

MALAYSIAN TRUST SCHOOLS: A NEW EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

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Malaysian Trust Schools: A New Educational Approach

Kate Mayberry

Abstract

Malaysia has enjoyed considerable success in expanding access to education. Less than 10 percent of Malaysian adults now have no schooling, compared to more than half the population at the time of independence in 1957. But, despite spending heavily on education (roughly between 5 and 6% of GDP), Malaysian pupils perform poorly in international tests. In the Asian region, Malaysia is ahead only of Indonesia.

The government has embarked on what it promises will be the deep-seated reform of the national education system. The National Education Blueprint, released in 2013, acknowledged the decline in the performance of government schools and laid out an 11-point agenda for change, promising to lift Malaysia into the top third of international testing benchmarks in 15 years. The blueprint includes a variety of reform initiatives, from improvements to English language teaching, to the teaching of “thinking skills.” It also includes the development of what it calls, Trust Schools, one of a series of public-private partnerships about which there has been relatively little public discussion. This paper will seek to narrow that information gap, assess the programme’s strengths and weaknesses and suggest ways in which it can be developed further.

Devised by state investment fund Khazanah Nasional and inspired by US Charter Schools and similar endeavours in Britain and Sweden, the programme allows schools greater autonomy, and has been most effective in raising standards with its more progressive approach to learning and classroom practice. Weaker schools have shown the most immediate improvement. The government has signalled it plans to expand the programme further, with a target of 500 Trust Schools by 2025. It further underlined its commitment in the 2015 Budget, allocating 20 million ringgit to support 20 Trust Schools.

This paper will not aim to address the issue of the Trust School programme’s strength as a Public-Private Partnership. While the business structure may have some bearing on a school’s performance, the teachers, and what goes on in the classroom, have been shown consistently to be the most crucial factor in a child’s success at school.

This paper will, therefore, focus on the approach to learning and training that Trust Schools have adopted; methodologies that enable teachers to rediscover their love of teaching through school-based training and effective mentoring. Better teaching, combined with an expansion on extra-curricula activities such as art, the environment and sport have also had an effect on the children, who are also expected to take more responsibility for their learning and participate actively in class. Schools that have adopted the programme say their students are more excited about coming to school than they were before.

1. Malaysia's education system and the struggle to improve performance

In 1957, when Malaysia secured its independence from Britain, more than half the country's population had no formal schooling and just six percent of Malaysian children went on to secondary school.¹

The post-colonial government invested heavily in school buildings and classrooms, training teachers and developing a curriculum to serve the needs of a country that aimed to broaden its economy beyond agriculture and plantations to manufacturing.

Those early initiatives enjoyed considerable success.

These days, less than 10 percent of Malaysian adults have no schooling at all and more than 60 percent have completed secondary education to the age of 16.²

But access to education has not been matched by the quality of education and Malaysia's performance in internationally-benchmarked assessments - the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as well as the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) – has deteriorated.

In Maths, Science and Reading, Malaysian 15-year-olds perform well below the international average. In 2012, Malaysia ranked 58th out of 64 in Reading, 52nd in Maths and 53rd in Science, underperforming all its Asian neighbours except for Indonesia.

In its analysis of the findings, the OECD noted that Malaysian schools had less responsibility for curriculum and assessment than their PISA counterparts and students were more likely to be in institutions where teachers and senior staff had considerably less autonomy than other participants in choosing textbooks and determining course content.³

An OECD report released in April 2015 underlined the PISA findings, ranking the 15-year-old students of 76 countries around the world, put Malaysia in 52nd place. Singapore and Hong Kong took the top two places.

Responding to parental concern about declining standards, the government has, over the years, introduced a number of initiatives to try and raise standards - from computer-enabled Smart Schools⁴ to Cluster Schools as "centres of excellence" and, more recently, High Performing Schools,⁵ which are recognised as the country's best institutions and receive additional funding. A School Improvement Programme was

¹ Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013-2025, Executive Summary, p E-4

http://www.moe.gov.my/cms/upload_files/articlefile/2013/articlefile_file_003114.pdf (accessed 13 August, 2014)

² Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2014: Beyond the Middle Income Trap, OECD 2013.

³ Malaysia Student Performance (PISA 2012)

<http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=MYS&treshold=10&topic=PI>

⁴http://www.msomalaysia.my/sites/default/files/pdf/publications_references/Smart_School_Blueprint.pdf

⁵ www.moe.gov.my/userfiles/file/High_Performing_Schools.ppt

introduced in 2010 to rank schools from Bands 1 (the best) to 7 (the worst) and nurture improvement at the lower levels.

The Ministry has also introduced a number of programmes directed specifically at the classroom, including measures to improve the standard of English language teaching, for example, or to equip students with “thinking skills.” Many of these ideas were included in the Blueprint, which aims to elevate Malaysia to the top third of countries in PISA and TIMSS in 15 years.

The slew of initiatives reflects a concern that the drift towards private and vernacular schools⁶, which are government-funded, but thought to have higher standards and enforce discipline more strictly, will undermine social cohesion in a country that is mostly ethnic Malay, but has substantial minorities of ethnic Chinese and Indian as well as indigenous people. Officials hope that by improving standards in government schools, parents will be encouraged to reconsider their choice of school, and, perhaps, move their children back into mainstream schooling.

