Compulsory education in Singapore – who benefits?

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Compulsory education in Singapore – who benefits?

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Compulsory education was legislated in Singapore in 2000. This came several decades after the attainment of universal primary education and after numerous assertions on the part of the government that such legislation was unnecessary. Also interesting is that the period of compulsory education was limited to six years. The article discusses the background to the introduction of the compulsory education legislation and highlights ongoing tensions as the Singapore state attempts to grapple with the role of education in economic development and social cohesion.

Keywords: compulsory education; Singapore

Introduction

The overwhelming majority of countries and territories covered by UNESCO’s World Education Report 1998 reported provision of compulsory education in the year 1995. The duration of compulsory education varies from 3 to 12 years, with most industrialized nations providing for 9 or more years. Of the 186 countries and territories for which data were available, only 16 did not have this provision: Botswana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Netherlands Antilles, Bhutan, Lebanon, Maldives, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands (UNESCO, 1998, pp. 132–135). One of the main supporting arguments for enforcing compulsory education centres around education being a basic human right. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to education” and that “elementary education shall be compulsory” (cited in UNESCO, 2000, p. 16). Other arguments include protecting children from parental ignorance regarding the benefits of education; improving both individual and national economic productivity; and socializing children with a view to enhancing social cohesion.

At the same time, several arguments have been raised in opposition to the imposition of compulsory education. These include the ultimate right and responsibility of individual parents to make choices and decisions concerning their children’s welfare. It has also been pointed out that compulsory education should not be confused with compulsory schooling (Wong, 1997). The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states clearly that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (cited in UNESCO, 2000, p. 16). At the same time, the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognize the parental right to decide on how children should be educated (Petrie, 2001; UNESCO, 2000, p. 20). Education can take place in a variety of settings, including the

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home, libraries, museums, exhibitions, and can be conducted by various individuals such as parents, friends, neighbours, or relatives (Petrie, 2001). Some parents consider home education more suitable than formal school education for their children. Their reasons include the inability of mass schooling systems to cater to their children’s individual needs, and an incompatibility between personal ethical or religious beliefs and those of mass schooling systems (Apple, 2000). Compulsory education in schools may also be at odds with personal autonomy, especially in the case of older children. In other words, equating compulsory education with compulsory schooling may lead to a decrease in the variety of options open to parents and children. State concerns over curbing child labour and truancy may adversely impact on the fundamental rights of those parents who are genuinely keen and able to provide alternative modes of education for their children. The rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minority communities to enjoy an education in keeping with their own cultural beliefs also add to the complexity of educational provision (Spring, 2000). These arguments in favour of greater diversity are countered by those who feel that the trend towards educating children outside of mass schooling systems, which provide a common reference point for all children, represents part of a move towards wider societal fragmentation. Concerns have also been voiced over the adequacy of such alternative modes of education in preparing children for adult citizenship and for participation in a modern economy (Apple, 2000; Hill, 2000).

Despite the passing of over 50 years since the right to education was affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and despite considerable expansion of school enrolments across the world, there are still less developed countries where compulsory education laws have not managed to ensure universal school attendance. A majority of the out-of-school children are girls. Many of these countries continue to face basic problems of providing equal access to schools and financing and resourcing schools. A related question involves the duration of compulsory education. If education is viewed as a right, how many years of compulsory education can states realistically promise without straining their financial and material resources (UNESCO, 2000)?

My article will trace the course of official policy debate surrounding the introduction of compulsory education in Singapore. It may appear odd to the observer that a relatively wealthy country such as Singapore has only recently, in the year 2000, decided to enforce six years of compulsory education in state-run schools beginning in the year 2003. This government decision has come after more than 30 years of official insistence that compulsory education was unnecessary in Singapore. It also comes at a time of almost universal attendance at both primary and secondary levels of schooling, and at a time when Singapore’ government has been announcing the relative success of its education system. Among the questions to be addressed in this article are:

- What factors led to the imposition of compulsory education?
- What reasons had the government previously been offering against the imposition of compulsory education?
- Why was the duration of compulsory education limited to six years despite the government’s publicly stated desire to provide every child with at least 10 years of education?
- What exemptions were provided in the compulsory education legislation?
- Why were these exemptions made?
- What practical differences will this legislation make to the education of different individuals and groups in Singapore?
Some of the interesting issues that emerge in the Singapore case include the balance between state responsibility for educational provision, on the one hand, and parents’ rights to choose the most suitable means of education for their children, on the other hand. The new compulsory education legislation has imposed hitherto non-existent controls on parents’ rights to homeschooling. Parents’ rights to choose an education in Islamic religious schools have also been curbed through the imposition of enrolment limits on these schools. This is in turn related to another issue, namely, the right of religious minorities to choose to educate their children in accordance with their individual beliefs, which in turn touches on the balance between allowing for diversity and choice, and fostering common socializing experiences for all children in mainstream schools.

Next, the government has openly acknowledged that six years of compulsory education in state-run schools is neither adequate nor ideal for the dual purposes of preparing students for the knowledge-based economy and for the fostering of social cohesion. Furthermore, the imposition of six years does not square with the government’s stated desire to provide at least 10 years of general education to every child. It should be borne in mind that it was not for a lack of financial resources that a 10-year period of compulsory education was not decided upon. The article attempts to explicate the various political and social factors that led to this six-year duration being chosen instead. Finally, a detailed examination of the compulsory education debate and resulting legislation reveals that the actual impact of this legislation on increasing attendance in state-run schools will probably be relatively insignificant. Rather, it becomes evident that the major impact will be on the future survival of privately run Islamic religious schools.

