CHAPTER 11

Global–Local Dynamics in Expanding School Choice in Singapore

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SUMMARY This chapter examines the opening up of school choice in Singapore. The establishment of privately-funded international schools for the first time in Singapore in 2005 marked a significant and symbolic policy shift further away from highly centralised government control of education characteristic of Singapore. With this reform, families were able to choose these fully privately-funded schools (provided they could afford the fees) rather than the previous model of schools selecting students on the basis of 'merit'. This initiative potentially challenges the long-standing governing ideology of 'meritocracy' in Singapore. The chapter analyses the policy processes involved from the macro level of elite economic agencies, to the meso level of the Ministry of Education to the micro level of the new privately-funded international schools.

Introduction

The phenomenon of globalisation provides the broader context for this analysis of school choice in the Singapore setting. In an era of a 'global knowledge economy' education moves to centre stage in public policy making as it produces the human capital – in the form of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of students entering the workforce – to enhance national positioning in the global marketplace. Thus, international economic competition becomes a key driving force behind government-initiated education reform.

Globalisation has been defined in a multitude of ways, most of which point to the greater interconnectedness of the world. Bottery (2006) identifies many different forms of globalisation, including economic, cultural,
political and environmental, but he maintains that it is economic globalisation which sets the framework; it ‘captures the discourses’ of the other forms of globalisation. The ‘boom’ in school choice policies, in all of their variants from forging quasi-markets within public education sectors to growing for-profit private education sectors, sits firmly within the ideological framework of neo-liberalism accompanying globalisation. Globalisation, however, is not necessarily an omnipotent, top-down pressure forcing standardised policy ‘solutions’ on passive nation-states. Green (1999), amongst others, has emphasised that while globalisation has facilitated a transfer of common policy discourses across many countries, there is less evidence of convergence of specific structures and processes, as revealed in his comparative study of education policies in Europe and East Asia. In the reporting of his study, he identified Singapore as a ‘state developmentalist’ model of education and training (along with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) based on distinguishing contextual factors: ‘the specific forms of East Asian capitalism; the nature and role of the “developmental state”; the historical evolution of traditional Confucian and “familiaristic” patterns in East Asian culture and society; and the effects of Japanese colonialism and occupation in the “Tigers”’ (Green, 1999, p. 62). Thus, Green has brought to the fore the importance of localised, context-specific differences within an umbrella of globalisation, and such an approach is also the foundation of this current chapter. We argue here that in Singapore, the repositioning of education to serve the global knowledge economy has been a primary impetus for a symbolic shift in government policy on school choice through the mechanisms of simultaneous privatisation and internationalisation of secondary schooling.

The Singapore Context

Until 1956 there was no national system of education for Singapore, and education was conducted by private tutors, missionaries, clan associations and philanthropists. Schools were established along ethnic lines, fragmenting communities of Malays, Chinese and Indians. The 1956 Report of the All-Party Committee recommended a more integrative approach to education through parity of treatment for all and the provision of a common and nationally oriented curriculum for all schools. School registration was required under the 1957 Education Act.

After independence from Malaysia in 1965, there was a critical need for Singapore to achieve national survival, social cohesion and economic competitiveness. It was a new country with a small geographical size and population, and with no natural resources. Therefore, it would rely on its human resources to establish itself as a key player on the world scene. Education would be vital in this quest and the Government invested heavily in education, retaining tight control of a highly centralised system of public education (Low & Johnston, 2001). Promulgation of an ideology of meritocracy was a central principle. In a meritocracy, there was a single criterion for educational and career pathways — a legacy of Confucianism, its notion of meritocracy in the context of a culture of meritocracy, schools and parents choosing schools as a route to success.

In Singapore, formal education streaming for the last two years of secondary education begins with students from both Special and Normal (Technical) education tracks being sitting for the Singapore Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examinations. By contrast, Normal (Academic) students may diverge into General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examinations or may enter polytechnics or junior colleges as a route to university entry through the Singapore Certificate of Education Advanced Level examination.

The role of education focus in Singapore with the growth of the economy and the development of the country’s human capital, the Education Committee was formed to study the management and report, Towards Excellence: Independent Schools in Singapore (1992). The report recommended the introduction of independent schools, which today constitute a range of schools, from ‘independent’ schools, to ‘autonomous’ schools (Anglo-Chinese School, Raffles Institution) became ‘independent’ status status after they were granted autonomy and resources to offer a curriculum that is different from the ‘independent’ schools, to the ‘autonomous’ schools. ‘Autonomy’ and also competitiveness were exercised in the domain of curriculum and pedagogy.

It is important to note that they were still considered part of the public sector, but they signified a move toward institutional autonomy. How do the term ‘privatisation’ work (Low, 1997), and it was never the...
meritocracy was a central plank in Singapore’s survival strategy. Within this meritocracy, there was a social trust that academic merit is an acceptable criterion for educational and social selection. This approach to meritocracy is a legacy of Confucianism, and it contrasts with a stronger critique of the notion of meritocracy in the West. Cheng (1999, p. 2) maintained that ‘in a culture of meritocracy, schools will legitimately choose students, rather than parents choosing schools as a matter of rights’.

In Singapore, formal education is divided into six years of primary (with streaming for the last two years) and four years of secondary schooling. Secondary schools offer three streams – Special, Express and Normal. Students from both Special and Express streams complete their secondary education by sitting for Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O level) examinations at the end of Secondary Four. By contrast, Normal stream students may take a fifth year to reach O levels or may divert into vocational education. Post-secondary education occurs in junior colleges and polytechnics, with junior colleges being the route to university entry through Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A level) examinations.

