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Constructing underachievement: The discursive life of Singapore in US federal education policy

Roberto Santiago de Roock & Darlene Machell Espeña

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers insights into the referencing of Singapore within the US Obama Administration educational discourse, underscoring the political-material-discursive nexus of international educational benchmarking. Using critical discourse analysis, we find that an objectified Singapore functions as a rhetorical tool of US policymaker agendas, with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international assessments as basis for truth statements. US policy discourses on Singapore's education system perpetuate, rather than interrogate, PISA's questionable underlying "truths" around socio-economic development, equity, and excellence, and thus on student achievement and underachievement. Singapore's status as an "Asian Tiger" reference society intertwines with international assessments to form part of an emerging transnational regime of truth, homogenizing what to consider as factual or important, holding sway over views of reality by obscuring other more robust data, research, and lived experiences. In the process of constructing "high performance" around the role education plays in the international economic system, the notion of "low performance" is also discursively constituted and a schemata established for the disciplining of "low performing" bodies through neoliberal policy agendas.

Keywords: Underachievement, PISA, Singapore education, US educational policies, discourse analysis, neoliberalism

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, Asian economic and educational systems, especially the highly developed "Four Asian Tigers" of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, have taken the place of past reference societies like Japan in the 1980s and the Soviet Union before it (Sellar&Lingard, 2013; Thorsten, 2012). Whereas the Asian Tigers were once portrayed as inhabiting an exotic present more closely connected to the past, they increasingly form essential parts of futurist discourse (Philip, 2010), but similarly objectified. In particular, within a neoliberal globalization framework, they are seen as the future competition of Western workforces, which is manifested in anxiety over schooling (Suprpto, 2016) among other worries. This is best illustrated by the cycles of shock and reform perpetuated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international assessments, on which the Four Tigers perform at the top, providing a yardstick for the rest of the world to measure their own children and opening up new ways of problematizing "underachieving" students and schools (Waldow, 2017). These countries have become reference societies – idealized as "knowledge societies" best positioned for the "knowledge economy", constructing a discursive framework where other countries need to "move" their education systems to the (physical and symbolic) time of "tomorrow's world" (Carvalho, 2012, p. 174).

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Drawing from policy sociology (e.g., Ball, 2006) and using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012), this paper analyses the US Obama administration's references to Singapore's educational system and implications for notions of student "underachievement". We find that Singapore functions as a bendable rhetorical tool of US policymaker agendas, with PISA and other international assessments as bases for truth statements. In this discourse, Singapore is objectified in the US policymaker gaze as a "high performing" threat, drawing on schemata that go back to Cold War Sputnik illusions (cf. Thorsten, 2012) while further objectifying and problematizing "low achieving" students. This serves to bolster global policy ensembles that misconstrue and distort the capacities, needs, and development of those labelled as "low-achiever", not just in the US but also (indirectly) in Singapore.

Reference societies and the transnational discursive construction of low achievers

This section provides contextual background on our study, including international educational benchmarking and its place in global educational policymaking, especially in the US. As the topic has been covered in-depth elsewhere (e.g., Ball, 2006; Carvalho, 2012; Cooper & Dunne, 2000; Louis, 2017), we aim here to contextualize our study in a few key points rather than conduct anything close to an exhaustive review. We emphasize the place of reference societies in international policy discourse and how such discourse impacts concepts of "low achieving" schools, teachers, and students.

International educational assessments and global assemblages

We understand policymaker discourse as part of "global assemblages", "situated interactions, decisions and practices... to account for the heterogeneity of outcomes that issue from entanglements with global flows" (Ong, 2009, p. 89). One major aspect of these global assemblages are international educational assessments; they form a consistent but largely unmentioned part of policymaker discourse in referencing Singapore. While TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) are longer running, we focus our discussion on the more influential PISA, although we find policymakers jump between referencing the exams fluidly.

PISA has come to be seen as an "emerging regime of global educational governance" (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 11); it has become an important mechanism for shifting, influencing, and shaping educational policy around the world. Such a positioning is by design of the OECD. One of the stated goals of PISA and other international assessments is to serve as an international comparative evidence base for educational policy development and implementation. The OECD has developed cross-nationally comparative education indicators and its *Education-at-a-Glance* is heavily referenced by a wide range of stakeholders, from the media to policymakers (Carvalho, 2012; Goldstein, 2004; OECD, 2010; Pereyra, Kotthoff, & Cowen, 2011). Governments are meant to "draw policy lessons" (OECD, 2004, p. 12) from PISA, specifically around the ability of various countries to prepare their workforce and compete in the future economy. This overall "positioning" by the OECD, rather than the actual research and data practices involved in PISA itself, is utilized, localized, and reinforced by policymakers (cf. Carvalho, 2012; Gorur, 2011). The focus on governance and policy shaping is important, as PISA is widely regarded as not simply a neutral way of gathering and disseminating data on student and school system excellence, but rather to push a particular market-driven concept of educational reform and governmentality (Ball, 2006).

