Vocational education in Singapore: meritocracy and hidden narratives

Terence Chong


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.927165

Published online: 26 Jun 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 828

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Vocational education in Singapore: meritocracy and hidden narratives

Terence Chong*

Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, Singapore

This paper offers a broad overview of vocational education in Singapore. Looking at vocational education from Independence, it argues that the development of a skilled labour force was not only crucial in the age of globalisation and the dominance of multinational companies, but also an empirical litmus test of the newly elected post-colonial government to self-govern. By the mid-to-late 1970s, Singapore’s ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ to attract more skill-intensive industries demanded that vocational education kept pace with a more integrated and dynamic global economy. However, vocational education suffered from a less than prestigious image. It is argued that the government’s rhetoric on meritocracy and elitist policies did little to address this image at a time when the middle class was developing its own characteristics, tastes and values. This paper concludes that while vocational education in Singapore has been constructed as a success story, there are several hidden narratives. From the overrepresentation of Malay students to increased stratification, to the gendering of schools, these hidden narratives reflect dominant interests and values.

Keywords: vocational education; Institute of Technical Education; global city; meritocracy; middle-class habitus; Malay overrepresentation

Introduction

Vocational education is conventionally expressed in three, sometimes overlapping, ways. First, as a by-product from the industrial age that gained importance at the close of the nineteenth century, it is often framed as distinct yet associated with traditional academic education (Clarke & Winch, 2007). While occasionally viewed as an integral component of the conventional syllabus by progressive educators, for the most part, vocational education has either been designed as a complement or an alternative to traditional schools. Its evolution as a separate educational cosmos has resulted in a homologous sub-field within the broader field of education with its own set of norms, standards and visions (see Bourdieu, 1993). Second, the hands-on and practical approach to tasks as well as the notion of ‘vocation’ has framed the student as a subject to be trained as an apprentice, craftsperson or technician. The vocational student is thus associated with a particular set of industry skills and proficiency that does not lend itself to other industries. In short, the vocational student is interpellated with a specific vocational or technical habitus that does not easily translate across industrial fields. Third, vocational education is typically seen as a balance between market forces, skills training and youth employment (Burke & Reuling, 2002). The emphasis in this case lies in imparting market-relevant skills to non-academically inclined students in order to keep youth

*Email: terencechong@iseas.edu.sg
© 2014 Taylor & Francis
unemployment low and thus reduce social and political problems. As such vocational education is perceived as necessary not only to drive the lower-skills sector but also to starve off social ills such as crime, poverty cycles or political unrest that may emerge as a result of chronic unemployment or delinquency.

Although better known for its levels of excellence in the fields of maths and sciences, vocational education in Singapore has also been heralded as a success for others to emulate (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC], 2010). The strides made in vocational training were recognised with the winning of the inaugural Harvard–IBM Innovations Award conferred by Harvard University (Straits Times, 25 September 2007). These awards and international kudos have not come by accident. Singapore government’s investment in vocational education is relatively high. In 2007, expenditure on each primary school, secondary school, polytechnic and university student was S$5123, S$7234, S$12,510 and S$19,404, respectively. Expenditure on a vocational education student was S$10,343, approximately 83% of the expenditure on a polytechnic student (Chew & Chew, 2011). This high level of expenditure suggests that vocational education in Singapore is no mere afterthought but an important component in the national educational system.

Vocational education in Singapore is consolidated under the Institute of Technical Education (ITE). ITE was established as a post-secondary education institution in 1992 and comes under the Ministry of Education. As the principal institution for vocational training and education, ITE confers national certificates of occupational and industrial skills. According to its literature, ITE plays an important role in catering to technically inclined students and seeks to complement the broader education system (ITE, 2009). Formal education in Singapore begins at age seven when a child enters six years of primary schooling, after which the child proceeds to another four (Express stream) or five years ('normal academic' or 'normal technical') of secondary schooling, depending on the student’s academic inclinations. After secondary school and armed with GCE ‘O’ Level certification, about 25% of the 52,000 students in each post-secondary school cohort will take the academic route to university by enrolling in two-year Junior Colleges where they will graduate with a GCE ‘A’ Level. An estimated 40% will be admitted into one of five polytechnics for a diploma in which academic learning is complemented with practical training, while 10% will enter the labour market or other institutions. The remaining 25% of this cohort (or 13,000 students) will enrol in ITE for two or more years where they will receive various permutations of the National ITE Certificate or NITEC, depending on entry requirements.

