Tan, Jason

Independent schools and autonomous schools in Singapore. Experiment in increased school autonomy

formal überarbeitete Version der Originalveröffentlichung in:
formally revised edition of the original source in:
Tertium comparationis 4 (1998) 2, S. 140-152

Tertium Comparationis
Journal für Internationale Bildungsforschung
Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 140-152, 1998

Independent Schools and Autonomous Schools in Singapore: Experiment in Increased School Autonomy

Jason Tan

National Institute of Education, Singapore

Abstract

This article examines two recent policy initiatives in Singapore: the independent schools scheme and the autonomous schools scheme. The Singapore government has claimed that these reform initiatives, both of which are aimed at promoting greater school operating autonomy, will help attain greater choice and diversity for parents and students as well as promote excellence in education. The author examines the operating framework of both schemes and concludes that even while these schemes purport to offer school heads increased autonomy, the government continues to exert a great deal of influence over all schools. In addition, the author is critical of the extent to which the policy objectives of these two schemes will be attained.

1 Introduction

A prominent trend in several countries for the past two decades involves the devolution of operating autonomy to schools in such matters as finance and staff recruitment. These reforms have been occurring in countries as diverse as New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan. The increased autonomy goes under different names, for instance, 'local management of schools', 'restructured schools', 'selfmanaging schools', 'school-based management', or 'site-based management' (Caldwell 1990; Hopkins, Ainscow, & West 1994; Mohrman & Wohlstetter 1994). At the same time, there are also differences among various policy contexts in term of three main variables: (a) the task areas over which autonomy is exercised; (b) the level at which the autonomy is exercised; and (c) the degree of autonomy that is exercised and the extent to which it is constrained by regulations and other forms of external control and accountability (Bolam 1993).

This autonomy is regarded as an essential element in the move towards enabling schools to function within a market model. It is believed that, among other things, the devolution of certain aspects of decision-making to the school level will enhance educational effectiveness (Angus 1992; Bush, Coleman, & Glover 1993; Department for Education and Employment 1996). First, it is argued that excessive centralization of decision-making authority in government education departments leads to passive conformity, and to a slow and cumbersome decision-making process. Conversely, judgements as to what is best for each school are better made by those closest to "the open-

tional point of service delivery" (Guthrie 1993: 246). Principals should be able to decide what is best for their schools, taking into account their schools' unique characteristics and circumstances.

Secondly, it is hoped that delegating decision-making authority to school principals will make them more accountable, not only to government, but also to other parties such as parents (Brown 1990). Increased accountability should provide an impetus for principals to be more innovative and responsive to the needs of parents and students. Thirdly, several governments are now actively extolling the merits of forcing schools to compete among themselves for 'customers'. These include the attainment of quality teaching and learning as well as efficient, effective, and economic use of resources.

What is interesting is that in some cases, moves to grant school administrators greater autonomy in terms of micro-policy areas are occurring alongside moves to increase central government authority in macro-policy areas (Caldwell & Spinks 1992; Cummings & Riddell 1994).

Schools are being held accountable through such measures as implementation of national curricula, publicizing of performance indicators, and rewards for accomplishing desired goals or sanctions for not doing so (Simkins 1993).

This article focuses on two experiments in granting increased school autonomy in Singapore since the mid-1980s: the independent schools scheme and the autonomous schools scheme. Selected secondary schools have been allowed greater autonomy in a government attempt to foster educational innovation and promote excellence in education. The article outlines the workings of the two schemes and argues that the Singapore experiments illustrate the desire by government to devolve to school administrators the authority and capacity to determine the ways in which schools may achieve government-determined outcomes, rather than unbounded operating autonomy. The Ministry of Education continues to exert a great deal of both direct and indirect influence over all schools. At the same time, it is not entirely clear whether the desired policy goals will be successfully attained. The discussion adds to the existing literature on school autonomy and the accompanying policy implications.

