LEADERSHIP AND THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS IN TWO GOVERNMENT SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

By Joseph Chin Kern Tan

ABSTRACT

This thesis centres on the research problem of leadership and strategic planning processes in two Singapore government secondary schools, both of which were engaged in the strategic planning guided by the School Excellence Model (SEM) Framework launched in 2000. Many schools are apprehensive toward this mandatory requirement. They are unclear of the strategic planning approach, process, or model to adopt. This study investigates how the strategic planning process was established and managed in two contrasting case schools, and expounds on the factors influencing the strategic planning processes in each school. Emanating from the aims, the study seeks to address the following research questions: First, what do school leaders and teachers understand by strategic planning? Second, what are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how schools develop their strategic plans? Third, what are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how the strategic plan is implemented, managed and led? Fourth, what are the perceived helping and hindering factors engaging in strategic planning? In addressing the research questions, a case study approach and qualitative research methods using interviews, non-participative observations, and documentary analysis were employed to elicit in-depth information from school leaders and teachers of two contrasting schools, one deemed successful and the other less so, in implementing, leading and managing the strategic planning spectrum. Key findings, inter alia, suggest that the principal's approach to leadership of the process of strategic planning greatly influenced the likelihood of successful implementation, influencing and shaping the approach of other senior staff and teachers. In particular, a more democratic and consultative approach inspired staff more to execute the plan compared to command and control – something of a paradox for Singaporean schools, given their centralised culture. Findings also affirmed that time allocated for strategic reviews at planning meetings, coupled with effective communication strategy to involve stakeholders, can enhance strategic thinking and capability of staff.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The successful completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the help of several individuals who supported me through the course of this thesis. I would like to thank sincerely the following people who made valuable contributions to this study and the writing of this research report:

To Professor Clive Dimmock, my supervisor and mentor, I owe a special debt of gratitude. I am deeply grateful for his perspicacious and enthusiastic support, suggestions and creativity in seeing me through the successful completion of this thesis. He pushed me relentlessly towards continuous improvement and to a level of intellectual growth that I never anticipated.

To my long suffering family, Priscilla, Ying, Yong and Ze, who had to handle domestic issues and shoulder additional burdens while I was 'otherwise engaged'. They encouraged and supported me in many ways. Thank you for all you have done for me and what you mean to me; thank you for beginning and ending this journey with me and helping me to grow.

To my beloved mum who never places limits on the things that I can accomplish, and has given me roots and wings. My greatest regret, though, is not being able to share this achievement with my dad, Tan Chong Yim, who passed away on 25th July 2005. I will never be able to thank him enough for supporting me right through my early education and showing me the values of hardwork, perseverance, and self-discipline.

To the following people who helped me on the journey to complete this case study: Ms Esther Quake, Superintendent of North Zone One, and Ms Mariam Chia, Superintendent of North Zone Five, for their permission to gain entry to two case study schools. Special thanks also to Mrs Elsie Lim and Mr Eric Lim, both government school principals, who allowed me to successfully conduct a pilot study to test suitable interview questions; Ms Sandra Wong, a sister in Christ and a language instructor, who willingly made effort to proofread various drafts of this thesis and offered suggestions regarding the write-up of this thesis.

To all the respondents of the two case study schools, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude for participating willingly and providing confidential information without which this thesis would not have taken its current shape.

Last but not least, to God for His unfailing goodness and grace that has been tremendous sources of motivation and strength. All glories are to Him!

DEDICATION

To Pris

who believed in me and supported my dreams

To Mum and Dad,

who taught me that nothing that is learned is ever lost

To Ying, Yong, and Ze,

who unconditionally loved and encouraged me in all I sought to do

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GLOSSARY

AASA	American Association of School Administrators
AFI	Area for Improvements
BEM	Business Excellence Model
BPA	Best Practice Award
BSC	Balanced Scorecard
CCA	Co-Curriculum Activities
CD	Character Development
C.O.D	Challenges Opportunities Decisions
CS	Cluster Superintendent
DOE	Desired Outcomes of Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
EFQM	European Federation of Quality Management
ESA	Environmental Scanning and Analysis
EV	Evaluation and Validation
GCE 'O'	General Certificate of Education Ordinary
GCE 'N'	General Certificate of Education Normal
HDB	Housing Development Board
HOD	Head of Department
KP	Key Personnel
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LH	Level Head
MBNQA	Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award
MOE	Ministry of Education
PDS	People Developer Standard
PSG	Parent Support Group
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examination
SAA	Sustained Achievement Award

SAB	School Appraisal Branch
SDP	School Development Plan
SEA	School Excellence Award
SEM	School Excellence Model
SMT	School Management Team
SGB	School Governance Board
SQA	Singapore Quality Award
SQAs	Senior Quality Assessors
SSS	Staff Suggestion Scheme
ST	Senior Teacher
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
TQM	Total Quality Management
VMV	Vision Mission Values

CHAPTER 1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Education has always been key to both the economic and social viability of Singapore. As a small nation with no natural resources, human resources and skilled manpower become imperative to its survival. The Education Ministers Mr Teo Chee Hean (1997 till 2003) and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (2003 till 2008) underscored this point in the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Annual Work Plan (MOE Press Release, www.moe.edu.sg, 1997 [1] onwards) by highlighting the important role of education and the need for the education system to evolve in tandem to nurture students and graduates with the right mindset, knowledge and skills to meet the manpower needs of the new economy. This has resulted in the MOE introducing significant changes to schools and subsequently greater diversity and flexibility to the education system over many years.

Being a very small country, Singapore always strives for excellence through best practices (Singapore Government Press Release, 2000). A key way in which educational standards and school improvement are maintained is

[1] In January 1998, Ministry of Education crafted the Desired Outcomes of Education (DOE) for all schools and that has since become the corner stone of educational philosophy of Singapore. The DOE is a holistic approach to education and seeks to develop the total person in five specific spheres: Moral, Cognitive, Physical, Social and Aesthetic.

through planning and inspection. Recognising the need for a more reliable quality assurance system, the MOE launched the School Excellence Model (SEM) Framework in 2000. It was to replace the externally-driven school inspection culture with a self evaluation framework, placing great emphasis on both the in-school processes and the resulting outcomes. Schools were given the autonomy to plan and decide their direction through strategic planning under the centrally controlled Framework. The fact that the engagement of a strategic plan was made mandatory under the SEM is indicative of its importance to the MOE policy. However, the process of switching from programme-based planning to strategic planning has constituted a stiff learning curve for many Singaporean schools. The change has not only presented considerable challenges to school leaders and teachers, but also threatened to drastically change the management and operation of schools. The issue is further compounded by the fact that the SEM is a non-prescriptive Framework. Although the MOE recognises that under the Framework there are many approaches to achieving sustainable excellence (The School Excellence Model – A Guide, 2000:8-15), the Framework forms part of the platform on which schools can spearhead their own education or reform initiatives within the broad policy parameters defined by the MOE (Ng, 2003).

Views from the Cluster Superintendents (CS) of the School Division and the Senior Quality Assessors (SQAs) of the School Appraisal Branch (SAB)[2] pointed to the concerns that school leaders and teachers were not adapting comfortably and easily to strategic planning and were still very much engrossed with operational issues and problems taking place on the ground. They corroborated that many schools did not even know how to build an effective strategic planning process.

[2] The researcher conducted a two-day workshop on the Balanced Scorecard for the SQAs of the SAB and the CS of the School Division in May 2002 and Sep 2003 respectively.

After the present researcher had contacted some Singaporean school leaders,[3] it became clear that many of them felt that not only did they lack the requisite skills in managing the strategic planning process, but they also did not possess adequate knowledge to develop and implement a strategic plan. Below are some often heard remarks made by school leaders and teachers – comments which were recorded by the researcher during the two-day strategic planning workshops conducted for schools between 2002 to 2005:

> *"If strategic planning is useful, then the MOE should at least show us exactly what we should do about it and how we could benefit from it." (Head of Department)*
>
> *"Many of us are not trained in how to effectively develop and deploy a strategic plan for school." (Principal)*
>
> *"We are all fighting for time. With new initiatives introduced by the MOE, the effect of having to do more paper work may displace good teaching in class." (Level Head)*
>
> *"There are so many changes in education these days. Would the SEM be another management fad?" (Head of Department)*
>
> *"We could have avoided unnecessary mistakes, stress and pains only if we were shown how to formulate and implement a good strategic plan." (Level Head)*

This thesis looks at how Singaporean secondary schools have approached managing the process of developing and implementing strategic plans, from a base of little knowledge and experience. To exemplify the problems and issues, the study uses two contrasting schools, each of which stand at

[3] The researcher underwent a two-day intensive assessor training on the SEM conducted by the SAB in January 2003 and was appointed as an assessor of an Evaluation & Validation Team in June 2003. The researcher was also subsequently invited by the School Division, MOE to conduct some rounds of workshops on strategic planning for school leaders and teachers from year 2002 to 2005.

opposite ends of the strategic planning spectrum in regard to managing the process of strategic planning. The case study approach was adopted to elicit in-depth information from school leaders and teachers on how schools develop and implement their strategic plans and to identify the key factors that influence the strategic planning process.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.2.1 The Role of Education in Singapore

Without any natural resources, the Singapore government understands the importance of keeping a competitive edge in the 21st century by investing heavily in education and training its workforce so as to sustain the country's growth and development. Underpinning its survival, Singapore's education system is structured along economic priorities, nation building and national identity formation (Gopinathan, 1995, 1997, 2001; Green 1997; Hill and Lian, 1995; Spring, 1998). The Singapore government is well aware of the two developmental challenges in the 21st century, namely, enhancing national economic competitiveness in the global market place and fostering social cohesion in the city state (Tan, 2001). In fact, Low (2001) describes education and human resource development as investments that have paid off handsomely.

Singapore, a fast growing economy, a small island with a population of approximately 4.5 million, has been going through many changes in the education system in the last decade, motivated by a concern with the future. The most recent proposed reforms in the education system and the introduction of "Thinking School, Learning Nation" (TSLN), coupled with the

implementation of SEM, can be understood as part of the larger "social re-engineering" project initiated by the government to strengthen its socio-economic position in the regional, and even the global, market context (Tan, 1999). In a bid to foster greater creativity and innovation in students, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, openly acknowledged the challenge brought by the strong tide of globalisation. He told the audience at the Thinking Conference held in July 1997 that:

> *We cannot assume that what has worked well in the past will work for the future. The old formulae for success are unlikely to prepare our young for the new circumstances and new problems they will face. We do not even know what these problems will be, let alone be able to provide the answers and solutions to them. But we must ensure that our young can think for themselves, so that the next generation can find their own solutions to whatever new problems they may face. Singapore's vision for meeting this challenge is encapsulated in four words THINKING SCHOOLS, LEARNING NATION (TSLN) (Goh, 1997:3)*

Central to the TSLN scheme is to develop all students into active learners with critical thinking skills and a creative and critical thinking culture within schools. Its key strategies include: the explicit teaching of critical and creative thinking skills; the reduction of subject syllabi content; the revision of assessment modes; and a greater emphasis on processes instead of outcomes when appraising schools (MOE, 1997). In order to nurture students that meet the needs of Singapore, the government has adopted a policy of decentralisation (Singapore has traditionally had a centralized system of control) to increase schools' autonomy in their operation.

The SEM is the framework that is intended to enable schools to take initiatives as agents of change to bring about excellence. It is meant to allow schools to take ownership of their strengths and areas for improvement and to cultivate an environment that practices self-questioning and spurs self-

initiated improvement strategies. Despite efforts in decentralising its education system, Singaporean schools are still under traditionally tight control of the government, relative to Western standards. Lee and Gopinathan (2003:128) argue that this is a form of "centralised decentralisation", by which the state authority continues to steer education policies and directions. In other words, decentralisation in the Singapore context is not simply about shifting power and authority; rather the government still carries a great responsibility for achieving national outcomes and providing high value for public money (Ng, 2007). Given the national economic strategies, the functioning of the schools must be aligned to the goals of national, social and economic development in Singapore, hence the emphasis on accountability and standards. Therefore, what the schools are facing is a trend of centralisation within a decentralisation paradigm. Therein lies a paradox: the more the decentralisation of tactical matters, the more the centralisation of strategic directions (Ng, 2007). The government wishes to promote high quality education, yet expects schools to be flexible enough to diversify and innovate on the other (Tan and Ng, 2007; Ng, 2007), twin goals that are never easy to achieve for both the government and the schools.

1.2.2 The School Excellence Model (SEM) Framework

The introduction of the SEM is to replace the externally-driven school inspection model with an internal assessment approach. It was a significant part of the move of the government to embrace a broader notion of success, emphasising total quality. The SEM is a self-assessment framework for schools, adapted from various quality models used by business organisations, namely the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) model and the education version of the American Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model (MBNQA).

Before the SEM was introduced, schools practised programme-based planning related mainly to student learning activities on an *ad hoc* basis, with little consideration given to the external environment. It was almost unheard of that schools needed to achieve long-term advantage through configuration of their resources within a changing environment, other than making sure that programmes were provided within the annual allocated budget.

In the present context, by contrast, the SEM, which has a five year time-span, requires all schools to engage in self-assessment before they are externally validated by an External Validation (EV) team. Often, after the EV, schools are expected to take stock of their efforts and gauge their progress with inputs from the external assessors. For schools with outstanding achievements, the MOE honours them with various awards and encourages them to share with other schools their methods of success, in order that others may propagate best practices, and help fellow schools to scale greater heights (MOE Annual Work Plan Seminar, 2001). There are three levels of awards. The first level comprises the Achievement Awards given to schools each year for the current year's achievements. The second level comprises the Best Practices Award (BPA), which recognises schools with good scores in the "Enablers" category and the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA), which recognises schools with sustained good scores in the "Results" category. At the apex of the awards is the School Excellence Award (SEA), which gives recognition to schools for excellence in education processes and outcomes. Schools may also apply for the SQA just like any other industrial or commercial organisation.

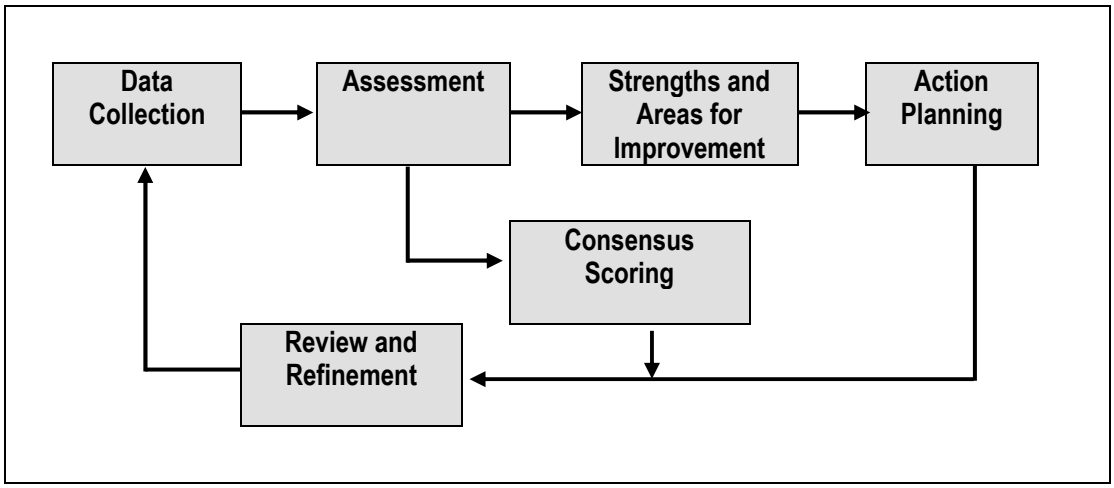
The purpose of the SEM is twofold: first, to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of schools through the delivery of ever-improving educational value to students, and second, to improve overall school performance and

capabilities (The SEM Guide, 2000:8). For each school to have a strategy for improvement, the SEM guidebook (2000:82) spells out a four-step process:

(1) Assess needs and set goals;
(2) Draft and choose a set of coherent strategies to best fit identified needs and priorities;
(3) Focus and sustain results throughout implementation; and
(4) Evaluate and provide feedback to facilitate continuous improvement.

Schools are to base the process on the stated criteria of the SEM to conduct "Self-Assessment". This outcome should then provide the schools with information by which they can monitor and evaluate progress towards their own goals and organisational excellence, thus leading to the identification of strengths and areas for improvement in a wide range of activities, which in turn, prompts actions to be owned and taken forward (Bou-Llusar et al., 2005). The key steps to conduct the Self-Assessment Process are shown in Figure 1-1.

Figure 1-1 The Key Steps to Self-Assessment



Source: Bou-Llusar et al. (2005), To What Extent Do Enablers Explain Results in the EFQM Excellence Model? An Empirical Study, *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, p. 339

A key assumption underlying the execution of self-assessment in the SEM, however, is that school principals and teachers have the time, resources, interest, and capacity to undertake self-assessment based on the Framework criteria. In fact, from the experience of being an assessor for the EV in addition to the contacts with the CS and the SQAs, the present researcher has come to know that many schools are often confused about what the criteria mean and how to apply them in a particular context. For example, schools may have trouble defining short-term and long-term goals, identifying key challenges, and articulating how best to deploy resources to address these challenges. In some instances, they may not know how to develop and implement a strong assessment strategy or how to use data for continuous feedback and improvement.

1.2.3 Strategic Planning Component

In helping schools to chart directions and bring about changes that lead to improvements, the *Strategic Planning* component is seen as the key to the SEM. Seymour (1994) describes *Strategic Planning* as the "glue" holding the quality effort together, the glue that secures the measures needed to demonstrate improvement in key areas. He further advocates that a well-conceived plan can do much to hold an organisation together, make leadership effective, and achieve the results necessary for high performance. Seymour (1996) and Ford and Evans (2000) argue that strategic planning is significant to the Business Excellence Framework because it forces the leadership to define the core attributes of an organisation and links those attributes to action; it wires the Framework to focus on the customer by addressing the needs of stakeholders and defining strategies in terms of

stakeholder concerns. Strategic planning also supports the Framework's focus on process because it engages the total organisation in action.

The *strategic planning* category in the SEM requires schools to establish strategic directions, generate a set of annual strategic plans, and ensure that broad-based participation in the creation of the strategic plan occurs and that the units affected by the plan understand its relationship to their day-to-day activities. The category comprises two parts: *strategy development* and *strategy deployment*.

The purpose of *strategy development* is to examine how a school sets strategic directions and determines key plan requirements. In other words, strategy development requires a school to describe key steps, participants, and its strategy development process. *Four* areas must be addressed in the strategy development process (SEM Guide, 2000:30):

(1) How the school considers internal factors in its strategic planning process
(2) How the school considers the external environment in its strategic planning process
(3) How the school's strategic planning process ensures a cascading of the school plan to all levels
(4) How the school uses data in its strategic planning

Strategy deployment focuses on the developed school strategy and its implementation. This part focuses on the operational goals and plans for the short term and long term that arise from the strategic planning process. *Three* areas must be addressed in the strategy deployment process:

(1) The school's long term goals and plans
(2) The school's short term goals and plans
(3) The school's stretch goals[4]

Schools are required to address the above areas by stating one-to-five year projections of key indicators of student performance and operational performance. Schools are not only required to select suitable measures to a proposed strategic plan, but are also required to establish a baseline for comparison from their past performance.

However, through his work with many Singaporean schools, the present researcher found that claims of success experienced in engaging in the strategic planning process among Singaporean schools appear to be rare. For most schools, feelings of stress, frustration, pressure, fears and inadequacy were commonly expressed by school principals and teachers. Often, the schools adopt the "wait-and-see-and-learn" attitude so as to avoid similar mistakes made by other schools. They are tardy in engaging in strategic planning due to their lack of knowledge and experience coupled with a fear of failure. It has been claimed elsewhere (see Rowley and Sherman, 2001) that, ironically, many of the failures attributed to strategic planning have had little to do with the strategic planning process itself, and much more with misconceptions and false expectations about strategic planning. Mintzberg (1994) pointed out that a realistic understanding about what the strategic plan can actually do is essential. It cannot do everything, but it should not be allowed to do nothing.

[4] Stretch goal means that a goal that is challenging and requires a significant increase in effort and commitment for it to be achieved. It is usually determined by external factors such as benchmarks set by others schools and changing national needs and global trends. (Source: The SEM – A Guide, page 80)

In fact, with non prescription in the SEM about the strategic planning process, the researcher noticed many schools have embraced strategic planning by adapting it from the planning literature of business organisations. Nonetheless, Rowley and Sherman (2004) and Keller (1983) strongly believe that strategic planning in academia is a different type of process from the more traditional business process though they do not deny the applicability of strategic planning in education. Fidler (1989), Byars (1991) and Hanson & Henry (1992) share the same view that strategic planning is as applicable in the field of education as in any other sector. All these, however, do not eradicate the fact that there is no one well-tested or accepted model of strategic planning for education (Basham and Lunenburg, 1989; Hambright, 2004).

Over the past 20 years, many strategic planning models specific to education have been suggested by authors from both the USA and the UK. These include those of Valentine (1991), Kaufman and Herman (1991), Fidler et al. (1991), Weindling (1997), Davis and Ellison (1998a, b), and Bryson (2004). They were developed as a result of educational reforms taking place in the early 1990s. The traditional business planning model which dominated in the 1980s was however disparaged for being too linear, relying too heavily on available information, creating elaborate paperwork mills, being too formalised and structured, ignoring organisational context and culture, and discouraging creative, positive change (Bell, 2000; Mintzberg, 1994; Fidler, 1998; Davis and Ellison, 1998a; Bryson, 2004). Mintzberg (1994) rightly pointed out that the rigidity of the traditional business planning model – even for business, let alone education - has produced inflexibility and an inability to grasp opportunities to ensure the long-term effectiveness of the organisation. In other words, the school planning model needs to be set alongside a re-conceptualised and wider-reaching context.

To better comprehend the issue and understand the strategic planning process in Singaporean schools, the researcher communicated with senior members of the MOE, conducted numerous rounds of Strategy Planning workshops for schools leaders and key personnel, and finally decided to conduct a qualitative research study among a selection of school leaders and teachers.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate how case schools approach the strategic planning process with a view to explaining how a strategic planning process is established and managed in a school, and expounding the factors influencing the engagement with the strategic planning process and its utility. The study attempts to discuss processes in which schools develop and implement their strategic plans. The researcher foresees that outcomes of the study might be the alleviation of the pressures and anxieties for Singapore schools, and at the same time support for launching an effective strategic planning process while meeting the requirements of the SEM. This in-depth understanding could further help school leaders cope better with the prevailing uncertainties and align themselves with the ultimate DOE set by the MOE.

To elicit a deeper appreciation of the intensity and enormity of the task facing schools when engaging in strategic planning, this research employed a case study approach and selected two atypical secondary schools, each of which, it is adjudged by the researcher, stand at opposite ends of the strategic planning spectrum. One is considered as being in the vanguard of strategic planning, while the other has been considered as being relatively tardy in

engaging the strategic planning process. Studying the contrasts between these two schools should provide rich information since Flybjerg (2006) argues that extreme or *atypical* cases often reveal more information as they activate more basic mechanisms and more actors in the situation studied. In order to capture authentic views of the planning process, the researcher set out to focus on teaching staff perspectives and understandings of the case schools' planning. Thus a challenge for the researcher was to capture the *emic* perspective as sensitively as possible. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained his own perspective as investigator of the phenomenon, that is, the *etic* perspective, so as to make conceptual and theoretical sense of the case, and to report the findings clearly.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to achieve the aims of the study, the following *four* research questions were posed:

(1) What do school leaders and teachers understand by strategic planning within the SEM framework?
(2) What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how schools develop and formulate their strategic plans?
(3) What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how the strategic plan is implemented, managed and led?
(4) What are the perceived helping and hindering factors to schools engaging in strategic planning?

The first research question explores the extent of understanding possessed by school leaders and teachers regarding the concepts of strategy and

strategic planning. To develop and implement a strategic plan well, a good understanding of the meaning of strategy and the strategic planning process needs to be in place. This research aims to draw out the similarities and differences in the understanding of strategic planning between two Singaporean government secondary schools using qualitative research methods.

The second research question investigates the perspectives of leaders and teachers in regard to how schools develop and formulate their strategic plans. To develop and formulate a strategic plan is a complex process. Bryson (2004) sees the inputs and outputs of strategy as a dynamic process, and the conditions for strategy formulation are subject to continuous change and evolution. Because of this convoluted process, it has led to numerous educational strategic planning models, but none can be considered as the 'right' model for all institutions (Rowley and Sherman, 2001). This study will therefore not delineate a strategic planning model for schools; rather, it will attempt to ascertain how schools establish the strategic planning process. As most of the strategic planning models have been proposed by Western researchers in the last two decades, the study will also consider how the strategic planning process is established in the context of Singaporean schools which are largely based on Asian values.

The third research question investigates the perspectives of leaders and teachers on how the strategic plan is managed and implemented. The execution of a strategic plan has been regarded to be the most difficult step in the entire strategic planning process – it is even more difficult than strategy development. Much has been written on strategy formulation, but not on strategy implementation. It was reported by Charan and Colvin (1999) that many organisations failed not because they did not have strategies, but because they could not execute the strategies effectively. This study thus not

only looks at the issues and problems of strategy implementation, but also discusses approaches schools could adopt in managing the implementation of their strategic plans.

The final research question concerns the key factors that helped or hindered the strategic planning process in schools. According to Mintzberg (1994), the act of formulating and implementing strategies is an extremely complex process demanding sophisticated cognitive and social skills. Clearly, being armed with essential knowledge of strategic planning and with appropriate skills, schools will be more able to achieve the desired outcomes of the strategic planning process (Rowley and Sherman, 2001). Being a multi-racial society with Chinese as its main race, according to Hofstede's cultural map (1991), Singapore has a high 'collectivist culture'. That means Singaporeans learn to use their social groups as the primary sources of reference for understanding their place in society. In other words, employees will often look to leaders for directions and reassurance. With different cultural perspectives from Western societies, the study attempts to draw out the differences and similarities of key factors that help or hinder the strategic planning process in the case of Singaporean schools.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE AND OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

Singaporean schools have encountered numerous difficulties in the uncharted territory of more autonomous strategic planning. Switching from a system of strong centralized decision making by the MOE to one that allows schools the flexibility in deciding and implementing what is best, has ushered in a new era of opportunity/development/growth for the Singaporean school system. However, schools have little experience or expertise as to how

strategic planning works, which process should be adopted, or how the guidelines provided in the SEM can be used to conduct the strategic planning process. At or before the launch of the SEM in October 2000 until the start of this study in December 2006, little or no specific research was conducted to explain why schools had no knowledge in coping with the new situation. This study, albeit limited in scope, is therefore deemed timely and significant. It attempts to not only contribute an insight into the key elements and management of the strategic planning process in Singapore schools, but to also underscore the helping and hindering factors when schools are engaged in the strategic planning process.

The amount of research devoted to strategic planning in schools continues to lag significantly behind comparable studies in the private sector. Moreover, the applicability of these research studies, mostly conducted in Anglo-American cultures, is still an untested proposition in South-east Asian societies such as Singapore. The outcomes of this research may therefore not only contribute to the existing sparse literature of the strategic planning process, especially within a South-east Asian context, but also benefit the following groups of stakeholders:

(1) *School Principals,* who are the main drivers for the schools' directions and strategies. Seen as central to strategic planning (Bell, 2000), they play critical roles in envisioning, shaping and transforming the future of schools. It is unarguably essential for every principal to understand how strategic planning can be established and managed in their schools.

(2) *Cluster Superintendents,* whose role is to supervise schools on their strategic directions, among other duties, as well as approve budgets for new initiatives decided by the schools. CS should be able to exercise their supervisory role diligently with relevant information

made available. The outcomes of this study may help them in providing schools with valuable advice in embracing the strategic planning process.

(3) *Senior Quality Assessors* of the School Appraisal Branch. The external assessment of a school is done by the EV team, whose members include SQAs, CS, school principals, private consultants and key personnel of higher education institutes. At the end of the assessment, the team has to provide indicative measures of the school's standing. The team is often comprised of members with different experiences and varied expertise. The interpretation and assessment of the school's standing may well vary from team to team. The findings of this study should give the SQAs and other EV assessors a clearer perspective of the establishment of the strategic planning process in schools, thus resulting in a more systematic assessment approach. In other words, if the assessors are more informed about the key factors influencing the strategic planning process in schools, then they may be enabled to give a more valid assessment.

(4) *School Key Personnel and Teachers* should ultimately benefit from this study since they are now expected to adopt and participate in the strategic planning process. Relevant and adequate knowledge of the strategic planning process will help them in not only better formulation of strategic plans, but also, more importantly, better understanding of the implementation of the strategic plans.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

To facilitate a shared understanding of terminology used in this study, key terms are defined as follows.

1.6.1 Strategic Planning

There are numerous definitions of, and many different approaches to, strategic planning. From the literature, most definitions focus on aligning the organisation with its future environment and are based on ideal constructs that yield planning methods that are primarily rational, sequential, and comprehensive. According to Weindling (1997:219), strategic planning "is a means for establishing and maintaining a sense of direction when the future has become more and more difficult to predict….It is a way of continuously keeping the organisation on course, by making adjustments internal and external as contexts change". Cook (1988:93), on the other hand, defines strategic planning "as an effective combination of both a process and discipline (which)…[aims] at total concentration of the organisation's resources on mutually predetermined measurable outcomes." Davis and Ellison (1997:81), who carried out extensive research on school strategic planning, define strategic planning as "the systematic analysis of the school and its environment and the formulation of a set of key strategic objectives to enable the school to realise its vision, within the context of its values and its resource potential." Bryson (2004:6) defines strategic planning as "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it."

From these definitions, strategic planning can be considered a systematic process of gaining a holistic perspective of an organisation, establishing its long-term direction, translating that direction into specific goals, objectives and actions, and measuring organisational success in accomplishing those goals. In other words, strategic planning blends forward-looking thinking, objective analysis and evaluation of goals and priorities to chart a future course of action that will ensure an organisation's vitality and effectiveness in the long run.

Strategic planning in this study thus refers to a process where an organisation, taking a broad and generally longer-term view, develops approaches and decides on specific activities to achieve defined goals and objectives as well as evaluates the effectiveness of these approaches and activities.

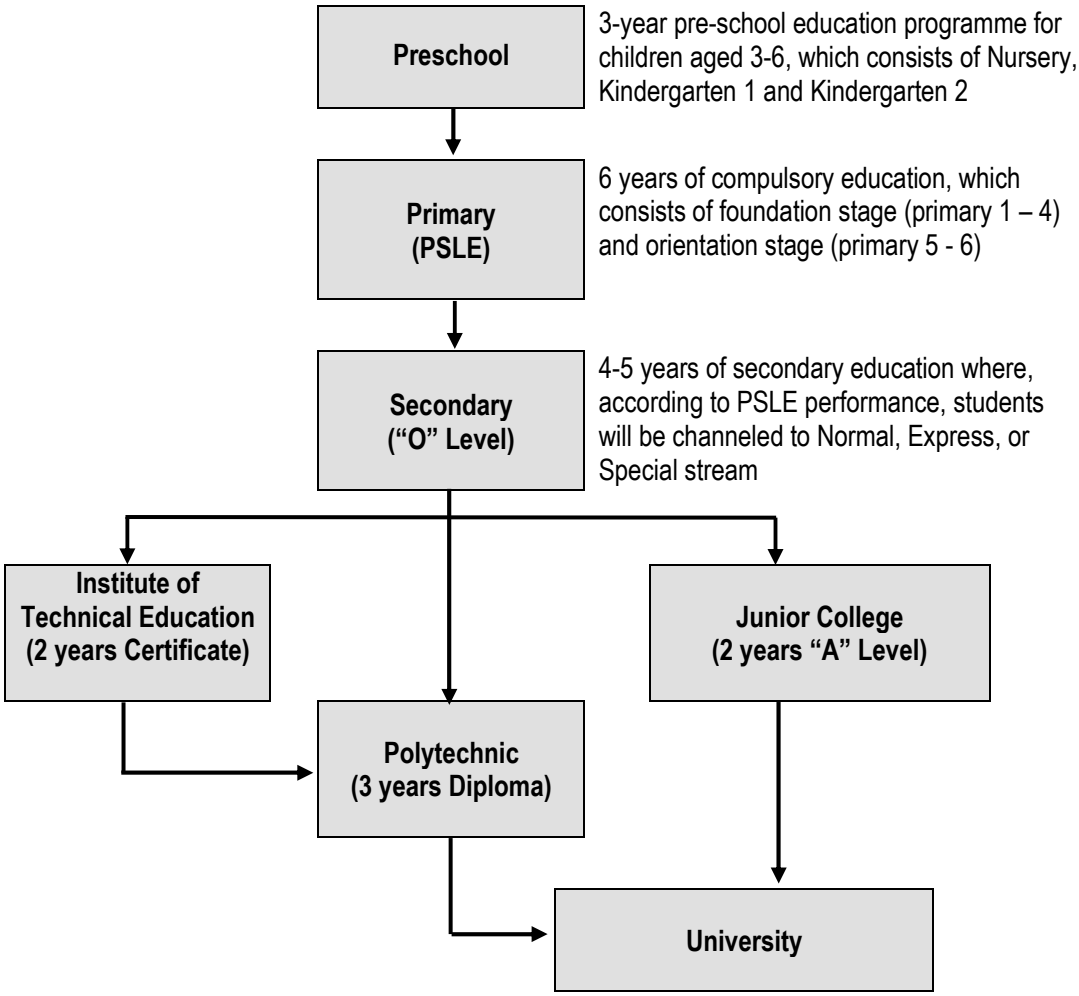
1.6.2 Government Secondary Schools

Students in Singapore begin their education by going through six years of primary school education where they prepare for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). This examination assesses the students' abilities for placement in a secondary school course. Three streams are available in the secondary courses, which are designed to match each student's learning ability and interest. Both Special and the Express streams constitute a four-year programme where students prepare for the General Certificate of Education "Ordinary" (GCE "O") Levels examination at the end of the course. In contrast, students placed in the Normal stream prepare for their General Certificate of Education "Normal" (GCE "N") Levels examination held at the end of the fourth year and, if their GCE "N" Levels results meet the criteria stipulated by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, the GCE "O" levels

examination during the fifth year. Within the Normal stream, students can choose between the academic option or the technical option (Ministry of Education, 2002). Academically weaker students with below average scores for their PSLE are therefore channelled into the Normal (Academic or Technical) course while students with higher academic ability are streamed into the Special or Express courses (http://www1.moe.edu.sg/secondary.htm).

A simplified Singapore Education System is shown in Figure 1-2 below:

Figure 1-2 A Simplified Education System of Singapore



There are different types of secondary schools and all come under the close supervision of the MOE. They are broadly grouped into Government Funded schools, Autonomous schools, and Independent schools - including specialised independent schools such as the Singapore Sports School. This study looks specifically at government funded secondary schools excluding the following categories:

(1) *Mixed-level schools,* where students enrol into six years of primary education, stay on and graduate after four years of secondary education;
(2) *Six-year-direct schools,* where students join the schools right after the primary school and stay till Junior College; and
(3) *Junior-plus schools,* where students opt for two years of secondary study (secondary three and four) and two years of Junior College.