Universal education without compulsory education

One of the major developmental tasks undertaken by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) when it first came to power in 1959 was the expansion of both primary and secondary schooling opportunities. Education was supposed to serve twin objectives: meeting national economic needs and promoting social cohesion in a multi-cultural society. The party also undertook to provide equality of opportunity for education to all Singapore citizens (PAP, 1959a, 1959b). In 1963, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the attainment of 6 years’ free universal primary education for all Singapore citizens (Parliamentary Debates, March 27, 1963, 20:1, col. 18; November 29, 1963, 22:3, col. 122). Schooling was provided almost entirely through government-run and government-aided schools, as the government restricted attendance in international schools to children with at least one non-Singaporean parent. MOE also undertook a rapid policy of standardization across all government-run and government-aided schools in terms of curricula, duration of schooling, examinations and teacher qualifications and salaries. However, no compulsory education legislation was enacted. In the 1960s and 1970s, two PAP Members of Parliament (MPs) asked the Minister for Education to consider introducing compulsory primary education (Parliamentary Debates, December 16, 1966, 25:11, col. 791; December 2, 1971, 31:8, col. 373). The then Minister replied that such legislation was unnecessary since more than 97% of each six-year-old age cohort were attending government-run or government-aided schools (Parliamentary Debates, December 2, 1971, 31:8, cols. 373–374).

After almost 20 years of quantitative expansion, qualitative cracks were beginning to show. In 1978, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister chaired a committee to undertake reform of the education system (Goh, 1979). The committee’s report raised troubling concerns about large numbers of premature school leavers and failures in national primary- and secondary-level examinations, and the low literacy levels
of many school leavers. Only 29% of each primary one cohort progressed to secondary school, with 14% surviving to the pre-university level, and 9% eventually enrolling in universities or polytechnics (chap. 3, p. 2). These figures compared unfavourably with those in France, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and Japan. The report claimed that some affluent nations such as the United Kingdom and Japan avoided high dropout and failure rates through the provision of compulsory education. This report marked a watershed in Singapore’s education system as it led to the introduction of streaming at the end of three years’ primary schooling (beginning with the 1979 Primary 3 cohort) and at the beginning of secondary schooling (beginning with the 1980 Primary 6 cohort). However, no mention was made of making education compulsory as a means of reducing school dropout rates.

In the wake of the phasing out of labour-intensive industries and the concurrent introduction of high-tech industries, scattered requests continued to be made by PAP MPs in the early 1980s for education to be made compulsory in order to ensure higher skill levels in the labour force (Parliamentary Debates, March 15, 1982, 41:9, cols. 920–922; August 31, 1982, 42:2, cols. 97–98). The Minister of State for Education responded with statistics showing that the proportion of children between ages 7 and 12 who were not enrolled in state-run or government-aided schools was below 3%. He felt the imposition of compulsory education in many countries had not necessarily ensured all children left school educated or skilled. To the contrary, compelling unwilling and unmotivated students to remain in school would lead to increased problems of truancy and delinquency. He cited the example of the United Kingdom having to deploy special officers to enforce compulsory education (Parliamentary Debates, August 31, 1982, 42:2, cols. 99, 199–200).

The 1990 population census revealed improvements in the student enrolment ratio for the 6–16 age group across all three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays and Indians) during the 1980s. The national ratio was 96.8% in 1990 compared with 90.1% in 1980 (Lau, 1993, p. 9). The following year brought more major reforms to educational structures at the primary and secondary levels. The results of another MOE review of the primary schooling system revealed inadequacies in literacy levels of students in vocational and technical institutes. The official report recommended that all students be provided with at least 10 years of general education, six at the primary level and another four at the secondary level, before proceeding to post-secondary education (MOE, 1991, pp. 28–29). That same year, the PAP included as part of its election manifesto a pledge to maximize the full potential of each Singaporean by providing the opportunity to have at least 10 years of “good basic education” (Singapore Government, 1991, p. 33). Once again, no mention was made of compulsory education.

The question of school dropout rates re-emerged in 1993 when the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed concern during a National Dally rally speech in August over 650 students in the 1985 primary one age cohort who had left primary school prematurely: “Some may think that 650 children dropping out of a cohort is no big deal; it is only 1.7 percent of the cohort. But for me, that is 650 too many” (The Straits Times, 1993a). Goh also pointed out the relatively higher dropout rate of the Malay minority community (5.4%) compared to the Chinese (1%) and Indians (2.9%). This official concern over Malay educational achievement vis-à-vis that of the non-Malays had resulted in the formation of Mendaki, a Malay/Muslim community-based self-help group, in 1982 to work on strategies to improve Malay/Muslim educational performance (Tan, 1995). The government had been providing Mendaki with financial and infrastructural support, and had extended similar support when equivalent groups were established in the Chinese and Indian communities in the early 1990s. Goh urged all the self-help groups to help MOE reduce dropout rates.
He pointed out that Singapore’s unskilled labour could not continue to remain competitive alongside millions of unskilled workers elsewhere in the East Asian region. The following month, Goh reiterated his belief that dropout rates among primary and secondary school students (2.6% and 4.1% respectively) were “high and unacceptable”. The dropout rate of the 1981 Primary 1 cohort had not improved over that of the 1976 Primary 1 cohort and had in fact increased among the Malays and Indians (The Straits Times, 1993b). At about the same time, the Senior Minister (and former Prime Minister) Lee Kuan Yew compared the educational profile of Singapore’s labour force unfavourably with those of Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan (Zuraidah, 1993).