2 The advent of increased school autonomy: Independent schools and autonomous schools

The 1957 Education Ordinance included provisions for the registration of schools, managers, and teachers, and provisions governing the role and responsibilities of school management committees. The Ordinance was followed by regulations that gave government and government-aided schools equal recurrent funding and that stated that staff qualifications and salaries and fees should be the same in both types of school. In addition the Director of Education was given control over staff recruitment and dismissal in all schools. This marked the beginning of moves towards a highly centralized system of education. Over the next decade further steps included the standardization of subject syllabuses and educational structures across the various language streams, and the institution of common terminal examinations.

By the early 1980s, the tide of centralization had begun to turn. The then Director of Schools declared in 1982 that the Ministry of Education wanted to decentralize educational management from the Ministry headquarters to the schools. A major boost to the idea of freeing schools from centralized control was given by the then First Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, in 1985. He spoke of the need to allow more autonomy within schools, and of giving the right to appoint staff, devise school curricula, and choose

textbooks, while conforming to national education policies such as bilingualism and common examinations. Goh asserted that prestigious schools had lost some of their individuality and special character through centralized control.

In 1986, 12 school principals were invited to accompany the Education Minister to study the management of 25 "acknowledged successful schools" in the U.K. and U.S.A., and see what lessons could be learned for Singapore. The principals' report recommended greater autonomy for selected schools in order to "stimulate educational innovation" and "to enable schools to respond more promptly to the needs and aspirations of pupils and parents" (Ministry of Education 1987: ix).

Accepting the recommendations, Education Minister Tony Tan cited approvingly the findings of Chubb and Moe, who had concluded that U.S. public schools performed less well than private schools because they were sheltered from market forces. Tan stated that several well-established schools would be allowed to become independent schools. They would be given autonomy and flexibility in staff deployment and salaries, finance, management, and the curriculum. These schools were to serve as role models for other schools in improving the quality of education. They would also help set the market value for good principals and teachers by recruiting staff in a competitive market. Parents, teachers, and students would enjoy a wider variety of schools to choose from.

In 1987, three well-established boys' secondary schools announced their intentions to go independent in 1988. Their applications for independent status were approved by the Ministry of Education. They were followed a year later by two prestigious government-aided girls' secondary schools. To date, a total of eight secondary schools, all of which are well-established and prestigious, have become independent schools.

This move towards greater autonomy in school management must be viewed against the background of increasing government concern over the role of education in moulding Singapore's future. In the wake of the 1985–86 recession, an Economic Committee recommended, among other things, the education of each individual to his or her maximum potential, and the development of creativity and flexible skills in order to maintain Singapore's international economic competitiveness (Ministry of Trade and Industry 1986).

The need for creativity and innovation was repeated in a report by the Economic Planning Committee in 1991 (Ministry of Trade and Industry 1991).

Right from the introduction of the independent school scheme, there was intense public criticism over its elitist nature and the high fees charged by the schools. For example, monthly independent school fees ranged between 50 and 100 Singapore dollars in 1990, way above the S$ 10.50 fee in non-independent secondary schools (Tan 1996: 160). In response, the government established a Financial Assistance Scheme for financially needy students attending these schools. It also reaffirmed its commitment to providing large subsidies for basic education (*Parliamentary Debates,* 54, November 29, 1989, Col. 680). However, it insisted that parents had to be prepared to pay for high quality education (*Parliamentary Debates,* 54, November 29, 1989, Cols. 673–674).

In the wake of the 1991 general elections, which saw the governing party returned to power with a reduced parliamentary majority, the government took further steps to defuse public criticism of the independent schools scheme. First, it limited the number of independent schools, thus reversing its earlier announcement that it wanted to see more schools turn independent. Secondly, a government-appointed Cost Review Committee expressed concern over the high fees charged by independent schools and urged the schools to keep their fees affordable (Ministry of Trade and Industry 1993). Thirdly, in 1994 it established a new category of schools called autonomous schools. In the first

three years, 18 existing non-independent secondary schools, all of which had outstanding academic results, were designated as autonomous schools. Unlike the independent schools, which had to submit detailed proposals prior to gaining independent status, the autonomous schools had their new-found status thrust upon them by the Education Ministry. These schools were selected according to several criteria such as a sound track record in academic performance, sports, and aesthetics, evidence of capable school leadership, and geographic location. They were supposed to provide a high quality education while charging more affordable fees than independent schools. Parents and students were thus supposed to have a greater range of choices (Goh 1992a). One sees in the promotion of the independent schools scheme and the autonomous schools scheme the use of the language of market economics. Terms such as 'choice' and 'competition' are now commonplace in Education Ministry discourse, evidence of a growing marketisation of education in Singapore (Tan 1998).