The role of education in stimulating economic growth came into sharp focus in Singapore with the economic recession of 1985, and an Economic Committee was formed to make recommendations to stimulate economic growth. In recognition that education was the key to the development of the nation’s human capital, the following year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) sent 12 selected principals on a mission to the USA and United Kingdom to study the management and operation of 25 high-quality schools. Their report, *Towards Excellence in Schools*, recommended the establishment of ‘independent’ schools in Singapore. These schools were given flexibility in staff deployment and salaries, finance, management, and the curriculum, and they were to serve as role models to improve Singapore’s education system. In 1988, three well-established government-aided boys’ secondary schools (Anglo-Chinese School, The Chinese High School, and St Joseph’s Institution) became ‘independent’ schools. Another five schools gained ‘independent’ status over the next five years. Further, in 1992, several government schools were turned into ‘autonomous’ schools, with greater autonomy and resources to introduce curricular innovations along the lines of the ‘independent’ schools, while at the same time keeping the fees lower than ‘independent’ schools. ‘Autonomous’ schools would provide greater parental choice and also competition for the ‘independent’ schools (Fernandez, 1992).

It is important to note that ‘independent’ and ‘autonomous’ schools were still considered part of the public education sector, although arguably they signified a move towards privatisation with higher fees and greater institutional autonomy. However, the Government was careful to avoid using the term ‘privatisation’ with its connotations of profit-making (Tan et al, 1997), and it was never the Government’s intention to deregulate the whole
system, but to restrict the enhanced autonomy to 'top' schools with 'top' students, consistent with its meritocratic principles. It is also important to note that in the Singapore context, education is well resourced, and public schools are recognised as being of a high quality (Cheng, 1999).

In 2005, the public education sector consisted of government schools (often referred to as 'neighbourhood' schools) (254 in number), government-aided schools (65), 'autonomous' schools (25) and 'independent' schools (11). The private sector consisted of commercial schools (805), private kindergartens (500), foreign system (international) schools (36), special education schools (21), Islamic religious schools (9), private regular schools (2) and privately-funded schools (2). Regarding the latter, the opening of these first two privately-funded schools in 2005 represented a significant shift in policy on school choice. Until that point there were only two 'private regular schools' (Methodist and Adventist) and, further, Singaporean students were not permitted to enrol in international schools. With the two new schools, there was a transition to a more market-oriented model which features parent/student (customer) choice rather than the usual \textit{modus operandus} in Singapore of schools selecting students on the basis of merit. Below we report a study of these reforms.

**Singapore as a 'Global Schoolhouse': an analysis of the policy process**

This was a study of the policy process involved in establishing the first two privately funded international schools in Singapore. After Ball (1994), Taylor et al (1997), Vidovich (2002, 2007), and a growing number of other policy sociologists, for the purposes of this study 'policy' is defined broadly as a process which incorporates the factors influencing the origin of the policy, the characteristics of the policy text itself, and the subsequent effects and consequences of the policy in practice. Policy is a messy process in which the original intent by central authorities is negotiated, resisted and transformed into a multitude of (often contradictory) practices as it progresses through a trajectory from macro, to meso (intermediate level) to micro levels of an entire policy process. The subsections below present an analysis of the macro, meso and micro levels of the policy processes involved in establishing the first two privately funded international schools in Singapore, progressively over the time period 2001 to 2006.

Sources of data were documents, interviews and surveys. Interviews were conducted with six members of the policy elite from economic agencies and the Ministry of Education (coded E1 to E6) and with school managers of the two new privately funded schools (coded SM1 and SM2). Surveys were then conducted with 12 teachers (coded T1 to T12) in the privately funded schools and with 240 parents whose children attend these schools. Quotations are used in presenting the data to provide greater insights using the voices of the respondents. The data from parent surveys is presented in tabulated form (see Appendix for respondents in this category).

**Macro Level: strategic economic discourse**

Economic discourses prevailed in choice in Singapore in the period, the leading role played by the agencies. The two key policy Committee's New Challenges, (2003) and the Report of the (2002).

The Economic Review Prime Minister and Minister of was still recovering from recent and development of Singapore that the required the provision of services, economic gain, had hindered education. Therefore, it was in the public sector expertise and develop new products and set up privatization of government agencies and good reputations to go global and bolster Singapore's global economic policy agenda.

The ERC's report partly Singapore could be international a bigger slice of the US$2.2 trillion would be taken to make Singapore a diverse and distinctive mix of 2003, p. 4). The Minister for 'Global Schoolhouse' concept to an international arena:

Asians are on the move. themselves and their children pay large amounts to schools... Because of Singapore's Third World, our multi-education infrastructure needs a major economic opportunity to attract private education sector as a contributor to our economy.
tabulated form (see Appendix), given the significantly larger number of respondents in this category.

**Macro Level: strategic economic organisations (2001-2003)**

Economic discourses prevailed in macro-level policies on globalising school choice in Singapore in the period 2001-03, which was not surprising given the leading role played by the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) and its agencies. The two key policy documents were the Economic Review Committee’s *New Challenges, Fresh Goals – towards a dynamic, global city* (2003) and the *Report of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee* (Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee, 2002).