The government secondary schools can be further categorised as:

(1) Government schools – these include mainstream and autonomous schools with niche programmes. Based on their PSLE scores, students of these schools are generally grouped into *express* (that is, four years of secondary study), *normal (academic)* or *normal (technical)* streams (that is, five years of secondary study).
(2) Government aided schools – these include independent schools with greater autonomy in programmes and operations. Students of these schools are generally grouped into *special* (i.e. students who need to study Higher Chinese) and *express* streams. Historically, these schools were originally set up by private bodies, clans and religious associations and are currently under the supervision of the MOE.

The number of schools marked by the type and level is shown in Table 1-1.

Table 1-1 The Number of Schools by Level and Type

Type of School	Secondary	Mixed Level	Total
Government	110	3	113
Government-aided	20	-	20
Autonomous	21	4	25
Independent	5	5	10
Total	**156**	**12**	**168**

Source: Singapore Education Statistics Digest (2006), Ministry of Education, p. 3

This project studies two schools in the first category, that is, government schools. This category of schools constitutes about 70% of total secondary schools in Singapore (Singapore Education Statistics Digest, MOE, 2006).

1.7 LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

At the time of this research, the SEM initiative was already into its *sixth* year of operation. Whether or not the SEM is helping to improve the quality and the outcomes of education in Singapore is still open to question for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the initiative was implemented in all schools simultaneously rather than in progression/stages. Thus, it was not possible to compare the schools where strategic planning was employed sooner with those where it was employed later.

Secondly, because the SEM does not prescribe the precise strategic planning process or model that is to be used in schools, it is difficult to presume that the strategic planning process adopted by these selected

government schools is indeed shared by all other schools. Thus, this study does not claim that two case studies are representative of a large number of schools. Instead, the study focuses on specifying the conditions of each of the two case schools and the processes of planning each has followed, so that readers can be informed of, and understand in detail, the issues relating to leadership and management of strategic planning taking place in them.

Thirdly, at the time when schools were coming to terms with the principles and practices of strategic planning, many other changes were taking place. One of these was the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) approach adopted by the MOE, which intended it to be a strategic performance management system adopted by all schools. At the beginning of the launch in 2006, *ten* schools were invited by the MOE to be in the pilot tests for the adoption of the BSC. The implementation of the BSC by schools is tardy because many are still barely coping with the SEM. Nevertheless, it is a matter of time before the BSC approach is adopted by all schools.

1.8 OUTLINE OF THE REMAINING THESIS CHAPTERS

Chapter two of the thesis provides a comprehensive review of related literature. The purpose of the chapter is to discuss the concept of strategy and the definitions of educational strategic planning. It also discusses how schools establish and manage the strategic planning process, as well as the critical helping and hindering factors for the process.

Chapter three explains the research methodology, including the overall research approach, the research design, the data collection and analysis

procedures, research ethics, research reliability and validity, and research limitations and assumptions.

Chapter four reports the analysis of the data collected from multiple sources of evidence about the two chosen government schools on the process of developing strategic plans, the management of strategy implementation and critical factors that affect the strategic planning process.

Chapter five elucidates the findings of this study in the light of previous research and literature.

Finally, Chapter six summarises the research by drawing conclusions from the study and suggests recommendations for further study.

1.9 SUMMARY

This chapter provides the background and context to the research. It is argued that this study is timely because Singaporean schools are currently at a turning point in their evolution in regard to the SEM and school-based strategic planning that is shaping the whole school policy arena. The urgent need for school leaders to acquire appropriate skills in executing the strategic planning process is deemed essential by the MOE. This study points to the need not only to improve the understanding of how schools establish and manage the process of strategic planning through the perspectives of key stakeholders, but also to identify the key factors that schools should take into consideration when engaging in the strategic planning process under the SEM.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 OVERVIEW AND ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

The purpose of this review is to provide the theoretical and practical underpinnings on how strategic planning process is established and how strategy implementation is managed in a school, and to determine the factors influencing the engagement with the strategic planning process and its utility. There is a wealth of literature on the topic of strategic planning. This chapter reviews literature on strategic planning as it has been examined and discussed by some of the leading researchers of the present day, particularly, in the last three decades. The challenge of developing this chapter lies, therefore, in maintaining a focus on and staying within the boundaries of the research questions, particularly in providing sufficient background information to frame the research. This review is characterised by deliberations in the following four key areas:

(1) The understanding of the meaning of strategy and strategic planning in education

(2) The process of developing a strategic plan in schools

(3) The management and implementation of a strategic plan

(4) The helping and hindering factors to the strategic planning process

The first section of the chapter begins with an overview of the importance of strategic planning for school effectiveness and improvement. The section then continues with a discussion of the meaning of strategy, drawing mainly from the wisdom of leading authors. It is well regarded that by raising the awareness of strategies, strategy can be more effectively managed (Mintzberg, 1994). Raising awareness means that strategic approaches can be critically evaluated and improved upon. Based on the understanding of the meaning of strategy, the section will then go on to discuss several fundamental definitions by a mix of experts and authors on educational strategic planning.

The chapter continues with a discussion and analysis of the literature relative to the current research study on the process of developing a strategic plan. Strategic planning emerged as a management technique in the business community long before it became an important feature for education. The applicability of business strategic planning to education will thus first be discussed in this section, and then processes that schools might use to develop their strategic plans will further be critically reviewed. The literature will extensively review key elements of strategic planning processes proposed by the authors involved in education, in particular from the USA and the UK.

In the third section, the discussion will look at why organisations, including schools, fail to execute strategic plans effectively, that is, issues and problems schools might face in implementing their strategic plans. Because of the scope of the current research, it is neither the intention of this section to identify, examine, or analyse various factors affecting the strategy implementation nor to arrive at a synthesised strategy implementation

framework. It will focus on discussing appropriate approaches that schools might use to manage and implement their strategic plans.

In the first part of the final section, a brief overview is presented on why it is important to comprehend key factors that affect the strategic planning process. The review will continue to discuss key factors identified by the Western researchers that might help or hinder the strategic planning process in schools. However, given that Singapore society tends to be paternalistic, that is promoting values of high power distance and collectivism (Hofstede, 1991), the section will also attempt to crystallise how Asian values could influence Singaporean schools when engaging in strategic planning process.

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In the last three decades, education systems throughout the world have been exposed to considerable reform and change – all justified on the grounds of improving the quality and effectiveness of school education (Cheng, 2004; Marsh, 1999; Mortimore, 1998). Saunders (2000) argues that this movement of change inevitably means that there is a sharper focus, and a more intense pressure on the capacity of individual schools and teachers – as distinct from the system as a whole – to deliver 'educational goods' for their students. Caldwell (1993) provides a comprehensive description below, in arguing convincingly for school-based management as the most likely approach for school improvement,

> Forces which have shaped current and emerging patterns of school management include a concern for efficiency in the management of public education, effects of the recession and financial crisis, complexity in the provision of education, empowerment of teachers and parents, the need for flexibility and responsiveness, the search for school effectiveness and school improvement, interest in choice and market forces in schooling, the politics of education, the establishment of new frameworks for industrial relations and the emergence of a national imperative. (1993:xiii)

Specifically, Davis (1997) also suggests that the key to the realisation of effective schooling depends on the capability of the leaders and the staff at the school level. In the UK there is a clear recognition that the main responsibility for school improvement lies with each school (DFE, 1995) and that it is the "key unit of improvement" (DFEE, 1995). This argument is also aligned to the findings of school effectiveness research that schools and school-level factors, have the major effects upon children's development (Reynolds and Creemers, 1990). This notion is well accepted by policy-makers that effective schools have to articulate the sorts of outcomes that they wish pupils to attain before leaving the school. It is indeed up to the school leadership to articulate the means by which these outcomes will be achieved (Harris, 2003). Bell (2000) argues that headteachers are central to strategic planning or development planning. In the UK, headteachers have to lead and manage their school's improvement by using pupil data to set targets for even better performance while being subject to inspection and the publication of inspection reports (DfEE, 1997). It is evident that school improvement relies upon transformational, direct and indirect qualities, influences and behaviours of the headteachers (Mulford et al., 2005; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Harris and Chapman, 2002). The fundamental point increasingly accepted by all, is that the responsibility of principals is now firmly focused on the search for enhanced school success through strategic planning to improve institutional and pupils' performance. Fidler et al. (1996)

and Fidler (2002) argue that strategic planning is ultimately needed and employed by school management to facilitate and ensure effective education.

Historically, the school development planning movement grew out of parallel movements in the late 1980s and 1990s that included school effectiveness and school improvement research, and school-based management. Planning at school level began to be seen, and still is seen, as a crucial part of the school improvement process. The early research carried out by Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) indicated that the main benefits of development planning for schools is that,

> It allows the school to focus on its fundamental aims concerned with teaching and learning….Many of the current changes with which schools have to cope are being imposed from outside. Development planning is the way in which each school interprets external policy requirements so that they are integrated into its own unique life and culture. (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991:7)

In other words, development planning allows schools to internalise and take ownership of the ways in which they promote improvement. For principals, teachers and pupils, development planning is seen to focus on the aims of education, particularly learning and pupil achievement (Brundrett and Terrell, 2004). It is, therefore, evident that school development planning is essentially about whole school improvement.

According to Weindling (1997), strategic planning has, as its key, the notion of strategic thinking which considers the vision, mission, and values of the organisation as well as the anticipated external forces and trends which affect the school, to produce what can be called the 'helicopter view'. In the school development plan, schools establish expectations for student learning aligned with the school's vision that is supported by school staff and stakeholders. These expectations will in turn serve as the focus for assessing

student performance and school effectiveness. It is accepted that a fundamental requirement for school improvement appears to include a set of shared values which all stakeholders hold about the school and its aims and objectives. Law and Glover (2000:151) suggest that "achieving and inculcating a set of values may, in turn, depend on the nature of leadership, the culture of relationships and the communication of a vision which is understood by both students and staff".

As the target driven approach to educational planning has been pursued by many policy-makers of Western countries, a significant change has occurred that schools are expected to produce not only development plans around targets for improvement in pupil achievement, but also expected to take account of national targets set by the policy-makers. Thus, the emphasis has shifted in development planning away from resource management and general accountability for pupil attainment and for the deployment of resources to achieve improvement targets for pupil attainment (Bell, 2000). This new departure is derived from the close relationship between government policy and the school effectiveness and school improvement movement. As a result, school development plans are now termed school improvement plans in many Western countries such as the UK, Canada, and Australia. It is evident that strategic planning for school improvement has increasingly gained recognition in different parts of the world and has been utilised as a management tool for improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Fidler, 2002; Davies, 2003, 2006; Knoff, 2007; Hatton, 2001; Brundrett and Terrell, 2004).

Although there may be micro- or macro- political dimensions to the purposes of strategic planning, schools in general do aspire to improve or become more effective. In fact, Quong et al. (1998) argue that a key facet of school improvement is a commitment to strategic planning. The two – improvement

and planning – appear to be inextricably linked. The increasingly competitive environment in which schools operate today – towards the end of the first decade of the 21st Century - has placed a much greater emphasis upon the need to raise standards and to improve the outcomes of schooling. This leads policy-makers to take the stand that schools should be accountable for student outcomes, monitoring performance continuously, and reporting outcomes annually (Sammons, 2006). Within this context, strategic planning is viewed as a way for the school to organise what it is doing in a coherent way and help to manage change. Knoff (2007), for example, who is a provider of consultancy services in the areas of school effectiveness and school improvement in the USA, sees the importance of organisational change and strategic planning as ongoing components of any healthy and evolving school. He suggests that, as schools focus on student outcomes, they must attend to these organisational change and strategic planning processes to build the 'infrastructures' – at the staff, school, system, and community levels – that coordinate resources, build capacity, support school-wide programmes and maximise success. Baron et al. (2008) argue that successful development and implementation of school programmes requires strategic planning and ongoing commitment from all stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, community members and members of the School Governance Board. Davies (2003) also argues that schools today need not only short-term improvement agendas, but also a strategic approach to long-term sustainability. He further argues that short-term effectiveness in schools will not be sustainable if longer term strategic approaches are not established. In other words, schools will not be able to deploy longer-term strategy if short-term ineffectiveness drives the school into crises.

2.3 MEANING OF STRATEGY AND STRATEGIC PLANNING IN EDUCATION

Strategy is a much used, but much misunderstood, concept in management. It captures an important idea, yet there is much disagreement on what that idea is. The statement that people in general may use the same language to mean different things or a different language to mean the same thing is as true with issues relating to strategy as it has been in many other contexts. Bennett notes that "many people use the words 'strategies', 'plans', 'policies' and 'objectives' interchangeably" (Bennett, 1996:4). Bell (1998) argues that 'strategy' and 'planning' become synonymous. Cummings (1993) claims that the term strategy is derived from the Greek word *strategos* which was associated with the leadership and command of military units. The term emerged in response to the increasing complexity of military decision making. A century before strategy was applied to the management of corporate organizations, *Abraham Lincoln* captured the essence of the term when stating that "if we know where we are and something about how we got there, we might see where we are treading – and if the outcomes which lie naturally in our course are unacceptable, to make timely change" (David, 2003:3).

From the literature regarding definitions of strategy given by renowned experts (Chandler, 1962; Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1965, 1987; Porter, 1985; Mintzberg, 1994; Hamel and Prehalad, 1994; Weick, 1987; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991), three common themes can be identified:

(1) *What: Content vs Process* - As *content*, the strategy is the result of strategy decisions. It can be found in the organisation's mission statement, its objectives, and its plans for achieving these objectives. It is what the organisation is planning to do. A content focus emphasises the formation of plans and the results of decisions. As a

process, strategy is about the way in which the decisions are made (Mintzberg, 1994). Strategy as a process looks at the factors that influence the decision making and the changing dynamics of strategy over time. The strategy can be either content or process; the question for an organisation is, "What's more important: the strategic plan or how you go about producing the strategic plan?"

(2) *Where: Deliberate vs Emergent* - The traditional view of strategy as planning implies that strategy is deliberate (Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1965, 1987). *Deliberate strategy* relies upon analysis, prediction and vision. By accurately working out the current state of the situation and what it will do in the future, decisions can be made about what should be doing. The alternative view, suggested by Mintzberg (1994) and Weick (1987) called *emergent* strategy, is that strategy emerges from a series of actions, and it relies on learning and flexibility. Usually, responses to the strategy need to be immediate, fast, and reasonably effective. The reality of strategy is that neither deliberate nor emergent strategy is always the case. There are intentional elements to strategy, but one cannot know the future. This means that there will always be surprises.

(3) *How: Macro vs Micro* - The *macro vs micro* decision focuses on how the strategy is implemented: who makes strategic decisions and who implements strategy? One view of strategy is that it is the high-level senior management's decisions. Strategy is a *macro level* decision concerning the organisation: what markets it should compete in, what the organisation should be doing, and what the principle policies and plans of the business should be. This is the more common and more traditional view of strategy. The alternative view is that strategy exists in the day to day actions of all of the people working for the business. Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) argue that success in strategy

implementation is to integrate the strategy and operations of the business. Hence, *micro level* decisions concern what needs to be done to implement these decisions. In other words, operations should support the strategy, and strategies have to be realised by operational action.

Mintzberg (1994) and Hamel and Prahalad (1994) further categorised these three themes into two views: the traditional and the modern view of strategy. These two views are summarised in Table 2-1 below:

Table 2-1 Traditional vs Modern View of Strategy

Traditional View of Strategy	Modern View of Strategy
Content strategy is plans and decisions	*Process strategy* is dynamic planning, decision making and acting
Deliberate strategy is produced by analysis, then implemented	*Emergent strategy* is produced from the actions taken by the organisation
Macro strategy is the responsibility of senior managers	*Micro strategy* is planned and performed by everyone in the organisation

Source: Mintzberg, H., (1994), The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
Hamel, G., & Prahalad, C. K. (1994), Competing for the Future. Boston: Harvard School Press.

It is safe to say that strategy has never been entirely 'traditional'. Nor is it suggested that strategy should be entirely 'modern'. Both views are important in raising the awareness of the meanings of strategy. There are strengths and weaknesses to both the traditional and modern views of strategy. In very simple terms, *traditional strategy* provides direction and *modern strategy* enables learning. Because the future is uncertain, no direction can be completely decided beforehand; on the other hand, learning can sometimes be slow and risky, and, hence, learning cannot always be relied upon.

In reality, the meaning of strategy is neither entirely 'traditional' nor 'modern'. One generic definition of strategy can however be put forward: *strategy is everything an organisation does to ensure its long-term survival*. This definition will not only involve doing some of the things described in all the definitions above, it will involve a balance between traditional and modern strategies. This definition of strategy will set the background to the discussion of educational strategic planning.

Under the sponsorship of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Cook (1985), a strategic planning consultant to private sector companies, was engaged to conduct strategic planning workshops for education throughout the USA. Cook offers his definition and describes what strategic planning is not: it is not a model, not a process, not an academic exercise, not a prescription, not an edict, not political manipulation, not a budget. He defines the term as follows:

> *Strategic planning is an effective combination of both a process and discipline, which, if faithfully adhered to, produces a plan characterised by originality, vision, and realism. The discipline includes the vital ingredients of the plan itself; the process is the organisational dynamic through which the vital ingredients are derived. Both the discipline and the process are aimed at total concentration of the organisation's resources on mutually predetermined outcomes. (Cook, 1985:93)*

In Cook's view of strategic planning, its central purpose is the identification of specific desired results to which all the effort and activities of the organisation can be dedicated. In other words, the success of any plan is determined only by the results it produces. Cook has outlined an approach that entails a fundamental redistribution of decision making responsibilities, particularly in the area of basic policy development. He believes that planning is a simultaneous top-down, bottom-up process, and that people at all levels of the organisation are equally qualified to participate in the planning process.

Around the same period, McCune (1986), from her position as Policy Services Director of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Labs (McREL), published a book that translates strategic planning into the language of educators. She echoes many of Cook's views, and presents an approach that is similar to Cook's in many ways. She does offer some cautions that strategic planning may have minimal impact on a district transformation. She sees, however, the power of strategic planning in its ability to go beyond a series of planning procedures to create dissonance in people, upset old views, identify new possibilities, and pose new questions. Not only is strategic planning a rational planning process, it is an activity that has strong psychological effects on an organisation and the people involved in the process.

Her definition of strategic planning emphasises its use as a tool for transforming schools:

> *Strategic planning is a process for organisational renewal and transformation. This process provides a means of matching services and activities with changed and changing environmental conditions. Strategic planning provides a framework for the improvement and restructuring of programmes, management, collaborations, and evaluation of the organisation's progress. (McCune,1986:34)*

In the UK, Davies and Ellison (1997:81) define strategic planning as "the systematic analysis of the school and its environment and the formulation of a set of key strategic objectives to enable the school to realise its vision, within the context of its values and its resource potential". Different from other researchers, Davies and Ellison believe strategic planning concerns more predictable and definable rather than broad-based activities in the planning process. They propose instead, a three-stage strategic planning model which incorporates concepts of 'Futures Thinking', strategic planning and shorter-

term school development planning. The model gives a broader perspective of strategic planning and enables informed discussions to build possible future scenarios. According to Davies and Ellison, these possible scenarios may not actually happen, but they could give the school the opportunity to consider possible responses to ensure that it has built-in capacity and competencies to meet those possible future needs.

An author of a well-known book on strategic planning for public and non-profit organisations, Bryson (2004) defines strategic planning in a more comprehensive and political sense. He defines strategic planning as "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation is, what it does, and why it does it". (2004:4) He states that strategic planning is an excellent method for the public sector, including schools, to contend with fluctuating situations and circumstances. Bryson argues that strategic planning's main aim is to think and act strategically. Furthermore, strategic planning is necessarily cognizant and attuned to political realities. Bryson believes that strategic planning "accepts and builds on the nature of political decision making" (1995:20). Such a definition would be applicable to Singapore schools, as with schools in other countries, where much of what is decided, insofar as school missions and goals, for example, is tied to political decisions.

The above definitions of strategic planning for education, for the most part, are varied yet remarkably alike in many aspects. In a nutshell, common features of strategic planning can be summed up in five common elements as follows:

(1) Concerning the long-term direction of the school;
(2) Defining what the school should engage in;

(3) Matching the activities of the school with the environment and resources available in order to minimise threats and maximise opportunities, that is, doing things to take advantage of its situation;
(4) Building resource capabilities and being able to use information to make appropriate decisions which promote the school's growth; and
(5) Evaluating the outcomes for further improvement.

A review of the literature indicates a great deal of consistency in identifying these five elements as critical aspects of strategic planning (Bryson, 2004; Fidler, 1998; Weindling, 1997; Valentine, 1991; Quong et al., 1998; Johnson and Scholes, 1997, 2004). These five elements described above form the basis in this study for assessing the extent to which leaders and teachers of the two selected government schools understand the meaning of strategic planning.

2.4 THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN IN SCHOOLS

The study and practice of strategic planning has been of increasing interest in the last three decades in educational institutions. For example, Hatten (1982) identifies difficulties with the application of the corporate model of strategic management to non-profit organisations such as schools. This is because schools are not profit making organisations and are not directly measurable using financial goals. Saker and Speed (1996) caution against the applicability of strategic planning in educational services on the basis that schools are different from businesses. Bryson (1988) gives similar advice and adds that politics is a much more influential factor in planning in the public sector, including schools, than it is in the private. Because of this

political ingredient, the atmosphere for planning in the public sector tends to be more reactive than its private sector counterpart (Cope, 1981).

Educational institutions have, however, been seen engaging in strategic planning because of the rapidly changing environment (Kriemadis, 1997), in particular, the increasing pressure for reform, revitalization and restructuring of education that has taken place in the USA and UK since the mid 1980s (Conley, 1992). Hatten (1982:103) cautions that the application of strategic planning is a desirable and potentially attainable goal: “this task may be more complex…but it is not impossible”. Cooper (1985), who produced a policy paper on strategic planning for the National Association of State Board of Education in USA, declared that strategic planning for education is needed badly. He strongly advocates that the emphasis and approach may differ between education and business, but the needs are similar.

Historically, the term “strategic planning” did not appear in educational publications much before 1985 (Conley, 1992). Lumby (1999) concludes from her research that strategic planning has brought benefits to the colleges that were engaged in it. Perrott (1996) goes beyond that and adds that, if public sector organisations want to meet their new challenges, then they have to look to the private sector for guidance. Bryson (1995) contends that for the public sector, including schools, a strategic planning process can provide qualitative improvements to the design process over conventional long-range planning. Bryson’s reasoning is that strategic planning is more issue-oriented in public organizations and therefore more suitable for politicised circumstances. Others argue that the unique characteristics of schools demand an approach to strategic planning that allows for bargaining, and response to the dynamic forces in the political environment (Cope, 1981; Steiner, 1979). There are also many more “given” contextual constraints operating in the educational setting. Staff, budget, laws, building or land

restrictions, and client characteristics are a few obvious examples. Because of the contextual constraints and parameters on policy in education, the challenge for educational strategic planning is to understand the internal and external boundaries which schools face. This information can then be used to formulate plans that will position the resources under the control of the school – programmes, budget, staff, goals, etc. – to maximise educational excellence. All these suggest, according to D'Amico (1988), that a strategic planning process that stresses understanding of external and internal environmental forces and positioning of resources is the most useful one for education.

Although there are a number of approaches to strategic planning, the foundation begins with a formal process (Freeland, 2002). While the process may differ from one organisation to the next, the intent is to focus attention, stimulate discussion and debate, promote interaction, track issues, and facilitate consensus (Mintzberg, 1994). The primary goal of the strategic planning process is to formulate a framework for effective decision-making. Through this process, a school assesses both the current and future environments and determines the impact that future trends and / or changes will have on the school. According to D'Amico (1988), the process of strategic planning is more than simply a thought process; he sees it as a tool to assist top educational administrators to anticipate changes in their environments and plan appropriate, responsive alternatives (or strategies) for dealing with them.

Many authors in strategic planning hold that to be successful, the planning process should have specific elements that reflect the unique nature of the organisation and its environment (Eadie, 1989; Koteen, 1991; Mintzberg, 1994). Nevertheless, in an extensive content analysis on K-12 education in the USA, Hambright and Diamantes (2004) analysed 66 books, 29 journal

articles, 28 research presentations from national conferences and the ERIC data base, 6 doctorate dissertations and several additional miscellaneous sources and concluded that there is no agreement as to what the specific or critical elements of strategic planning are. The literature also seems to indicate that regardless of the number of elements in the strategic planning process, it is fairly rudimentary (Young, 2001). Brown (2001), one of the strong advocates for the USA National Baldrige Quality Programme[5], recommends a simple *four-phase approach* to strategic planning and this includes:

Phase 1 involves the development of "guiding documents" which includes the development of statement of vision, mission, and values.

Phase 2 entails a situational analysis, that is, a SWOT or, in other words, an assessment of an organisation's strengths and weaknesses and its opportunities and threats.

Phase 3 is the actual development of a plan. Such a plan would incorporate key success factors, measures and objectives, and action strategies.

Phase 4 is the implementation of the plan. This involves aligning and deploying resources, communication, and feedback and adjustment.

The author claims that this *four-phase approach* takes on "a simple yet fully adequate format" (Brown, 2001:112). Though it is not only widely adopted by the public sector in the USA, the author claims that it is adequately used by the USA schools. More importantly, this *four-phase approach* is not only broad enough to accommodate variations, it is also aligned to the planning criteria of the SEM. That is, phase 1 and 2 would encompass *strategy development* criteria, and phase 3 and 4 *strategy deployment* criteria of the SEM.

[5] The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Programme (MBNQP) is equivalent to the European Federation for Quality Management (EFQM).

In the UK, Hargreaves and Hopkins were commissioned by the then Department of Education and Science (DES) to provide a series of short documents which offered advice on school development planning (DES, 1989, 1991). They stressed the link between planning and school improvement to help improve the quality of teaching and learning in a school through the successful management of innovation and change. In Hargreaves and Hopkins' model, they propose *four* main processes in the development planning cycle and this includes:

(1) ***Audit***: the school reviews its strengths and weaknesses.

(2) ***Construction***: priorities for development are selected and then turned into specific targets.

(3) ***Implementation***: the planned priorities and targets are implemented.

(4) ***Evaluation***: the success of the implementation is checked.

Some UK authors such as Fidler (1998), Weindling (1997), and Davis and Ellison (1997), based on the Hargreaves and Hopkins' model, proposed variations by integrating elements of strategic planning process and illustrated the practical uses of strategic planning for UK schools. In referring also to other USA authors such as Bryson (1995, 2004), Cook (1995), and Kaufman et al. (1996), the following *four-phase approach* remains much of the same nomenclature and they are:

Phase 1 Pre-planning and Guiding Document

Phase 2 Strategic Analysis and Issues

Phase 3 Strategic Choice and Operational Plan

Phase 4 Strategic Implementation and Evaluation

Following Mintzberg (1994) and Fidler (1998), this *four-phase approach* should, however, emphasise the 'strategic' aspect of strategic planning rather than a 'technical' approach to planning, that is, emphasising the need to adapt to the environment rather than project the present into the future. The following sections will discuss the strategic aspect on key elements that schools may consider, to a greater or lesser extent, when developing their strategic plans:

Phase 1 – Pre-planning and Guiding Document

Several studies by the USA and UK authors listed pre-planning as a critical component in the strategic planning process (Cook, 1995; Valentine, 1991; Weindling, 1997; Bryson, 2004). Most educational strategic planning models proposed by the USA authors (Conley, 1992; Cook, 1995; Rieger, 1994; Valentine, 1991; Strategic Planning Roundtable, 1993; Bryson, 2004) advocate utilising a *broad-based panel* of the school's internal and external stakeholders for providing input towards the school's improvement plan. The purpose of having a broad-based panel of stakeholders is to arrive at a shared vision, that is, "fostering commitment to a common purpose" (Senge et al., 2000:71). Light (1998) sees that the key to success in public and non-profit organisations (and communities) is the satisfaction of key stakeholders.

In all the recent literature, vision has been stressed as a major element in strategic planning in both the business and school context (Nias et al. 1989; Senge, 1990). As Senge (1990) points out, the task of a leader is to generate a shared vision,

> *Today, vision is a familiar concept in corporate leadership. But when you look carefully you find that most visions are one person's (or one group's) vision imposed on an organisation. Such visions, at best, command compliance – not commitment. A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to, because it reflects their own personal vision. (Senge, 1990:206)*

In their research on USA high schools, Louis and Miles (1992) discussed the relationship of vision and school improvement. They found that, in reality, the process differed somewhat from that offered by most of the theoretical writers:

(1) Visions develop over the course of the evolutionary planning process.
(2) Visions are developed collectively, through action and reflection, by all those who play active roles in the change effort.
(3) Visions are a complex braid of the evolving themes of the change programme. Vision provides a shared meaning; people talk about it, use the same language to describe it, and believe that they are engaged in a common task.
(4) The school principal plays a significant role in spreading the vision to a broader group in the school. (Louis and Miles, 1992:236-7)

In building a vision for the school, Davies and Ellison (1997) argue that it is useful to consider some of the trends and thinking that may impact on schools over the next five to 15 years. They incorporate not only Futures Thinking at this phase, but also an amalgamation of values and expectations. Underpinning their argument is that to make a significant impact in the midst of rapid changes, the school must do things differently. Davies and Ellison (1998a, b) propose to build scenarios of what the school might look like in the next 10 to 15 years, that is, to project a future desired state and to dream dreams unfettered by the constraints of current realities. Evidence showed that UK schools, such as Southlands Community College (Mather, 1998) and

Rhyddings High School (Forshaw, 1998), have benefited from building scenarios exercise.

According to the research by Hambright and Diamantes (2004), confusion abounds in the literature regarding the uses of the terms vision and mission in regard to their respective roles in an educational organisation's strategic plan. In Conley's (1992) extensive review of educational strategic planning literature, he generally categorises most planning templates as having a vision or a mission statement. Many researchers use the terms interchangeably (Basham and Lunenburg, 1989; Brown and Marshall, 1987; Cook, 1995; D'Amico, 1988; McCune, 1986; Rieger, 1994; Valentine, 1991). However, other researchers (Bryson, 1995; Kaufman et al., 1996, Weindling, 1997) clearly differentiate the two terms as separate and essential entities. From the literature, vision statement serves as catalyst for longer range and / or broader based aims; whereas mission statements focus efforts towards shorter range and / or narrower based ends. The mission statement is used not only as the base from which strategies and action plans are developed (Hache, 2007), but can also reduce the risk of conflict and act as a marker to the stakeholders and to members of the organisation (Bryson, 1995). Mortimore (1996) raises an important issue in relation to mission: it has to be collaboratively formulated if it is to serve its purpose.

Several authors believe in defining guiding principles as an essential part of the pre-planning process (Bryson, 1995; Conley, 1992; Cook, 1995). Cook (1995:49) refers to these guiding principles as "its ethical code; its overriding convictions". It is seen that the support and commitment of key decision makers shown at the early stage of the strategic planning are vital if strategic planning and change in an organisation are to succeed (Bryson, 2004). Producing the guiding principles might deem to be essential in the democratic societies of the Western countries, and often these principles are

used to avoid misunderstanding and to forge commitment from the participating members towards strategic planning. Bryson (1995:25-26) suggests therefore that the agreement of the pre-planning document should include: (1) the reason or intent of the strategic undertaking; (2) the planning steps; (3) the deliverables; (4) the roles and responsibilities of the group participants; and (5) the agreement to provide adequate resources to complete the strategic planning undertaking.

Phase 2 – Strategic Analysis and Issues

All authors agree that the strategic analysis is a critical component of a good strategic plan (Fidler, 1998; Cook, 1995; Bryson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Weindling, 1997). It is the assessment of the environment that should drive the school's thinking about its future and this should be the basis for the school's mission, goals, principles, and strategic objectives. In other words, this is where the aim is to form a view of the strategic position of the school and the key factors which will influence it in both the short and long term. According to Bryson (1995, 2004), the situational analysis provides organisations with valuable information for subsequent stages in the planning process, that is, choice of strategy. Sybouts (1992:35) also states that strategic analysis is to establish "a common base of understanding and agreement and ultimately, ownership upon which subsequent planning steps will be built". Kaufman et al. (1996:146) believes that the SWOT analysis (that is, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) serves as an "organisational barometer by indicating environmental factors beneficial in determining the future strategies and tactics to be used in fulfilling the ideal vision". Cook (1995) strongly suggests that schools must conduct their internal and external analyses with complete objectivity. Failing so, schools may severely detract from the validity of the ensuing strategic plan.

In formulating the strategy for dealing with the future, it is critically important to not only look inward at what one desires, but to conduct the process in the context of looking outside to see what others are doing that will affect the organisation and its future. It is essentially an outside-in process (Kaufman et al., 1996). This view is affirmed by Cook (1995) that conducting the environmental scanning objectively would lead to issues raised in an open and frank manner so as to avoid detraction from the validity of the ensuing plan. This open manner not only helps schools to filter out a lot of information that may be useful if not vital in the development of strategy (Moore, 1995), but also allows schools to be able to match their capabilities with the environment in which they operate.

In a study of 11 secondary UK schools, Bagley et al. (1997) noticed that school managers placed a great deal of reliance upon informal and ad hoc means of feedback instead of using more systematic methods of data collection. However, Mintzberg (1989) warns of an excessively detailed and technical approach to this environment scanning and analysis activity, which runs the risk of a form of 'analysis paralysis'. He argues that by paying too much attention on monitoring the environment may lead to a situation "when nothing is happening that when something really does, it may not even be noticed. The trick of course is to pick out the discontinuities that matter, and….that seems to have more to do with informed intuition than anything else" (1989:126-7). Mintzberg (1990) highlights the significance of 'soft' information in shaping strategic managerial decisions. It should not, however, be assumed that the use of more systematic methods of data collection is crucial for schools seeking to be more responsive to school needs. Instead, it does need to be recognised that an over-reliance on ad hoc feedback can have its limitations. Often, it is a balance of both formal and informal information that is required to better gauge a situation (Bagley et al., 1997).

According to Fidler (1997), it is important to recognise the implications of organisational culture when conducting a SWOT analysis. This is because what might be an opportunity from one perspective may not be so from another. Also, the subsequent formulation of strategy not only depends on culture (Sapienza, 1985), but also the perceptions, which are likely to be biased by the current organisational culture and its assumptions (Stevenson, 1976; Ireland et al., 1987). Underpinning this argument, it is of critical importance to establish a systematic method of collecting information from internal and external influences on educational institutions (Pashiardis, 1996).

The data obtained from the external and internal environmental analyses is to identify specific strategic issues (D'Amico, 1988; Bryson, 1995; Kaufman et al., 1996). According to Bryson, strategic issue identification is the "heart of the strategic planning process" (1995:104). He further defines a strategic issue as "a fundamental policy question or challenge affecting an organisation's mandates, mission, and values; product or service level and mix; clients, users, or payers; or costs, financing, structure, or management" (1995:104). Finding the best way to frame these strategic issues typically requires considerable wisdom and dialogue, informed by a deep understanding of organisational operations, stakeholder interests, and external demands and possibilities (Bryson, 2004). As strategic issues could ultimately impact the deployment of resources, it is suggested by various authors to prioritise them using the following criteria: (1) need for action (Cooper, 1985), (2) magnitude and importance (D'Amico, 1988); (3) rightness and usefulness (Kaufman et al., 1996); and (4) impact on strengths and weaknesses (Mecca and Adams, 1991).