3 The Framework of Independent Schools and Autonomous Schools

3.1 Management Structure

Non-independent secondary schools are divided into two kinds: government and government-aided. The former are run directly by the government while the latter are run by either a School Management Board or a School Management Committee whose members are approved by the Director of Education. These governing bodies have the authority to decide (subject to the provisions of the Education Act and the Grant-in-Aid Regulations) on such matters as fund-raising activities and the role and content of religious instruction. They may also appoint teachers who wish to become direct employees of the school (instead of being government employees). However, the government continues to pay these teachers salaries. Government-run as well as government-aided schools that have been designated as autonomous schools retain their previous statuses.

Following the implementation of the independent schools scheme, the School Boards (Incorporation) Act was passed in 1990. It provided for the establishment of governing boards in independent schools. Each board could promulgate its own constitution and could decide on the exact number of governors to be appointed. However, all such appointments had to be approved by the Education Minister. Other indications of strong Ministry influence permeated the Act. For instance, the Minister could vary or revoke the constitution in consultation with the board. The Act also allowed for the Minister to appoint the Director of Education to take over the running of schools if the Minister was satisfied that a board had "failed to conduct the school efficiently or that the education of pupils of the school [was] not being promoted in a proper manner" (Singapore 1991 a, Section 10 (1)). Typical powers entrusted to governing boards of independent schools include (a) the recruitment, promotion, dismissal, and disciplinary control of teaching and non-teaching staff; (b) the determining of student fees; and (c) the establishment of scholarships and endowments.

Another innovation in management structure in independent schools has involved the recruitment of more top- and mid-level administrators, many of whom are full-time administrators, to assist the principals. Each non-independent secondary school has a vice-principal. In addition, since the mid-1990s the Education Ministry has allocated a full-time school administrator to each non-independent school. In contrast, several independent schools have hired more than one deputy or assistant principal as well as public

relations officers, bursars, and estate officers. By hiring more administrators than are allowed non-independent schools, principals of independent schools may be able better to focus on providing professional and academic leadership (Tan 1996).

3.2 Finance

In launching the independent schools scheme, the Education Minister announced that the government would pay each independent school a per capita grant equivalent to the average cost of educating a secondary school student. All the independent schools remain heavily dependent on the government for a substantial portion of their annual recurrent funding (Tan 1996: 165). Another form of government financial assistance is through contributions to independent schools' endowment funds. The government matches donations to these funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to the first million dollars. Financial subsidies are also provided for the schools' building projects. The government provides 80 percent of these costs, 15 percent less its subsidy rate for aided schools. Furthermore, there are large subsidies for students awarded government scholarships as well as for students receiving money through the government-run Financial Assistance Scheme for financially needy students in independent schools (Tan 1996).

A major innovation in independent schools, and an important feature of independent schools vis-à-vis non-independent schools, is that the former are able to establish their own fees. All the eight independent schools have taken advantage of this autonomy by raising their fees upon turning independent. The monthly fees charged by independent schools are much higher than those in non-independent schools, ranging between S$100 and S$200, compared with a range of between S$15 and S$32.10 in autonomous schools, and between S$12 and S$14.10 in non-independent, non autonomous (NINA) schools. All the independent schools have raised their fees at least twice since turning independent. In fact, two of them have raised their fees four times within the span of five years.

The government stand on independent school fees has been ambivalent. At times, it has said that its responsibility does not extend to determining these schools' fees, but rather, ensuring that there are adequate financial assistance schemes available (Parliamentary Debates, 54, November 29, 1989, Col. 674; 54, February 22, 1990, Col. 1046). At other times, however, there are signs of government influence over the setting of fees. For instance, in 1993 the Permanent Secretary of the Education Ministry revealed that the Ministry had on several occasions objected to proposals for fee increases or had asked the schools to reduce their proposed fee increases (Davie 1993).

