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Singapore Education in “New Times”: Global/local imperatives

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This paper critically examines recent education reform in Singapore launched under the rhetoric of “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN). I will make explicit the context and the premises underlying the new state-initiated TSLN education reform. I argue that the re-alignment of education change is a response to the trajectories of (global) economic conditions, concomitantly framed by (local) sociopolitical and cultural-ideological needs. Next, I tease out and critique the pedagogical problems and contradictions embedded in the TSLN education reform. The paper concludes by asking what critical perspectives can be drawn from the Singapore case vis-à-vis globalisation and education reform.

The recent restructuring of education policy can be aptly explained by recourse to an understanding of globalisation. However, we also need to understand the micro-histories, cultures, and politics of local practices of educational restructuring as they are implicated in the multiple flows of globalisation. (Lingard, 2000, p. 79)

Introduction

The impact of globalisation has left no stone unturned; the domain of education is not left unaffected. Globalisation, regardless of how we define it or what stance we take, has direct consequences on teaching and learning, schooling, education policies, and reform. There is a sense that structures of schooling, and more importantly what is taught in schools, is now obsolete or has no relevance to new economic conditions and the techno-environment of the new workplace.

At risk of becoming defunct, schools are rapidly consolidating how and what to teach in the name of reform, premised on the exigencies of the new semiotic economy. These changes are articulated in the ubiquitous rubric of “education reform”, “restructuring”, “innovation”, “curriculum intervention”, “new pedagogies”, and the like, around the world. For example, in the United States, education reform is...
mandated around a sense of crisis evinced by, inter alia, a high attrition rate, a
decline in basic literacy and numeracy skills, high failure of standardised tests,
and perceptions of a general decline in school standards and discipline (Apple,
2000). In Queensland, Australia, education reform, thematised as *Education Towards 2010*,
is orchestrated to address “problems of new poverty, of new student identities,
of new life pathways and changing markets for employment and unemployment”
(Education Queensland, 2001, p. 9). Clearly, globalisation heralds new times where a
new “crisis” brought about by “social, economic, political and cultural changes of a
deeper kind” (Hall, 1996, p. 223) has also affected education and effected educational
change.

Likewise, in Singapore, a new blueprint for education change was officially
launched in 1997 as “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN). TSLN mandates
a new curriculum intervention, which includes the teaching of critical thinking, IT
skills, and citizenship education, called national education (NE), in Singapore
schools. Following the launch of TSLN, new initiatives in pedagogy, curriculum and
assessment, and re-structuring of higher education and education policies have also
ensued. These educational changes, I shall argue, are framed by global/local
imperatives. In other words, re-aligning educational change in response to the
trajectories of (global) economic conditions, concomitantly framed by (local)
sociopolitical and cultural–ideological needs, is an act of tactical globalisation. As I
will argue in this paper, education policies are not only used to solve the anxieties of
the state, they are also used ideologically as administrative apparatus to govern,
discipline, and regulate the Singaporean habitus.¹

I begin the paper by providing a context for education change in Singapore as a
preliminary inquiry to show how a “strong state” takes a technocratic approach to
education policy implementation in the interests of (global) needs and (local)
“identitarian” politics. The narrative of the bilingual language policy serves to
illuminate the micro-politics of a top-down approach to policy implementation, and
to scaffold ideas pertaining to education reform and strategies of governing and of
governmentality. Next, I offer a critique of the policy and tease out some of the
pedagogical problems and contradictions embedded in TSLN curriculum interven-
tion. Finally, the paper highlights the significant changes that have hitherto occurred
in the education system and asks what critical perspectives can be gleaned from the
Singapore case vis-à-vis globalisation and education.

Framing Education Change in Singapore

Education change may take many paths. It can take the form of new curriculum
inclusion, new pedagogies, new assessment methods, change in leadership, teacher
training, language policy, co-curricular emphasis, or even matters of administration.
Education change may also be steered in the direction of “a developmental skills
formation model” (Ashton, Green, James, & Sung, 1999, p. 4) or a model that
pursues democracy, social justice, and equity (New London Group, 1996; compare
Freire, 1972).
Yet any form of educational change does not work from a clean slate; as Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, and Henry (1997) have argued, “There is always a prior history of significant events, a particular ideological and political climate, a social and economic context” (p. 16). In other words, the form and content of education change are invariably driven by a (global) outcome to address the (local) needs and/or problems of the larger society (Taylor et al., 1997). To illustrate this point, in what follows, I recount the implementation of the bilingual language policy in Singapore, which has remained to this day a central tenet in the education system.