The private sector is now being offered an opportunity to partner reform efforts, not only in support services such as catering and technology but, in a first for Malaysia, the provision of learning itself⁷.

The Trust School programme began before the Blueprint’s release, but is mentioned in the document as one of a number of measures for the Ministry achieve its transformation goals and close the performance gap between the country’s best and worst performing schools.

The Malaysian initiative found its inspiration in the educational reforms that have gathered pace in the US, UK and Sweden in recent years. It is pertinent then to look at each of these countries’ approaches in order to understand and assess the scheme now underway in Malaysia.

2. The U.S., U.K and Sweden: Inspiring Trust Schools

In developing the Trust School concept, the team at Khazanah looked at educational reforms taking place in the US (Charters), UK (Academies) and Sweden (vouchers). Khazanah identified certain merits within each system, which it then adapted and finessed for the Malaysian situation.

In Britain and the US, for example, Khazanah was impressed by the autonomies afforded to Charters and Academies, particularly in terms of teaching and learning environments. From the Swedish voucher system, it focussed on the way the

⁶ Vernacular schools provide education in either Mandarin or Tamil, so-called “mother tongue” languages. They are funded by the government, but sometimes receive additional financial support from parents and the community.

⁷ The introduction of vouchers has also been suggested.

authorities leveraged on the private system, emphasised parent choice and centred schooling around students themselves.

2a. U.S. Charter Schools

Charter schools first originated in the US in 1980s with the aim of empowering teachers to innovate in the classroom and create a body of high-achieving schools from which the rest of the United States public school system could learn – a goal that’s strikingly similar to the aims of the current Trust School programme in Malaysia.

It was envisaged that Charters would also reinforce two key tenets of the country’s public education system: social mobility for children from poorer families and greater cohesion within an increasingly diverse population. Malaysia too has stressed public education’s role in connecting communities and developing an engaged citizenry.

Over time, however, Charters became more closely associated with neo-liberal ideas such as the creation of a “market place” in public schooling to give parents a “choice” in where their child could go to school, a shift that has perpetuated opposition to the programme among those who do not share that ideological view. Teaching unions have been among the most vociferous opponents to the spread of Charters.

But such opposition has not hindered expansion. While just 1.7 percent of US public schools were Charters in 1999-2000, in a decade that figure had risen to 5.8 percent, or 5,700 schools⁸, catering to more than two million American children. About one million are said to be on waiting lists for admission. Only eight states, which have responsibility for education in the federal system, continue to prohibit Charters.

So how does a Charter differ from a typical public (government) school in the United States?

Firstly, Charters do not have to comply with the same set of rules and regulations as their mainstream counterparts. Instead, they are bound by the targets and goals agreed in their agreement, or charter, with the local education authorities, which they are required by law to deliver. In some places, the laws governing charters require them to have a social justice aim, focussing their work on the education of the poor and disadvantaged. Those that fail to meet their targets risk closure.

Secondly, while Charters continue to receive public funding they get less than the public schools in the surrounding area – generally an amount per student with no budget for facilities or maintenance. However, unlike a traditional school, they are allowed to accept private donations.

Thirdly, the school itself has more flexibility and autonomy in the recruitment of staff, the way they teach and how they structure the school day. For some, that has meant

⁸ Condition of Education, April 2014. nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgb.asp

longer school days and terms and for others, a strict academic focus. Few teachers in Charters are union members.

Much of the support for the programme – the latest Education Next⁹ survey shows 54 percent of people backing Charters with 28 percent opposed – comes from a dissatisfaction with the performance of existing government-run schools. Although its position in the world rankings is not as bad as Malaysia's, the US government is also keen to raise standards and create an education system that is among the best in the world. Parents, too, want the best for their children.

So do Charters achieve that aim? The answer would appear to depend on how the Charter is structured, how closely it is monitored and the profile of its students.

An extensive analysis by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes¹⁰ analysing the learning gains of students attending Charters in 27 different states, showed improved standards of reading and maths across the system and, in eleven states, including the District of Columbia and New Jersey, Charters outperformed their public school peers in both areas.

Nevertheless the Stanford report, the most in-depth study of Charter Schools so far, reveals striking differences between and within states, between individual schools and among students. Researchers found poor children, and those with black or Hispanic backgrounds were, on average, likely to perform better in a Charter School.

Principals and teachers who have worked in Charters say the ability to hire and fire staff, as well as the flexibility over curriculum and scheduling are the keys to a school's success. The authorities also enjoy considerable regulatory control and can withdraw the charter for schools that underperform, ensuring management accountability.

Still, there remains considerable opposition to the development of Charters. In New York, the mayor, Bill de Blasio, has vowed to curb Charter School access to public school facilities, a move that would limit their expansion. Political struggles have taken place in other major cities and there are allegations that some districts have withheld funds from Charters.

Other challenges have also emerged. Traditional public schools and Charters in the same district often consider themselves competitors rather than partners in their attempt to improve educational standards. Partnerships between the two types of school have enjoyed only limited success.