The independent schools heavy dependence on government funding is naturally accompanied by demands for accountability. For example, the schools, like their non-independent counterparts, need to submit their accounts for annual Ministry auditing. An independent school principal expressed his views on the situation thus:

> "The Ministry must have some say ... The government, after all, gives us two-thirds of our funds ... Therefore, what happens in the Ministry, what's decided in the Ministry, automatically impinges on the school ..." (Tan 1996: 166).

Autonomous schools receive more generous funding than NINA schools. The former each receive an extra 10 percent in annual per capita grants. In addition, autonomous schools may charge extra monthly fees up to a government-determined maximum and stay to receive matching government grants for part of these increased fees. Each autonomous school may thus receive between 11 percent and 21 percent more in per capita funding than a NINA school with the same student enrolment (Tan 1996).

The additional funds available to each autonomous school from these grants and fees are managed as an Autonomous School Fund (ASF), which is managed by a Fund Management Committee. This Committee comprises the principal, teacher representatives, School Management Committee members, as well as members of the community. Schools are bound by Ministry regulations to use the ASF money only for four main purposes: enrichment programmes to improve the quality of teaching and learning; purchase and maintenance of instructional resources and equipment; hiring of temporary administrative and support staff; and staff training and development. Data obtained from several autonomous schools indicate that spending priorities vary among schools and even within schools from year to year (Tan 1996). Similar to independent schools, the autonomous schools remain heavily dependent on government financial aid and are subject to detailed Ministry financial scrutiny.

3.3 Curriculum Policy

In some respects, all schools, whether NINA, autonomous, or independent, enjoy an equal amount of discretion to be innovative. For example, variations in teaching methodologies and approaches, as well as emphasis in pastoral care programmes and extra curricular activities, may be carried out relatively freely. In some other respects, independent schools have clearly been more innovative than non-independent schools as a result of the greater degree of leeway they have been allowed by the Education Ministry. First, a few independent schools have broken away from standard assessment practices such as the conducting of examinations in the middle of the school year. Secondly, several subjects such as Home Economics that are mandatory examinable subjects in non-independent schools have been made non-examinable in a few independent schools. Thirdly, independent schools have added new subjects or have scrapped subjects that are mandatory in non-independent schools. For instance, all the four independent boys schools have scrapped Design and Technology and have replaced it with their individually designed Computer Studies courses.

At the same time, though, not all the independent schools have been equally innovative. The Chinese High School has stood out as one of the more innovative independent schools. It is the only Singapore school to offer its own gifted education programme in direct competition with that offered by the Education Ministry in three other independent schools and one autonomous school (Lim 1997). The school designed and started the programme without any Ministry assistance. In addition, its programme differs from the Ministry's programme in several key respects. Another innovation undertaken by this school has been the offering of consultancy services to a Singapore international school that was established in the Chinese city of Suzhou in 1996. The services include curriculum design, teacher recruitment, and the establishment of a training infrastructure (Tan 1996).

It should be pointed out that non-independent schools would never be able to undertake initiatives such as those mentioned in the preceding paragraph. For one thing, they are forbidden to recruit extra staff. Secondly, they lack the necessary funds. Only an independent school would be able to marshal the necessary funds to recruit the extra staff and purchase the resources to start such a programme without any financial or personal assistance from the Education Ministry.

However, in some other respects the degree of choice and diversity that independent schools offer parents and students is still rather limited. The government still exerts a great deal of influence over all 147 secondary schools. In particular, the imposition of

national curricular requirements such as bilingualism, the teaching of moral education and common national examinations, restricts the scope for curricular innovation. None of the independent schools have moved away from a subject-based curriculum. In addition, the range of subjects offered in these schools is still largely identical to that in non-independent schools.