PISA "truths" and constructing low performance

Such global assemblages more-or-less explicitly target underperforming students not only in the material reforms that are enacted but also in the schemata they employ to justify such reforms, extending to social violence, like union busting and teacher performance-based pay, that underlie

them (Ball, 2006; Lipman, 2011). We follow many others in maintaining that “low performance is not a given category, but a reality performed into being by students, test instruments, and measurement rationality” (Serder & Ideland, 2016, p. 342). Here Foucault’s (1977) notion of “discipline” is relevant, which he uses to describe the type of power and a modality for its exercise, as opposed to direct coercion, that emerged in nineteenth century institutions (e.g., the school, prison, hospital, and military). Within disciplinary regimes such as PISA that leverage normalizing judgement (Foucault, 1977), the individualization of power is hierarchical and “descending”: “as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized” (p. 193). In other words, as the disciplinary gaze turns to those further below the norm (and even further from the ideal), the exercise of power on subjectivity becomes stronger. In this way, the deployment of numbers can tend to discipline on those they depict; even when designed to describe behaviour, quantification can easily be used to judge and control it (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). Reform discourse directly targets students deemed underperforming along with their teachers and their communities. If we may flip the neoliberal script drawing on futurist schemata, PISA simply extends the disciplinary role of schooling (originating in the nineteenth century) to a global level: “In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification” (Foucault, 1977, p. 187).

To describe international assessments as ceremonies of objectification is not to deny utility in the data generated by them. However, their influence goes far beyond the validity of their truth claims. In particular, the reliability of PISA has been critiqued based on numerous factors. From a test-theory perspective, critics have identified technical issues of reliability and validity, sampling and bias (e.g., McGaw, 2006, 2008; Wiliam, 2008). Others have critiqued the ways items are tested, tests administered, and test scores interpreted (e.g., Goldstein, 2004) along with construct validity (Dohn, 2007; Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014). Finally, still others have identified issues with cultural bias, distributional effects, and equity (e.g., Cooper & Dunne, 2000; Nardi, 2008; Stobart, 2005). Despite such issues, PISA has succeeded in achieving an obligatory point of passage (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Law, 1986) for educational policymaking as an “unavoidable (and ‘obvious’) provider of information ‘based on proof’, a tool that creates and allows the creation of new problems and imagined new tomorrows” (Carvalho, 2012, p. 183). In other words, the exam propagates particular “truths” that largely go uncontested by the media and policymakers alike, identifying problems that may not really be there and proposing solutions that are ideologically-laden, reinforcing and reinforced by neoliberal ideology on the march across the world and policy spectrum. To put it more plainly, PISA may indeed lack validity as a research instrument, at least compared to its level of impact, but continues to be influential in shaping public opinion and policy that disproportionately and negatively impact the lives of poor and minoritized communities deemed “underperforming” (Ball, 2006; Lipman, 2011).

Singapore as reference society

While there is a growing body of work on Singapore’s postcolonial policies and positioning, for example in a strategic globalization approach (Koh, 2011) and as part of the broader group of “high performing systems” (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016, p. 451) as measured by PISA and other international assessments, there is not much work specifically discussing Singapore’s discursive positioning within globalization and trends in global educational policy. Most studies looking at references to the Asian Tigers or generally to a high performing “Asia” focus on the larger economies of East Asia (e.g., Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Waldow, 2017; You & Morris, 2016). However, the Southeast Asian island nation of Singapore has been recognized to play an important role within the global educational policy discourse propelled primarily by international educational assessments. Such a role is disproportionately large given Singapore’s small and declining population of students numbering fewer than half a million (Ministry of Education (Singapore), 2016) in a country of

under four million citizens and permanent residents, plus 1.6 million non-resident population (Department of Statistics (Singapore), 2017), few of whom are able to send their kids to government schools (Teng, 2017).

Singapore's rise in the global education field is part of the so-called "pivot to Asia" or "look to the East" phenomenon augmented by the success of Asian tigers on PISA and TIMSS that lead these states to be regarded as "reference societies" (Park, 2013; Suprpto, 2016; Tan, 2012; Tucker, 2011; Waldow, Takayama, & Sung, 2014). However, doing well on international exams is not enough to become a reference society (Waldow, 2017). While "local configurations, including local patterns of political controversy and problem perception" (Waldow et al., 2014, p. 317) remain crucial factors in edifying reference societies, the popularity and influence of Asian reference societies remains powerful (Yong, 2017) and certainly a major factor in Singapore's position as a reference society.

