11. SINGAPORE ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

Profile of Singapore

The Republic of Singapore has a total population of 4,987,600 which comprises 3.73 million residents (citizens and permanent residents) and 1.25 million non-residents (Population Trends 2009). The resident population profile indicates a median age of 36.9 years; 2,735,900 belong to the age group of 15 to 64 years, 667,900 are below 15 years and 330,100 are aged 65 years and over (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2009a). Geologically located in Southeast Asia, between Peninsular Malaysia and Archipelago Indonesia, the island state has a land area of 710.2 sq km. Since its independence in 1965, there has been continual increase in its per capita gross domestic product and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (2009b) disclosed a figure of S$53,192 (US$37,597) for the year 2008. Eighty percent of total households in Singapore have at least one computer (Info-communications Development Authority of Singapore, 2009); the usage of computer is above 90% among those in the resident age group of 7-34 years, 75% for 35-49 years, 43% for 50-59 years and 15% for 60 years and above. The literacy rate among residents above 15 years of age is 96% and the mean years of schooling among resident non-students above 25 years of age is 9.7 years (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2009c).

The Singapore Education System

In preparation for the future of the nation, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore attempts to ensure that the system evolves towards desired, yet currently unforeseen, changes. In 1997, the vision of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) was adopted by MOE to denote an education system that nurtures a next generation responsive to the challenges of the 21st century. From 2003, schools have been actively encouraged to promote Innovation and Enterprise (I&E). Further, schools were urged to Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) in 2004, as a means to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in quality teaching and learning; the focus on teaching was on higher level aspects of learning to equip students with life-long learning capacities.
Concomitant with MOE on-going initiatives, school principals have been given increasing autonomy and accountability. There are opportunities for students in Singapore to undergo a minimum of ten years in education. The Singapore education system features a national curriculum, with national examinations at the end of each stage of the students’ primary, secondary and pre-university school years. Recently, notions like “flexible and diverse” and “broad-based education” have been increasingly espoused (Ministry of Education, 2009). The provision of greater choice seeks to cater to varied interests and aptitudes, and encourage ownership of learning, while the latter notion seeks for a holistic student development within and beyond formal curriculum. As such, upon completion of their primary school education, students can select their choice from a range of education institutions and programs. In an effort to recognize and develop a wider spectrum of aptitudes, talents and achievements, there are also selected institutions with the flexibility to admit a percentage of their intake using their own criteria instead of the standard national criteria, in the direct or discretionary admission exercises of their educational settings.

The Singapore education system also encompasses a bilingual policy which provides opportunities for students to learn both the English language and their Mother Tongue (Chinese, Malay or Tamil). Such a move seeks to enable students to be proficient in English, which is the common language of administration, commerce and technology as well communication across various races in Singapore. It also seeks to enable students to learn their own Mother Tongue, the language of their cultural heritage.

**The Singapore Sample**

Fifty two principals in Singapore participated in the survey, out of which 50 returns were usable for data analysis. Unlike the principal questionnaire where there were two invalid returns, all 100 teacher questionnaires were valid. As such, a total of 150 valid questionnaires from Singapore were used in this study. The demographic distribution indicated that, for Singapore, female principals were a minority. Females were a majority in the Singapore sample for both principals (64%) and teachers (52%). Almost half of the principals in the sample were in their forties (46.9%) and fifties (42.9%), and the majority of the teachers (59.8%) were in their thirties with about a quarter (25.8%) in their forties. The age distribution of principals in Singapore was similar in pattern to the ten-country distribution of approximately half below and half above 50 years of age. While the median age of the teachers in the combined countries was in the low forties, Singapore had 67.0% under 40 years of age. In Singapore, 89.5% of respondents were from schools with at least 1,000 students; out of which 62.2% had school enrolment of 1,000-1,499 and another 22.4% had 1,500-1,999 students. The percentage of respondents in large schools with enrolment larger than 2,000 was only 4.9%. The ten-country distribution indicated a plurality (34.1%) with school enrolment of 500-999, whereas most Singapore respondents (62.2%)