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Ka-ho Mok

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Decentralization and marketization of education in Singapore
A case study of the school excellence model

Ka-ho Mok
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Keywords Globalization, Markets, Education, Governance, Singapore

Abstract Globalization and the evolution of a knowledge-based economy have caused dramatic changes to the character and functions of education in most countries around the world. In order to enhance the overall competitiveness of individual nations in the global market environment, comprehensive education reforms have been launched in different parts of the globe to strengthen manpower training. Realizing the fact that there is only one resource in Singapore — human capital — the Singapore government therefore has tried to maximize the potential of its citizens in the further advancement of its economic modernization. In order to make its citizens more creative and innovative, the Singapore government openly acknowledges the importance of allowing more autonomy for schools in charting their own courses of development. By introducing a policy of decentralization, the Singapore government hopes that schools could have more autonomy and flexibility to develop their strengths and thereby individual schools can evolve with their own unique features. One way to promote quality education is the introduction of the “school excellence model” (SEM) to engage schools in self-improvement and self-assessment exercises. This paper sets out in this policy context to examine and study the newly proposed SEM, with particular reference to examining and studying the philosophy and principles, major features and detailed procedures of this quality assurance model. More specifically, this paper will also analyze this model in light of the global trends of educational decentralization and marketization, reflecting upon the changing role of the Singapore government in educational governance.

Introduction
Preparing for the new century, the Singapore government openly acknowledges the importance to reform its education systems in order to make its citizens more competitive and competent in the open global market place. The introduction of “Thinking schools, learning nation” (TSLN), which was first introduced by the Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in July 1997, came on to be the central theme for the current tidal wave of education reform in Singapore. While the notion of “thinking schools” deals with the school education on infusing students with independent and creative thinking skills, that of “learning nation” aims at cultivating habits of continuous learning so as to apt for changes in the era of globalization and the information
Globalization, state competitiveness and educational restructuring
Over the last decade, people have begun to talk about the impact of globalization on economic, social, political and cultural fronts (see, for example, Giddens, 1990; Sklair, 1991; Held, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Robertson, 1995; Waters, 2001). As Morrow and Torres (2000) have rightly suggested, different scholars may have had different interpretations of the phenomena of globalization. Despite the difficulty in getting a consensual view of when did globalization originate, there is no doubt that the globalization discourse has become increasingly popular after the end of the Cold War in 1989. When talking about “globalization”, sociologists generally refer to the complex set of processes which “result from social interaction on a world scale, such as the development of an increasingly integrated global economy and the explosion of worldwide telecommunications” (Sklair, 1999; Giddens, 1999). Malcolm Waters, the author of Globalization, sees globalization as “a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (Waters, 1995, p. 3). More importantly, “globalization also influences our everyday life as much as it does events happening on a world scale” and “globalization is restructuring the ways in which we live, and in a very profound manner” (Giddens, 1999, p. 4). As the processes of globalization are so complicated, developments in economics, politics and culture are not immune from such restructuring processes.

The growing impact of globalization has unquestionably drawn a number of people to believe that there are many aspects of globalization that go beyond the control of nation-states. It is also argued that the newly-risen global capitalism has inevitably forced individual nation states to change both their roles and their constitutions in order to creatively adapt to the demands and pressures generated from changing external environments. In addition, globalization and the evolution of a knowledge-based economy have generated additional pressures for nation states to improve/maintain their “competitiveness” in the global market environment. In order to enhance their national capacity, education reforms have become common agendas among nation states of advanced industrialized countries since the 1980s (OECD, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001). Striving for what Cerny calls “competitive state”, an increasing number of countries/societies have been engaging in comprehensive reviews of their education systems and introduced fundamental
reforms in education (Cheng and Townsend, 2001; Mok and Chan, 2002; Mok and Welch, 2002). It is within such a wider socio-historical and socio-economic context that dramatic changes have been caused to the characters and functions of education in most countries around the world. However, the impacts of globalization on schools and universities are not uniform though business-like practices have been adopted to cope with competitions in the global marketplace (Green, 1997; Mok, 2001a; Mok and Welch, 2002).