Phase 3 – Strategic Choice and Operational Plan

As expressed by Fidler et al. (1996:104), strategic choice includes three areas, "generating options, evaluating options, making a choice". Any options will partly arise from the results of the analysis and partly from a creative vision of the future (Bryson, 1995). In evaluating an option, Dobson and Starkey (1994) suggest the following three criteria,

(1) *Suitability* – the ability of the option to overcome the difficulties identified in the strategic analysis.
(2) *Feasibility* – an assessment of how this option might work in practice.
(3) *Acceptability* – consequences of the risk to interested parties by selecting this particular option.

The third criterion has the overtly political aspects of the choice process (Fidler, 1998). The first two criteria involve substantial elements of technical and rational decision-making although they will need to take into account the prevailing culture since what may be possible in one school may not be possible in another school faced with the same situation but with a different culture.

The third step involves making a choice and Davies and Ellison (1997) suggest that it is appropriate to divide the issues into *two* broad categories: (1) one which follows the strategic planning route akin to the school strategic plan; (2) the other which focuses on matters where no definable strategy is immediately discernible, about which there is a lack of knowledge, expertise or finance to make them achievable in the immediate future and, therefore, the need to build capability. Davies and Ellison (1997) use 'strategic intent' to describe this latter category. Boisot (1995:44) defines strategic intent as "a process of coping with turbulence through a direct, intuitive understanding,

emanating from the top of a firm and guiding its efforts". Both Mather (1998) and Forshaw (1998) see the value of creating the strategic intent as it helps to set a series of achievable but significantly difficult activities that 'leverage up' their schools to perform at much higher levels in definable areas. Boisot (1995:37) believes that strategic intents can be used in an organisation to "keep the behaviour of its employees aligned with a common purpose when it decentralises in response to turbulence".

Bolman and Deal (2003) suggest that coordinating action among organisational actors over time requires a formal plan so as to allow people to keep track of what they should do and why. The operational plan describes a set of steps or tactics needed for achieving desired outcomes. It is to ensure strategic initiatives and programmes are implemented and followed through. A version of a planning sheet which has been used with the UK schools (Weindling, 1997) includes focus area, objectives, tasks and activities, identification of responsible persons, time lines, resources (both financial and human), and measures of evaluation and success.

Phase 4 – Strategic Implementation and Evaluation

Strategy implementation involves aligning and deploying resources, communication, and feedback and adjustment (Brown, 2001). Researchers have long recognised that an organisation's ability to implement strategy and achieve desired results is directly related to the alignment of the entire human resource function and the people practices that support needed behaviours and competencies (Beer et al. 1995; Kaplan and Norton, 2005). Cascella (2002) suggests that involving people in developing measures and collecting data on performance helps drive these feelings of accountability. This is true not only for the drivers of the programmes, but also for many of

their subordinates, who may be assigned to measure, improve and monitor these programmes on a regular basis. Cook (1995) says that schools need to cascade plans downward at the school, curriculum area and individual levels, which would ensure that challenging targets are met in a cost-effective manner. Knox (1993) also affirms that the strategy implementation should consist of all goals, policies, programmes, actions, decisions and allocation of resources that define the institution, what it accomplishes and why it does what it does. The resulting objectives put the strategies into measurable and qualitative terms; they are the basis for the development of action plans.

Communicating the strategic plan to all staff can, however, be a challenge to schools as it is not easy to determine success criteria for schools (Giffords and Dina, 2004). Despite its challenges, strategy evaluation is an essential component of good planning because it allows the organisation to make adjustments to the strategic plan and to assist in future planning (Wolf, 1999). The activities associated with strategy evaluation include: reviewing internal and external factors, measuring performance, and taking corrective actions (David, 2003).

As strategic planning is a dynamic process, Thompson and Strickland (1995) suggest that schools must re-evaluate their strategic plans regularly, refining and recasting it as needed. Goens (2001) also notes that the world is not predictable and does not succumb to cause-and-effect behaviour or straight-line projection. It is therefore important to realise that things cannot always be measured and gauged with hard data. With regards to what the exact elements included in the planning process, Mintzberg (1994) suggests that any planning process should allow organisations to discover what works, and adjust their plans and methods as they progress towards their strategic targets. In other words, the ultimate purpose of engaging in strategic planning should lead schools to achieve desired outcomes.

It is important to view strategic planning today as more than simply establishing a long-term plan for realising a vision or dealing with future environmental conditions. It is neither solely prescriptive nor solely descriptive (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Strategic planning is now seen as a continuous dynamic process that redefines an organisation as its resources and core competencies change (Prehalad and Hamel, 1990; Torraco and Swanson, 1995). It involves a process of openness, for building direction around internal conditions, collective competencies (Mirabile, 1996) and the collaborative qualities that link an organisation to the interest it serves (Mintzberg and Lampel, 1999).

2.5 THE MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

It is evident that the formulation of a good strategic plan is only the first part of a successful planning process (Rowley and Sherman, 2001). Bryson (1995:9) states that "strategic planning…..probably should not be undertaken if implementation is extremely unlikely….Engaging in strategic planning when effective implementation will not follow is the organisational equivalent of the average New Year's resolution". Indeed, strategic planning is action-oriented and is useful only if it is carefully linked to implementation – and this is where the process often breaks down.

In reviewing the literature, there is generally a lack of comprehensive study on strategy implementation in both private and public sectors (Kaplan and Norton, 1996, 2005; Alexander, 1991; Noble, 1999; Pearce and Robinson, 2000; Atkinson, 2006). For example, Noble (1999:132) states that "there is a significant need for detailed and comprehensive conceptual models related to

strategy implementation". Alexander (1991) and Pearce and Robinson (2000) suggest several reasons for the lack of studies on strategy implementation:

(1) Strategy implementation is less glamorous than strategy formulation;
(2) People overlook it because of a belief that anyone can do it;
(3) People are not exactly sure what it includes and where it begins and ends;
(4) There are only a limited number of conceptual models of strategy implementation; and
(5) Strategy implementation has usually been regarded as being distinct from strategy formulation, and truly, most of the existing literature and materials have put emphasis on strategy development and formulation rather than strategy implementation.

There are a number of theories to explain the general failure of strategy implementation. Studies by researchers of educational strategic planning (Romney, 1996; Fidler et al, 1996; Cook, 1995; Rieger, 1994; Strategic Planning Roundtable, 1993; Cunningham, 1993; Valentine, 1991) seem to highlight a major reason for the failure of strategy execution in schools - "poor management" by the Senior Management Team (SMT). This is in-line with the claim of Beer and Eisenstat (2000) that the top management is one of the key silent killers of strategy execution. A Fortune Magazine study suggested that 70 percent of the CEOs in the USA failed not because of bad strategy, but because of bad execution (Charan and Colvin, 1999). A study by Renaissance Solution survey (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) also indicated that 85 percent of management teams spent less than one hour a month on strategy issues and only 5 percent of employees understood their corporate strategy. These alarming statistics confirm the earlier research done by Mintzberg (1994), who critiques that organisations' planning activities are too often completely divorced from performance measurement and resource

allocation. Similar research results released by Renaissance Worldwide and Business Intelligence (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) suggest that there are four main barriers to successful strategy implementation:

(1) ***The vision barrier***: strategy is not understood by those who must implement it and it is not translated into objectives.
(2) ***The management barrier***: management systems are designed for operational control and tied to budgets, not strategy.
(3) ***The operational barrier***: key processes are not designed to leverage the drivers of business strategy.
(4) ***The people barrier***: personal goals, knowledge building and competencies are not linked to strategy implementation.

To overcome the above barriers, more and more organisations experimented with the BSC approach and found it to be a critical tool in aligning short-term actions with their strategy (Niven, 2005). The USA authors like Kaplan and Norton (1996:10, 19) claim that organisations that adopt the BSC approach have not only been able to resolve the four barriers, but have also gained the following benefits:

(1) Clarify and gain consensus about vision and strategic direction
(2) Communicate and link strategic objectives and measures throughout the organisation
(3) Align departmental and personal goals to the organisation's vision and strategy
(4) Plan, set targets and align strategic initiatives
(5) Conduct periodic and systematic strategic reviews
(6) Obtain feedback to learn about and improve strategy.

The BSC approach appears to offer considerable potential to the public sector, including schools, in terms of contributing both to improve performance and to improve performance measurement. Kaplan and Norton (1992, 1996, 2004a, 2006) declare the BSC approach to be a strategic performance management system rather than simply a performance measurement system. In principle, the BSC offers a coordinated approach to ensuring that an integrated set of performance measures link to the organisation's mission and strategy (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; Newing, 1994, 1995). As such, the BSC approach is an integral part of the strategic planning process, and not just a system for tracking performance after the fact (Chang and Chow, 1999). O'Neil et al. (1999) found that the BSC approach is particularly adaptable to the unique characteristics of academic organisations although it was first developed with business organisations in mind. The BSC approach is an attractive one for schools because it links long-term strategic planning to day-to-day actions and activities, for making each dimension widely known and open to change if judged inappropriate in practice (Storey, 2002). Although there are some criticisms and "question marks" concerning the BSC approach, many of these seem to represent problems of practical application rather than fundamental flaws (Atkinson, 2006). There is evidence to show that there is increasingly more guidance on establishing measures (Kaplan and Norton, 2001, 2004a, b) and implementing a scorecard (Bourne et al., 2002, 2003) with appropriate implementation processes including top management commitment (Bourne et al., 2003; Beer et al., 1990).

According to Dorweiler and Yakhou (2005), educational institutions can use the BSC approach to evaluate its performance. In their study, they claim that the BSC approach helps educational institutions define and articulate implementation of strategies and provide an integrated perspective on goals, targets, and measure of performance. In other words, the BSC approach tracks key strategic elements through a balanced series of performance

indicators to ensure that action meets strategic objectives, while demonstrating that the institution is meeting accountability expectations and legislative requirements (Dorweiler and Yakhou, 2005). The importance of measurement is affirmed by Bossidy and Charan (2002) who say in their book that when organisations do not execute, chances are that they do not measure. As is commonly heard, what gets measured gets improved. Consequently, as a result of good measures, employees tend to rise to meet their expected level of performance (Rowley and Sherman, 2001; Vitale and Mavrinac, 1995). To successfully implement a strategic plan, Rowley and Sherman (2001) suggest that developing relevant KPIs requires everyone in the organisation who is responsible for implementing the strategic plan to sign off on the plan and to commit to reaching the goals the plan has identified.

In addition, Bryson (2004) and other researchers (Peters and Pierre, 2003:205-255) affirm that the successful implementation of strategies and plans must use various implementation structures that coordinate and manage implementation activities, along with the continuation or creation of a coalition of committed implementers, advocates, and supportive interest groups. Numerous researchers also strongly support linking strategic planning with key processes and systems throughout the organisation (Atkinson and McCrindell, 1997; Lingle and Schiemann, 1996; Vitale et al., 1994). This linkage directs the focus of organisational resources toward established strategic goals and can even bring about a change in the organisational culture as a result.

To achieve the planned strategy, Knight (1993) argues that resources must be allocated. With sufficient allocation of resources specifically for a particular programme or service, the chances to carry forward the programme or service will increase significantly. Detweiler (1997) shows that a strategic

commitment to improving technology at Hartwick College in the USA allowed an easy budget swing to support its strategic goal through a highly participative planning and implementation process. Rowley and Sherman (2001) suggest that those who are involved with the budget should also be involved in the strategic planning process. However, it is not uncommon to find that the planning processes of educational institutions have little or no relationship to budgeting processes (Paris, 2003). The reasons are complex and they may include factors such as the historical patterns of financial decision making, the availability of accurate financial data throughout the organisation, budgeting process, and the mismatch of the school planning cycle and the government budget cycle. The latter factor seems to be particularly true in the Singaporean school context[6].

It is important to recognise that people will naturally want to implement the strategic plan if they believe it will benefit them. This is in-line with the claim of Rowley and Sherman (2001) that people will resist change of which they do not know the outcomes. They suggest that other than monetary rewards, people may be recognised with non-monetary rewards such as release time, personal recognition, improved relationship, a sense of community, and a sense of accomplishment, for their efforts. According to Kaplan and Norton (2005), linking incentive compensation to the individual scorecard is one of the effective ways to ensure orgnisational strategies are implemented. They argue that it is a powerful lever to gain people's attention to organisational objectives and a significant push in employees' level of interest in the details of the strategy.

[6] The academic calendar of Singaporean schools starts January and ends mid-November each year; whereas Government budget cycle only starts in April till the end of March each year.

According to Rowley and Sherman (2001), every strategic initiative needs a champion who accepts ownership for its successful implementation. Similarly, Cascella (2002) argues that accountability is maintained best when specific people are designated as owners of the initiatives, and an array of owners helps ensure broad participation and commitment. The champions are the people who have primary responsibility for managing the strategic planning process day to day. They are the ones who keep track of progress and also pay attention to all the details (Bryson, 2004). Morgan (1997:271) confirms this view by suggesting that by "getting key opinion leaders behind the initiatives, he or she may be able to create the crucial time or space in which success can be demonstrated, publicised and made irreversible".

Rowley and Sherman (2001) also suggest that an *incremental* implementation strategy, that is, by carefully selecting areas of the plan that will be easier and more straightforward to implement, leaders can achieve success in the early stages of the implementation process. They also suggest that incremental implementation allows leaders to build trust with some of the more skeptical staff. By choosing carefully the first areas for change and by demonstrating success, leaders should be able to point out to the institution that nothing harmful has occurred. Bryson (2004:212) also advocates that "incrementalism guided by a sense of mission and direction can result in a series of small decisions that accumulate over time into major changes". Karl Marx is perhaps the progenitor of this line of thought with his observation that changes in degree lead to changes in kind. Kouzes and Posner (2002) support this argument by stating that a small-win strategy reduces risk, eases implementation, breaks projects into doable steps, quickly makes change real to people, encourages participation, boosts people's confidence and commitment, provides immediate rewards, and preserves gains. By the same token, big-win strategy should be controlled by senior decision–makers, although they may also emerge through the loosely

coordinated actions of many people moving in the same direction at the operating level (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

2.6 THE HELPING AND HINDERING FACTORS TO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

At the heart of a true strategic planning process is "change", which, far from being straightforward, is complex, unpredictable and multi-dimensional. Quong et al. (1998) argue that schools will be more proactive in seeking to do the things that make them more effective if strategy change could be managed well. People are in general reluctant to change. Indeed, change is always difficult. Kotter and Schlesinger (1991) claim that change usually brings some form of human resistance. Due to the multi-dimensional system of actors in schools, Fullan (1992) argues that formidable barriers could obstruct management efforts to transform the way a school's strategic decisions are made and routine operations conducted. Rightly put, success in achieving results is largely determined by how well the organisation adjusts all its tangible and intangible properties[7] to stay relevant to its surrounding (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Zeffane (1996) also argues that the older and the larger the organisation, the greater its difficulty in fostering and implementing change. Just as hardening of the arteries sets in with age for individuals, hardening of beliefs and assumptions comes with age and size of the organisation.

[7] Tangible properties mean assets that have a physical form such as machinery, buildings and land; intangible properties include human capital (skills and competencies), information capital (information and knowledge management systems) and organisational capital (culture and alignment). (Kaplan and Norton, 2004:125-126)

According to Valentine (1991), strategic planning is an intuitive and conceptual thinking process that demands a new way of thinking and creative ways of doing things. She further argues that strategic planning will not guarantee success; it is expensive and difficult, and may not get the school out of a current crisis. Mintzberg (1994) also states that strategic planning is an involved, intricate, and complex process that takes an organisation into uncharted territory. It does not provide a ready-to-use prescription for success; instead, it takes the organisation through a journey and helps develop a framework and context within which the answers will emerge. Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders understand and comprehend key factors that help or hinder the strategic planning process.

Literature and research works of both private and public sector have documented influential factors that affect the strategic planning process (Waterman et al., 1980; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991; Conley, 1992; Cook, 1995; Bryson, 1995, 2004). However, many of these factors are not coherent and studies also fail to provide detailed understanding of how these factors actually drive strategy development and implementation. For example, Waterman et al. (1980) define and discuss the seven 'S' factors - *strategy, structure, systems, style, staff, skills and shared values* – which are commonly used by organisations in the private sector, but they fail to provide clear examples and explanations of the relationships and interactions between factors.

In the educational strategic planning process literature, factors generally cited by researchers include *leadership, culture, participation, commitment, mindset towards change, and constraints and organisational practice* (Fidler et al, 1996; Baldrige, 1983; Birnbaum, 1988; Taylor and Miroiu, 2002). These key factors are however mainly drawn from the studies which were conducted in Western settings. Dimmock (2000) argues that schools in

different societies are best advised to adopt practices which harmonise with key features of their respective cultural contexts. The social and cultural differences between Western and Asian learners (Bajunid, 1996; Marton et al., 1993; O'Donoghue, 1994; Watkins and Biggs, 1996) may have enormous implications in determining what are regarded as appropriate patterns of leadership, management and organisation for schools in different societies. The question arising is whether listed factors by the Western authors would be the same for schools in the Singapore setting, which is multi-racial in nature and largely driven by Asian values. The arguments for each of these factors are examined as follows:

2.6.1 Leadership

The leadership of schools is crucial to the success of the strategic planning process. According to Rouche et al. (1989), leadership should engender collaboration around an organisational vision. With dynamic changes in the education system, the demand for school principals' leadership qualities has become competitive. The School Principals are expected to astutely and passionately be aware of the challenges, rationale for change, and the envisioned benefits for the school and even the broader community. In the study of strategic planning and retention within the Community College setting in the USA, Walters and McKay (2005) suggest that the college leadership should serve as the catalyst for setting the focus and keeping the momentum going. School principals are not only required to possess clear educational goals and vision, strong leadership, high moral standards and excellent interpersonal skills, but they are also expected to fully commit to their unique missions in leading schools. Fullan (1992) notes that the more complex one society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become. Strong leadership is seen to be a crucial factor to the implementation of

school-wide reform (Olson, 1999). Schaffer and colleagues (1997) point out that in many schools where reform failed, principals did not keep the staff aligned to the goals of the design. In other words, strong leadership is necessary in order to execute changes generated by strategic planning and to ensure the necessary tenacity and perseverance to get the desired results.

Research also finds that many UK school principals are not knowledgeable about the concepts of strategic management, and thus could not provide good leadership (Bell, 2000). Mylen (2002) confirms Bell's observation and states that today's educational environment requires leaders to have the emotional and intellectual capacity to be flexible enough for continuous change no matter what their position is. This is because leadership of schools needs profound vision and understanding of social trends and changes as well as a familiarity with the dynamics of the education sector. In the USA, Senge et al. (1994) argue that the school leaders often have the tendency to look at issues from a biased or limited perspective. This tendency of school leaders is attributed to their education, training, and work experiences. Inevitably, the transaction of information between the environment and institutional members could only be realised if the leaders possess the ability to read and interpret the information they congregate. In other words, it is quite difficult for any individual to be knowledgeable about all occurrences that affect an institution. It often requires special expertise to realise how an event or trend might affect an institution in the future.

The ability of the principals to involve staff, governors and the community in strategic planning is a reflection of their leadership style (Southworth, 1993; Webb and Vulliamy, 1996a, b). Leadership style can be seen at three levels – working with individuals, teams, and the whole school community (Tuohy and Coghlan, 1997). A more *risk-taking style* may well produce strategic options different from those of a more *conservative style*. The leadership

style may in turn determine the outcome of a strategic decision and how to move the strategy process forward (Quinn, 1980). In other words, the effectiveness of leadership not only is crucial in the development of strategy, but also clearly influences the organisation's culture and style. The choice of style has an impact on strategy in the attitude to risk-taking and the ability of the organisation to innovate.

It is imperative to note that the Chinese cultural approach towards management leadership is rather different from the West (Ong, 1994). For example, the Chinese leaders see that the management success depends on the way the employees are led and management motivation is for others outside oneself. Given this cultural background, the leaders of Singaporean schools may approach management tools such as strategic planning rather differently from the leaders of the Western schools. In the Western organisations, transformational leadership attributes, such as clear vision, are often seen as important elements for employee job satisfaction and commitment (Iverson and Roy, 1994; Sergiovanni and Corbally, 1984). This type of leadership style is often associated with a flatter organisational structure and low power distance as in Western organisations (Chen, 2001; Whitley, 1997). On the contrary, Asian organisations tend to be more bureaucratic, hierarchical, have central decision making, and its leadership tends to be based on position, authority and seniority (Chen and Francesco, 2000). Similar observation was concluded by Walder (1995) that Asian organisations are often ruled by people rather than ruled by law whereby top bosses dominate organisations.

2.6.2 Organisational Culture

Culture is believed to affect planning processes (Haiss, 1990). As Brock et al. (2000) note, cultural values shape acceptable organisation processes such as planning and decision making. Furthermore, Hofstede (2001) has observed that planning processes often reflect the dominant values of a culture. Organisational culture functions as a filter and shaper through which the leaders and staff develop and implement their strategies. For these reasons, Lynch (1997) argues that organisational culture is considered as one of the key factors that influence the development of organisational strategy. In the strategic planning process, it is easy to view the type of strategic changes the plan proposes as affronts to the revered culture of the school. If school leaders do nothing to address this concern, the full weight of the powerful culture can become a formidable block to change. Rowley and Sherman (2001) think that this is usually a mistake for school leaders to feel that their own personal leadership abilities are far more important in the implementation process than the culture because the strength of culture often overpowers the change tactics of leadership. A strong organisational culture can be seen as a handicap to change initiatives such as strategic planning.

The level of trust among and between staff and key stakeholders involved in the planning process can significantly hinder, or greatly support, the discussion of differences and the management of conflict. This can be the outcome of a myriad of symptoms such as vested interests, refusal to share information, conflict over resources, conflicts between departments and sections, and petty interpersonal differences. Bennett (2000) concludes in his study that *cultural instability* due to changing personnel and context inhibits strategic planning. This observation goes along with the study of Miller and Inniss (1992) that shows strategic planning is more likely to be effective where staff work collegially and do not resent a changed direction or

leadership style. Research by Bennett (2000) also suggests that schools in unstable local environments, where the problems of the many socially disadvantaged families spill over into the daily life of the school, find strategic planning inappropriate for their needs.

Organisations like schools not only have multiple subcultures, but also have highly complex operational and power relationships between them (Wallace, 1999). Morgan (1986:133) also coins “multiple realities” to describe schools that have not one culture but many cultures. Obviously some, or even all, of these subcultures may function to undermine the initiatives of other cultures rather than support them. Indeed, schools would normally structure under different curriculum areas and these may constitute distinct and competing cultures. This is like a kaleidoscope of cultural signals representing different groupings of people. This ‘multiple realities’ may be a unique feature of Singaporean schools in a multi-racial society where different races working under one roof, and it is a force that can not be overlooked.

In the Hong Kong schools, Cheng (1993) finds that stronger school cultures have better motivated teachers. In other words, in schools with strong organisational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership and intimacy, teachers would experience higher job satisfaction and enjoy increased productivity. Similar to the Hong Kong culture where Asian values are much emphasised, the Singaporean teachers may support strategic change if they are working in a healthy and supportive culture. Singaporean schools are largely managed by ethnic Chinese and their relatively high power distance preference (Hofstede, 1991) and Confucian values (Chen, 2001) can make significant influence on the school culture. These Confucian values are often associated with obedience, respect of authority and loyalty (Chen, 2001; El Kahal, 2001). For example, not only directions and orders tend to be top-down with little delegation and empowerment, employees also

tend to follow instructions without questions. According to Hofstede (1980, 1991), the USA and UK are relatively low power distance countries and values of democracy, equalitarianism and participation are more prevalent. Western organisations, hence, see bureaucratic structure and rules as a means to coordinate activities and report purposes; whereas Chinese organisations see bureaucracy as ownership, control and centralised decision making (Chen, 2001). On these notes, it is predicted that Chinese culture could influence the school's culture, leadership style and, subsequently, their commitment to the organisation's plans and new initiatives differently from the Western cultures.

2.6.3 Participation

Western educationists such as Keller (1983) and Rowley et al. (1997) strongly emphasise the need for participation in the process of strategic planning in educational institutions. Their argument is backed by Conley (1992:35) who highlights the symbiotic relationship between strategic planning and participative management by stating that "strategic planning may be the 'glue' needed for decentralised decision making to succeed". This point is further confirmed by the study of Frese (1996) where he shows the combination of strategic planning and shared decision making is an enabling vehicle for organisational change within their school district. From the recent literature, most educational strategic planning models (Bryson, 2004; Cook, 1995; Kaufman et al., 1996; Romney, 1996; Strategic Planning Roundtable, 1993; Valentine, 1991; Fidler, 2002, Weindling, 1997) advocate utilising a broad-based panel of both the internal and external stakeholders for providing input toward the school's improvement plan.

The representatives of Community and school's Parent Support Group (PSG) participating as members on the school planning team were seen as an issue in Brown's (1996) study. He advocates that the involvement of stakeholders has helped to formulate a shared plan and also to increase the chance of success in executing them. However, Stone (1987:47) asserts that unless "(those who are responsible) for carrying out the action plans (are involved) in designing them, it can bring about a breakdown in communications and resistance to or interruption of logical action". In a recent study, nevertheless, Pool (2004) claims that a true conversation between the leaders and stakeholders would prepare and develop the minds of the planning team with strategies that impact the organisation positively. This is supported by Quong et al. (1998) that the involvement of stakeholders in planning should lead to a greater understanding of how the bits and pieces of the whole work puzzle fit together. Gratton (2000:187) articulates three powerful reasons for participation of staff in strategy discussions:

(1) To build guiding coalitions. She means "[t]he continued involvement of broad groups of people is crucial – to build management learning through involvement in the visioning process….to become involved and committed to making the journey" (ibid.:187).
(2) To build the capacity to change. She sees this as "being about creating genuine adaptation, developing an organisation which is permanently adaptable and flexible and is involved at both the individual team and organisational levels, with a collective wish to move forward" (ibid.:187).
(3) To keep focusing on the strategic themes. This she interprets as "[t]he broad themes of the [strategic] journey act as a focus for action….it is a vehicle for communication, both across the teams and to the wide group that will be involved….This overview ensures consistency of action across the organisation…." (ibid.:187).

Writers on strategic planning generally accept this notion and assume that the involvement of middle management in the planning process would increase middle management's understanding of, as well as their commitment to, the organisational goals (Steiner, 1979; Koteen, 1989). The improved communications, combined with broad participation, are believed to be helpful to building teamwork and increasing members' commitment to the organisational goals (French and Bell, 1995; Bryson, 1995).

However, existing empirical studies on the subject have different findings on the impact of participation. For example, Wotring (1995) examines the perceptions of 130 participants who were involved in the year-long development of the strategic plan for the Belpre City School District, Ohio and finds that both the degree to which the participant was involved and the participant's role in the planning process were strongly related to his perceptions toward the activities and product of the strategic planning process.

An earlier piece of work done by Pfeffer (1981) indicates that when lower-level organisational members participate in decision making, they usually are allowed to respond to only the issues raised by the top managers in the organisation, and participate within specific contexts defined by the latter. Such participation not only prevents the ability of the lower-level members to express their needs and viewpoints, but it has also serious limitations in either increasing communication or enhancing commitment in the organisation (Mohrman, 1979).

In a high power distance society like Singapore, leaders usually dominate and they may prevent empowerment (Chen, 2001). In an extensive study on the art of Chinese management, Schlevogt (2002) observes that Chinese

leaders may not strive for consensus even though some members of a work group may be invited to be involved in the decision-making process. The author concludes that although the Chinese leader may solicit input from employees, he / she will still make all final decisions either himself or together with his leadership team (Schlevogt, 2002). Although Singapore is a multicultural society, its value system is still largely based on the Chinese culture (Chinese population is about 76.8% of the total population[8]); where it has been characterised by Confucianism which emphasises harmony, reciprocity, and loyalty (Singapore Government Media Release, 2007; Earley, 1989; Warner, 1993). It is, thus, plausible that the influence of Confucian values would produce different patterns of relations in Singaporean schools.

2.6.4 Commitment and Passion

Most literature would grade *commitment and passion* at the top management as the key to successful strategic planning process (Mintzberg, 1994; Bryson, 1995). Romney (1996:17) also argues that "if there is no internal commitment to the plan and no intent to implement it, strategic planning is a waste of time and energy". The same argument is echoed by Bryson & Alston (1996:6): "if the organisation lacks the….commitment of key decision makers, to carry through an effective strategic planning process and produce a good plan, the effort should not be undertaken". The demonstration of commitment by the leaders will further encourage involvement throughout the school, and 'empower' staff to make decisions within the framework defined by the strategic planning process. The commitment of people to the planning process goes hand-in-hand with the commitment of the top management. Mintzberg (1994) argues that strategic planning implies organisation-wide

[8] Singapore racial composition comprising a disproportionate mix of Chinese (76.8%), Malay (13.9%), Indian (7.9%), and others (1.4%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2004)

participation, which can only be achieved if people believe that their involvement counts, and that they will benefit from the process. Handy (1985) also reinforces the imperative for whole-school involvement that "the solution is to….drench the organisation in a common set of values" (1985:246).

It is accepted that the relationship between commitment to line manager and satisfaction with supervision in the Chinese organisations is different from the West. Wong and Kung (1999) argue that employees' commitment towards specific persons (such as line manager) is important in the Chinese context, because the Chinese usually have a strong sense of responsibility and obligation towards those who have closer relationship with them. It has been suggested that Chinese workers are group-oriented (Wang, 1990). Leung and Bond (1984) also find that the concern of the Chinese is oriented toward enhancing in-group harmony. The Confucian values of social duty and obligation might well lead to an emphasis on respect for authority and loyalty at work, which, in turn, has important bearings on the development of trust and commitment to the organisation.

2.6.5 Mindset towards Change and Organisational Practice

Strategic planning is about change. It is often true that strategic plans may well be resisted by employees who feel threatened by change or by the institution of additional controls (Franklin, 2000; Bryson, 2004; Rowley and Sherman, 2001). Indeed, the need for change is more likely to be accepted by employees when top management provides competent, rational explanations for such changes (Daly and Geyer, 1994). For various reasons, public and non-profit organisations such as schools typically are not very savvy about perceiving changes quickly enough (Light, 1998:66; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001) and are generally weak in their proactive response towards

externally imposed changes (Bell, 2000). Bowman (1990:9) provides some insights into why public organisations are reluctant to change and they have been adapted for the school context below:

(1) There is a lack of awareness of the school's true situation by the school principal and SMT;
(2) The SMT reinterprets, or ignores, unpleasant information that does not fit in with their preferred way of looking at the world;
(3) There are some powerful people in the school with vested interests in maintaining the status quo;
(4) Schools are having to deal with externally imposed change and this tends to promote reactive, incremental responses rather than a strategic approach;
(5) The principal and SMT are too tangled up with everyday problems;
(6) The past success of the school encourages management to stick with the tried and tested strategies which may be inappropriate to present and future circumstances;
(7) Clinging to past glories can also make management reluctant to see the school move in a different direction.

Schools are different entities from the private organisations in that its resources are subject to political forces, which make obtaining funds more complicated compared to the private sector. It is particularly true that implementation of programmes in schools may face bureaucratic hurdles associated with rules and regulations, and scrutiny from oversight bodies such as the MOE, Singapore. While the Singapore government may have been allowing schools to have more autonomy and flexibility to decide their own development plans in recent years, it may take much effort and time to rectify and change this situation.

Moreover, the effects of workplace uncertainty on motivation and mindset towards changes are found to be particularly salient in the Chinese context (Jackson and Bak, 1998). They find that Chinese workers have a low tolerance for uncertainty and a strong desire to maintain order and predictability in the workplace. They argue that as uncertainty increases, Chinese workers tend to engage in uncertainty avoidance behaviours that result in disengagement on the job and a lack of work related achievement. Hofstede (1991) argues that uncertainty avoidance may be linked to the question of "truth". He argues that "truth" is not a relevant issue in Eastern thinking. In other words, the Chinese manager may well be motivated to save "face" and to tell the other person what they want to hear, rather than what may be regarded as the absolute truth in Western eyes.

2.7 SUMMARY

This chapter has taken a rather straightforward approach by reviewing the literature comprehensively on strategic planning related to the research questions. The definitions of strategy and educational strategic planning have been discussed in the context of expert literature. The key characteristics of strategic planning would serve as a good benchmark to see whether Singaporean schools understand the meaning of strategic planning. In addition, the applicability of business strategic planning in the Business Excellence Framework has been discussed, and the key elements of the strategic planning process suggested by various leading experts in strategic planning process have also been examined in detail. The difficulties in executing strategies have also been highlighted, approaches and principles in executing and managing strategic plans offered by the gurus of strategy implementation from both the public and private sectors were also discussed

and examined. School leaders must be aware of key factors that are likely to influence the strategic planning process in order to achieve expected results.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 OVERVIEW AND ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter describes the research approach, research methodologies and procedures of data collection that were used to review and analyse the perceptions that principals and teachers of two Singapore government schools have towards the strategic planning and management process. For the fulfilment of this purpose, two government schools in Singapore were chosen using certain requirements. The aim of this research approach and strategy is to clarify the issues related to leadership and management of the strategic planning process. In particular, the study is aimed at examining the situation in the schools after the MOE, Singapore, launched the SEM in the year 2000. The research questions can be summarised into four key components that require further investigation in order to achieve a more comprehensive evaluation. These components are:

(1) To investigate the extent of understanding among school leaders and teachers on strategy and strategic planning within the SEM
(2) To investigate the perception and experiences of various key school personnel on the development of a strategic plan

(3) To examine the perception and experiences of school leaders and teachers in managing the implementation process of the strategic plan
(4) To establish the perceived factors that facilitate or hinder the engagement of the strategic planning process

A case study design was chosen for its potency in answering the research questions on the strategic planning process of the two government schools. The use of case studies is a research strategy that focuses on the understanding of the dynamics present within a single setting. This embedded design also achieves multiple levels of analysis within a single study, and this is appropriate for the nature of this study as both the current practice and general understanding of the strategic planning process are investigated. The case studies aim to uncover the interaction of significant factors that helped and / or hindered the development and implementation of the strategic planning process. The study started in December 2005 when approval from the MOE was officially obtained, and the research time period spanned a total of 14 months – from January 2006 to March 2007. In this period, the whole planning cycle process was purposefully studied in both Singaporean government schools.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND STRATEGY

In this study, issues related to the perception of various key personnel towards the management of the strategic planning process in schools are investigated. It is a complex task to uncover the human experiences and perceptions of the school leaders and teachers on strategic planning, and

thus this in-depth study of the perspectives of people naturally lends itself to qualitative research (Ercikan and Roth, 2006).

Qualitative research is defined as the systematic, empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a bound social context (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997). In other words, qualitative research seeks to answer the question: "What is going on here?" and explain the particular phenomenon under investigation (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). In this form of research, the questions and problems are usually derived from real world observations, dilemmas and questions, and take the form of wide-ranging inquiries. A study that attempts to uncover the nature of persons' experiences with a social phenomenon naturally lends itself to qualitative types of research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

According to Sarantakos (1993), the process of qualitative research brings the collection and analysis of data together in a way that the identification of data automatically leads to its analysis. In turn, it directs the area in which data should be sought and identified in order for it to be analysed again. This ongoing process culminates in the development of new concepts, which can explain the planning characteristics in ways otherwise impossible with quantitative research techniques.