This paper offers a broad overview of vocational education in Singapore. Looking at vocational education from Independence, it argues that the development of a skilled labour force was not only crucial in the age of globalisation and the dominance of multinational companies (MNCs) but also an empirical litmus test of the newly elected post-colonial government to self-govern. By the mid- to-late 1970s, Singapore’s ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ to attract more skill-intensive industries demanded that vocational education kept pace with a more integrated and dynamic global economy. However, vocational education suffered from a less than prestigious image. It is argued that the government’s rhetoric on meritocracy and elitist policies did little to address this image at a time when the middle class was developing its own characteristics, tastes and values. This paper concludes that while vocational education in Singapore has been constructed as a success story, there are several hidden narratives. From the overrepresentation of
Malay students to increased stratification, to the gendering of schools, these hidden narratives reflect dominant interests and values.

**Early vocational education: the litmus test of self-rule**

Only one government trade school and two vocational schools run by missionary organisations existed in Singapore before Second World War (Chai, 1977). Vocational education did not flourish under the colonial administration, and by 1959, when the People’s Action Party (PAP) came into government, it inherited only two technical schools and one vocational institute (Lee, 1972). A keen sense of the potential consequences of youth unemployment and the need for skilled labour, as well as reliance on human capital in the light of the island’s lack of natural resources, led to the PAP government’s commissioning of a national study on technical and vocational education in 1961. Among the recommendations of this study was the building of more vocational secondary schools, the establishing of additional technical schools and the conversion of the Trade School into a vocational institute (Chai, 1977). By 1965, there were 72 vocational schools on the island – a rate of one school built every month the PAP had been in power (Ong, 1965).

While the key purpose of vocational education was, and continues to be, the training of students for industries, it also played an ideological role in the nation-building process during the country’s merger with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. Like the arts and culture, vocational education and training was seen by the PAP government to be useful in nurturing strong and wholesome citizens. Speaking at the opening of Thomson Integrated Secondary Vocational School in 1964, Minister of Education, Ong Pang Boon (1964) opined that:

> It is, perhaps necessary to point out that the secondary vocational schools are primarily schools, despite their vocational bias, providing the atmosphere and discipline that will promote the physical and mental development of our youths … They have to be trained and guided and taught to grow up as Malaysians, to be proud of being Malaysians, to be proud of belonging to Malaysia and proud of all that Malaysia can give them.

It may not be an exaggeration to argue that the success of vocational education and the nurturing of a skilled labour force were not only integral to the country’s economic viability but also to the broader political project of Asian nationalism that had swept across the region. The 1960s was a period of decolonialisation, the result of which was the sudden exposure of local governments to the international economy where the harsh interface between global market trends and the domestic workforce could, in the shorter term, mute the clarion call for self-rule and, in the longer term, derail the broader Asian nationalist project. Indeed, the ability of the local workforce to adjust to global market demands, free from the communal and ethnic politics that was plaguing both the city-state and the hinterland during the merger years, was seen as the litmus test of self-rule. For the PAP government, the urgency of vocational education stemmed from the challenges of the global market and the shift from colonial protection to a new world order that was shaping. According to Ong (1965), speaking at the opening of yet another vocational school in June 1965, just two months before expulsion from Malaysia:

> Many leaders particularly leaders of communal political parties in this country do not seem to appreciate this fact. They think that the old superstructure of a semi-feudal traditionalist
society can still work in a resurgent South East Asia. We are well in the second half of the 20th century and to survive we have to re-adjust ourselves to this situation. We must tell them – those who want to perpetuate the old society – that to be about to keep with the times we must keep abreast of technological progress by bringing about industrialisation and laying the emphasis on science and technology.