In face of financial constraints and weakened state capacity in social service/policy provisions, the pressure for restructuring and reforming education is increasingly driven by growing expectations and demands of different stakeholders in society. In recent years, widespread concerns over widened access, funding, accountability, quality, and managerial efficiency are perceived as the prominent global trends related to education (Currie and Newson, 1998; Mok and Welch, 2002). Because of the divergent political, social, economic, cultural and historical backgrounds, national/local governments may adopt similar strategies in response to pressures generated from globalization. Some popular public policy measures commonly adopted by modern states is the policies of decentralization and marketization, even though there is no consensus on whether a policy of centralization or decentralization is more effective to improve the organization and management of the public sector (Fiske, 1996; Dill and Sporn, 1995).

Decentralization and educational governance
The discernible trend of restructuring of the role of the state in running the public sector has undoubtedly affected the governance of education, and eventually led to a fundamental change in state-education relationships. One of the changes is the adoption of the policy of decentralization. Based upon the work of Rondinelli and his associates (Rondinelli and Nellis, 1986), Hyden (1983) and others, Turner and Hulme (1997, p. 153) identify at least six major types of decentralization, namely, devolution, deconcentralization, privatization of devolved functions, interest group representation, establishment of quangos and privatization of national functions.

In reality, the nature of decentralization is far more complicated since hybrids and “mixed authorities” can occur, and hence all systems of government involve a combination of centralized and decentralized authority (Turner and Hulme, 1997). Similarly, Bray (1999) believes the processes of centralization and decentralization are dynamic since they are “-zations” rather than static situations. During such processes, we may easily observe the co-existence of both decentralizing and centralizing trends in which “control was centralized but is then made less centralized, and to systems which were already decentralized but become even more decentralized” (Bray, 1999, p. 208). It must be noted that policies/practices of decentralization have long been adopted as strategies by different nation states to reform and to improve their
administrative systems, and three major forms of decentralization are herein identified:

1. **deconcentration** typically involves the transfer of tasks and work, but not authority, to other units in the organization;
2. **delegation** involves the transfer of decision-making authority from higher to lower hierarchical units, but that authority can be withdrawn at the discretion of the delegating unit; and
3. **devolution** refers to the transfer of authority to an autonomous unit that can act independently, or a unit that can act without first asking permission (Hanson, 1998, p. 112; Bray, 1999).

We may also conceptualize the three major types of decentralization discussed above into two main categories, namely functional decentralization and territorial decentralization. Functional decentralization refers to “a shift in the distribution of powers between various authorities that operate in parallel” while territorial decentralization refers to “a redistribution of control among the different geographical tiers of government, such as nation, states/provinces, districts, and schools” (Bray, 1999, pp. 208-9), with the public/statutory corporations being a good example of this type of decentralization. We must also note that the range of models for educational decentralization can be very wide. During the processes of centralization and decentralization, it is very often that a process of re-centralization may take place for the fear of losing control (Tatto, 1999). In some occasions, we can easily identify the process of “centralized decentralization” in the education sector, which is particularly true when the state/government does not impose detailed controls over educational institutions. In introducing various regulatory frameworks, mechanisms or assessment/quality assurance systems, the state/government could easily steer/control the developments of educational institutions at a distance (Massen and van Vught, 1994; Neave, 1995).

Therefore, operational decentralization is combined with the centralization of strategic command in educational governance, whereby the academic autonomy becomes a regulated one (Hoggett, 1991; Mok and Lee, 2000). Hence, we may find the co-existence of trends that are centralizing, decentralizing and re-centralizing in the governance of education in some countries, since these processes are fluid and in motion, and can thus change over time (Bray, 1999). Therefore, a better understanding of the models for governing education adopted by any countries/places must be analyzed in the wider contexts of political ideologies, historical legacies, and other factors such as linguistic plurality, geographic size, and ease of communications (Bray, 1999). In addition to the global trend of decentralization, policies and strategies of marketization and privatization have become increasingly popular in educational governance, especially under the impact of globalization.
Marketization and educational governance

