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Globalization, the strong state and education policy: the politics of policy in Asia

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ABSTRACT

Much of the scholarship around the workings of education policy has focused on the global West and has taken for granted the state’s limited abilities in the control of policies as both text and discourse. Drawing upon policy texts from the Singapore Ministry of Education and ethnographic data collected in a Singapore school, this paper explores the enlarged but by no means unproblematic role of strong states and their provision and regulation of education policy in Asia. The paper begins by providing an overview of the major emphases and research trajectories taken up by the field of education policy. This is followed by an elaborated account of the nature and politics of the strong state in Asia in general and particularly in Singapore. These theoretical and contextual remarks then pave the way for a closer look at how the Singapore state functions as a major mediator and recontextualizing agent of education policy. The discussion foregrounds the enlarged role of the state in prescribing, translating, and regulating how a national curriculum policy on critical thinking finds its way into the practice of local schools and classrooms. The paper concludes with a number of remarks on the deparochialization of research and how recent work on ‘Asia as method’ may provide a fortuitous approach to critiquing hegemonic systems of knowledge production.

Introduction

Among the central and enduring concerns of the field of education policy studies is that of understanding ‘what we mean by policy, how we should conceptualise it, and how we should research it’ (Ball 2015, 306; see also Taylor et al. 1997). One approach that has proven immensely useful in illuminating the tasks at hand involves ontologically distinguishing between and researching policy as text – exploring the processes of policy interpretation and translation through which schools enact policy – and policy as discourse – uncovering the ways policy constructs particular subjects and subjectivities, and how these in turn coalesce into meaningful discursive possibilities for agents working at the level of schools (Ball 1993; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). More recently, under the increasing dominance of a neoliberal political agenda, these ideas have been extended and applied to the complex politics of global–national policy formation, dissemination and enactment (Singh 2015). This carefully
curated body of research, to be sure, has generated powerful insights into the workings of policy across various social fields – within schools, across society, and in its spawning of a global ‘social imaginary’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Nevertheless, in focusing the bulk of its inquiries on how schools and/or their private sector affiliates ‘do’ – and are also ‘done by’ – policy (Ball 2015, 307; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010), such research remains largely silent on a range of critical questions concerning the role of the state in producing, sustaining, and mediating education policies and their often contradictory discourses.

Indeed, such accounts of the workings of education policy – largely emerging from the global West – may be unduly limiting in capturing the dynamics of education reforms in Asia; the political discourse and popular legitimacy that underpin liberal states – or in their neoliberal guises ‘reluctant,’ ‘competition’ states (Ball 2012a, 2009a) – and their procedural functions are noticeably different from that of states that seek precisely the expansion and incursion into the body politic. Across many Asian nations that have for traditions been characterized by such strong or developmental states (Gopinathan 1997, 2007; Johnson 1982) and are not simply reflections of Western understandings, questions such as the following take on pressing importance: In societies with often entrenched regulative orders, what are the tensions – ideological, cultural, historical, political – states face in the promulgation of policies that prima facie embody global, transnational aspirations? How are these states – rather than schools – selectively appropriating or ‘recontextualizing’ (Bernstein 2000) global policy discourses in ways that augment their legitimacy and preserve extent modes of social control? How are policies premised on neoliberal discourses of knowledge negotiated and what forms do they take under the auspices of authoritarian/illiberal governments? What are the connections between economic structures, the institutions of the state and civil society, and schools and how do these arrangements help states foster adherence to its policies? Relatedly, what are the critical spaces in which policies might be rejected or negotiated? Paying close attention to these questions becomes at least necessary for presenting a more authentic – even alternative – picture of the workings of policy both as text and discourse in increasingly globalized nations in Asia.

Drawing upon policy texts from the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) and ethnographic data collected in a Singapore school, this paper explores the enlarged but by no means unproblematic role of the Singapore state in pursuing critical thinking as a national curriculum policy. The paper begins by providing an overview of the major emphases and research trajectories taken up by the field of education policy; the discussion points to a diminished presence of substantive accounts of the politics of the (non-Western) state, and Basil Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) work on recontextualizing fields is highlighted as a way of addressing this lacuna. This is followed, in the next section, by an elaborated account of the nature and politics of the strong state in Asia in general and particularly in Singapore. These theoretical and contextual remarks then pave the way for a closer look at how the Singapore state functions as a major mediator and recontextualizing agent of education policy. The discussion foregrounds the enlarged role of the state in prescribing, translating, and regulating how its policy discourses on critical thinking find their way into the practice of local schools and classrooms. The paper concludes with a number of remarks on the deparochialization of research (Appadurai 2001) and how recent work on 'Asia as method' (Chen 2010) may provide a fortuitous approach to critiquing hegemonic systems of knowledge production.

**Education policy, practice, and the state**

According to Ball et al. (2011), central to the reading of policy as text is that policy enactment involves policy actors making meaning of official texts for their use in specific contexts and practices (see also Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). Policy enactment, then, is really made up of the ‘closely interwoven and overlapping’ processes of interpretation and translation (Ball et al. 2011, 621). Interpretation refers to ‘an initial reading, a making sense of policy – what does this text mean to us? What do we have to do? Do we have to do anything? It is a political and substantive reading – a “decoding”’ (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013, 466). Contextual considerations such as schools, official reports, staff expertise,
etc. shape and constrain interpretation and regulate which aspects of policy texts are given salience. Translation, on the other hand, Ball et al. (2011) refer to as the ‘re-coding’ of policy:

an iterative process of making texts and putting those texts into action, literally ‘enacting’ policy, using tactics, talk, meetings, plans, events, ‘learning walks,’ producing artefacts and borrowing from other schools, from commercial materials and official websites, and being supported by local authority advisers.