That same year, the debate over compulsory education re-emerged in Parliament and continued for over a year. This time, an opposition MP asked how the target of 10 years of general education was to be achieved in the light of press reports of non-attendance at school and school dropouts. Another MP asked if 10 years of compulsory education could be introduced. Yet another opposition MP noted that the government lacked neither the facilities nor the funds to implement compulsory education. The then Education Minister Lee Yock Suan appeared more upbeat than Goh and Lee, claiming that “the drop-out rate [of 6–7% of an age cohort at the end of 10 years of schooling] is very low, especially in the primary school stage” and that “our situation is under control”. He claimed that there was no point forcing unmotivated children to remain in school. Compulsion was not as effective as principals and teachers counselling and persuading parents and students of the benefits of remaining in school. The latter was already being undertaken in schools. Lee assured Parliament that the Education Ministry would work with the three community-based self-help groups in order to strengthen efforts to reduce dropout rates. He admitted that there was no official mechanism for tracking those students who had not enrolled for primary school. Lee insisted that compulsory education would require “a whole army of officers” to track down truants, and that many countries had not been able effectively to enforce compulsory education legislation. Singapore’s school attendance rates compared favourably with those in countries with such legislation. “We can have a law against littering, but people are still littering. We can have a law against illegal parking, but people are still parking illegally” (Parliamentary Debates, February 26, 1993, 60:6, cols. 482–486; December 3, 1993, 61:13, cols. 1208–1212; March 10, 1994, 62:10, cols. 824–854).

Towards compulsory education

It was not until 1999 that the pace and intensity of the debate heated up considerably. In the first half of the year, Goh Chok Tong reiterated his government’s commitment to developing the full potential of every citizen and to providing equal educational opportunities. These pledges were made as Goh launched the government’s Singapore 21 vision of the country’s future. At the centre of this vision was the ideal that “every Singaporean matters” and that “every Singaporean has a contribution to make to Singapore” (Singapore Government, 1999a, p. 11). In August 1999, the question of compulsory education was raised yet again by an MP who enquired about the number of children who had not registered for primary school enrolment. In his reply, the Education Minister Teo Chee Hean provided detailed information regarding the 1677 children (between 2% and 3% of the relevant age cohort) who had not registered for primary one during the 1997 registration exercise. Teo informed Parliament that the Education Ministry had a mechanism for attempting to locate non-registrants, including sending letters to parents and making home visits. About 28% of this total number could not be located at all because the
parents’ addresses were unavailable, parents could not be contacted at their last known addresses, or the child’s whereabouts were unknown after the parents had divorced.

While acknowledging that children who did not attend schools would be disadvantaged as Singapore attempted to become a knowledge-based economy, Teo rejected the idea of introducing compulsory education by providing two arguments against it. The first had been repeated by his predecessors, namely, legislation would not in itself ensure attendance, much less motivation. Instead, enforcement would bring along its own set of problems. Jailing or fining parents might act to the detriment of the child and the family instead of solving the root problems underlying non-attendance in school. How could the children who were uncontactable be compelled to attend school? The second argument involved striking a balance between the state’s responsibility and parental responsibility. Parents had the ultimate responsibility to decide to send their children to school, and compulsion would undermine parental responsibility. Teo pledged that any Singaporean child aged between 6 and 17 years who wanted an education in a mainstream primary or secondary school would be assured of a place. As his predecessor Lee had done, Teo stressed that the number of school dropouts had declined steadily over time and that principals and teachers were actively trying to reduce dropout rates (Parliamentary Debates, August 4, 1999, 70:17, cols. 1893–1901, 1985–1986; September 6, 1999, 70:20, cols. 2277–2278).

A firm and sudden turn in favour of compulsory education came in October 1999 when Goh Chok Tong addressed Parliament during the debate on the Singapore 21 vision. Goh felt that in order for Singapore to attain its vision of building a first-world economy, every Singaporean had to be provided the opportunity to develop his or her potential to the fullest. School dropout rates had therefore to be reduced. Goh claimed to be shocked by the 1500 or so children who failed to register for primary one in national (i.e., government-run and government-aided) schools each year. Goh ordered the Education Ministry to consider introducing compulsory education, saying that he was personally in favour of at least four years of compulsory primary education. “Beyond that, if a child does not want to study, or wants to drop out, there is little we can do” (Parliamentary Debates, October 13, 1999, 71:4, cols. 346, 350–351).

A further, more controversial dimension to the debate was added when Goh addressed Malay community leaders between October and December 1999 (Goh, 1999a, 1999b). He added a further reason behind his decision to push for the introduction of compulsory education. Goh claimed that having all Singaporean children enrolled in national schools would contribute to “reducing the fault lines” in a multi-racial, multi-religious society by exposing children to a common socializing experience. He recognized the concern his proposal had caused among substantial sections of the Malay/Muslim community because of its potential impact on enrolment in madrasahs (Islamic religious schools). These six full-time madrasahs, some of which offered classes from primary to pre-university levels, were each privately run and received financial assistance from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). The main role of these madrasahs was to provide the local Muslim community with Islamic religious scholars and teachers. They were relatively poorly funded vis-à-vis national schools, offered lower teacher salaries and had lower examination pass rates compared to national schools. After several decades of declining enrolments in the face of growing Malay/Muslim enrolments in national schools, these schools experienced a resurgence in enrolments beginning in the mid-1980s and lasting right to the end of the 1990s. Despite this resurgence, their enrolments constituted no more than 4–5% of each Malay/Muslim primary school age cohort. Commonly cited reasons for enrolling children in madrasahs included the desire for an Islamic school environment
in order to provide a sound moral environment; the provision of Islamic religious knowledge and Arabic language alongside secular subjects such as English language, mathematics and science; and the ability of female students to dress modestly, something denied them in national schools. A growing number of these students were participating in national primary and secondary level terminal examinations and making transitions to the secular national school system after completing their *madrasah* education. The *madrasahs* were even part of an Information Technology Plan launched by the MUIS in 1998 (Ahmad, 1999a; Parliamentary Debates, April 15, 1999, 70:11, cols. 1279–1282; Salim, 1989; Siti, 1999a; Zuraidah, 1994, 1998).

