Values Education Amid Globalization and Change: The Case of Singapore's Education System

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About the Author

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Education is an endeavor that has far-reaching influences, for it embodies development and justness. Its development needs enormous support from society as well as the guidance of policies that serve the imperatives of economic development and social justice. Policy-makers in education, as those in other public sectors, can neither rely on their own visions nor depend on the simple tabulation of financial cost and benefit to arrive at decisions that will affect the pursuit of the common good. Democratization warrants public discourse on vital matters that affect all of us. Democratization also dictates transparency in the policy-making process. Administrative orders disguised as policies have a very small audience indeed. The public expects well-informed policy decisions, which are based on in-depth analyses and careful deliberation. Like the policy-makers, the public and professionals in education require a wealth of easily accessible facts and views so that they can contribute constructively to the public discourse.

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Values Education Amid Globalization and Change: The Case of Singapore's Education System

Abstract

This paper critiques values education initiatives in Singapore, a city-state whose government is ever-conscious of the need to ensure national economic competitiveness in the global economy. In particular, the paper highlights the National Education policy initiative that was implemented in all mainstream schools in 1997. The paper's central argument is that despite a very top-down, technocratic approach to policymaking and implementation, values education policy initiatives will achieve only limited success. This is because the very ethos of the entire education system, as well as wider socio-political factors, militates against the success of these initiatives.

Globalization in its economic, cultural, and social manifestations has been the focus of many educators especially over the past few decades (see, for instance, Hershock, Mason, & Hawkins, 2007; Townsend & Cheng, 2000). Economic globalization with its implications for national economic competitiveness has led numerous governments to re-examine their national education systems with a view to developing specific skills and attitudes that are supposedly essential for preparing young people for success within a knowledge economy. In addition, there is now the emerging literature on how the fruits of economic globalization have not been equitably distributed in various societies. If anything, existing inequities in income distribution

have been exacerbated. On the cultural front, the advent of the Internet and other forms of information technology, with its accompanying rapid spread of ideas across national boundaries, has been viewed as a potential threat to cultural, linguistic, and religious homogeneity. Many governments have renewed calls for education systems to emphasize values education in a bid to strengthen social cohesion and maintain cultural continuity (see, for instance, W. O. Lee, Grossman, Kennedy, & Fairbrother, 2004). However, governments do not always find it easy to reconcile sometimes wildly contradictory functions of schooling. For instance, schooling systems often serve as key sorting or sifting devices to prepare students for their future roles in the workforce, which sometimes leaves them open to accusations of perpetuating social class inequalities. At the same time, in a bid to enhance educational outcomes, some governments have fostered market forces and inter-school competition at the risk of sidelining more humanitarian values.

Singapore exemplifies the case of a country whose government is well aware of the pressing imperatives for economic, cultural, and societal change brought about by globalization (Velayutham, 2007). It offers interesting lessons on how the tensions and pressures of globalization have played out in the arena of the education system over the past decade. On the one hand, schools and universities are constantly being urged to better prepare students for the challenges of the knowledge-based economy. An avalanche of education reforms has descended on various sectors of the school system in an attempt to promote certain skills, attitudes, and behaviors. A wave of marketization initiatives has also swept through

schools in the past two decades. Terms such as "diversity," "choice," and "competition" are now commonplace. On the other hand, there are also attempts in the school system to shore up national identity and to preserve "desirable" cultural traits and behaviors as a bulwark against the perceived undesirable effects of globalization on young people. This paper highlights and discusses various issues pertaining to equity, as well as the inculcation of values and ethics, in a climate characterized by rapid globalization and change. It suggests that at times the values prescribed in the official values education curriculum appear at odds with the social context in which the schools are functioning. Furthermore, there are limits to a paternalistic, interventionist style of education policymaking.

