An examination of school leadership in Singapore through the lens of the Fourth Way

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Abstract School leadership is an important factor in educational reform and school transformation. This article aims to examine the challenges of school leadership in Singapore through the lens of the Fourth Way. In particular, this article makes reference to three messages in the Fourth Way and examines the paradoxes and challenges faced by school leaders in Singapore associated with each message. The article argues that the government both drives and steers the education system; that democracy and professionalism, and bureaucracy and market coexist; and that educators embrace both accountability and responsibility.

Keywords School leadership · Fourth way · Paradoxes · Singapore

1 Introduction

Whenever there is a discussion on educational reform and school transformation, the factor of school leadership will feature prominently in the discourse. Although there have been debates on the amount of impact school leaders have on student learning (e.g., Hallinger and Heck 1996; Mulford 1996), most if not all literature agrees that school leadership plays a critical role in the operational effectiveness, resource allocation, culture, and transformation of a school (e.g., Sergiovanni 1996; Leithwood 1998; Leithwood et al. 1999; Caldwell and Spinks 2007; Gurr et al. 2006). Education reform may start with policy articulated by politicians, but the real work of education reform happens at ground level.

The Singapore government believes strongly that school leadership is the key to school transformation (e.g., Teo 1998; Tharman 2006). The Singapore school leader is exhorted to be proactive and yet reflective in bringing change to the school that is beneficial to the staff and students. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, former Education Minister, said:

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Perhaps more than in any other profession, leadership in schools must also be anchored in a strong sense of purpose in education. Especially where we are giving principals greater autonomy, this sense of purpose must ensure that we are not side-tracked into making short-term gains. We have to stay close to our vision and values in providing an all-round education to our young, even where the gains are not easily measured. (Tharman 2006)

Hargreaves' and Shirley's Fourth Way (2009) encourages educational reform that integrates harmoniously government policy, professional involvement, and public engagement in order to build learning schools, develop knowledge societies, advance democracy, address inequity in education, restore professionalism, and establish greater cohesion in the society. This article aims to examine school leadership in Singapore through the lens of the Fourth Way. In particular, this article makes reference to three messages in the Fourth Way and illustrates the paradoxes and challenges that school leaders in Singapore face associated with each message. These messages are

- Government should steer and support schools, not drive education.
- Democracy and professionalism should replace bureaucracy and the market.
- Education should be driven by responsibility, not accountability.

2 Drive or steer?

One critical message in the Fourth Way is that the government should not drive and deliver education. Instead, it should steer and support the schools (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). The case is made for education reforms to involve 'less government and more democracy':

The Fourth Way pushes beyond standardization, data-driven decision-making and target-obsessed distractions, to forge an equal and interactive partnership between the people, the profession, and their government. It enables educational leaders to "let go" of the details of change, steering broadly whenever they can and intervening directly only when they must - to restore safety, avoid harm and remove incompetence and corruption from the system (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p. 120).

The paradox in Singapore is that instead of making a choice between driving and steering, the government both drives and steers the education system. On the one hand, the government has intentionally started to decentralise its power to the schools to encourage diversity and innovation. As Singapore moved into the 21st century, the one-size-fit-all centralised approach of the past was no longer sufficient to bring about improvements. Schools had to improve quality at the local level. One of the key thrust was for schools to be given support to strive for excellence on their own. Minister Tharman said:

Quality will be driven by teachers and leaders in schools, with ideas bubbling up through the system rather than being pushed down from the top... They are in the best position to develop new approaches to engage their students. (Tharman 2005)

Current Education Minister, Heng Swee Keat, said:

Schools are the centre of action in our education system. We achieve the right outcome when our schools do it right. We must therefore empower our schools and enable our teachers. (Heng 2011)

Giving autonomy to the school leaders allows the government to move from an interventionist role to a supervisory one (Tan and Ng 2007). This aligns harmoniously with the message in the Fourth Way for the government to steer instead of drive education. However, the government still carries a great responsibility for achieving national outcomes and providing high value for public money (Ng 2008a, 2010). The functioning of the schools must be aligned to the goals of social and economic development in Singapore. Thus, there is a need to ensure accountability and standards. Because these schools are government schools, 'a failing on the part of a school is a failing on the part of the government' (Ng 2010, p. 283). So, the government's effort is much more accurately described as a paradoxical form of centralised decentralisation (Ng 2008a) to achieve 'strategic alignment, tactical empowerment'. (Ng 2010, p. 284) elucidates:

> The Singapore government carries a great responsibility for economic survival as a nation, which include achieving educational outcomes and providing high value for fiscal spending. Therefore, as Singapore continues to revamp its education system by empowering the schools to customise education to the needs of the students and to be innovative, the government still wants a certain level of control to ensure that ends are achieved.

Therefore, the implication to school leaders is that while the Ministry of Education (MOE) will continue to develop system level policy initiatives, it is them who must determine what the policy means to the staff and the students. They must be able to wisely adapt policies to the school context to bring actual benefits to the school. They must be reflective so that they are not lost in a sea of changes without purpose or direction, implementing changes for the sake of change (Ng 2008c). They have to acquire a model of the professionalism of educators in which the acquisition of knowledge about the profession should proceed interactively with reflecting about real practical situations (Elliot 1996).