In conceptualizing reference societies, we should note that it is never a straightforward process. Selective borrowing of educational policies and agendas do occur, both publicly and silently (Waldow, 2009), although always in ways adapted to local context. On the other hand, reference can occur without any borrowing, including the case of "phoney" borrowing (Phillips & Ochs, 2003, p. 455); such policy referencing may simply work as a legitimating device for policy agendas (Waldow, 2017; You & Morris, 2016). The actual conditions in the reference society are often of minor importance. To describe this process as transfer or borrowing is probably misleading; it has also been called "projection", a notion on the rise in the literature (e.g., Morris, 2012; Smithers, 2004; Takayama, 2010), but has only recently been discussed systematically in relation to reference societies in education (Waldow, 2017). An examination of how Singapore serves as a reference society in the US and how it is leveraged by key policymakers in the process of projection is therefore very much warranted.

Methodology: political discourse as practical argumentation

We asked the following questions in formulating this research study:

- (1) How and to what end do US federal educational policymakers discuss Singapore and construct it as a reference society?
- (2) How do these discourses contribute to constructing the notion of low achievers in the US educational system?

Our underlying goals are to disrupt predominant assumptions about international educational benchmarking and better understand the consequences of such assumptions on the lives of already marginalized students in the US. Our concern is a local one as well – as ethnographers working with "low performing" students, their teachers, and their communities in Singapore, we are attentive to the ways student subjectivities are constituted by emerging global governance structures and thus how discourses on high and low performing systems shape their educational experiences.

Critical discourse analysis

In order to answer these questions, we used a critical discourse analysis methodology in the tradition of Marxist dialectics (e.g., Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1977, 1991; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) in analysing US policymaker discourse, in particular the methods for political discourse analysis described by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012). We understand discourse as "epiphenomenal of social and material relations. That is to say: patterns of meaning-making and exchange are materially enacted practices that have empirical effects in the world, and discourse is grounded in an encompassing world of social and cultural relations" (Graham & Luke, 2011, p. 104). Language

is always situated in social action, and is both constituted by and constitutive of social relations. Discourse is thus understandable in terms of political economy and broader power relations (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1977, 1991), in this case embodied in ongoing shifts in US educational policy.

In a practical sense, we focus on political discourse as being about “making choices about how to act in response to circumstances and goals, it is about choosing *policies*, and such choices and the actions which follow them are based on practical argumentation” (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 1). Concretely, we approach the discourse of a political figure not simply as talking “about” something, but arguing “for” something, such as a particular brand of educational reform. Discourses provide reason for action through representation; even non-argumentative genres like narrative or explanation are situated within broader arguments over policy agendas. In terms of statements around data, from a sociology of quantification perspective “numbers, like words, should be regarded as deeds: acts of communication whose meaning and functions cannot be reduced to a narrow instrumentality and which depend deeply on ‘grammars’ and ‘vocabularies’ developed through use” (Espeland & Stevens, 2008, p. 431). Numbers take work and do work; the act of doing and using numbers intervenes in the world being depicted.

Method

We undertook a systematic review of US policies and policymaker documents for references to Singapore. The selection criteria for the documents was guided by our goal to provide a qualitative analysis of documents that capture US federal education policymakers’ perspectives on Singapore and PISA. First, the documents must be dated/published during the Obama administration, that is, from 2009 to 2017. Second, they must be prepared/written by US education policymakers from the federal level. Finally, the documents must contain direct references to Singapore. We utilized the US Department of Education’s website along with online media platforms to source the documents.

The resulting 38 documents (see [Appendix A](#)) included speeches of President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden; memos, press releases, messages, and speeches by US Education policymakers such as Secretary Arne Duncan, Joanne Weiss (Duncan’s Chief of Staff), and Under Secretary Martha Kanter. We also examined and coded US Education policy documents, including *Race to the Top*, *Common Core*, *Connect to Compete*, and *No Child Left Behind*; the latter was included for historical context. These documents, though not exhaustive, provide a coherent view of how US federal education policymakers interpret and negotiate Singapore’s high performance as well as their understanding of PISA as a litmus test for student achievement or underachievement.