Indeed, the topic of the strategic planning process is complex. Falshaw and Glaister (2006) conclude that strategic planning represents a subtle and complex activity, and the obtainment of rich data on such phenomena may be best accomplished through research methods that employ qualitative data gathering. In addition, Hill et al. (1999) attacks the use of the survey research method and advocates greater use of on-site-based research when investigating strategic processes. Characteristically, quantitative methodologies that employ questionnaires and scaled responses rarely

generate the “hidden”, “deep” or elusive information that is necessary to explain the complexity of the strategic planning process.

Qualitative research is an appropriate strategy in understanding how school leaders and teachers make sense of their world and the experiences they have in implementing the strategic planning process. Patton (1990) argues that qualitative research strives for a depth of understanding as an end in itself, not as an attempt to predict what may happen in the future, or to create generalizations. Qualitative research methods are employed in this study because the aim is to capture stakeholders’ perspectives on the strategic planning processes and thus how they are seen to vary according to the type of organisation, the experience of people, and people’s perceptions and judgement of that experience. This argument is supported by Miles and Huberman (1994) as they argue that qualitative research methods are often particularly appropriate in researching organisational processes and experiences of people in-depth. Above all, Patton (1990) argues that the most effective research strategy to ascertain the in-depth perspectives of human experiences is through qualitative research. Creswell (1998) categories five research methods of qualitative research:

Biography	Exploring the life of an individual
Phenomenology	Understanding the essence of experiences about a phenomenon
Grounded Theory	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field
Ethnography	Describing and interpreting a cultural and social group
Case Study	Developing an in-depth analysis of a single case or multiple cases

Source: Creswell, J. W. (1998), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

According to Yin (1994), a choice between case studies and other empirical methods might be rationally undertaken against three conditions:

(1) the *type* of research question being posed,
(2) the extent of *control* a researcher has over actual behavioural events, and
(3) the degree of focus on *contemporary* as opposed to historical events.

The first condition depends on the fundamental “Who, What, Where, When, Why and How” questions that bedevil most research. Any question can be handled by most research approaches with varying degrees of efficiency. For example, surveys and historical accounts better address the “Who”, “What” and “Where” questions, while the use of case studies better suits the “How” and “Why” questions. Hence the second and third conditions provide the necessary discrimination needed as other methods (e.g. formal experiments, historical accounts) can also be employed to investigate the “How” and “Why” type of research questions. Experiments require an ability to control and manipulate events in a direct, precise and systematic fashion which is rarely accomplished beyond laboratory conditions. Historical accounts are best used when there is no scope for control over or within contemporary events.

Given that the behaviour of people in this study cannot be manipulated, it is therefore appropriate to employ case studies (Yin, 1993). Gall et al. (1996:545) defined case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon”. Feagin et al. (1991:2) defined a case study as “an in-depth, multi-faceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon”. In addition, Merriam (1998:153) defined a case as a “single bound system or an instance of a class of phenomena”, while Yin (1994) defined a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p.13). Stake (1995) also argues that case studies are designed to

bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data. Characteristically, case studies tend to have an open-ended, emergent quality that facilitates the discovery of unanticipated findings and data sources (Snow and Anderson, 1991)

The case study approach, using multiple sources of evidence, was chosen for this study, focusing on the strategic planning process, as it is typically influenced by many purposive and ad hoc management decisions that often occur within a context of ill-defined feedback loops and uncertainty. In the context of such complex phenomena, case study research brings us closer to, and can capture the experiences of key personnel and teachers than other forms of research such as surveys. Darke et al. (1998) also suggest that the use of case study research is useful in newer and less well-developed research areas particularly where the examination of the context and the dynamics of a situation are important. This is particularly true in the new phenomenon of school level leadership and implementation of strategic planning in Singapore. The case study approach allows insights into specific instances, events or situations regarding the setting (Walker, 1980) in its full context, and this was a key aim of the present research about the issues and personal experiences of the strategic planning process in Singapore schools. Furthermore, given the intended research questions, case study research is an appropriate research strategy, whatever the researcher's epistemology, for answering research questions which ask 'how' or 'why', and which do not require the researcher to control the conditions and events of the research context (Robson, 1993). In addition, the compelling characteristic of case study is the drawing of boundary or demarcation lines around a specific school, organisation or individual – to be studied in depth within the fullness of its context and culture. In this study, two case schools were to be the focus of research.

According to Yin (1994), case study data collection has six different research methods that can be used to collect data: (1) documentation; (2) archival records; (3) interviews; (4) direct observation; (5) participant-observation; and (6) physical artefacts. Of these six, three - archival records, interviews, and non-participant observation - were utilised for this study. However, it is pertinent to note that of these three research methods applied, interviewing was the most critical method of data acquisition. Table 3-1 below shows the research methods used for the four research questions in this study:

Table 3-1 Data Collection Methods on Four Research Questions

Research Questions	Research Methods
Concept of Strategic Planning	Interview
Development and Formulation of Strategic Plan	Interview & Archival Records
Strategy Management and Implementation	Interview, Archival Records & Observation
Helping and Hindering Factors of Strategic Planning Process	Interview & Observation

In this study, a “semi-structured interview” strategy was adopted for all four research questions. Part of the complete study of the strategic planning process in the school, such as the school thrusts, targets and programmes, could potentially be retrieved through content analysis of existing documents. However, the other side of the analysis of the strategic planning process (i.e. leadership, communication, culture, values and staff perception towards the strategic plan) in the schools could only be obtained from in-depth interaction with the research participants. In order to capture relevant data over the planning period in schools, a strategy to employ methods matching the research purpose was devised. The strategy, including justifications of actions, is shown in the Table 3-2 below:

Table 3-2 The Process and Strategy of Employing Research Methods		
Period	**Research Method**	**Source of Data / Duration**
2006 Feb	Interviews	• Interviewed each principal for a duration of approximately two hours
Justification	1. Formulation and development of school Strategic Plan – decision process, target setting, systems, processes & procedures, resources, people, and culture 2. Implementation and deployment of school Strategic Plan – issues, difficulties, monitoring & evaluation, helping factors, and challenges	
2006 Feb	Observation	• Observed school's setting – office, canteen, concourse, notice board, school activities, over three separate occasions at different time in each school • Wrote reflective and field notes
Justification	To collect first impression observable data of school setting. For example, dress and appearance of staff and students, school canteen, displayed artefacts, and information on notice boards	
2006 Mar	Content Analysis of Archival Records and Interviews	• Collected information from the School Office / Principals and Vice Principal • Interviewed each principal for a duration of approximately forty minutes
Justification	1. To study the school Strategic Plan, Evaluation & Validation (EV) reports submitted to the School Appraisal Branch (SAB), school magazines & newsletters. 2. To verify archival records on school's strategic plan, the submitted SEM reports to the SAB, school and departmental minutes	
2006 July	Observation and Interviews	• Attended school and departmental meetings, observed student assembly • Wrote reflective and field notes • Interviewed two HODs and three LHs of School N / two HODs and two LHs of School W; interviews lasted approximately fifty minutes each
Justification	1. To observe the proceeding of staff meetings and departmental meetings - the extent the involvement, engagement and general mood of the people in the meetings	

	2. To understand HOD's involvement in the strategic planning process, and issues and problems in developing and implementing the strategic planning process	
2006 Sep	Interviews	• Interviewed two HODs, one ST and two teachers of School N / two HODs, two STs and two teachers of School W; interviews lasted approximately fifty minutes each
Justification	To gain first hand understanding from the HODs on school strategic planning process – concerns, difficulties and challenges. Also to seek feedback on data collected from the records and observation	
2006 Nov	Observation	• Attended School Annual Planning Retreat, school and departmental meetings • Engaged in casual conversations with key personnel during breaks and lunches • Wrote reflective and field notes
Justification	To observe the proceeding of the school planning retreat and the extent to which people participated in the sessions.	
2007 Jan	Interviews	• Interviewed two HODs, one ST, one LH & one Teacher of School N & W respectively; interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes each
Justification	To find out the responses of the Key Personnel (KPs) on the school strategic plan after the planning session	

3.3. RESEARCH DESIGN

There were *three* phases to the research design for this study:

(1) to decide which schools would be in the research sample,
(2) to select individuals to be interviewed from each school, and
(3) to collect information from each school through multiple research methods.

3.3.1 Selection of the Two Government Schools

As so often is the case when using case studies, the question of how well a particular case was chosen for the sample is "usually answered by assertion rather than evidence" (Bahr and Caplow, 1991:92). In other words, the particular cases chosen are justified as important or relevant to the research questions rather than as representative. Stake (2000) suggested that selection decisions are based on which case studies provide the most fruitful data for the research question or, the most opportunity to learn, rather than whether the cases are similar, related, and / or conflicting (Noblit and Hare, 1988). Lincoln and Guba (1985:233) argued that 'maximum variation sampling is most useful'. In fact, they advocated that qualitative researchers should consider taking extraordinary steps to locate negative cases or extreme variations (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Many researchers have contributed important and / or pivotal interpretations to the educational dialogue through non-representative cases (Goodman, 1992; Reitzug and Reeves, 1992; McLaren, 1989). Noblit and Hare (1988) encourage researchers not to exclude differences but rather to use these valuable findings through maximum variation sampling.

For this study, *information-oriented sampling* was used to select two government secondary schools. This is due to the fact that the typical or average case is often not the richest in information, especially when studying a major innovation. *Extreme* or *atypical* cases often reveal more information for they activate more basic mechanisms and more actors in the situation studied (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In addition, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur. Since

the purpose of this study is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information from a limited number of cases on the research problem, the strategy of choosing extreme or atypical cases was adopted. To this end, the study focused on two atypical cases – a school which had engaged strategic planning successfully, and another which had not. It is hoped that focusing on two cases that are at opposite ends of the spectrum of take-up regarding strategic planning would provide richest information on the central theme of this study.

The first school was an atypical case for its success in employing the strategic planning process and was noted by the Cluster Superintendents (CS) and the Senior Quality Assessors (SQAs) as one of the exemplars in employing the strategic planning process effectively. The school is also largely regarded by other schools as vanguard in the strategic planning process as it had achieved a Band Three[9] score in the SEM scoring system. In the SEM scoring system, scoring a "Band three" signifies that the school has put in place a sound and integrated approach in deploying the strategic planning process (The SEM – A Guide, page 85-87).

The second school, on the other hand, is at the other end of spectrum. It was observed by the CS and SQAs that this school was relatively tardy in engaging the strategic planning process. This is most likely due to the fact that the school is considered new with a history of less than six years. Moreover, the school scored an upper "Band 1" in the scoring system of the SEM. This means that the school had either no sound approach (i.e. the experience of strategic planning is not substantiated with fact or data) or the

[9] In the SEM Scoring System, the scores are divided in to five bands, ranging from Band 1 (0% to 10%), Band 2 (20% to 30%), Band 3 (40% to 60%), Band 4 (70% to 80%), to Band 5 (90% to 100%). Any school would be seen to have a sound and integrated approach and a well-deployed strategic planning process if the school scored a Band 3 and above. At the time of this research, no schools had achieved Band 4 and 5.

process of strategic planning is partially deployed and limitedly practiced at some levels in the school only.

The selection process relating to the two government schools is described as follows: Various associations, the researcher's personal networks and Singapore Statistics were used as means to identify schools suitable for the research. This included the CS of the School Divisions of MOE, SQAs of the School Appraisal Branch (SAB), School Information Service from the MOE website (http://moe.edu.sg), Singapore Statistics (2004) and Singapore Education Statistics Digest (2006).

After a search on the Singapore Education Statistics Digest, the CS and the SQAs were contacted for their opinion on appropriate schools for the research. After a few rounds of enquiring and discussions, a total of *five* government schools were initially recommended by the CS and the SQAs. Through the introduction by the CS, the researcher was able to contact the respective school principals and subsequently called them individually about the possibility of involvement in the study. The selection process on the final two government schools is explained as follows:

School N

School N was one of the two schools recommended by the CS and the SQAs upon the criteria of being tardy and having no sound approach to the strategic planning process. From the initial recommended list of the two schools, the principal of one of the schools was in the process of transferring to another school. The agreement was thus finally reached with the other school, School N, being the selected case for the study. At School N, the school principal is currently serving her first six-year term as principal. The

principal readily welcomed the study and, in fact, expressed desire for the school to be studied when she was approached by the researcher.

School W

School W was one of the three schools recommended by the CS and SQAs that fit the criteria of having a well-established and advanced strategic planning process. From the initial list of the three schools identified, one school turned down the request to be researched because the school principal was reportedly applying for People Developer Standard (PDS) during the research-period and would thus be too busy to engage in the research. Another school declined the request to participate in the research as the principal was due to be posted to a new position at MOE. After a series of exchanges via telephone calls and electronic mails to provide additional information about the research project and the credentials of the researcher, the principal of the third school, School W, agreed to participate in the research.

For both selected schools, a presentation was given to the school principal and vice-principal. This presentation included the intent of the study, the specific steps involved, specific individuals in the school who would be invited to participate, the amount of time required of each participant, the questions to be asked and the documents required. Also, a research proposal describing the importance of the study, the conceptual framework of the research, the research design and the research questions were made available to each case school.

The Profiles of Two Selected Government Schools

Given the size of Singapore, most schools are located in and around the housing estates. About 83% of the Singapore population live in flats provided by the Housing Development Board (HDB) (Singapore Statistics, 2004). This spreads over 23 HDB towns island-wide. The numbers of schools in each area are purposefully and proportionately built to meet the demand of students according to the size of population of the HDB towns. 70.5% of all secondary schools (i.e. 110 out of 156 secondary schools in total in year 2005) in Singapore (Singapore Education Statistics Digest, 2006) are categorized as government schools. This includes mainstream and autonomous schools with niche programmes. Table 3-3, shows the two selected government secondary schools in the respective HDB towns:

Table 3-3 Government Secondary Schools in Respective HDB Towns

Zone	Resident Population (Age 13 to 16)*	Number of HDB Flats	Number of Schools in respective HDB Town
School N Area	11,310	46,467	9
School W Area	10,406	51,300	10

Source: Singapore Statistics, Census of Population 2000
Singapore Statistics, Occupied Dwelling by Zone, Census of Population 2000

* Estimated resident population for age group 13 to 16 staying in respective HDB towns, Census of Population 2000.

Students are free to choose which secondary school to attend based on their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) score. A fraction of students with outstanding PSLE scores (250 points or above out of 300 points) would choose to go to independent schools which are mainly located in the central-south zone of Singapore (Singapore Education Statistics Digest, 2006).

Each year, the MOE publishes the admission criteria and niche 'Co-Curriculum Activities' (CCA) of each secondary school. Parents with PSLE graduates will receive a booklet containing such information, as well as the lowest and highest PSLE scores for the various streams offered by the schools based on the PSLE scores of the previous year applicants. Students may apply to any school of their choice based on their PSLE score. Many secondary schools therefore engage in efforts to improve their image so as to attract students whom they think will be able to contribute to the school. Most schools take the view that the quality of students might in turn shape the ultimate performance of the school at the GCE "O" level examinations.

According to the published PSLE score in the year 2006, the intake profiles of students for both School W and School N were quite similar. Table 3-4 displays the scores obtained by students accepted into the two selected schools in the year 2006:

Table 3-4 Students' Profile of Two Selected Secondary Schools					
	Stream	Lower Score (*)	Upper Score	Mean	Median
School W	Express (a)	188	236	189	196
	Normal Academic (b)	165	188	174	172
	Normal Technical (c)	125	153	138	138
School N	Express	191	224	202	201
	Normal Academic	152	186	162	162
	Normal Technical	121	151	140	142

Source: MOE, Singapore, School Information Service, 2006

* Score is based on the PSLE. It included four subjects: English, Mathematics, Sciences, and Mother Tongue (could be Chinese, Malay, or Tamil).

(a) Express: this is a four-year course leading to the GCE 'O' Level Examinations.
(b) Normal Academic: this is a four-year course leading to GCE 'N' Level Examinations. Students who do well at the 'N' levels will quality for an additional year to prepare for the GCE 'O' level examinations.
(c) Normal Technical: this is a four-year course leading to GCE 'N' Level Examinations. In this course, students learn English, Mother Tongue at a basic level, Mathematics and subjects with technical or practical emphases.

3.3.2 Selection of Participants for Interview

A purposeful sampling technique was used to select the participants for interviews in this research. Purposeful sampling techniques are "non-probability sampling in which units are selected because the investigator judges that the units are somehow representative of the population" (O'Sullivan and Rassel, 1989:436). In purposeful sampling, the population is chosen to provide information-rich cases for study and the quality of the sample depends on the researcher's ability to choose units that best meet the purpose of the study.

The *maximum variation sampling technique* (Patton, 1990) of the purposeful sampling was used in this study so as to elicit a wide variety of views and experiences of different categories of staff members in schools. The goal was to select individuals with direct experience and responsibility for strategic planning as well as to provide differing perspectives that could possibly represent varied key segments of the school. To this end, *eleven* individuals from each school were purposefully selected because of their direct experience and responsibility for driving key programmes of the school plan, and they were drawn from one of the following three categories:

(1) Management category: The Principal and the HOD, who are the main drivers for key school initiatives and programmes
(2) Key Personnel category: mainly the Senior Teachers (ST) and the Level Heads (LH) who hold key appointments for school programmes and key activities
(3) Teacher category: mainly the teaching staff who are involved in execution of programmes

Category	School N	School W
Principal	1	1
Head of Department	4	4
Level Head	3	2
Senior Teacher (*)	1	2
Teacher	2	2
Total	**11**	**11**

(*) School N has only one ST, whereas School W has two. These ST normally have at least 20 years of teaching experience.

All of them had some form of direct involvement in the planning process and had served, or were still serving, as members of the coordinating planning

committees. Their direct involvement was deemed essential as they were then able to provide informed responses to the questions about specific planning purposes, activities and genesis of the effort. While the principals and HODs were involved in the complete planning process, the teachers were only involved at the departmental and sectional level. The reason for including staff members from different categories with different statuses and responsibilities is due to the view that different people with different backgrounds and experiences might provide different perspectives and insights of their schools and departments in relation to strategic planning process.

The interviews started with the principals of the two government secondary schools. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours. Prior to all interviews with the staff members, the school principals sent an electronic mail message to each of the potential interviewees introducing the researcher and the research topic. The principals also cited the applicability of the research in the school context while verifying the school's agreement to participate in the research project. The electronic mail also included a description of each interviewee's expected level of involvement as well as expressed appreciation for each interviewee's assistance.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODS

The following section explains in detail the rationale and processes of various research methods employed in this study. These include interviews, content analysis of archival records as well as non-participant observations.

3.4.1 Data Collection Through Interviews

The research interview is a specific form of conversation that focuses on the dynamics of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee with critical attention to what is said (Kvale, 1996). Kvale states that the purpose of the qualitative research interview is "to obtain descriptions of the lived world [life world] of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (1996:30). In addition, Patton (1990:278) reckoned that "qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit".

The primary advantage of the interview is its flexibility which permits the investigator to pursue leads that appear fruitful, to encourage elaboration of points that a respondent has not made clear or has possibly avoided, and to clarify questions the respondent has misunderstood (Mouly, 1978). Miles and Huberman (1994:17) believe that "any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas". They view it to be a good idea to start with some general research questions in qualitative research. These questions, at least in broad terms, are important since they will provide research focus. Without them, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the volume of data.

The study relied on *semi-structured* interviews to collect data from the school management team and key personnel with regard to their perceptions of the strategic planning process. Semi-structured interviews (sometimes referred to as "focused interviews") involve a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas the study intends to cover. The open-ended nature of the questions defines the topic under investigation but provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. If the

interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or promptings to encourage the interviewee to further consider the question. One of the advantages of using the semi-structured interview is that it allows the interviewer the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on the original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. An example that the researcher had with an interviewee was as follows:

Interviewer:	"I'd like to hear your thoughts on whether the school strategic plan has changed the work of the teacher in the classroom. Has your work changed at all? "
Interviewee:	"Absolutely! The workload has increased for a start."
Interviewer:	"In what way has it increased?"

Another reason why the study adopted the semi-structured style of interviewing as compared to the unstructured style (sometimes referred to as "in-depth interviews") is that one principal who participated in the pilot interview advised that most teachers of the Eastern culture, including HODs, are generally not expressive in articulating their thoughts, views and feelings. [The pilot process of interview questions is shown in Appendix A]. They are generally more reserved and cautious in voicing their opinions. The semi-structured interview approach would then provide means to aid the interviewee in sharing information crucial to the research without compromising the extent of information shared.

Each interviewee was presented with a set of pre-determined questions focusing on the four main research questions of the study. Additional questions aimed at establishing the interviewee's position and responsibilities

in the school were also asked. Table 3-5 presents a list of the interview questions against each of the research questions:

Table 3-5 Semi-Structured Questions for Research Questions	
The Profiles	**Participant's position description and responsibilities**
	• The teaching experience, role and position in the school
Research Question 1	**What do school leaders and teachers understand by strategic planning within the SEM Framework?**
	• The SEM framework was introduced in 2001. What do you think are the benefits of the framework? • Did the school encounter any difficulties while implementing the framework? If so, what were they? • What role did you play in the school strategic planning process? • In your own words, can you define "strategic planning"?
Research Question 2	**What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives of how schools develop and formulate their strategic plans?**
	• What are the key elements of the school's strategic planning process? • On what basis are the strategies developed and decided upon?
Research Question 3	**What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how the strategic plan is implemented, managed and led?**
	• How are strategic plans implemented? • What are the median the school used to communicate the school plan? • Are strategic plans monitored and evaluated? If so, how?
Research Question 4	**What are the perceived helping and hindering factors to schools engaging in strategic planning?**
	• What have been the biggest challenges in developing strategies for the school? Why? • What are the critical issues the school must pay attention to when implementing the strategic plan? Why? • Given your experience to date, do you have anything else to add that might be helpful to strategic planning in this school?

The researcher understood that because of the conversation format used in a qualitative interview, the interview questions were not necessarily covered in a pre-ordained sequence. Instead, it was desirable to grant respondents full opportunity in discussing and explaining issues beyond the questions asked, as well as to probe each response made by a respondent to the greatest depth possible. It was also recognised that every question listed in the interview guide was not necessarily covered with every respondent. As such, the interview guides varied slightly for each interviewee. For example, questions posted to the teachers were slightly different from those posted to the subject HODs in that HODs were asked about issues largely related to the formulation of the strategic plan and issues on deployment of strategies, whereas teachers were asked about issues related to execution of the work plan or programmes.

According to Patton (1990), the *interview guide* approach allows flexibility to pursue responses in order to gain more in-depth information. Compared to an approach using a standardised set of questions, the interview guide approach allows the researcher to tailor the interview "on-the-fly" in order to obtain the most useful information. However, the disadvantage of using the interview guide approach is that some important topics may be omitted, and different sequencing and wording of questions can result in different responses. Hence this slightly reduced the ability of the researcher to compare responses. Still, the interview guide approach was chosen for the interviews because the respondents of the two selected schools were different. It was expected that different levels of knowledge, language and terminology would be used to express information unique to each school, especially in the area of working relationship and school culture.

The interviews were conducted in the school's meeting room and followed a general guide that directed the inquiry in concert with the research questions.

The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 70 minutes, with an average length of approximately 50 minutes per interview. Permission to record the interview with an audio-tape was obtained from all the interviewees prior to the commencement of the interview. Assurances of anonymity were also given (McCarter, 1996). A consent form was used at the start of every interview session and a sample is shown in Appendix B.

During each interview, great effort was made to gain the trust of each interviewee and to make him or her feel at ease. An offer was made that if at any time during the interview the interviewee should specifically request that information be held in absolute confidentiality beyond just the two individuals present in the room, such requests would be honoured and the tape recorder would be turned off. Only one interviewee from School N made such a request when he considered certain information to be sensitive. Informed consent was also verbally obtained from the respondents throughout the research process. This is very much aligned with Rowling's (1994) recommendation that informed consent need to be sought at regular intervals throughout a research process rather than only prior to its commencement.

Three types of probes were used in the interviews:

(1) *Detail-oriented probes* were used in a bid to form a more complete picture of the issue at hand. Simple questions such as "Who was with you?" and "What was it like being there?" were asked in order to elucidate more information from the interviewee.
(2) *Elaboration probes* were used to encourage the interviewee to explain or describe more about the issue at hand. This was achieved by asking the interviewee questions such as "Tell me more about that" and "Can you give me an example of what you are talking about?"

(3) *Clarification probes* were used when the researcher was unclear of the response given. For example, interviewees were asked to explain certain meaning of issues by probing questions such as “I’m having trouble understanding the problem you’ve described. Can you talk a little more about that?” or “I want to make sure I understand what you mean. Would you describe it for me again?”

At the close of each interview, a short debrief was conducted with each interviewee. The purpose was to solicit from the interviewee his or her reactions to the interview process and to gain information that might assist in the improvement or revision of subsequent interviews.

To ensure the quality of the interview data, the qualitative data were transcribed right after every interview. The transcripts were then sent via email to the interviewee for accuracy check. The transcript serves to assist in subsequent analyses and reflections as it allowed the researcher to be more aware of emerging themes. This proved to be useful in the subsequent interviews.

It took an average of five days to complete a process from interview to accuracy check for each participant. As such, the interval between each interview was spaced out accordingly. This special arrangement was made possible because the respective principals had kindly consented for a HOD to be the link person between the researcher and the interviewees where meeting dates and times could be mutually agreed upon. Interviews were mostly held from 1.30pm onwards, after the school working hours.

In addition, the researcher also made notes about his personal experience after each interview. These experiences included a description of how the

interview went (for example, was interviewee talkative, cooperative, nervous, well-dressed / scruffy, etc.); any other feelings about the interview (for example, did it open up new avenues of interest?); and the setting (for example, busy / quiet, etc.). This is very much aligned to Ives's (1995) suggestion that the practice of maintaining a diary or journal to keep information will assist the researcher in appreciating what occurred before, during, and after each interview.

3.4.2 Data Collection Through Content Analysis of Archival Records

Existing records often provide insights into settings and / or groups of people that might not be observable otherwise, and this information can be found in document form. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define a document as "any written or recorded material not prepared for the purposes of the evaluation or at the request of the inquirer". The types and quantity of archival records procured from each school varied. A list of potential information sources was established prior to actual data collection. Once on campus, collection of written materials went beyond the pre-determined list of materials to include any source of information that could add to the base of information. Table 3-6 shows a list of archival records provided by the schools:

Table 3-6 Archival Records Items			
School N		School W	
1	School strategic plans	1	School strategic plans
2	School EV reports	2	School EV reports
3	School magazines	3	School magazines
4	Newsletters	4	Newsletters
5	Records of past planning retreats	5	Records of past planning retreats
6	Minutes of meetings	6	Minutes of meetings
7	Newspaper cuttings	7	Newspaper cuttings
8	Report of "Inviting School Award"	8	Planning forms
9	Timelines for planning activities		

From these documents, the researcher looked specifically for evidence of tacit knowledge, impressionist views, intuitive understanding and stories that illuminate how and if the records of the strategic plan are perceived to have or contain evidential and informational value.

The Evaluation and Validation (EV) reports submitted to MOE and school Strategic Plans provided especially good documented evidences for analysis. For example, the EV report required the school to spell out the strengths and the areas for improvements (AFIs). It was from these documents that the researcher learnt about the type of measures and targets the school used to gauge its performance as well as the depth of the deployment of the school strategic plan.

Besides searching for facts, critical analysis of documents and pursuing collaborative evidence elsewhere when reviewing documents, the researcher also paid special attention to the 'what' and 'why' elements behind the

documents before drawing and comparing them with the sources derived from the interviews. In other words, like historians, the researcher was aware that documents cannot be relied upon merely to report facts. They may contain one-sided reports or even deliberate distortions intended to gain some kind of advantage for those who control their contents. As Carr (1961:5) notes:

> *…the most effective way to influence opinions is by the selection and arrangement of facts…The facts speak only when the (writer) calls upon them; it is he [sic] who decides which facts to give, in what order or context.*

As a whole, the archival records helped to corroborate the interviewees' responses and to supplement data gathering.

3.4.3 Data Collection Through Non-Participant Observation

There are variations in observational methods – from full participation to onlooker observation. There is also a continuum between overt and covert observation. For this study, the non-participant (or onlooker) and overt observational methods were adopted. Despite difficulties in applying overt observation for the reason that people may behave differently once they know they are being observed, observations are still powerful tools for research (Cohen et al., 2000).

According to Silverman (1993), the reliability of data collected through observation will increase if the researcher follows the procedural rules properly and gets sufficiently close to what it is like "on the inside". Furthermore, Brewer (2000) suggests that the fragments of recorded talk can reliably represent a social world as long as the researcher has been reflexive

and maintains his or her integrity. In other words, maintaining discernment and a clear mind throughout the observation period is critical.

On the other hand, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggested that a more selective approach on the research setting will normally result in data of better quality. The quality of observation data will further improve if the researcher has planned on what and when to make notes of what is being observed. In this study, the researcher used a list of what should be observed and recorded in order to fully contextualise the setting which was based on the work by Spradley (1980:78), but adapted for this research. This list is shown in Table 3-7:

Table 3-7 A List of Observation

Date :		**Time :**	
	Observation		**Observer's Comments**
Space	The physical place or places – the extent the intended strategic plan unfolded in the areas of learning environment; the extent the school built its climate, the display of artefacts, etc.		
Actor	The people involved – the experience and feeling towards the strategic planning and the implementation of the strategic plan in SEM framework; the extent the people on the ground responding to the formulation and development of strategic plan;		
Activity	A set of related acts people do – the extent the activities people engaged in which are or are not related to the strategic plan and goals; the engagement and dynamic of group discussion during planning sessions and departmental meetings;		
Feeling	The emotions felt and expressed – the extent the people felt towards strategic plan and programmes; the working relationships and interaction among staff;		

Source: Spradley, J. P. (1980), 'Participant Observation', New York: Rinehart and Winston.

The above list provided focus for observation and specifically granted the researcher the ability to take down notes when purposefully observing the

processes of annual strategic planning sessions of both selected schools. While sitting in on planning sessions, the researcher was not only able to pick out relevant proceedings about the process of strategic planning and critical issues that concerned the school most, but, most importantly, the researcher was also able to capture the mood and climate of discussion and engagement of people during the sessions. Table 3-8 provides an example of part of the edited field notes for an observation of the planning retreat of School N.

Table 3-8 Sample Field Notes

Date:	**20th Nov 2006**	**Time:**	**10.40am to 12.15am**
Observation		**Comments**	
The planning retreat was held in one of the seminar rooms of a golf club. The room ambience was peaceful and suitable for group discussion. There were 24 key personnel participating in the annual planning retreat and they were grouped into 4 discussion groups. Each group had a mix of HODs and Level Heads. The proceeding was mainly led by the principal and assisted by vice-principal. The vice-principal played the role in providing information as and when it was required, such as new initiatives from the MOE, external scanning results to the group, etc. The meeting was conducted in a very logical manner with fixed agenda listed on the wall in front of the seminar room. Each group was given certain time frame to brainstorm issues and came up with ideas after the principal had posted an issue. All ideas were written on the flip chats and pasted onto the wall behind each group. Group members took turn to present their ideas to all in the room. The principal and vice-principal joined in the group discussions and provided ideas. Decision making tools such as		*The KPs seemed to be cooperative and discussed issues that were posted by the principal and came up with new ideas and suggestions. There was however no concrete decisions as to what actions should be taken after the long discussion on the groups' ideas. The principal seemed to compete with time and eager to complete the agenda within the stipulated time.* *KPs were generally 'obedient' and there was no real challenge to the principal's decision on most of the ideas.* *Some KPs seemed to be 'lost' and very quiet during the group discussion.* *The discussion mood among KPs was however pleasant and relax.* *Some staff members appeared*	

'decision matrix' and 'prioritisation' were used throughout the meeting whenever decisions were needed……. Lunch was held at the restaurant of the club house with western food served. It was nicely laid out and naturally staff chose to sit with those whose were from the same department. Most staff shied away from sitting with the principal and the vice-principal. Virtually no one at the lunch table talked about the issues raised at the discussion. Almost all were happily talking about the holiday they planned to go after the retreat, or sharing tips about the holiday they had the year before.	*confused and were not too sure how to apply those tools. (Note: the researcher checked with a HOD on use of these tools during tea-break and was told it was a new tool that had just been introduced by the principal that day)* *The relationship among the departmental staff is strong.*

The researcher also used the process of observation to triangulate data collected through interviews upon which difficulties in validation were faced. For example, interviewees were asked how they behaved in setting strategic goals and targets for the school and department, yet there was no guarantee that they actually did what they say they did. Observing them in the planning retreat and departmental meetings provided a little more insight; it was eye opening to see how they actually behaved in the group meetings. In those moments of observation, the researcher was able to sense the mood of interaction among the members, as well as the level of commitment and attitude toward the planning. The extent of involvement of the members in the strategic planning process was also notably discernible.

3.5 DATA TRANSCRIPTION, ANALYSIS AND REPORT

Data analysis in qualitative research involves making sense of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place and integrating what different people have said (Patton, 1990:347). The procedure of analysis is based on the premise that the words transcribed from the interviews can be broken down into categories. This categorising involves "working with the data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others." (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992:153).

The data were analysed on two levels: the basic and higher level of analysis. The basic level of analysis is a descriptive account of the data: this is what was actually said with nothing read into it and nothing assumed about it. The higher level of analysis is interpretative: it is concerned with what was meant by the response and what was inferred or implied. Utilising the principles, the researcher began by reading and re-reading the transcripts several times, becoming familiar with them (Merriam, 1998). While reading the transcripts, the researcher underlined key words and phrases and created a preliminary list of categories. This developed into a recording system that involved searching through transcripts for regularities and patterns as well as topics the transcripts covered. From this process, certain words, phrases, patterns of behaviour and subjects' ways of thinking emerged. The researcher then recorded these preliminary categories which in turn provided a means for the researcher to sort descriptive data so that the material bearing a given topic could be physically separated from other data.

Direct quotes from respondents were used as “evidence” to support the findings. Key quotations were selected to illustrate the meaning of data because they are good examples of what people have said specifically about the category being described. The researcher purposefully selected those quotations to illustrate features such as the strength of opinion or belief, similarities between respondents, differences between respondents and the breadth of ideas.

As the researcher worked through the different categories, links between categories were made to demonstrate how the themes emerged and how conclusions about the findings were drawn. In fact, it was clear that many of the quotes revealed these themes as they were examples of the manifest level of analysis, i.e. what people actually said. A careful selection of quotations was used at the interpretative level of analysis which involved extracting the meaning of what was said; this process was to ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis. In every instance, individual names were changed in the narrative to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees. The source of the interviewee associated with each transcript was identified through a series of sequential numbering - such as NA, NB, NC, ND - in the order each interview was completed.

While engaging in this categorizing process, the researcher modified categories as necessary – adding new categories and / or deleting old categories. At this point, the researcher used the Excel spreadsheet [A sample of case study database is showed in Appendix C] to assist in the handling of data. The spreadsheet was created as a substitute for conventional methods such as scissors, typewriters, folders, and index cards. The spreadsheet allowed the researcher to mark links and segments in a preliminary fashion using the ‘Filter’ feature of the Excel programme. The

creation of the spreadsheet allowed the organisation of data collected as well as the documentation of the process of data collection.

