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:
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 thrusts 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)