The separation from Malaysia and the controversial decision to develop an export-oriented economy only increased the importance of vocational education. The city-state’s reliance on trade, foreign direct investment, manufacturing, labour-intensive industries and the attraction of MNCs demanded a disciplined and skilled workforce that would be able to meet capitalist demands. This was compounded by the sudden decision by the British government to pull out its naval base in Singapore. These early years of industrialisation meant that the national priority was to provide and expand education, both conventional and vocational, for the masses in order to meet labour-intensive demands. Nevertheless, as some scholars have noted, global conditions were favourable to the city-state:

Fortunately, just at the time Singapore embarked on this policy of attracting foreign investment, world trade was booming and MNCs were searching for politically stable, low-wage locations in which to manufacture labour-intensive products. As far as such companies were concerned, Singapore was an ideal site in which to expand: the workforce was motivated and relatively well-educated (with English being widely spoken); the government was supportive of investment, having removed all the trade barriers that had been erected prior to 1965; and the unions had been ‘tamed’ and institutionalised. (Rigg, 1988, p. 341)

The Technical Education Department (TED) was set up in 1968 to ensure vocational education kept pace with industrialisation in Singapore and to oversee the development of industrial and teacher training (Law, 2008; Lee, 1972), by which time vocational education had become a mainstay in the local education system. In 1969 all male students in lower secondary school students (aged 13 and 14) had to take technical subjects in order to prepare for industrial demands. In addition:

To meet what are thought to be the educational needs of rapid industrialization one-third of all secondary school students attend technical secondary schools which combine typical academic education with technical training in broad basic skills. (Clark, 1972, p. 450)

Woodwork and metalwork classes were taught alongside conventional classes in national schools which enjoyed well-equipped workshops and specialised teachers. This was a key move as it integrated the homologous sub-field of vocational education more deeply with conventional education with emphasis on its own distinct set of rules and norms like the privileging of craftsmanship, meticulous eye for detail and the creative use of materials. According to Sung (2006, p. 57), ‘This formalisation of technical education can be argued to be a necessary first step towards Singapore’s efforts to “plug into” the global capital system’. Vocational secondary schools were gradually phased out and replaced by vocational institutes. ‘By 1972, there were nine vocational institutes, and the number of graduates increased 10-fold from 324 in 1968 to more than 4,000’ (Law, 2008, p. 117). In 1973, the Industrial Training Board (ITB) was set up as a statutory board to centralise and coordinate vocational training. The development of Singapore’s vocational education depended heavily on overseas expertise and equipment during the early years. Officers and teachers were sent abroad on fellowships to industrialised countries like Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Australia and the UK for training.
Engineered for global city aspirations

In 1979, the Singapore government embarked on its so-called ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ in order to expand the domestic economy by moving from labour-intensive industries to skill- and capital-intensive industries in order to produce higher-value goods (Rigg, 1988). There were several compelling reasons for this. According to Mirza (1986), other developing nations in the region such as Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, with far lower wage rates were beginning to industrialise and compete with Singapore in its traditional markets. The petroleum industry was in decline not only because of the oil crisis but also because other countries were building their own refineries. Growing unemployment in developed countries had exerted a downward pressure on wage demands and this, together with rising wages in Singapore, had eroded the latter’s traditional advantage over advanced countries. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, the national economy saw a shrinking in domestic labour supply, thus marking the beginning of a reimagining of traditional vocational education.

In order to develop a skilled industrial base that would facilitate the shift from labour- to skill-intensive industries, the traditional raison d’être of vocational education were gradually reconsidered. It could no longer be viewed as a mere complement or alternative to traditional education in light of the national need for mass industrial skills training. Vocational education had also outgrown its conventional role as a blunt instrument to starve off youth unemployment because manual and labour-intensive jobs were readily available to the non-academically inclined. While vocational education in the earlier years was primarily concerned with producing skilled labour in order to take advantage of favourable global trends in manufacturing and MNC investment in order to facilitate the broader industrialisation process, vocational education had to undergo a paradigm shift to enable the country to climb up the international division of labour. Instead, the Second Industrial Revolution saw vocational education move from its cottage industry settings towards a more integrated position within the global economy. MNCs in a variety of sectors from manufacturing, engineering, hospitality and food and beverage were consulted on industry needs in order to shape the policy-making and content of vocational education. The result of which was the establishment of the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB) in 1979 by merging ITB with the Adult Education Board. The highly centralised state allowed for close coordination between economic planning and vocational education development. Along with the revamp of vocational education, the government also used the National Wages Council as a means of raising wages ahead of productivity so as to force companies to upgrade and to move the value chain.