It is also worth noting that despite the growth in the number of Charters, they still account for only about six percent of the country's total schools. The vast majority of American children, in other words, continue to attend traditional state schools.

⁹ educationnext.org/2014-ednext-poll-no-common-opinion-on-the-common-core/

¹⁰ credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf

2b. U.K. Academies

Academies were conceived by the Labour government that held office in Britain until 2010 as a way to help failing schools in deprived areas by giving them a fresh start outside the control of the local governments that usually manage the country's state school system.

In the early years each school needed to find a sponsor – usually a philanthropist, local businesses or charities - willing to provide two million pounds to establish the school. Reflecting the stringent conditions, just over 200 academies were founded in the four years after the policy was introduced.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that came to power in the wake of the 2010 election was more aggressive in its pursuit of educational reform. It quickly made it easier for Academies to be established and existing schools to become Academies. The programme was opened to all schools, but especially those judged by the regulator to be “outstanding” or “performing well.” The requirement for a sponsor was also removed. As result, there are now more than 4,000 Academies in the UK,¹¹ making up about a fifth of all state-funded schools.

Academies differ from traditional state schools in a number of ways.

Firstly, they receive their funding from the central government in London – depending on the number of children registered at the school – and answer directly to the Secretary of Education, rather than the local authority. Academies get additional funding to cover the provision of support services that were previously provided by the local education authority, but receive no extra money for the provision of education itself. The government has encouraged operators to set up academy chains, so that they can benefit from economies of scale and provide the school with a sustainable financial foundation.

Like Charters in the US, Academies enjoy considerable autonomies over the recruitment and management of teaching staff and need not adhere to legislation on teachers' pay and conditions. They are not required to teach the national curriculum and can decide for themselves how to structure the school day and individual terms.¹²

As in the United States, the government retains oversight. In the British case, Academies – unless rated “outstanding” – are still required to undergo regular inspections by Ofsted, the watchdog that enforces standards and ranks schools across the country's education system¹³. Exam results are published nationally, as they are

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/become-an-academy-information-for-schools>

¹³ OFSTED, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills inspects and regulates schools in England, publishing the results online.

for every other school. Like a Charter, an Academy risks closure if it fails to perform.

In terms of improving standards, Academies, as with Charters, have tended to show greater success in more deprived areas or where schools were not performing strongly. But the programme's association with market orientated philosophies has fuelled opposition. Teaching unions fear Academies are part of a "creeping privatisation" of the state school system while Labour, now in opposition, warns the revisions to the programme will benefit schools in more privileged districts leaving state schools behind.

Even before the government accelerated the reforms, the U.K Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Skills cautioned against the rapid expansion of Academies programme before they could be evaluated fully.¹⁴

Recently concerns have been raised that some Academies are becoming increasingly selective, excluding even pupils who live in surrounding areas. Inspections have also questioned the ability of academy chains to maintain standards across the different schools that they operate. The percentage of schools achieving an outstanding rating has declined every year since 2010, suggesting effective monitoring is required in order for performance to be maintained. Over the same period, the number of locally-maintained schools rated outstanding has remained relatively stable at around 18 percent, albeit at a lower level than the academies.

2c. Sweden's Voucher system

Sweden pioneered market reform in state education more than two decades ago, dismantling its tightly regulated, government-controlled system and replacing it with a lightly monitored structure that included private schooling for the first time. The system was economist Milton Friedman's 1955 vision¹⁵ made real.

The move to liberalise the system was largely motivated by cost, amid concern that Sweden could no longer afford the extensive welfare state, including free education from primary to university level, for which it had become renowned in the post-war years. At the time, just one percent of the country's children were enrolled at private schools, about the same proportion as in Malaysia.

The reforms also included modifications to the curriculum, which became a broad framework of goals instead of a detailed programme of education, the decentralisation of school funding to the local authorities and the promotion of private schooling.

Vouchers were a key part of the liberalisation; a means to introduce competition into the tax-funded system and provide parents with a choice about where to send their

¹⁴<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmmeduski/86/8605.htm#a2> par 23

¹⁵ The role of government in education (1955), [www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/The-Role-of-Government-in-Education-\(1955\).aspx](http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/The-Role-of-Government-in-Education-(1955).aspx)

children to school.

As part of the voucher scheme, independent schools would be privately operated, but publicly funded. Although not allowed to charge fees, they would have to offer the same services as public schools, such as free meals and transportation. Nor would they be allowed to select their intake on ability, ethnicity or socio-economic factors. However, making a profit was permissible.

If a family decided to send their child to an independent school, their municipality would be obliged to provide that school with the equivalent to the average spent on a public school student in the same area. Each child that chose to opt out and attend an independent school would result in an equivalent drop in the municipal budget.

Its supporters argued the scheme would improve the performance of weaker schools because the laggards would be forced to improve in order to keep the students, and funding, coming.

All schools – public and private - were given the power to choose staff, develop their own curriculum and structure their teaching day. As in the UK, early sponsors of independents tended to be NGOs or religious groups – offering distinct alternatives to a typical state school education. However, later sponsors tended to be more general in their outlook and Sweden experienced an influx of school corporations and private equity firms operating independent schools.