Historically, the provision of education was bifurcated along ethnic and linguistic lines. Originally the education system was not a centralised system. Essentially, this meant there were four different systems of education for the different ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English (Hill & Lian, 1995). The fragility of a divisive education drawn along ethnic lines led to a notable division between the English-educated and the non-English educated, whose linguistic capital also determined their social mobility and class. The Chinese-educated felt disadvantaged compared to their English-educated counterparts. Their disadvantaged position soon culminated in widespread student unrest and anti-government activities in the mid-1950s. This prompted the intervention of the government to conduct an All-Party Committee on Chinese Education in 1956 (Gopinathan, 1995; Hill & Lian, 1995). The purpose was to resolve the tension of language policy in the education system. The committee recommended a bilingual language policy and the merging of the separate education systems into one national system. It was decided that English was to be the medium of instruction in all schools, and the other three official mother tongues, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, were to be taught as second languages. The government argued successfully for the teaching of English to remain a priority in schools because it saw English as a (global) vital link to the world of business, capitalism, science, and technology. English also serves as a unifying language as it is a “neutral” language not affiliated to any racial groups in Singaporean society. Therefore, what was a native tongue of the colonial master also became indigenised as a national language of Singapore.

While the government clearly saw the benefits of English fluency among the populace, at the same time it was aware that learning an “Other” tongue also meant opening the floodgates of Western values and undesirable influence. As early as 1965, Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, expressed the fear that English might lead to the de-culturalisation of the population (Hill & Lian, 1995). This time also saw the emergence of the hippie culture, which was seen as evidence of a hedonistic alternative lifestyle that could infect the body politic (Gopinathan, 1995). Therefore, the bilingual language policy was to address a local problem of perceived fragmentation of a cultural/national identity. Studying the mother tongue language was meant to act as cultural ballast to the perceived negative influence of Westernisation which was made accessible through exposure to the English language and the mass media.

This example of a national bilingual language policy illustrates that any form of educational change does not exist in a vacuum, but is motivated by both global imperatives and local cultural politics. Further, education change in the Singaporean
context functions ideologically as an administrative apparatus instrumental in disciplining and regulating the Singaporean habitus and moulding Singaporean subjectivity and identities. The bilingual language policy exemplifies Foucault’s (1979) notion of a technology of control and governmentality for shaping (local) Asian identity and values, while Singapore pursues (global) modernity. The launch of the TSLN policy is also structured along these national imperatives: creating a citizenry with the necessary skills to go global, while maintaining its (local) roots and identity. At this point, I turn to critique the TSLN policy.

**Thinking Schools, Learning Nation: A critique**

It is my contention that TSLN policy is a “curriculum imagination” (A. Luke, 2001, p. 10) that the state has conceived as the solution to the problems of the new economy with its attendant volatile job markets, changing job demands, portfolio careers, and an increasingly competitive international labour pool (Burbules & Torres, 2000). In other words, the premise for TSLN policy is that old ways of doing education were for an old economy. It was time for change, and rightly so. As Kress (2000) has succinctly argued, “in periods of relative social and economic stability it is possible to see the curriculum as a means for cultural reproduction” (p. 133), where education works to reproduce “the stabilities of well-defined citizenship or equally stable subjectivities as a participant in stable economies” (p. 139). However, in “new times”, education systems must explore new ways to cultivate dispositions such as creativity, innovativeness, and adaptability, while at the same time coping with these changes (Kress, 2000). And Singapore does this by tracking the new life pathways of Singaporean students with a national curriculum intervention that incorporates a (global) skill-oriented curriculum that emphasises critical thinking and IT skills and a (local) national education to foster national/cultural identity.