Policy processes are, therefore, complicated and sophisticated processes. They are what Rizvi and Kemmis (1987, 14) describe as ‘interpretations of interpretations,’ signaling the shifting influences of policy discourses as these find their way through hierarchies of practice and networks of power relations, from the state to ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1980).

It is here that an understanding of policy as discourse, with its focus on how policies exert power ‘in a capillary form [and] establish disciplinary micro-technologies’ (Grimaldi 2012, 452) becomes important in appreciating how ‘policies both change what we do, and what we are’ (Ball 2015, 306). On this understanding, policy discourses provide us with ways of thinking and talking about our institutional selves. As sets of texts, events, artifacts, and practices, they speak to wider social processes of schooling, such as the production of ‘the student,’ the ‘purpose of schooling,’ and the construction of ‘the teacher’ (Foucault 1986, 125; see also Ball 2015). In this way they constitute what Butler (2005, 22) calls a ‘regime of truth,’ and form the very basis of our judgments of whether someone is – indeed, whether we are – a ‘good’ or ‘effective’ teacher, and of what counts as a ‘good’ lesson or a ‘good’ school.

The foregoing discussion of policy as text and policy as discourse as well as, crucially, the ways they inform each other strongly suggests that policy work is hardly linear or rational (Apple 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Policies are heavily contested and struggled over as different actors in different contexts understand and enact them in ways that are both productive of and produced by implicit knowledges and deep assumptions about the social world (Gale 2001). For Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992), these struggles and their consequent uncertainties occur at various stages of what they call the ‘policy cycle’ – from inception and influence to text production and finally to practice (see also Ball 1994).

In what has quickly become a major piece of research that illustrates this paradigm, How Schools Do Policy attests to ‘the diverse and complex ways in which sets of education policies are “made sense of”, mediated and struggled over, and sometimes ignored, or […] enacted in schools’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 3).

Yet in acknowledging the above we might also ask if these deep uncertainties and ambiguities around policy enactment are the logic and consequence of a methodological particularism in education policy research. As pointed out earlier, much of such insights have been derived from research undertaken in the global West. Implicit in what is signaled by such work is a limited or attenuated ability of the state in its policy translations: the state ‘centrally mandates’ policy, while much of the recontextualization or ‘relay work’ is performed by schools and/or the private sector (Reeves and Drew 2012, 711). It is instructive, however, to point out that in these cases the archetypal state is often one that is conceived in its liberal form, as a minimally ‘bureaucratic administrative structure’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 13) and whose legitimacy is continually constructed out of such ‘small state’ discourses (Lim, 2014a). Here we find a litany of terms pointing to a state that is historically but also increasingly (kept) limited in its form and functions, such as Ball’s ‘reluctant state’ (2012a) and ‘competition state’ (2009a), Rhodes’s (1994) ‘hollowed-out state,’ Jessop’s (2002) discussion of ‘destitution,’ and still others who write of a state that has become divested and/or withdrawn. Of late these portrayals are made vis a vis the globalizing pressures of neoliberalism, how neoliberalism and the market-based social reforms it eulogizes leads to shifts in power and control relations in society, and how all these require the complex redrawing of the public–private divide and the reallocation of tasks and rearticulation of relationships across the divide.1 For example, some of Ball’s (2012b, 2007) recent work on ‘network governance’ demonstrates more than a little clearly the confluence of public, private, and philanthropic agents and agencies involved in the interpretation and eventual translation of education policy in predominantly Western nations. And yet others have drawn upon Bourdieu’s methodological tools and concepts to explore the emergence of a ‘global education policy field’ (Lingard, Sellar, and Baroutsis 2015; Rawolle...
and Lingard (2008) and its ‘cross-field effects’ on such areas as governance, accountability regimes, and the provision of data infrastructures (Lingard et al. 2016).

But how do these analyses play out in the context of Asia and its tradition of strong state governance? Sometimes referred to as the developmental state, strong states are characterized by extensive state intervention, regulation, and planning over the economy and public policy, and where sometimes education has been used as a key instrument to ‘retool the productive capacities of the system’ (Gopinathan 2007, 59). Such a mode of governance has in fact availed states there of a wider and more intrusive range of policy mechanisms and levers that extend into the curriculum and other quotidian aspects of schools and society (Deng, Lee, and Gopinathan 2013; King and Susana 2005; Mok 2006). Additionally, it is also important to point out that in smaller ‘peripheral’ nations in the global East (Takayama 2014), much of the education policy discourse – along with their cultural and political legitimacy – is in fact borrowed from more dominant global players (Sung 2011). Given the significant differences in how knowledge is embedded in the extant regulative orders of these places, in these nations the state inevitably plays an enlarged role in prescribing and regulating the curriculum and the ways in which policy becomes instantiated in the ‘official knowledge’ of schools and classrooms (Apple 2014). As pointed out above, a growing interest in the area of research on globalization and education policy has emphasized the changing forms of the state under the pressures of neoliberal reforms (Ball 2012a; Rizvi and Lingard 2010), and how, in such ‘policy assemblages’ (Colliers and Ong 2005) the state becomes a major actor in the work of ‘decontextualization and recontextualization, abstraction and movement’ of their attendant meanings and subjectivities across spaces, cultures, and societies (Colliers 2006, 400). What remains relatively unexamined, however, is how in societies with different political and economic logics, neoliberalism as what Ong (2007, 4) calls a ‘mobile-technology’ involves different strategies for governing and managing populations.