The Economic Review Committee (ERC), chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, was set up in 2001, when Singapore was still recovering from recession, to propose strategies to enhance growth and development of Singapore’s economy (ERC, 2003). The ERC report highlighted that the Singapore Government Agencies’ Charter, which required the provision of services for local residents, and not for export for economic gain, had hindered the growth of ‘exportable components’ such as education. Therefore, it was recommended that the country should ‘unlock the public sector expertise and allow the private sector to tap on them to develop new products and services’ by ‘pushing on with corporatization and privatization of government agencies so that they can build on their expertise and good reputations to go global’ (ERC, 2003, p. 18). Thus, deregulation to bolster Singapore’s global economic positioning was firmly on the national policy agenda.

The ERC’s report particularly identified education as an area where Singapore could be internationally competitive, and urged moves to capture a bigger slice of the US$2.2 trillion world education market. Therefore, steps would be taken to make Singapore into a ‘Global Schoolhouse that offers a diverse and distinctive mix of quality education services to the world’ (ERC, 2003, p. 4). The Minister for Trade and Industry further explained the ‘Global Schoolhouse’ concept in terms of relocating ‘choice’ from a national to an international arena:

> Asians are on the move. Over 2 billion people want a better life for themselves and their children. ... Many are therefore prepared to pay large amounts to secure the best education for their children. ... Because of Singapore’s position between the First and the Third World, our multi-lingual facility and our excellent public education infrastructure, this growing education market in Asia is a major economic opportunity for us. Building on the strengths of our public education sector, we will nurture the growth of the private education sector and make education an important contributor to our economy. ... Our objective is to make
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Singapore a ‘Global Schoolhouse’, providing educational programmes of all types and at all levels from pre-schools to postgraduate institutions, that attracts an interesting mix of students from all over the world. (Minister for Trade and Industry, 2003)

There was a high degree of synergy between the recommendations of the ERC’s New Challenges, Fresh Goals – towards a dynamic, global city and the contemporaneous Report of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review. The latter was established in 2002 (during the period of the ERC’s review), was chaired by the Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education, and included broad representation from the political, education, private and public sectors. It maintained that in addition to attracting foreign students, privately funded international schools could contribute to Singapore’s education system by providing greater diversity and choice for Singaporean students as well as adding sources of ideas and innovative practices in education. These schools could also ‘cater to children of returning Singaporean expatriates who may prefer an alternative curriculum that they are more familiar with or prepared for. They could also cater to those whose parents otherwise send them overseas for secondary/Junior College education’ (Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee, 2002, p. 29).

The Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee did acknowledge that privately funded schools could introduce less meritocratic practices since admission would partly depend on ability to pay, and therefore elitism and social segregation would be an inevitable development. Nonetheless, ‘on balance, the Committee supports allowing 2-3 privately-funded schools. It is envisaged that they will be operating at the periphery of the education system, catering to about 1-2% of the cohort’ (Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee, 2002, p. 29). Several conditions, however, were laid down by the Committee, including that the MOE’s policies on bilingualism and National Education (citizenship education) must be adhered to, and that a minimum of 50% of Singaporean students must be enrolled in the privately funded schools.

Feedback on the Committee’s recommendations was sought from a wide range of national and international stakeholders including teacher, business, parent and student groups, and visits were also undertaken to schools and systems in the USA, United Kingdom, China and Hong Kong. These consultations revealed broad support for privately-funded international schools as a source of innovation and diversity, and to promote Singapore as an ‘education hub’. However, consistent with the anticipation of the Committee, some concerns of elitism and socially differentiated treatment of students were raised in feedback.

In parliament, the Minister for Education emphasised that ‘changing our education system is a bit like changing the tyres on a car that is moving down the road. It is a hazardous business. It is a bumpy ride for the passengers, very dangerous for the driver, even more dangerous for the one trying to change the tyres’ comments reflect the anxious education policies which had educational outcomes in a global international ranking in the Science Study). In Parliament Industry and Education reply continue to maintain the two opportunity, and he assured schools would not receive further offered scholarships as any cap place in the best public school schools policy was very limited Secondary Education Report 2002.

With the combination of towards a dynamic, global city Singapore’s global economic priorities by the Ministry of Trade and the Economic Development (STB). The new role planning privatisation and internationalising the MOE, underlines the underpinning education policy pushing for an expansion of these two or three recommend existing private education or privately funded schools were agencies envisaged the private function of securing the confidence could offer quality-controlled (counselling).

Interviews with key policy insights, in particular about the meritocratic ideology in Singaporean schools. Given is selected for the prestigious ‘in the public education system’ exercise choice, and a rapidly turning to overseas education Singapore were raised by the was observed that ‘they [Sing they can’t make it because we to Australia, England and An that the EDB [Economic Dev...
trying to change the tyres' (Parliamentary Debates, 2002, p. 96). These comments reflect the anxieties about risks associated with changing education policies which have been recognised as producing quality educational outcomes in a global context (with, for example, Singapore’s top international ranking in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). In Parliament, the Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education reiterated that the Singapore Government would continue to maintain the two important principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity, and he assured parliamentarians that the privately funded schools would not receive funding from the Government and would not be offered scholarships as any capable students would always be able to secure a place in the best public schools. Overall, opposition to the privately funded schools policy was very limited, and the Review of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Report was endorsed by the Singapore Parliament in November 2002.

With the combination of the ERC’s New Challenges, Fresh Goals – towards a dynamic, global city and the Review of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Report, the important role for education in securing Singapore’s global economic positioning had been ‘driven home’, especially by the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) and two of its key agencies – the Economic Development Board (EDB) and Singapore Tourism Board (STB).[1] The new role played by these agencies in championing the privatisation and internationalisation of education, over and above the role of the MOE, underlines the increasingly strong economic rationale underpinning education policies in Singapore. These agencies were also pushing for an expansion of the number of privately funded schools (beyond the two or three recommended by the MOE), largely out of concern that existing private education organisations were not regulated, whereas new privately funded schools would be registered by the MOE. Economic agencies envisaged the privately funded schools performing an important function of securing the confidence of international customers that Singapore could offer quality-controlled education.