In order to facilitate the government’s plan for economic restructuring, vocational education was given the added task of retraining and reskilling existing workers in order that they remained industrially relevant. The so-called Continuing Education and Training (CET) system was designed to enable older workers to upgrade their skills. Under CET, programmes such as the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST), Work Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE) and Modular Skills Training (MOST) were implemented from 1983–1987.

The middle-class habitus, the rhetoric of ‘meritocracy’ and elitist policies

One of the major social obstacles facing vocational education is the social stigma attached to it. It is generally seen as less demanding or less prestigious than conventional forms of
academic education primarily because of its manual and labour-intensive nature (King, 1993; Morris, 1996). This is undoubtedly the case for Singapore as well. It has been observed that:

Parents want their children to attend university. The desire for a university degree is pervasive in society. The respect for the ‘scholar’ and disdain for the ‘mechanic’ and all the negative associations with those who do poorly in school and perform manual labour only helped to perpetuate the poor image of VTE [vocational and technical education]. (Law, 2008, pp. 130–131)

To make matters worse, the economic progress and social mobility that were showing by the early 1970s meant that school-leavers entered the job market with a strong preference for white-collar desk-bound jobs. Industries that required outdoor and laborious work were very unpopular and thus saw a decline in job applicants. This phenomenon prompted then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1976) to note that:

If Singapore’s economy can depend solely on commerce, finance and servicing, we can afford to leave things be. But prudence tells us that the hard core of workers in all the essential industries must be our own citizens, be it construction, metal processing, shipbuilding or repairing.

Lee went on to tell his audience:

Recently, a Labour Ministry study group interviewed at random 1,700 National Servicemen on ROD [run out date]. They were young men who have gone through tough training. Over 77% said they did not want jobs in the construction industry, and 55% said they did not want jobs in shipbuilding and repairing, even though the jobs were well paid. Their reasons were: high physical risks, strenuous work, lack of career prospects, uninteresting work.

The middle-class habitus had thus emerged by the late 1970s. As ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53), the habitus is the embodiment of practices and experiences that have been determined by one’s economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus is a useful tool to understand not just the individual’s negotiation of social reality but also groups of people with shared experiences and capital (Oliver & O’Reilly, 2010). When household incomes rose, spurring employment expectations to greater heights, the middle-class habitus began to exhibit its interests and desires more openly through its preferred modes of production which, unsurprisingly, exposed its embedded prejudices against vocational education and manual labour. The limits to the homologous sub-field became clear. While vocational education was integrated into national schools where students could be rewarded for their technical prowess, the middle-class habitus had been successful in replicating itself and imposing its aspirational goals on students and parents across the economic spectrum. The shunning of non-prestigious and physically demanding jobs in the construction and marine industries was a sociological matter of the new middle class in search of symbolic capital in occupations such as medicine, law and other socially desirable occupations. The irony was that the dominance of this middle-class habitus was both evidence of the PAP government’s skilful stewardship over the economy and obstacle to its plan to build up a strong industrial base of skilled workers.

The persistence of the middle-class habitus was also detrimental to the working-class and vocational habitus. The obsession with the paper chase and the privileging of
university degrees in Singapore was but the natural progression of an elitist system of rewards and power which accelerated the development of a steeply hierarchical society. This was often justified ideologically by the rhetoric of ‘meritocracy’ – the ideology and system in which rewards and remuneration are objectively distributed according to the talent and industriousness demonstrated by the individual. After all, one’s mediocre job or unattractive salary must necessarily infer that one either lacks the merit or is not working hard enough since one’s economic status is the tangible reflection of worth in any meritocracy. In other words, the rejection of manual labour or vocational education was but a societal reaction to the PAP government’s rhetoric on meritocracy.

The narrow definition of ‘meritocracy’ rested solely on academic credentials. The PAP government perpetuated this narrow definition through several structural mechanisms such as the awarding of government scholarships based primarily on the student’s performance in national exams, the gradual phasing out of older Members of Parliament who were more grassroots inclined to make way for younger better educated political candidates and elitist policies such as the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme.