Yet, I argue, the mix of critical thinking, IT, and national education has generated potentially irreconcilable tensions and paradoxes around the role of education in the formation of national identity, the knowledge economy, and the shaping of creative and critical citizens. While critical thinking and IT skills are ostensibly orientated towards the global economy, national education is, on the contrary, a parochial vision that focuses on the local. In an era of globalisation where identities are up for grabs, maintaining an organic or essentialised identity will be increasingly difficult. A hybrid culture and hybridised identities are the new cultural formations in new times.

**Thinking, but Thinking in What Ways?**

When hierarchical structures and an examination culture are the pillars of an education system, how does one teach or learn thinking in an environment with such discursive structures always in place? I argue that creativity will not blossom to its fullest when governmentality is normalised in the Singaporean habitus. Elsewhere, I have argued that critical thinking has pedagogical limitations (Koh, 2002). It is
primarily concerned with methods and the “how tos” of solving problems framed by procedural skills such as analysing, synthesising, extrapolating, evaluating, and so on (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 1999). Instead of a preoccupation with problem solving, what is of more immediate concern is the ability to critique the kind of symbolic systems and semiotic meanings that are inherent in the new semiotic economy (A. Luke, 1998). In a semiotic economy, issues of power structure and relationship, and the discourses that advocate a particular ideological position, are important as they position us and construct a preferred meaning over others. However, critical thinking is disenabling and acritical to such concerns. The “criticality” of critical thinking, I argue, lies in questioning the given, not just solving problems. This will include questioning the power structures and the ideological constructions of truth and belief. The concern with methods rather than the semiotic and symbolic structures and meanings in discourses thus may have limited purchase in the new semiotic economy.

**IT as Skills or a Critical Tool?**

The IT masterplan is not without limitations. While I do not wish to dampen the enthusiasm of this techno-evangelism (Snyder, 1996) in Singapore schools, it is necessary to critique the incorporation of IT in schools with appreciation and understanding. Whereas the objective of integrating IT into the curriculum is to promote independent learning and critical thinking, what seems to be a central preoccupation is computer competence, or what Lankshear, Snyder, and Green (2000) call “competency”, rather than the use of IT as a critical tool. That is to say, students will have the skills to perform computer-related tasks such as saving and retrieving records, designing web pages, and surfing the Internet, among other things. While the acquisition of such skills is important, the potential for a critical orientation to reading hypertexts must not be overlooked. What this means is that as well as being skilled in the operation of computer-related tasks, students must develop technological literacy (C. Luke, 1997), which will have greater transfer in the new technoenvironment workplace.

Developing technological literacy will preclude a simple consumer orientation to the Web. Instead, a critically oriented literacy recognises that no matter how world wide the Web, the information gleaned is far from complete; there is information inaccessible to the learner, and most of the time this is done intentionally for ideological reasons. In this way, the information privileges certain voices and perspectives (Burbules, 1998; compare Burbules & Callister, 2000; McConaghy & Snyder, 2000). Further, students who are taught a critically-oriented technological literacy will be able to question the meaning systems and the sociocultural context in which the text is produced. Moreover, they will have the critical skills to question and critique the power relations embedded in social relations and institutions (Burbules & Callister, 2000; C. Luke, 1997). Developing technological literacy, therefore, moves from an understanding of IT as tool to an understanding of IT as a critical social practice.
The new IT curriculum that the Ministry of Education has charted and implemented is essentially good in terms of the provision of infrastructure and the availability of software and hardware, but I argue that it will have greater success and purchase for the new semiotic economy if it re-conceptualises technology from a functional perspective to a critically-oriented technological literacy (Koh, 2001). There is a contradiction in the outcomes that the IT masterplan endeavours to reproduce: a workforce that is skilled in IT, but lacking in the kinds of critical skills needed for new times. Indeed, while IT is paving the trajectories of economies, we need to remind ourselves that technology per se does not bring about change; it has to be complemented by a change in educational practices (Burbules & Callister, 2000).