Unlike governments in the US and UK, Sweden took a hands off approach to regulation, even though its reforms were considerably more radical than any undertaken elsewhere.

At first, the system appeared to perform well, capturing the attention of countries such as the Britain, which had yet to embark on their own reforms. PISA results from the turn of the millennium showed Swedish students among the world's best performers in Maths, Science and Reading. A 2012 study by Anders Bohlmark and Mikael Lindahl at the Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy¹⁶ found that the introduction of competition into the system improved average educational performance, but added that it took at least a decade for the improvements to be felt across the system.

But then the reforms began to unravel.

PISA results declined¹⁷ and some private school operators – mostly run by private equity companies – went bankrupt. Children were left without schools to attend. Critics blamed the profit-motive and said the desire to make money from education had undermined quality.

In 2014, Sweden invited the OECD to review its education system and the pace and

¹⁶ www.ifao.se/Upload/pdf/se/2012/wp12-19-Independent-schools-and-long-run-educational-outcomes.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/23/42/93/11ed5f6d.pdf>

scale of privatisation became the central issue in the general election held in September that year.

Critics say the voucher system fuelled inequality because parents tended to choose institutions based not on pedagogy, curriculum or even facilities, but more on their socio-economic profile. Top students gravitated towards the best schools in a snowballing effect. In rural areas, where there were few schools in any case, vouchers did not provide parents with a choice because there simply wasn't one.

In May 2015, the OECD urged Sweden to improve quality and equity¹⁸ in education and ensure greater accountability. It noted that the country's decline in the PISA rankings over the previous decade had been the steepest among all countries in the assessment programme, falling from "around average" to "significantly below average."

3. Malaysia's Trust Schools

3a. *Khazanah, Yayasan Amir and Trust Schools*

The Trust School system in Malaysia is largely the work of the state investment fund, Khazanah Nasional, its philanthropic foundation, Yayasan Amir, and its education services company, LeapEd Services, which was created to develop the teaching and classroom pedagogy for the initiative.

The aim was to transform "the education system through a paradigm shift, with the end goal of maximising student potential, utilising the existing resources."¹⁹ In other words, not to create a new educational structure, but to improve student outcomes *within* the existing system. In this sense, the initiative is more narrowly focussed than any of the reforms in the US, UK or Sweden.

In every Trust School, the Ministry of Education retains ownership as well as responsibility for the teaching staff and funding. The schools are financed in the same way as any other government school, based on size, location and performance. Yayasan Amir is given responsibility, and held accountable for, learning practice and curriculum delivery. In other words, its focus is mostly on learning and developing teaching skills among the staff. Khazanah describes the system as, "semi-privatised."²⁰

The state investment fund initiated the pilot with RM100 million; enough to establish LeapEd and fund the development of the teaching programmes for the initial ten

¹⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/sweden-should-urgently-reform-its-school-system-to-improve-quality-and-equity.htm>

¹⁹ Yayasan Amir chairman Raja Arshad Raja Tun Uda, 2013 Trust Schools Programme Progress Report, 6

²⁰ Interview with Loh Tzu Ann, Director, Education, Khazanah Nasional. 18 July, 2014. The terms were agreed in a Public Private Sector Operating Management Agreement with the ministry in 2010.

schools. It has since raised additional funds for its educational initiatives through a RM1 billion Islamic bond sale²¹.

Echoing the US and Britain, it also sought corporate sponsors, with the money used largely to support the operations of LeapEd.

The pilot schools – five in Johor and five in the Borneo state of Sarawak²² - were chosen to be as diverse as possible and ranged from religious, vernacular language and poorly performing institutions to the country's top performers. The objective was to test the approach under a variety of situations and create a network of schools from which existing public institutions could learn.

Three schools from Kuala Lumpur joined the programme in 2013, 17 more last year and schools from Sabah and Perak, including the elite Malay College Kuala Kangsar, joined in 2015.²³

All Trust Schools have four broad goals, which are similar to the demands set for High Performing Schools, and mirror the key thrusts of the Education Blueprint. Each is expected to develop high quality leadership, improve standards of teaching and learning, maximise student potential and strengthen engagement with parents, communities and other outside parties.

In theory, the government schools that become Trust Schools²⁴ have similar autonomies to Charters and Academies. In practice, however, the institutions have tended to use only those autonomies related to curriculum, teaching and timetabling.

THE SIX TRUST SCHOOL AUTONOMIES

1. Curriculum. Schools can introduce new subjects on top of the existing curriculum and determine the most effective pedagogical approach.
2. Timetabling. Schools can determine the minimum weekly timetable allocation for each subject and add teaching days in consultation with parents.
3. Finance. The school leadership can manage the operational budget in line with the school improvement plan. In other words, they can allocate money to the areas where they think it is most needed.