3 Democracy + Professionalism or Bureaucracy + Market?

In the Fourth Way, democracy and professionalism replace bureaucracy and the market (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). Democracy and professionalism bring about sustainable school reforms rather than through bureaucracy and the market (Darling-Hammond 2008). The Fourth Way recognises and espouses the idea that each and every stakeholder within the system is a valuable contributor. In particular, the Fourth Way galvanises professionals by giving them opportunities to develop curricula together within broad state guidelines. Teachers set shared targets, rather than scurrying around to meet the targets demanded by others (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). This means 'a fundamental shift in teachers' professionalism that restores greater autonomy from government but also introduces more openness to and engagement with parents and communities' (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p. 122).

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2009, p. 146), 'teachers are the ultimate arbiters of educational change. The classroom door is the open portal to innovation or the raised drawbridge that holds it at bay. No plan for sustainable educational change can ignore or bypass the teacher'. Therefore, the Fourth Way advocates 'a democratic and professional path to improvement that builds from the bottom, steers from the top, and provides support and pressure from the side. Through high quality teachers committed to and capable of creating deep and broad teaching and learning, it builds powerful, responsible and lively professional communities in an increasingly self-regulating but not self-absorbed or self-seeking profession. Here, teachers define and pursue high standards and shared targets, and improve

by learning continuously through networks, from evidence, and from each other' (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p. 177).

The paradox in Singapore is that democracy plus professionalism, and bureaucracy and the market co-exist. On one hand, there is now increased democracy and professionalism. There is a strong movement to involve parents and other stakeholders (Khong and Ng 2005). However, the engagement of parents and the wider community presents a paradox too. Ng (2010, p. 279) opines that 'culturally, Singapore is a society that is result-oriented. Parents want results. Employers look for results. The government emphasises results. In this sense, there is unanimity in the goals of education'. So, why is there a need for further engagement and run the risk of disrupting the 'unity'? (Ng 2010, p. 279) elucidates, 'However, the government is now increasingly emphasising a different type of goal. As the globalised knowledge age economy accords premium to creativity and innovation, the government wants to adopt a broader definition of success to cultivate different types of talent'. Education Minister Heng (2011) said:

> I encourage schools too to reach out to parents. MOE has been rolling out many initiatives to improve our education system. It is important that we reach out to parents so that they understand these changes and work together with us…. Reaching out to parents will not always be easy, but our schools should see this as an investment to create a long term, collaborative partnership.

There is a strong movement to increase the professionalism of the teaching profession. Under the Teach Less Learn More initiative, a move to shift the focus of education from 'quantity' to 'quality', teachers are exhorted to review the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of education (Ng 2008b). A number of professional academies, operating on the philosophy of 'teachers for teachers', were set up recently to deepen professional capabilities through sharing and reflection. These include Academy of Singapore Teachers, ELIS (English Language Institute of Singapore), PESTA (Physical Education and Sport Teacher Academy), and STaR (the Singapore Teachers' Academy for the Arts) (Heng 2011). These movements signify an encouragement and support for a higher level of teacher professionalism for system renewal, instead of relying only on external scrutiny.

On the other hand, bureaucracy and the market are strongly present as well. Quality assurance in Singapore is well-established through league tables, excellence models, and external validation (Ng 2008a,d, 2010). The marketisation of schools is still strong and inter-school competition is still fierce (Tan 2008). Schools still report to the MOE in a clearly defined structure. Indeed, professional reflections among educators, though encouraged by the MOE, are generally confined to the educational technical processes within the current educational paradigm (Ng and Tan 2009). Change is still driven from the top.

Therefore, school leaders face a challenging task. They have to navigate a system which now promotes more involvement from stakeholders and higher teacher professionalism, while needing them to satisfy the bureaucracy and competition within the market. This is a tall order.

4 Accountability or responsibility?

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), 'our schools are the social embryos of humanity—those institutions that we establish to promote our highest collective values. They should be the embodiment of norms of reciprocity, social trust, and democratic deliberation' (p. 163). Thus, they argue that in the Fourth Way, education should be driven by responsibility, rather

than accountability. Responsibility is an inner drive. Accountability is a system check. Therefore,

> Responsibility precedes and supersedes accountability. Socrates died because he believed it was his responsibility to teach his students to think for themselves. Confucius insisted that educators had an incontrovertible responsibility to ensure their students were true scholars who modelled a methodical social etiquette that reflected celestial harmony in all their interactions with rich and poor alike. Accountability is the remainder that is left when this responsibility has been subtracted. (p. 168)

The paradox in Singapore is that instead of a dichotomy between accountability and responsibility, educators embrace both strongly. On the one hand, the accountability culture and structures are strong and prevalent (Ng 2010). On the other hand, educators are driven by their own sense of responsibility towards their students (Ng 2011).