Closely related to the globalization discourse is the notion of “competitiveness”. In order to make individual nation-states more competitive, schools and universities in different parts of the globe have been under tremendous pressures from government and the general public to restructure/reinvent themselves in order to adapt to the ever-changing socio-economic and socio-political environments. As Martin Carnoy has pointed out, “globalization enters the education sector on an ideological horse, and its effects in education are largely a product of that financially driven, free-market ideology, not a clear conception for improving education” (Carnoy, 2000, p. 50). According to Carnoy (2000), the ideological horse in the context of globalization could be characterized by a finance-driven reform emphasizing decentralization, privatization and better performance. In order to promote competitiveness, discourse of economicism, ideological stance as performativity (Lingard, 2000; Ball, 1998) and notions of neo-liberalism (Apple, 2000; Morrow and Torres, 2000) have become increasingly popular in governing education reforms and educational developments across the globe.

Realizing the fact that modern states have to run their businesses with limited resources in the present social and economic context, coupled with the intensified pressures to improve their competitiveness, different governance strategies such as decentralization, privatization, marketization, commodification, etc. are adopted. It is within this wider policy context of marketization and privatization that educational governance has been significantly affected by a number of higher education institutions which intend and attempt to follow the example of business by adopting corporate decision-making and planning strategies, as well as in the using of economic measures of productivity. The impact of business management techniques and managerial culture can be reflected from the changing organizational culture in schools and higher education institutions.

At the same time, with a major shift from elite to mass education systems, schools are under increasing pressure to improve both the quality and the market value of their courses and programs, as a kind of commodity and service provided to customers or students, in a customer-oriented and market-driven environment. The notions of vocationalism and pragmatism have applied to the latest development of school/university education in most countries around the world. It is note-worthy that similar developments can be easily identified in East Asia (Mok and Welch, 2002). In his recent studies, Mok has contrasted and compared the changing higher education governance models in the “four little dragons” of Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, and has discovered that similar ideas and practices along the line of decentralization, marketization and corporatization are adopted in these societies, in order to make their education systems more competitive in the global market (Mok, 2000a, b, 2001b, c). This paper sets out in such a wider
public context to examine when and how SEM has been introduced by the
Singapore government to reform its school quality assurance system from an
externally driven inspection to an internal self-assessment exercise.

The role of education in Singapore’s economic and social
developments
A better understanding of the most recent reforms and new initiatives that the
Singapore government has adopted to restructuring/reforming its education
system could be obtained by linking the analysis of educational reforms with
the wider public policy orientation and the unique governance philosophy that
the Singapore government has adhered to since the founding of the city state.
The Singapore’s governance philosophy is to ensure a good life for all
Singaporeans through the maximization of political stability and economic
growth (Quah, 2001). Openly recognizing the growing impact of globalization,
the Singapore government is well aware of two developmental challenges in the
early years of the twenty-first century, namely, enhancing national economic
competitiveness in the global market place and fostering social cohesion in the
city state (Tan, 2001). Low nicely describes the role of Singapore government in
education, suggesting that “the role of education and human resource
development in economic growth and development is unequivocal and, in the
Singapore context, public policies and strategies in education, training and
manpower development as a leading edge have paid off handsomely in the
economic and socio-political success it enjoys today” (Low, 2001, p. 305).