In his speeches, Goh stressed repeatedly that the government had no intention of closing the *madrasahs*. After acknowledging that *madrasahs* fulfilled an important role, Goh noted that a significant proportion of the children who had not registered for primary schools had enrolled in full-time *madrasahs*. He asked the Malay community to consider how many religious scholars and teachers were truly needed, and whether growing *madrasah* enrolments would augur well for Malay preparedness in a knowledge-based economy. The debate had to extend beyond standards, curricula and examination results in *madrasahs* to encompass the future of the Malay/Muslim community itself. He felt that a superior alternative to full-time *madrasah* education would be a sound grounding in secular education complemented by out-of-school part-time religious education. Although the Malays had made considerable progress in improving examination pass rates since the 1980s, their results continued to lag behind the national average, and the community had a long way to go before it was ready for a knowledge-based economy.

Goh’s speeches came on the heels of similar concerns that had been expressed in 1997 by the Education Minister, who had highlighted the fact that more Malays were opting out of national schools compared to the Chinese and Indians. Teo had claimed that these children would not be able to integrate successfully into Singapore’s society and economy, “or learn to cooperate and compete as part of the Singapore team, or think critically, or be discerning about ideas and people” (Koh, 1997). *Madrasahs* had been also been at the forefront of a heated public debate carried out through the “Letters to the Editor” section of *The Straits Times*, the main English-language daily newspaper, between April and May 1999. This debate centred around whether *madrasahs* were encouraging and perpetuating ethnic segregation; whether *madrasahs* were providing an adequate education; whether Muslim parents had the right to choose a *madrasah* education for their children; and why Special Assistance Plan schools, run by the state and almost exclusively ethnically Chinese in student enrolment, were worthy of government funding while *madrasahs* were not. Among the participants in this debate were the Senior Minister’s press secretary and the Association of Adult Islamic Religious Students (PERDAUS) (see, e.g., Ahmad, 1999a, 1993b; Hassan, 1999; Ismail, 1999; Yeong, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). The debate over *madrasahs* was potentially intractable since Article 16(2) of the Singapore Constitution guarantees every religious group “the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and provide therein instruction in its own religion”. Furthermore, Article 152(2) states that:

> The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language. (Singapore Government, 1999b)

Just two months before Goh’s speech in parliament in favour of compulsory education, he had asked Abdullah Tarmugi, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, to work with
the MUIS, Mendaki and the madrasahs to conduct a study on madrasah school leavers.
Goh voiced his concern over the fact that an average of 65% of madrasah students had left secondary school prematurely over the previous three years (The Straits Times, 1999c). So potentially touchy was this suggestion that Abdullah had immediately to pledge that the study was aimed at improving madrasahs and not at exposing their flaws and shutting them down (The Straits Times, 1999d). In the wake of Goh’s speech, five of the six full-time madrasahs announced the formation of a joint committee to study the implication of compulsory education for their future role (Siti, 1999b). The Malay PAP MPs and the MUIS also began discussions on how to ensure the continued relevance of madrasahs (Ahmad, 2000a).

Meanwhile, the Education Minister appointed a 12-member Committee on Compulsory Education in December 1999 with the Senior Minister of State for Education (a junior cabinet post) as its Chair. The other members included principals of national schools, MPs (none of whom were from opposition parties), the Chief Executive Officer of Mendaki, and senior civil servants from MOE and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports. Over the course of the next six months, the Committee worked with the Feedback Unit of the Community Development and Sports Ministry to conduct closed-door discussions with members of the public, community leaders and representatives of various interest groups. Although the official terms of the reference of the Committee included studying the need for, and feasibility of introducing compulsory education, there was little doubt that its introduction was a fait accompli, given the personal backing accorded by the Prime Minister, and the composition of the Committee. Even the phrasing of the terms of reference was heavily loaded in favour of adoption:

How implementing CE [compulsory education] could contribute to achieving the two key objectives in national schools: ... First, to give our children a common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education and training that will prepare them for a KBE [knowledge-based economy]; and ... Second, to give our children a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000, p. 1).

The only major unknown outcomes were its exact duration, and whether any exemptions would be granted, and if so, to whom.

Even as the Committee was in the process of soliciting public views and deliberating on its findings, the debate continued unabated, undoubtedly with some effect on the nature of the Committee’s report. Midway between the Committee’s formation and the publication of its report in July 2000, the Vice-Chairman of the Committee, a PAP MP, briefed Parliament on the progress of its work. Among the prevalent opinions expressed at the dialogue sessions held with the public was that four years of compulsory education, as suggested by the Prime Minister, was inadequate. Six years was regarded as a minimum, with 10 cited instead as an ideal. Several parents of homeschoolers were adamant that their parental right to choice not be denied them, and asked that a distinction be drawn between compulsory education on the one hand, and compulsory schooling in national schools, on the other. While claiming to respect these parents’ “dedication and commitment”, he said he had pointed out to other participants in the dialogue sessions the risk of societal fragmentation if various communities set up their own schools to educate their children in accordance with their own preferred value systems. “If this means usurping the choice of the parents, most would consider it a price worth paying so that future generations of Singaporeans can live in peace and harmony” (Parliamentary Debates, March 17, 2000, 71:20, cols. 2461–2463).
Most of the debate raged around the future of the madrasahs, with scant attention paid to other issues such as the pros and cons of homeschooling, and bringing special education schools (which were not part of the national school system) within the national school system were compulsory education to be introduced. Little was said either about how the several hundred children who were uncontactable each year might be located and helped to obtain an education.