Interviews with key policy players at the macro level offered further insights, in particular about the perceived problems with the long-standing meritocratic ideology in Singaporean education and the high standards in Singaporean schools. Given that only the most ‘meritorious’ students were selected for the prestigious ‘independent’ schools (albeit still seen as part of the public education system), many parents and students were unable to exercise choice, and a rapidly growing number of Singaporean students were turning to overseas education. Concerns about the subsequent loss to Singapore were raised by the policy elite during interviews. For example, it was observed that ‘they [Singapore students] were all going away because they can’t make it because we are so meritocratic ... So they were all going to Australia, England and America and they were all doing well. So I think that the EDB [Economic Development Board] felt we should do more in this
area’ (E6). At the same time it was increasingly difficult for international students to gain entrance to Singapore’s public schools because of the strong academic focus, which was seen to act against prospective foreign students seeking admission. One member of the policy elite noted that ‘if we are looking at privately funded schools that are offering programmes that are not hung up on just academic results, but looking at wider issues of strength in other areas, then we would be able to accept international students’ (E5).

Another respondent highlighted the benefits of diversity for Singapore: ‘The way going forward for Singapore is to have different types of Singaporeans, experiencing different types of education, because we believe that as the world goes forward there is no single way that is the right education’ (E6).

Overall, at the macro level, policy to establish privately funded schools was seen as ‘a good compromise between taking steps towards privatisation, but also ensuring that national objectives for the education of Singaporeans were still met’ (E4). Thus, the concept of a ‘Global Schoolhouse’ was emerging as a significant new policy agenda driven by a combination of global economic imperatives and local issues.


The selection and registration of the first privately funded schools during 2003 and 2004 was the role of the MOE at the meso level of the policy trajectory. In August 2003, the MOE invited proposals for registration of privately funded schools. The MOE website emphasised the importance of social cohesion: ‘privately-funded schools should meet certain requirements to ensure that all Singaporean students continue to learn and interact with one another in an environment that nurtures a Singaporean spirit and character’ (Ministry of Education, 2003). In January 2004, the MOE reported the receipt of five proposals for privately funded schools. According to the MOE:

the proposals were evaluated based on the quality of the programmes, the credibility of the operators and whether they would be a valuable addition to the education landscape ... the strength of the management team, the coherence of their curriculum offerings, and the quality of education they can potentially offer to their students. (Ministry of Education, 2004)

Although the selection process for the privately funded schools was conducted by a wholly MOE review panel (without representation by the MTI or its key agencies of EDB or STB), the EDB did approach some of the top public secondary schools to encourage their application. Further, the EDB offered capital loans to such schools to support this venture, reflecting its ‘engineering’ role in the enactment of the policy.

In April 2004, the MOE announced the approval of the proposals for privately funded schools submitted by two of the original ‘independent’ (public sector) schools: the Anglo (later amalgamated with a Junior School International (ACSI) and Both institutions would develop schools at ‘arm’s length’ from schools would be clearly identified with their rich histories, high alumni networks. This was a proposal rejected by the MOE school, Raffles Institution, which school for a 100% foreign enrolment model, including paying the parent its ‘brand’ and facilities. The education was actively supported abroad: ‘Raffles would be the up It would be like Eton or Harrow. However, the MOE preferred a international schools remained catered for Singaporeans as well.

Interviews offered further between MTI (macro level) and ‘world views’. The limited role of forging privatisation and importers: ‘the Ministry of B giving the rubber stamp to the first was to provide “light touch” to teachers and programmes’ (E2). very optimistic about the new p appeared to be less enthusiastic about the MOE’s stance:

The MOE has excess capacity to the foreign students global perspective. MOE prefers to have more of the MOE and the MOE. According to another respondent, actually really not interested in not in their charter’ (E5). The other respondent, who highlighted Singapore were never designed.
(public sector) schools: the Anglo-Chinese School and Chinese High School (later amalgamated with a Junior College to form Hwa Chong Institution). Both institutions would develop separate privately funded international schools at ‘arm’s length’ from the parent school. These privately funded schools would be clearly identified as international schools: Anglo-Chinese School International (ACSI) and Hwa Chong International School (HCIS). With this development, moves towards enhancing both privatisation and internationalisation were symbolically brought together, and ‘piggybacked’ on the established reputations of prestigious public (independent) schools with their rich histories, high academic standing and strong (international) alumni networks. This was a strategy of ‘brand extension’. One notable proposal rejected by the MOE was that from another elite ‘independent’ school, Raffles Institution, which proposed a model of a privately funded school for a 100% foreign enrolment which would be much more clearly differentiated from the parent school and would operate on a franchise-like model, including paying the parent company over S$2 million for the use of its ‘brand’ and facilities. The idea of privatising the Raffles ‘brand’ of education was actively supported by the president of Singapore Education International, a new association for advancing education businesses venturing abroad: ‘Raffles would be the ultimate brand name for Singapore education. It would be like Eton or Harrow of Britain going abroad’ (Davie, 2003). However, the MOE preferred a more hybrid model where privately funded international schools remained connected to their ‘parent’ public schools and catered for Singaporeans as well as international students.