As the survival of Singapore closely relates to its economic development and
racial harmony, education is placed at the paramount position in its public
policy agendas. Taken the calls to upgrade education and training as prime
sources of national economic competitiveness seriously, the Singapore
government has consciously attempted to tailor the education system to
perceived economic needs. Such efforts received added impetus in the wake of
the 1985-1986 economic recession. An Economic Committee recommended the
education of each individual to his maximum potential, and the development of
creativity and flexible skills in order to maintain Singapore’s international
competitiveness in the global economy (Ministry of Trade and Industry,
Singapore, 1986). The need for creativity and innovation was repeated in a
report by the Economic Planning Committee in 1991 (Ministry of Trade and
Industry, Singapore, 1991). Once again, schools and universities have been
called upon to play a major role in bringing about this change (Lee, 1996). The
most recent proposed reforms in the education system and the introduction of
TSLN vision, coupled with the implementation of SEM, can be understood as
part and parcel of the larger “social reengineering” project initiated by the
government to strengthen its socio-economic position in the regional, and even
the global, market context (Tan, 1999a).
In order to have a better understanding of the origin of the SEM vision, we must trace it back to the developments and reforms in Singapore’s education systems in the 1980s. As the government has been very keen to develop education with the intention to make its citizens more competitive and innovative, various reform measures have been initiated by the Singapore government since the past decade or so. As Gopinathan (1999) suggested, the introduction of the SEM is closely related to the education reforms in the past 15 years. By the closing years of the twentieth century, in a bid to foster greater creativity and innovation in students, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, openly recognized the challenge brought by the strong tide of globalization (Goh, 1997, p. 1).

Well aware that globalization poses challenges to the future development of Singapore, the government has attempted to equip people with creative and critical thinking skills, making them to become change-adaptive individuals well-equipped with entrepreneurial skills (Tan, 1998). To fulfill this mission, Mr Goh therefore introduced the idea of TSLN to set a climate for continual learning among students and teachers. He told the audience at the Thinking Conference held in July 1997 that:

We cannot assume that what has worked well in the past will work for the future. The old formulae for success are unlikely to prepare our young for the new circumstances and new problems they will face. We do not even know what these problems will be, let alone be able to provide the answers and solutions to them. But we must ensure that our young can think for themselves, so that the next generation can find their own solutions to whatever new problems they may face. Singapore’s vision for meeting this challenge is encapsulated in four words THINKING SCHOOLS, LEARNING NATION (TSLN). It is a vision for a total learning environment, including students, teachers, parents, workers, companies, community organizations and government” (Goh, 1997, cited in Tan, 1998, p. 3, italics added by the author).

The TSLN vision can be seen as the overall descriptor of an entire education system geared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century ahead. As Singapore, like Hong Kong, is too small to exert its influence in shaping “global agenda” of the future world, therefore the quality of its people is extremely important to prepare for the future challenges that are externally imposed. On the whole, the introduction of TSLN education reform in the recent years is to respond to the changes derived from the global economy, on the one hand, and to prepare the nation and its people for the realization of a knowledge-based economy, which is transformed from a manufactured-based economy with the completion of the industrialization process, on the other hand.

Central to the TSLN scheme is to develop all students into active learners with critical thinking skills, and on developing a creative and critical thinking culture within schools. Its key strategies include: the explicit teaching of critical and creative thinking skills; the reduction of subject syllabi content; the revision of assessment modes; and a greater emphasis on processes instead of
on outcomes when appraising schools (Ministry of Education, 1997). A start has been made in the implementation of these strategies in all schools. For instance, the SEM is currently being tested on a pilot basis in some schools before being launched in all schools in the year 2000. This model is meant for schools to utilize when conducting self-appraisal exercises (Ministry of Education, 1999).

Policy of decentralization and SEM
Allowing greater autonomy to schools had dated back to early 1985 when the then Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, already spoke of the need to allow more autonomy within schools. Goh believed that by devolving more responsibilities for schools to appoint staff, devise their own school curricula and choose their own textbooks, schools would then be able to develop their own unique characters and individuality. Having a comprehensive review of the system in the mid-1980s, the government began to allow more autonomy to schools by diversifying its school systems. Believing that TSLN is not just a slogan for the Ministry of Education, but rather a formula to enable Singapore to compete and stay ahead, it is hoped that the ideal students, under the framework of TSLN, would be “literate, numerate, IT-enabled, able to collate, synthesise, analyse and apply knowledge to solve problems, capable of being creative and innovative, not risk-averse, be able to work both independently and in groups and be a lifelong learner” (cited in Gopinathan, 2001a, pp. 11-12). In order to make students to become the ideal type for Singapore, the government has adopted a policy of decentralization to increase school autonomy to run their own businesses.