Given the richness of the literature on policy studies, one possible entry point into obtaining a fuller account of the above issues lies in Basil Bernstein’s work on recontextualizing fields, already taken up in some of the research on policy sociology. As Bernstein (1990, 2000) reminds us, when talking about the social process by which knowledge and ideas are converted into pedagogic communication there are three fields with which we must be concerned: (1) the field of ‘production’ where new knowledge is constructed in the universities and research institutions; (2) the field of ‘reproduction’ where pedagogy and curricula are actually enacted in schools; and, between these two; (3) the ‘recontextualizing’ field where discourses from the field of production are appropriated and then transformed into pedagogic discourse and recommendations. Because the former two fields are often highly insulated from each other, of crucial significance are the workings of the recontextualizing field, or as it turns out, fields. Indeed, as Bernstein details, the latter refers to two subfields composed of different agents and differing interests; namely, the official recontextualizing field (ORF) which produces the official pedagogic discourse and the pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF) which creatively mediates the elaboration of the former discourse. The ORF includes the ‘specialized departments and sub-agencies of the State and local educational authorities together with their research and system of inspectors’ (Bernstein 1990, 192). The PRF, on the other hand, is comprised of teachers in schools and colleges of education, agents and practices drawn from research foundations, specialized media of education, journals, publishing houses, examination boards, and so on.

Such a framework identifies the multiplicity of agents and alliances involved in interpreting, implementing and appropriating policy and its translations both within and outside the state. Bernstein (1990) indicates that the resulting interdependence among all these strongly suggests a field rife with conflict and contestation. Yet when brought to bear on the context of strong states, it becomes crucial to understand and uncover the ways in which the manifold agents within the PRF may in fact be to differing extents aligned with/sponsored by the ORF (Wong 2002), so much so that the policy discourses created by the latter might vitiate any nascent relative autonomy enjoyed by non-official pedagogic agents. Indeed, as Bernstein (2000) reminds us, in these struggles to regulate the production and reproduction of policy and its texts and contexts, the stakes are high; the group that exercises power in all this functions as the ‘symbolic regulator of consciousness’ (Bernstein 2000, 37). Given
the hegemonic aspirations of strong states in securing both political as well as moral legitimacy – a point discussed further in the next section – we should expect the authority and influence of these states to extend well over their PRFs.

Bernstein’s ideas are, to be sure, not foreign to the field of education policy studies. Recent scholarship has seen the application of his work to, among other areas, studies of globalizing education policy and conceptual debates over the notion of life-long learning and what Bernstein calls the ‘totally pedagogised society’ (Ball 2009b; Singh 2015a, 2015b; Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). While these studies provide trenchant critiques of the social power relations embedded in a number of policy texts and discourses, they too echo the same partiality documented earlier. A recurring but fundamental theme raised in such work is that of a weak or withdrawing state, increasingly limited and constrained by global neoliberal reforms and the discourses of supranational educational agencies/organizations. For example, in writing about the growing dominance of international testing bodies such as TIMSS and PISA on local governments in the US, UK, and Australia, Singh (2015, 369) notes how in many of these cases ‘the state increasingly loses power over the rules of knowledge dissemination and recontextualization … and has redefined what is within its competence and what is not, what needs to be outsourced, privatized and what is kept public.’ As the subsequent sections of this paper will show, however, in the context of Asia and Singapore in particular, states continue to exert significant influence and control over their education systems, along with the social ideologies that both produce and are produced by it.

The strong state and the politics of policy in Asia

Asian states, of course, do not comprise a homogenous group. In this paper the reference to Asia is, in the main, to those nations in East and Southeast Asia that have in recent decades embarked on intensive modernization projects and have as a result experienced major economic, political, and material transformations. Among others, places such as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and the metropolitan cities in China such as Shanghai figure prominently here. Clearly, to the extent that each is shaped by its unique colonial past, ethnic tensions and cultural politics, the historical presents of these nations differ considerably; as a former British colony the strong state in contemporary Singapore emerges out of very different discourses compared to its South Korean counterpart given the latter’s history of a military dictatorship and Japanese colonialism. Nevertheless, with their highly successful state-directed capitalist economies organized around social and political spheres that privilege more collective rather than individual forms of consciousness, these areas present a common front in contradicting the grandiose claims that Western liberal capitalist states would be, as arrogantly proclaimed by Fukuyama (1992), ‘the end of history.’ As Fukuyama (1992, 238) goes on to acknowledge:

The most significant challenge being posed to the liberal universalism of the American and French revolutions today is not coming from the communist world, whose economic failures are for everyone to see, but from those states in Asia which combine liberal economics with a kind of paternalistic authoritarianism.

To get a sense of how paternalistic authoritarianism functions writ large in Asia, it is worth remembering that many of what we now know as the nation states of East and Southeast Asia were not too long ago colonized territories of either Western powers or imperial Japan. With memories of brutal civil wars and anti-colonial struggles still clearly present in the national consciousness, nationalism continues to be a fundamental political sentiment in these places. As newly minted nations these states have shown, often through a highly standardized national curriculum, various ‘values’ education programs, and other social and education policies, a tendency to tightly embrace their citizens, incorporating them within a bounded ‘national’ space and inscribing upon them a collective ‘national’ identity (Chua 2010). It is in this context, then, that the ideological trajectory and actual practice of a liberal state – organized around the preservation of individual rights, unfettered private enterprise,
and a weak and limited government with minimal influence in the lives of its citizens— is pointed to as potentially destabilizing to a nation that remains an insecure object-in-the-making.