A second major factor inhibiting innovation is conservatism and resistance to change among some Education Ministry officials. Such attitudes often prove frustrating for school principals who desire greater autonomy from Ministry control, as manifested for instance in this statement by the principal of an independent school:

> "So the system on the one hand allows it [autonomy], on the other hand chokes it ... There's a gap here. You've got the rules in the middle, on one side. You've got the people interpreting them ... the inspectors. You've got the school principal, who's got to abide by the rules and be inspected by the inspector who works for the rules, because he's accountable to his bosses. So if this principal doesn't observe that rule fully, the inspector's got to account for that principal and give the answer up here ... And yet the Director on top is saying, "But if you read the rules, they've [referring to school principals] got a lot of freedom" (Tan 1996: 218).

There are thus tensions between centralizing tendencies in the Ministry on the one hand, and the desire by some principals to exercise their professional judgement on the other hand. The former Director of Education has recognized the existence of conservatism and resistance to change within the Ministry: "I suspect that decentralization efforts may have been resisted by some Ministry officials who are reluctant to yield authority or share their power" (Yip 1982: 6).

A third factor circumscribing the scope of curricular innovation in all secondary schools, not just independent secondary schools, in Singapore relates to the coupling of examination pressures with those induced by the annual ranking of all secondary schools. This ranking has been carried out since 1992 as part of a government attempt to foster keen competition among schools. The Prime Minister has stated the competition will improve the quality of education and provide parents and students with a wider range of choices. Schools will also be made more accountable, thus forcing them to improve their programmes (Goh 1992b).

Secondary schools are ranked on three main criteria. The first of these is a measure of student's overall results in national examinations. Next schools value-addedness is evaluated by comparing students' performance in national examinations with their examination scores upon entry to their respective secondary schools. In 1995 the Ministry began giving cash awards to the 40 secondary schools that were most highly ranked in the annual value-added league tables. The third criterion is a weighted index that measures a school's performance in the national Physical Fitness Test as well as the percentage of overweight students in the school. The publication of the league tables in the local press is supposed to provide parents and students with better information so that they might make intelligent and informed choices (Goh 1992b).

It is highly debatable whether fostering competition does improve the quality of education for all students and promote greater choice and diversity for parents and students. This is especially so in the Singapore context for a number of reasons. First of all, the competition among schools does not take place on a level playing field. The terms of competition are to a large extent dictated by the government. For instance, the number of independent schools and autonomous schools is determined by the government. Next, unlike independent schools, non-independent schools may not decide their enrolment figures or the number of teachers they wish to employ. Furthermore, not all schools may offer certain prestigious academic programmes such as the Gifted Education Programme.

The government only conducts such programmes in selected schools, all of which are either independent or autonomous. The Chinese High School was able to establish its own Gifted Education Programme in competition with that of the Ministry in large part because it was an independent school with ample financial resources. It is questionable to what extent all school principals can engage in activities such as the provision of consultancy services and the establishment of branch schools in other countries.

In other words, 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. Analysis of the ranking results for national examination scores from 1992 to 1996 reveals that the majority of the top 30 secondary schools have remained in this category over the five years. In particular, the top four school have remained the same over this period. It is therefore questionable to what extent increased competition actually helps to improve standards in all schools.

A second criticism is that competition leads some schools to focus narrowly on those outcomes that are relevant for public ranking and that may be useful for attracting parents and potential students. Such a criticism is especially relevant in a situation such as Singapore where one's performance in competitive examinations is a major determinant of educational and social mobility. Ample evidence for this criticism was provided during the controversy in 1995 over the teaching of English literature by some secondary schools. Some prestigious schools had decided to make the subject optional rather than compulsory for their graduating students. This was because English literature was widely perceived to be a subject in which it was difficult to do well during national examinations. These schools were wary of the potential consequences that students' less-than-ideal performance in English Literature might have on their positions in the annual ranking exercises (Nirmala & Mathi 1995). An independent school principal has spoken of the dilemma he faces in deciding curriculum policy for his students, of having to "compromise my subject offerings to try and find a middle ground, where I've got one eye on ranking and one eye on what I want to do with the kids" (Tan 1996: 243).