²¹ The Khazanah Sukuk Ihsan is Malaysia's first social-impact Islamic bond. Khazanah has other educational initiatives as well as Trust Schools. 29 April, 2015. [www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/29/asia-bonds-idUSL4N\)XQ2A420140429](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/29/asia-bonds-idUSL4N)XQ2A420140429)

²² The first ten schools were in Sarawak: SK Combined, SK Empila, SMK Seri Setia, SK Tabuan, SM Sains Kuching and in Johor: SJK(T) Kangkar Pulai, SK Bandar Uda 2, SK Kampong Layau, SMK Gelang Patah, SMK Semenchu

²³ Interview with Shahnaz al-Sadat. 8 July, 2014

²⁴ The sponsor identifies a preferred school and works with Yayasan Amir, the school leadership and the ministry to become a trust. The process involves an evaluation on whether the school – staff, parents and students – are sufficiently receptive to change.

4. Human Resources. A trust school can hire additional teachers.
5. Pupil Admission Policies. Up to 20 percent of the intake can be selected.
6. Procurement. Each school has the ability to manage and enter into contracts with outside suppliers and service providers.

Unless the Trust School is also a High Performing School²⁵ it gets no additional funding, although the programme does provide a small sum – usually a few thousand ringgit – to buy teaching aids the school might not previously have had such as individual whiteboards and markers, and “traffic light” cards that students can use to show their understanding of a concept.

Yayasan Amir estimates that for a school of about 900 students, the cost works out at about 900 ringgit per student per year over five years – about RM810,000 a year - although most spending takes place in the first two years, the so-called “transformation phase.” Yayasan Amir expects that as more schools join the network, costs will come down to between 600 ringgit and 700 ringgit per student.²⁶ Annual reports and financial statements are supposed to be made publicly available on Yayasan Amir’s website²⁷ to reinforce the idea of accountability.

Unlike Charters and Academies, Malaysia’s Trust Schools have little choice when it comes to teaching staff. Each institution’s teachers remain employed, as civil servants, under the Ministry of Education. Recruitment is controlled by the Ministry, but Yayasan Amir has been able to sit in on interviews for senior staff. The crucial difference with the Charters and Academies is that staff cannot be sacked; they can only be transferred.

In order to join Yayasan Amir’s programme, schools must complete a series of evaluations, which include whether the leadership and teachers are sufficiently enthusiastic about the programme to ensure its success. If there is too much resistance, the plan will not proceed.

The month-long process considers not only academic performance, but also student well-being, truancy, parental involvement and community engagement. The evaluations – the foundation performs its own analysis, separately - provide a base from which to create an individual improvement plan with measurable targets for each school.

Each school also devises its own targets – at the level of the institution, the principal, each teacher and every student. Many of these goals are inter-connected to ensure that everyone has a stake in the school’s success, and while academic results form part of

²⁵ High Performing Schools get an additional 700,000 ringgit a year, which the principal can spend in the areas where it’s deemed to be most needed. The government has set a target of 100 HPS schools by 2015.

²⁶ Email correspondence with Shahnaz al-Sadat, August 2014

²⁷ <http://www.yayasanamir.org.my/downloads-3/downloads-2/>

the annual targets, they contribute only 20 percent to the overall assessment. Problem solving, creative thinking and ethics are also included.

Progress is monitored throughout the five-year period. Schools that fail to meet expectations because of failures that result from the teaching or classroom environment are set performance improvement targets. If the problem reflects external factors such as policy changes or a sudden departure of teachers, solutions are devised to address each issue, but there is no ultimate sanction of closure – a threat that hangs over Charters and Academies.

3b. LeapEd and Trust School Pedagogy

Teachers have been identified internationally as crucial to the transformation of any education system²⁸ and many of the world's best performing nations, such as Singapore and Finland, ensure that not only are the best teachers recruited, but that they are constantly improving their practice. Malaysia too has indicated it wants to raise the quality of its teachers and it is in this area where Trust Schools differ most from their conventional school counterparts.

Inspired by the work of educators such as Canadian Michael Fullan²⁹ the former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Ontario, and New Zealander John Hattie³⁰, who undertook the largest-ever study of classroom teaching in his 2008 book *Visible Learning*, LeapEd has taken a “whole school approach” to transformation, focussing on the school's senior leadership and teaching staff and putting the children at the centre of its work.³¹ Rather than focus on changing the structure of the school system, the initiative aims to improve the quality of teaching and, as a result, children's learning experience.

The transformation process starts with a training session that involves the school's entire teaching body. LeapEd staff explain the ideas behind the new approach and teachers are encouraged to ask questions. Intensive training sessions take place on site over the first two years and LeapEd advisers are stationed in the school to provide advice and feedback.

These advisers, who are experienced teachers, may work out a lesson plan with a teacher or go into the classroom and teach the class to give the teacher an example of how a different teaching strategy might work. The next week, the teacher might work out the plan and “team teach” with the adviser. After that the teacher takes over, but the adviser is on hand to guide and explain.