Interviews offered further insights, particularly into the tensions between MTI (macro level) and MOE (meso level) in terms of their different ‘world views’. The limited role of the MOE in the multi-agencies approach to forging privatisation and internationalisation was explained by several respondents: ‘the Ministry of Education had a role to play only in terms of giving the rubber stamp to the programmes’ (E5), and ‘the role of the MOE was to provide “light touch” regulations in the area of logistical needs, teachers and programmes’ (E2). While politicians and corporate leaders were very optimistic about the new policy direction, the response from the MOE appeared to be less enthusiastic. A member of the policy elite was critical of the MOE’s stance:

The MOE has excess capacity in the public school system to admit the foreign students, but they are not there yet in setting the global perspective. MOE has not been encouraging. ... STB would prefer to have more of the privately-funded schools. (E2)

According to another respondent from an economic agency: ‘they [MOE] are actually really not interested in the economic aspect because they think it is not in their charter’ (E5). These views were contested by an MOE respondent, who highlighted three points. First, government schools in Singapore were never designed to increase the intake of foreign students, as
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their top priority was to serve Singapore citizens with quality education. Second, there was the issue of the MOE’s efforts in trying to keep smaller class sizes and student–teacher ratios, and this would be difficult with an increased intake of international students. Third, the MOE was concerned about how to structure the school fees of international students. One MOE respondent particularly highlighted the clash of ideologies between MTI (and its economic agencies) and MOE:

MTI is very much driven by the economic imperatives ... for MOE, not to say that we are not supportive, but MOE is driven by much larger considerations, some are not immediately obvious in terms of dollars and cents ... MTI agencies only look at the point ‘We can earn money, come on, let’s earn money’. (E5)

The restricted role of the MOE in the policy enactment underlines an increasing tension between preserving traditional educational values but in a climate of needing to embrace the economic and strategic pressures of globalisation.


The first two privately funded international schools – Anglo Chinese School International (ACSI) and Hwa Chong International School (HCIS) – opened in January 2005. In early 2006, data was collected from managers (interviews), teachers (surveys) and parents (surveys) at each school to obtain perspectives from the micro level of the policy trajectory.

It is noteworthy that school fees for the privately funded schools were up to 10 times that charged by ‘independent’ schools, which in turn were up to 10 times that charged by government schools. Early enrolments in the newly established privately funded schools fell short of expectations – ACSI enrolled 150 students and HCIS enrolled 85 students – in 2005. Both schools received a higher proportion of local to international applicants than the intended 50/50 split, but anticipated that the latter would increase with more active marketing efforts. Despite the lower than expected numbers, one school manager pointed out that she had admitted students from 15 different countries during the course of the first two years, and the other claimed, ‘it is like bringing globalisation to the doors of Singapore itself instead of sending students for exchange programmes’ (SM2). These observations point to the beginnings of diversifying the student mix sought in the policy intent.

Both school managers highlighted the mounting demands from parents in Singapore for choice. One manager commented that for a long time the Singapore education system was very centralised; highly structured with a one-size-fits-all approach’ (SM1). Then, with the introduction of the privately funded schools, suddenly there was enhanced diversity and choice:

All your life you have been given chicken rice, you can make it yourself. If you like to try... So it is a choice if you have a 

School managers of both ACSI and HCIS parents choosing privately funded alternative curricula (ACSI of Secondary Education and International General Certificate Placement/Foundation Program internationalised and innovative; HCIS interviews with school managers ‘freedoms’ enjoyed by privately achieving students to ‘fast track’)

In addition to interviews with a total of 12 teachers from the two schools at ACSI) completing new schools in which they were similar views across the two schools to the introduction of the programmes consistent with the data from the vast majority identified globalisation international ‘education hub’ respond succinctly summarise.

Globalisation and popular citizenship; Asia’s rapid economic investment and local schools government initiatives to provide opportunities with economic ‘waterway’ to private entrepreneurship

As with the school managers, the diversity in the curriculum, the primary attractions of the new public schools.

Several teachers identified enjoyed a high degree of flexibility competition from the mainstream school-based scholarships of affordable alternative conduits; one leader respondent summed up entry, the impact of the private Singaporeans will still be studies. The respondent raised concerns about orientation of the privately
All your life you have been fed plain white rice, now I am offering you chicken rice, you can afford to pay for the chicken rice, would you like to try? ... So it is a matter of choice ... you have an alternative to the existing systems. (SM1)

School managers of both ACSI and HCIS believed that the main reasons for parents choosing privately funded schools were that they could provide alternative curricula (ACSI offers the International General Certificate of Secondary Education and International Baccalaureate, and HCIS offers the International General Certificate of Secondary Education and Advance Placement/Foundation Programme), a wider range of activities, and also an internationalised and innovative environment for the students (Lee, 2005). Interviews with school managers also revealed that another of the ‘new freedoms’ enjoyed by privately funded schools was flexibility to allow high-achieving students to ‘fast track’ through grade levels.

In addition to interviews with two privately funded school managers, a total of 12 teachers from the two schools (32% of teachers at HCI and 14% of teachers at ACSI) completed a survey about their perspectives on these new schools in which they worked. Teacher respondents expressed very similar views across the two schools. Their opinions about the factors that led to the introduction of the privately funded schools were also relatively consistent with the data from other levels of the policy trajectory. That is, the vast majority identified globalisation and the development of Singapore as an international ‘education hub’ as the primary influences. One teacher respondent succinctly summarised these factors:

Globalisation and popularisation of the concept of global citizenship; Asia’s rapid economic growth; trans-Pacific investment and local schools gaining international acclaim; government initiatives to provide globally-oriented education opportunities with economic goals; and private schools as a ‘waterway’ to private enterprise and consumer dollars. (T10)

As with the school managers, the vast majority of teachers maintained that diversity in the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment were the primary attractions of the new schools, and this set them apart from the public schools.