Dissenting voices with regard to the future role of the madrasahs were not long in surfacing. Pergas, the association of Islamic scholars and teachers, claimed that Goh’s proposal did not give due recognition to the worth of madrasahs as educational institutions. The argument that parents could send their children to madrasahs for a secondary education after attending compulsory education in national primary schools, and attend madrasah classes outside of school hours, was rejected. Such a development would contradict the government’s assertion that it did not intend to close down the madrasahs. Pergas claimed that secondary level madrasahs would die a natural death without the existence of primary level madrasahs, and that primary level madrasahs could always pay greater attention to computer literacy and the English language in order to prepare students for the global economy (The Straits Times, 2000a, 2000b). Majlis Pusat, the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations, pointed out that rising madrasah enrolments were due in part to inflexible official attitudes with regard to the use of Islamic attire in national schools. Furthermore, Islamic Religious Knowledge was not taught in national schools (The Straits Times, 2000b). The MUIS urged the government to do more to allay Muslim fears that madrasahs would be shut down, and claimed that many Muslims felt hurt by the negative media portrayal of madrasahs (Siti, 2000). It announced two alternative plans to allow madrasahs to co-exist alongside national schools after the introduction of compulsory education (Ahmad, 2000b). Both of these plans were immediately and soundly rejected by Pergas (Ahmad, 2000c). Instead, it proposed that madrasahs be made part of the compulsory school system while continuing to remain autonomous, in return for which all of them would ensure that the national curriculum was taught. It also called on the government to provide assistance in terms of staffing and equipment (Ahmad, 2000d).

Goh weighed in at this point with his views on the nature of compulsory education (The Straits Times, 2000c). He claimed that the debate had taken a wrong turn:

The issue is not the future of madrasahs, but the future of a younger generation of Muslim children. Do you want them to grow up all being religious teachers and religious preachers, or do you want them to be trained in IT, to be engineers, doctors, architects, professionals? If the madrasahs were training 100 or 200 students a year, I think we can live with that. But if you are training 400, 500, 1000, 2000 in full-time madrasahs or in full-time religious education supplemented by some secular subjects, what will be the future of the Malay community?

While repeating his point that madrasahs would not be closed down, he said that madrasahs hoping for their students to remain exempt from the requirements of compulsory education in national schools would have to ensure that their students met minimum performance benchmarks in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE; normally taken at the end of six years of primary schooling in national schools). Those madrasahs that failed to do so might have to close down, or continue teaching religious subjects to Muslim students in national schools outside of their official school hours. It was already clear, even before the Committee released its report, that the introduction of compulsory education was a certainty, and that it would be for at least six years of primary education. The madrasahs would also be given time to prepare themselves to meet the benchmarks (Ahmad, 2000f, 2000g). He extended the offer of government help to develop
one of the six existing *madrasahs* so that it could “produce well-qualified Islamic scholars, teachers and officials who are well-versed in English, science, mathematics and information technology”. By doing this, he said, the government would be making an exception to its policy of not intruding into the religious schools (Ahmad, 2000f).

On the issue of Islamic attire in national schools, Goh claimed that the “time is not right” for Islamic attire to be allowed as this would introduce “religious practices into national schools”. The schools then risked becoming compartmentalized, which would in turn impact adversely upon national cohesion. Allowing Islamic dress codes would “spark similar calls from other religions” and “the common ground will shrink over time”. He recalled that Religious Knowledge was removed from the upper secondary school curriculum (just five years after its introduction in schools) because religion had become a divisive issue (*The Straits Times*, 2000d). Goh made no mention of the fact that male Sikhs have all along been allowed to wear turbans as a distinctive mark of their religious faith not only in the schools but also in the armed forces. However, Islamic attire probably carries much more significance than those of other religions. This is because of the Islamic revivalism that has been occurring worldwide, and in particular, in Singapore as well as its immediate geographical neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, both of which have numerically- and politically-dominant Muslim majority populations. Singapore’s Malay/Muslim minority, constituting 14–15% of the total population (Leow, 2001), has periodically been involved in public controversies involving matters of religion, ethnicity, and national identity. This is exemplified by Lee Kuan Yew’s remarks at a public forum in 1999 regarding the gradual development of national cohesion:

> We must not make an error. If, for instance, you put in a Malay officer who’s very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that’s a very tricky business. We’ve got to know his background. I’m saying these things because they are real…and I think even if today the Prime Minister doesn’t think carefully about this, we could have a tragedy. (Ng & Lim, 1999)

Even though the number of *madrasah* students constitutes a small percentage of the total Muslim student population, the intense government concern over them is probably because their potential influence as Islamic religious scholars and teachers might prove greater than their numbers suggest at first glance.

Goh’s assurance that *madrasahs*’ survival was not under direct threat from compulsory education was welcomed by the *madrasahs*, as was his offer of government assistance to one of the *madrasahs* (Ahmad, 2000e, 2000h). Pergas, while grateful for his assurance on the *madrasahs*’ continued survival, urged him, without any success, to rethink his earlier statement on Islamic attire, and to broaden the offer of help to all the six *madrasahs* (Ahmad, 2000i).