Thinking Schools, Learning Nation

Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has enjoyed uninterrupted political power since 1959 and has developed a paternalistic, interventionist style of governance. Almost every aspect of social policy has been harnessed single-mindedly in the pursuit of economic development in order that Singapore might emerge alongside other "First World" nations (Wee, 2007). The education system, in particular, has received special attention as a prime instrument of socializing the populace into norms of behavior that might better suit the needs of economic development. In the early 1990s, the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned that the educational profile of Singapore's workforce trailed those of its chief economic competitors in East Asia. He claimed as well that Singapore would not be able to compete effectively against the People's Republic of China and India, which offered abundant supplies of low-wage labor

("2 Main Challenges," 1993). The then Education Minister Lee Yock Suan echoed Goh's claims in 1995 and highlighted that the advent of rapid advances in information technology, coupled with increasing global economic competition, would invariably increase income disparities (Y. S. Lee, 1995). A few years later, Goh launched the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) initiative. Driven explicitly by official concern about Singapore's economic competitiveness within the global economy, TSLN included a reduction in curricular content from primary to pre-university levels to allow more time to be devoted to thinking skills and processes, and the revision of assessment modes. A whole list of desired outcomes, such as creative, critical, analytical and flexible thinking, the exercising of initiative, communication skills, problem solving, cooperative team work, and research skills, were announced. Goh claimed that TSLN had to instil a passion for learning among students instead of having them study merely for the purpose of obtaining good examination grades (Goh, 1997b). Several skills, such as creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation, knowledge application, independent thinking, and the ability to work in teams, were subsequently listed in an official Ministry of Education (MOE) document that outlined the final desired outcomes of formal education for every Singaporean (MOE, 1998). TSLN has since become a major policy umbrella encompassing multiple policy prongs such as Innovation and Enterprise, the Information Technology Masterplan, Ability-Driven Education (where every child's potential is supposed to be developed to its fullest), "Teach Less, Learn More," the review of primary, secondary and pre-university curricula, as well as the revision of university undergraduate admission criteria.

Values Education

Along with this emphasis on thinking skills for economic ends, values education policies have also taken center stage over the past decade (as they have over the past five decades). Chief among them has been National Education, which was officially launched in 1997. In 1995, Goh Chok Tong had claimed that:

> [g]iving them [students] academic knowledge alone is not enough to make them understand what makes or breaks Singapore …. Japanese children are taught to cope with earthquakes, while Dutch youngsters learn about the vulnerability of their polders, or low-lying areas. In the same way, Singapore children must be taught to live with a small land area, limited territorial sea and air space, the high cost of owning a car and dependence on imported water and oil. Otherwise, years of continuous growth may lull them into believing that the good life is their divine right …. [students] must be taught survival skills and be imbued with the confidence that however formidable the challenges and competition, we have the will, skill and solutions to vanquish them. ("Teach Students," 1995)

At the same time, the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew commented that:

> thirty years of continuous growth and increasing stability and prosperity have produced a different generation in an English-educated middle class. They are very different from their parents. The present generation below 35 has grown up used to high economic growth year after year, and take their security and success for granted. And because they believe all is well, they are less willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of the others

in society. They are more concerned about their individual and family's welfare and success, not their community or society's well being. (K. Y. Lee, 1996, p. 30)

At a Teachers' Day rally in September 1996, Goh (1997a) lamented the lack of knowledge of Singapore's recent history among younger Singaporeans, as reflected in the results of a street poll conducted by a local newspaper. The MOE had also conducted a surprise quiz on Singapore's history among 2,500 students in schools, polytechnics, and universities. The results proved equally disappointing.

Goh (1997a) claimed that the gap in knowledge was the direct result of a deliberate official policy not to teach school students about the recent political past and the events leading up to political independence. However, he felt that this ignorance was undesirable among the younger people who had not personally lived through these events. He claimed too that these events, constituting "our shared past," ought to "bind all our communities together, not divide us …. We should understand why they took place so that we will never let them happen again" (p. 425). Goh highlighted the possibility that the young people would not appreciate how potentially fragile inter-ethnic relations could prove to be, especially in times of economic recession. Not having lived through poverty and deprivation meant that young people might take peace and prosperity for granted.