After gathering documents, we coded them for direct and general references to Singapore using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. We collated the documents and performed text searches for “Singapore”, “Asia”, and references to high performing systems. Then, we categorized these texts into three themes that emerged, namely references to Singaporean students, teachers, and national government, and sub themes within these. Finally, using principles of Fairclough and Fairclough’s (2012) political discourse analysis discussed above, we analysed the texts for the practical argumentation (and corresponding “truth” and “knowledge” they conjure) around Singapore and underachievement, including their underlying assumptions and intimations.

Findings: the discursive life of Singapore in US educational policy talk

We found that discourses surrounding Singaporean students, teachers, and government were particularly associated with neoliberal value frameworks. However, references to Singapore showed very little actual knowledge about the island nation beyond international benchmarking and anecdotal sources. Most importantly, while low performance of US students was a

cornerstone of policymaker discourse, there was no direct mention about low performing students in Singapore, although a student performance gap is a significant issue within Singapore (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). In the process of constructing “high performance” around the role education plays in the international economic system, the notion of low performance was also discursively constituted and a schemata established for the disciplining of “low performing” bodies.

Singapore students as competition

One of the most consistent themes is the recurring depiction of Singapore students as a faceless “Other” who, despite the fact that US students only rarely come into contact with them, are direct competition. This was evidenced in recurring offhand references to Singapore students, as described in the examples below. The references supported the argument that US students do not just need to compare their performance against other US students, they also need to match up to, or beat, Singaporean students in order to be able to compete globally (Kanter, 2009; Obama, 2009, 2014; Weiss, 2009). The message was that Singaporean students are winning, and this is a threat and indicative of decline.

In one illustrative instance, as the newly elected President, Obama laid out his views on US education in a speech delivered to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in 2009. Obama (2009) situated the nation in “difficult times... a crisis unlike anything we have seen before” (para. 4). Coming out of the financial crisis, he impressed the urgency for the US to increase job creation, revive the financial system, and propel the market forward, all of which he linked to needed reforms in the educational system. Educational achievement, he contended, plays a crucial role in maintaining their position as global economic leader: “The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, it’s unsustainable for our democracy, it’s unacceptable for our children, and we can’t afford to let it continue”(Obama, 2009, para. 12). It bears noting that there is a long history of US presidents citing similarly unparalleled crises as part of a seemingly perpetual pessimism and agonizing about public education in the US in the last 70 years (cf. Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Thorsten, 2012).

It is within this framework that Obama referenced students in Singapore as performing better than US students and thus, as evidence of declining US education:

And yet, despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we’ve let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us. Let me give you a few statistics. In 8th grade math, we’ve fallen to 9th place. Singapore’s middle-schoolers outperform ours three to one. (Obama, 2009, para. 12)

He used the Singapore comparison, backed by statistics (apparently) from the 2007 TIMSS mathematics report, to highlight how the US is lagging behind, and that the nation is facing a crisis that needs to be addressed through educational reforms. Immediately after, he linked the internal gap in the performance of White American students relative to African American and Latinx students in the US to further highlight the crisis, but he did not mention how that gap compares to other systems, such as Singapore. However, the comparisons between ethnics groups internally frequently occurred with comparisons with Singapore, such as in speeches by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan discussed below.

Obama’s speech was positioned to argue for three education reform pillars: investing in early childhood initiatives; standardization of curriculum and assessments; and teacher recruitment, training, and merit-based pay (Obama, 2009). It was seen by the media as a step towards confronting teachers’ unions, a major Democrat constituency, in laying out and justifying his plan to embrace policies of merit-based pay that would reward teachers for student achievement and punish them for student underachievement (Chaggaris, 2009). Such policies were, and continue to be, generally opposed by teacher unions.

The rhetoric of the Singapore student as competition was repeated frequently, linked to this same policy agenda and with the same targets. In another illustrative instance, Arne Duncan, in his remarks to the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council in 2011, claimed that White middle class students in the United States are “not just competing against students in New England, but are competing with children from high-achieving nations like... Singapore” (Duncan, 2011c, para. 61). There is both a racialization and classism inherent in his framing of the “average” American student, embodied in New England (a US region where Rhode Island is located), compared to the international competition. The implication here is that such normative, “average” American students are not adequately challenged by other racialized Americans, particularly underperforming African American and Latinx communities. Rather, he argued competition is against the students from the rest of the world, with countries like Singapore posing the greatest threat. Here the Asianness of Singapore, as part of the “Asian Tigers” and as a reference society, comes into play. The framing of crisis arising from threats to racial hierarchy is telling and even inflammatory. Meanwhile, protesters from Occupy Providence and the Coalition to Defend Public Education gathered outside to challenge many of the suggested reforms; protestors linked Duncan with Providence Mayor Angel Taveras’ decision to fire all of the city’s teachers earlier in the year as part of school reform and teacher accountability efforts (Grabel, 2011).