Another piece of evidence that points to the adverse effect of ranking schools is the tendency on the part of some schools to over-emphasize preparation for the national physical fitness test at the expense of the acquisition of skills in sports and games (Physical Education 1996). The growing stress on school accountability and the use of narrowly defined, easily quantifiable performance indicators has clearly had a detrimental impact on some schools. Far from promoting choice and diversity, heightened inter-school competition and rivalry may in fact work against these goals. The growing obsession among many school principals with maintaining or enhancing school ranking positions in the league tables does not augur well for curricular innovation (although some of the strategies that are used towards this end could no doubt be considered rather dubious innovations).

Another criticism is that the current performance indicators are not in fact very meaningful. The differences in performance between the top-ranked schools are often so minuscule as to be of little use to parents and students in helping them choose a particular school. Various observers have suggested refinements to the performance indicators in order to provide more information about the non-academic aspects of school life. However, these invariably involve quantifiable measures. Thus, those aims and goals of

education that are less amenable to quantification, such as moral development, continue to be given less emphasis.

3.4 Enrolment Policy

All secondary schools are assigned a new batch of students at the end of each school year a centralized system operated by the Education Ministry. Several factors such as individual students performance in the national primary school leaving examinations, students choices of secondary school, and the physical capacity of individual schools, determine the final outcomes of this annual exercise. Since not all schools are equal in prestige, there is tremendous pressure to secure admission to the more prestigious schools at all levels of the education system. When the Ministry gave the green light in 1987 for the establishment of independent schools, it announced that these schools would continue to admit students primarily on the basis of academic merit as determined by their results in the national primary school leaving examinations. Independent schools with affiliated primary schools could continue giving priority in admission to students from these affiliated schools.

The granting of greater autonomy in terms of enrolment policy has paved the way for several major innovations in independent schools. First, at least three independent schools took steps during the initial years of independent status to reduce their annual intakes. Secondly, at least six independent schools have reduced their class sizes compared to what they were before the schools became independent. Thirdly, at least seven schools have improved their teacher-student ratios relative to those in non-independent schools (Tan 1996). Greater autonomy in terms of both finance and staff recruitment has played an important role influencing independent schools' enrolment policy decisions. Now that these schools are free to charge higher fees than non-independent schools, and to hire as many teachers as they can afford, they are able to hire more teachers in order to improve teacher-student ratios.

Although independent schools enjoy a much greater degree of autonomy in enrolment policy vis-à-vis non-independent schools, the Education Ministry continues to play a heavy role, both direct and indirect, in influencing enrolment (Tan 1996). First, it continues to offer special academic programmes in several of the schools and to provide staffing, financial, and resource support for the conduct of these programmes. Secondly, it has on occasion admonished principals who have aroused public controversy through their enrolment decisions. Thirdly, the last two schools to turn independent have had to respond to public disquiet over the perceived elitism involved in allowing independent schools to reduce their class sizes. The principals of both these schools pledged to maintain their current class sizes at the same time that they announced their schools' intention to turn independent.

A major pressure bearing upon independent schools' enrolment policy decisions is the need to attract top-scoring students and maintain school prestige amid the current climate of intense inter-school competition that has been fostered by the Education Ministry. All the independent schools were already academically selective prior to turning independent. The advent of annual school league tables, along with government statements that independent schools are meant to nurture the future social and political elite of Singapore, has only intensified the drive towards academic selectiveness. For instance, two independent schools with affiliated primary schools have revised policies allowing automatic admission for students from affiliated schools who meet government-determined minimum entry scores for admission. Both these schools have faced a two-

pronged dilemma after turning independent. On the one hand, they have had to deal with the commitment to governing boards, alumni, and parents of students from affiliated primary schools in terms of preferential admission policies. On the other hand, there has been a need to tighten admission requirements so as to strengthen the schools' competitiveness in the annual league tables. As a result of more stringent admission policies, the percentage of students in these two independent schools that come from affiliated primary schools has dropped drastically in the past few years. One principal explained the rationale for his decision in the following manner:

> "... if I keep coming down in ranking, I'll get less of the better kids. Because parents' perception would be, 'It's not a good school.' ... So you're on a downward slide. So the only way you can turn it around ... is ... to the cohort ..." (Tan 1996: 200).