Calling on all school principals to throw their support behind this urgent initiative, which he termed National Education (NE), Goh (1997a) pointed out that NE needed to become a crucial

part of the education curriculum in all schools. Emphasizing the importance of nation building in existing subjects such as social studies, civics and moral education, and history would be insufficient. More important was the fact that NE was meant to develop "instincts" in every child, such as a "shared sense of nationhood [and] understanding of how our past is relevant to our present and future" (Goh, 1997a, p. 419). NE was to make students appreciative of how Singapore's peace and stability existed amid numerous conflicts elsewhere around the world. This meant that what took place outside the classroom, such as school rituals and examples set by teachers, would prove vital in the success of NE. Goh announced the establishment of an NE Committee to involve various ministries, including the MOE, in this effort.

The NE initiative was officially launched in May 1997 by the then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Lee claimed that countries such as the United States and Japan, with longer national histories, still found it necessary to have schools transmit key national instincts to students. Singapore, being barely one generation old, therefore needed a similar undertaking in the form of NE (H. L. Lee, 1997, para. 8).

NE aimed at developing national cohesion in students through (see MOE, 1997a):

- fostering Singaporean identity, pride, and self-respect;
- teaching about Singapore's nation-building successes against the odds;
- understanding Singapore's unique developmental challenges, constraints, and vulnerabilities;

- instilling core values, such as meritocracy and multiracialism, as well as the will to prevail, in order to ensure Singapore's continued success.

Lee Hsien Loong called on every teacher and principal to pass on six key NE messages (see MOE, 1997b):

- Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong;
- We must preserve racial and religious harmony;
- We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility;
- No one owes Singapore a living;
- We must ourselves defend Singapore;
- We have confidence in our future.

Several major means were suggested for incorporating NE in all schools. First, every subject in the formal curriculum would be used. Certain subjects, such as social studies, civics and moral education, history, and geography were mentioned as being particularly useful in this regard. Social studies at the primary level would be started earlier, at primary one instead of at primary four. It would also be introduced as a new mandatory subject for all upper secondary students in order to cover issues regarding Singapore's success and future developmental challenges. The upper secondary history syllabus would be extended from 1963, where its coverage had hitherto ended, to include the immediate post-independence years up until 1971.

Secondly, various elements of the informal curriculum were recommended. All schools were asked to include a few major events on their school calendar each year:

- Total Defence Day, to commemorate Singapore's surrender under British colonial rule to the Japanese in 1942;
- Racial Harmony Day, to remember the outbreak of inter-ethnic riots in 1964;
- International Friendship Day, to bring across the importance of maintaining cordial relations with neighboring countries;
- National Day, to commemorate political independence in 1965.

In addition, students would visit key national institutions and public facilities in order to feel proud and confident about how Singapore had overcome its developmental constraints. A further means of promoting social cohesion and civic responsibility would be through a mandatory six-hour community service for secondary and pre-university students each year. An NE branch was established in the MOE headquarters to spearhead this initiative.

To further demonstrate the importance of NE, the key NE outcomes were enshrined in the *Desired Outcomes of Education* document (MOE, 1998). At the same time, civics and moral education syllabi at the primary and secondary levels were revised twice in the past decade. Both syllabi were premised on the key values of respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience, and harmony, and were supposed to be consistent with NE messages. In addition, elements of the *Singapore 21* Vision, which the government had promulgated in 1999, were incorporated in the civics and moral education syllabi (MOE, 2006a, 2006b). This Vision was yet another official attempt to manage the growing impact of income disparities by claiming

that every Singaporean mattered and had a useful contribution to make to society (Government of Singapore, 1999).

