today, the Singapore education system continues its evolutionary path of change by adopting a student-centric, value-driven education paradigm. It aspires to achieve (Heng 2012a):

1. Every school, a good school;
2. Every student, an engaged learner;
3. Every teacher, a caring educator and

P. T. Ng (✉) · B. Wong
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: paktee.ng@nie.edu.sg

4. Every parent, a supportive partner.

To be able to do so, a key success factor is school leadership, in particular, that is exercised by the school principal. Although there are still arguments to whether the effect of a principal is direct or indirect, principals are generally perceived as having significant impact upon school effectiveness (read for example Hallinger and Heck 1998; Gurr et al. 2005; Leithwood et al. 2008; Dinham 2005; Fullan 2014). While there can be many variables that have effects on student learning in school, only the principal can create the conditions under which these individual variables combine synergistically in school to enhance learning. Singapore believes in the importance of the work of the school principal in bringing about educational change.

The successful implementation of Singapore's education policies depends critically on the effectiveness and conviction of the principals interpreting these policies in school. Principals are at the forefront of educational reform and they have great impact, as former Education Minister Heng Swee Keat articulated:

> Principals are the critical interface between MOE HQ and the ground, between the current reality and our desired future. The actions of our 360 Principals have a tremendous impact on 33,000 teachers and over half a million students. (Heng 2012b)

Principals have the challenging task of developing a positive school culture so that people are united in achieving the common goal of the entire system.

> A supportive school culture is critical. There is nothing like school leaders and HODs coming together, with the Senior Teachers and Lead Teachers in the school, to create this culture of support, and this culture of understanding… this is key to making Every School a Good School. (Heng 2014a)

But principals are not just leaders of their own school. They are leaders of the national school system. As Minister Heng explained:

> All schools are part of a national school system. You take up appointments across schools and see every school as your school… School leaders hand over to another pair of hands. This enables us to run a marathon, passing the baton, taking the long view, rather than seeing every school as a sprint and competing in this sprint. In that sense, you are all co-builders of every school. (Heng 2014b)

The roles and responsibilities of a principal are complex and wide ranging. They include managing teachers, leading change, working with stakeholders and transforming curriculum and pedagogy.

> Implementing this series of changes is going to be very challenging, because it is not just about programmes, but about mindsets and beliefs on what matters, and of exercising fine judgment of what is relevant and useful for each child. (Heng 2013)

Of course, school leadership is not an easy journey, as the minister said to the principals:

> Education is hard work, and it is only with this conviction that you (the principal) will have the stamina to inspire every student to be an engaged learner. (Heng 2012b)

This book aims to provide readers with insights into how Singapore school leaders are actively engaged in the transformation of the Singapore education system. The case studies will focus on how Singapore school leaders interpret and implement new policy initiatives, sharing valuable 'insider' stories about the problems and challenges of educational reform.

1.1 The Case for Case Studies

The case studies in this book should be of great interest to those keen to explore possibilities of educational reform both in Asia and beyond. They are sufficiently rich to fulfill a broad sweep of educational interests, although their main purpose is pedagogical—to facilitate professional reflection and discussion regarding the challenges of school leadership. These case studies can be used by practicing school leaders in their reflection or as instructional material in school leadership preparation programmes. While useful to academics as a potential source of information, the cases here are not to be confused with formal qualitative empirical studies designed to answer research questions.

A case is a description of an event, a problem or a challenge, with its relevant details most commonly presented in the form of a written narrative.[1] With proper construction, they aid in the identification of problems or challenges, in facilitating critical discussion and analysis of issues, and in offering exercises in practicing decision-making.

Cases may be anonymous if not doing so may disclose sensitive strategic and/or personally identifiable information. They may even be partly or wholly fictitious, but contain enough details that capture the essence of the themes and problems involved. A case need not be 'real' in the sense of a faithful recording of events that have actually happened, but must have a basis in reality and help readers engage with scenarios that are likely to occur in reality. A case is thus designed to be a learning vehicle with specific educational purposes in mind (Easton 1992); it is often written in order to present particular themes and to foster relevant disciplinary and/or professional skills.