²⁸ World Bank <http://blogs.worldbank.org/education/are-great-teachers-born-or-made>)

²⁹ <http://www.michaelfullan.ca>

³⁰ www.visiblelearningplus.com

³¹ Interview with Elmarie Potgieter, General Manager, Education, LeapEd Services, 24 July 2014

Research shows Malaysian teachers, at both primary and secondary level, spend about 40 percent fewer hours in the classroom than the OECD average because they are spending as much as 30 percent of the day on paperwork.³² Trust Schools aim to put teachers, including principals, back in the classroom and restore their passion for their work. A head teacher³³ who transferred seven months ago from a traditional school to a Trust School notes that while her new school is twice the size of her old one, the teachers are more enthusiastic and willingly stay late into the afternoon to draft lesson plans or prepare for activities such as sports and games. In her previous school, she says, they left soon after the bell rang.

In the classroom itself, LeapEd's approach encourages children to take more responsibility for their own learning. At the end of each class, they are expected to assess their understanding of the lesson. The idea is to establish strong relationships between children and teachers and provide the teacher with the tools to support the students who are most in need. Children, meanwhile, are expected to become more confident, developing thinking skills, resolving problems and becoming effectively bilingual.

Progress reports from the initial cohort highlight the programme's strengths in improving the quality of learning and teaching, which is based on three indicators: the adoption of new pedagogies, a high level of engagement with students during lessons and creating an effective learning environment. One school, SK Kampong Layau, a school of just 116 students in the rural heart of southern Johor state, had already achieved its 2015 target by 2013. Progress in leadership and management was described as "steady" although three of the initial ten had met their 2015 targets, while student achievement in both academic and co-curricula activities, as well as parent engagement all showed improvement. However, more reports should be made publicly available in a timely manner so that the benefits of the programme can be more accurately assessed. By May 2015, the annual report for 2014 was still not available on the foundation's website.

To give the school the best chance of success beyond the initial five-year period, the Yayasan Amir approach is designed as a "gradual release" model. Thus, in the third year, known as the *sustaining phase*, the advisers' presence in the school is reduced and the school's own staff, trained in the first two years, become peer coaches and take on more responsibility. By the fourth and fifth years, the *monitoring phase*, the school will be expected to work closely with state and district education departments and share experiences with other institutions. LeapEd and Yayasan Amir will provide centralised support and continue to monitor the school closely – with six monthly reports. By the end of the fifth year the intention is that the school will be able to cope on its own - the *self-sustaining phase*.

³² Malaysia Education Blueprint. Chapter 5. Exhibit 5-6.

³³ Interview with the Principal of Sekolah Kebaangsaan Desa Pandan on 20 May 2015

The Trust School project will face its first major sustainability test at the end of this year when the first group of schools complete their final year under Yayasan Amir, but the government has indicated already it plans to extend the scheme to 500 of the country's 10,000 government schools by 2025.

Yayasan Amir says it does not plan to be involved in any more than 220 schools³⁴ and it is not yet clear which organisations will step forward to drive the planned expansion. Most of the initial sponsors have been government-linked companies who have participated in the programme as part of their social responsibility programmes, but the government is encouraging private companies, NGOs and alumni groups to get involved.³⁵

Khazanah's agreement with the Ministry of Education created a relatively limited form of partnership, which has allowed for experimentation in teaching; an area recognised globally as crucial to the success of any education system. A greater commitment to the six autonomies may encourage more groups and companies to step forward, but there is no indication about the way in which any new entrant might package their Trust School and thus how successful it might be.

Studies have found a "large and growing" private education sector a prerequisite for the introduction of PPPs³⁶ and Malaysia does have some successful private schools, one³⁷ of which rivalled Singapore's scores in the PISA tests. The government has so far given little indication that it is willing for corporations to get more deeply involved in the actual operation and management of schools in the state sector, but co-operation with a private provider of education might be a way to expand the Trust Schools programme with organisations that have already developed a track record in education.

Given the experience overseas and the numerous educational initiatives that have taken place in Malaysian schools over the past decade, the government must ensure that all future partners are able to provide improvements at least to the level of Yayasan Amir. They must show their approach will work if they are to have the chance to operate in government schools and the Ministry must hold them to account.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, Malaysia's government is well aware of the crisis in education that the country now faces. The Education Blueprint is a frank assessment of the system's

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The four initial sponsors are Khazanah Nasional, UEM, Westport and Yayasan DayaDiri, the philanthropic foundation of mobile phone company Maxis Communications.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Sri KDU is part of KDU Smart School Sdn. Bhd. and operates Malaysian and international curriculum schools near the Malaysian capital. It has a longer school day, strong parental engagement and enthusiastic teachers. It also supplements the local curriculum with the Singapore syllabus in Maths and Science.

decline and what needs to be done to ensure Malaysian children receive a world class education that will not only give them the academic skills they need, but also make sure they are, “individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious.”³⁸

Trust Schools are a part of a slew of recent initiatives that has been introduced with the same ultimate goal – better outcomes. Initial results suggest LeapEd’s approach has been effective in helping teachers rediscover their passion for teaching and students become more enthusiastic about learning. In schools where truancy was once a problem, fewer children are staying away because they say it is more fun to be in the classroom. There is also less absenteeism among teachers. It is arguably this, rather than the actual structure of the PPP, that is of greatest significance and why it is the focus of this paper.

However, as the government moves to expand the programme, it needs to address a number of challenges.