Contradictions and Tensions in
Values Education Over the Past Decade

Behind the NE initiative, one can detect a pressing concern among the top political leadership about how, on the one hand, to satisfy the growing desires among an increasingly affluent and materialistic population for car ownership and bigger housing amid rising costs of both commodities, and on the other, to maintain civic awareness and responsibility. A related concern is that the population might translate their dissatisfaction with unfulfilled material aspirations into dissatisfaction with the ruling party.

There is also official concern that social cohesion might suffer, should the economy falter and fail to sustain the high growth rates of the past few decades. Social stratification has assumed a growing prominence on the government's policy agenda, especially in the wake of the 1991 general elections, when the PAP was returned to power with a reduced parliamentary majority. Whereas the issue of income stratification was largely taboo in public discussions up till 1991, there has been growing acknowledgment on the part of the PAP government since then of the potential impact of income disparities on social cohesion. For instance, Goh Chok Tong has acknowledged on several occasions that not all Singaporeans stand to benefit equally from the global economy. He has also pointed out that highly educated Singaporeans are in a more advantageous position compared to unskilled workers

and that there is a great likelihood of widening income inequalities and class stratification (Goh, 1996, 1997a).

Goh (1996) has drawn an explicit link between income inequalities and the need to maintain social cohesion. However, he thinks that "we cannot narrow the [income] gap by preventing those who can fly from flying …. Nor can we teach everyone to fly, because most simply do not have the aptitude or ability" (p. 3). In the late 1990s, Goh introduced the terms "cosmopolitans" and "heartlanders" to illustrate the class divide between the well-educated, privileged, globally mobile elite, on the one hand, and the working class majority, on the other (*Parliamentary Debates* 70(20), 1999, Col. 2284). A PAP Member of Parliament expressed his fervent hope that Singaporeans would not "allow our system of education [to] create a bipolar society of cosmopolitans and heartlanders that will be destructive for nation-building" (*Parliamentary Debates* 71(2), 1999, Col. 87). More recently, these income gaps show no sign of closing and may in fact be widening (Loh, 2007).

This tension between social inequalities and social cohesion permeates the underlying framework of NE. Different emphases are planned for students in various levels of schooling. For instance, students in technical institutes are to:

> understand that they would be helping themselves, their families and Singapore by working hard, continually upgrading themselves and helping to ensure a stable social order. They must feel that every citizen has a valued place in Singapore … (MOE, 1997a, para. 9)

Polytechnic students, who are higher up the social prestige ladder, are to be convinced that "the country's continued survival and prosperity will depend on the quality of their efforts, and that … there is opportunity for all based on ability and effort" (MOE, 1997a, para. 9). Junior college students, about four-fifths of whom are bound for university, must have the sense that "they can shape their own future" and must appreciate "the demands and complexities of leadership" as future national leaders (MOE, 1997a, para. 9).

One sees in these differing messages clear and unmistakable vestiges of the stratified view of society espoused by Lee Kuan Yew more than thirty years earlier. Speaking to school principals in 1966, Lee stressed that the education system ought to produce a "pyramidal structure" consisting of three strata: "top leaders," "good executives," and a "well-disciplined and highly civic-conscious broad mass." The "top leaders" are the "elite" who are needed to "lead and give the people the inspiration and the drive to make [society] succeed." The "middle strata" of "good executives" are to "help the elite carry out [their] ideas, thinking and planning," whereas the "broad mass" are to be "imbued not only with self but also social discipline, so that they can respect their community and do no spit all over the place" (K. Y. Lee, 1966, pp. 10, 12, 13). It was clear in this message that Lee wanted the education system to act as a key sorting or sifting device to identify and nuture the tiny elite group, and to send clear messages to each student about his or her place in the "pyramidal structure." Lee also lamented the tendency among many Singaporeans to be more concerned with individual survival, rather than national survival, a theme that both he and

Goh Chok Tong later repeated, within the setting of a much more materially prosperous society.