But there have also been deeper, more structural accounts of the presence of such strong states. As Chen (2010, 237) argues, in various places where Mandarin is spoken (including Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia),

The concept of the citizen (gongmin) was, from the early twentieth century onward, displaced by the concept of guomin, which literally means ‘people subjugated to the state.’ The nation therefore becomes the only agent of modernization, and the guomin are reduced to being those who are to be mobilized for that project.

Chen’s arguments resonate with what Chatterjee (2004), Chua (2010), and others have elsewhere referred to as the ‘pastoral’ functions of the state. Here, another pair of social relations, again not to be understood in strictly oppositional terms, are important – guan (state officials) and min (people, or commoners). The state has the power to govern, but it also carries the responsibility to take care of the people. Unlike the ‘procedural’ functions of the liberal state, the responsibility accorded to guan expands the metaphor of the family to the level of the state, in doing so carrying an unapologetically moral dimension. There is then preserved in many of these societies a very real – even if at times abused – faith that the state will wisely use its social and material resources to bring prosperity to its people. Such a moral dimension undergirds the state’s educational and other social policies, profoundly influencing how these come to be understood and received.

Singapore perhaps best exemplifies such a model of strong state governance (Chua 1995; Gopinathan 2007). Well into its third generation since gaining full independence in 1965, Singapore’s political leadership has consistently rallied behind the position that as a tiny nation lacking material resources, the survival of the country hinges upon its ability to integrate into the transnational economy and to take advantage of overseas capital and expertise. This ‘garrison mentality’ (Tan 2001) has often legitimized heavy-handed state intervention in various areas of social and economic policy. By the measures of most observers, including those of its own leaders, the city-state has done remarkably well in these areas – so much so that what were once existential questions of survival have since been displaced by the hegemonic aspirations of a global city capable of not only producing but also attracting talents in fields as diverse as those of industry, finance, research, and leisure. Indeed, both generating much acclaim for the country’s successes as well as fueling its relentless desire to outperform itself is its sterling record of achievements on the international stage. Singapore ranks as the top financial hub in Asia and looks set to overtake Switzerland by 2015 as the world’s location of choice for managing international funds (Reuters 2013). According to the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation, Singapore also helms the list of the world’s freest and most open economies, emerging at the apex of 50 major investment destinations. And as a sign of the rising success of its education system, Singapore students often lead their counterparts in international measures of student achievement; most recently two of its flagship universities have taken the top spot in Asia.

Yet the nation’s preoccupation, even obsession, with strategically positioning itself vis a vis the global flows of capital – what Koh (2010) terms ‘tactical globalization’ – often belies the more fundamental workings of an illiberal social ideology (Zakaria 1997). Western liberal mores such as open dissension, political conflict, and freedoms of speech, press and assembly have been portrayed by state leaders as far from essential, and instead really threatening to the stability and growth of the polity. Thus, for example, in resisting the perceived narcissism of selfish desires masquerading as ‘rights’ and the community-corrosive consequences of liberal individualism, in 1991 the government instituted through the tabling of a White Paper a national ideology of five ‘Shared Values’ explicitly elevating ‘society rights’ over ‘individual rights’: nation before community, community before family, family before self; family as the basic building block of society; consensus instead of contention as a way of resolving issues; racial and religious tolerance and harmony; and regard and community support for the individual (Singapore Government 1991). It was not long after that these Shared Values found policy expression in a set of six messages that formed the cornerstone of the MOE’s new National Education curriculum (Ministry of Education 1997). Clearly, of course, together with the subsequent
'Asian values' discourse propagated by its leaders, the authenticity of these shared values and messages have drawn significant cynicism (Clammer 1993; Tamney 1996). Yet it seems that such criticisms are tangential to the more subtle cultural politics at play. Embedded in such policies are ideological articulations of what Raymond Williams (1961) calls the ‘selective tradition’ – essentializing strategies that, by reinventing historical resources, construct new forms of social and political control. Indeed, in the context of strong states, policies often function to reproduce the state's moral and regulative orders.

In an article of this length it is not possible to engage in a more in-depth portrayal of the Singapore state (see Lim, 2015). It suffices to note, however, and as the next section continues to demonstrate, such a model of strong state governance and the regulatory orders it constructs serve not just to narrow the discursive ambiguities that surround its education policies. Perhaps more significantly, they provide motive and direction to how these policies are received, interpreted, and eventually acted upon by various pedagogic agents.

‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’

As a global city competing for international capital and investments the Singapore state recognizes the importance of a workforce equipped with what Harvey (2005) calls the ‘technologies of information creation’ – skills associated with knowledge processing, information analysis, problem solving, decision-making, etc. The first explicit articulation at the policy level of the need to emphasize such skills – in particular critical thinking – came in the MOE’s introduction of the ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (TSLN) curriculum policy of 1997. Constituting the ORF, the MOE is responsible for conveying the official pedagogic discourse of the state through its policy pronouncements; its interpretation and subsequent dissemination of the discourse of critical thinking under the TSLN rubric becomes crucial to our study of policy work in strong states. TSLN, the MOE tells us, would represent one of the education system’s major strategies for dealing with the challenges of the twenty-first century, a ‘new work order’ characterized by rapid technical and scientific breakthroughs and the cyclical obsolescence of knowledge (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). Consequently, the linchpin that holds together and emboldens this new curriculum vision consists in the building of a more dynamic and innovative society through inculcating in younger Singaporeans the ability to think critically, creatively, and independently (Koh 2002). In unveiling the reform the then Prime Minister (Goh 1997) stressed the urgency for schools to nurture thinking and to be the ‘crucibles for questioning and searching, within and outside the classroom,’ stating that only by doing so could the education system ‘develop future generations of thinking and committed citizens, capable of making good decisions to keep Singapore vibrant and successful in future.’

Given the foregoing characterization of the Singapore state, it is not surprising that ‘vibrancy’ and ‘success’ here have been overwhelmingly interpreted in an economistic sense, and that, as a result, the policy discourse of critical thinking has from the outset been framed by a neoliberal human capital ideology (Koh 2002; see also Olssen 1996). This is evidently borne out by then Education Minister Teo (2000)’s argument for the importance of critical thinking on the basis that

[the nature and content of work in future will increasingly be knowledge-based. To succeed in this new economic landscape, our students entering the workforce must not only be skilled and technologically savvy, but also be creative and adaptable. They must be able to think critically, come up with innovative solutions to problems, and work effectively as individuals and in teams.

Indeed, the instrumental connections here between the economy and education policy are hard to miss. More recently, just months into office the current Education Minister (Heng 2011) reaffirmed his ministry’s commitment to such a policy by proclaiming that

[students will need to be discerning, to be able to judge the reliability and accuracy of the information they access. They will need to be able to make sense of the information, to synthesise it and to communicate purposefully and meaningfully. … As mechanistic jobs will be increasingly offshored or relegated to machines, the knowledge worker of the future will have to compete on higher levels of critical thinking, synthesis and creativity.]
Yet given the state's illiberal ideologies, this focus on critical thinking, or ‘critical analysis – knowing what questions to ask, what information you need and the value of different sources of information’ (Ng 2008), remains far from unproblematic. In emphasizing a set of skills such as assumption-hunting, argumentation, analysis, questioning, reflective skepticism, etc., the epistemic orientations of critical thinking come close to what Bernstein (2000), Young (2009) and others in critical curriculum studies refer to as esoteric knowledge – the site and means of knowledge production and ‘new ways of thinking about the world’ (Young 2009, 14) – as against mundane knowledge, or established, everyday knowledge that has been made ‘safe’ by its selective incorporation into and legitimation as ‘official’ (Apple 2014; see also Durkheim 1967). To be sure, insofar as critical thinking opens up new ways of problematizing what has hitherto been taken for granted, the subject occupies a central position among liberal forms of education, carrying strong overtones of personal freedom, social justice, and transformation (Paul 1994; Siegel 1997).

While in liberal societies such knowledge forms are often cherished or at least given greater latitude in the public sphere and in the school curriculum, in other places they may be regarded as potentially challenging to the state's definition of the common good. In the case of Singapore, there is little in the TSLN policy discourse about the use of critical thinking in directing citizens to counteract forms of social injustice and/or deliberate on the common good; at stake is, perhaps, a destabilizing of the authority and political legitimacy of a set of state–society relations that have for long been built on the expectation that citizens acquiesce in the political will and wisdom of its leadership.

Indeed these tensions have not gone unnoticed. At a gathering of academics in Beijing, Lee (2004), Singapore's founding Prime Minister, affirmed the importance of such forms of knowledge for global market economics when he acknowledged that

... the scholar is still the greatest factor in economic progress ... capturing and discovering new knowledge, apply[ing] himself to R&D, management and marketing, banking and finance ... Those with good minds to be scholars should also become inventors, innovators, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs.

However, he then turned to warn against their gratuitous deployment, arguing that in order to sustain social order and good government, such knowledge had to be buttressed with certain fundamental features of Confucianism, such as the ‘Five Relationships.’ The latter refer to the relations between ruler and ruled; father and son; husband and wife; elder brother and younger brother; and between friends. Both the order in which these relations are listed and the gender specificity of their referents are not inconsequential.

Ideological conflicts such as these permeate education policies and educational institutions everywhere. Apple (1995) reminds us that schools are complex places having to perform, to different extents, both regulatory and liberating functions; not only do they initiate individuals into a given social order, very often, in that process they also equip individuals with the capacities to transform that order. Nevertheless, the Singapore state has been a powerful semiotic and material force (Luke et al. 2010) and has proven remarkably successful in using education policy as an instrument for not just economic growth, but also social cohesion, regulation and state legitimacy (Gopinathan 2007). As the next section will show, through various institutional mechanisms and curriculum provisions the state has been more than a little able to influence how its policy discourse of critical thinking is taken up by schools and other pedagogic agents in the PRF, and in ways that extend its ideologies and interests.

Knowledge, control, and the practice of policy

The following discussion reports from a larger set of data collected in 2011 on how critical thinking is taught and conceptualized in Singapore schools (Lim, 2015). In the case of Valley Point Secondary, whereupon the present discussion is based, the research involved extensive interviews and lessons observations with five teachers over a school term. Teachers were asked to invite the research team into a series of lessons they felt best exemplified how critical thinking was/should be included in the school curriculum; these lesson observations were followed by semi-structured interviews that sought
to clarify the intent behind the lessons as well as the teachers’ assumptions of what critical thinking involved. The data were then analyzed and coded using prefigured codes drawn from Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) conceptual framework of classification and frames. For a more detailed discussion see Lim (2015) and Lim and Apple (2015).