1. The most crucial challenge is funding and a key reason for the focus on the nature of the PPP arrangement. Clearly, the Trust School approach is costly, but it is also true that the Malaysian government has always been willing to invest in the education of its citizens.

Some have argued that Malaysia’s Trust Schools are a “very weak” example of Public-Private Partnership and the system needs to be strengthened in order to attract more interest.³⁹ Certainly, there is an argument for providing more incentives to potential funders, but while more autonomy and the chance to actually take control of a government school would undoubtedly be more appealing to private companies, it may also create more risk.

Private involvement in education is no guarantee of substantially improved outcomes. The Swedish example shows how a privatised system with insufficient checks-and-balances can quickly run into trouble, while the rapid expansion of Academies in Britain has also raised concerns about the long-term effect on standards and equity.

Moreover, the best performers in the international benchmarks – notably Singapore and Finland – have achieved their results without expanding private sector involvement in government schooling. While Singapore is open to private participation in technical education and more specialist areas, the state remains, “the principal provider of education and primary, secondary and tertiary levels.”⁴⁰

Malaysia’s spending in terms of percentage of GDP and the percentage of the total budget is more than the OECD average and at around the same level as Singapore,

³⁸ The National Education Philosophy, revised 1996. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 -2025. Chapter 2, Vision and Aspirations, 2-2.

³⁹ The Malaysian Trust School Model: It’s good but is it sustainable? Dr. Arran Hamilton, Policy Ideas No. 11, February 2014

⁴⁰ www.moe.gov.sg/education/private-education/

South Korea and Japan⁴¹ - but given its below average performance on international benchmarks it would seem there are considerable “inefficiencies.”⁴² In other words, the funds provided for education are not being spent effectively – an issue highlighted each year in education and other departments with the release of the Auditor General’s Report⁴³.

Moreover, even with the Blueprint, there appears to be considerable overlap in initiatives related to improving standards, as well as in school improvement.⁴⁴ A full evaluation of all the programmes undertaken in the past decade, coupled with a more cohesive and streamlined strategy, would free funds for priority areas, namely the quality of teaching and better student outcomes. Malaysia is not alone in failing to measure the impact of its reform initiatives - the OECD notes that of the 450 educational reforms enacted globally between 2008 and 2014, only about a tenth have been evaluated⁴⁵ - but doing so would provide officials with a better understanding of which policies are the most effective and where the Ministry should be allocating its budget.

Given the likely difficulty of expanding Trust Schools through sponsorship alone, a matching programme – with the federal government providing a donation equal to the sponsor – might also be a way to fund the scheme’s future development. A commitment to using LeapEd as the capacity building partner, would also ensure a common, and tested, approach and remove the need to assess a new partner all over again; a time consuming, but necessary process.

2. In order for the Trust School advantage to be sustained, mainstream schools need to begin adopting Trust School teaching methods, as the programme initially intended. More effort must be made to broaden the Trust School approach within catchment areas and districts. Malaysia has many more Primary schools than Secondary schools. Currently, there is little chance that a child schooled in a Trust School environment to the primary level will be able to continue at the Secondary level.

Partnering between institutions should be encouraged and the teaching staff of Trust schools urged to share their experiences with their colleagues in mainstream schools. Changing mindsets is always difficult, but early introduction of the “active learning’

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ The Auditor General’s report of June 2015 questioned the spending of RM6 million on an unnecessary spell-check program. <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/a-g-report-education-ministry-spent-over-rm6.6m-for-spell-checker-software> Questions have also been raised over the 1BestariNet initiative to introduce technology to schools. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/ytl-communications-fined-rm2.4-million-over-1bestarinet-says-ministry#sthash.kc7wwKj1.dpbs>

⁴⁴ The Education NKRA includes the School Improvement Programme, which is supposed to raise standards at all schools, but has a specific focus on those in Bands 6 and 7.

⁴⁵ <http://www.oecd.org/education/success-of-education-reforms-threatened-by-lack-of-oversight-says-oecd.htm>

concepts at the core of the Trust School approach, as well as a mentoring programme would help make the process go more smoothly.

3. The government must ensure that in expanding the programme it does not compromise on quality. Yayasan Amir intends to work with no more than 220 schools. That means the government will need to find other partners and funders for its targetted expansion to 500 schools or more and it is by no means certain that those sponsors would follow the Yayasan Amir model or adopt LeapEd's educational approach. Newcomers must be required to pilot their proposals in the same way that Yayasan Amir has done or adopt the LeapEd approach.

Focussing on the depth of private involvement in the trust schools programme being pioneered through Yayasan Amir is, perhaps, a distraction. The project's major achievement has been its reorganisation of the Malaysian teaching and learning environment; an attempt to move away from the rote-learning that has dominated the country's education system since colonial times. It is the focus on systems rather than structures that has made it a success.

The Yayasan Amir approach needs further study and examination – especially once the first ten schools “graduate” from the scheme at the end of this year – but it is a strategy that does appear to deliver results across a variety of settings. The government now has a small network of schools that provide a living, and evolving, example of how a change in teaching methodologies can create more satisfied teachers, happier children and better schools. The authorities now need to ensure more of the country's school children can benefit.