Introduced in 1984, the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme was to encourage marriage and child-bearing among graduates. The main proponent of the scheme, Lee Kuan Yew, believed that the educational level of parents reflected their intelligence which, in turn, had a direct impact on the performance of their children in schools. The consequence of this scheme was that mothers with university degrees would be privileged over mothers with lower education in terms of primary school placement and registration for their children. Despite defending this policy in public numerous times, it proved so unpopular at the 1984 general elections that it was scrapped soon after. Another elitist policy is the ‘Three or More (If You Can Afford It)’ campaign to boost the flagging population growth in 1987. This was a reversal of the earlier ‘Stop at Two’ policy which offered state-sponsored sterilisation for working-class women.

Another elitist policy was the setting up of the Social Development Unit (SDU) in 1984. It was revealed that large numbers of university-educated women above the age of 40 were still unmarried. It was believed that local men preferred to marry women with lower educational qualifications than themselves and that female university graduates preferred to marry men who were better-educated men or those with the same educational level as themselves. With these two beliefs, SDU was established to offer opportunities for single graduate men and women to meet in social settings. The PAP government justified the exclusion of non-graduates by arguing that they had no problems finding marriage partners (Straits Times, 7 March 1985; see also Palen, 1986).

By openly privileging and rewarding the better educated and middle class, these elitist state structures and public policies were self-imposed obstacles to public acceptance of vocational education. What resulted was the further entrenchment of vocational education into a sub-field of education. It was a sub-field that was yoked to nation-building objectives and economic imperatives while marginalised by the government’s rhetoric on meritocracy and elitist policies. As such, vocational education was a paradox in the state’s meritocratic and elitist driven ethos. On the one hand, it was imperative that vocational education and skills be continually raised in order to meet national goals to move up the international division of labour, while on the other, their ‘lower status’ and the social stigma that accompanied vocational education was not altogether undeserved under the state’s rubric of meritocracy.
The rehabilitation of the vocational habitus

Instead of including technical and vocational skills in the rhetoric of meritocracy, the state’s impulse was to rehabilitate the vocational habitus. This was part of the broader task the developmentalist state embarked upon from the mid-1970s with the aim of reshaping and gentrifying the working-class habitus to make vocational work more palatable. The goal was to appeal to the dignity and nobility of manual work. The rehabilitation of this particular mode of production not only sought to revive authenticity in vocational endeavour but also fitted the dominant elitist narrative of affinity and pride in one’s station in life, regardless of elevation. The PAP government launched the nationwide ‘Use Your Hands’ campaign in mid-1976. Its mission was open and clear – ‘The campaign is to inculcate healthy attitudes towards manual work among students’ (Straits Times, 6 May 1978). The campaign, in seeking to change negative attitudes towards manual work, was targeted primarily at teachers and students. Prime Minister Lee (1976), at the launch of the campaign, made clear that:

This campaign to get students, teachers, and principals, to use their hands is a start to reverse the process of the last 8 years, during which we went through a rapid change in social attitudes and life-styles.

In parallel with the ‘Use Your Hand’ campaign was the ‘Top of the Trade’ competition organised by the Science Council of Singapore. This was a series of televised competitions where participants would challenge for honours in woodwork and upholstery, electronics, automotive trades, mechanical applied arts and building construction (Science Council of Singapore, 1977). The Science Council made clear that the competitions were useful in ‘enhancing the image of the blue-collar worker’ and ‘forging a change in the attitudes of youngsters, their parents and the general public towards blue-collar work’ (1977). Ultimately, the “Top of the Trade” Competitions hope to encourage primary and secondary school leavers to acquire industrial and technical skills and thus build up the pool of technical manpower, so vital to Singapore’s industrial growth’ (1977).

Beyond propaganda, another round of genuine structural changes were also made to make vocational education more attractive. The biggest change came in March 1991 when the Ministry of Education announced that all students would receive a minimum of 10 years of education in the school system. This meant six years of primary schooling and four years of secondary schooling. Furthermore, a new secondary level course – Normal (Technical) – was introduced to prepare the less academically inclined pupils for vocational training. As a result of these major policy changes, VITB was restructured and become a post-secondary institution in technical and vocational training. This was a key change because it meant that vocational education was no longer for school dropouts but required a minimum of 10 years of education for entry.

