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Transforming Singapore Schools into a World Class System: The Economic Imperative, Government Policy and School Leadership.

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Background

Singapore attracts interest worldwide for its successful schools and top-performing students (especially in maths and science). Relatively little is known however, about how an undeveloped and poor country 50 years ago has risen to have a burgeoning economy and one of the world's best education systems. This paper focuses on the nexus between the government, economic development, and the education system (especially the institutions, curriculum and principal leadership) that contribute to an explanation of the Singapore success story. It argues that tight centralised political control has enabled alignment of all sectors of society in securing synergy and avoiding wasted effort, but the driving force has been economic growth and periodic changes in economic structure. The twin goals of building nationhood (since 1965) and economic survival and prosperity have driven reforms in the curriculum and schooling - in an unashamedly instrumentalist way. Three phases of Singapore's economic and educational history are recognisable since 1965; during all three phases, the curriculum has been highly centralised and prescribed and principals have been line managers preoccupied with implementing government policy. Recently, however, rigid centralised controls show signs of easing, principals are being expected to take initiatives, and educational policy is gearing up to 'choice, flexibility and diversity'. But these changes are all taking place within a distinctly Singaporean context. Again, these recent reforms reflect the economic needs of Singapore going forward into the 21st century.

Research Questions

This study focuses on explaining how Singapore developed one of the world's most successful school systems over the 45 years since its independence. It particularly tracks the unique relationship Singapore enjoys between the politico-governmental system, the economic system and school system. It seeks to clarify the functionality and connectedness of these systems with a view to determining patterns of influence in terms of which system acts as 'driver' to reform and change in the others. It particularly seeks to understand changes and reforms in the school system over the past 50 years as well as future directions. Special focus is on the evolution of educational policy, school type, curriculum and leadership past present and future.

Methods

Documentary analysis for the study focused on ministerial policy speeches and government papers, as well as school handbooks and brochures and reports of outstanding school achievements in the press. In addition, a literature review of Singapore's educational history since 1965 was undertaken, alongside conversations with expert colleagues. The work of Gopinathan, Wong and Tang are among the authors cited.

Frame

Two main conceptual frameworks underpin the study. The first is the relationship between the political, economic and educational systems. Analysis reveals that changing priorities and needs of the first two systems (the economic and political) drive changes and reforms in the education system. Thus the school system and curriculum constantly evolve and respond to the changing needs and priorities of the state. Moreover, tight political control over all systems - economic, social and educational - has ensured quick, effective and synergistic responses from education. The absence of time lags means that human capital with relevant knowledge and skills are flexibly and speedily

provided to meet the changing needs of the economy. The second framework contends that the 45 years since Singapore's independence can be seen in three phases - Phase 1 (1965-78) nation building and economic survival; Phase 2 (1978-1997) efficiency-driven education with an emphasis on producing efficient workers for the growing manufacturing sector; and Phase 3 (1997 to the present) 'ability-driven' education aimed at maximising the talents of all students and catering to the needs of a diversifying knowledge-based economy.

Research findings

Significance to practice: Practitioners - such as principals and teachers - are provided with a historical analysis and understanding of how the school curriculum and pedagogy, school organisation and leadership have evolved over the past 50 years and how they are planned to change in the 21st century.

Significance to policy: Policy makers and analysts are provided with a historical account of past and present policy reforms - spanning a 50 year period - as they have affected school type, curriculum, teaching and learning. Moreover, the causes and drivers of these policy changes are made clear, as are the contributions of the education system as a whole to the development of Singapore.

Significance to theory: Conceptual frameworks are developed relating to connectivity of the economic, political and educational systems; and the evolution of Singapore's school system over a 45 year period - from a poorly developed third world system to a world leading and much admired system - is framed in an historical perspective. Moreover, both current and future major reforms -and challenges likely to arise - are more explicable from such a conceptual perspective.