Cases vary in length and detail. The complexity of a case is independent of its length. Rather, it is largely dependent on the individual's or group's ability to solve the problems that make up the case, and the inter-disciplinary skills that each person or group brings to bear on them. Cases are typically accompanied by questions of the form, 'If you were person X, what would you do?' Such questions help the individual to make a decision regarding the most suitable course of action, after a process of deliberation and discussion. Some cases also record the decisions actually taken by the person(s) in question, and the resulting effects, offering the

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[1]There exist multimedia cases containing audio, video and slides, etc., though they are relatively few because they are expensive to prepare. (see Easton 1992).

individual an opportunity to reflect on what might otherwise have been the case if he or she had chosen differently (Midlock 2011).

What often distinguishes the case study method of instruction from other traditional instructional methods is the great degree of equality between the instructor and the student. Cases give the same information to both, and while the instructor may be more experienced or informed in certain aspects of the problem or disciplines,[2] the instructor is in the same position as the students with respect to the information provided, and the problem posed (Barnes et al. 1994; McNair 1954). Therefore, some have observed that the case method of teaching requires a different relationship between teachers and students, with the consequence that teachers and students *both* teach and learn (Barnes et al. 1994). In case studies, there are rarely any absolutely right or wrong answers. But there exist a range of better or worse responses, and the discussion of cases will reveal them to those involved. The instructor's job is to *facilitate* the discussion, not dominate it.

Well-crafted case studies capture the complexities of reality and challenge the learner to address them with all the relevant skills and resources that he or she possesses. Tackling a case, whether individually or collectively, is a very different process from absorbing and regurgitating information. It requires and trains one to perceive and appraise the complexities of reality, and make decisions that may involve difficult trade-offs. Thoughtfully written cases give sufficient details (without overwhelming learners) and appropriate reflection questions to help learners develop important intellectual and decision-making qualities. The case study method of instruction is powerful in helping learners develop the knowledge and skills to deal with complex and unstructured real-world issues.

1.2 Case Studies of Singapore School Leaders

The cases presented in this book are constructed mainly, though not exclusively, through interviews with school leaders. Occasionally, teachers were interviewed to fill in gaps or to provide more details on events referred to by the school leaders. In some cases, other stakeholders were interviewed to provide another perspective on the issues. All chapter writers were guided by the following open-ended questions:

1. What are your general views of educational policy reform or school-based curricula innovation (e.g. Character and Citizenship Education, Professional Learning Communities)?
2. How do you interpret and implement policy initiatives in your school?
3. How does curricula innovation or policy reform come about in your school?
4. What role do you play in it? How do you provide support for the reforms and innovations in your school?

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[2]'Teaching by the case method is class discussion of possibilities, probabilities, and expedients… Such discussion rests on the nice balancing of probable results; and in this balancing the teacher has little to contribute except a broader appreciation of the springs of human action than his pupils are likely to have developed and perhaps a greater knowledge of …theory and its applications' (McNair 1954, p. 4).

5. Who are the key people you work with to support these reforms and innovations? How does your school benefit from these reforms and innovations?
6. What are the challenges that you face in implementing or enacting these reforms and innovations?
7. What have you learned from your experience in the implementation or enactment of these reforms and innovations in your school?

The number of principals and types of schools were determined by chapter writers. Often, the schools were chosen based on convenience and purposive sampling techniques. Participation in the case studies was made through invitation with approval from the Ministry of Education, Singapore. Chapters were crafted in line with the pedagogical purposes outlined in the previous section.

All cases in this book are based on real-life events. They are, however, not necessarily strict reproductions of the transcriptions of school leaders' responses to interview questions. For example, while most responses were left largely verbatim, certain responses had to be modified for fluency and for the understanding of international readers. Local terms and idioms unfamiliar to an international audience were either deleted or modified into conventional English terms or phrases. In some cases, some details were modified or the number of actors in the case reduced, in order to simplify the complex narrative for easier appreciation.

Each chapter in the book focuses on a particular issue, such as technological innovation, professional learning communities, and character and citizenship education, which has become important or has gained renewed importance in the Singapore education system. While the authors adhere to a common broad structure of the chapters, they craft the chapter in their own style. Each chapter first provides a background to the theme under examination and a theoretical basis for discussion. It then narrates the case that shows how school leaders interpret and implement policy initiatives in their respective schools or lead change in that area. It also highlights the challenges and learning experiences of the school leaders. At the end of each chapter, there are guiding questions to help readers critically analyse and reflect on the main learning points of the case.

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