### The Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education

As a result of Goh’s airing of his views on compulsory education, the Committee’s report contained few real surprises when it was published in July 2000 (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000). The report began by reaffirming the success of Singapore’s national school system as measured by participation rates in higher education, national examination pass rates, and Singaporean students’ performance in international studies of academic achievement. It stressed the importance of schools in achieving two major goals: preparing students for the knowledge-based economy and in promoting social cohesion. It also highlighted the fact that Singapore’s education system was the object of emulation by foreign education planners and practitioners (p. 4).
The Committee presented a table showing the various categories of children who comprised the approximately 3% of the age cohort that had failed to register for national schools or special education schools at the end of the 1997 Primary 1 registration exercise. It was clear that the major focus of the report was on children enrolled in madrasahs, with relatively less being paid to homeschoolers, and none to the final category in Table 1, namely, those children who could not be located at all.

Chapter 3 of the report began by recommending the introduction of compulsory education in national schools for all Singapore citizens living in Singapore. The chapter stressed that even with the introduction of compulsory education legislation, parents still had the ultimate responsibility to send their children to school. However, the State could be empowered to compel them to do so, and to penalize them for infringing the law (2000, p. 12).

With regard to the duration of compulsory education, there were clear signs of a lack of complete consensus among Committee members. Some felt that 10 years was a minimum period. However, the Committee noted the difficulty of enforcing school attendance among unmotivated teenagers, and of motivating them to complete their schooling. Such students would benefit more from enrolling in vocational skills training to prepare them for employment. Instead, the Committee recommended six years of compulsory education, which it said was a minimum period rather than an ideal one. It claimed the Education Ministry would nevertheless continue to provide 10 years of education for any students who wanted it (pp. 13–14).

On the question of exemptions from compulsory education requirements, the Committee singled out four categories: madrasahs, the San Yu Adventist School, homeschoolers and special education. Some Committee members felt that madrasah students would benefit from attending national schools. There was specific concern over the preparedness of madrasah school leavers for the demands of a knowledge-based economy. The Committee favoured mandating full-time attendance at national schools, which could

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of children not registered with national schools or</td>
<td>1677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special education schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who subsequently joined national schools</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents having financial/family problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eventually enrolled in national schools after cases were referred to the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Community Development and Sports for assistance</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who subsequently joined special education schools (excluding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>those who registered directly with special education schools during the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>registration exercise</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family migrated/living overseas/studying overseas</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children having medical problems and not ready for school</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who have passed away</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who have enrolled in madrasahs</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who have enrolled in private schools</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who are being coached at home</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents could not be contacted from available records and visits to</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last known address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000, p. 35)
be supplemented with *madrasah* attendance outside of school hours. However, the Committee agreed that the power of the State to impose compulsory education had to take into account the concerns of Muslims over the preservation of *madrasahs*. These concerns included the survival of secondary level *madrasahs* were primary level *madrasahs* to be denied the opportunity to enrol full-time students. The Committee’s decision to limit compulsory education to six years instead of 10 (which would have been consonant with MOE’s desire to provide 10 years of schooling to each child) was clearly linked to the issue of secondary level *madrasahs*’ survival. Another sign of compromise involved the Committee recommending exemption from compulsory attendance in national schools on an individual basis for students enrolled in any of the six full-time madrasahs. An important proviso was attached: all *madrasah* students had to sit for the PSLE. In addition, each *madrasah* would have to ensure that its students met minimum performance benchmarks. These benchmarks were the average PSLE aggregate scores of Malay students in the two highest performing academic streams in the six lowest-performing national schools. In yet another compromise, the Committee made use of a MUIS estimate that the Singapore Muslim community would need an average of 110 religious teachers and scholars each year over the coming decade. The current total annual primary one intake in the six *madrasahs* had been about 400 over the past five years. The Committee therefore recommended restricting future intakes to 400.

The San Yu Adventist School, a school administered and funded by the Seventh Day Adventist Mission of Singapore, had not featured at all in the public debate on compulsory education and proved uncontroversial in the Committee report. It provided its students at the primary and secondary levels with a curriculum similar to that found in national schools, with Bible Knowledge as an additional subject. In recognition of the school’s “education service to the community over the years”, the Committee recommended granting students attending the school exemption on an individual basis from compulsory education legislation. In return, the school had to ensure its students met a PSLE benchmark that was set much higher than that for the *madrasahs*, probably in recognition of the relatively better academic performance of San Yu students. As in the case of *madrasahs*, the Committee recommended a maximum limit, in this case 10 students, on future Primary 1 enrolment. This limit was based on the school’s recent enrolment trends.

Homeschoolers proved to be another area in which the Committee found difficulty achieving total consensus. The Committee noted that the number of homeschoolers in Singapore was small, and that most of the parents who wanted to teach their own children at home were Christians who had extremely strong views on the upbringing and education of their children. Although the Committee noted that these parents often used curriculum packages designed for homeschoolers in other countries, it expressed its concern that these children would lack sufficient peer interaction and knowledge of Singapore society. There was also the possibility of societal fragmentation if “too many” parents opted for homeschooling for their children. Furthermore, it was harder to monitor the effectiveness of homeschooling. Some Committee members therefore felt that homeschoolers should not be granted exemption from compulsory education legislation. However, other members felt it would be unfair to penalize parents who obviously displayed keenness and interest in their children’s education.