**National Education: What’s the catch?**

National education (NE) constitutes part of the package of TSLN. Essentially, NE is citizenship education, but rather than a stand-alone subject it is infused in other subject areas. Ideologically, NE embodies “a production of locality” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 178). In other words, it is a curriculum design that re-articulates culture within its national boundaries in the form of citizenship education. Its pedagogical outcome is, as Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (1997) told teachers at the launch of NE, “to equip … [the young] with the basic attitudes, values and instincts which make them Singaporeans”. This “common culture”, he continues, is the “DNA to be passed from one generation to the next” (p. 1).

Lee’s assertion of creating a common, unified culture through NE should be understood as a direct admission of the cultural anxiety of the state—a subliminal fear that globalisation may bring about the erosion of cultural and national identity. However the view of a common, unified culture and, by implication, a homogeneous, organic identity, which can be transplanted from one generation to another, is problematic. Such a view presupposes that culture can be transmitted in its purity without being shaped and reshaped inter-generationally and by global and local forces. The intermingling of the global and the local will produce cultural syncretism and hybridised identities. Hall (1991, p. 34) contends that globalisation will see “the emergence of new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities”. As it is, Singapore’s ethnoscape is increasingly complicated by the flow of migrant workers. It will become evident that with the global flow of migrant workers in Singapore’s ethnoscape, what is envisioned as a common culture will be complicated by the formation of new diasporic communities and new ethnicities (Koh, 2003). Chun (1996, p. 67) therefore correctly observes that:

> Given the integrative and divisive tendencies of globalization, one could perhaps argue then that the celebrations of difference and re-inscriptions of space which have given rise to national solidarity and cultural homogeneity within one global context might also be seen in other global contexts to produce functional disjunctures, diasporic sentiments and multiple identities.

Therefore, a focus on national culturalism, which NE aims to achieve, is contradictory to the logic of global cultural flow, which is about living together-in-(uneasy)diff-
ence (Ang, 2001). A curriculum that takes this as a pedagogical focal point, I argue, will dislodge the myopic and inward looking construction of a national (local) identity.

These criticisms aside, TSLN policy marks Singapore’s take on globalisation as both a process of (global) material flow and a basis for meaningful localisation within a (local) sociopolitical and cultural–ideological framework (Chun, 1996). As mentioned earlier, TSLN is at most a curriculum imagination, which should be opened to revision and change. Since the launch of TSLN, further changes in the education system seem to be pointing in this direction. It is my opinion that Singapore’s education system has become more flexible and receptive to change because of the instability of the global economy. These changes are ineluctably motivated by a sense of urgency to match up to global imperatives without compromising the local agenda. In the next section, I shall document what I consider to be important changes since the launch of TSLN policy. I will make evident that these changes are framed along the global–local axis.

A Brave New (Education) World: Recent changes in Singapore’s education system

1. Curriculum Reduction

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has embarked on a major curriculum reform in the form of curriculum reduction for all subjects and across all levels following the recommendations of the External Review Team. The committee observed that the school curriculum was overcrowded and there was over-teaching and drilling (MOE, 1998). In other words, the “banking concept” (Freire, 1972) of education was still largely evident in Singapore schools. Because of the mandatory public examinations that students have to sit, teachers are pressed to complete examination syllabi and to prepare students for the examinations. Hence, in terms of pedagogy, there is no time for developing processing skills. Along with the vision of creating “thinking schools”, the committee recommended that schools should reduce their curriculum by 30% for all subjects and across all levels. The purpose of the curriculum reduction is to free up space and time in the school curriculum to promote thinking and self-directed learning; these are recognised as important skills required for the new globalised economy.

2. Assessment

Although examinations remain in the system, how students are tested and assessed has taken on different forms. Students are no longer tested on factual recall. Instead, the emphasis is on higher order thinking skills—hence the use of less predictable and more open-ended questions (MOE, 1998). Open-book examinations have also made their way into the Cambridge Examinations, and are increasingly used as a new mode of assessment at tertiary level. One other mode of assessment is project work (PW).
MOE (2001) recognised that PW is a valuable learning activity. It extends students’ creativity, independent learning, curiosity to explore beyond the boundaries of the classroom and textbooks, research and presentation skills, and learning to work in teams. These are the so-called “high-value knowledge” and skills required in the new workplace (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Green, 1997; Sweeting, 1998; World Bank, 1999; compare Gee, 2000). So important is PW taken as a new mode of assessment that MOE (2001) has decided to include it as one of the admission criteria for local universities from 2005.

