Singapore has been recognized globally for its high performing education system. What are in your view the most important achievements of public education in Singapore and where would you like to see the country's educational system moving forward?

Singapore has indeed worked very hard to achieve a robust public education system. Policy makers, school leaders, and academics from different education systems have visited Singapore because of our system’s consistently high standing in various international assessments such as PISA and TIMMS.

One of the greatest achievements of our education system is its undeniably critical role in our nation-building process. Our educational policies are planned and implemented with national goals in mind. The public education system is affordable and trusted by parents and the society at large. Schools here are generally seen as safe environments for students to study and develop themselves. Generally, every young Singaporean can get a good education from the public school system.

Moving forward, I would like to see our education system focusing even more on quality rather than quantity. By this, I mean that students are really engaged in learning, embrace a spirit of lifelong learning, and success is no longer solely measured by examination grades. The education system will be able to provide different pathways for different talents to flourish and different aspirations to be fulfilled. Students will be able to find identity, meaning, and purpose through their school lives.

I would also like to see Singapore achieve its aspiration of “every school a good school”. To me, this means that parents trust that they do not need to send their children to an elite school just to be sure that their children are getting a high quality education.

I would like to see that teachers will believe, even more strongly, that they are not merely doing a job in school but they are, as a whole teaching fraternity, contributing to nation-building and the long-term well-being of Singapore. Teachers will
also change their mindsets towards teaching and learning, so that we will succeed in teaching less, so that children may actually learn more.

Education in Singapore was not always great, and its rapid improvement has attracted international attention. What were the keys to the rapid improvement of the country’s educational system?

I think that there were several key factors to our improvement. Firstly, we laid the foundation for sustainable change by formulating far-sighted education policies. There was a strong political will to implement policies with high levels of fidelity, backed by a citizenry that wanted good education for their children. An example of these far-sighted policies with long-term goals was our bilingualism policy. It was first implemented in the 1960s, but it took many years before we saw its fruits. We struggled in the process, but we bit the bullet and carried on. What our pioneer generation has displayed was a spirit of tenacity.

Secondly, to us, education is an investment, not expenditure. We have invested heavily in funding our public education system, hiring good teachers and developing them professionally. We spent the money prudently. We did not cut back on education funding even when there were a few periods of tough economic conditions. This ensured that children would not be denied education when times were hard. Educators also had a stable platform to build their work and consolidate progress. We did not look for short-term gains but long-term progress.

Thirdly, while our education system has started off as a highly centralized one during our independence, we have increasingly adopted a centralized-decentralization approach towards school management. That means that schools in Singapore are strategically aligned with national education goals, while tactically empowered to implement policies to suit their student profile. Therefore, we derived more synergies among schools and at the same time were able to meet the unique challenges of each school.

In Singapore’s impressive trajectory of improvement, what can be attributable to unique cultural, historical, and political characteristics of the country and what, if any, would you consider to be universal aspects of successful system-wide educational reform?

Singapore gained its independence in 1965. It was a poor country then. Therefore, there was a great desire among its people to work hard for survival. Education was seen as the way towards a better future. The subsequent years of political stability in the country allowed its people to pull together to work towards common goals. It also allowed education policies to reap long-term benefits.

Improving education is a long process and we have been doing it in a patient and calibrated manner. Even so, change is never really neat and orderly. During the early years of our independence, times were difficult and people were really yearning for change. Change and being adaptable to change became part of the Singapore psyche. This was and is helpful in our journey to improve our education system.

So, in a way, our history and culture are unique to us. On the other hand, long term considerations to education reform, rather than short term knee jerk reactions, coupled with hard work, adaptability to change and a desire to succeed, are ingredients for education success anywhere in the world.

Singapore has been incorporating technology in its education system since 1997. What are key lessons the country has learned about the possibilities and challenges of introducing technology to deepen and accelerate adult and student learning system-wide?

Singapore has been strategically implementing its ICT Master plan in various phases since 1997. We learned various lessons along the way.
Technology is good news. It enables different forms of learning for our children. ICT allows increased interconnectedness, empowerment of individuals, and learning anytime and anywhere. ICT shapes instruction by altering the learning environment and the mode of interaction of learners. But it is important that we do not use technology for the sake of technology. It is a tool, albeit a potentially powerful one. We should focus on the pedagogy that the tool can enable, not on how fanciful the tool is. The challenge, therefore, is for teachers to learn how technology can be used in a student-centric manner to enhance student learning, or to bring about learning that is not possible in the past.

Technology can enhance learning, but it is not an educator. Technology cannot replace a human teacher. Education is about lives impacting lives. It is, to us, a human enterprise of paying it forward. A machine cannot do that. In a world where information can be supplied in an instant, a teacher is more important than ever before to help young people discern information from misinformation, and right from wrong.

The approach to implementing ICT in education is also important. Instead of a top-down standardized approach, we have learned to increasingly draw upon the expertise of the professional teaching community. The professionals in school must be empowered to search for their own solutions. When that happens, natural champions in ICT are more likely to emerge in schools. The innovations will be more organic to the operating context and gain wider acceptance.

The 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis” What are key accomplishments, limitations, and possibilities of education research to advance justice?

I have read the past 2 issues of the “Lead the Change Series”. Others have responded very adequately to this question. I agree with many points raised. Pertinently, the word ‘justice’ can mean different things to different people. Used too loosely and frequently in academic and political discourse, it can become empty talk. One key accomplishment of educational researchers is that they are able to bring issues of social justice to the public’s attention. They highlight the needs of the disadvantaged through their research findings. Researchers in many countries, therefore, are powerful advocates of social justice. However, researchers have to work with policy-makers and other stakeholders to develop a practical way through which justice can really be served.

Many educational researchers moan that policy makers are not paying attention to their research findings. That may be true. But before we ask others to change, perhaps we also ought to examine ourselves as a fraternity of educational researchers.

Take, for example, research about healthy diets. On a certain day, we read a report that says that eating eggs is good for health (essential proteins). On another day, we read another report that says that eating eggs is bad for health (high cholesterol). On yet another day, we read another report that says that eating egg yolks is bad for health and we should eat mainly the egg white. As consumers of research, after reading these different research findings, would we not be more confused than enlightened? So, some of us end up ignoring research and relying on common sense: just eat in moderation!

Therefore, educational researchers who would like to advocate justice have to work together on a common message and find ways to make information easily understood by all stakeholders of change. Otherwise, research findings will just be different voices in the wilderness, crying out for justice but dissipating in the wind. Coordinated good intentions bear more fruits!
Pak Tee Ng is Associate Dean of Leadership Learning and Head of the Policy and Leadership Studies Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. His main areas of teaching, research, training and consulting at NIE are education policy, education reform, quality assurance in education, educational leadership, organizational learning, change management, knowledge management, innovation, complexity, and coaching. He has spoken at many local and international conferences, and has been consulted by schools, school clusters, government ministries, and commercial organizations. He is the author of several books and a good number of journal articles, and book chapters. He has also been interviewed by various local and international media. He can be contacted at paktee.ng@nie.edu.sg.