Before describing in detail some of these lessons, a brief characterization of the school’s background and how it typifies the majority of its counterparts is important. Like more than three-quarters of all secondary schools (grades 7 through 10/11) in Singapore, Valley Point Secondary is closely regulated, funded and directly administered by the MOE through its network of school superintendents and principals. The school’s teachers are also centrally allocated by the MOE. Valley Point Secondary’s student intake reflects a wide range of scores from the centralized sixth-grade national placement examination; to meet these diverse needs the school, like most others, offers three academic tracks varying in their emphasis on academic or vocational skills. The teachers there commonly refer to their school as a ‘neighborhood school’ – indicating that their students are drawn from the immediate neighborhood – as opposed to the more premier ‘magnet schools.’ Yet perhaps what marks out the commonness of the school is the fact that its curriculum closely mirrors the national examinations that the great majority of secondary schools partake in. Detailed syllabuses for each subject mapping out specific learning outcomes for the grade levels and academic tracks are provided by the MOE’s Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD), an agency within the ORF that provides support to schools and monitors the implementation of official syllabuses and programs. At the level of schools, these syllabuses translate into a tightly-knit framework of themes, units of work, and both formal and informal assessments, all of which eventually culminate in how students are prepared for their national high-stakes examinations at the end of secondary school.

It should be pointed out that while the MOE has in its policies emphasized the importance of critical thinking, it has not provided any curriculum materials nor prescribed sample lessons that exemplify its teaching. There may be then, some latitude in how critical thinking may be taken up in schools. Nevertheless, given the parameters outlined in the previous paragraph, Valley Point Secondary has sought to ‘infuse’ the teaching of critical thinking across each of its existing curriculum subjects; all the teachers from the various academic departments professed to have had, in one way or another, incorporated critical thinking skills into their units of work. This seemingly wide focus in the scope of critical thinking, however, is underpinned by a narrow instrumental rationality. From the classroom lessons it became quite clear that the teaching of critical thinking draws heavily upon a set of subject-specific content knowledge (memorization of formulas, technical details, historical facts, etc.), and in each case the ubiquitous emphasis is on critical thinking as a technical skill that students ‘switch’ to in order to solve clearly delineated problems in their examinations.

Consider, for example, how in one of the chemistry lessons the teacher retains almost exclusive control over the pedagogic interaction. In this grade 9 lesson, getting students to think critically involved getting them to, in the teacher’s words, ‘hypothesize the relationship between two reagents and their precipitate and solution.’ In a previous lesson, students had conducted a series of investigations combining different salt solutions (for example, silver nitrate and sodium chloride) and had observed and recorded the word equations for the subsequent precipitates and solutions formed (sodium nitrate and silver chloride). The present task required proposing a general formula of the form \( AB + CD \rightarrow AD + CB \) to show how a precipitate could be obtained. Critical thinking in this case thus first demands the recapitulation of a corpus of highly specific subject content, and evinces a particularly narrow application. But not only was the context strongly bounded, the answer the teacher had in mind was also highly specific. As the teacher puts it in quite unambiguous terms:

Use the concept of ABCD ok? Represent the cation and the anion from the salt solutions using [the letters] ABCD. AB plus CD gives you AD plus CB. So you should have: soluble salt AB plus soluble salt CD becomes soluble salt AD plus insoluble salt CB. This should be your final scientific concept that you are proposing.

Literally, then, there were no two ways about it. Throughout the lesson the teacher closely regulated the classroom interaction, prescribing, and controlling how students should be thinking in order to
be thinking critically, the ways in which this could be done, and the responses that would constitute legitimate realizations of critical thought. This rigidity comes across most obviously when the teacher explained to the students why none of them were able to derive the ‘correct’ answer:

So in order to come up with a theory, a scientific theory, you need to take a look and observe all the chemicals that were given to you. … First thing is, can you see this [i.e. that the two reagents are salt solutions]? Most of you can’t even see this. In fact all of you couldn’t. You couldn’t tell me that it was a salt. Because I asked you the question: Is it an acid, is it an alkaline, is it water, or is it question mark? Some of you can tell me it is acid. Totally forgotten what you had learnt. What must you see for acid? What is the critical ion in acid? $H^+$-plus. What is the critical ion in alkaline? $O\cdot H^-$-minus. And then you take a look at all the things that were given to you. Do they contain any of this? So can it be any of this? So it is neither acid nor alkaline. So what is it?

Before it may be pointed out that the nature of scientific inquiry and its methodologies might preclude a less regulated pedagogic script, consider a social studies lesson. That the teacher in this class explicitly connects critical thinking to one of the core components of the high-stakes national social studies examination suggests the dominance of an instrumental discourse. Students were given five sources, each accounting for the extent to which religious differences between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland were the cause of the conflict there, and were subsequently required to compare and analyze each source in terms of its reliability and evidential strength. Not unlike the previous example, the reliance on an explicit body of prior knowledge is clear, and serves to demarcate the boundaries of critical thought. To be sure, being able to focus on the issue(s) presupposes familiarity with, among other things, the national relations between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland; the religious and ethnic composition of Northern Ireland; the distinctions between Protestantism and Catholicism within the larger Christian religion; and how religious and ethnic differences between the two territories have historically founded nationalist sentiments. When the teacher was asked if students who lacked these understandings might actually be impeded from critically engaging with the sources, he admitted that ‘I chose this [particular case study assignment] because we taught them the background knowledge. So it will be easier. [But] you are right, if I had not taught them this then it will not make sense.’