3. Inclusion of Life Sciences in Curriculum

Touted as the next big thing, life sciences is said to be an industry that may surpass that of the Internet. As a potential growing field, the Economic Development Board of Singapore has already identified life sciences as a niche industry alongside electronics, chemicals, and engineering. The government has since injected S$1b to push for life sciences and to attract top-notch research and development projects to Singapore. While science education has traditionally been an important curriculum area in the national education system, a curriculum revamp to include life sciences education began in 2001 (MOE, 2000). MOE is taking an integrative approach by infusing life sciences in every curriculum area and at all levels (Davie, 2000). More importantly, the over-arching objective of integrating life sciences into the school curriculum is to equip students with in-depth knowledge and skills so that they can pursue a career in life sciences or apply life sciences knowledge in other fields (MOE, 2000). This in turn will contribute to the development of what is now a (local) small industry in its infancy to a potential (global) hub for life sciences.

4. Diversifying Secondary School and Junior College Programs

In the wake of a worldwide economic slump, which has inevitably hit Singapore, the PM addressed the nation in last year’s National Day message and asserted that Singapore has to “re-make itself”, in order to stay ahead in the competitive global economy. In yet another bold step, MOE (2002) has responded to the call to re-make Singapore by setting up a committee to review the current junior college3 and upper secondary education system.4 The aim is to study the feasibility of providing a more flexible system that offers more choices for the different talents and aspirations of students. This would mean the possibility of modifying the current narrow selection of specialised A-level subjects and including a more broad-based curriculum aligned to the undergraduate curriculum. There is also a possibility of abolishing the O-level and A-level systems for more able students. Students may also be given the option of taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) instead of the traditional Cambridge GCE pathway (Davie, 2001a).
5. Reform in Higher Education

From what used to be just two universities, a third university, called the Singapore Management University (SMU), has been established. SMU is affiliated with the top-ranking University of Pennsylvania, Wharton Business School. Unlike the two older universities in Singapore, SMU offers predominantly business courses. It also follows an academic structure similar to that of the American system. Plans have also materialised to transform Singapore’s oldest university, National University of Singapore (NUS) into a multi-campus university (MCU) system, after the initial plan of setting up a fourth university was abandoned. The two new niche campuses, called the NUS (Buona Vista) and NUS (Outram) respectively, will have course offerings that cater to postgraduate and research in highly specialised fields (MOE, 2003).

In addition to local university restructuring, nine world-class foreign universities have also set up a base in Singapore (Nirmala, 2001). These universities have chosen Singapore as outposts to attract students from the region. Known to be elite in the fields of medicine, business, and engineering, these universities are mostly offering postgraduate programs. Currently, the universities are:

1. Johns Hopkins, US, specialising in medicine and basic science;
2. INSTEAD, the French business school;
3. Wharton, US, specialising in business;
4. Chicago, US, specialising in business;
5. Georgia Institute of Technology, US, specialising in logistics;
6. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US, specialising in engineering;
7. Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, the Netherlands, specialising in engineering;
8. Technische Universität Munchen, Germany, specialising in engineering; and
9. Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, specialising in business.

The intention of these elite outpost universities is to form an education hub in Singapore. Commenting on this new landscape of higher education, Dr Tony Tan, the Deputy Prime Minister who is in charge of Higher Education, remarked that “change has to come as Singapore re-makes its economy” (Quek, 2002, p. 1). The presence of a cluster of first-rate universities here also serves as a magnet to draw business.

A more interesting development is also taking place at the National University of Singapore (NUS). NUS has set up a college in California’s Silicon Valley, known to produce entrepreneurs, to enable its undergraduates to experience a short stint in Silicon Valley. Students in this scheme will work as interns and starts-up, and attend entrepreneur courses at Stanford (Davie, 2001b). There are also further plans to set up similar overseas colleges in Boston, ShenZhen, Shanghai, and India by 2005 (Davie, 2001c).