The goal of the write-up is to portray a complex problem in a way that conveys a vicarious experience to the reader. The researcher paid particular attention to displaying sufficient evidence to gain the reader's confidence that all avenues had been explored, the boundaries of the case clearly communicated and conflicting propositions have been given special attention. During the write-up preparation process, the researcher critically examined the document, looking for areas in which the write-up could possibly be incomplete. Key features of the write-up include retelling of the processes of strategic planning employed by the case schools and specific factors related to the hindering or facilitation of the implementation of the strategic planning process experienced by the school staff. The researcher developed key issues related to the study using quotations or other details from the data collected, and pointed out the triangulation of data where applicable. The write-up also included confirming and conflicting findings from the literature review.

3.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY IN RESEARCH

Reliability and validity are conceptualised as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in the qualitative paradigm. Beyond the rigour built into the method of analysis, this research employed techniques that increase the trustworthiness of its assertions. The researcher was officially introduced by the school principal to the KPs, who were instructed to cooperate with the researcher whenever possible in the research process. Through this introduction, the researcher had the benefit that the role as inquirer had been

an understood and accepted position from the beginning of the interaction with these key personnel. As Lincoln and Guba (1985:302) clearly assert,

> *No one enters a site in a mindless fashion; there are always prior formulations, as attested to by the fact that it is always possible to write out ahead of time what one expects to find there.*

In order not to completely place undue confidence in the cooperative posture of the participants, the researcher adopted an investigative posture. It was recognised that people had a tendency to hide the truth behind a façade of the ideal. The adoption of interpretation-follows-expectation stand subsequently facilitated the validity of the collected data.

To further enhance the reliability of the research, triangulation was used extensively. *Triangulation* is a form of comparative analysis. It is defined as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell and Miller, 2000:126). Reliance upon multiple sources of evidence helped to establish the soundness of qualitative research findings. The technique of data triangulation holds that a robust assertion is established when more than one source of data coincides (Yin, 1994). The researcher looked for such convergence by asking the same questions of different sources of evidence, and compared and cross-checked the consistency of information which was derived at different times and by different means (Patton, 1990). This process checked for the consistency in what people said about the same thing over time and validated interview data with the archival records and observational notes. However it has been noted that the triangulation of data sources will not yield a totally consistent picture since different kinds of data capture different impressions. To account for these differences in data, the researcher gave reasonable explanations when analysing the data. An important contribution to trustworthiness is made

when there is a consistency in the overall pattern of data from different sources.

The researcher employed another technique called member check to ensure reliability and validity of qualitative research, hence the trustworthiness. What the triangulation process is to data, the member checking process is to constructions. The member checking procedure gives interviewees the opportunity to react to and further inform the researcher's assertions. To that end, the researcher sent interview transcripts to the interviewees via electronic e-mail to review and confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. This process gave interviewees the opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what were perceived to be inadequate interpretations. Member checking also allowed the interviewee opportunity to volunteer additional information and to summarise key points.

However, Patton (1990:315) warns that member checks can be misleading if members "share some common myth or front, or conspire to mislead or cover up". There is potential in this study for interviewees to feel allegiance to speak and act according to this paradigm. Naivety on the part of the investigators may cause him or her to be taken in by what interviewees want him or her to "discover". Under this situation, the member checks is an easy next step to affirm the validity of what has been "found". The authenticity of the research is enhanced when respondents operate under the realisation that the researcher seeks only the reality of their experience and is not seeking results that validate a bias. Unless one has reason to doubt the integrity of interviewees, the member check is a valid way to establish the meaningfulness of the interpretation.

3.7 RESEARCH ETHICS

Contracting with participants at the early stage is an area of concern to research ethics that has been raised by Miles and Huberman (1994). Hence, questions for agreement were presented at the first meeting with the school principal. These questions were:

- How much time and effort will be involved?
- What kind of data collection is involved?
- Will material from participants be treated confidentially?
- Will participants' anonymity be maintained?
- What benefits will accrue to participants / schools?

Both school principals consented that this research be carried out in their schools for the period from January 2006 to March 2007. An official letter of approval from the Research & Data Division of MOE was subsequently obtained. When conducting this investigation, there were three ethical issues in which the researcher paid particular attention to. These include an assessment of harm versus benefit, confidentiality, and informed consent.

When research procedures are highly structured and controlled, the researcher usually has the ability to provide a fairly accurate assessment on the risks of participating in his or her research project. Since it was reasoned that competent individuals would not consent to be harmed, informed consent was considered to be the best way to protect participants from harm (Pettifor, 1995). During the interview, the interviewees were often invited to share aspects of their experience which were relevant to the topic at hand. In the interviews, the researcher actively worked to elicit private information as the research may focus on highly emotionally charged issues that impact an individual's personal identity. At the minimum, the interviews were centred on

events that were consequential to the interviewees as they may find themselves revealing things that they later decide to be too sensitive to report.

To minimise possible harm to the reputation of the interviewees, the project practiced the protection of interviewees' rights, interest and sensitivities, as Knapik (2002) suggested. In most circumstances, interviewees were first told about the proceeding of the requirements of the research. For building better trust with interviewees, the researcher was truthful and it was made clear that no hidden recording devices were present during the interviews. In addition, the researcher adopted the suggestion by Kiegelmann (1996) to disclose the research agenda to the interviewees in order to build stronger trust. The researcher was aware of situations where the power imbalance might put the interviewees at a disadvantage.

To further enhance the trust between the researcher and the interviewee, a consent form was used before the start of the interview. Consent was also obtained from interviewees before proceeding to take field-notes during interviews. The researcher paid attention to minimise harms by presenting factual information in the report and eliminating all possible fabrications or distortions.

Privacy is seen as a fundamental value of a democratic society. It is perceived by many as essential for the protection and promotion of human dignity. Hence, the researcher treated all disclosed information in the context of a professional or research relationship as confidential. Close monitoring on who had access, and how personal information were controlled and disseminated were practised. In addition, the researcher adopted the suggestion by Josselson (1996) of not disclosing anything in the report that might lead to recognition. During the interview, the interviewees were

reminded to provide information relevant to the research project, especially when the interviewees sidetracked during the interview.

The principle of informed consent arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination. Being free is a condition of living in a democracy and when restrictions and limitations are placed on that freedom they must be justified and consented to, even in research proceedings (Cohen et al., 2000). Informed consent has been defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) as 'the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions'. This definition involves four elements:

(1) *Competence* – This implies that responsible and matured individuals will make correct decisions if they are given the relevant information
(2) *Voluntarism* – This entails applying the principle of informed consent and thus ensures that interviewees freely choose to take part (or not) in the research and guarantees that exposure to risks is undertaken knowingly and voluntarily
(3) *Full information* – This implies that consent is fully informed, though in practice it is often impossible for researchers to inform subjects on everything
(4) *Comprehension* – This refers to the fact that interviewees fully understand the nature of the research project, even when procedures are complicated and entail risks

The researcher ensured these four elements were observed throughout the interviewing. The researcher was aware that, in reality, there are practical problems when obtaining consent in fieldwork, i.e. the flow of interviewees through a setting might be too complex and fast-paced for a researcher to have chance of explaining himself to the interviewees, let alone get their permission. To overcome that, besides obtaining written consent, the

researcher also obtained verbal approval from the interviewees in the research process (Rowling, 1994).

3.8 RESEARCHER'S STANDPOINT

As a result of the researcher's background in management consulting experiences to businesses and schools, and also as a lecturer-practitioner in a Singapore polytechnic, the role and positioning of the researcher in this study has to be explicitly acknowledged. The researcher holds the view that good planning involves both analysis and thinking. Planning skills can indeed be taught and learned, and having such skills can make a difference for individuals and their organisations. The researcher not only believes that no single model of strategic planning that will work for every organisation, but also believes in a flexible approach, enabling the process to be modified at key decision-points as required to produce the most meaningful results. In facing the challenges of globalisation and knowledge-driven economy in the new century, the researcher advocates that it is even more critical for schools to develop a strategy that will help the principal and teachers to take control of the process of change. As a management consultant, my role is to assist clients to determine the shortest, most efficient and most economical approach to producing and implementing a strategic plan.

The researcher is aware that case study research is an interactive process that can be shaped by the personal history and constructions of both the participants and the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). In order to arrive at what the reported 'story' will be (Stake, 2003), the researcher paid particular attention to the rule of 'reflexivity', which helped him reflect on the

ways that his personal background, influences, and perspectives might impact the research process (Robson, 2002).

That the researcher is the only instrument for gathering data in this study, it is inevitable that the researcher's interests, experiences and expectations may affect what he attends to, and this may result in selective perceptions that may distort the data (Patton, 2002). For example, biases in coding (because expectations colour what is observed, and in turn what is recorded and interpreted), selective memory (in particular when there is a time delay between the interviews and the writing up of field notes), and interpersonal factors (it may be easier to interact with those who, for whatever reason, are more welcoming and easy to get on with) (Robson, 2002). In this study, the avoidance and reduction of personal bias was consciously observed so as to distribute attention widely and evenly, as well as through a heightened sensitivity to the problem of subjectivity and the need for justifying one's claims (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2005). Reflexivity, or critical self-awareness and self-reflection, was exercised throughout the research period.

To evaluate a researcher's skill and readiness to attempt a qualitative inquiry, a useful suggestion by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) is what they term as the theoretical *sensitivity*.

> *Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data….[1] refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't. (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:42)*

These authors believe that theoretical *sensitivity* comes from a number of sources. These sources include professional literature, professional experiences and personal experiences. To date, the researcher has more

than ten years of experience in strategic planning as a practitioner. The researcher has also been invited by more than 150 schools[10], as well as business organisations (both local and overseas) to conduct Strategic Planning and Management workshops. The experience and ability in the research topic aided the researcher in being sensitive in the data collection and ensured appropriate decisions in the field. Moreover, on the issue of personal disclosure to one's case study participants, Gall et al. (1996) suggest that brief comments by the researcher about one's background and experiences relevant to the case study may facilitate data collection and the reader's understandings of the findings.

All interviews were carefully recorded and transcribed verbatim. To carefully take account of possible researcher bias, as advocated by Peshkin (1988), the researcher systematically reflected on his subjectivity during the research process, so as to better determine how it might be shaping the inquiry and research outcomes. To this end, the researcher systematically wrote reflective records to keep an eye on, and be aware of, subjectivity in the research process as suggested by Peshkin (1988),

> *By this consciousness I can possibly escape the thwarting biases that subjectivity engenders, while attaining the singular perspective its special persuasions promise.*

This research process was accomplished by actively seeking disconfirming evidence as ideas began to emerge and categories were formed. Moreover, objectivity was protected by systematically including all data in the analysis and by consistently using and returning to the raw data, that is, the subjects' own words.

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[10] The researcher conducted a two-day workshop on Strategic Planning and Management for schools. However, the two government schools selected for this study did not attend the workshop conducted by the researcher.

In the year 2003, the researcher underwent an intensive three-day training programme, 'SEM Quality Assessor', conducted by the SAB. Subsequently, the researcher had an opportunity to validate one secondary school together with two experienced SQAs of the SAB. In the same year, the researcher was appointed as the 'team leader' of a joined government-agency-team, looking into the applications of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) into the public sector, including education institutions. With the three months experience in studying how the BSC works, the researcher has since provided numerous consultancy and training services to schools and business organisations. In year 2003, the researcher was invited to conduct a two-day BSC workshop for all the CS of School Division and SQAs of the SAB respectively. All these experiences helped the researcher better prepared before the actual data collection works were carried out in schools.

3.9 GENERALISABILITY OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The term *'generalisability'* refers to the degree to which the research findings are applicable to other populations or samples (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). It involves 'the usefulness of one set of findings in explaining other similar situations' (Grbich, 1999:66). Generalising is 'central to the definition and creation of valid public knowledge' (Metcalfe, 2005). One of the frequently cited limitations of the case study research is the difficulty in generalising the findings.

In Yin's (1994) view, generalising from case studies is not a matter of a *statistical generalisation* (generalising from a sample to a universe) but a matter of *analytic generalisation* (using single or multiple cases to illustrate,

represent, or generalise to a theory). Yin (1994:10) points out that issues of generalisation are relevant for other research strategies, as “case studies, like experiments, are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations”. Miles and Huberman (1994:28) expand the argument of Firestone (1993) that the most useful generalisations from qualitative data are analytic (theory connected), rather than generalising from a sample to a population. According to Stake (1995:8), “the real business of case study is particularisation, not generalisation”. Miles and Huberman (1994:29) further states “The choice of cases usually is made on conceptual grounds, not on representative grounds’. In other words, the usefulness of case study findings rests on whether they shed light on the phenomena of interest.

The purpose of this study is not to make generalisations from the case studies to a large population. The focus is more on specifying the conditions under which the observed phenomena exists so that readers can be informed of what actually takes place in schools. The study examined two selected government schools, with a focus on the strategic planning process - stakeholders’ perspectives and experiences of the strategic planning process, capturing similarities and differences between them. The provision of the “thick” descriptions of this study therefore allows readers to assess the potential transferability from the study and its context to their own setting (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The goal of qualitative research is to ensure that the findings are consistent with the data, and the results can then be applied to other situations. Moreover, it is characteristic of case study research that interpretation often goes beyond the mind of the researcher to that of the reader.

In the reporting of the results, the researcher avoided using case studies to address enumerative questions such as *“How often”, “How many”, or “How do most people respond”*. This is in line with Williams’ (1991) suggestion that

qualitative researchers must be careful not to use quantitative descriptions in their non-random samples or to include the use of percentages to describe the sample's behaviours as this lends a false impression of generalisability to the larger population.

3.10 LIMITATIONS & ASSUMPTIONS

There were several limitations when employing the case studies design in this study. A considerable proportion of the data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and this tended to be of a predominantly subjective nature. As a result, the extent to which such information is wholly accurate cannot be known. Although the researcher consciously made effort to apply research techniques such as *triangulation, member checking* etc, the subjectivity of the study can never be completely avoided. Besides, human beings are known not to have perfect memories and may not accurately portray the truth at all times. Even if interviewees could be relied upon to produce perfectly accurate data, the possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of the interviewer has still not been fully eliminated.

Furthermore, the researcher cannot help but affect both the nature and quantity of the information obtained from their interviewees. For example, even though interviewees were allowed a certain degree of freedom concerning the aspects of strategy deployment they wished to discuss and elaborate upon, the particular interests and biases of the researcher tend to, deliberately or otherwise, influence both the questions asked and the general direction of semi-structured interviews.

The issue of researcher bias, or seeing only what the researcher wants to see should be noted. Bogdan and Biklen (1992:33-34) address this issue of qualitative research well by asserting that the researcher's task is to objectively study the subjective states of the participants. They explain,

> *While the idea that researchers can transcend some of their own biases may be difficult to accept at the beginning, the methods researchers use aid this process. For one thing, qualitative studies are not impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few subjects. The researcher spends a considerable time in the empirical world laboriously collecting and reviewing piles of data. The data must bear the weight of any interpretation, so the researcher must constantly confront his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data.*

All researches are affected by bias. Biases cannot be eliminated, but there must be a conscious effort towards limiting them by acknowledging and dealing with them. The researcher minimised the effect of bias by taking reflective field notes and using participant member checking. The reflective field notes helped to monitor the researcher's subjectivity. In order to mitigate concerns relating to the reliability of the findings and conclusions, the research should ideally be repeated using both another sample of participants and a different researcher.

Due to time constraint, the researcher could only use observations over some key planning events such as school planning retreats, staff meetings and departmental meetings to cull out quality data. It is recognised that risks exist as the researcher may miss out on things which could be equally or more important but their importance may not be recognised or acknowledged at that time. The observation of the events can only be a partial portrayal of the way of life compiled from selective records. It is partial because it represents the researcher's view and the complete representation might thus be affected.

The researcher interviewed staff members recommended by the school principal. The time constraint allowed only *eight* key personnel plus *two* non-key personnel for interviews. Patton (1990:278) stated, “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit”. It was assumed in this study that these ten recommended interviewees of respective schools would enter into a relationship with the researcher for the purpose of sharing how they do their work, their opinions on strategic planning and what factors influence their thoughts and actions on the strategic planning process.

3.11 SUMMARY

The research design described in this chapter provides a sound methodology for preparing, collecting and analysing data and reporting the findings for the research study. The approach and research methods were clearly identified and examined, as were the necessary resources and limitations. Efforts were taken to achieve *triangulation* - to ensure that various data sources could be evaluated against each other - and also member checking - to ensure the credibility, reliable, accuracy, comprehension, clarity and soundness of the findings. The interview process ensured full and guaranteed confidentiality for the schools and the interviewees. The research design allowed for an adequate and appropriate level of flexibility in the methodology for the researcher.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 OVERVIEW AND ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis of the study. It starts with an extensive analysis of the meaning of strategy and strategic planning within the SEM from the school leaders' as well as teachers' point of view. All participants were asked to use their own words to define their understanding of strategic planning. Input was then compared with researched literature. It goes on to analyse the process of the strategic planning that these two case schools employed in developing their strategic plans. The findings are organised according to the heading of the four-phase approach to strategic planning which has been discussed in Chapter Two. The chapter then goes on to highlight the issues and problems of strategy implementation encountered by the two case schools, and also to analyse the similarities and differences in approaches each school had used in managing and implementing their strategic plans. The chapter concludes with an analysis and evaluation of the key factors that would influence the two case schools when engaging in the strategic planning process.

To present the analyses and findings as accurately as possible to the readers, quotations of respective interviewees of the two case schools are appropriately cited using a series of sequential numbering abbreviations. For

example, “HOD: N-B” represents a current appointment as a Head of Department (HOD) of School N; and “Teacher: W-J” represents a current appointment as a teacher of School W. The analyses and findings are organised according to the four research questions.

4.2 STRATEGIC PLANNING WITHIN THE SCHOOL EXCELLENCE MODEL (SEM) FRAMEWORK

The interviewees from both School W and School N acknowledged that the SEM was a huge challenge which had literally changed the way schools operated. However, they differed considerably in their perceptions in that the interviewees from School W appeared to remain largely positive and their comments reflected their attitudes, as indicated below,

> *It is an external model; the ideas and spirit of the SEM are good…the SEM helps us to focus our energy. (HOD: W-G)*
>
> *It is a benchmarking of best practices, so we know where we are heading and what the areas we need to improve on. The SEM is a good framework as compared to the old appraisal system. (Senior Teacher: W-E)*
>
> *SEM is a framework or a guideline, with parameters that link to the enablers. It is a holistic approach and allows you to see totality. (Senior Teacher: W-D)*

In contrast, the interviewees from School N seemed to be more critical and less favourable towards the SEM. Some of their sentiments are reflected below,

Every year we just add new initiatives to the existing Framework. More often than not, we have no time to apply them. Resources are limited, and time is a constraint. Personally, I think this exercise is useless. (HOD: N-F)

Some criteria can be rather rigid. Schools should have the freedom to make adjustments to suit needs. Very often, the "it may include" in the SEM guidebook eventually becomes standard prerequisite that all are expected to follow. (Senior Teacher: N-D)

Many staff just want to be told what to do next and quickly finish it. They see themselves as teachers and are reluctant to do the additional administrative work required by the strategic plan. (HOD: N-B)

These unenthusiastic attitudes might suggest a general lack of knowledge and understanding of the SEM. This became obvious when all the interviewees of School N, except the school principal, admitted that they had not attended any formal training on the SEM.

In contrast, the Principal of School W foresaw the importance of a good knowledge of the SEM from the beginning. When she took office in 2003, she engaged an external consultant to conduct a two-day workshop on the SEM for all key personnel. Also, she reshuffled the School Management Team (SMT) by bringing in some colleagues from her former school and recruiting new HODs. Furthermore, she collaborated with another school which had scored well in the Evaluation & Validation (EV) exercise and invited the principal to share practical concerns on the requirements and execution of the SEM. One HOD from School W confidently put it thus,

When the SEM was launched in the early days, many of us did not know how to respond to the requirements of the model. But the two-day workshop and the sharing of a school principal about her experience in an EV exercise really helped us. In fact, that had helped us to better prepare for the EV and to score well in the recent EV exercise. (HOD: W-B)

Looking at the EV reports submitted by both schools to the School Appraisal Branch (SAB), School W seemed to be more strategic and organised in its approach when compared to School N. The principal of School W employed the school's strategic thrusts as the ultimate outcomes and defined relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) as the strategic measures for the objectives, supported by key processes and systems. Above all, the expected outcomes were neatly linked to the capabilities and resources of the school. School W's principal stated,

> *We were commended for our effort in the EV assessment that we were able to show the connection between the expected outcomes and the capabilities of the school. (Principal: W-A)*

For School N, the approach and presentation were based directly on the requirements according to the nine criteria stipulated in the SEM, with little or no clear links between the outcomes and the enablers. Judging from the assessment criteria and requirements of the SEM, it could well be the reason why School N did not score well in their EV assessment. School N might not have fully utilised the benefits of the SEM.

The definitions of Strategic Planning given by the principals and teachers of both schools presented great disparities in their understandings. These definitions were, in turn, being translated into how each school organised its planning efforts, thereby resulting in varying degrees of attention to the planning components. In each case, the school principal appeared to play the key role in defining the meaning of strategy and strategic planning. Below are the findings of each school's understanding of the meaning of strategy and strategic planning.

4.2.1 Concept of Strategy

The Principal of School W was a commerce graduate from Nanyang University[11] where the medium of instruction was Chinese[12]. She became vice-principal of a secondary school in 1998 and was later appointed principal in year 2000. The current school is her second posting as principal. She was appointed in 2003. Her knowledge of strategic planning came mainly from a planning workshop by an external consultant, as well as from the monthly Zone Cluster meetings in which school principals were invited to share their good practices by the Cluster Superintendent (CS).

Coming from a former school with serious student disciplinary problems, she had gained experience in dealing with the similar problem in her current school. When asked to elaborate, she spelt out the seriousness of the issue,

> *The students smoked, used vulgar words, showed no respect to their teachers; some even threatened the teachers with pen knives; many teachers pretended to have noticed nothing…. I then went straight to the source of the trouble, picked out the chief trouble maker and caned him in front of his class. His parents came and begged me not to expel him from school…..To send a strong message of discipline, I involve all staff members in supervising the students' behaviour. I make no qualms about caning the trouble-making students in front of all staff and students….Initially, 17 staff (around 30%) wanted to transfer out of the school….. many parents were upset when their children were posted to our school and wanted their children transferred out. (Principal: W-A)*

In order to garner the support of all staff, many of whom suffered from extremely low morale, and for other plans to work, she reckoned that the

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[11] Nanyang University was a Chinese media University started in 1954. It was renamed as Nanyang Technology University (NTU) in 1990.

[12] Before the reform in the late 1970, four main streams of schooling, that was, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, were taught in schools. All schools started to teach English as the 1st language in the late 1970s.

disciplinary problems had to be promptly and effectively dealt with. She deliberately prioritised disciplinary problems in the school's strategic plan. Although she did not specifically define the strategy, her approach to students' disciplinary issues appeared to be a strategic one – where, if ineffectively handled, could pull down the standing of the school. She strongly believed that,

> *My immediate strategy was to solve students' discipline problem and staff morale issues. I needed to create an inclusive environment in school so that learning can take place once again. (Principal: W-A)*

Furthermore, School W's principal took a bold and radical step in revamping the existing academic curriculum to make it more appealing to the students. She viewed the existed curriculum as working against this group of students who often found classroom sessions dreadful and torturous. They could not sit still for long hours in the classroom and preferred a more interactive learning environment. With support from the HODs and teachers, the school came up with very interesting and stimulating lessons and programmes. One example was the introduction of "out-of-classroom' activities, in which students could travel on bicycles across the city for site visits, collect information through guided work sheets, and then present their findings to the whole class later. Simultaneously, teaching methods were revamped to enhance better learning. With such bold changes, the school was described by the MOE as an "Innovative School", an exemplar school that turned around an environment with great disciplinary problems. The school's efforts were further recognised when it received the "Value-Added" Award[13] from the MOE in 2006 and 2007 consecutively.

[13] Value-added Award is awarded by the MOE to schools which are able to improve student's performance.

The Principal of School N was assigned to her current post in December 2003. Prior to that, she was a vice-principal at another secondary school for three years; she was also formerly a member of the EV team[14]. Her brief experience in strategic planning came from her previous school as well as the sharing with other school principals during the monthly cluster zone meetings. She adhered closely to the requirements of the SEM when engaging the school in strategic planning.

Teachers from School N were told specifically by the Principal to deliver lessons based on the set curriculum and prepare the students for their "O" level examination by completing the syllabi within the given time frame. It was plain to the principal that,

> *…the students are to pass their 'O' level examination…this is expected of the school by the parents. (Principal: N-A)*

Based on the concept of *Strategy* defined as "*everything an organisation does to ensure its long-term survival"* shown in chapter 2 (page 33), both school principals seemed to interpret the meaning of strategy rather well, but from different perspectives. School W Principal believed in disciplining the students and customising the curriculum and programmes to make learning attractive to the lowly motivated and troublesome students, so as to ensure the 'long-term' survival for the school; whereas School N Principal emphasized good "O" level results to build the school's reputation and its standing in the long run.

[14] An EV team consists of a leader, usually the SQAs of the SAB, two external assessors from the industry, one CS and one senior staff member of school (include principal, vice-principal and Senior Teacher).

4.2.2 Definition of Strategic Planning

With reference to the *five* common elements of strategic planning depicted in chapter 2 (page 36), both school principals seemed to comprehend the meaning of strategic planning - to a limited extent. Below are their respective definitions,

> *Strategic planning is a process to succeed with whatever capabilities and resources the school has; a means to anticipating the future. (Principal: W-A)*
>
> *Strategic planning attempts to base its development on the school's strength relative to that of its competitors. It focuses on the direction of the school and actions necessary to improve its performance. Simply put, it means plan to win, and put in place to succeed; put the best forward and monitor movement. (Principal: N-A).*

School N principal used 'competitors' in her definition. She appeared by nature to be a competitive person and had wanted to make a difference through good "O" level results; whereas the School W Principal showed greater concern for the staff's readiness and capabilities in resolving the learning issues among the weaker students.

Although the selected interviewees from School W had been involved in the strategic planning process, some of them admitted apprehension at the actual working. They were nonetheless forthcoming when asked to define Strategic Planning in their own words. The deliberations were as follows,

> *It is a means or a process to set long term direction of schools with whatever resources so as to achieve the desired outcomes and results. (HOD: W-C)*
>
> *The school charts new directions after doing the external and internal scanning. (HOD: W-F)*

To achieve goals that relate to the survival of the organisation. It involves a time frame, and process of review of assessment and human resources. It is a very systematic process. (Senior Teacher: W-D)

It is a process to match the plans and actions to the environment and available resources, so that the set objectives can be achieved. (Level Head: W-I)

It is a school plan for the coming year. It is supposed to focus on areas that the school would want to do well in. The students are the main focus, so the school needs to plan based on the capability of students. (Teacher: W-J)

Although the definitions given by these staff members might not have matched perfectly the *five* common elements of strategic planning discussed in the literature chapter, they displayed a much deeper understanding of strategic planning as compared to the staff of School N. All the interviewees from School N appeared to have greater difficulty in coming up with their own definitions. Below are some thoughts given by these interviewees,

It can be defined as a means or a method to achieve the set goals. Techniques designed to be implemented so as to achieve certain desired outcomes of the school. (HOD: N-B)

School set directions by looking at internal and external issues, set both short and long term goals and strategies to achieve the goals. (HOD: N-G)

Based on objectives you want to achieve; must be workable, crucial for the result. (Senior Teacher: N-D)

School decides on plan and actions after the environment scanning and analysis. (Level Head: N-I)

It is a process to put all actions together. (Teacher: N-K)

The definitions above varied greatly and none had come close to the five elements outlined in chapter 2 (page 36). The knowledge owned by the staff of School N seemed to be comparatively weaker and more superficial.

In contrast to School N, the interviewees from School W unanimously acknowledged a big difference in the outcomes of the strategic planning after the current principal had been in office for three years. They praised their principal for handling the student discipline problem effectively and changing the learning environment to a more pleasant one. A senior staff member with 26 years' teaching experience in the same school observed the change and said this in the interview,

> *I have witnessed a great improvement in students' discipline ever since the current principal took office a few years ago. That helped a lot in my delivery of class lessons really. I have been in this school long enough to say that she really makes a difference. She is very strategic in her approach. (Senior Teacher: W-D)*

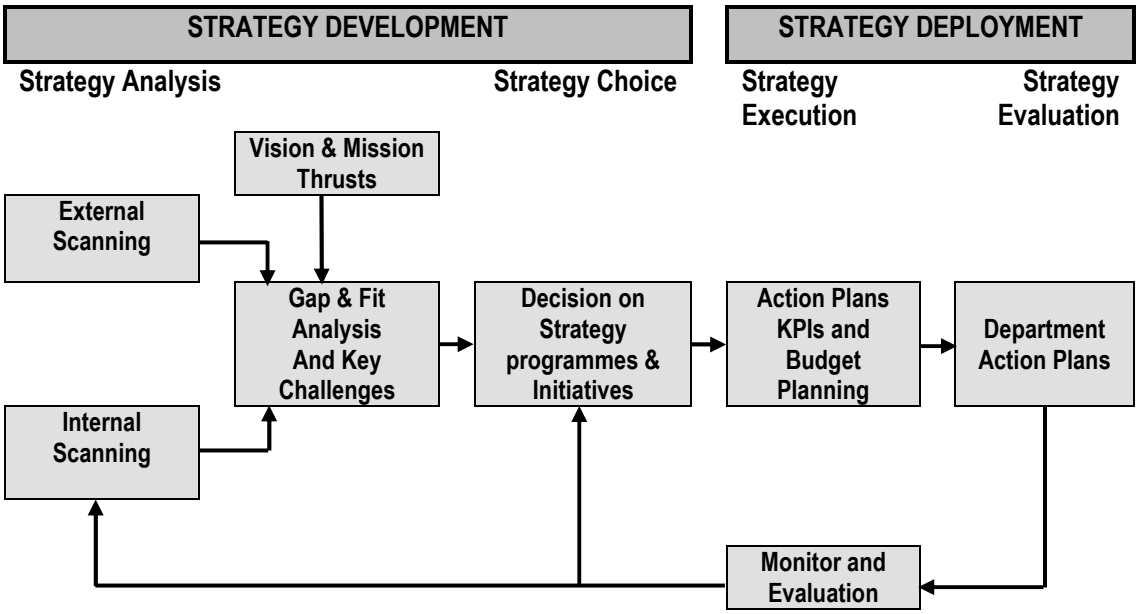
The two schools are thus diverse in their understanding of strategic planning and outcomes, due largely to varied exposures, experiences and leadership styles. School W displayed a closer understanding of the *five* common elements of the strategic planning (chapter 2, page 36). The lack of such understanding probably contributed to the tardiness in strategic planning in School N.

4.3 THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN

From the EV reports as well as the school strategic planning documents, both schools used consultation as part of the strategic planning process, as

suggested by the SAB[15]. The process was linear and sequential, tied closely to the planning components of the SEM, namely, the *strategy development* and the *strategy deployment*. Figure 4-1 shows the process.

Figure 4-1 The Strategic Planning Process



Source: School Planning Documents

The analysis covering the process of developing strategic plans falls into *four* main phases, namely pre-planning, strategy analysis, strategy choice, and strategy implementation. Both schools might have adopted similar strategic planning processes as suggested by the SAB, yet they seemed to differ somewhat in their approaches and methods in formulating their strategic plans.

[15] The SAB issued a pseudo case study school called 'Merlion' where a strategic planning process was depicted in the booklet.

4.3.1 Pre-Planning Phase

The School W Principal appeared to be resourceful enough to forge a formal partnership in strategic planning by engaging all the stakeholders (for example, representatives of the School Governance Board (SGB) and two members of the school Parents Support Group (PSG), teachers, and students' leaders) in an envisioning exercise. The exercise resulted in the forging of the school vision, mission and value statement after a couple of meetings. The proceedings were further streamlined to *four* strategic thrusts and *eleven* strategic objectives by the HODs and key personnel (KP) who later shared them with their respective departmental staff. This was followed with a two-day planning retreat in which all staff members brainstormed for new ideas and initiatives.

School W Principal affirmed the need to involve stakeholders by asserting that,

> *It is important that they own the plans and be responsible for the execution. Without their involvement and active participation, a plan is just a plan. (Principal: W-A)*

One HOD agreed that the brainstorming sessions at the annual planning retreat were helpful. He said,

> *It is very encouraging to see many staff keenly giving their ideas at the two-day planning retreat. In fact, quite a few key programmes implemented this year were the results of these brainstorming sessions. I can see the people are very committed to these programmes. (HOD: W-B)*

On the other hand, School N Principal wasted no time in formulating the strategic plan after she took office. Together with the SMT and some key personnel, she mapped out the school vision, mission, values and strategic

thrusts. She then roped in some potential teachers to be HOD-interns, and put them into various SEM criteria committees chaired by respective HODs. One HOD recalled the meetings and said,

> *We spent many hours in the conference room….discussing, analysing, debating….it was tiring but enriching. (HOD: N-B)*

Nevertheless, not all the staff of School N appeared receptive to the process. Some interviewees were cynical in their comments. One interviewee grieved over her lack of proper training in strategic planning and the SEM. She observed,

> *Many of us are not trained in strategic planning….with this SEM Framework, our teaching life actually becomes busier….I don't really understand why we have to comply with every requirement in the Framework. (HOD: N-E)*

After all these meetings, the Principal then met with the respective representatives of the PSG and the SGB, to explain to them the rationale of the crafted visions and share with them the simplified version of the school's strategic plan. She did not invite participation.

Western authors such as Bryson (2004), Conley (1992), and Cook (1995) saw the need to produce 'guiding documents' at the pre-planning process stage. However, both School W and School N did not have that. It was thought to be unnecessary because all the interviewees might have viewed engaging in strategic planning as a mandatory requirement under the SEM.

Both principals agreed that the school's vision statement is created for the purposes of instilling a common identity and a sense of destiny for staff, and for inspiring and motivating them. School N's vision stated - "*A school of students with good character, who will be people of value to their Community*

and to the Nation" was fairly focused and tapered. In contrast, School W bore the vision to - "*Weave Quality Teaching, Learning and Values; Dream the Best; and Lead to Inspire",* - which appeared to be comparatively broader, more balanced and inspiring.

Participants from both schools involved in the envisioning exercise in 2003 affirmed that the school vision should be somewhat lofty while presenting a clear and exciting picture of what the school sought to become. One HOD from School N said that,

> *The school vision is to influence major decisions regarding goals and allocation of resources. (HOD: N-B)*

The other interviewee from School W articulated that,

> *The shared vision should be result-oriented and focused on the long term gains. The vision statement also helped us to articulate the four school thrusts. (HOD: W-B)*

School W defined short term as one year and long term as three years (instead of the normally recommended five years). When asked for the reason, the school principal reiterated that the learning environment these days is ever changing and it is more desirable and practical to set a three-year plan.

> *We set targets for 1st and 3rd year. 3 years is a good time frame for the school. No point setting the timeline longer than 3 years. I believe that plans must be practical. Also, there are so many changes these days in education. Just like what China's leader Deng Xiao Ping once said: "An incremental change in each year; a big change in the third year". (Principal: W-A)*

School N followed the practice of the conventional strategic planning time-frame and adhered to *one* year as short-term and *five* years as long-term.

