

Purpose of education in singapore



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Education is said to be as old as humanity itself. (Gordon, 1966) All living things, regardless of animal or human origin, are born with a capacity and need to be educated. The genetic makeup of any animal causes it to recognize that educating their offspring plays a crucial role to ensuring their survivability in the wild. Prehistoric human beings realize this too but modern human beings also recognize that in today's complicated world, our purposes for educating our young are far more complex than simply knowing how to gather and hunt for food. Thus, in this essay, I will briefly explore both the selfish and the societal reasons for education in our modern society before delving specifically into the aims of education in Singapore as well as their implications.

There is one fundamental limitation to be addressed - the aims of education are ever changing. Survivability in today's modern society is defined differently from the past and also differently from the society of the future. Hence, there are no fixed aims of education because our purposes will change along with the current societal needs and mindsets.

The question " Why do we educate?" can be answered from the selfish point of view. Firstly, as human beings, we evolved from animals and are instinctively concerned about our survival. Thus, the most evident reason and aim in pursuing education is for the sake of our livelihoods. This is also known as the ' bread and butter' aim (Gordon, 1966) because we desire to be educated so we can graduate with better qualifications and hence land a better paying job. This utilitarian purpose of education enables people to provide the basic necessities, and possibly luxuries, for themselves. While

this practical aim may be important, I believe that there are many other things Man has to live for other than simply money.

The other selfish reason is nobler. It is to pursue education for the sake of education. Although it is still a selfish reason, it is in contrast to the livelihood aim because people who believe in this deem education as more than a vehicle for the mere acquisition of knowledge to gain wealth. These are people who have developed an intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning and see that education as a dynamic tool that allows one to think and adapt independently as compared to a static process of memorization. (Gordon, 1966)

Other than selfish reasons for education, there are also society's objectives in having its people educated. The first societal purpose of education is to have socially contributive citizens. Ironically, this societal purpose ties in with the selfish purpose for livelihood. In achieving the knowledge, skills and understanding required of us to deal with a specialized and better paying job, we unintentionally play a part in the creation of society's workforce and hence contribute to economic development and growth of the country. (Biesta, 2009) This relates very closely to the educational theory of Essentialism. Essentialism, grounded in philosophies of Idealism and Realism, disregards interests and promote teaching "useful" knowledge instead for the learner to use in society. In addition, discipline is a key focus in Essentialism as it emphasizes on how the learner is expected to respect legitimate authority to function efficiently in society. (Ellis, 1981) Hence, Essentialism is crucial in creating people who participate effectively in society.

Another social intention of education involves character and moral development as emphasized by Aristotle (Homiak, 2007) and by Herbart in the 19th century. Aristotle claims that there are 2 sides to every Man. The baser side involves primal animal instincts of brutality and passion while the humanitarian side involves morality and intellect. The aim of education, Aristotle insists, should be towards developing human character through the humanitarian aspect. (Gordon, 1966) In accordance to Aristotle's claims, I personally believe that while we should develop the humanitarian portion, we should focus equally on both the intellectual and moral sections because they are of equal importance and not place greater emphasis on the intellect as our society currently does.

The last societal aim of education is for society to create responsible citizens of a country through the development of every child - the political agenda behind education. The 2 aspects to this societal aim are the positive and the negative. The positive aspect is what Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady of America during her husband's presidency, describes as "good citizenship." (Roosevelt, 2008) She illustrates how education is to help a child see and understand the various governmental processes through the government departments of law and legislation along with America's relationship to the rest of the world. The child, being able to see such things, will see himself as a part of a greater being and understand "where his own usefulness may lie." I agree with Roosevelt as National Education is a vital aspect of Singapore's education system and this will be elaborated further.

The negative aspect however, has roots in the USSR. Lenin, the Communist leader, once expressed: "Without teaching, there is no learning. Without

learning, there is no knowledge. Without knowledge, there is no Communism. Without Communism, society degenerates into capitalist decay." (Nicholas, 1983) The leadership of the Soviet Union then started to shape its national education programmes to promote Communist propaganda to the children in order to guarantee the security of the Communist ideology. (Nicholas, 1983) This is an example of how a country can use its education system with a political motive to legitimize a particular political doctrine.

While the purposes of education are inexhaustible and constantly changing, Singapore has managed to define its own rationale of educating her citizens for the 21st century society. As extracted from the Ministry Of Education's (MOE) Website, Singapore has 4 clear Desired Outcomes of Education (Ministry of Education, 2010). They are: Confident person, self directed learner, active contributor and concerned citizen. These 4 desired outcomes of education are adaptations of the purposes of education as discussed above and this essay will only focus on the latter 2.

The first desired outcome of education that I am focusing on is the creation of an active contributor. An active contributor is one who cooperates well in a team, takes lead and responsible ventures and is original and competent in his actions. (Ministry of Education, 2010) The reason for this desired outcome of education is Singapore having no natural resources except for her population. Therefore, Singapore, having to rely on her people for economic growth and development, has no margin for mistakes and emphasizes on the need for her people to contribute. This need resulted in several educational

policy changes, the most obvious trend being the inclination towards Essentialism.