Singapore teachers as key to student high performance

One of the key links between the Obama policy agenda and Singapore educational performance pertains to the role of Singapore teachers and performativity measures. Duncan frequently identified teachers as the “most important factor” that determine students’ success in school; this comes across as a compliment but rhetorically serves more to assign responsibility within a proposed accountability regime. In a speech to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, he explained:

Shortly after he took office, President Obama travelled to Asia. He discovered that in South Korea and Singapore teachers are considered ‘nation builders’... Sadly, in America, our teachers aren’t treated like the nation builders that they are. Education is the key to America’s success in the 21st Century. (Duncan, 2011a, para. 9–11)

Duncan legitimized his argument by referencing President Obama’s “discoveries” in his travels to Asia; the colonial imagery evoked by such framing is telling. Duncan plotted Asia, in particular Singapore and South Korea, as foreign and exotic lands, although not of a static past (as in colonial narratives) but as an idealized future. As nation builders, teachers are supposed to produce “leaders and workers who will ensure the country’s long term economic prosperity” (Duncan, 2011a, para. 10). He compared what Singapore has accomplished with what the US still has not achieved, holding teachers responsible for the survival of the nation and its economy; this sense of accountability is meant to be concrete and actionable through disciplinary measures (from merit to dismissal). Duncan did not actually describe what it means to see teachers as “nation-builders” in these countries, although such a role would possibly be distasteful to most US teachers; for example, Singapore’s Character and Citizenship Education course emphasizes social harmony and cohesion over critical thinking and open democratic participation (e.g., Sim, 2013).

In remarks at the National Center on Education and the Economy National Symposium later that year, Duncan used the case of Singapore to advance the link between compensation and teacher performance. He asserted:

Singapore’s Senior Minister of State reported that upwards of 30 percent of Singapore’s teachers get performance-based bonuses... As I said earlier, I am committed to benchmarking the practices and performance of top-performing countries because it can help America accelerate achievement and elevate the teaching profession. (Duncan, 2011b, para. 52–53)

This argument was repeated frequently by Duncan, such as his speech at the Building Blocks for Education: Whole System Reform Conference in Toronto the previous year:

American educators and policymakers have much to learn from other countries... Other nations, like Singapore..., are showing the way to building a top notch teaching force, creating better assessments of student learning, and ensuring that outstanding teachers instruct the most challenging students. (Duncan, 2010, para. 49–50)

In this speech and numerous others, Duncan suggested the US has failed in these aspects and should, therefore, look at the way Singapore (and other high performing nations) select, train, and keep their teachers.

On the home front, many regarded the Obama administration's policies as destructive to the teachers (Lipman, 2011). For instance, the administration sought to transform state educational policy through the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) (Ravitch, 2011). The central relevance of this discussion over teachers is the way the RTTT has pushed through reforms around "teacher quality", specifically by requiring participating states to opt-in to mechanisms that allow teacher pay to be tied to student performance. The discursive link is clear in Duncan's statements, with performance-based pay emphasized over support for better pay or more, well-funded teacher education. The teacher, like the student, is also consistently quantified and thus held accountable. In what Ball (2003) described as the "terrors of performativity" (p. 216), teacher performance is linked to student assessments and is therefore defined and motivated (and also disciplined) by monetary means.

Underachieving students: the visible and invisible

As important as the utterances in the texts are the silences. Since the references to Singapore cite only international benchmarking and anecdotal sources – despite the scholarly literature available on the island nation's complexities – it appears as flat, homogenous, and faceless. The silences create gaps that are filled by the listener's assumptions about Singapore as an Asian Tiger, and shaped by the schemata evoked. This renders US low performing bodies – students, teachers, and "crumbling" schools – as highly visible and in need of correction. In particular, no direct mention was made in any of the speeches or documents about low performing students in Singapore, although Singapore has a persistent achievement gap, the so-called "long tail" of PISA performance, nor was there any informed discussion of the factors underlying high performance (cf. Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). Relatedly, since they did not mention the "underachieving" students in Singapore, they also could not refer to the efforts to level up these students and close the achievement gap (Wang, Teng, & Tan, 2014).

Tellingly, there were also no references to many of the impressive features of Singapore's education system. While there were references to system-wide efforts and reforms to better prepare future-ready learners (Tan, Choo, Kang, & Liem, 2017), there were no mentions of "innovative" features like Singapore's quadrilingual approach where students are expected to be fluent in English plus one of three "mother tongues" of the country (Silver & Bokhorst-Heng, 2016). Further, even when referring to the success of the pre-service and in-service teacher education system in Singapore, they neglect to mention the fully subsidized training for teachers prior to posting and a close research-practice nexus, both connected to a well-funded National Institute of Education. In other words, only features aligned with US education policy agendas were mentioned, thus disciplining the notion of "educational innovation" itself.