These strong controls on the transmission are also evident in the criteria students were presented with as valid realizations of critical thought. The teacher was more than a little precise here. Following each of the questions in students’ assignment handouts are specific targets that mark out how responses should be formulated. Thus, for example, the question ‘How far does Source E prove that …’ is accompanied by a ‘Question Target’ instructing students to ‘Draw conclusions based on a reasoned consideration of evidence and arguments.’ The teacher also makes clear to students that ‘if the [question] says “how similar?”’, definitely they [the examiners] would have worked out the answer. There is some similarity and difference. You have to find it.’ At times during the lesson, he even attempts to help students by dictating the exact manner in which their responses (usually 100–150 words long) are to be phrased. All this is despite the fact that as he admits after the lesson, ‘we mark according to [a] “levels of response marking scheme”. There is really no right or wrong answer. As long as the answer is credible, it is logical, we give them [the] marks.’ Indeed, even when the criteria may be more flexible and accepting of a range of responses, they are nevertheless presented to students as highly specific, even pre-specified.

Similar modes of delivery structure the rest of the lessons (mathematics, language arts, etc.) observed at the school. The pedagogic oeuvre had little to do with building substantive forms of critical thinking referred to earlier, such as encouraging students to craft and assess the strengths of their arguments, analyze and evaluate the evidence presented, identify flaws in reasoning and faulty assumptions, and, through all this, nurturing a disposition to engage in open-ended discursive inquiry. In these classrooms, the emphasis was instead on ensuring that students answer specific questions with equally specific responses (or specific ways of arriving at these responses). Indeed, what constitutes critical thinking almost never requires students to elaborate beyond a body of prior knowledge and to develop ambiguous, alternative, and even contrary opinions. Far from approximating the dispositions of open-ended discursive inquiry, then, critical thinking as it is received from the state’s policy
discourses and enacted in a school like Valley Point Secondary continues to take aim at answering the knowledge economy’s call for knowledge workers. And to the extent that such forms of thinking are prized in the market and increasingly underpinned by global neoliberal education reforms, like all forms of labor they will need to be controlled and regulated, and workers will need to be outwardly responsive to whatever material they may be asked to think about (Beck 2002).

All this, however, should not be taken to imply that teachers and students do not at times seek to challenge or redefine the meanings around such policy discourses. Indeed, some of the students in the school – especially those academically weaker – exhibited non-chalance, even a passive resistance toward any exhortation to critical thinking. Teachers lament that these ‘students are not very receptive toward the idea [of critical thinking] … they just said that they don’t want to think.’ Given the ways in which critical thinking has become narrowly defined by an instrumental discourse of academic achievement, such responses on the part of students are perhaps not without good sense; as Bernstein (1977) and Willis (1977) demonstrated, students often adopt a stance of deferred commitment, even resistance, to a pedagogic code in which they are unable to recognize themselves.

Likewise, even as we note the dominance of economic rationalities in the state’s policy discourses, it would be a mistake to assume that teachers are not also saddled with multiple ideological obligations, some genuinely progressive and focused on the cultivation of intellectual autonomy. The social studies teacher whose lessons were observed, for example, notes in considerable detail some of the more ‘critical’ functions of critical thinking:

> When [students] leave school, when they read the newspapers, when they hear people say certain things, they will know whether it is bias, whether there is prejudice. When they read the internet, Wikipedia, Facebook and so on, they will think critically, they will look for other sources … When they read The Straits Times [newspaper], they will not take at face value what [it] tells us is happening in Singapore … When it comes to [the] elections, they will not follow the herd, they will use their vote wisely.

At one level these discrepancies might suggest that teachers – as agents in the PRF – do not always hold watertight and non-conflicting understandings of what critical thinking means. But perhaps more fundamentally, they reveal how teachers are also grappling with the state’s hegemonic discourses on the subject, discourses that emanate from, on the one hand, its illiberal ideology and, on the other, a set of neoliberal global education reforms, and how teachers are in their own classrooms trying their utmost to both evoke and contain these ideals.

**Concluding remarks**

In nations and education systems characterized by strong state governance, then, significantly different dynamics exist around the interpretation and translation of policies. As we have seen in the case of Singapore, by maintaining greater regulation over various institutional mechanisms and the moral orders of the education system and larger society, the ORF possesses greater wherewithal in ensuring how its policies are understood and ultimately practiced by agents in the PRF. Firstly, the state’s illiberal ideology has eclipsed much of the discursive possibilities around critical thinking as a mode of consciousness anchored in debates over social justice and the common good. This has led to the state dominating the policy discourse around critical thinking with neoliberal and instrumental articulations of the subject that connect it to the knowledge worker and the putative needs of the new economy. Secondly, through a traditionally strong ORF – the MOE mandates a highly standardized national curriculum; the CPDD routinely prescribes syllabuses and curriculum guidelines and monitors their implementation; and all schools and students are subject to a system of high-stakes national examinations – the state has not just accorded little autonomy for schools and teachers in the PRF to engage in non-official interpretations of policy, but it has also kept the latter weak by keeping its competencies in curriculum development and design relatively underdeveloped.