Discussion

In charting out the recent changes in the “edu-scape” of Singapore, my intention has not been to assess whether these changes are heading in the right direction, if indeed
there is such a thing as a right direction. It is also not difficult to critique and point to the pitfalls of each of the educational changes outlined in the preceding paragraphs. A number of criticisms come to mind. First, it might be argued that the move to reduce curriculum workload is hardly coming to fruition when new assessment initiatives to include project work have been added, negating what was originally to be a curriculum reduction.

Second, the plan to diversify secondary school and junior college programs is targeted exclusively at elite schools. The disadvantaged, such as those who are streamed into EM3 and Normal Technical, are often excluded from the potential benefits of proposed changes. This might lead to the reproduction of elitism and a social class divide between elite independent schools and government schools, and those who are academically inclined and those who are not.

And third, there is no guarantee that NUS’s initiative to induct selected students through a stint at Silicon Valley will produce more entrepreneurs. I would argue that while the support structures and resources in Silicon Valley are conducive to cultivating entrepreneurs, what is lacking in the Singaporean culture, by contrast, is a supportive environment that accepts failures and risks. It is in a supportive environment that entrepreneurs will thrive, rather than a token journey into the heart of the Silicon Valley.

These criticisms are not exhaustive. As one would expect, any attempt at change inevitably and invariably invites criticisms and resistance. Moreover, what are conceived as noble intentions by policy planners are often perceived as pointless “add-ons” by those working at the ground, regardless of the intent of the policies and whether these policies instituting educational change are communicated clearly to teachers. For this reason, we should steer away from alluding to what may or may not work or suggesting better ways of implementing educational change. Rather, I am guided to probe for answers to a more pertinent question associated with the big picture of educational change: what critical perspectives can be drawn vis-à-vis globalisation and education in the Singaporean context?

Capitalism is embedded in globalisation and education reform. The ideological focus of the recent changes is in tandem with a global orientation, at least where pedagogical skills are concerned. What with a critical thinking program, the use of IT, the inter-disciplinary approach to project work, and the journey into the heartlands of Silicon Valley, the pedagogical outcome is made obvious: to produce a citizenry who are conducive and are amenable to the exigencies of the competitive culture of transnational capitalism. In a sense, globalisation is presented as a problem with its attendant economic-related problems such as job insecurity, keen competition, and economic instability, and education reforms are instrumentalised as problem-solving activities. Therefore, education reform, or globalisation for that matter, is not a freestanding element. Embedding capitalism and the question of appropriating modernity (the Asian way) underpins globalisation and education reform in the Singaporean context.

State intervention in education change is writ large in the Singapore case. Whether one considers this an act of political enterprise or economic rationalisation, the state
believes in mobilising education in the interest of nation building. The rate at which
globalisation is happening is compelling Singapore to adopt a more flexible approach
to educational change, despite its reputation for being a traditional, rigid, and
conservative system. Arguably, flexibility and receptiveness to education change
forces us to rethink the role of the Singapore state, particularly regarding its pejorative
reputation of being an authoritarian, inflexible, rigid, and paternal hegemony. What
we are witnessing, I would argue, is a case of co-operation with capitalism's presence,
giving way to a more flexible approach to education reform so as to materialise and
enable capitalist embedding. The recent changes in education, as outlined in the
preceding paragraphs, amount to that. In this regard, contrary to the claim of the
erosion in “the autonomy of the nation-state in all matters, including education policy
matters” (Burbules & Torres, 2000, p. 15), education reform is and will remain the
business and prerogative of the Singapore state. From a pragmatic point of view, a
plausible explanation is that only the nation-state is able to bear the cost of large-scale
educational reform, such as the IT masterplan which amounts to S$2 billion.
Arguably, the returns of such hefty investments warrant the state treating education as
a problem-solving activity, especially in the light of global economic instability and the
crisis of a fragile national identity.