It is somewhat difficult to reconcile this stratified view of society, in which individuals are still being pigeonholed based on their academic achievement, on the one hand, with visions of a socially cohesive society, on the other. The claims of the *Singapore 21* Vision (Government of Singapore, 1999) that "every Singaporean matters" and of "equal opportunities for all," as well as one of the secondary schools' desired outcomes "believe in their ability" (MOE, 1998) tend to be belied by the persistent reliance on academic achievement as a primary indicator of an individual's societal worth, as well as the longstanding belief of the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who continues to play an active role in governance, in the primarily genetic basis of an individual's intelligence, creativity, and leadership qualities (see, for instance, "Entrepreneurs Are Born," 1996; "How Singapore," 2005; *Parliamentary Debates* 66(3), 1996, Cols. 331–345; *Parliamentary Debates* 70(14), 1999, Cols. 1651–1653). For instance, it is only recently that high-profile official attention has been paid to special needs education in mainstream schools. At a more general level, the continued insistence on what some observers have termed a paternalistic, interventionist political system — one in which many citizens are "denied self-designed forms of citizenship performance"; one in which many citizens' mother-tongue languages such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew, as well as the widely-spoken colloquial form of Singapore English have been marginalized by official language policies; and one in which many citizens "have never experienced how their views can

have an influence" — has in practice "disenfranchised" most citizens and contributed further to their obsession with consumerism (Woo & Goh, 2007, p. 111).

The task of holding on to citizens' sense of loyalty and commitment will come under increasingly severe strain as globalization and its impact mean that Singaporeans are exposed via overseas travel, the Internet, and news and print media to social and political alternatives outside of Singapore. Increasing wealth also means that individuals are able to send their children to be educated outside of Singapore, after which work opportunities beckon. Furthermore, the government itself has been calling upon Singaporeans to work outside of Singapore in order to further broaden the country's external economic competitive advantage. It has also been government practice for four decades now to sponsor top-performing students in the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level examinations for undergraduate studies in prestigious universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Stanford. It is perhaps ironic, if somewhat unsurprising, that the well-educated elite, in other words, the very individuals who have been accorded generous support and funding in their schooling in the hope that they will take on the mantle of national leadership, are the most globally mobile, and who are best placed to take advantage of economic opportunities around the world, to the point of contemplating emigration. This policy dilemma was exemplified in the late 1990s when parliamentarians debated the merits of publicly naming and shaming individuals who had been sponsored for their undergraduate and/or postgraduate studies in elite foreign universities, only to repay the government

the cost of their studies upon completion of their studies instead of returning to Singapore to work for the government (*Parliamentary Debates* 68(7), 1998, Cols. 855–996). A few years later, there were echoes of the "cosmopolitans-heartlanders" issue in the wake of Goh Chok Tong's National Day rally speech about two categories of individuals, the "stayers" (Singaporeans who were "rooted to Singapore") and the "quitters" ("fair weather Singaporeans who would run away whenever the country runs into stormy weather") (*Parliamentary Debates* 75(8), 2002, Cols. 1110–1201).

Entangled with the question of class-based disparities is that of ethnic inequalities. Data from the population census in the year 2000 indicated that the ethnic Malay and Indian minorities, constituting 13.9% and 7.9% of the total population respectively, formed a disproportionately large percentage of the lower income strata and a correspondingly small percentage of the higher income strata vis-à-vis the majority ethnic Chinese. There is sufficient cause for concern that these disparities will not narrow as the effects of economic globalization make further inroads into Singapore society.