The Committee’s report recommended individual exemption for homeschoolers on the condition that their parents provide the Education Ministry with full details on the nature and outcomes of their instructional programmes, and satisfy MOE that their children would participate in community involvement programmes and National Education (aimed at fostering national identity) programmes. In order to prevent “irresponsible parents”
from using homeschooling as a pretext to circumvent the school attendance law, MOE would have the right to monitor students’ progress closely, require students to sit for periodic tests, and withdraw exemption at any time.

Turning next to special education, the Committee believed there was no need at all to incorporate special education schools within the proposed compulsory education framework. Students with sensory disabilities and who could be accommodated within mainstream schools were already being integrated within these schools. The Committee felt that children with severe physical or learning disabilities were better placed being educated in special education schools. To enforce compulsory education legislation among parents of students with special needs would be “unduly harsh” as voluntary welfare organizations had yet to complete building sufficient schools and to provide sufficient teaching resources. Despite this admission of inadequacy, the Committee defended MOE’s policy of notShouldering the total cost of funding such schools, but rather of sharing the cost of funding such schools with the National Council of Social Service. It recommended that children who were unable to attend national schools because of physical or intellectual disabilities be granted exemption on a group basis from compulsory education legislation. The report concluded by suggesting the enactment of fines and jail terms as necessary deterrent measures to send a clear signal to parents on the government’s seriousness about enforcing compulsory education. However, care had to be taken so that the penalties did not have adverse effects on the long-term interest of children and families. The Committee recommended an expansion of existing MOE structures and processes to deal with children who failed to register for school and school dropouts. It also recommended that compulsory education be introduced beginning with the Primary 1 age cohort in the year 2003. This would allow the madrasahs and the San Yu Adventist School two years to review their curricula and to train their teachers before the implementation of compulsory education. These schools would therefore have a total of eight years before the first batch of students would be benchmarked against their peers in national schools in the 2008 PSLE.

The government accepted the Committee’s recommendations in their entirety and published the Compulsory Education Act in October 2000. A Compulsory Education Board will be established to administer the enforcement of the Act. The Board will consist of individuals from voluntary welfare organizations, parents’ groups, self-help groups, and other community organizations. During the Parliamentary debate on the Committee’s recommendations, an MP said that the compulsory education recommendations were “limited in scope and myopic in reach”, being confined as they were to the primary level. She urged the government to reconsider extending the duration of compulsory education to reach the even larger number of students who were not enrolled in national secondary schools (Parliamentary Debates, October 9, 2000, 72:9, cols. 893–894). In her reply, the Senior Minister of State of Education, Aline Wong, pointed out two main reasons for confining the duration of compulsory education to six years. The first was the greater difficulty of enforcing school attendance with secondary school students. The second had to do with Muslims’ concerns over the survival of madrasahs. She admitted that six years was:

a practical and workable compromise… We do not pretend that it is the best length of education that each child must have… we know its shortcomings. It is not the ideal. It is not an adequate amount of education to equip you and go right into the workforce (Parliamentary Debates, October 9, 2000, 72:9, cols. 902–906).

Wong said as well that madrasahs that failed to meet the agreed minimum benchmarks within the stipulated timeframe would not be allowed to admit students on a full-time basis. They could instead offer religious education to students on a part-time basis. Wong expressed
her indignation at the claims made by the parents of homeschoolers about the quality of education in national schools:

I do not doubt their keen interest, their good intentions, in wanting to home school their children... But my worry is... are they really able to give the children the best? ... In fact, I was a little bit disturbed with the vehemence in [sic] which they pleaded their cases... they even went on to say that our schools do not provide a good education. They said, once the children go into the national schools, they imbibe the wrong values and fall into the wrong company. Therefore, they are very worried and withdraw their children from school. I think this is not the right perspective on our schools. Our national schools provide a good rounded education. (Parliamentary Debates, October 9, 2000, 72:9, col. 909)

Wong made it clear that the Committee had never had the intention to use compulsory education legislation as a means to improve access to, and support for, children with special needs (Parliamentary Debates, October 9, 2000, 72:9, col. 902). She pointed out that MOE provided special education schools with funding of up to 2.5 times the recurrent cost of educating a student in a national primary school, and supported 90% of the development cost of each new special school. This arrangement was adequate and additional requests for funding and resources could be addressed outside the framework of compulsory education in national schools. In a tautologous argument, Wong argued that:

because we define “Compulsory Education” as education within national schools that provide the curriculum and the total environment that will meet the two objectives of Compulsory Education, special education schools are outside the ambit of the Compulsory Education framework. (Parliamentary Debates, October 9, 2000, 72:9, col. 911).

Concluding thoughts

For more than three decades prior to 1999, and even two months before the Prime Minister ordered the Education Ministry to consider its implementation, the government kept insisting that there was no need for compulsory education in Singapore. It reasoned that school attendance was practically universal, and that compulsory education would prove difficult to enforce. In addition, negative experiences with enforcement of compulsory education laws in other countries were cited in support of its case. It claimed that teachers and principals were already trying their best to counsel students and parents in order to reduce dropout rates. Next, State responsibility should come second to parental responsibility in ensuring school attendance.

Now that the legislation has been put in place, what practical effects will it have on the education of various groups and individuals in Singapore? The new compulsory education legislation will not likely reach the several hundred students each year who fail to register for primary school and who cannot be located by MOE officials. These students formed about a quarter of the 1677 non-registrants in 1997. The new penalties will have little impact on these children’s chances of enrolment as their parents are simply not to be found in the first place.