Several teachers identified concerns. While the privately funded schools enjoyed a high degree of flexibility to attract foreign students, they faced competition from the mainstream public schools, where the availability of school-based scholarships offered high-achieving foreign students an affordable alternative conduit to the Singapore education system. One teacher respondent summed up the feelings: ‘with the high barrier [cost] of entry, the impact of the privately-funded schools will be minimal as most Singaporeans will still be studying in government schools’ (T1). Another respondent raised concerns about corporate governance and the business orientation of the privately funded schools, as well as insecurity of
employment which he associated with market-driven forces characteristic of
globalisation.

On the question of the impact the teachers thought the privately funded
schools would have on the educational development of Singapore, responses
suggested that these schools could help overcome the rigidity of Singapore's
centralised structures and high stress environment resulting from the
overemphasis on academic competition and achievement. One respondent
explained:

[privately-funded schools] will create demand on schools to
develop their own distinctive characteristics to attract and retain
local and overseas students ... This will diversify the educational
provisions found in Singapore ... equalise the qualification divide
and bring upon a more laissez-faire approach to government
legislation of education in Singapore. (T10)

Parents – the customers – at the two privately funded international schools
responded to a survey about their initial views. The whole parent population
of each school was sent the survey and the response rate was 71% at HCI
and 68% at ACSI. That is, there were 132 respondents from HCI and 108
respondents from ACSI. The survey used a five-point Likert scale and
contained a series of items distributed across two key themes: reasons for
choosing the school and expectations of future developments in the school.
Patterns of parental perspectives were relatively similar across the two schools
(see tables in the Appendix). Parents at both schools identified key reasons
for their choice as the broad education offered (beyond a purely education,
smaller class sizes, the presence of international students, and a
curriculum which was different from that of MOE schools (in particular the
International Baccalaureate at ACSI was attractive to parents). At both
schools parents had high expectations for future developments in the school
to focus on more individual attention to their children, student self-
discipline, academic rigour, additional subjects and more international
teachers. Although the patterns were similar at the two schools the particular
percentages in each response category varied. Overall satisfaction was high at
both schools (85% at ACSI and 70% at HCI).

Altogether, then, at the micro level of the policy trajectory, within the
two new privately funded schools, school manager, teacher and parent
respondents might be described as 'cautiously optimistic' about this
development in enhancing school choice in Singapore.

Discussion

In expanding school choice in Singapore in the early 2000s,
internationalisation was conflated with privatisation – both relatively new
policies in the historically highly centralised and government-controlled
Singapore schooling sector – to bolster Singapore's position in the global
economic marketplace. Opening the introduction of the first two private
symbolic (signalling engagement ideology) and instrumental (and
potentially wider application).

Triangulation of the data
meso, to micro levels of the
consistency in identifying: policy
globalisation; policy texts as the
'customisation' of Singaporean
enhancing customer choice, esp.
was only limited disquiet about
the initial uptake of this choice
being identified as a key factor.
trajectory data presented in this
the time (2001-2006) and that
t meantime, some tentative met.
study may provide 'food for
contexts, as outlined below.

Navigating Ideological Ten
From the literature (e.g. Bose
associated with an economic

efficiency and effectiveness as the
quality of education for all, an
global marketplace. In Singap
education policy in the strugg
According to Tan et al (200)
cornerstone of schooling 
competitiveness was the man
establishment of two privately
economic ideology was further
lack of strong contestation of 
economic discourses was not also evident; in particular, dis

equity and social justice, creati

First, there was evidence of
centred ideologies prevailing w.
trajectory, and the strong eco
the macro level. The MTI and
the MOE could be seen as ideol
gy as it focused on pr
Second, there was evidence of
the powerful meritocratic ide
economic marketplace. Opening up school choice in Singapore through the introduction of the first two privately funded international schools was both symbolic (signalling engagement with globalisation and its associated market ideology) and instrumental (an experimental reform of limited scale prior to potentially wider application).

Triangulation of the data along the policy trajectory, from macro, to meso, to micro levels of the policy process, shows a high degree of consistency in identifying: policy origins as a reaction to economic globalisation; policy texts as emphasising the need for ‘differentiation’ and ‘customisation’ of Singaporean education; and subsequent practices/effects as enhancing customer choice, especially in terms of curriculum diversity. There was only limited disquiet about potential elitism and social stratification, but the initial uptake of this choice option was lower than expected, with cost being identified as a key factor. It is important to emphasise that the policy trajectory data presented in this chapter was located at a particular point in time (2001-2006) and that policy dynamics will continue to evolve. In the meantime, some tentative meta-level themes to emerge from the current study may provide ‘food for thought’ in Singapore and possibly other contexts, as outlined below.

Navigating Ideological Tensions

From the literature (e.g. Bosetti, 2005), enhancing school choice is highly associated with an economic ideology in education which emphasises efficiency and effectiveness as well as innovation, purportedly to increase the quality of education for all, and hence national economic positioning in the global marketplace. In Singapore, an economic ideology has underpinned education policy in the struggle for ‘survival’ since independence in 1965. According to Tan et al (2001, p.13) ‘economic instrumentalism was a cornerstone of schooling provision in Singapore, and economic competitiveness was the major national project’. In 2005, with the establishment of two privately funded international schools, arguably, an economic ideology was further entrenched. Although generally there was a lack of strong contestation of the policy within Singapore, the hegemony of economic discourses was not complete, as other competing discourses were also evident; in particular, discourses around educational values, meritocracy, equity and social justice, creating a web of potential ideological tensions.