Under the policy framework of decentralization, different types of schools have been set up since then, namely: independent schools, autonomous schools and ordinary government schools. To date, there are eight independent, well-established and prestigious secondary schools in Singapore; while more schools are now being turned into autonomous schools. “Autonomous schools” are supposed to provide a high quality of education while charging more affordable fees than independent schools. In order to foster greater autonomy to school principals, the government also set up the Education Endowment Scheme in 1993 to offer additional grants for individual schools in supporting development plans and enriching students’ co-curricular activities organized by schools (Tan, 2001; Gopinathan, 2001b). All the initiatives outlined above have already suggested that the Singapore government has long been well conscious about the importance of making its citizens more innovative and creative in thinking, and thus prepare them for intensified globalization challenges.

In positioning the SEM in the larger education reform project, as started by the Singapore government in the past decade, it is clear that the SEM is a tool to turn schools into creative and innovative learning organizations, and hopefully,
students would eventually be nurtured as creative thinkers. After examining the policy background for the SEM, let us now turn to the origins, core values and central features of the SEM.

SEM: origins, core values and features

Origins and core values

Since schooling provision in Singapore has long been driven by “economic instrumentalism”, and that economic competitiveness has been the major national project, the introduction of the SEM is intended to replace the external-driven school inspection model with an internal assessment approach. In line with the “TSLN” vision, the Ministry of Education of Singapore (MOE) sees the SEM as a “systematic framework for helping schools become excellence organizations as they drive towards the achievement of the Desired Outcomes of Education” (Ministry of Education, 2000). Seeing continual improvement and the drive for excellence as the cornerstone of success for education, the MOE therefore instructs individual schools to identify their strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement in order that schools can “reengineer” themselves for excellence (Ministry of Education, 2000).

Since the Singapore government has long attached weigh to high service quality not only in the private sector but also in the public sector, the government has deliberately promoted high quality service image both in the domestic context and in the global context for the past decade or so. More specifically, the Singapore Productivity and Standards Board assists private and public organizations to engage in continual quality improvement projects by certifying their quality performance. Adopting principles and practices from the business sector to run public services, the Singapore government strongly believes that the newly proposed SEM can be a way to promote quality service in the education sector (field interview with Prof. Gopinathan, March 2001). The importance of quality and continual upgrading is reinforced by the official document of the SEM which states clearly that:

The framework and scoring method are adapted from the business excellence model developed by the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM). The adapted framework offers schools a clear framework of reference with which school leaders can easily communicate and motivate staff to superior performance . . . The use of indicators and areas to address are adapted from the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) model and the education version of the American Malcome Baldrige National Quality Award model (MBNQA). Business and technical terms are changed wherever necessary, to educational ones. A conscious effort is made to align the SEM to the SQA. This alignment is important as it will enable schools to pitch themselves against national benchmarks for organizational excellence (http://intranet.moe.sg/schdiv/part_1_content.htm p. 1).

In addition to the adoption of business principles and practices as organizing tool in school management and governance, there are seven fundamental values and principles underpinning the SEM framework, namely, student first,
teachers – the key, leading with purpose, systems support, working with partners, management by knowledge, and continuous improvement and innovation. All these core values have taken into consideration the attributes that make a school successful, and together they define the purpose of SEM, that is, to enable schools to seek continuous improvement and innovation. Primarily, the seven core values underscore the tenet that, above all else, “the development of students is at the heart of all education processes”. The MOE believes that once people in the school setting are motivated and sensitized to the drive for excellence, and if the quality assurance systems are sound, then organizational excellence will be eventually achieved, thereby schools will become agents for continuous improvement and innovation (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Central features and the framework

Central to SEM is “self-assessment and analysis” and it is an organizing tool to promote school excellence. Turning from an external inspection to an internal appraisal exercise, individual schools are given more flexibility and autonomy to decide and chart their own development plans. Four major features of the SEM are discussed in the following sub-sections.