These ethnic disparities play out in the area of educational attainment as well. Ethnic Chinese are heavily over-represented in local universities and polytechnics, forming 92.4% and 84.0% of the respective total enrolments in 2000, as compared with their 76.8% representation in the overall population. Ethnic Malays (2.7% and 10.0% respectively) and Indians (4.3% and 5.2% respectively) are correspondingly under-represented (Leow, 2001, pp. 34–36). Despite ethnic Malay and ethnic Indian students having made tremendous quantitative

improvements in educational attainment over the past four decades, their public examination results continue to lag behind those of their Chinese counterparts (see, for instance, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2007). A disproportionately large percentage of Malay and Indian students are streamed into the slower-paced streams at both primary and secondary levels. In other words, the educational gap is already present at the lower levels of schooling (MOE programs such as the Learning Support Programme notwithstanding) and perpetuates itself at the higher levels. This gap also translates into ethnic minority under-representation (and working class under-representation) in some of the most prestigious schools and a corresponding over-representation in some of the least prestigious schools.

There is evidence that four decades of common socialization in a national school system have still not managed to eradicate racial prejudice among school students (see, for instance, C. Lee et al., 2004). The existence of Special Assistance Plan schools, which are almost entirely ethnic Chinese in enrolment, has been the subject of periodic discussion because of their perceived ethnic exclusivity (see, for instance, *Parliamentary Debates* 55(4), 1990, Col. 371; 64(5), 1995, Col. 486; 70(9), 1999, Col. 1027; 76(10), 2003, Col. 1635). Moreover, the practice of streaming students into various tracks at the primary and secondary levels within the context of a highly competitive, high-stakes education system has, since its inception in 1979, contributed to prejudice on the part of students in faster-paced streams, and teachers as well, toward students in slower-paced streams (see, for instance, Kang, 2004).

Exacerbating tendencies toward segregation and stratification of students across and within schools has been the marketization of schools since the early 1990s. This marketization drive, which is supposed to enhance the quality of education by increasing competition between schools (and supposedly fostering diversity and choice for parents and students), has been manifested in several key ways. One of them is the annual publication of secondary school ranking league tables that provide summary data of schools' performance in the annual national General Certificate of Education "Ordinary" Level examinations. It took a number of years before the MOE responded to public criticism about the way in which these ranking league tables had made a number of principals focus narrowly on boosting students' examination results. It announced in 2004 that it would be moving away from raw numerical rankings of secondary schools in favor of broad performance bands.

Another response to public criticism of school ranking exercises has been instead to broaden the range of indicators upon which schools are to be assessed, through the use of the School Excellence Model (SEM). This quality assurance model, which was implemented in all schools in 2000, is meant to help schools appraise their own performance in various areas such as leadership, staff management, staff competence and morale, and student outcomes. Beginning in the year 2001, each school is supposed to subject its own internal assessment to external validation by a team headed by staff from the School Appraisal Branch of the MOE. These validations are to be carried out at least once every five years. Part of the SEM involves the

awarding of Achievement Awards, Development Awards, Sustained Achievement Awards, Outstanding Development Awards, Best Practice Awards, School Distinction Awards, and School Excellence Awards to individual schools. These awards reward achievement in various categories such as aesthetics, sports, uniformed groups, physical health, character development, NE, organizational effectiveness, student all-round development, staff well-being, and teaching and learning. 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. This phenomenon may have been exacerbated by the recent introduction in 2003 of the Enhanced Performance Management System used to appraise principals and teachers, a system that puts a premium on quantifiable indicators of personal achievement and contribution.

The competitive stakes have now extended to student recruitment after the MOE initiated the practice of Direct School Admission (DSA) for secondary schools in 2004. The scheme allows schools to apply for full discretion to conduct selection interviews and devise their individual selection criteria to admit a certain percentage of their students before they sit the Primary School Leaving Examination. The DSA will certainly

allow these schools further to fuel their competitive edge by recruiting (and competing for) students with academic, artistic, or sporting abilities, as well as poaching coaches with proven track records in securing medals for their teams in competitions. It will also intensify the tendency of some schools to narrowly focus on co-curricular activities that are proven award winners, to concentrate obsessively on student participation in activities more for competitive stakes than for intrinsic enjoyment, and to exclude students without a proven track record of competitive achievement from participation in niche co-curricular activities.