On a related point, education reform can be understood as a governing practice or
as a form of governmentality (Popkewitz, 2000). The effect of education reform is
ostensibly to care for its population. Ideologically, education reform and policies also
work to biopoliticise the Singaporean habitus, that is, to materialise the proper
planning of the state under the aegis of nation building and nation formation. In a
sense, the administration of education policies and practices of reform are inscribed as
a site for the formation of the Singaporean subjectivities: the thinking Singaporean,
with adept skills, and cosmopolitan (global) outlook that casts nets to the world for
economic opportunities yet retains his/her local dispositions of loyalty, patriotism, and
roots in the tides of globalisation. These attributes do not have their own agency.
Neither do they evolve out of a tabula rasa. Instead they require the administrative
practices of education policies, reform, and the ritualised bodily inscription of
schooling to shape and fashion the citizen. On this note:

Schooling [is] a mechanism used by the state to conceptualise and organise a massive and
ongoing program of pacification, discipline, and training responsible for the political and
social capacities of the modern citizen. (Popkewitz, 2000, p. 163)

Therefore, education policies and the practices of education reform are acts of
governmentality and must be understood as a tactical response to globalisation.

While not tampering with the optimism that is often associated with educational
change, I caution that such a large-scale state-centric approach to educational reform
does not guarantee the reproduction of a dominant (educational) culture. In new
times, Kress (2000, p. 134) argues that “reproduction’ is no longer a plausible
metaphor for institutional education and its curriculum”. In other words, the
traditionally-held view that varying inputs will engender an equitable output in
educational terms is no longer tenable, especially in the current tides of changing
economic conditions, where instability and uncertainty are the order of the day. Therefore, the guiding metaphors of curricular aims of educational reform have to be reset to constant flux. Kress uses the metaphor “design” to describe the contingent curriculum for the future. Following Kress, the TSLN policy and recent changes in the education system are an attempt to design the social future of Singaporeans.

Conclusion

The Singapore case illustrates that a national characteristic still frames education reform, problematic as it is. The inclusion of national education as part of the TSLN education reform package gestures to an education reform organised around a revitalised concept of nationalism and citizen loyalty (Burbules & Torres, 2000). This goes to show that even as Singapore accepts that it cannot resist globalisation, it can appropriate (global) capitalism with its national (local) particularities and institutional structures.

Another point raised in this paper is the role of nation-state in education reform. The intervention of the state in education reform affirms the power the nation-state wields to tame the uncertainties of economic development brought about by globalisation. And it does this by using education policies as techniques of governmentality to mould and shape the Singaporean habitus and subjectivities. The Singapore state has for a long time played a key part in making capitalism possible and successful; this justifies the approach that it has to be on top of it all, including matters such as education reform and re-structuring. Yet, as I have pointed out, a top-down approach to education change is not free from problems. Notwithstanding the possible disjuncture between curriculum-as-knowledge and curriculum-as-practice, state-led education reform such as the TSLN policy projects “the sanctioned images of the attitudes, dispositions, and capabilities of the ‘citizen’ who is to contribute and participate in the process of modernization” (Popkewitz, 2000, p. 170).

Notes

1. “Habitus” is Bourdieu’s (1977) term. It is used to refer to the unconscious dispositions, attitudes, and values that human beings acquire as they move through various fields and by being located in their cultural trajectories such as the family, school or a religious institution. Hence, “Singaporean habitus” refers to the ways in which Singaporeans are predisposed towards certain attitudes, values, and ways of behaving because of the cultural shaping and forms of governmentality employed by the state.


3. A junior college (JC) system is equivalent to Year 11 and 12 in Australia. At the end of the two-year JC system, students sit for the Cambridge G.C.E. A-level.

4. Upper secondary education refers to Secondary 3 and 4 in the Singapore system. This is equivalent to Year 9 and 10 in the Australian system. At the end of Secondary 4, students sit for the Cambridge G.C.E. O-level. They have the options of continuing in a JC system or furthering their studies in a polytechnic, depending on how well they have performed in the examination.
5. Streaming students according to their academic abilities is a central tenet of Singapore’s education system. EM3 and Normal Technical streams are for students who are less academically inclined. Students in these streams, in general, are less able to cope with languages and mathematics. Their educational pathway is geared towards technical/vocational schooling. Information on primary and secondary schooling, and details on the various streams, can be obtained from http://www1.moe.edu.sg/primary.htm and http://www1.moe.edu.sg/secondary.htm

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