Self-assessment. The self-assessment approach requires schools to be self-questioning and self-initiative in reviewing their own current practices. Schools are required to look at their results and outcomes beyond academic performance. They can benchmark processes against all appropriate organizations (including schools, educational or public sector organizations and commercial organization) in drawing up their improvement programmes.

Since 2000, all schools have used the SEM to do their own self-assessments. The SEM enables schools to assess themselves in a coherent manner at both the macro and micro levels. It also provides a common language and frame of reference within the school sector to learn more about themselves and be comparable with others. Then good practices within the school can be identified and shared. Progress and outstanding achievements can also be recognized.

In the self-assessment process, school members have a chance to view the school’s strengths and weaknesses. Such an involvement of staff promotes the ownership of school’s improvement and shared vision. The SEM also allows schools to determine their status of growth. Based on the findings, schools can prioritize the areas for improvement and draw up action plans. Then schools can focus their resources, integrate improvement strategies into the normal school operations and monitor the progress of plans. Furthermore, schools learn how to develop their growth plan and strategy by going through the cycle of evaluating and taking action repeatedly. In the long run, schools can raise their professional level and education management capabilities by sustaining their self-assessment processes.
Integration. The SEM provides a systemic framework for schools to examine their practices comprehensively but not discretely. Under such a framework, schools can anchor the different initiatives undertaken in recent years. Principals can use SEM to link and communicate the initiatives so that the initiatives complement each other instead of competing against each other.

Dynamism. The SEM is not a “one-size-fits-all” instrument. It realizes that different approaches are relevant in achieving the desired outcomes of education. Indeed, the ability-driven education paradigm encourages a diversity of approaches in order to enrich education system in Singapore. As the schools keep on using the SEM to assess themselves, the SEM details should be updated in the process. Therefore, the framework can continue to be dynamic and relevant in alignment with current expectations and thinking.

External validation. The SEM requires schools to be externally validated once every five years by the School Appraisal Branch. The main purpose of the validation is to introduce an external perspective to a school’s assessment. By applying for the external validation, schools can reap benefits as follows:

• The validation process will enable schools to sharpen the focus of their internal self-assessment procedures and calibrate the process.
• The feedback report will provide an external view of the strengths that schools could build upon and the improvements that will carry them forward in the provision of better quality education.
• The preparation will give the staff a clear and tangible objective to work towards. Good teamwork can be fostered.
• The site-visit will heighten staff awareness of the importance of involvement and commitment to excellence.
• The process also raises staff’s pride in themselves, their work and their school and lead to improved overall performance (quoted from Ministry of Education, 1999).

Furthermore, the MOE can ensure the consistency of the application of the SEM across the board through this external validation process. More importantly, based on the information and knowledge from the reviews of schools, the MOE can assist the schools in accordance with their status and specific needs. Having discussed the core values and central features of the SEM, let us now turn to the framework for assessing schools, with particular reference to the concrete criteria in schools’ self-assessment exercise.

The SEM framework has two broad categories, namely “enablers” and “results”. The enablers category is concerned with how results are achieved, while the results category is related to what the schools have achieved or are achieving. More importantly, the framework requires schools to examine the design, delivery and output of education in light of the processes and results involved. The enablers focus on how the school leadership leads people and
manages systems to produce the desired results. Detailed criteria are presented in Figure 1.

The first aspect of assessment focuses on how school leaders and the school’s leadership system address values and focus on student learning and performance excellence; and how the school addresses its responsibilities towards society. Further attention will be given to strategic planning of individual schools by examining the question of how the school sets clear stakeholders-focused strategic directions; develops action plans to support its directions, deploys the plans and tracks performance. In addition, the validation team will examine staff management issues by reviewing how the school develops and utilizes the full potential of its staff to create an excellent school. How the school manages its internal resources and its external partnerships effectively and efficiently in order to support its strategic planning and the operation of its processes is another major area for appraisal. Student-focused processes, administrative and operational results are other areas for examination by exploring how the school designs, implements, manages and improves key processes to provide a holistic education and work towards enhancing student well-being and what the school is achieving in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the school. Additionally, the validation team will look for areas related to: staff results, i.e. what the school is achieving in relation to the training and development, morale of its staff; and partnership and society results such as what the school is achieving in relation to its partners and the community at large. Last but not least, key performance results will be examined in reviewing what the school is achieving in the holistic development of its students, in particular, the extent to which the