The marketization of education has further accentuated the stratification of schools within a hierarchy of prestige and the segregation of students along ethnic and class lines across schools. This sort of stratification sits somewhat at odds, as was also pointed out earlier, with the government's claim in the *Singapore 21* Vision that:

> Everyone has a contribution to make to Singapore. It is not only those who score a dozen "A"s, or those who make a lot of money who are important and an asset to the country …. Each one of us has a place in society, a contribution to make and a useful role to play …. As a society, we must widen our definition of success to go beyond the academic and the economic. (Government of Singapore, 1999, p. 11)

Far from supporting some of the desired outcomes of education, such as "have moral integrity," "have care and concern for others," and "be able to work in teams and value every contribution," as well as the communication skills and

team work required in TSLN and the key civics and moral education messages, the marketization of education has tended instead to foster a climate of self-centered individualism that views individuals more as "assets" or "liabilities" according to what they are perceived to be able to contribute tangibly to schools' academic and non-academic outcomes.

In the past few years, there have been belated policy reforms as part of a tacit official admission of the divisive impact of education policies. For instance, there have been moves to blur some of the boundaries across different academic streams at the primary and secondary levels; to encourage greater interaction between primary students enrolled in the Gifted Education Programme and their other schoolmates; and to provide some semblance of upward mobility from lower-prestige academic streams to higher-prestige academic streams.

The various tensions and dilemmas that have been discussed in this section have serious implications for efforts to impart the key values education messages in all students. Further compounding the situation in recent years has been a renewed heightening of awareness of religious differences, especially between Muslims and non-Muslims. In 1999, there was a public controversy over the future of privately run Islamic religious schools following the publication of an MOE report recommending six-year-long compulsory education for all children in state-run schools. This was followed by events in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001 when, at the end of that year, Singapore authorities arrested several Muslim Singaporeans on suspicion

of involvement in terrorist activities. The specter of militant Islamic terrorism is far from over as exemplified by the further arrest of several Muslim Singaporeans in June 2007. In early 2002, another domestic controversy broke out over the MOE's insistence that female Muslim students not be allowed to don Islamic head veils in state-run schools. In the midst of these potential flashpoints, government leaders have renewed calls for all Singaporeans to remain united, and for schools to play their role in fostering social cohesion.

In a sense, the Singapore government has never pretended that ethno-religious tensions have been swept away as a result of various educational policy initiatives (including civics and moral education) and other economic and social policies. In fact, certain government pronouncements may have served (unintentionally) to make the task of forging social cohesion more problematic. For example, the question of ethnic Malay representation in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has continued to remain controversial ever since the establishment of the SAF in 1967. Government leaders have openly stated that Malays are not recruited into certain military units in case their religious affinities come into conflict with their duty to defend Singapore (Hussin, 2002; see also Chua, 2007). In addition, Lee Kuan Yew has stated publicly that Singapore needs to maintain current ethnic ratios in its population in order to ensure continued economic success. These ethnic-based controversies have been complicated in recent years by the influx of new immigrants and individuals on temporary work permits from such countries as the People's Republic of China and India. Permanent residents formed 10.1% of the total

population in 2005 (Department of Statistics, 2006, p. 3), whereas "non-residents" (which includes foreign students and transient workers, among other categories) comprised 18.3%. These new immigrants have had at times to cope with resentment among some Singaporeans over perceived competition for jobs, a phenomenon that has been acknowledged by Goh Chok Tong (see Loh, 2007). The schools will have to grapple with the task of socializing the children of the new immigrants, as well as how values education ought to play out in the case of students whose parents may have no intention of seeking Singapore citizenship, but who have chosen nevertheless to enroll their children in Singapore schools. Even in the schools arena, there is worry among some parents, teachers, and local students about the added competitive element that talented foreign students are perceived to represent (see, for instance, Quek, 2005; Singh, 2005).