Discussion

Our findings reveal three intertwined themes: (1) US policymakers project Singapore rhetorically in ways that depend on general ignorance of Singapore to support neoliberal educational policies; (2) such projections discursively and materially construct and misconstrue low performance in the US

educational system (and in Singapore); (3) there are interrelated schemata at play in the obsession with Asia as an imaginary location of the future and the datafication of educational policy.

Singapore and the neoliberal imagination

In an idealization of the social imaginary, discourses on Singapore's high performance normalize the values and norms of competition and drive for profit. Citizens have the same role: take individual responsibility in acquiring the life skills needed to get ahead in the global knowledge economy where "companies from around the world... are interested in locating places where they can find a workforce that is creative and smart and can do the job" (Obama, 2016b, para. 53). Global power elites reinforce this rhetoric over and over through their discourses. As the drivers for the capitalist global economy, executives of multinational companies, their lobbyists, communications and media representatives, intellectuals, and policymakers operate as "codifiers of neoliberalism" (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 38). In referencing Singapore as the model that can "thrive in this new knowledge-based society" (Obama, 2016a, para. 102), US policymakers assume this role through conjuring "idealized images of a consumerist, free-market world. [painting] globalizing markets in a positive light as an indispensable tool for the realization of a better world. [wherein] the production and exchange of material goods are at the heart of the human experience" (p. 38).

The Obama Administration's key educational policy initiatives are much more closely aligned with neoliberal ideology than with wholesale adoption of the Singapore education system, or those of other high performers, although there is some significant crossover. This is a good indication of what the references were really intended to accomplish. Specifically, the structure of RTTT itself was predicated on open market competition between states, wherein states were applying for a pool of funds that not all could qualify for. In a move to get states to adopt policies aligned with the Administration's goals despite control over education traditionally being that of the states, for states to participate in the RTTT competition they had to agree to three things: adopting "internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace", loosening restrictions on charter schools, and placing no restrictions on teachers' "performance-based" pay (Obama, 2009, March 10). In this way, US federal education policymakers repeatedly identify the responsibility of teachers in being key propellers for global competition in education. There is a certain level of fluidity involved here as the Singapore model is taken as a distilled truth but nevertheless credible and potent enough to be able to permeate US particularities.

Discourses on underachievement

By rhetorically linking "high performance" to objectified, almost superhuman "others", the notion of low performance is also discursively constituted and a schemata established for the disciplining of "low performing" bodies – for example, attacks on students, teachers, schools, districts, and even communities (cf. Lipman, 2011, 2013). Low performance and US "failure" is captured in terms of numbers and ranking, but as rhetoric rather than analysis. By mapping the competition as global and framing the gap between Singaporean and US students in numerical terms, low achievement is given a discursive and material form, thus the formation of the "quantified child" (Smith, 2017, p. 701) through the development of practices as well as the discursive power of policymakers' political rhetoric. Such definitions are also increasingly instrumental. By referencing Singapore, US policymakers construct low performance as an appendage to economic performance, in a global order that requires continuous growth through consumption and production. Underperformance then entails the inability or difficulty to contribute or play a part in the neoliberal project of the state and, by extension, the inability to compete in the global level. Low performance is therefore not premised on learning outcomes or student abilities but on the ability to compete or get ahead. This attaches a label of insecurity and insufficiency to low

performance. In particular, low/underachievement is attributed to teachers' failure to contribute to the nationalist project.

It is also revealing that US policymakers erase low performance in Singapore while misconstruing it in the US by relying on superficial references to Singapore's high performance. The different dynamics and mechanisms of "underachievement" (and thus low or high performance) from a policymaking perspective in the two countries are worth teasing out. Singapore has national-level streaming determined by student scores on the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) at the end of year 6 (US grade 7) and school-level streaming before and after the PSLE. "Low achieving" or "at risk" generally refers to those students in the Learning Support Programme (LSP) or Learning Support for Mathematics (LSM) in primary school, or in the Normal Technical (NT) stream in secondary school (years 7–10). The LSP is an English language support programme introduced in 1992 to help lower primary school students (grades 1–2) who are weak in the English language. A corresponding programme for Mathematics, LSM, was introduced in 2006.