![Diagram of School Excellence Model](image)

**Source:** Ministry of Education (2000)
school is able to achieve the desired outcomes of education (quoted from Ministry of Education, 1999).

Decentralization and marketization of education in Singapore
The above discussion has indicated that the Singapore government has been aware of the importance to allow schools to have more autonomy in order that they can have more room and flexibility to decide their own development plans. The adoption of decentralization policy has undoubtedly affected the governance of education, and has eventually led to a fundamental change in state-education relationships. In order to make its schools and its citizens more competitive and competent to face the future challenges, the government has therefore taken a proactive approach to reform its education system. By providing more autonomy and flexibility to the school sector, together with principles and strategies adopted from the business and commercial sectors, the Singapore government believes schools can be turned into learning organizations and students will become more creative and innovative in their thinking.

Conceptualizing the recent developments in school management and governance change in light of the theoretical framework discussed at the beginning of the paper, we may find that various kinds of decentralization co-exist in Singapore’s school sector, namely, deconcentration, devolution and delegation. More important of all, educational decentralization in Singapore should not be understood as the entire withdrawal of the state in educational governance. Once power is decentralized to the school sector, the government is very concerned about whether education standards and qualities could be maintained and upheld. Therefore, different quality assurance mechanisms and exercises are introduced in education, and internal competition has been encouraged, to promote efficiency, effectiveness and economy in running the school sector (Mok, 2000a, b; Mok and Lee, 2000, 2001). A shift from centralization towards decentralization means that restrictions on schools have now been reduced as to how they can achieve their missions and objectives. However, the decision-making power devolved from the government has begun to re-centralize by the institutionalization of quality assurance mechanisms in school governance and management, because a “centralized decentralization” strategy is needed to avoid the loss of control on quality, authoritative communication and managerial scrutiny, as Watkins (1993) has rightly suggested in terms of educational governance.

Like the school sector, the promotion of quality control in the university sector is definitely putting pressure on its faculty staff for a higher level of performance as well. The adoption of the decentralization policy in Singapore universities has indeed strengthened the state’s role because it has been accompanied by performance reviews and regular inspections. To make its university system more competitive in the pursuit of the world class university
status, the Singapore government now grants more autonomy to individual universities in order to cultivate the spirit of entrepreneurialism and creativity among universities, academics and students alike. Such measures are meant to promote the skills and attitudes required for competitiveness in the global economy (Tan, 1999b). Nonetheless, the “autonomization” process does not necessarily mean that state control and regulation have reduced. On the contrary, the introduction of stringent measures have held universities accountable to the public, and the implementation of various kinds of quality assurance activities in Singapore’s universities can be seen as clear indicators of re-centralization, although by different means (Mok, 2000c; Mok and Lee, 2001). Hence, it is not surprising that many university academics may consider the policy of decentralization as another process of re-regulation or “centralized decentralization” (Lee and Gopinathan, 2001), instead of a genuine policy of decentralization and deregulation (Tan, 1999b). In this regard, we can see the co-existence of the dual processes of “decentralization” and “re-centralization” taking place in Singapore’s education sector at the same time, which are there to strengthen the government’s control, instead of marking a genuine process of devolution in educational governance. Such developments could be conceptualized by the notion of “centralized decentralization” in educational governance.