4.3.2 Strategy Analysis Phase

The cascading of information in School W was done by the principal to the SMT on a regular basis, detailing especially the relevant potential external factors that could possibly affect the school. The principal had long been aware that sharing relevant information to her staff was essential for the execution of plans for she said,

> *Staff must know the situation of the school and the challenges she faces. I will share whatever information I know with my staff…. Twice a month to the SMT and once a month to all the staff….MOE has done a lot of external scanning for schools; all we need is to align [ourselves] to the MOE's initiatives. (Principal: W-A)*

Every October, the MOE organises the Annual Work Plan for all the school leaders and introduces new initiatives. The school leaders, in turn, facilitate dialogue with the staff to deploy the suggested initiatives in their respective schools for the following year. The School W Principal said,

> *Schools are required to work out in detail how to operate the initiatives suggested by the MOE. Normally these initiatives mean good for schools. We will discuss which parts of the initiatives are useful for our school and adapt accordingly. (W-A)*

One HOD felt the sharing of the information was very useful,

> *During the management and staff meetings, our principal always begins with the latest news from the MOE, or from the Cluster meetings, or anything to do with students and curriculum. Personally I find her sharing very informative and helpful in my position as HOD….I feel there is meaning and purpose in my work (HOD: W-C).*

Before the School Annual Planning Retreat, School W would carry out a detailed exercise on internal and external environmental scanning led by the

vice-principal. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats faced by the school were then collated and shared at the retreat.

At this retreat, the researcher observed that most of the conversations pivoted around *challenges, opportunities and decisions*; in short, C.O.D. At least two HODs felt the C.O.D approach was a useful and effective tool. One of them said,

> *This C.O.D approach introduced by the principal helps us to challenge issues at a higher level, so that we do not mince around at the operational level. (HOD: W-C)*

Apparently, the school principal picked the C.O.D approach up at one of the zone sharing sessions organised by the CS. The questions posted at the retreat were also rather strategic, with staff engaging in questions such as - "*What capabilities do we need to build a better school? What can we do to be better than now? What other options are there open to the school?"*

While the School W Principal made efforts to include all staff members, even the administrative staff, to attend the Annual Planning Retreat, the principal of School N invited only the HODs and some key personnel. Prior to the annual retreat, School N carried out an internal scanning exercise which gave rise to "Areas for Improvement" (AFI). When it came to the Annual Planning Retreat, the Vice-Principal shared very briefly the external environmental scanning and analysis (for just five minutes) with no further delivery on how the school could capitalise on its strength to maximise opportunities or reduce threats. The researcher noticed that the school paid much attention to the discussion of AFIs which were largely operational. The break-out groups spent considerable times discussing AFIs, such as the recording of bookings for the science laboratories, the hiring of coaches for school sports, and the taking of attendance for staff undergoing training and

development. All these might have little or no direct link to the school strategic thrusts and objectives. The sentiment echoed by a HOD below spoke volumes,

> *I think the whole process is rather fragmented. The discussions tend to tackle a number of things here and there; they lack strategy. Also we tend to do too many things, with a fair bit of repetition. It is effort wasted. (HOD: N-D)*

It was observed that the teachers of School N appeared to be cooperative, compliant and obliging. They discussed issues posted by the principal and suggested new ideas and proposals, with no decisive actions to reach the goals. Interestingly, the principal also seemed pressured by time to complete the agenda. There were also no clear decision-making criteria used to decide which action to take. One Level Head put it gently,

> *I actually wanted to say something at the discussion, but I felt that since my supervisor and other HODs were all silent on the issue, there was no point questioning it. (Level Head: N-E)*

4.3.3 Strategy Choice Phase

The two schools differ in the criteria used for strategic decision making. School N found a '*consensus*' approach suitable for decision-making on strategy choice. School W adopted a similar approach plus a few evaluation criteria, namely: *(1) impact of the project on school thrusts; (2) ease of implementation; (3) cost of the project*. The interviewees found the decision-making criteria useful as it allowed them to prioritise and select what strategies to adopt.

For School N, the plan was comprehensive and wide ranging, entailing many activities and programmes. It tended to provide an answer to almost every requirement put forth by the SEM. As a result, the strategic plan of School N might lack both focus and substance. One HOD of School N commented that,

> *Just look at the strategic plan the school produced… it is so voluminous that I don't think many understand the plan. To be honest, I have no clues what is going on in other departments; I have mine to worry about…..I don't have time to think about others. (HOD: N-D)*

4.3.4 Strategy Execution Phase

The format of the Action Plan of School N was borrowed from the Merlion School[16] case study material. A sample of the template is shown as follows:

Sample					
Strategic Thrust: Character Development (Student Leadership and Preventive Education Programmes)					
L.T. Goal	**To Achieve the Character Development Award**				
Objectives	**1. Teaching values and social emotional skills 2. Incorporating Habits of Mind 3. Providing opportunities for pupils to demonstrate behaviour consistent with the school values**				
S.T. Goal	**KPI**	**S.T. Target (1 yr)**	**Strategies**	**Owner**	**Review Dates**
To Equip Pupils with Skills and Knowledge to Lead and Serve	No. of student leaders in the school	1. 80councillors 2. 20 Peer Leaders 3. 54 Class Committee Leaders	1. To adopt a structured approach to identify and nurture the leadership potential of student leaders 2. Clear selection criteria 3. Clearly defined scope of responsibilities 4. Identify specific and generic training	Head (CD)	June

Source: School Strategic Plan Documents

[16] Merlion School case study material was joint-written by the consultant of the European Federation of Quality Management (EFQM) and SQAs of the SAB.

However, the items used in the template appeared to be lacking in clear links between the short term goal and the objectives. The short term goal appeared to be unclear as to what skills and knowledge pupils needed to lead and serve in order to achieve the set objectives.

School W adopted a similar template, but added two more bearings, namely, long-term goal, review period and method. A portion of the template on its school action plan is shown as follows:

Sample					
Strategic Thrust 2: An Enrich Total Pupil Development Programme					
Objective 1	**To Promote Active Participation of Pupils in Co-Curricular Activities**				
Long-Term 3rd Year Goal	**Short-Term 1st Year Goal**	**Strategies**	**Process Owners**	**Time Frame**	**Review Period and Method**
100% participation rate of pupils in CCAs	95% participation rate of pupils in CCAs	1. Provide a wide range of CCAs to cater to the different interests of the pupils 2. Match students ability and interest to the right CCA	HOD (CCA) HOD (CCA)	Termly Termly	Attendance records Semestral CCA update

Source: School Strategic Plan Document

The modified table of School W seemed a lot easier for teachers to digest. Besides, School W had an average of *three* new initiatives for each objective compared to *six* by School N.

4.3.5 Strategy Evaluation Phase

The evaluation of programmes and projects in School W is mainly carried out at the SMT meeting at the end of each term[17]. Each key staff member reported progress on their own programmes and projects, to keep all SMT members informed. One HOD felt the reporting was useful,

> *The review has helped me to see how the school is progressing. (HOD: W-B)*

School N did the same termly review at the SMT meeting and then had the outcomes reported at the staff meetings. When asked about the usefulness of such reporting sessions, the responses from some of the interviewees were lukewarm. One teacher commented that,

> *There were so many reports. The sessions were long and tedious; more like a showcase of some personal glory. I think these sessions should be made short and brief. (Teacher: N-H)*

The detailed evaluation of the whole year's plans was done by both schools using the Self-Evaluation Form required by the SEM.

4.4 MANAGING AND IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

A major challenge faced by the school teachers was the rigorous and robust execution of the strategies and programmes. School life - with its routines and 'busyness' - tended to cripple their strategic thinking and actions. In

[17] There are four terms in a school year, that is, from early January to early March; mid March to end May; end June to end August; and mid September to mid November.

particular, the HODs seemed to constantly experience the lack of resources, relevant strategic information and the commitment from some departmental staff to implement plans.

The problems of strategy implementation were further amplified by having a very short time for planning, which took place between the end of the year-end examinations and before the teachers went on vacation. The effort appeared to be further interjected with many new initiatives and activities regularly suggested by the MOE and the school, resulting in the staff's inability to keep up with all of the multiple programmes and hence, frustration was a common outcome. One participant of School N who had just begun to see the rationale and values of the SEM soon lost zeal after being swamped with unexpected additional activities. He observed,

> *I am feeling very stressed. To me, I thought these management tools were supposed to help me to do a better job, but in reality, many of us are swamped with activities after activities. (Senior Teacher: N-D)*

A considerable number of interviewees from both schools attributed the problem of strategy implementation to communication, where information often was insufficient or misinterpreted.

4.4.1 Resources Deployment

Both Principals acknowledged that availability of funds had a direct impact on the execution of school plans and programmes. The Singapore government finances all recurrent expenditure in government schools. In addition, it subsidises all capital costs such as construction of new buildings, extensions and major repairs of buildings and major purchases of furniture and equipment for new facilities. Any additional items required by schools have to

be self-financed through fund-raising efforts. Government schools have *five* main funds: School Operating Fund, Edusave[18] Grant, Pupils Fund, School Advisory Funds, and Project Grants (including staff welfare grant). Although the government has relaxed its guidelines on fund utilisation in schools, school accounts are subject to annual government audits.

Interviews with both Principals confirmed that they did indeed enjoy considerable financial discretion, especially with the introduction of the Edusave scheme. Table 4-1 shows the allocation of various funds for both schools. It is not necessary here to delve in great detail into key aspects of financial decision-making of each school, such as the submission of spending proposals, the process of deciding priorities, the composition of the decision-making body and the monitoring and review process. However, Table 4.1 compares their allocation of expenditure across various categories.

Table 4-1 Relative Allocation of School Funds

	Staff Training and Development	Student Development (Enrichment Programmes)	Buying of Administrative and Support Services	Resources and Equipment	Special Projects
School N	30%	30%	20%	20%	0%
School W	20%	50%	10%	10%	10%

Source: Data obtained from school principals.

For School W, 10 percent of the total annual budget was set aside for new initiatives that arose during the year, especially those unforeseen needs occurring during the financial year, such as new equipment and fittings for learning. The Principal was well aware that the annual budget was

[18] In 1993, government started the Education Endowment Scheme called Edusave. This fund may be used for two main purposes: (1) To pay for school-organised enrichment programmes such as extra-curricular activities, sports and games lessons, and educational tours; (2) To pay the second-tier miscellaneous fees in government schools.

insufficient to fund all programmes and activities in schools. Thus, she was selective and adhered closely to initiatives that fell within the school thrusts and objectives. One HOD of School W agreed with the Principal that,

> *It is only sensible to pick those initiatives derived from the MOE Work Plan that are aligned to our school thrusts and objectives. With our limited resources, we can't possibly adopt everything. (HOD: W-B)*

School N Principal acknowledged that many initiatives had to be shelved due to the limited funding from the MOE.

4.4.2 Organisational Structure

For every strategic objective or approach, School W put in place not more than two essential KPIs for the short-term target and one for the long-term target. The Principal attributed the limiting of the number of KPIs to competent management. School N Principal seemed to view the setting of KPIs differently. She preferred all relevant KPIs to be indicated in the planning documents. As a result, the school had an average of five KPIs for each short-term target. One teacher put it diffidently,

> *I think we have far too many KPIs….imagine we have to collect data for every KPI….I have brought up this concern to the HOD, but was told that all KPIs are important. (Teacher: N-J)*

Learning from other schools' best practices, School W Principal appeared to be more practical in setting desirable targets. She spent time discussing with the HODs responsible for various strategic objectives, and drafted the achievable targets with them. The HODs then discussed the targets with their departmental staff. Furthermore, the Principal remained open to proposed changes by the department which were reasonable. This style of

management pleased both the HODs and teachers. One participant commented that the process was workable,

> *It is largely based on consensus i.e. finding a reasonable target that is agreeable by all. In this way, all of us own the outcomes. I could sense that teachers are committed to these targets because they are the ones setting them. (Senior Teacher: W-D)*

School W Principal intentionally engineered the target setting at the departmental level to allow increased staff involvement in the planning process. The researcher observed one of the departmental meetings and found the discussion to be focused and purposeful.

It was clearly indicated in the strategic planning documents presented by School W that each adopted programme and initiative was carefully assigned to a driver or owner with a clear timeline to complete the task. The owner worked out details with a committee. All plans were then presented at the SMT meeting and endorsed by the school principal. The drivers would be responsible for the execution of the projects and would report the progress and outcomes periodically at the SMT meetings. The Principal explained the need for appointing a driver for each new initiative thus,

> *To implement strategies properly, we assign process and project owners. They are responsible for the executing, monitoring and checking. They are the champions for the process and programmes. (The Principal: W-A)*

A concern was however aired by a participant regarding the competency of some appointed owners. She observed that,

> *All of us, especially the key appointment holders, are very busy. I can see that not all the owners have sufficient time to think through some of the projects. (HOD: W-F)*

In School N, owners were assigned once the projects and programmes had been decided. Different from School W, the owners presented the detailed plan first to the principal and the vice-principal at a separate meeting and then informed the SMT members subsequently.

4.4.3 Team Work

Knowing that a healthy culture can be a contributing factor to the school's overall performance, School W Principal emphasised *team work* by promoting better trust among teachers through a strong sense of *esprit de corp*. She explained,

> *I believe every staff is valuable. Teachers will give their best if they know they are trusted for delivering good work. In fact, it is the teachers who are motivated to do more for the school and the students that bring us where we are today. The success owed largely to the teamwork of the dedicated staff. Together, we build the culture of innovative teaching and creative learning… (Principal: W-A)*

In School N, team work is forged differently. The principal used a combination of orders and persuasion to foster change. By and large, most of the decisions and actions were decided by the principal and the vice principal. The rationale for the adopted initiatives was then explained to the teaching staff at the staff meetings. As such, no further staff participation was encouraged. The principal summed up her rationale for fostering change this way,

> *I introduced discipline and rules as I strongly believe that discipline can bring the best out of a person, and rules do make things run better. But, I am not a task-master. I am prepared to listen if there are good enough reasons to break the rules. I dislike people wasting time. (Principal: N-A)*

To facilitate the smooth operation of the key activities in school, she also requested regular spelling out of the terms of reference and documentation of the operation procedures. The principal reiterated the importance of observing the operation procedures,

> *I truly believe in getting the work done efficiently and effectively…. The documentation of procedures will also help in meeting the SEM requirements….(Principal: N-A)*

4.4.4 People and Systems

The School W principal appeared to recognise the unbreakable link between motivated staff and strategy implementation. She said that,

> *If teaching staff are not motivated and groomed properly, they will not give their best to the school. (Principal: W-A)*

Aware that quite a high percentage of the existing teaching staff had less than three years of teaching experience, she created a once-every-two-months non-threatening "Learning Time". The aim was to encourage teachers to present and share their new and innovative teaching approaches. In addition, she emphasised a culture of mentoring. One way of inculcating this was to video-record lessons conducted by all new staff. This was then viewed by all departmental staff who would then give feedback for improvement. The entire process was then completed with class observation done by either the principal or a HOD. One interviewee who went through the whole experience of receiving feedback said that,

> *It was a very scary but enriching experience. I had just graduated from the NIE (National Institute of Education) and was so 'green' at my job. But the feedback I received was quite encouraging. That way, I could further improve my teaching skills. (Level Head: W-H)*

To further motivate staff to give their best, *two* deserving staff would be selected each year to attend a one-week overseas attachment with the Department of Education, University of Queensland in Australia. A HOD who was chosen for such a programme two years ago affirmed that such recognition had benefited him a lot,

> *I was happy to be attached to an overseas institution, and get exposed to a different learning environment….I experimented on some of the new learning approaches after my return, the outcomes were very encouraging. (HOD: W-B)*

The principal of School W appeared to use this overseas trip as a reward to motivate staff to contribute positively to the school. She said that,

> *When teachers got to fly to Australia as a reward, they are further motivated and the culture of the school improved. … (Principal: W-A)*

In School N, staff members were assessed and rewarded based on their contributions which might or might not tie in with the school strategic plan. One teacher felt that the annual rewards seemed always to go to the SMT members first, or to people who are "favoured" by the HOD. She lamented,

> *No matter how hard you work, one needs to have a good record with your HOD….or else his or her work will never be noticed. (Teacher: N-K)*

One interviewee from School N confessed that review of staff performance had not been fully built into the school system. She said that,

> *We did not review regularly mainly because of time constraints….teachers tend to play multiple roles, wear too many hats. The school is probably too action based. Honestly, to sit back and review just does not come naturally in our profession. (Teacher: N-F)*

By and large, both schools faced personnel shortages, especially in terms of support and administrative staff. This resulted in the data collection and computation being undertaken mostly by the teachers. One HOD appeared to be upset when asked how data was being collected. She responded quite energetically,

> *We face the problem of insufficient resources to carry out the process of strategy implementation properly. We simply do not have extra manpower to do the data collection. More often than not, we have to do that ourselves. (HOD: N-F)*

Even with a large amount of information, it might not necessarily guarantee good understanding among staff. That was one of the major concerns among interviewees of School N.

The HODs' role in communicating strategies cannot be over-emphasized. They were responsible for the continuation of the flow of strategic information and for ensuring the understanding of the strategy. Regrettably, HODs of both schools felt handicapped as they might lack the knowledge and skills in managing the communication process. Many of them were conscious of the importance of a favourable school culture being conducive for successful implementation of plans; it took more than individual effort. Interestingly, the informal communication between the HODs and teachers appeared to be recognised as of no less importance than the formal channels of communication.

4.5 HELPING AND HINDERING FACTORS TO STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The factors below are said to be able to either help or hinder the strategy planning process.

4.5.1 Leadership

All the interviewees of School W seemed to attribute the success of strategic planning to their principal whom they spoke fondly of. The critical factor for staff commitment towards the school strategic plans may be due to her genuine love for the students. There was no lack of praise from the staff regarding her leadership,

> *School leadership is vital and the principal plays a big role in turning our school around. She is very supportive in forging rapport with staff. We can walk into her office anytime and share our thoughts; we have no fear in approaching her as she would listen attentively. (Senior Teacher: W-E)*
>
> *This principal allows 'failure' and staff are encouraged to move out of the comfort zone. (HOD: W-B)*
>
> *I see that leadership plays a vital role here; our principal sets the tone, and we join force to build a healthy culture. (HOD: W-G)*

Accurately, the principal's own words echoed her passion for the welfare and positive attitude of the students and the staff,

> *I convinced the students by actions that I care for them; I believe that they can fly high and want them to start believing in themselves; achieving results for themselves and for the school…..I also encouraged my staff to see ideas beyond problems… As leader, I constantly walk my talk and lead by example. (Principal: W-A)*

One senior teacher, who had been with School W for the last 24 years and had worked under a number of principals, spoke of the significance of the leadership of school principals,

> *The leaders must believe in themselves, show sincerity and walk the talk. Usually, people do not give themselves to plans but the one behind those plans. If the plans are not for self glory, I think teachers will abide by them. Having worked under different principals; I find the current one very different. She is friendly yet firm; fair and convincing. She is one of the best principals I have ever worked with in my entire teaching career. (Senior Teacher: W-D)*

All interviewees from School W agreed that their principal could be the driving force that pulled all staff together to commit to the school strategic plan. They regarded her as people-centric with genuine concern for the students as well as the staff. On the other hand, School N principal seemed to have less empathy with her staff who regarded her as someone who emphasised 'efficiency' and was fast and prompt in her decision-making. One senior teacher put it light-heartedly,

> *Many things were put in order since the principal took office three years ago. She has made a number of changes in school. Personally I appreciate her effort in making sure things work properly, but I feel she can relax a little sometimes, just so that the situation is less tense. (Senior Teacher: N-D)*

4.5.2 Supporting School Culture

The principals from both schools were serious about building healthy school cultures derived from their school's core values. Indeed, at the point when they took office, both principals discussed the devising of core values with

their key personnel. These values were subsequently explained to all the staff. The core values of both schools are shown in Table 4-2 below:

Table 4-2 School Core Values

Values emphasised by School W (Acronym: WISDOM)	Values emphasised by School N (Acronym: GIFTED)
Working with Others	**G**racious
Integrity	**I**ntegrity
Per**S**everance	**F**ortitude
Dedication	**T**eamwork
L**o**yalty	**E**mpathetic
Mindset of Excellence	**D**isciplined

Source: School's Strategic Plan

Each school's core values appeared to be different. The staff from both schools also reacted differently to them. Two of the ten interviewees from School N had doubts about the espoused values and values in-practice. They questioned the meaning of 'Teamwork' and 'Disciplined' and even cited that school leaders displayed rather sluggish attitudes and minimum effort to get by. One of them put it empathically,

> *They are nice values to have, but I have yet to see them happen in reality. (Teacher: N-J)*

Besides, an atmosphere seemed to form when asked about the proceeding of staff meeting. All of the teachers agreed that staff meetings were used for dissemination of information. Staff discussed concerns among themselves informally, rather than at the meetings. One Level HOD expressed this very cautiously when asked to describe a staff meeting,

Most of us prefer not to speak up at the staff meeting, even though we disagree with issues raised by the principal. (Level Head: N-H)

Things appeared different in School W. Of ten interviewees, two had joined the school less than 2 years ago. However, they seemed to identify well with the school values, which according to them, were constantly put into practice. They both acknowledged that the working climate might be one of the reasons that helped them to ease in smoothly, as the existing teachers, HODs and the Principal were helpful and professional. One of them observed,

I am very glad to be posted to this school. I was pretty aware of the school discipline issue before I joined; but when my friend told me how the principal handled the discipline problems, I said this is the school I would want to join. It is like joining a big family; I have a very supportive HOD. The friendliness of colleagues allows me to adjust to the workplace quickly. Teachers here are so willing to share their experiences and even handouts. I really appreciate the high level of trust given by the school leaders to a new teacher like me. (Teacher: W-K)

The culture of School W seemed to bear positive experiences, such as being supportive, collaborative and having trust among the staff members. Two HODs spoke about the school culture fondly,

The warmth and level of cooperation among the teachers compels me to want to work harder and give my best to the school. I am very glad to be a member of this big family. (HOD: W-B)

It is inevitable that a certain percentage of the staff choose to stay on the sidelines… The relationship among staff is extremely important; a lot of things work well because staff are connected to each other. I find many colleagues to be very understanding and supportive. (HOD: W-F)

In School N, conversely, meeting targets and increasing effectiveness had always been the top agenda of the SMT. Overemphasis on the “O” level performance of students might have compelled the school to incubate an

"action-packed culture", so much so that the staff might have felt uneasy loosening up to even chat or hang around. Few, if any, volunteered or contributed, other than dutifully fulfilling the basic duties such as following syllabi closely, monitoring students' learning progress, setting and marking students' assignments, and counselling weak students. This tense culture might have unfortunately given rise to increased institutional and individual conflicts. On top of that, the participants felt that the drive to achieve targets might have inevitably resulted in a trade-off with the sustained effectiveness in the quality of their teaching. One of them summed up the general feeling, thus,

> *In the early days of my teaching career, I was able to spend time preparing lessons during those free periods. I could find time to chit-chat with colleagues and students. Today, I hardly have time to sit down with my colleagues or joke with my students. When we have time to sit down, it is always for some form of serious discussion. (HOD: N-E)*

The younger profile of the teachers in School N was another major concern, with around 50% of them having less than three years of teaching experience. This percentage was particularly crucial mainly because the history of School N is relatively short[19]. Most of these young teachers were posted to the school when they graduated from the National Institute of Education.

The short history of School N might also have accounted for the fragmented culture which was further weighed down by many sub-cultures. In the current SMT, some HODs and Level Heads had been appointed by the previous principal, while the others were appointed as HODs when the current principal took office. There were obvious sub-cultures between these two groups of the key personnel thus resulting in a fragile working relationship

[19] School N was one of the nine new schools that the Ministry had built since 1999 to cope with the increased in demand of students (Education Statistics Digest, 2006).

and partnership. One interviewee, who specifically requested not to be voice-recorded, said that even HODs were talking behind each other's backs. She stated,

> *It is hard to build a team when no body trusts any body else… I see leadership as a very vital factor to the success of the school plan …..It is not so good talking bad behind each other. (HOD: N-F)*

The School N principal seemed to understand that these sub-cultures did not add up to a healthy school culture. She saw the introduction of what was called a 'Staff Learning Hour' as a good way to fortify good communication. Once a week, all the staff members would gather at the "Learning Lab" to be informed of the forthcoming school projects and events. Unfortunately, the structured and somewhat rigid working system might not have helped much in forging smooth relationships. When asked why the school had to push so hard to get things done, one HOD reiterated,

> *We were a little slack in the past and that has to change. Meeting deadlines and setting higher expectations become necessary. (HOD: N-B)*

One HOD observed that since the current principal took office three years ago, the latter regularly stressed the importance of observing protocols, meeting deadlines and abiding by school rules. Two other interviewees echoed the same sentiment,

> *The words we hear constantly are 'meeting deadlines', 'proper channel' and 'do your best'. (Teacher: N-J)*

> *The administrative work these days is voluminous. Deadlines imposed on us have added more stress to the already very packed curriculum work load. (Level Head: N-H)*

All the interviewees of School N seemed to acknowledge the importance of a healthy school culture in supporting the implementation of the strategic plan and all the school programmes although they admitted not to having it in their school. One HOD affirmed that,

> *A healthy and supportive climate has to be in place for the implementing of a good strategic plan. It goes a long way to nurture the young and inexperienced teachers, so that they can learn the ropes within a shorter timeframe. (HOD: N-E)*

4.5.3 Alignment and Commitment

The documentation on planning of School N did not show a strong alignment of actions to their strategic thrusts. One interviewee sceptically said,

> *The documents are supposed to help us execute plans properly…..but some initiatives do not really align to the objectives….(LH: N-I)*

The situation was further aggravated by the fact that many teachers might not have bothered outside their subject areas. One interviewee lamented that,

> *Some teachers just followed orders and instructions. They do not question why they have to do the tasks; they are more concerned with how to carry out the tasks. I don't blame them because we are very pressed for time. (Senior Teacher: N-D)*

On the other hand, staff of School W seemed better aligned to their school plans and exhibited genuine care and concern for students' learning. Some of their typical comments are,

Teachers involved must have passion… it really depends on how much they believe in the plan, the results differ greatly. If the goal is hazy and back breaking, the job will finally fizzle out when no one is looking. When conviction is in place, even without a whip, it will go by itself. (HOD: W-G)

I have taught NT (Normal Stream) classes all my teaching life. This group of students need special guidance and encouragement as most of them are commonly neglected by their parents since young. As educators, we just have to view them as unique, believe in them, make friends with them, build their self-esteem and hopefully win their trust. We guide them with small achievable tasks. Once they taste success in completing these tasks, their morale will rise… I am happy to see many of them respond to our new curriculum and begin to pick up new life skills. (HOD: W-B)

Effort and energy spent on students' learning were not without distraction, especially the externally-driven strategies from the MOE. One interviewee from School N questioned the way the school adopted the MOE initiatives totally and said that,

Regular checks on the target alignment with the school direction are important. I think schools spend too much time trying to align to the constantly changing goals set by the MOE simultaneously. I am not too sure whether it is the right thing to do. (HOD: N-F)

4.5.4 Communication

Both schools appeared to stress the importance of communication when engaging in the strategic planning process. For them, the key communication channels were the verbal information and the progress reports delivered at the staff meetings, while dissemination of major events and programs were usually done through emails. At the departmental level, subject meetings were the most frequent vehicle for communicating departmental plans. Often, it was information-overload that might have caused the staff to choose to be

ignorant or selective and sieve out certain information. This might have resulted in wrong assumptions or misinterpretations. This is especially risky when incorrect understanding of the definitions of KPIs leads teachers to collect or interpret data wrongly.

School W faced the challenge of how best to decide “what” information and “why” such information was relevant to the staff. One of her HODs put it plainly,

> *It is important to communicate clearly to the relevant staff and help them see the big picture. Once we get the teachers' understanding of the plan, it is easy to execute it. This is because most teachers have the mindset of teaching and not administrative work. (HOD: W-B)*

School N might have had its fair share of concern over the communication of its strategic plan. In actual fact, two teachers interviewed sought effective dialogues with their principal on school and departmental plans. According to them, many projects and tasks handed down by the HODs had little bearing on the bigger plan. To make things worse, they could not refuse these jobs because their performances would be assessed at the annual appraisal by their respective HODs. One of them stated,

> *The top management needs to be more sympathetic towards the staff’s workload. We are living hand to mouth, with little energy to do things that are irrelevant … .not that we are not committed to school plans, we are barely coping. (Level Head: N-I)*

4.5.5 Participation

The Principal of School N tried to involve other key event drivers apart from the HODs in the planning process. However, the observations of the researcher suggest that the participation was not so forthcoming among

these members. For example, at the small group discussion during the school planning retreat, these drivers appeared to behave more passively by merely observing and hardly participating in the discussions. One interviewee confirmed this observation,

> *The Principal tried to introduce new management tools and techniques at the planning retreat, but I was lost as to how to use them. Not only me, there were others who were not familiar with the issues discussed….but no one in the group bothered to ask. We were kind of hoping that other groups would provide the answers eventually. (HOD: N-F)*

Poor time management appeared to be cited as an issue by the interviewees repeatedly. They felt that more could have been done to help the students learn better rather than spending a large amount of time on data collection for meeting the KPIs. A number of the interviewees of School N raised this concern,

> *There is too much information and too little time to digest it; we should be more focused on our teaching. (HOD: N-B)*
>
> *Teachers are spending lots of time in data collection. Why aren't we spending more time with pupils and in teaching? (HOD: N-F)*
>
> *I think setting lesser goals will make the teachers very happy and may be more committed. Right now, many of us just touch and go. But then again, if there are fewer targets, people may think they must be less important. (Teacher: N-J)*

It seemed apparent that the HODs and teachers of School N were consumed by functional operations, budgets and processes and spent too little time to consider the impact of the strategic changes on the school. Time management might have been the biggest challenge. Under pressure to perform, they went against their desire to displace teaching time for time to

plan or collect data for the KPIs. Many interviewees expressed concern over the multiple roles played by teachers today,

> *Teachers are wearing many hats these days. We are expected to deliver lessons, to type and print lesson notes, to mark attendance, discipline students and to write and submit reports, the list goes on….(HOD: N-G)*

4.5.6 Mindset and School Practices

The teaching staff of School N seemed to be relatively resistant towards change. Most of them recognised the need to plan strategically, but preferred only to take the plan in incremental bits. They justified that teaching students was their top priority. One young teacher was adamant when she said,

> *I joined the teaching profession because I enjoy teaching….I pay little attention to school planning simply because I am seriously 'hand-to-mouth' in completing my basic chores …. Teachers these days have many different expectations placed on them, from the subject head, HOD, principal, parents, as well as MOE. (Teacher: N-K)*

The introduction of the SEM was set in motion for schools to engage in exercises for self improvement and self assessment. School N chose a conservative approach by following closely all criteria of the SEM framework. In contrast, the Principal of School W adopted a radical step by bulldozing her way to eventually revamp the whole curriculum to better serve reluctant learners. However, it was her hard work and persuasion to finally revolutionise the mind set of her teachers. She said passionately,

> *I talked to every HOD and the subject team, and challenged them to think out-of-the-box when teaching these problematic kids. They (staff) always think the best way to solve the problem is to have good students. But, I believe staff must first change themselves before the school starts to get good students. I am fortunate to have a good team of staff who is committed to make a difference in the lives of these children. (Principal: W-A)*

Clearly, it would seem to require a visionary leader to set the pace and lead by example to change the deeply rooted mindsets among teaching staff who have been working under the shadow of the centralised authorities of the Singapore system.

4.6 SUMMARY

From the analyses, the two case schools show similarities and differences in their understanding and managing of, and engaging with, strategic planning. The differences may mark School W as distinctly superior to School N. The Principal and the staff of School W appeared to exhibit much better knowledge of the strategic planning process and a greater commitment to implementing the SEM. Moreover, there are many instances pointing to the enthusiasm and motivation among the staff in School W, while engaging in strategic planning. The school also formulated a more integrative strategic plan. In turn, their commitment and passion for the students might be the reasons that compel and impel the successful execution of the strategic plan. One key to their success may be largely due to the passionate leadership spearheaded by the Principal, who is very clear about communication, participation, alignment and building a healthy culture in the school.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

5.1 OVERVIEW AND ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter discusses the salient findings of this study and engages previous research and literature. The discussion addresses each of the *four* research questions, taking into consideration the education system and the cultural context of Singapore. To allow greater clarity, the key research questions are revisited below:

(1) What do school leaders and teachers understand by strategic planning within the SEM framework?
(2) What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how schools develop and formulate their strategic plans?
(3) What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how the strategic plan is implemented, managed and led?
(4) What are the perceived helping and hindering factors to schools engaging in strategic planning?

Adopting the definitions provided by the school principals, the chapter will first discuss how the understanding of strategy and strategic planning for education might play a significant role in the conception and formulation of the school's strategy. The discussion will also focus on the applicability of the

SEM in formulating strategic plans in the two case schools. Secondly, insights will be provided into the key elements that Singaporean schools use in formulating their strategic plans. Although the key elements of strategic planning appear quite similar for the two case schools, there were differences in deploying the techniques and tools in their development and implementation of strategic plans. The discussion will further expound on how Singaporean schools establish their strategic planning processes. Thirdly, the chapter will explicate the problems faced by Singaporean schools when executing their strategic plans, and reveal the practical and workable approaches the schools used to effectively manage their strategy implementations. Fourthly, the discussion will specifically highlight key factors that might hinder or help the strategic planning process, taking into consideration the context of Singapore where Asian values are extolled.

5.2 STRATEGIC PLANNING WITHIN THE SCHOOL EXCELLENCE MODEL (SEM) FRAMEWORK

The first research question on school leaders' and teachers' understanding of strategic planning within the SEM framework sets out to establish their general understanding of strategy and strategic planning formed within the SEM via the selected respondents from the two government secondary schools. This is a particularly important because their understanding will provide insight into how the school strategy was conceived and developed. Based on the five common elements of strategic planning that are described in chapter 2, plausible explanations of the meaning of strategic planning are drawn with reference to the two schools. The findings in this study appear to reveal that a clear understanding of strategic planning does have positive and significant impact on the development and execution of the school's

strategic plan. Confucius said "工欲善其事,必先利其器", meaning that to do a good job, an artisan needs to sharpen the tools; it also means "one cannot make bricks without straw". The study indicates how school leaders' knowledge and skills for strategic planning can make a difference to a successful and sustainable performance as demonstrated by School W. The key personnel of School W underwent formal training in both strategic planning and the SEM. They were also knowledgeable about the 'best practices' shared by another school principal on how they could most benefit from the implementation of the SEM. These sessions helped the school leaders and the respondents to view the SEM and strategic planning in a very positive manner. With these as the foundation, the respondents of School W did indeed, to a great extent, demonstrate the capabilities of developing and implementing the strategic plan far better than School N. There appeared to be a competency gap among the members of School N's Management Team (SMT) in formulating and implementing strategies; they seemed to lack apparent skills to execute strategies. These findings support research studies in both the USA and the UK that one of the most significant effects on strategic planning is a clear understanding of the meaning of strategy and strategic planning (Mintzberg, 1994; Bryson, 2004; Rowley and Sherman, 2001). Both theorists and practitioners have affirmed that: *a clear understanding of a strategy would lead to effective management of the strategy.*

From a strategic perspective, selecting the right things to do at the right time is the key strategic decision of an organisation, no matter how small the steps may be. In a school, the principal is the vital person to make that right choice of strategic action. School W's Principal wasted no time in dealing with the critical issue – student discipline – when she first resumed office in year 2003. Not only did she tackle one of the root problems accounting for students' poor learning and resultant poor academic performance, she also

helped improve the morale of the teaching staff by removing this thorny issue that had plagued in the school for years. Her decisive actions towards the issue also won her praise from the interviewees, especially for her commitment, genuine love and care for the welfare of both the students and the staff. Her simple yet effective strategic action seems to fall under what Morgan (1997:271) calls “double high leverage initiatives”. In other words, small changes and interventions can have an impact out of all proportion to their scale. Morgan went on to say that, in complex, non-linear systems, even seemingly minor changes can produce large-scale, significant effects. The small changes may be so pivotal that, in themselves, they lead to a major effect, or, when combined with other factors, transform into a significant force.