The NT stream was established in 1994, as a move by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to address students dropping out after primary school education. About 10–15% (4,000–7,000 students) of each cohort are enrolled in the NT stream (Ministry of Education (Singapore), 2016), and few of them have access to university education or professional careers (Anderson, 2015). Unlike students in the Express and Normal Academic (NA) streams who sit for the Cambridge GCE "O" Level examinations at the end of their secondary school life, the NT stream students sit for a separate examination (a simplified version of GCE "N" Level) which prepares them for a technical education. The Express students sit for the "O" Level after four years, while the NA students have four years to prepare for the GCE "N" Level exam, then one additional year to prepare for GCE "O" Level exam. NT students sit for the "N" level exam after four years, following which NT students are able to move on to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), a vocational post-secondary institute with an emphasis on skills-based training for industry readiness; few of them have access to university education or professional careers (Anderson, 2015). However, NT students are found in most schools in Singapore in varying proportions; the phenomenon of concentrated underachievement linked to poorly resourced, often urban, schools (as found in the US and elsewhere) does not occur in Singapore. Government policy has only recently been oriented towards seeing this as underachievement at all, although these definitions are themselves contested; within the Ministry of Education, the term "low progress" can be understood to refer to students struggling within any given stream. Nonetheless, efforts have been undertaken to make the system more equitable (de Rook, Espeña, & Raj Lawrence, *in press*; Wang et al., 2014).

While in Singapore the divisions are clearer and are rationalized as part of a meritocratic system (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; Koh, 2014), "underachievement" or "low performance" in the US is much more complex, fluid, and contested. From a policy perspective, categories of "underachievement" for the last several decades have been quantified by state-level exams steered by national standards and oriented towards correction through "accountability" measures. Ostensibly, such moves have been towards alleviating poverty and battling inequalities, but in practice (and policy) accountability measures have been a mechanism of coercive neoliberal governance (Lipman, 2013) and are important in shaping educational discourse and teacher practices and subjectivities (Ball, 2006). Negative effects on teaching and learning, teacher morale, and teaching as a profession are well documented (e.g., Hursh, 2008; McNeil, 2000), as are ways performativity exacerbates inequality (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Lipman, 2011; Valenzuela, 2005).

While Singapore is objectified in the US policymaker gaze as a high performing threat, this reinforces particular discourses within Singapore. For example, Singapore's Ministry of Education frequently references PISA reports and Singapore's international reputation as evidence that Singapore schools are on track (e.g., Ministry of Education (Singapore), 2014, 2016), even as issues like high levels of inequity persist (cf. Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). PISA reaffirms categories in need of correction – a substantial group of low performing students – but a system that merely needs to be polished. PISA discourses serve to entrench particular hierarchies and test culture within the Singapore system that

also buys into the international discourse on Singapore being a “high performing” system. In pointing this out, we are not denying the quality of Singapore’s educational system. We urge focusing beyond the findings of international educational assessments, especially given the dangerous combination of PISA’s limited research validity with its powerful discursive reach.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the Obama Administration’s discourses on Singapore’s “high performing” educational system, as legitimized through international benchmarking, and implications on the definition of underachievement. Discussions about country rankings by politicians or even researchers, directly or indirectly referencing international assessments, typically take it for granted that they are in fact about high performance. However, such technologies are designed to problematize low performing students at multiple stages, and taken up in ways that objectify low performing students within the policy gaze. Establishing and discussing any legitimate connection beyond performance on international assessments between Singaporean students and US students seems of little importance to policymakers, let alone what a real examination of Singapore’s practices may have to offer. In fact, there are significant lessons to learn from the Singapore education system, such as robust bilingual education policies and teacher professionalization, neither of which are explicitly discussed or emulated by US policymakers. Singapore largely serves a projective, rhetorical role in US policymaker discourse, which is largely repeated in the popular media in the US and elsewhere, but also in educational scholarship (e.g., Barber & Mourshed, 2009; Darling-Hammond, L, 2010).

Rather, Singapore student performance (and corresponding assumptions around high performing teachers and schools) are leveraged to perpetuate a crisis narrative around US school performance as justification for particular policy agendas in the US. “Singapore” is inserted discursively largely as a flat “high performing” comparison, a yardstick for establishing US underperformance and crisis. The cited evidence is based on performance on international assessments and off-hand references, such as from conversations with Singapore’s Prime Minister and other government officials. Such a framing requires societies such as Singapore and others that are easily objectified and constructed as mysterious, almost mystical, representations of a fetishized techno-human competition, tracing back decades to Japan’s references of the 1980s and USSR before then; this discourse necessarily further marginalizes those excluded from such visions of the future. Such narratives are powerful and have very real implications for low performing students (and their teachers and schools) in the US but also in Singapore. In objectifying Singapore as a reference society, US policymakers use it as a rhetorical weapon in battle over the ongoing transformation of schools and society as a whole, backing reforms that most directly target (and discipline) “underperforming” students, their communities, and (increasingly) their teachers.