In addition to the trend of educational decentralization, education development in Singapore has been affected by the strong tide of marketization and privatization. Schools and universities nowadays experience pressures from the government, the main provider of education, to demonstrate maximum outputs from the financial inputs they are given. At a time of economic constraint, people begin to ask for better use of limited public money, thus more attention is given to the issue of “value for money” and how the investment in education can best facilitate social and economic developments (Mok and Lo, 2001; Lee, 2000; Law, 2003). In order to make the delivery of education more efficient and effective, there has been an ideologically driven and increasingly popular trend of marketization and privatization in education sector in the region (Kwong, 2000; Bray, 2000). According to Tan, Singapore’s school system has been experiencing “marketization” since the mid-1980s. “The main manifestations of marketization have been increased school autonomy as well as increased inter-school competition” (Tan, 2001, p. 135). Nonetheless, one major aspect that the marketization project that is taking place in Singapore’s education differs substantially from that in most other countries is related to financial aspect. “While financial stringency is a key motivating factor in many cases, the developments in Singapore are taking place against the backdrop of healthy budgetary surpluses and increased government expenditure on education” (Mok and Tan, in press, pp. 18-19).
What really characterizes the marketization project in Singapore is the adherence to “economic instrumentalism”, whereby market principles and practices are adopted to improve governance and management of the education sector. In general, scholars in Singapore have observed that what the Singapore government really intends to do is to stress competition between schools. “Besides improving the quality of education, competition is supposed to provide parents and students with a wider range of choices and to improve accountability by forcing schools to improve their performance” (Goh, 1992, cited in Tan, 1999b, p. 6). The belief that marketization will increase efficiency and will automatically achieve the universally desired outcomes is well connected with the neo-liberal ideology. In order to make the school system more responsive to the needs of the knowledge-based economy, the Singapore government therefore adopts market principles and practices to manage the school sector. Diversified education systems, i.e. the establishment of autonomous schools, independent schools, government schools and the possible emergence of private schools in Singapore have already confirmed one major element of marketization, whereby parents and students may have more choices in education services (field interviews, February 2002, Singapore). In short, the new education reform initiatives, including the introduction of the SEM, have provided us with concrete evidence that the Singapore government has responded to the urgency of globalization seriously by employing marketization and decentralization strategies. By means of such reform measures, the government hopes to enhance the competitiveness of Singapore in the global market place.

Conclusion
Our above discussion has suggested that the Singapore government has initiated a policy of decentralization in the education sector in recent years to allow individual schools to have more autonomy and to be responsible for their own development plans but we should not reach the conclusion that the state has retreated entirely from the education domain. Instead, the government has taken a rather proactive approach to reviewing their education systems and has started reforms to nurture more creative and innovative citizens for future development. As the case of Singapore, the recent reform measures introduced to the education sector in general, and the introduction of new management initiatives (such as quality assurance mechanisms) in particular, can be understood as part and parcel of the nation-building project in the city state. The Singapore government has been very aware of the important role of education, since it regards education reform as a way to maintain its own competitiveness and to uphold its reputation as a city state of “high quality”. By means of education, the Singapore government has attempted to inculcate its people a strong sense of belonging to its society. “Survival urges” have long been embedded in the Singapore leaders’ minds. The government, therefore,
has consistently and continuously attached weight to education in Singapore as a nation-building strategy, and as the way to facilitate the competitiveness of the city state in the regional and global market contexts (Gopinathan, 2001b).

Most interesting of all, the case of Singapore demonstrates how a fragile state can become strong because it gets its developmental priorities and policies right, and its education is well resourced, credible, productive and significant (Mok and Lee, 2001). The Singapore government has gained legitimacy through its ability to foster rapid economic growth by putting stress on meritocracy, high academic achievement and the relevance of education to manpower planning (Quah, 1998). The reforms in Singapore’s education are to serve its political agenda so as to make the city state a cultural and academic centre in the region, or the so-called “Boston of the East”. The Singapore government does possess important tools for influencing economic, political, social and technological changes in the city state. In a government-made society (Low, 1998), the Singapore government has managed to manipulate forces generated from globalization to justify its own local political agenda by pushing education reforms to make Singapore a more competitive and economically vibrant society in the global market place (Mok and Lee, 2001).

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