This point is well echoed by Waterman (1987), who argues that the strategic state of mind is far more important than the strategic plan. The strategic state of the mind of a leader, such as that possessed by a good school principal, can make a great difference to the outcomes of strategic plans (Masifern and Vila, 2002). Ohmae (1982:4) concurs that “successful business strategies result not from rigorous analysis but from a particular state of mind of a leader”. School W’s principal was Chinese-educated (a commerce graduate of the then Nanyang University) whereas School N’s principal was English educated (a science graduate from the National University of Singapore). Their different educational training and backgrounds together with personality differences may have led to a stark contrast in their way of thinking and leadership style. Difference in leadership style seems to account for the different approaches to their respective planning for their schools. School N’s principal stresses efficiency and expects staff to follow rules and procedures, whereas School W’s principal accentuates the people dimension by building the camaraderie of the staff to work together.

It has been observed by Stott and Low (2000) that Singaporean school leadership has become characterised more by 'masculine' traits of assertiveness and competitiveness rather than by the 'feminine' attributes of care and compassion. Going by the definition of strategic planning given by school principals, as well as their approaches and attitudes towards the staff, students and learning, School N's principal appears to display more 'masculine' traits of assertiveness and competitiveness and places great emphasis on 'efficiency'. By contrast, School W's principal appears to be more 'feminine' in her style because she exercises more care and compassion towards disadvantaged students and general staff welfare. In School W, the interviewees wholeheartedly supported their principal and displayed their cohesiveness, working as a team in executing the strategic plan. While cautious about generalising from two cases, the findings seem to suggest a management style incorporating strong 'feminine' traits is important for Singaporean schools in executing the approach to strategy. It may suggest that even in Singapore where staff are accustomed to strong directive leadership, they still treasure the 'feeling of being valued' and 'being recognised for their contributions', in particular how school leaders genuinely and sincerely value them. This shows the need to emphasise sustainable relationships and the people dimensions in the Singaporean school context.

The findings also reveal that the focus of the SEM on standandised "best practice" may not necessarily translate to strategic success. Although using the criteria of planning may help School N to arrive at some plans and objectives, the so-called "school strategic plan" may merely be a regurgitation of the components of the SEM. In other words, School N followed closely the planning process according to the criteria of the SEM. However, this resulted in characterless strategies for the school and reflected a lack of comprehensive knowledge in strategic planning within the SEM. School N appeared to be clearly focused not on the substance but rather the form of

the SEM. This is exactly in line with the argument put forward by Mintzberg (1994:360) that strategies may be implemented successfully but may then prove to be inadequate due to a lack of relevant knowledge. Rowley and Sherman (2001) refer to this kind of strategic planning as a short-term and/or problem-solving planning. In fact, the SEM may be a good diagnostic system for identifying areas for improvement (AFI), but by itself is not prescriptive (Ng, 2003). Without the appropriate remedial action, the search for AFI is just an academic exercise and the SEM self-assessment process may lose momentum. More importantly, the role of the SEM should be firmly located in the strategic planning, programme implementation and performance monitoring of the school. It is therefore critically important to integrate self-assessment with action planning and implementation, followed by effective review. Without this tight cycle, momentum may be lost and the translation of self-assessment outputs into continuous improvement is not likely to be effective.

Furthermore, going through the 'self-assessment' exercise according to the criteria of the Framework might not allow School N's leaders to focus on the essence of the school and its uniqueness. This study also seems to affirm the finding of McAdam and O'Neill (1999:191) that the European Quality Award model from which the SEM is adapted "is an audit tool of what is already happening; it does not indicate best or preferred practice in an organisational context." In fact, best practice competition creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If every school is doing the same thing, then advantages or distinctiveness of each individual school cannot be sustained. Ng (2007) argues that benchmarking, if not appropriately done, may be meaningless and can be an impediment to real breakthroughs. One ends up trying to imitate another and importing 'best practices' that may not be appropriate to a different context. The study appears to confirm Seddon's (1999) argument when he questions the usefulness of the Business Excellence Model (BEM)

and sees it as an unreliable method for starting change. In other words, the SEM per se may not provide school leaders valid guidelines to determine where to invest as a strategic priority, or where improvement will make the biggest impact in school performance and results. In fact, the study finds that in order to score well on the SEM, both case schools were bogged down by data collection and report writing. The enthusiasm and vigour demonstrated in the generation of the report appeared to be absent in the follow-up action because people were already exhausted producing the report, which effectively took the momentum away from improvement and innovation.

According to Murphy and Beck (1995), the adoption of the BEM is supposed to promote ownership as well as increase professionalism and organisational health, which in turn lead to improved organisation performance. The use of the BEM to improve performance is in itself useful, but may not necessarily be relevant to the school's strategic goals and priorities. This 'ripple effect' may be true in the case of School N. While the criteria and requirements of the SEM spell out all 'areas for consideration', the findings might not identify a strategy to meet all requirements leading to improved performance in the case of School N. As Ng (2003) puts it, in order that school excellence is meaningful, school leaders should concentrate on school excellence as the desired outcome and leave the SEM score as a product of the journey. The present study reveals, however, that school leaders may still interpret the SEM as one element for control and scrutiny, especially as they feel the SEM score may affect their careers.

The same could be said of awards and league tables. The intention of giving awards is to encourage schools to continue their excellence practices, not to signify an end to the journey. However, several incidents were reported in the newspapers of schools dropping certain sports from their co-curricula activity list in order to focus on their niche areas, namely, areas of strength where

they were more likely to reap results and win awards (Ho and Almenoer, 2004). Others have written to the newspapers, wondering whether some schools were more interested in competing for the award that came with the achievement of physical fitness and low levels of obesity among their students, rather than the actual physical fitness of their students. A typical newspaper report is given below:

> *Now, the school's performances in the Co-Curricular Activities (CCA), as well as their physical fitness statistics, are also made public. As are their achievements in other areas such as National Education and best practices for teachers and pupils. The intention, it is understood, is to develop all-rounded students. But in introducing these peripheral awards, has the pressure shifted from the obsession over grades to the obsession with winning all the other awards as well? Are we moving away from a pressure-cooker system into another more complex one? (Bharwani, 2006)*

Tan (2005:106) writes:

> *It is arguable that the use of the SEM may result in some schools using more of the same covert strategies that they have been using thus far, this time in a wider spectrum of school processes and activities in order to boost their schools' performance in as many of the aspects that are being assessed as possible. For example, principals may narrow the range of available co-curricular activities in order to focus the schools' resources on those activities that are considered more fruitful in terms of winning awards in inter-school competitions.*

Therefore, the SEM may be turned into yet another form of 'ranking' of schools, the original meaning and purpose having been lost in the rat race! Some form of competition and benchmarking is healthy, but too much of that will make the SEM a vain exercise in amassing evidence of excellence, hampering a real drive for diversity and innovation.

5.3 PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN

This section addresses the second research question, *"What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how schools develop and formulate their strategic plans?"* The findings show that the key elements adopted by the two case schools were based on using the same planning model suggested by the School Appraisal Branch (SAB) that was depicted in the pseudo case study 'Merlion' school. These elements are in line with the four phase approach and are components according to the requirements of the SEM discussed in chapter 2. The findings, however, reveal that there appeared to be distinct differences or nuances in managing and handling the strategic planning process in these two case schools.

For discussion purpose, the four phase approach adopted by both case schools is summarised in Figure 5-1 below:

Figure 5-1 Four Phase Approach to Strategic Planning

Strategy Development			Strategy Deployment		
Pre-Planning	Strategy Analysis & Choice		Strategy Execution		Strategy Evaluation
❖ Formulation of vision / mission / values	❖ SWOT analysis ❖ Gap analysis ❖ Strategic options and decisions		❖ Objectives ❖ Action Plans ❖ Accountability ❖ KPI & Targets ❖ Time-line		❖ Review ❖ Rectify "Areas for Improvements"

The basic concept of the four phase approach to strategic planning is simple – at times deceptively so. The study agrees with the analogy of Sybouts

(1992), where he candidly likened strategic planning to wine making. Wine makers would acknowledge that the steps involved in the process are few and uncomplicated, but the techniques and crafts, even artistry, are complex. Likewise, the management of every key element of each phase in strategic planning may require delicate skills.

The discussion now switches to the 'whys' and 'hows' of the process of developing a strategic plan in the two Singaporean government schools. The analyses seem to affirm the importance of rallying stakeholders' involvement in crafting the vision / mission / values (VMV) for schools. At the pre-planning phase, the two case schools demonstrated two contrasting processes of formulating the VMV: School N involved only the SMT members, whereas School W chose to call on different groups of concerned stakeholders, which included teachers, student leaders and the chairman of the Parent Support Group. These groups were invited by the school principal for the school's envisioning exercise. Even though it took considerable time, School W's leaders purposefully focused and synthesised – in a 'rolling up' process – what they believed in, and also what was valued by the stakeholders. Getting everyone aligned to the school's VMV is critical for Fullan (1993:28), who argues that "visions are necessary for success but few are as misunderstood and misapplied in the change process". He continues,

> *The question is not whether visions are important; they invariably are, rather, it is how they are shaped and reshaped. They die prematurely if they are mere paper products churned out by leadership teams, when they are static or even wrong, and when they attempt to impose a false consensus suppressing rather than enabling personal visions to flourish. (1993:29)*

Involving only a selected few SMT members in the development of the VMV perhaps suggests why there were signs of reluctance towards change among some of the respondents of School N. The process did not arise from the

bottom. Rather, it was action mainly directed from the top. In contrast, School W's principal chose to develop the VMV by listening to the voices of the teachers, students and parents, voices that embodied collective beliefs about how the school should approach its future. This approach is much aligned to the argument of Ingram (1992:18):

> *For best results, the people in the institution must have ownership of the new vision with decisions being made from the bottom-up in a participatory fashion rather than top-down. Re-thinking is a constant, long-term process with the word process being emphasised. It is not a product you get or bring in from the outside. It is something that occurs inside an institution. And it must be a shared vision…*

In Singaporean culture, where collectivist cultural dimensions are apparent, many people put group aspirations above their own needs, there are unspoken obligations to the community with great emphasis on harmony. The respondents of both case schools revealed that they would not insist on their stands if their ideas were different from the majority. Two respondents said,

> *For the good of the team spirit, I concur to the opinions of the majority…it is usually a group decision. (HOD: N-E)*
>
> *There are differences in opinions during discussions….but at the end, it is the group consensus….. (HOD: W-B)*

Under the TSLN initiative, the new paradigm of school management now encourages principals to think of themselves as CEOs of their schools, and to manage their schools like companies. In this respect, they are to lead people, produce results and answer to 'shareholders' and 'customers', and emphasise quality service, marketing, bottom-line, mission and vision statements (Ng, 2004). Every school is supposed to nurture students according to the Desired Outcomes of Education (DOE) (Wee, 1998) which was published in 1998. With DOE clearly spelt out in the SEM (under criteria

9.1 to 9.6 of the SEM Guidebook page 70-75), schools relied on it to formulate their mission statements and develop their action plans. With their involvement in the strategic planning process, the findings indicated that all the respondents had little or no problem in understanding the schools' mission statements. This seems to contradict the findings of Stott and Walker's (1992) research with Singaporean schools that no one knew what mission statements were all about. They concluded that these mission statements had become the rhetoric of school walls and prospectuses, but staff had had no part to play in conceiving them. This could be true because in the early 1990s, very few Singaporean schools understood or engaged in strategic planning.

Under the SEM, environmental scanning and analysis (ESA) is an essential element in developing strategies. However, a number of critics claimed that the output from ESA is often trivial or too broad, and relatively meaningless in the context of making actual strategic decisions (Bryson, 2004; Rowley and Sherman, 2001). In a rapidly changing environment, it is found that engaging in ESA as well as keeping the key personnel informed regarding environmental changes on a regular basis played an important part (Bryson, 2004). For example, School W seemed to place a great deal of focus upon a mixture of formal and informal means of information and feedback. Both the 'hard' (quantitative and secondary data) and 'soft' information (often in the form of anecdote and hearsay) helped to sharpen the principal's sense of responsiveness to the changes in the external environment. This active mode of the ESA taken by School W's principal appeared to put the school in a better situation as it would evade the claim of Miller (1994) that many organisations are feeble in detecting signals from the environment and are even worse at assessing their implications, generally dismissing them as insignificant until it is too late. The challenge for Singaporean school leaders is, therefore, well illustrated by Everard and Morris (1996:215) who argue that

“as the environment becomes more turbulent, so it becomes more important to develop their manager’ / leaders’ skills in coping with change, and indeed in steering it”. Relevant information on the internal and external environments would, thus, help to sharpen people’s thinking strategically as well as making them more sensitive to changes.

In Singapore, the educational environment evolves rapidly. The findings suggest that the strategic planning process ought to be constant yet fluid, with the flexibility to accommodate change in both internal and external forces. In the case of School W, the Principal viewed strategic planning as a ‘verb’ rather than a ‘noun’, that is, an ongoing and people-centred process rather than a finished product. Hence, the strategic slogan such as “Challenges, Opportunities, Decisions” (C.O.D) at the SMT meetings was deliberately used. It seemed to help to cultivate and sharpen strategic thinking among the SMT members. The sparring process also allowed the SMT members a greater insight into why the school needed to adopt particular strategies. A more cohesive team was also built during the process.

Two strategy decision processes adopted by School W in selecting appropriate strategies are worth mentioning here. First, the school used the C.O.D approach to leverage discussions at the strategic rather than operational level. This approach echoed Drucker’s (as cited in Lorenzo, 1993:50) idea that “organisations can no longer base decisions on what is most likely to happen. They must ask instead, ‘What has already happened that will create the future?’” This process elevated the school leaders to look at issues from a higher order perspective. Second, the school prioritised strategies with decision making criteria such as: (1) impact of the project on school thrusts; (2) ease of implementation; and (3) costs of the project. These evaluation criteria gave rise to a selection of strategies and initiatives. Such a decision making process confirmed the observation of Bourgeois

(1980) and Mintzberg et al. (1998) that agreement on strategy is more important than agreement on vision or goals. This prioritisation of strategies and initiatives allows the school to focus on executing a few yet high leverage strategies.

The evidence gathered in relation to monitoring and strategy evaluation appears to indicate that both quantitative and qualitative data are vital in understanding the impact on planning, and that periodical feedback and evaluation should be carried out throughout the implementation of the plan. It was noted that both schools produced a planning sheet showing a list of actions and programmes, a time line showing dates when each activity should occur, the key people responsible, and a set of KPIs by which progress can be measured and judged. Although not perfect, this format seems to provide both case schools with a rather effective planning tool.

The study also seems to show the importance of decision-making in the strategic planning process and evidence of devolved and participative methods of managing the planning process. However, the degree of devolution and participation in planning varied between Schools W and N. At School W, decision-making is devolved within an overall agreed vision and mission to those leaders who are faced with day-to-day decision-making. The approach at School N seems to be more in line with directive approaches to management. The adoption of these approaches in School N could be because of the relatively high percentage of young staff members as well as the leadership style of the school principal, which was particularly inclined towards ‘efficiency’. In view of the staff’s motivational level in School W, the findings appear to confirm that purposeful employment of the consensus style of decision making allowed everyone to have a say, which in turn led to commitment to the decided initiatives. This might be the way to manage the

strategic planning process. Consensus decision making seems the much preferred decision making tool which was definitely working well in School W.

The evidence from the study indicates that the written plan needs to be open and treated as a working document, that is, a document which is practical and flexible in nature and which can be amended if necessary. While strategic planning is a process that should generate receptivity to change and foster a responsive and proactive posture for the staff in a school system, it has been suggested that when rigidity is found in the process, the benefits and intent of the process have often been lost through misuse (Mintzberg, 1994). This over-rigidity of the process appeared to be true in School N, resulting in these responses at the interviews,

> *I agreed not to change the strategic plan without reasons. Often times, the situations have changed and we must make adjustments. (HOD: N-D)*

> *I have yet to see current plans bring forth results. We seem to do everything right, the working systems have also improved, but I do not see significant improvement in our students' results. (Level Head: N-E)*

Referring to the Hong Kong context, which also bears resemblance to the Singapore situation, Wong et al. (1998) advocate a process of flexible planning involving the participation of teachers in the planning process. They conclude that participative and flexible planning is more likely to be effective for organisations such as schools because:

> *A flexible planning approach…responding to the environment is a key concept….Teachers should be encouraged and helped to participate in planning decisions. If the plan is developed collaboratively, teachers' professional knowledge and experience are utilised and there should be better scanning and evaluation of the environment. (Wong et al., 1998:77-78)*

The findings advocate that it is also worthwhile to accommodate the actions of certain key departments through a bottom-up process. This bottom-up process seems to promote a higher commitment from departments in School W. The study also found that an efficiency-driven or purely rational approach to planning - deployed by School N -may not be appropriate.

5.4 MANAGEMENT OF STRATEGY IMPLEMENTION

The third research question aims to investigate "*What are leaders' and teachers' perspectives on how the strategic plan is implemented, managed and led?"* Managing strategic change means much more than keeping people happy and reducing resistance to new ideas and methods; it also means knowing the tactics or steps needed to manage and execute the process over time. Do managers implement change sequentially, bit by bit, or do they do everything at once, 'biting the bullet' and implementing change in one fell swoop? The wrong answer can seriously hamper or kill implementation efforts. Knowing how to manage the execution process and related changes over time is important for operational success. The following section discusses key issues and problems encountered as well as appropriate approaches adopted by Singaporean schools during the implementation of their strategic plans.

5.4.1 Key Issues and Problems in Implementing Strategic Plan

The findings indicate that poor information sharing or poor knowledge transfer and the lack of focus are the key reasons for failure of strategy-execution attempts in the study. Attempts at coordination or integration

across departments suffered largely due to poor sharing of vital information needed for execution. The findings further appear to suggest the need for having specialists to manage and interpret data generated throughout the process. Hiring these specialists is a "luxury" for Singaporean schools at the moment due to the cautious manpower policy of the Ministry. The shortage of administrative support was highlighted in the interviews,

> *Teachers are wearing many hats these days. We are expected to deliver lessons, to type and print lesson notes, to mark attendance, discipline students and to write and submit reports, the list goes on…we do not have the luxury of administrative support. (HOD: N-G)*
>
> *The Ministry is careful in adding on more administrative staff to the schools….many of my teaching staff are shouldering additional administrative duties…many are not trained in handling data… (Principal: W-A)*

Although the Ministry has built the database called 'School Cockpit'[20] for information dissemination to all schools, the skills in interpreting such information for use seem far from satisfactory. This lack of skills was highlighted in the interviews,

> *There is so much information in the School Cockpit. It needs a statistician to properly retrieve and interpret the information that would be useful to the school. Many of us do not possess this skill. (HOD: W-C)*
>
> *I think we are information over-loaded. Few of us really know how to use the information in the Cockpit to our advantage. (HOD: N-C)*

The findings also suggest that it might not always be an advantage if schools try to cover every component of the SEM. For example, School N had 5 strategic thrusts bearing 15 objectives, with an average of 6 new initiatives for each objective; in comparison, School W had 3 strategic thrusts bearing

[20] School Cockpit co-ordinates the deployment of new MOE IT systems to schools.

11 objectives, with an average of 3 new initiatives for each objective. Based on the high number of initiatives, School N not only had to work 3 times harder than School W, but also had more frustrated and stressed staff members burdened with duties beyond their already heavy existing workload. Tackling too many execution decisions or actions all at once will surely create problems. "*When everything is important, then nothing is important*" is a clear but simple way of expressing the issue. The study seems to affirm that priorities among initiatives must be set, and a logical order to execution actions adequately defined, if execution is to be successful. In other words, schools perhaps should consciously choose and focus on fewer rather than more strategic thrusts to yield greater impact. For this, School W's principal appeared to be clear in her mind as she said,

> *I will make sure I get the purpose straight before I jump into the process. They are so many things I can ask the people to do. But, I know there is no guarantee that (all the) initiatives will make the school a better place. (Principal: W-A)*

This suggests that efforts to change need a focus, a sense of priority, and some reasonably clear objectives, which is a distinctive mark of School W. The findings also seem to affirm that implementing strategic plans require school leaders to lead through inspiration and coaching rather than command and control. The respondents of School W showed great commitment to school plans mainly because they were motivated by their school principal who recognised, inspired and generously rewarded staff who performed well (for example, annually sending one to two staff members to Queensland University, Australia). In contrast, School N, with its use of authority coupled with command and control, seemed to promote passive resistance and hidden resentment.

Developing and encouraging good skills in staff as well as reinforcing the use of these skills in daily practices have led to the successful implementation of strategic planning and the institutionalisation of the strategic management. To a large extent, School N's Principal may have under-estimated the general feeling of staff members towards strategy development and implementation, assuming that they would give full support to the school plan crafted by the SMT. This is in agreement with Senge et al. view (1994:20) that "this is a testament to our naiveté about culture that we think we can change it by simply declaring new values; declarations such as these tend to only produce cynicism". Below are discussions on plausible approaches that schools may use for strategy implementation.

5.4.2 Approaches to Managing and Implementing the Strategy Plan

Proper use of key performance indicators (KPIs) plays a central role in today's accountability system focusing on results. In line with the SEM, the use of KPIs provides focus and energises schools to work towards improving students' achievement. Levesque et al. (1998) believe that the systematic use of KPIs allows schools to take charge of their own assessment by means of identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as pinpointing the workable improvement strategies. Relevant KPIs aligned with strategies and objectives are, therefore, critical, and the choice of measures of success is often an obvious one (Cronin, 2007). The findings suggest that one sound approach for strategy implementation is to link all KPIs to the school's mission, riding on a well planned budgetary process, coupled with strong support and inputs from the principal and staff members. The bold allocation of resources amplifies the importance and the commitment to the school strategic plan. Besides, the use of comprehensive KPIs helps to suggest to the staff

members what to focus on, and in turn reinforces engagement of staff to the strategy.

The findings also suggest that KPIs are not without limitations and can be potentially exploited for adversarial purposes. For example, the respondents of both case schools almost obsessively made the 'number of staff's suggestions' an indicator to track the commitment of staff members to the school. This seriously contradicted the primary purpose of the 'Staff Suggestion Scheme' (SSS), which was to cultivate the spirit of innovation and continuous improvement (Ministry of Education, 2002) for the school. A similar warning was signalled by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) that total reliance should not be placed on KPIs in making judgements. Over reliance on KPIs can result in them being a handicap rather than an aid to decision making. In other words, an increase in staff suggestions may not be taken as the sole indication of staff commitment to the school. The choice of appropriate KPIs for strategic objectives thus becomes critical.

With regards to the use of KPIs as a vehicle to manage strategy implementation, the steps adopted by School W seem worthy of consideration by other Singaporean schools. The steps are: (1) identify the desired outcomes; (2) generate questions about how well students / staff are accomplishing those objectives; (3) select and organise data that will help answer the school's questions; (4) interpret the collected data; (5) take appropriate actions; and (6) assess those actions for the next inquiry cycle. These steps may provide a platform for school leaders to discuss suitable KPIs and review results for further improvement.

To effectively mobilise everyone in any organisation, the strategy must be clear, and communication is the prerequisite for executing the strategy. From this research, the findings on communication align well with previous studies

by Alexander (1991) on the importance of two-way communication between the leaders and staff to improve strategy implementation. The findings suggest that the communication of strategy in schools should go beyond just linear and / or downward communication. A continuous two-way communication with feedback and reacting to upward messages serve the purpose well. Theodore Levitt, the esteemed marketing guru from the Harvard Business School, says it well,

> *To be successful, a strategy must also be simple, clear and expressible in only a few written lines. If it is elaborate and complex, and takes a lot of space or time to communicate, few people will understand it or march to its tune.*
>
> *(Levitt, 1986:139-40)*

The findings highlight the pivotal role that middle management (that is, HODs) play in strategy communication, for instance, in filtering strategic messages and ensuring plans are carried out accordingly. Adequate communication skills of the HODs may encourage team members to participate actively in the strategy process and further develop and enhance their strategic capabilities.

From the study, collecting relevant data and information systematically for strategic decision in schools appears to be vital for strategy execution, especially when the information supporting the strategic review is in a useful, accurate and easily digestible form, reinforcing focus. This makes review and evaluation of strategies a lot more meaningful. The appropriate measurements that link to the school mission and strategic objectives also lend a hand in alleviating burdens of staff members overwhelmed with operational details.

The study also affirms the effectiveness of strategy implementation by way of assigning responsibility to the person-in-charge of the project team. For

strategic leaders to succeed in their roles, they must first become conscious of the role; a formal title inevitably affirms its importance. To this, School W's principal always assigned a champion, usually a HOD, to be responsible for any new initiative. That intensified new priorities for development.

The findings suggest that a 'proper' management of funds carries high level impact on strategic change in schools. While both case schools used varied forms of open consultation in fund allocation, School N adopted a more top-down approach and relied less on open discussion during decision making. The principal applied careful discipline in the fund allocation procedure to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness. In contrast, School W took a more flexible approach, setting aside ten percent of the annual recurrent budget for special emerging projects initiated from within, or new requests coming from the Ministry, so as to surface worthy projects for deeper deliberation and discussion. The study indicates that both approaches can be equally effective as long as they are managed according to the direction of the school. This aligns with the argument put forth by Glover (1997) that linking sufficient resources to initiatives increases the success of strategic objectives.

5.5 FACTORS THAT HELPED OR HINDERED THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

In this section, the research question "*What are the perceived helping and hindering factors to schools engaging in strategic planning?*" will be discussed.

5.5.1 Leadership

The findings suggest both case school principals exercised different leadership skills in encouraging and shaping their school cultures to uphold smooth implementation of the school plans. While the school principals' actions carry symbolic content - such actions communicate meaning, value, and focus (Deal and Peterson, 2000; Bolman and Deal, 1994) - their words are also held in high esteem. Their education philosophy, teaching reputation, demeanour, communication style, and other characteristics are important signals that shape people's perception / understanding of the school. It takes considerable courage and confidence for them to exercise their autonomy to the fullest extent and to live out their espoused philosophy about education and leadership. This is especially the case in Singapore's system, where the climate of compliance with directives from the MOE or their supervisors (that is, Cluster Superintendents) is more often accepted unquestioningly than challenged (Stott and Low, 2000). Not surprisingly, Singaporean school principals are given a freehand to plan for the school, under 'close' supervision.

Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to say that the Singapore situation is characterised exclusively by either individualism or collectivism. On the one hand, there is a fundamental belief in the value of collective endeavour. On the other hand, there is also a valuing of loyalty and harmony with a sense of common purpose. Because school principals see themselves as individually accountable for the success of their schools, this frequently lands them with actions that typify a task rather than relationship and that underscores the sheer importance of self-preservation. Although School W's principal generally emphasised 'relationships' in her management approach, more often than not, she was ruthless in ensuring actions were properly executed. Her ruthless action was highlighted in one of the interviews,

> *….the teacher in-charge of Chinese dance gave excuses for not winning the National Youth Dance Competition. I had to take a tough decision to remove the teacher and introduce a new coach, and personally supervised the dance team. I am so proud that the dance team came in third in the junior category in the following year…. (Principal: W-A)*

In that way, the findings of this study confirm the observation of Stott and Low (2000) that Singaporean schools have a complex cultural dynamic which is best explained as neither individualistic nor collectivist.

The findings also suggest that strategic planning is most impacted by the personality and style of the leader. It was clear that School W's principal took the necessary risks by revamping the curriculum to ensure active and stimulating learning among the academically weak students. She probably realised that playing it safe may be more dangerous than taking risks, in her case. She then steered and created a new culture for learning in the school. Schein (1992) notes that a single influential individual, often the founder or the leader, can create prominent organisational culture change.

During the interview, the principal of School W reiterated the choice of consultative leadership style to enhance a culture that would cultivate creative input from the staff members and, in turn, benefit the school. Clearly, she appeared to evoke a more participatory mode of leadership. In contrast, the principal of School N relied on finding an acceptable balance between the pressures for change (for example, accountability) and group harmony. When asked about the sub-cultures in the school, the principal of School N seemed to be well aware of the many different subcultures within the school. She depended on setting rules and procedures to enforce discipline among staff members so as to align all sub-cultures to the school goals and directions. This echoes the argument put forth by Krajewski (1996) that

principals are the “chief en-culturing agents” as they are expected to be the initiator, facilitator, visionary and leader of the school. Indeed, both the case principals purposefully fostered unique sets of values congruent with their leadership styles in their respective schools.

5.5.2 Supporting School Culture

Many authors hold the view that organisations should only start the type of strategic planning that their respective cultures can support (Lynch, 1997; Haiss, 1990). The study affirms this important principle. In a healthy and supportive culture, people develop the habit of viewing changes with a healthy perspective, considering the potential of how new initiatives might enhance the school’s mission, goals, vision, and directions. This was well displayed by School W in adopting ‘out-of-the-box’ approaches when designing a new, innovative and appropriate curriculum for the academically weak students. This, in turn, seemed to motivate the teachers to see how these students progressed with the new learning strategies. The school with a discipline problem had become a school with a positive environment where students enjoyed learning and staff members enjoyed engaging students in meaningful learning. School W’s Principal made it clear that caring for pupils was part of leadership concern and that staff should always feel free to share ways of doing their jobs. Where there is shared vision and values, there is likely to be trust; and where there is trust, people are more likely to be ready to share their problems and find ways to move forward together. This is also in line with Telford’s (1996) argument that:

> *It was not so much what leaders did that was significant but what they believed in. Not so much what strategies were used but what norms of behaviour were instituted, and what symbols, rituals and ceremonies represented them. (Telford, 1996:88)*

As Pedler et al. (1991:32) state, “a learning company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself”. At a more practical level, a learning culture is one that encourages people to take risks, make suggestions for improvements, commit to change and innovation, and perhaps, most importantly, believe in what they are doing and know that their values are shared by the management. The findings, thus, suggest that the key to building a successful team lies in developing a highly cohesive group with high morale and excellent technical skills, while goals are aligned with the needs of the school. In the context of Singaporean schools, quite a number of new initiatives are driven from outside the school, in particular from the MOE. These, if properly managed, might have brought teachers together in their implementation and in doing so, might have created collaborative structures which have led to the effectiveness of the initiatives. School W’s Principal strategically created a ‘collaborative culture’ by encouraging staff members to test, experiment, and share innovative classroom teaching methods, as well as provide overseas learning attachments as incentives. This is seen as an important enabler to school improvement and the teacher development effort. There is alignment here with Hargreaves’ (1994) point that collaborative cultures can lead to real development in the classroom:

> *Research evidence…..suggests that the confidence that comes with collegial sharing and support leads to greater readiness to experiment and take risk, and with it a commitment to continuous improvement among teachers as a recognised part of their professional obligation. In this sense collaboration and collegiality are seen as forming a vital bridge between school improvement and teacher development. (Hargreaves, 1994:186)*

The influence of national culture on the behaviour of individuals has long been established, reflected mainly through how organisations are structured

and managed (Chen, 2001; Cheng, 1995; Hofstede, 1991). In the Singapore culture, people in general are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1991). The classic case is that of School N, where, despite different sub-cultures, staff members seem still to respond obligingly to the call of the principal and take instructions assigned to them without asking too many questions. In a more cohesive and supportive culture, as in the case of School W, the study appeared to show that almost all HODs and teachers said that they would not question the intentions and instructions given by principals as they were perceived to have the best intentions for the schools and the students. These behaviours have, by and large, reflected the attitudes and values deeply rooted in Asian societies.

In cases where staff held different opinions, instead of direct confrontation, the respondents would seem to discuss matters in private with the school leaders. Lau (1992) and To (1992) maintain that Asian teachers tend to be more sensitive about how they are viewed by peers, students and superiors as compared to their Anglo-American counterparts. The ancient Chinese belief - '敬老尊贤' (that is, respect the elders and the nobles) is still highly upheld in many parts of Singapore. Also, in a high 'power distance' culture like Singapore's, people readily accept that power is distributed unequally and do not mind working under directive and autocratic management. For example, it was observed at the annual planning retreat of School N, participants kept silent during the discussion even though they did not quite understand the issues raised by the principal.

5.5.3 Alignment and Commitment

It is suggested that when an organisation lacks capacity and / or commitment, it would not be able to produce a good strategic plan (Bryson, 2004). The study suggests that staff commitment to the planning process is vital in maintaining the momentum of executing the plans. All respondents acknowledged that planning is hard, abstract, time consuming, and uncertain, even more so in today's rapidly changing environment. The constant moving targets make it hard to answer the nagging question of whether the plan is "right". More often than not, even with commitment, there is a real temptation to just bypass the planning and get on with the work. This study suggests that a strong process which lets the staff exercise responsibility for what they need to do - appears absolutely necessary for success.

It is suggested that good planning cannot be imposed externally (Rowley and Sherman, 2001). The findings of this study seem to confirm that the commitments are likely to be stronger if staff members are convinced of the validity of the strategies and implementation plans and if they are involved heavily in the planning process. This may, however, not be the case in Singapore as most respondents of School N still carried out the assigned initiatives even though they were not convinced of the strategies because their performance would be appraised by the school leaders. To put it more bluntly, their promotion chances might be compromised and annual performance bonuses might be at stake if they did not comply.

5.5.4 Communication

For the strategic plan to be quickly translated into practical actions and deliver sustainable results, it must be easily understood and communicated.

The study suggests that communication networks throughout the school play a particularly important role in successful strategy development and implementation. This is echoed by David (2003) when he argues that a working and functioning team provides a shared context where individuals interact with each other. Through sound communication, the staff members of School W shared their collective skills and knowledge in designing and developing innovative learning approaches, to help the academically weaker students in particular. Through regular sharing at the SMT meetings, the principal alerted the members of the changes and external influences taking place. The respondents from School W mentioned that the free sharing of information might have indeed pulled them together across the departments in close working relations with one another. The impact of openness in communication was made very clear by School W's Principal in that:

> *Openness has been the key to change. With the data and information, I hope to not only educate ourselves, but also to help us to perceive things from all perspectives….this will open up opportunities for more options. (Principal: W-A)*

A critical barrier in successful plan execution appeared to have the communication gap between the SMT and the staff members in School N. In practice, staff members at lower levels of the hierarchy, who might have important and essential knowledge, were seldom involved in strategy formulation. This communication gap obstructed commitment and appropriate actions among staff throughout the school. However, the findings suggest that staff members can be forthright in giving their suggestions if the school is receptive to suggestions from the ground. To facilitate the sharing of information, an effective school involves top management in the communication exercise and communicates across the school more widely and deeply at all levels as advocated by Bryson (2004).