It might have some impact on the students who leave primary school each year before the end of six years of schooling. The 1998 figure was 183, or 0.4% of the age cohort. More than half of them left during the sixth year of primary school (Parliamentary Debates, September 6, 1999, 70:20, col. 2277). This of course depends on whether Education Ministry officials can successfully locate these students and their parents in order to counsel them and to take legal action against the parents as a last recourse if necessary. However, the students who leave school prematurely at the secondary level will not benefit from the new law. There were 1400 such students, or 3.5% of the age cohort, in 1998 (Parliamentary Debates, September 6, 1999, 70:20, col. 2277).
The new legislation has made the option of home schooling tougher for parents. A major reason behind the Committee’s decision to allow the continued existence of this option was probably the open threat by some of these parents during dialogue sessions with the Committee that they would engage in “civil disobedience” if their parental rights were not respected (Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000, p. 5). This probably meant they were willing to bear the full extent of the penalties imposed by the State rather than compromise on their principles and beliefs. The restrictions imposed on home schooling are unlikely to have any significant impact on these parents’ decision to educate their children at home.

It is clear that the imposition of school attendance laws will not have any impact on those children whose physical or intellectual disabilities exclude them from attending national schools. In the first place, there was never any intention seriously to consider including special education schools within the framework of any proposals for compulsory education. Those children whose disabilities allow for inclusion in national schools, and who are among the small percentage of students who leave primary school prematurely each year, will benefit from the new legislation to the same extent as their non-disabled peers.

It is tempting to think that the major impetus behind the decision to impose compulsory education was the government’s desire to address the rising madrasah enrolments. Most of the debate on compulsory education focused on this issue, pushing the other categories of students to the sidelines. The exemption of students in the San Yu Adventist School did not even stir a fraction of the controversy that erupted over the madrasahs’ continued existence. Even though the relative numbers of Malay/Muslim students enrolling in madrasahs constituted only a small percentage of the Malay/Muslim age cohort, the prospect of most of these students not successfully completing secondary school and subsequently being unable to secure jobs in a knowledge-based economy must have proved alarming to the top political leadership. The ongoing Islamic revivalism at both national and regional levels, combined with the growing popularity of madrasahs despite their obvious inferiority to secular schools in terms of such measures as examination rates and physical facilities, must also have worried the PAP leaders. The imposition of performance benchmarks as a necessary precondition of continued survival will likely goad the madrasahs towards placing greater emphasis on secular subjects. Since closing them down completely would have violated the Constitution, the next best option was to contain their future growth by imposing enrolment limits. Muslim parents who feel strongly enough about the desirability of their children donning Islamic attire will likely continue to turn to the madrasahs as an alternative to national schools.

This last point has been brought home strongly in the first few months of 2002. Several parents insisted that their daughters wear tudungs (Islamic head veils) while attending state-run schools, in defiance of regulations proscribing the use of such attire among students (but interestingly, not teachers). The Education Ministry issued them an ultimatum, threatening their daughters with suspension from school. One of the parents chose to withdraw his daughter from school, while another three parents refused to comply with the ruling, which resulted in their daughters being suspended from school. The Prime Minister weighed in, saying that his government would stand firm in its refusal to allow the tudung to be used, prompting criticism from several Malaysian politicians and Islamic groups about its policy being discriminatory. The controversy was accentuated by the heightened religious sensitivities in Singapore in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and the subsequent arrests of 13 Singaporeans on suspicion of involvement with these terrorist activities. Further compounding the situation was the
re-igniting of a long-standing dispute between the Singapore and Malaysian governments over the supply of water by Malaysia to Singapore. After the Prime Minister voiced his opinion that allowing the use of the *tudung* would be socially divisive and would go against the goal of social integration, the issue of Special Assistance Plan schools being ethnically exclusive was revisited, demonstrating clearly that the underlying sentiments have far from diminished.

It has been seven years since the introduction of compulsory education in 2003. To date, there has not been any publicly available data about any significant decrease in primary school dropout rates. Neither have data been released on any changes in the number of homeschooled children. Also interesting have been the changes in *madrasahs* as they attempt to meet the PSLE benchmarks. Some of them have enrolled their teachers in the National Institute of Education’s preparatory teacher education programmes in a bid to improve their teachers’ credentials. So far, there are no signs that the restriction on the wearing of Islamic attire in national schools might be reversed in a bid to lessen the relative attractiveness of *madrasahs* to more conservative Muslim parents and students. Already, growing numbers of female Muslim students in universities and polytechnics are donning conservative Islamic attire, but as yet the issue of banning such attire has not reached higher education institutions.

The Singapore case is instructive from a wider international perspective. First, compulsory education will be implemented at a time of almost universal participation in national schools, in a relatively wealthy country. Second, it will also be implemented after years of government insistence that there was no need for such legislation. Third, after the official decision in favour of implementation had been made, the justificatory arguments had nothing to do with the fundamental human right to education. Talk of compulsory education serving important goals such as economic needs and social cohesion pales when one considers that the government itself admitted that six years was far from ideal or adequate for those purposes, but instead represented a pragmatic compromise. In addition, the actual increase in attendance at national schools as a result of this legislation is likely to be relatively negligible.

Lastly, the term “education” was equated to schooling in national schools in a manner that automatically meant that alternative forms of education were considered inferior. Even though the government claimed that parental responsibility was primary, its legislation aimed at restricting parents’ rights to homeschool their children or to opt for an Islamic religious school education. Diversity in educational provision was given less regard than the concern over promoting attendance in mainstream schools as a means of fostering social cohesion. The pressing need to impose controls on the *madrasahs* probably overrode considerations about the incongruity of having legislation that neither provided an adequate period of schooling nor led to a substantial increase in enrolments in national schools.

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