First, there was evidence from the data of tensions between education-centred ideologies prevailing within the MOE at the meso level of the policy trajectory, and the strong economic ideology of the MITI and its agencies at the macro level. The MITI was forging an international student market, but the MOE could be seen as a site of resistance to a pervading economic ideology as it focused on providing quality education to local students. Second, there was evidence of some level of public reluctance to relinquish the powerful meritocratic ideology embedded in Singaporean society in order
to allow families to choose privately funded schools (if they were able to afford the fees). A meritocratic ideology had been a 'social cement' in Singapore, holding together the different ethnic groups since independence, and therefore, the Government found it necessary to reiterate that choice would operate only at the margins (2% of the cohort) to preserve meritocratic principles. Third, there was evidence of concerns about the privately funded international schools policy intensifying elitism and social stratification, with implications for the ideologies of equity and social justice. Less wealthy parents could not afford to choose such schools and therefore a combination of financial and cultural capital would operate to exclude certain 'customers', leading to a re-Balkanisation of society, along class rather than necessarily ethnic lines.

On the issue of equity and social justice, Paquette (2005) has highlighted the equity challenge of enhanced choice, especially the use of public funding to support private schools, which he asserts is immoral and unethical. While the privately funded schools in Singapore would not receive direct government financial support, they could receive loans and marketing assistance as well as the benefits of 'brand extension' from their parent public schools. It will be interesting to observe if in the future the Singapore Government decides that it needs to partially fund private schools to render choice more viable for a larger proportion of the Singaporean population, and to be more attractive in the international marketplace with lower fees. Also, Olssen et al (2004) juxtapose individual freedom to choose against social justice, and they argue that choice leads to 'covert social selection'. In Singapore overt social selection already occurs in the mainstream with 'top' public schools choosing 'top' students and teachers, as well as having access to extra resources from fees and sponsorship. Therefore, the introduction of privately funded international schools would add a 'covert social selection' dimension, exacerbating social stratification.

Thus, in Singapore's policy of enhancing school choice through privatisation and internationalisation, economic discourses clearly dominated, but there was also evidence of other ideologies (educational values, meritocracy, equity and social justice) in potential tension. One might argue that the Government was attempting to navigate these tensions by taking a hybrid approach to policy changes, thereby reducing the perceived risks – both economically and socially – as explored in the next section.

Hybridisation and Risk Management

Hybridisation has been a feature of contemporary 'global' education policy in many countries, although it takes different forms in different locales. For example, 'third way' policies (from the UK) purportedly marry neoliberalism and social democracy, although critics argue that these ideologies are irreconcilable. Public–private partnerships in education are a manifestation of the 'third way', and the literature reveals a burgeoning series of arguments for and against rehearsed here. In Singapore, feature of the school choice of privately funded schools and a formalised collaboration by resources drawn from each school linked agencies. The governance of these new schools, but a partial.

In addition to public–private global and local level foci around schools, in terms of student (students) and curriculum (in Baccalaureate and Internation as well as national policies on curriculum 'packages' which curriculum innovation, such as the expense of being answer to these schools search for int market place.

Sharpe & Gopinathan (2012) ideal-type national responses when they describe reforms in as a hybrid between a 'neo-F' with concerns to increase state emphasis on creativity, innov that this hybridity is a distinct landscape. It is clear from the major national strategy, and schools initiative not only hybridisation to a new level.

Such educational hybrid management strategy in terms stability and quality reputation marked swing towards private given that they are relatively a highly centralised educational customers from other Asian centrally-controlled public schools funded schools in terms of all customers being prepared to forgo deeply embedded meta relevant to social stability. Bild in approaching the privately-funded margins has been a litmus tes
of arguments for and against such hybridisation, although they will not be rehearsed here. In Singapore, public–private partnerships were a significant feature of the school choice reforms. The new arrangements between the privately funded schools and their parent public school partners represented a formalised collaboration between the public and private sectors, with resources drawn from each school, alumni, private investors and government-linked agencies. The government was not prepared to give full autonomy to these new schools, but a partial or ‘regulated autonomy’ instead.

In addition to public–private partnerships, there was a hybridisation of global and local level foci around Singapore’s privately funded international schools, in terms of student composition (international as well as national students) and curriculum (international curricula such as the International Baccalaureate and International General Certificate of Secondary Education as well as national policies on bilingualism and citizenship education). There is an irony, however, that the two privately funded schools have adopted curriculum ‘packages’ which originate elsewhere as they work to achieve curriculum innovation, such that local (Singapore) controls are reduced at the expense of being answerable to authorities outside of the country, as these schools search for international legitimacy or currency in the global marketplace.

Sharpe & Gopinathan (2002) draw on Brown and Lauder’s (1997) two ideal-type national responses to meeting the ‘crisis’ of global competition when they describe reforms in Singapore towards the end of the last century as a hybrid between a ‘neo-Fordist’ emphasis on market competition, along with concerns to increase standards on the one hand, and a ‘post-Fordist’ emphasis on creativity, innovation and teamwork on the other. They argue that this hybridity is a distinct feature of the Singaporean education landscape. It is clear from this study that hybridisation continues to be a major national strategy, and we would suggest that the privately-funded schools initiative not only represents another example, but it takes hybridisation to a new level.