The study appears to confirm that communication involving formal documented messages, such as school-wide memoranda, emails, and scheduling time table activities - were the most common communication vehicles used, a view shared by the respondents of Schools N and W. However, the study also seemed to reveal that sufficient communication alone does not guarantee successful strategy development and implementation; it is the commitment, interpretation, acceptance and adoption among staff that are crucial. Indeed, the communication channels used were about the same in both case schools. However, staff in School N appeared to respond to the rules set by the principal by observing and following standard operating procedures. By comparison, with a more supportive working environment, staff in School W appeared to be bolder in taking risks.

5.5.5 Participation

It is evident that a highly participatory strategic planning process can ensure broad input, mobilise support for goals, help pave the way for implementation, and give the plan legitimacy (Keller, 1983; Rowley et al, 1997). People need to feel that their ideas are not only valued but that they also make a real difference. It seems unique that in Singaporean schools, while strategic planning (based on collaboration, participation and involvement) warrants successful implementation of strategic plans, the school principal holds the final say to the plans. Singapore remains still a largely 'boss decides – everyone complies' society. Besides, participation itself may not always guarantee a feeling of ownership. Some respondents of School N might not see themselves as the owners of the agreed initiatives, particularly when those ideas were raised by others, unless they were tasked to head the initiatives.

Many authors have noted the importance of middle management in dealing with challenges (e.g. Kanter, 1983; Tregoe and Tobia, 1989). The findings substantiate the necessity to shift power to middle management so as to make their schools more responsive to environmental changes. School W intentionally involved all staff in the planning retreat to promote their buying-in, which, in turn, encouraged the staff to be more enthusiastic about, and committed to, a management tool such as strategic planning. For two consecutive years, all staff of School W were at the 3-day-2-night planning retreat in West Malaysia, which served to bolster the bond among staff members, as well as to encourage contributions to the transformation and renewal of the school. This was confirmed by one of the respondents, who said,

> *My staff and I look forward to this annual planning retreat because it is time not only to have serious discussion on the school plan, but also to let our hair down for fun and bonding. All of us feel like we belong to a big family. (HOD: W-B)*

With a very supportive and cohesive culture, School W could hold staff meetings that were better able to discuss their many strategic options leading to decision outcomes. They also seemed to form strong internal value systems that served to filter information from a wide variety of sources.

5.6 SUMMARY

The four phase approach to strategic planning suggested by the SAB has steered Singapore schools in their engagement with strategic planning. From the outset, this four phase approach to strategic planning appears deceptively rudimentary and straightforward, yet it is complex. The findings

appear to affirm that a good understanding of the concept of strategy and the meaning of strategic planning plays a critical role in conceiving and executing a successful strategic plan. Schools perhaps should never be indiscriminate with the components in the SEM when drawing up the strategic plans. Although both case schools used similar elements for their strategic planning process, the findings seem to show that it is the techniques and crafts applied that made School W distinct from School N. To develop an effective strategic plan, the process of strategic planning also appears to be iterative and not sequential.

The major issues and problems in strategy implementation in two case schools may include poor sharing of information, poor knowledge transfer, and lack of focus. The study proposes approaches such as the use of KPIs, assigning accountability with a clear timeline, allocating resources, appointing champions, and using middle management to communicate strategies, to counteract the shortcomings in strategy implementation. The ultimate success of strategic planning in Singaporean schools, according to the findings of the present study, seems to depend greatly on the style and personality of school leaders. In turn, strong but caring leadership may give rise to a culture that allows staff members to participate in, align and commit to, the strategic plan. The ways in which these factors help or hinder the strategic planning process appear to be naturally distinctively Singaporean.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis began by discerning the existing acute problems faced by Singapore government secondary schools when engaging in effective strategic planning processes. Since the launch of the SEM in year 2000, employing strategic planning has become mandatory, yet many schools have encountered great difficulties in switching from an externally driven school inspection model to a self-assessment system. Many schools were apprehensive and hence have been relatively tardy in employing the strategic planning process, while a few have become vanguards in implementing the process. This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of the school leaders and teachers of two atypical government schools. These two contrasting case schools are at opposing ends of the strategic planning spectrum with regard to managing the process of strategic planning. The study also exemplified the problems and issues involved and examined how schools established their strategic planning processes all within the Singapore context. Schools might have implemented and improved their strategic planning over the recent years; nonetheless, these two case schools highlighted many of the concerns and challenges confronting schools in their strategic planning process.

Given the limited scope and size of the study, it is not possible to make broad generalisation. However, the insights gained from the two case schools suggest a number of significant findings in this study – which in turn may have implications for transferability to other similar studies. The claims made below apply only to the two case schools. The reader may be able to make application to other schools on the basis of comparing the similarities and differences with the two case schools investigated in this study.

Firstly, *this study suggests only weak support for the SEM model being a reliable approach for starting strategic change in schools at the present time.* There appears to be unresolved questions as to whether schools are able to plan strategically and to aim for excellence against all the SEM criteria. In the case of School N, focusing heavily on the criteria of the SEM might have actually distracted the school from the primary purpose of education – at least in the short to medium term. In comparison, School W seemed to focus more narrowly on a few high leverage strategic initiatives to turn the school around, and did not seem to follow closely all the SEM criteria. Furthermore, the measures of performance using KPIs might not adequately do justice to the more delicate and finer aspects of education that are embedded in human relationships rather than in systems and processes. It is difficult to fully quantify or capture evidence of love, care and role modelling demonstrated by teachers in their daily interaction with students. But it is in this softer and rather more tacit aspect where the noblest and most precious facets of education often lie.

Secondly, *the knowledge and skills of school leaders and staff members appear to have substantial impact on the formulation and implementation of the school's strategic plan.* While it is more straightforward for school leaders to acquire 'hard' knowledge to run the process, it appears to be more intricate to plaster it with 'soft' skills in order to forge relationships or mend feelings to

ensure sustainability of the process. Increasingly, achieving a real breakthrough, as in the case of School W, seems to result from the accumulation and deployment of staff knowledge and skills which allow individuals to adapt to change and build new ways of working. With a high percentage of staff members being young and new to the teaching profession, it can be a real challenge, but not impossible, for school principals to prepare and influence the mindset of their staff to administer and manage changes.

Thirdly, a *four-phase approach to planning is widely used by schools, but it appears to be the methods and techniques applied to the process that differentiate the vanguard from the tardy schools.* In this regard, the Merlion case school has been seen as the 'bible or modern answers' to school planning. The four-phase approach cannot be seen as the recipe to perfect 'cooking', or in this case planning. As in cooking, the right kinds of utensils, intensity of heat and duration, among others, may be essential techniques that have to be acquired and subsequently mastered over time. Strategic planning is a technique and a procedure for continuously keeping the school on course. As such, it should not be done mechanically as apparent in the approach undertaken by School W.

Fourthly, *the involvement of all staff members at every level in the planning process appears to have a significant effect on how strategic planning should be formulated and eventually implemented.* This study confirms that the participation of staff in the planning process encourages the 'ownership' of, or 'linkage' to, an initiative, which in turn leads to a strong desire to ensure that a strategic plan works. The total involvement of staff members in the entire strategic planning process, as in the case of School W, seemed to contribute to better outcomes than in the case of School N, where only key personnel were involved. The study therefore suggests that school leaders need to pay heed to involve all those who work in the school to build and develop the

strategy collectively. The participation of staff in the process may not only help to forge better collaboration, but also to build up the capacity to change.

Fifthly, *having a few good and high leverage initiatives seems far better than trying to undertake too many simultaneously*. There are certain issues that are considered 'critical' to respective schools, such as the students' discipline issues faced by School W. To attract due attention to these critical issues, an effective strategic planning process is likely to be one that is fairly simple, quick, and adaptive to special needs. As a result, people tend to give the process the time and attention needed to solve such issues. A real breakthrough strategic plan - as shown in the case of School W - seems more likely to derive from principles that are 'concrete, simple and focused'.

Sixthly, *time set aside for management meetings that focused on strategies appear to significantly sharpen strategic thinking and create strategic capability to execute strategic plans.* Focusing on operational details - as in the case of School N - may seem to overwhelm strategic planning efforts. Also, School N seemed to pay full attention to the day-to-day issues and simply appeared to ignore larger, longer term strategic issues. This study finds that strategic planning cannot simply be an 'add-on' for already overworked leaders, HODs, and staff. This was apparent in the case of School N, where too many activities and programmes were included in its plan; hence it was trapped tackling operational issues arising from the daily routines at meetings. It is desirable that primacy should be set aside to discuss how the school is currently progressing in relation to its strategic direction. The C.O.D. (challenges, opportunities, decisions) approach adopted by School W is a good illustration. Time was deliberately set aside especially during the initial period of the SMT meetings and the departmental meetings to focus intensely on C.O.D. This could have helped the school leaders build a common understanding and create a coherent team view of

the present state of the school. In undertaking these strategic conversations (Davis, 2006), the management team could focus on the broader strategic needs and issues, and not just the operational issues.

Seventhly, *allocating appropriate resources, assigning responsibilities with a clear timeline, appointing 'champions' and using middle management to communicate strategies seem more likely to ensure that a strategic plan will be properly executed*. The processes of involving staff in being part of the school's values and direction are critical, as shown in the case of School W. Putting all actions in a table (see Table 6-1 below) thus appears to become essential in moving the individual and corporate 'mindset' towards the strategic objectives of the school. Such a table would be useful for communicating action plans down the hierarchical levels as well as for subsequent review and evaluation of results for improvement. The findings indicate that the ability of school leaders to convey strategic objectives down the line lies not only in written communication, but also in what they say and do - both of which are critical components of effective implementation.

Table 6-1 Table for Execution

Objective					
Long-Term Goal	Short-Term Goal	Strategies	Owners	Time Frame	Review Period and Method

Eighthly, *the personality and style of the school leaders appear to have significantly influenced the extent to which staff members respond to strategic changes.* Although 'masculine' attributes of school leaders are generally practiced in Singaporean schools (Stott and Low, 2000), it seems feminine attributes like care, sincerity, honesty, and compassion demonstrated by the school principal in one of the case schools have won

the hearts and boosted the commitment of the staff members towards strategic planning. People treasure the 'feeling of being valued', especially acknowledgements that come from the school leaders. Significantly, it seems the personal touch of the school principal through inspiration and coaching rather than just command and control that builds a team to execute the agreed plan. It is perhaps true that strong and prominent leadership may steer the school and focus its direction. However, it is suggested that this unspoken virtue of earned leadership is delicate and subtle, not often noticeable on the surface, but it carries powerful and significant influence. In other words, it seems to be the "soft strength" that many Asians look to their leaders for inspiration and motivation. The "soft strength" is usually shown by leaders not through instructions, directives or lectures, but by gentle coaxing, persuasion, cajoling or enticing. Often it is over a cup of coffee in the canteen rather than behind closed doors in the principal's office. While people do not like to speak up in the group, they are forthcoming in sharing ideas when approached individually.

Ninthly, *the principal appears to be the determining factor in building and shaping school culture. However it could be that good performance is the cause of a cohesive and healthy culture rather than a cohesive and healthy culture being the cause for good performance.* Both principals demonstrated different leadership skills to encourage and to shape the rituals, beliefs, ideals and attitudes of staff that made student learning more connected and meaningful in their respective schools. Like "chief enculturing agents" (Krajewski, 1996), these two principals were seen as the initiators, facilitators, visionaries and leaders of the schools. They appeared to purposefully foster unique sets of values that were congruent with their leadership styles. One seemed to reiterate the choice of a consultative leadership style to enhance a culture that would cultivate creative input from staff members and in turn benefit the school; the other seemed to set rules

and procedures to enforce discipline among staff members so as to align all subcultures to the school goals and directions. Nonetheless, among many factors contributing to high performance, culture may be only one of the key factors. It is however true, as in the case of School W, that people appeared to be more cohesive when their efforts are successful.

6.2 EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

In the light of Singapore's current educational initiatives to pursue school excellence through best practices, the findings of this study on engaging effective strategic planning processes are likely to have important implications. The first implication appears to be the need for school leaders to acquire a deep understanding of the interdependent nature of school functions, and an appreciation of the interrelated impact of school programmes. To achieve significant benefits for schools, all leaders perhaps need to be good system thinkers who can integrate all parts of the school systems in the effort to realise the school's vision / mission in formulating its strategic plan. The plan is likely to require careful deliberations in that its goals, programmes, culture, processes, and resources are coherently and seamlessly integrated together in a robust and yet lean architecture, to produce the desired outcomes.

Secondly, the study has shown that Singaporean schools often find themselves taking on new initiatives introduced by the MOE with few questions asked. These external new initiatives, however, may draw time and resources away from the school's main business, namely teaching and learning. An implication of such a situation may allow a 'limit to success' (Senge, 1990) attitude to set in. The staff members soon may feel the

pressure of having to cope with new expectations while performing extra administrative work on top of their normal teaching loads. This inevitably may lead to compromising the teaching quality or minimal exploration and experimentation of new teaching methods. Appropriate management of the pace of change by school leaders appears to be vital because there is a fine limit as to how many changes staff members can cope with at the same time. School leaders may need to consciously recognise the critical point at which to introduce a change, and develop the ability to prioritise and abandon less important or unsuccessful programmes in favour of new initiatives.

Thirdly, school leaders perhaps need to acquire not only 'hard' knowledge, but also 'soft' skills when developing and implementing the strategic plan. The 'hard' knowledge and skills include the ability to (1) generate scanning and analysis for strategic issues; (2) manage information for strategic decision-making; (3) allocate resources for high leverage initiatives; and (4) evaluate results for improvements. The 'soft' skills, which arose from the study of School W, include the ability to (1) create a reflective learning culture among staff members in which people are geared to hold 'strategic conversations'; (2) institute a no-blame problem-solving teamwork approach in which people are valued for what they can contribute and in which ideas can be shared; (3) develop a deep understanding of differentiation (for example, creating unique learning experience for students) in which people could create a strategy that gives greater impact. The 'soft' set of skills seems to be more difficult to comprehend and requires a longer time to develop. This study suggests that it is the combination of both 'hard' and 'soft' knowledge and skills that helped School W in establishing the strategic planning process. It is also the 'soft' skills demonstrated by School W's leaders that seemed to provide the cutting edge, making the school stand out from others.

Fourthly, it is apparent that school leaders need to communicate the scope and benefits of change and expected outcomes of school plans to all staff members. Within the Asian cultural context, it seems desirable that Singaporean schools institute a two-way communication programme to permit and solicit questions regarding the formulated strategy; reciprocally, the staff members may need to be briefed about the new requirements, tasks and activities to be performed, as well as the reasons ("the whys") behind changed circumstances. This process of engaging people of different levels and taking into account their views and feelings may seem to strengthen their sense of ownership, involvement, and commitment to, the plan.

Fifthly, from an organisational point of view, students are customers or 'service targets'; yet at the same time, they are the products of the education system. Students may therefore to be treated as central to the entire planning process. Their parents, being one of the stakeholder groups, may voice concerns or resist comprehensive changes, especially when drastic curriculum change is involved. It is seen to be desirable for school leaders to listen to the voices of students and parents constantly through dialogue or other suitable channels to seek feedback from them to effectively address their needs and concerns.

Sixthly, under the TSLN initiative, the new paradigm of school management now encourages principals to think of themselves as CEOs of their schools, and to manage their schools like companies. As such, the elements of efficiency and effectiveness become hallmarks. Interestingly, the results of the study indicate that staff members responded positively to leaders who are sincere and honest in relationships and are good listeners. These attributes appear to be the cornerstones of strategic efforts, as in the case of School W. Interpersonal skills such as empathy, motivation, effective communication, and social intelligence are leaders' trump cards because the process of

decision-making, strategy implementation and performance improvement is rarely free of emotion. Particularly crucial is social intelligence, a thorough understanding of the social context which is defined by Gardner (1985:239) as the ability "to notice and make distinctions among other individuals….in particular among their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions". The ability to connect the involvement of others and to resolve conflicts may seem therefore increasingly vital in a context of developing a cohesive team and finding creative solutions for strategic change.

Seventhly, in Singapore, decentralisation is not simply about shifting power and authority. The MOE still carries a great responsibility for achieving national outcomes. Although schools are encouraged to 'think outside of the box' and find their own paths and break frontiers, in reality, the governmental centralisation paradigm is still very strong. Schools therefore are not entirely free to plan strategically: for example, the MOE still sees examination results as the fundamental yardstick for measuring performance. The then Minister of Education, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (2004) made this statement firmly,

> *Our exams serve a key purpose in education. They are an anchor in our meritocratic system. They provide transparency in the system, and give parents and students confidence that access to a school or tertiary institution is based on merit-confidence which is often lacking in other systems.*

This paradoxical situation provides significant leadership challenges. School leaders face constant pressures to deliver outstanding examination results that can be achieved with what many critics regard as replication of shallow learning. However, their value system may be based on a value of deep understanding in learning and nurturing a love of learning in their students. While strategic planning within the SEM may seem to provide the means to move the school forward, school leaders perhaps ought to see strategic

changes as being based on a clear value and belief system. In other words, defining the values and beliefs of the school appears to be a prerequisite of the strategy process. It thus seems necessary to answer the question of 'strategy for what?' before one attempts to look at the processes of the 'how' of strategy.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

This section recommends key suggestions as to how the strategic planning process could be successfully implemented through a practical and integrated approach for Singaporean schools, and highlights some possible areas for further research.

6.3.1 Imperatives

Strategic plans fail for all sorts of reasons, but this study suggests that the problems arise from deficiencies in the planning process rather than in the plans themselves. Breakdowns in the process appear to be attributed to shortcomings in one of the following areas:

(1) *Leadership* – commitment of leaders to the plan is vital for success. In addition, leaders' characteristics such as honesty, integrity, passion, empathy, motivation, fairness, social skills, and consistency appear to be significant ingredients to the accomplishment of the planning process. It implies that it is school leadership that determines the school culture, creating at its best, a 'risk-free' and cohesive working environment in which staff can give of their best.

(2) *Communication* – without careful communication strategies, change is likely to meet with resistance from staff and / or their reluctance to give of their best. Successful communication requires paying attention to each group which would likely be affected by the planning process and the goals of the overall plan.

(3) *Assessment* – ongoing assessments seem necessary to keep track of the progress of agreed plans and their outcomes. It becomes imperative to institute strategic conversations in both the school management and departmental meetings. This will help staff to have a thorough understanding of the 'what' and 'why' of the outcomes.

6.3.2 A New Approach to Strategic Planning

The findings suggest that the link between the formulation of a strategic plan and the execution of the process by teams and staff was critical. Schools may have formulated a strategic plan, but the promotion of continuous improvements in the efficiency and responsiveness of their operating processes using the SEM has never been easy. Schools have to invest considerable effort to ensure that the strategic planning process, and process improvement tool such as the SEM, works together coherently. Based solely on the findings and implications of this study, a practical and integrated strategic planning process that links strategy formulation and planning with operational execution for Singaporean schools is proposed. The new approach to strategic planning has *five* major elements:

(1) Formulation of Strategy
(2) Planning the Strategy
(3) Alignment with the Strategy
(4) Execution of Strategy

(5) Evaluation of Strategy

Each of the five elements is outlined below.

1.	Formulation of Strategy

The process involves stakeholders in their natural concerns for education to develop strategies for the school. In this stage, participants define values, identify critical issues, and decide what to prioritise and what to compete on. The school needs to address three aspects:

(1) ***School's Stand***: the school begins strategy development by mapping out its mission (affirmation of its purpose), values (internal compass that guides its actions), and vision (its aspiration for future outcomes).
(2) ***Critical Issues***: identifying strategic issues which are likely to have most impact on the school's vision through tools such as SWOT analysis.
(3) ***Niches***: the school delineates 'niches' on which it should compete based on capabilities and resources. The development of a plan involves spelling out precisely how the school will go forward, in terms of strategic objectives.

2.	Planning the Strategy

In this stage, school leaders plan the strategy by developing strategic objectives, measures, targets, initiatives and resource allocation. The school needs to address three aspects:

(1) ***Performance Measurement***: this involves all key personnel to convert the strategic objectives into measures and targets, over three to five years.
(2) ***Actions***: strategic initiatives are action programmes aimed at achieving strategic objectives.
(3) ***Responsibility***: the champion or programme owners provide accountability for and feedback on the execution of the strategy.

3.	Alignment with the Strategy

This is to ensure the school's plan is cascaded down to various departments and units. All staff must understand the strategy which must be well communicated to help the school succeed with the strategy. The school needs to address two aspects as follows:

(1) ***Team Work***: all middle management must discuss at respective departments / units and propose plans that are aligned to the school's plan
(2) ***Engagement***: the school should communicate agreed plans to staff clearly so as to help them understand the strategy and motivate them to achieve it.

4.	Execution of Strategy

To execute well, processes for improvement activities and allocation of resources should be aligned to the strategies. The school needs to address two aspects:

(1) ***Critical Processes***: improving key processes designed to deliver desired outcomes is critical.
(2) ***Resources***: Allocating resources for activities and programmes must be consistent with the strategic plan.

5.	Evaluation of Strategy

Procedures for monitoring the progress of the plan require specific attention as they ensure the relevant data necessary for evaluating the impact and progress of the strategic plan. This strategic plan is subjected to periodical evaluation according to changing external and internal conditions. The school needs to address two areas:

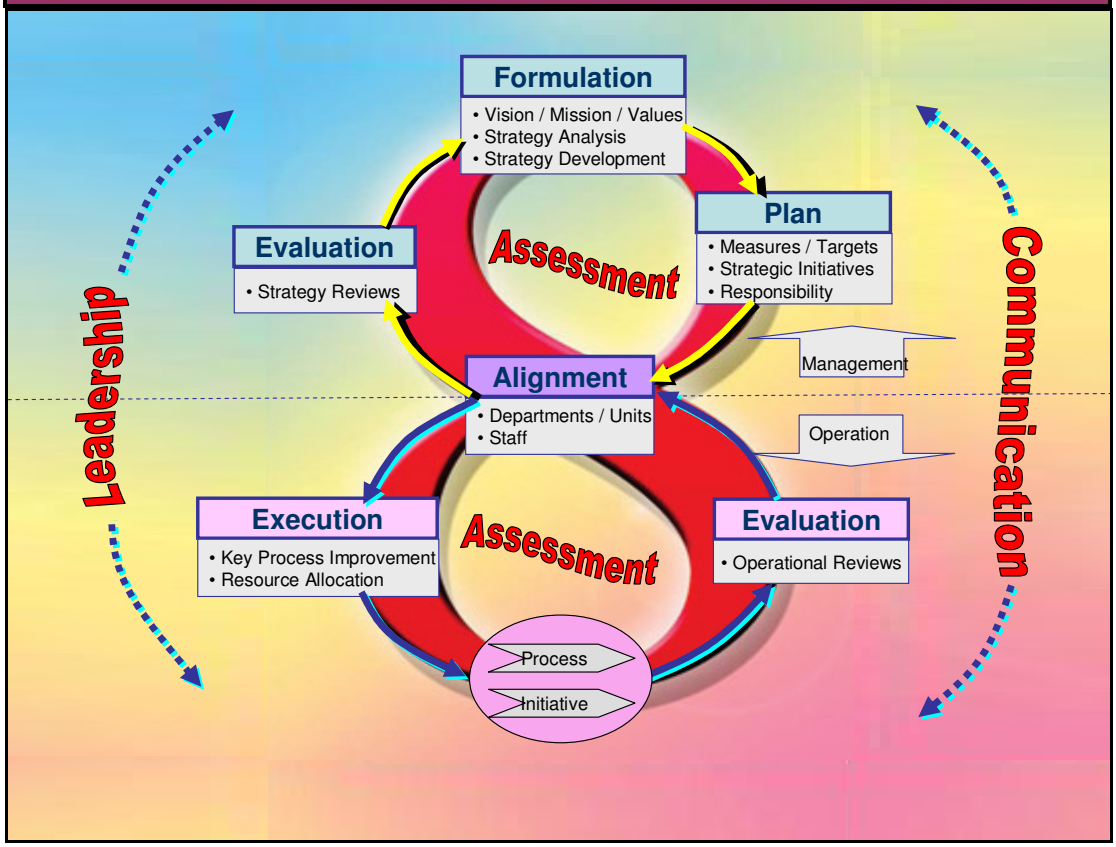
(1) ***Operational Review***: each department and unit need to hold operational review meetings to review short term performance and evaluate how to

improve the operational results. These meetings should be highly focused, short, data driven, and action oriented.

(2) ***Strategy Assessment***: the school leadership team needs to hold 'strategic conversations' on whether strategy execution is on track, determine implementation issues and problems, assign responsibility for corrective actions.

The new approach to strategic planning with *five* elements and *three* imperatives is represented in Figure 6-1 below. Each loop is a continuous and iterative process. While the upper loop signifies the responsibility at the management level, the lower loop signifies the responsibility at the operational level, namely, departments / units. One loop crosses over to the other when the alignment is finally reached. Joining the two loops forms a "prosperous 8" (The number '8' echoes prosperity in the Chinese language. It is widely believed in the Chinese culture that everything triumphs when happenings are allied to the number '8').

Figure 6-1 A New Approach to Strategic Planning



6.3.3 Further Research

The findings from the two case schools in this study have contributed to the body of knowledge relating to the strategic planning process, particularly in the Singapore context. There are, however, a number of possible areas for further research.

Firstly, the study investigated two government schools; thus, it is unable to provide insights into how strategic planning fares in 'Autonomous' and 'Independent' schools in Singapore, given that the latter normally have richer resources, better staffing, stronger finance, as well as better quality student intake. These schools are generally highly regarded not only for their

academic achievements, but also in many non-academic areas such as sports and aesthetics. It would be interesting to do a longitudinal study of how these schools establish and conduct their strategic planning compared to government schools.

Secondly, the current research focused largely on investigating the perceptions of school leaders and teachers toward the strategic planning process. The perceptions of other groups such as Cluster Superintendents, key personnel from the MOE, Senior Quality Assessors of the SAB and members of the Evaluation and Validation Team (EV), the students and the parents would make a valuable contribution to more thorough understanding in this area. Indeed, any potential perception gaps would warrant further exploration, too.

Thirdly, since the launch of the SEM, there is still a considerable lack of research on its uses, the impact on school operations and its overall effectiveness. There are many possible research questions, for example: Can a poorly performing school indeed turn itself around using the SEM? Is the lofty goal of seeking improvement in the nine criteria too intimidating to schools that seek improvement? Can a school really inspire its staff and students by aiming for excellence according to the SEM criteria? These are worthy questions for researchers to address.

Fourthly, since the 'liberalisation' of the school system in Singapore in the late 1990s, there has been a steady stream of locally conducted research exploring the various roles played by school leaders (Chong and Low, 1994). Nevertheless, there is still a noticeable gap in the current knowledge base about 'how' and 'why' school leaders make certain strategic decisions, in particular, their state of mind and their strategising experiences. It is to understand the mind of the principals as to what really determines their

‘strategic thinking’ about their strategic experience. These strategic cognitions would bring new insights and advance our understanding about what constitutes and contributes to successful implementation of strategy in schools.

Fifthly, this study did not address how the issues and factors of strategy design may affect strategy implementation. Reviews of strategy execution and organisational effectiveness indicate that existing explanations are still far from adequate (Okumus, 2001). More research is needed to determine what may be the framework of strategy execution for achieving optimal performance in school. Related to this, some interesting areas for further research on effective implementation of strategic plans include whether a school possesses the leadership skills required to implement the strategy; whether the strategy “fits” the culture; whether the strategy has broad-based understanding and support; and whether it is consistent with the culture.

Sixthly, a variety of longitudinal studies that are experimental in nature could be considered to examine the relationship between strategic planning and a performance measurement system in schools. For example, a series of randomised controlled (as far as such things are possible in social science research in schools) experiments could be conducted in order to investigate if and how performance management could improve the quality of secondary education in terms of objective measurable outcomes.

6.5 FINAL THOUGHTS

In an age of “hyper-competition” (D’Aveni, 1994), it is likely that the Singapore government will continue the decentralisation policy by introducing

more changes to existing systems in schools, and fine-tuning the existing practices. Tan and Ng (2007) commented that the decentralisation tide will remain unabated as more changes to school systems have been announced by the Singapore government in recent times. In the process, the prevailing tensions and challenges among the Ministry, school, and teachers, will continue to be strongly felt. Underpinning this, the need for school leaders to reflect policies introduced by the Ministry has become paramount. Nevertheless, strategic planning within the SEM is still in its infancy within the education system in Singapore. There are still teething issues to be addressed and refinements to be made, both in policy and in practice. It will be interesting to observe how Singapore continues to promote diversity and innovation in education while maintaining high quality and commitment to its national agenda. It will take a balancing act (Ng, 2007) to 'rock the boat' adequately in order to bring about change, but not to 'sink' it.

Today, most Singaporean schools have put in place a strategic planning process and sufficient practical assistance to help improve the process further. However, Boar (1993:15) reminds us that the strategic planning process is more art than science and warns "the results of the process are only as good as the intellectual investment of the participants in thinking deeply about the issues. What makes the difference is insight, not rote execution of analytical steps." The engagement of strategic planning in Singapore schools is still in its early stage; it will take some years before one can tell whether strategic planning has achieved its effectiveness as envisaged. This study has attempted to provide some insights into the strategic planning process of two Singaporean government secondary schools - in the hope that the process of strategic planning may play a more influential part in school improvement.

Appendix A

Pilot Study

Two pilot studies were conducted prior to the commencement of the interviews and data collection at the two government schools. The purpose of the pilot test was to preview the methodology used, to assist in developing relevant lines of questions about the subjects and issues to be addressed, and to affirm the research design. The intent of the pilot test was for the researcher to discuss with the principal and key personnel the goal and design of the research, to test the types of questions to be asked, and to solicit feedback on the methodology an design. In both cases, a similar methodology was used, that is, an interview guide was developed, the interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, coded, and analysed.

The first pilot test was conducted with a female principal, age 55, with 20 years as school principal. Her school was one of the targeted schools involved in the implementation of the SEM framework in year 2000. There were changes to the original proposed interview guide after the first pilot test was conducted. For example, the original interview guide did not include systematic gathering of demographic information. As a result, questions pertaining to age, sex, ethnicity, etc. were added. Also, the number of interview questions was reduced from more than 20 to less than 12.

With the newly constructed interview questions, two pilot tests were conducted with a male principal, age 53, with 8 years as school principal and a male teacher, age 33, with 7 years of teaching experience and currently appointed as Level Head for English and Literature. The principal was the main driver for the school strategic planning process; whereas the teacher was just a member in the planning team. There were further changes to the

interview questions after the second pilot test. For example, during the pilot interviews, the school principal discussed how he got staff members to involve in collecting relevant data for the SEM, and also issues and problems encountered in executing the strategic plan in greater detail than was anticipated. As a result, this area was expanded. Also, the teacher per se responded strong feelings about a cohesive school culture, alignment, and commitment from teachers. For this reason, the interview guide was adapted to reflect more in-depth exploration of these areas.

It was from these two pilot tests that the researcher had decided to adopt semi-structured interview technique because it was suggested by both principal and confirmed by the teacher that, being Asian, staff in general are more reserved in sharing their opinions freely as compared to the Western culture. The use of semi-structured interview technique would help in opening up the interviewees in sharing their views and experiences.

The pilot test also suggested to the researcher that a time-table visiting the school must plan out strategically. It was through the pilot test that the research got to know most schools have been holding annual planning retreat for all key personnel, normally around end of November or early December.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form Sample

Informed Consent

Project Title

An investigation of the Strategic Planning Process in two Government Secondary Schools in Singapore.

Section 1: Purpose of Project

The purpose of this study is to examine the strategic planning process in schools. The study is founded in the researcher's professional and personal experience in the field of strategic planning. Case studies will be conducted to examine in-depth, two schools that are actively engaged in the strategic planning process.

The researcher will acquire data through a series of interviews which will be conducted with individuals throughout the school. The interviews will focus on each interviewee's observations and experience related to the strategic planning effort conducted in the school.

Section II: Confidentiality Statement

1. The interviews will be tape-recorded. All information will remain confidential and anonymous. All identifying information such as names, areas of work will be excised from the document.
2. The researcher is the only individual who will listen to the tapes. The researcher will transcribe the tapes himself. Once transcribed, the original tapes will be kept locked in a secure location in the researcher's residence. Once the project is completed, the tapes will be erased.
3. Each interviewee will be provided with a copy of the transcription, as well as the final version of the analysis that pertains to their interviews to verify accuracy and protect their right to privacy. The interviewees will have the opportunity to correct the record at any time, including names or events.

Section III: Interviewee's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my consent for participation in this project. I agree to have my interviews tape-recorded under the conditions described in Section II, above.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature _____ Date _____

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Appendix C

Example of Coding System Using Excel Spreadsheet

Transcript	Theme	Major Category	Minor Category	School	Who	Code	Position	Reflective Journal (Interviews)
Question **What are the critical factors that would help to make strategic plan work?** People involved must have passion, and it also depends on how much they believe in it. If they strongly believe in the plan, the results would be good. If the goal is hazy, back breaking, it will finally fizzle out when no one is looking. The staff have to believe; even without a whip, it will still go by itself. When it comes to teaching, many things can't be measured. Teaching, it is basically the passion that counts. One needs to enjoy students. For example, making the	Critical factors	Believing	Team building	W	TYL	WF	HOD	
		Measure	Passion	W	TYL	WF	HOD	Teachers must show interest in students' learning

enrichment program more creative and interesting, that would make students happier and enjoyable, but it may not see grades jump so much. This needs the support from the leadership. They set directions, and also the way they allocate available resources. Last year, I learnt that the school could use the manpower grant to hire staff for administrative support. As a staff, I won't know such fund is available. This helps as we will have more time to do other things.	Critical Factors	Leadership	Set Direction	W	TYL	WF	HOD	Principal is the key to all decisions
Also, every organisation is about the people. It is hard to just work on paper, it needs people to execute.	Critical Factors	People	Team Work	W	TYL	WF	HOD	A good team work becomes critical
Question **What have been the biggest challenges in implementing the strategic plan?**								

It is the time factor and also to prepare youngsters for the next leap. We need to put in a lot of effort; time is a big factor. There are multiple programs in the school; teachers need to be realistic especially when they are involved in programs that run by different departments. Teachers, like students, are constantly challenged. For example, the TLLM policy, it is good, but it takes time to develop new methods of teaching; not that teachers are not willing, we need to prioritise properly, without short changing the students. The school programmes are quite seasonal. For example, Term I is for enrichment programmes, and term 2 to focus on CAs. The school trusts that "LEAP" is a holistic approach, so we cannot throw out any.	Implementation	Time Factor	Expectation	W	TYL	WF	HOD	Coordination of programmes is important
		Realistic	Coordination	W	TYL	WF	HOD	
		Prioritise	Student Centric	W	TYL	WF	HOD	Programme may take time to realise benefits
		Fixed Progamme	-	W	TYL	WF	HOD	This could leave little window for opportunities

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