4 Conclusion

The Singapore government has attempted over the past decade to promote school autonomy through the independent schools scheme and the autonomous schools scheme. Among the supposed benefits are greater choice and diversity through innovation in schools, which in turn leads to excellence in educational provision. To date, there are eight independent schools and 18 autonomous schools out of a total of 147 secondary schools.

One key observation is that even while school heads been given greater operating autonomy in certain respects, the government continues to exert considerable influence over all schools. For example, schools are still bound by nationally prescribed examinations. In other words, schools are being given greater autonomy in order that they might better achieve government-dictated macro-policy objectives and goals. In view of the central roles that the government has assigned to the education system in supporting economic development and fostering social cohesion (Gopinathan 1995), it is highly unlikely that centralized control will ever be relaxed. It might also be argued that there are benefits to having a certain amount of centralized control schools. One of these is the need to ensure that all children enjoy similar access to a basic general education.

However, the imposition of centralized control may conflict with the promotion of choice and diversity. None of the independent schools or autonomous schools, not to mention NINA schools, have been able to stray from nationally prescribed examinations. Furthermore, intense interschool competition has led some school heads to focus narrowly on the attainment of results that are published in the annual school league tables.

The government has claimed that it plans to extend the lessons learned from the two schemes to all schools and to provide all school heads with more operating autonomy (*Parliamentary Debates*, 67, August 25, 1997, Col. 1623). Since 1997, 59 schools have been grouped into various "clusters", each of which is headed by a group senior principal. This particular individual has been provided with autonomy in financial and staff training decisions. In addition, the independent schools and autonomous schools have been held up as role models for other schools to emulate in terms of improving educational standards. This of course begs the question of whether what proves effective in these relatively well-established and prestigious schools can in fact be transplanted into other schools. The government's reasoning also ignores the part played by a selective student intake in schools' academic success. It is therefore not clear the extent to which the experience of the independent schools and autonomous schools can be valid lessons

for the bulk of Singapore secondary schools, struggling with less-than-ideal student ability levels.

Another worrying trend is the increasing stratification of schools, one which is being fuelled by the feverish pursuit among some school heads of ever-improving academic results and school league table rankings. As the top becomes ever more academically selective, there is also evidence that students from wealthier homes are overrepresented in these schools (Tan 1993). Another related danger, therefore, relates to the potential for social stratification. This latter issue has already caused concern among various academics (Chua 1996; Da Cunha 1997).

Although the government is aware of the potential political fallout from the public controversy over social inequalities, it shows no sign of reversing its experiments in school autonomy and its promotion of the language of market economics in education policy. If anything, it is likely to further encourage competitions among schools. This is part of its urging of all Singaporeans to constantly "stay ahead of the pack" in terms of global economics competitiveness (Lee 1994). Creativity and innovation have once again been stressed as the keys to economic competitiveness (*Parliamentary Debates,* 67, July 30, 1997, Col. 1403). At the same time, it has urged Singaporeans not to allow "our Children to be softened" by the alleged denigration of academic excellence and the promotion of a "soft approach to life" by liberals in the West" (Goh 1992b). Thus, for instance, it rejected a recent recommendation by an external curriculum review committee that school ranking should be scrapped (Ministry of Education 1998). Its response to criticism of the elitist nature of independent schools has been confused at times. For instance, it has tried to dispel the notion that non-independent schools are inferior to independent schools (*Parliamentary Debates,* 63, August 25, 1994, Col. 398). At the same time, though, it has stated that the independent schools are to be developed into "outstanding institutions, to give the most promising and able students an education matching their promise" (*Parliamentary Debates,* 59, January 6, 1992, Col. 18.

This article has raised several interesting policy implications and dilemmas. It is likely that the various policy tensions, such as the balance between centralization and autonomy, will continue to feature prominently in the Singapore Education system. At the same time, it is still not clear that the intended objectives initiatives such as the independent schools scheme and the autonomous schools scheme will be attained, and if so, at what cost to students, parents, and broader educational objectives.

Literatur

Angus, L.B. (1992). 'Quality' schooling, education policy and educational change in Australia. *Journal of Education Policy, 7*, 379–397.