Since the independence of Singapore, the performance reporting and technical aspects of school accountability have been strong and clear, and they are expected to remain so (Ng 2010). Two significant ways of school accountability as performance reporting are the School Excellence Model (SEM) and the Masterplan of Awards (MoA) system. According to Ng (2008a, p. 121):

> In Singapore, the SEM in theory is for self-assessment and improvement. The awards are meant to promote quality in different areas and celebrate different forms of excellence. But in reality, some school leaders may still interpret these as measures for scrutiny, which can affect their school's competitiveness and their own careers, hence the acute need to score well. Quality assurance, while ensuring quality on the one hand, creates its own side effects to compromise quality on the other.

That is why the MOE announced change to the SEM and the MoA in 2011. Minister Heng (2011) said:

> We will change the way we recognise a good school, by simplifying and aligning the School Excellence Model and the Masterplan of Awards… The SEM is comprehensive, but is deemed to have generated much administrative work for the schools. Building on the streamlining in 2009, we will streamline further to reduce the work needed by up to a third… We will review the MoA with the intention of better supporting our schools to be student-centric, to innovate and to achieve holistic student outcomes. The new recognition structure will focus on recognising good practices that lead to desired outcomes of education. By making the structure 'flatter' and less hierarchical, schools will have greater flexibility to innovate and meet the needs of their students better in the next lap of excellence.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that for successful and coherent educational change, responsibility should precede and supercede accountability. However, research suggests that school leaders in Singapore embrace a paradoxical mix of both (Ng 2011). On one hand, school leaders work meticulously to the demands of accountability. On the other hand, many display an inner drive of responsibility. In fact, in the minds of Singapore school leaders, these two terms and concepts are inseparable. Being accountable is being responsible and vice versa. Moral responsibility amongst the school leaders is paradoxically harmonious with bureaucratic accountability.

5 Conclusion

This article has examined school leadership in Singapore from the lens of the Fourth Way. In a way, Singapore has exhibited many features of the Fourth Way, arguably Fourth Way-plus for some aspects and perhaps Fourth Way-minus for some others (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p.181). 'At a crucial turning point in global history, we have to make daring and disruptive changes, not incremental adjustments—but without abandoning everything we have valued and achieved in the past. And moment by moment, one issue at time, we have to learn how to steer clearly from the top while also knowing how and when to "let go"'. That is perhaps the Singapore story. The Singapore story has always been one that 'illustrates powerful and paradoxical dynamics at work' and shows that it is quite possible, though precarious, to engage in 'a delicate balancing act between conformity and diversity, and between standards and innovation' (Ng 2008a, p. 123).

As Singapore moves forward, regardless of whether the initiatives conform to the Fourth Way, 'the challenge is to make balanced choices: knowledge versus learning skills, teacher-centred versus student-centred instruction, depth versus breadth in curriculum, individual excellence versus collective learning, and student accountability versus student autonomy' (Ng 2008b, p. 11). Of course, the Singapore psyche is to try to achieve both ends of each continuum. However, the more likely challenge for school leaders is to carefully and continuously calibrate their strategic stance along the journey of change (Ng 2008b, p.11).

In a way, the Singapore education system is full of paradoxes, dilemmas, and balances. But it is in these seemingly irreconcilable dichotomies that Singapore finds the creative tensions to move its system forward. Singapore works, because the system is never in perfect equilibrium. Because there is always some form of tension within the system, disequilibrium punctuated perhaps by odd periods of relative stability becomes the norm. The system is never allowed to 'settle' into a state of homeostasis, for that will be a sign of demise. The system works because the teachers and school leaders can live with paradoxes. In fact, the system thrives because the aggregated movement of the teachers and school leaders in navigating the paradoxes drives it forward.

Singapore is a country where the government is obsessed with change in education, an amazing observation when one considers the success it has had in the international tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In fact, the Singapore philosophy appears to be that when one is successful, one has a solid platform for change. Changing from a position of strength allows some margin for experimentation. Changing from a position of weakness is rather too late. Minister Heng (2011) said:

> However good our system, we can always improve. We should make our changes from a position of strength. What is useful and good today may not be good for tomorrow. We need the right balance between focusing on our fundamentals and ensuring relevance for the future.

In this light, 'the issue is not whether these initiatives are implemented. The challenge is whether the initiatives delve deep beyond the surface level to change the basic philosophy and approach to education' (Ng 2008b, p. 13).

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), the elephant in the room of the Third Way has been an excess of government control. It is time to forge a Fourth Way that will create room inside the government elephant. This message, adapted to the Singapore context, raises an interesting question: can there be room inside the Singapore 'government elephant'?

Actually, this is inevitable. As the society progresses, parents who are more educated and sophisticated expect more from the schools. There will be increasing demands from different stakeholders upon schools to fit their purposes, making school accountability increasingly political (Ng 2010). Moreover, the centralised approach is no longer able to bring about the change that is required. The government is therefore giving schools more autonomy for school-based reform. So, there is room within the government elephant. In fact, the elephant is the one that actively carves out the room. The more interesting question is: will there be a day when the elephant finds that there is no room for it? It is difficult to answer the question now. The evolution of the Singapore education system will find its own way—perhaps a Fifth Way.

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