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Appendix A

List of US federal policymakers' documents containing references to Singapore

US Department of Education: Press Releases, Speeches, and Media Advisories (<https://www.ed.gov>)

- (1) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Science Teachers Association Conference, 20 March 2009.
- (2) *From Compliance to Innovation*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the America's Choice Superintendent's Symposium, 20 August 2009.
- (3) Remarks of Joanne Weiss to the Annual Meeting of the American Diploma Project Network, 10 September 2009.
- (4) *Teacher Preparation: Reforming the Uncertain Profession*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Teachers College, Columbia University, 22 October 2009.
- (5) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, 23 October 2009.
- (6) Education Under Secretary Martha Kanter's Remarks to the New England Board of Education, 26 October 2009.
- (7) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Statehouse Convention Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, 25 August 2010.
- (8) *Thinking Beyond Silver Bullets*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Building Blocks for Education: Whole System Reform Conference, 13 September 2010.
- (9) *Education and International Competition: The Win-win Game*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations, 19 October 2010.
- (10) *The Vision of Education Reform in the United States*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to UNESCO, 4 November 2010.
- (11) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 16 November 2010.
- (12) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at OECD's Release of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 Results, 7 December 2010.
- (13) *Improving Human Capital in a Competitive World – Education Reform in the US*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the World Bank, Human Development Network Forum, 3 March 2011.
- (14) *The Road Less Traveled*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the United Way of Greater Los Angeles Education Summit, 22 March 2011.
- (15) *Math Teachers: The Nation-Builders of the 21st Century*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 15 April 2011.
- (16) *Lessons from High Performing States*, Secretary Duncan's Keynote Remarks at National Center on Education and the Economy National Symposium, 24 May 2011.
- (17) *Equity and Excellence Commission*, US Department of Education Meeting Transcript, 24 May 2011.
- (18) *WorkingToward "Wow": A Vision for a New Teaching Profession*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, 29 July 2011.
- (19) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the U.S.-Indonesia Higher Education Summit, 21 October 2011.
- (20) *Siding with Students*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, 2 November 2011.
- (21) Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Microsoft Partners in Learning Global Forum, 8 November 2011.
- (22) Statement by Secretary Arne Duncan on the "Connect to Compete" Initiative, 15 November 2011.
- (23) *Teachers Get R-E-S-P-E-C-T*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Teacher Town Hall, 15 February 2012.
- (24) *World-Class Teachers and School Leaders*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Opening Remarks at the International Summit on the Teaching Profession, 14 March 2012.
- (25) The Obama Record in Education, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the Mom Congress, 30 April 2012.
- (26) *Broadening the Spirit of Respect and Cooperation for the Global Public Good*, Dr. Martha Kanter, Under Secretary of Education, Remarks at the International Education Summit on the Occasion of the G8, 3 May 2012.
- (27) Statement by Secretary Arne Duncan on the Release of the 2011 TIMSS and PIRLS Assessments, 11 December 2012.
- (28) Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney and Secretary Arne Duncan, 27 February 2013.
- (29) *Choosing the Right Battles*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks and Conversation to the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, 30 April 2013.
- (30) Press Gaggle by Deputy Principal Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Secretary Arne Duncan, 6 June 2013.
- (31) *The Threat of Educational Stagnation and Complacency*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Release of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 Results, 3 December 2013.
- (32) *Parent Voices for World-Class Education*, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the National Assessment Governing Board Education Summit for Parent Leaders, 13 January 2014.
- (33) Remarks by President Barack Obama at Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Town Hall, 28 July 2014.

The White House Archives: Obama Speeches and Remarks (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>)

- (1) Remarks by President Barack Obama to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, 10 March 2009.
- (2) Remarks by President Barack Obama at the National Academy of Sciences Annual Meeting, 27 April 2009.
- (3) Remarks by President Barack Obama to the Ghanaian Parliament, 11 July 2009.

- (4) Remarks by President Barack Obama at ConnectEd Superintendents Summit, 19 November 2014.
- (5) Remarks by President Barack Obama at Young Leaders of the Americas Town Hall, 9 April 2015.
- (6) Remarks by President Barack Obama at the Arrival Ceremony, 2 August 2016.
- (7) Remarks by President Barack Obama at the Young African Leaders Initiative Town Hall, 3 August 2016.
- (8) Remarks by President Barack Obama at YSEALI Town Hall, 7 September 2016.