Bolam, R. (1993). School-based management, school improvement and school effectiveness: Ove rview and implications. In C. Dimmock (Ed.), *School-based management and school effectiveness* (pp. 219–234). London: Routledge.

Brown, D.J. (1990). *Decentralization and school-based management.* London: The Falmer Press.

Bush, T., Coleman, M. & Glover, D. (1993). *Managing autonomous schools: The grant-maintained experience.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Caldwell, B. (1990). School-based decision-making and management: International trends. In J.D. Chapman (Ed.), *School-based decision-Making and management* (pp. 3–26) London: The Falmer Press.

Caldwell, B. & Spinks, J.M. (1992). *Leading the self-Managing school.* London: The Falmer Press.

Chua, B.H. (1996). Culturalisation of economy and politics in Singapore. In R. Robison (Ed.), *Pathways to Asia: The politics of engagement* (pp. 87–107). St. Seonards: Allen & Unwin.

Cummings, W.K. & Riddell, A. (1994). Alternative policies for the finance, control, and delivery of basic education. *International Journal of Educational Research, 21* , 751–776.

Da Cunha, D. (1997). *The price of victory: The 1997 Singapore general election and beyond.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Davie, S. (1993, September 22), Four independent schools to raise fees next year. *The Straits Times,* p. 19.

Department for Education and Employment. (1996). *Self-government for schools.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Goh, C.T. (1992a). Quality education. *Speeches, 16* (4), 1–4.

Goh, C.T. (1992b). *National Day rally 1992.* Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

Gopinathan, S. (1995). Singapore. In P. Morris & A. Sweeting (Eds.), *Education and development in East Asia* (pp. 79–103). New York: Garland Publishing.

Guthrie, J.W. (1993). School reform and the "New World Order". In S.L. Jacobson & R. Berne (Eds.), *Reforming education: The emerging systemic approach* (pp. 231–255). Thousands Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Hopkins, D., Ainscow, M. & West, M. (1994). *School improvement in an era of change.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Lee, H.L. (1994). The government, the people and the future. *Speeches, 18* (4), 15–19.

Lim, T.K. (Ed.). (1997). *Maximizing academic potential: The Chinese High School gifted programme in Singapore* . Times Academic Press.

Ministry of Education. (1987). *Towards excellence in schools: A report to the Minister of Education.* Singapore: Author.

Ministry of Education. (1998). *Ministry of Education's response to the External Curriculum Review Report.* (Internet press release http://www1.moe.edu.sg/press/980321.html).

Ministry of Trade and Industry. (1986). *Report of the Economic Committee. The Singapore economy: New directions* . Singapore: Author.

Ministry of Trade and Industry. (1991). *The Strategic Economic Plan: Towards a developed nation.* Singapore: Author.

Ministry of Trade and Industry. (1993). *Report of the Cost Review Committee.* Singapore: SNP Publishers.

Mohrman, S.A., Wohlstetter, P. (and associates). (1994). *School-based Management: Organizing for high performance.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Nirmala, M. & Mathi, B. (1995, May 24). Schools making Literature optional. *The Straits Times* , p. 3.

Parliamentary Debates Singapore: Official Report, various issues.

Physical education: Walking in thin line between fit, fat and fun. (1995, April 11). *The Straits Times* , p. 40.

Simkins, T. (1993). *The consequences of school-based management in England and Wales: A review of some evidence from an economic perspective.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April 12–16. (ERIC Document R eproduction Service No. ED 360740).

Singapore, Government of. (1991). *School Boards (Incorporation) Act (Chapter 284A).* Singapore: Government Printer.

Tan, E.T.J. (1996). *Independent schools and autonomous schools in Singapore: A study of two privatization initiatives aimed at promoting school innovation.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.

Tan, J. (1993). Independent schools in Singapore: Implications for social and educational inequalities. *International Journal of Educational Development, 13* , (3) 239–251.

Tan, J. (1998). The marketisation of education in Singapore: Policies and implications. *International Review of Education, 44,* 47–63.

Yip, J. (1982). *The role of the principal in a decentralised system of education Management.* Paper presented at Principal's Seminar on Principalship in a Decentralised System of Education Ma nagement, Singapore, November.