Such educational hybridisation in Singapore might be seen as a risk management strategy in terms of shoring up economic viability, social stability and quality reputation, simultaneously. Economically, a sudden marked swing towards privately funded schools could be very risky, especially given that they are relatively unfamiliar to local Singaporeans accustomed to a highly centralised education system, and also relatively unfamiliar to customers from other Asian countries where there is a strong history of centrally-controlled public schooling. Economic viability of the privately funded schools in terms of attracting Singaporean students is dependent on customers being prepared to accept the significant extra cost involved and to forgo deeply embedded meritocratic principles. Meritocracy is also highly relevant to social stability. Both providers and customers have been cautious in approaching the privately-funded schools option so that privatisation at the margins has been a litmus test for the broader social and emotional response
Lesley Vidovich & Yap Meen Sheng

from the community. Regarding quality reputation, preserving the high quality of Singapore’s public education, which is recognised internationally, and transferring that reputation to the new privately funded schools by ‘brand extension’, has been an important risk management strategy.

Thus, in developing school choice through privatisation and internationalisation, the policy elite cautiously configured hybrids of new policies with existing policies so as not to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’, especially in terms of quality educational outcomes and social cohesion.

Global–Local Dynamics

We draw towards a conclusion by returning to the phenomenon of globalisation with which we began. Arguably this is a common stimulus for accelerating school choice policies across many countries, and increasingly there are both national and international dimensions to these choices. However, to suggest that Singapore’s move to enhance school choice through privatisation and internationalisation is yet another example of a nation-state ‘marching to the drum’ of neo-liberal global trends would be to oversimplify. Olssen et al (2004) maintain that neo-liberal policies in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have involved reducing bureaucratic constraints on ‘free’ choice, and in the process reducing the state’s responsibility for provision and maintenance of quality public education. However, Singapore continues to invest strongly in education and to showcase its high-quality public sector in the international arena. In fact, the privately funded schools have been identified as ‘second chance’ (or second choice) institutions for those Singaporean and international students who are not selected for the most elite public schools.

This study points to Singapore as a site of active engagement with globalisation, but it also points to the cautious negotiation of global–local dynamics. That is, Singapore has tailored its policy of enhancing school choice through privatisation and internationalisation to its localised context, which relates to a number of factors: first, its history of colonisation by Britain and Japan and then its separation from Malaysia, providing a strong impetus for nation building in terms of both economic survival and social cohesion; second, its strategic location between East and West and between First and Third Worlds; third, its high investment in education as an engine for economic growth; and fourth, its strong public education sector, which can offer customers superior quality assurance compared to existing private providers. Thus, in analysing Singapore’s position within ‘global’ trends in school choice policies, we must examine closely localised contextual factors. As we focus on the dialectic between ‘the global’ and ‘the local’ (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), we are able to examine the ‘agency’ that nation-states, organisations and individuals can exert in actively negotiating policies and practices appropriate to different settings. Global policy trends are clearly evident in Singapore, but with specific context.

As we reflect on a variety of case studies, we have an opportunity for an uncritical and passive policy towards policy convergence. We urge us to examine more choice policies because ‘at the core of the issue, it is what constitutes the good school question directs the goals and the appropriate role of school choice’.

Note

[1] In addition to the EDB and oriented agencies also create Singapore’s education, subject Standards, Productivity and Division (Singapore Edu

References


Junior College/Upper Secondary E

evident in Singapore, but with important localised variants adapted to the specifics of Singapore's context.

As we reflect on a variety of national/local approaches to school choice we have an opportunity for critical and active policy learning rather than uncritical and passive policy borrowing to subvert homogenising pressures towards policy convergence. We finish by referring to Bosetti (2005), editor of a special edition of the American Journal of Education on school choice, who urges us to examine more closely the 'particularities' of different school choice policies because 'at the heart of the matter is the larger question of what constitutes the good society to which we aspire. The answer to the question directs the goals and purpose of public education in society and the appropriate role of school choice in achieving these goals' (pp. 440-441).

Note

[1] In addition to the EDB and STB, there was a plethora of other economically oriented agencies also created to support the internationalisation of Singapore's education, such as International Enterprise (IE) Singapore; Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board (PSB); and Education Services Division (Singapore Education) within the STB.

References


Lesley Vidovich & Yap Meen Sheng


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APPENDIX

Parent Surveys

Hwa Chong International

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Reasons for choosing

Studying with international students
Broad education
IGCSE Programme
Foundation Programme
Flexibility of subject combinations
Smaller class sizes
Selected teachers
Lower fees than other international schools
Co-education
Boarding accommodation
Recommendation of other parents
Location within Singapore
Affiliation with Hwa Chong/Chinese High
Asian tradition and culture

Expectations

Individual attention
Self-discipline
Academic rigour
Additional subjects
More international teachers
Wider co-curricular programme
More performing arts
More sports
More information to parents
Further facilities
### APPENDIX
Parent Surveys

**Hwa Chong International School (HCIS): parent survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for choosing</th>
<th>Strongly agree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Undecided %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Studying with international students</td>
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<td>48.10</td>
<td>13.70</td>
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<td>Recommendation of other parents</td>
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<td>7.69</td>
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### Expectations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Strongly agree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Undecided %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
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<td>Individual attention</td>
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<td>33.60</td>
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<td>0.77</td>
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IGCSE: International General Certificate of Secondary Education (both schools).

Anglo-Chinese School International (ACSI): parent survey

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<th>Reasons for choosing</th>
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<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Undecided %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
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Expectations

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</table>

IGCSE: International General Certificate of Secondary Education (both schools)
IB: International Baccalaureate (ACSI only)