Singapore chooses to adopt a practical and utilitarian approach to education though the Bilingualism Policy in 1966. (Dixon) Learning English aided communication with the Western world and was considered an Industrialization language. In the year 2000, the Mandarin language was promoted in order to help foster economic relations with China. Singapore also privatized education through allowing autonomous and independent schools, created a public ranking of all schools in 1992 (Tan, C. Wong, B. Chua, J. S. M & Kang, T, 2006) and started the “ Thinking Skills, Learning Nation” (TSLN) policy in 1997 in recognition that literacy only is not enough to survive economically in the 21st century and highly innovative individuals were crucial too. (Teo, 1997) These 3 policies encourage competition between schools and students for better results and prestige as well as promoting the freedom of ingenuity. These result in Singapore being able to nature the full potential of her citizens, develop an ability driven economy and encourage Research and Development, both surmounting to greater economic contribution.

These policy changes have significantly impacted Singaporean teachers and students alike. Both teachers and students had to be proficient in the English language in order to understand each other. More teachers were recruited to teach the various mother tongues of Malay, Tamil and Mandarin. Students had to work harder to compete and get into a prestigious and ‘ elite’ school. In addition, students had to pay higher fees for autonomous or independent schools. Teachers also had to rethink their teaching methods and engage

students more to promote creativity and induce intrinsic motivation to learn instead of mere memorization. As our former Minister of Education, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, explained “ diverse paths were also provided for students” with talents in different fields so as to train young people to “ embrace change and do well in life.” (Lee, S. K. Goh, C. B. Fredriksen, B. Tan, J. P. 2008)

In evaluation, while these policies appeared feasible in theory, practice proved it wrong. The Bilingual Policy was admitted to be a mistake. (Hoe, 2009) Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew said that his implementation of the Bilingual Policy caused “ students to be put off by the Chinese language” instead of fostering a love for the language. However, MM Lee is not entirely wrong as students are able to fluently converse, read and write in their Mother Tongues. This echoes the education theory of Essentialism where societal gains are placed before personal interests.

Another policy that was changed in 2004 involved the softening of the school ranking system. (Shanmugaratnam, 2004) While this policy may be effective in differentiating students of varying IQs, this has also objectified students as they are either classified condemned, normal or gifted. This is a result of our focus on meritocracy and ability. Streaming is not effective because students are not given equal chances to flourish in different aspects of their character but is solely based on how well he does in his studies in a particular examination.

Lastly, the TSLN policy is cast in a more positive light as it shifts Singapore from an efficiency-driven education system to an ability-driven education

system. (Lee, S. K. Goh, C. B. Fredriksen, B. Tan, J. P. 2008) This is a better policy as it offers students greater flexibility and choice in their education. Students are now able to choose from a range of educational institutes like the School of the Arts (SOTA), Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the Singapore Sports School and the Singapore Institute of Technology to develop their talents and abilities. Nonetheless, while this can be seen as a deviation from Essentialism, the main objective of the TSLN policy is to remain economically competent in the 21st century.

The other desired outcome is the creation of a concerned citizen through moral education. Moral education in Singapore was, and always will be, aimed at forging citizens together and promoting common values to prevent racial and cultural tension amongst the 4 racial groups. (Tan, J. Gopinathan, S. Ho, W. K., 1997) The reason for this desired outcome is due to the largely polarized cultural groups in Singapore directly after independence. Hence, there was a need to bring together the people of Singapore and thus, moral education is needed for nation building and cohesion.

The introduction of moral education into the education system resulted in several policy changes. The more significant ones include the mandatory singing of the National Anthem and recitation of the National Pledge (1966) in all schools every morning (Tan, C. Wong, B. Chua, J. S. M & Kang, T, 2006), the implementation of Education for Living as a subject (Tan, J. Gopinathan, S. Ho, W. K., 1997) and more recently, the National Education for all levels and Community Involvement Programme (CIP) in 1996 for lower level schools and Service Learning for upper levels. (Ministry of Education, 1998) These 3 policy changes work towards the cohesion of Singaporeans as a whole

regardless of race or religion and promote social concern and civic responsibility amongst citizens.

These policy changes have affected teachers and students in a more subtle manner. Students then had to learn the National Anthem and Pledge by heart. Teachers were required to undergo training to learn and teach the Education for Living syllabus, ' Good Citizen', as a subject in the various Mother Tongues. Furthermore, teachers also had to learn how to organize and manage students for CIP and incorporate National Education into everyday teaching.

The compulsory singing of the National Anthem and recitation of the Pledge is effective because the Pledge embodies our goals as a country as shown by the words, " One united people" to signify cohesion in diversity, and to " achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our Nation" and the recitation every morning reminds students that diversity is not an obstacle and that Singaporeans should always care for the country.

Furthermore, although the CIP and Service Learning projects have noble intentions and are theoretically effective, they turn out to be less efficient in practice. For example, secondary school students carry out the bare minimum of 6 hours of community work in order to meet the criteria set by the Ministry of Education. This defeats the purpose of CIP as it does not properly inculcate students to sincerely help out the needy but only forces students to help because their schools said so.

In conclusion, ultimately, Singapore is still a survival-driven society and economy. Having only people as resources has not made it any easier.

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Hence, regardless of what policy changes or desired outcomes of education, Singapore's ultimate goal in education is to remain economically competent in the 21st society.

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