Sekolah Kebangsaan Desa Pandan: Transformation in Practice

Sekolah Kebangsaan Desa Pandan, just a few kilometers from the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, joined the Trust School scheme in January 2013. After some initial reluctance among the teaching staff – some have since been transferred elsewhere – the primary school is now in the second year of the programme.

From the outside, with its pastel-coloured rectangular classroom and administration blocks surrounded by neat flower beds, SK Desa Pandan appears much like any other Malaysian city school. Most of its 1,209 students are ethnic Malay and are drawn from the surrounding area. There are between 30 and 40 children in each class.

The school was showing academic improvement even before it became a Trust School. Its Gred Purata Sekolah, the Malaysian equivalent of GPA, has been improving each year since 2008, recording 1.97⁴⁶ in 2013. Under the Ministry of Education's grading system it was Band 2⁴⁷, the second highest level, but in its baseline assessment for Trust School status it was rated just below "developing," the second lowest of five levels and indicating some evidence of the implementation of Trust School methodologies and systems. The foundation noticed that in its attempt to get higher grades, teachers tended to focus their attention only on the most academically-gifted students neglecting the others.

As a Band 2 school, SK Desa Pandan also has a well, if eclectically, stocked library, an air-conditioned reading room with graduated seating and a "mini museum" of Malaysiana. Despite its central location, it also has a large playing field, and operates a pre-school on site.

By the end of its first year, half the expected standards were being achieved, according to Yayasan Amir's 2013 progress report. By 2017, when SK Desa Pandan completes the formal programme it is expected to have advanced close to the second highest level of attainment – Extending, meaning the "Trust School methodologies are embedded with nearly all of the standards being met. The school is achieving well above the minimum expectations and sustainable continued development should result."⁴⁸

Trust School status has already fuelled a number of improvements in the learning environment, according to the senior teaching staff. Last year, the students organised their own "Green Rangers" day to which they invited their teachers and parents. The school's co-curricula programme has been strengthened and parents are closely

⁴⁶ The lower the reading, the better the score

⁴⁷ Malaysia places government schools in Bands 1-7, with seven being the lowest. The Ministry has introduced a School Improvement Programme to raise the performance of schools in Bands 6 and 7 and has a target of no schools in the lowest bands by 2015.

⁴⁸ Trust Schools Programme Progress Report, 2013. 23

involved in what goes on; even providing photos for the quarterly school bulletin and videos for the website.

The most obvious differences are in the classrooms. Many of the walls are decorated with students' work and visual representations of concepts and ideas. Some have lists of children's birthdays. Moreover, with children now at the centre of the school's teaching strategies, the desks have been arranged not in the traditional rows facing the teacher, but in small clusters that allow the students to work together in small groups.

The change is particularly marked at Primary 1, 2 and 3, collectively known as Lower Primary. All the classrooms are colourful and inviting and the students sit together in small groups. Many now have their own "reading corners." At one English lesson, seven-year-olds raised their hands eagerly to tell the teacher and the rest of their classmates about their pets. Even standing at the front of the class speaking in a second language they appeared confident and comfortable.

Many teachers have enthusiastically embraced LeapEd's alternative teaching tools. In one class, children wrote their answers on whiteboards and held them up for the teacher, enabling her to see at a glance which pupils had understood the concept and which ones had not. In a country like Malaysia where children might be more nervous about speaking up, it seems a good way to encourage participation.

Deputy head Uma Rajarethnam MT Rajarethnam notes that prior to the arrival of LeapEd, the learning objective was the preserve of the teacher. For the students, it was a "guessing game." She admits as many as 80 percent of the children may never really have understood the concepts that were being taught.

But not all of the classrooms have changed.

Malaysia's traditional emphasis on the 3Rs and a strong performance in national exams at the end of primary school and lower secondary has proved one of the main hurdles to schools considering becoming a Trust School. Principals and teachers, whose promotions and bonuses may be linked to certain levels of academic performance, fear that grades will decline if they transfer to the programme. Parents also want to see strong results. Changing perceptions of what a good education entails will not only take time, but also a change in culture.

Yayasan Amir was also unable to change the mode of teaching to subject-based instruction – which allows children to move from class to class – because the Malaysian system has few generalist teachers, particularly at the Primary level. Instead, the programme champions stronger bonds between teachers and better communication on the educational development of common students.

SK Desa Pandan's Head Teacher Khalilah Yahaya, retired in October 2014. She acknowledged that the first year was "difficult" with resistance most notable among male teachers and those aged between 35 and 40. Some teachers were transferred. The

arrival of a new Principal, Maheran Abdul Halim, appointed by the Ministry of Education (a representative from LeapEd was on the interview board), does not appear to have affected the school's commitment to the Trust School ethos. If anything, Ms Maheran, a teacher of Bahasa Malaysia, is even more enthusiastic. Having transferred from a traditional school in another suburb of Kuala Lumpur, she is impressed by the enthusiasm of the teachers and the students, the holistic approach to learning and the keen interest of parents and the local community in making the school better. For the Trust School programme, the smooth transition is an encouraging sign of its longer-term sustainability.

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