At the same time, the question of national vulnerability in terms of resource constraints has leapt to the forefront of public consciousness in recent years, adding further urgency to the task of values education, and perhaps complicating the task of values education by fostering a perpetual siege mentality among the populace. In particular, the governments of Malaysia and Singapore have been unable to agree on the terms under which Malaysia will continue to supply the bulk of Singapore's water needs. The two governments were until recently embroiled in a territorial dispute over an island, Pedra Branca, lying between the two countries.

On a more practical note, it is not always easy to get teachers and students to accord sufficient importance to values

education amid the general scramble to prepare students for examinations within a highly competitive education system, a trend which shows few signs of abating even amid the TSLN rhetoric about critical and creative thinking. As Chew (1997) has pointed out:

> … there is a conflicting moral orientation in parts of the written curriculum that socialises Singaporean pupils to behave in a very individualistic and self-serving way in their relationships with other people. The message is clear: if an individual and a small nation-state are to survive in a highly competitive world, then they must work smartly and try to "keep ahead of the pack." Herein lies the strongest driving force in Singapore society, a force that encourages unbridled competition and selfish individualism, and one that is reflected in the education system. The school programme poses some dilemmas to its pupils. Given the reward structure of the wider society, pupils are responding in an expected way. In this sense, the whole educational system is geared towards sustaining a competitive ethos rather than an ethos of cooperation and caring for others. An important consequence is that much of the effort put in by the school to give pupils a balanced education is in danger of being nullified by the entrenched value system. (pp. 90–91)

Attempting to quantify the success of values education initiatives (which essentially involve intangible emotional attitudes and beliefs) through the collection of hard data for the annual SEM reports leads more often than not to students chalking up the necessary hours of community service or attending school-mandated activities for the sake of complying with school requirements rather than undertaking these activities in the genuine spirit of helping one's fellow citizens (see, for instance,

Tan, 2005). The Singapore government has over the years instituted a system of incentives and disincentives to goad citizens into complying with official policies (K. Y. Lee, 1966). There is therefore the danger that schools might treat community service as yet another means to compete for national trophies and awards for schools that have chalked up tangible, quantifiable indicators in terms of community service or for NE, and might not manage to evoke genuine, intrinsic passion for the objectives of NE or civics and moral education on the part of students.

Another concern with regard to values education in Singapore is exactly how comfortably it sits within the TSLN initiative. One might argue that the patriotic nature of NE, for example, requires a certain degree of convergence among teachers and students in terms of the emotions and passions that are officially deemed desirable. In other words, a common set of responses is deemed more worthy than all others. However, it might be said that this sort of convergence of thought is somewhat incompatible with the sort of critical thinking skills that TSLN would appear to encourage.

Conclusion

The Singapore case is instructive for other countries as they grapple with reforms to their values education programs in direct response to the challenges posed by globalization. Despite a whole flurry of values education initiatives (e.g., NE, civics and moral education) over the past decade, this paper has shown how the rhetoric of these initiatives often appears at odds with the reality of school life in the light of other policy initiatives.

Most fundamentally, the education system has not strayed far from the fundamental sorting and sifting function assigned to it at the start of PAP rule five decades ago. Such a divisive function is hard to reconcile with rhetoric about inclusiveness and valuing every individual equally. The introduction of market values into schools has further served as a differentiating mechanism within and across schools, at times working against key values education messages rather than in consonance with them. Another lesson from Singapore is that despite the best efforts of an interventionist state that believes in a technocratic, state-directed manner of policy implementation, policy goals often remain elusive. This gives rise to repeated reform initiatives that very often sound repetitive in their rhetoric, which may lead to reform fatigue among school principals, teachers, and students over time. In the meantime, the various challenges posed by globalization, such as the growing income stratification and the influx of large numbers of non-local-born residents, show little sign of disappearing from the public agenda.

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