This, in turn, saw a systematised progression towards vocational training. As a sub-field in education, vocational education in Singapore began to adopt the norms and structures of institutional conventions of broader education. From these changes, the ITE emerged in 1992. As a post-secondary institution, ITE filled the gap between secondary schools and polytechnics. Perhaps more crucially, ITE was endowed with the symbolic capital to confer accreditation. For Bourdieu (1986), symbolic capital was expressions of honour, prestige and recognition that would be privileged in the field of struggle. ITE now offered four types of certification, namely, Master National ITE Certificate (Master Nitec), Higher National ITE Certificate (Higher Nitec), National ITE Certificate (Nitec)
and TED (from 2007 onwards). These structural changes and array of certification were crucial because they created a hierarchy within which vocational students could climb thus endowing them with a sense of progression and social mobility. They mimicked the ethos of the broader paper chase in other fields in order to co-opt vocational education into credentialist discourse.

**The hidden narratives of a success story**

In light of the developmentalist trajectory and financial investment, vocational education is often touted as a success story of the country’s nation-building project. ITE itself is quick to remind us that ‘ITE is nationally recognised as ‘world class’ through its win of the Singapore Quality Award in 2005’ and that ‘ITE was cited as a “Model Vocational and Technical Education System” in a 2005 World Bank study of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Systems of Korea, Malaysia and Singapore’ (ITE, n.d., p. 11). Indeed, there is some justification to this. For example, vocational education in Singapore has been empirically observed to have contributed to a reduction in income disparity and that women, in particular, have benefited from it in terms of increased wages, thus narrowing the gender gap (Sakellariou, 2006). The monthly salary of ITE graduates has been on a gradual increase from an average of S$1391 a month in 2009 to S$1646 in 2013, a surge caused partly by a shortage in the engineering industry (*Straits Times*, 3 December 2013).

Nevertheless, the construction of a success story is also the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of narratives. Such narratives are validated or hidden according to the interests at stake and the dominant agency at play. Accordingly, there are several hidden narratives behind the success story of vocational education in Singapore.

The first is the ethnic face of ITE students. According to government data, Malays form the lowest percentage of students with at least five GCE ‘O’ Level passes, compared to Chinese and Indians. In 1984, only 16% of the Malay cohort had at least five ‘O’ Level passes, while Chinese and Indians formed 44% and 43%, respectively. In 2005, Malays raised their percentage to 63%, but Chinese and Indians were still ahead with 84% and 73%, respectively. In 2011, these figures were 62%, 85% and 73% for Malays, Chinese and Indians, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2013). Furthermore, Malays have the lowest rate of post-secondary school participation. In 2002, 76.2% of Malays went on to junior colleges, polytechnics, private institutions and ITE. This was in relation to 91.4% of Chinese and 80.1% of Indians for the same year. In 2011, Malays were still lagging behind at 87.7%, with the Chinese and Indians at 96.1% and 90.8%, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2013; for a broader profile of the Malay community see Ministry of Social and Family Development, n.d.). Efforts to get the ethnic breakdown of ITE students were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, these figures offer a strong basis for deducing that the largest ethnic percentage of students enrolled in vocational education comes from the Malay community.

Such figures entrench the discourse on the Malay community and its attitudes towards education. Whether there are cultural and structural ‘impediments’ to educational development (Hafsah, 2006), the disproportionate number of Malay students in vocational education perpetuates certain beliefs. According to Tania Li:

> There is a strong conviction among some members of the Malay elite, the national government, and among many ordinary Chinese, that Malays are less hard-working and less achievement-oriented in education and in economy generally than the Chinese and that
inappropriate cultural values account for their poor educational and economic performance. (1989, p. 119)

This inferiority complex has ramifications beyond the working-class segments of the ethnic community. Lily Zubaidah argues that:

The ideology of Malay cultural inferiority has also been uncritically endorsed by sections of the Malay middle and professional class … Their socio-economic distance from the general Malay community and their ethnic difference from the non-Malay community places them in a position of double alienation. This profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community. (1989, p. 59)

The second hidden narrative is the challenge of a post-secondary vocational education. Access to vocational education, like other forms of post-secondary education, is increasingly dependent on students’ performance at primary and secondary school level. Only students with GCE ‘O’ Levels and GCE ‘N’ Levels, the latter of which consists of five years of secondary schooling instead of the typical four years, are eligible for ITE. The concern over the long term is that vocational education will, like the rest of the education system, become increasingly hierarchal and stratified where students’ performance in national exams like the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) and ‘O’ and ‘N’ Levels will determine access not only to vocational education but also to the schools available. Of the six ITE schools currently at ITE – Applied and Health Sciences; Business and Services; Design and Media; Engineering; Electronics and Info-Com Technology and Hospitality – Engineering and Electronics and Info-Com Technology are the most popular with total enrolment at 8000 and 6800 for 2012, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2013). It is not difficult to envisage that these two schools will only grow in popularity given the employment opportunities and higher salaries they command. It would be ironic if vocational education in Singapore became progressively hinged on academic performance, thus replicating the paper chase endemic in the rest of the system.

There is also a gendering of different courses. ITE schools such as Engineering and Electronics and Info-Com Technology have decidedly masculine representation with the Engineering school seeing only 448 female graduates out of 3352 graduates in 2012, while the Electronics and Info-Com Technology school sees 793 female graduates out of 3130 graduates in the same year (Ministry of Education, 2013). Meanwhile, courses such as Business and Services see disproportionate female representation with 2024 female graduates out of 3065 graduates in 2012. The same for Applied and Health Services with 702 female graduates out of 1097 graduates in the same year (2013). Such forms of gendered courses and subjects are not particular to vocational education but also evident across higher education (see Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991). These gendered patterns will reproduce and sustain wage differences between men and women in light of the fact that engineering graduates are more likely to command higher salaries. Such patterns are often hidden by the broader contributions of vocational education such as the narrowing of the overall gender gap.

These hidden narratives of the success story of vocational education in Singapore reflect the contours of dominant interests and economic opportunities. They are the flip-side to the proverbial coin, and while they do not suggest the failing of the system, they surely underscore the need to address hidden inequalities that are often obscured by
grand narratives and interests. This is particularly pertinent for Singapore where the national story is one of linear and developmental progress. This national story has its genesis in the trauma and despair of separation, a genesis which has been purposely incorporated and proudly retold as an imaginary land from which the national tribe has journeyed long and far from. More than anything else, this national success story has been told with numbers. From impressive statistic of gross national product (GDP) growth to rising income at the top, success in Singapore has long been articulated in percentages and charts. With 80–90% employment rates, incremental salaries and surveys on employer satisfaction, vocational education has fitted this mould of success.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a broad overview of the development of vocational education in Singapore. It began by examining vocational education as more than technical training but a litmus test for a newly elected government. The production of a skilled labour force was not only crucial to the nation’s survival as the global landscape became increasing dominated by MNCs but also a test of post-colonial governments to deliver economic growth. Moving on to the mid-to-late 1970s, the shift from labour- to skill-intensive industries meant that traditional raison d’être of vocational education – an alternative to traditional education – had to be re-examined. The country’s so-called ‘Second Industrial Revolution’ to attract more skill-intensive industries saw vocational education gear up towards a more integrated position within the global economy. Several structural changes were initiated including the skills upgrading of older workers and other programmes such as BEST, WISE and MOST. Nevertheless, despite all these improvements, vocational education suffered from social stigma in light of its less prestigious image. This paper argues that the government’s rhetoric on meritocracy and elitist policies exacerbated this social stigma as the middle class began to develop its own characteristics, tastes and values. Finally, this paper demonstrated that while vocational education in Singapore has been constructed as a success story, there are several hidden narratives. From the overrepresentation of Malay students to increased stratification, to the gendering of schools, these hidden narratives reflect dominant interests and values, and underscore the politics of inclusion and exclusion at subtle play.

References


When the house sat and talked of love. (1985, March 7). *Straits Times*. 