Drawing from the unique vantage point of strong states in Asia, this paper has provided an alternative account of the politics and struggles around the articulation of policy texts and discourses. By centering its analysis on the nature and hegemony of state intervention, both ideological and
institutional, the paper illuminates some of the hidden contestations and appropriations around the workings of policy. For some time now, scholars have emphasized the geopolitics and cultural biases embedded in knowledge production and called for the ‘deparochialization of research’ (Appadurai 2001; see also Connell 2007; Alatas 2006). As Hall (1992) points out in his seminal essay ‘The West and the Rest,’ the West has historically performed a wide range of functions. It has been an opposing entity, a system of reference, an object from which to learn, a goal to catch up with. As a framework many of us use to categorize the world, it is itself laden with the politics of a classificatory system that has historically connected to and legitimized the categories of the West/developed/metropolitan/center versus the non-West/underdeveloped/rural/periphery.

One is perhaps justified, then, for raising eyebrows when in explicating the politics of policy in Asia this article drew upon Bernstein’s – one of the foremost figures of critical educational studies in the West – discussion of recontextualizing fields. Indeed, in many ways such tensions speak precisely to the ethos of charting out alternative routes of inquiry. However, rather than conceiving of these tensions as simply forming a methodological impasse, they might be more productively thought of as motivating the search for new ways of problematizing. This requires some elaboration. One of the most intellectually rigorous but also existentially engaging ways of circumventing this East–West binarism may be found in the writings on ‘Asia as method’ by the cultural sociologist Chen (2010). Rather than continuing to fear reproducing the hegemony of the West, Chen asks that we actively acknowledge it as bits and fragments that intervene in local social formations in a systematic, but never totalizing, way. On this perspective the West is not simply cast as the dialectic Other, along with its implied antagonisms, but, in the form of fragmented pieces internal to the local, it sits as one frame of reference among others. The task, then, for Asia as method is to multiply these frames of reference. Chen (2010, 212) own words here are worth quoting at length:

Using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history.

Chen’s insights are twofold. By shifting the points of reference toward Asia, not only might societies there be inspired by and learn from how other societies that have similar experiences as colonized nations, similar trajectories of modernization, and/or similar structural locations in the global capitalist system deal with problems like their own. At a more fundamental level, Chen also implies that ignoring others who have experienced similar pressures makes it impossible for Asian nations to understand themselves in ways that go beyond Western theoretical constructs.

‘Asia as method’ thus becomes an exceptionally powerful platform for researchers to both employ Western constructs such as those of Bernstein’s but to also speak back to them at the same time (see for example, Lim and Apple, 2016; Zhang, Wing, and Kenway 2015). Such efforts may even clarify some of the fundamental questions continuously labored upon in Western traditions. Indeed, taking their cue from this process of relativization, Western scholars of critical policy studies working through these issues are not simply studying the politics of policy in parts of Asia. Rather, drawn into a different paradigm of political struggles, they are also themselves challenged to rethink and re-envision the possibilities of these dynamics in their own spaces.

Notes

1. See Angus (2015), Apple (2006), Au (2016), Rowe and Windle (2012), and others for discussions of how in the US and Australia the federal control of new nation-wide assessments, funding policies, and/or new national curriculums have assumed such neoliberal forms.

2. See for example, Mulcahy’s (2015, 2016) work utilizing the analytic of ‘assemblage’ to understand how schools in Victoria, Australia are enacting – often in seemingly paradoxical ways – state policies that call for ‘flexible’ and ‘open’ learning spaces and facilities.
3. There are of course considerable ideological differences within the liberal camp; yet in committing themselves to various interpretations of these central tenets, the discourse and rhetoric of the vast number of liberal positions constitute a significant counterpoint to the political ideology in many parts of Asia.

4. For an extended account of how the Mandarin notion of guomin connects to the Japanese notion of kokumin and is used in both Chinese nationalist discourse and Korean and Japanese political circles, see Chen (2010, 283, fn.14).


7. See Young (2009) for a restatement of esoteric/mundane knowledges as powerful knowledge/knowledge of the powerful.

8. It should also be recognized that insofar as the account of rationality presented here centers on abstraction, logic, and argument analysis, it has not gone uncontested. Among others, feminists theorists have sought to demonstrate a gender bias in thinking so conceived, charging that it privileges logic over intuition and empathy; it deals with abstract, intellectual principles while neglecting or downplaying the emotions; and it is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative (Hooks 2010; Martin 1992; Noddings 1984; Thayer-Bacon 2010). As the charge continues, such notions of rationality are rooted in a Western European version of masculinity, one that assumes the potential of humans to create a social order based on abstract, formal principles (Pateman 1988). For further discussions see Lim (2011, 2014b), Arnot & Dillabough (1999) and Yuval-Davis (1997).

9. In saying this it should not be romanticized that liberal states are necessarily wedded to the ideal of critical thinking. As a recent and interesting case in point drawn from the US, the Republican Party of Texas declared in their 2012 political platform their party’s opposition to the teaching of critical thinking in all schools in the state – a subject that they claim carries the ‘purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority’ (Republican Party of Texas 2012, 12).

10. Depending on their academic track, students enroll into either a four year program culminating in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) ‘Ordinary’ Level examinations or a five year program that leads to the GCE ‘Normal’ Level examinations.


12. See George (2012), for example, who considers the most widely circulated English newspaper in Singapore, The Straits Times, to be state-controlled.

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