

Revue
internationale
d'éducation de Sèvres

Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres Colloque : L'éducation en Asie en 2014 : Quels enjeux mondiaux ?

Education in Singapore: for what, and for whom?

Jason Tan



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ries/3856>

ISSN: 2261-4265

Publisher

Centre international d'études pédagogiques

Printed version

Date of publication: 19 May 2014

ISSN: 1254-4590

Electronic reference

Jason Tan, « Education in Singapore: for what, and for whom? », *Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres* [Online], Education in Asia in 2014: what global issues? (12-14 June 2014), Online since 05 June 2014, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ries/3856>

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

© Tous droits réservés

Education in Singapore: for what, and for whom?

Jason Tan

- 1 Singapore's education system has been the focus of intense international interest for the past two decades thanks to its students' repeated successes in cross-national tests of educational achievement such as PISA. The system has been hailed as a model worthy of emulation by countries eager to reform what many governments perceive to be schools that are failing to foster high achievement standards. Could it be possible that Singapore's story offers valuable lessons for the path to educational success?
- 2 This article begins by outlining the two major foci of school curricula over the past six decades: supporting national economic growth and fostering social cohesion. These two foci have remained consistent over time and have in fact taken on greater urgency in the face of the numerous challenges posed by globalization. Numerous reform initiatives have restated these foci, which have found their way into the latest policy statements, "Desired Outcomes of Education" and "21st Century Competencies".
- 3 The article then highlights several key features of Singapore's education system that help better articulate the context within which Singapore's schools can be better understood. The first of these is the belief in meritocracy, through a system of competitive high-stakes national examinations at primary, secondary and pre-university levels. This belief explicitly promises unequal education outcomes but holds out the offer of equal education opportunities. The second is ability-based streaming at both primary and secondary levels, in other words, the belief in unequal curricular experiences. The third is a balance between centralization of education policymaking and a devolution of decision-making to school heads.
- 4 The article critiques the growing elitism engendered by the purportedly meritocratic system, which masks an unequal playing field. The education system is a field in which growing income inequalities are played out. These inequalities have been exacerbated by the growing marketization of education over the past three decades. These inequalities also overlap with ethnic inequalities. In response, the government has attempted to blur

the harsh boundaries between various streams of schooling and to offer assistance to community-based efforts to improve educational achievement. It has also put in place a greater variety of education pathways, claiming that it values various forms of success and that “every school is a good school”. Another point of critique concerns the impact of these inequalities, along with growing immigration, on the fostering of social cohesion.

Major foci of education policy, 1959 – 2014

- 5 One distinctive feature of Singapore has been the governing hegemony since 1959 of the People’s Action Party (PAP). This hegemony may be one factor that accounts for relative consistency of purpose in policy-making. When the PAP first assumed political power in a self-governing Singapore after 140 years of British colonial rule, they inherited a disparate hodge-podge of schools operating in four different language media: English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Schooling was far from universal and the schools lacked a sense of common purpose, let alone common curricula or examinations. Besides embarking on a major programme of increasing primary school enrollment (universal primary school enrollment was a reality by 1966), the PAP also began unifying curricula, examinations, and teacher qualifications and salaries. The advent of political independence (after a brief period of political union within Malaysia) in 1965 added impetus to the drive to institute two major foci for education in a new nation: supporting national economic growth and fostering social cohesion in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population. In addition, the number of privately run schools was rapidly reduced in order to establish centralized control over policymaking, regulation, and funding. In order to support economic growth, emphasis was placed on proficiency in English, mathematics and science (with the relative marginalization of other subjects) at primary, secondary and pre-university levels. At the same time, a variety of daily rituals was instituted in schools in order to promote social cohesion and national identity. These rituals included the recitation of the national pledge, raising of the national flag, and singing of the national anthem.
- 6 These two major foci have remained consistent over time and despite numerous reform initiatives over the past six decades. For example, the publication in 1998 of the Ministry of Education’s “Desired Outcomes of Education” document (which was subsequently revised in 2009) mentions outcomes such as “lov[ing] Singapore” and “be[ing] enterprising and innovative”. In 2009, a set of “21st Century Competencies” was published, once again highlighting the need for “civic literacy” and “harmony”. These foci have received renewed emphasis in the challenges posed by the need to remain competitive within the global economy, as well as by the advent of large-scale immigration over the past two decades. This immigration has resulted in the latest population census revealing that about 37 percent of the population of 5 million consists of non-citizens.

Key features of Singapore’s education system

- 7 In order to further understand Singapore’s education system, several key features are highlighted. The first is meritocracy, which the PAP has enshrined as a founding myth. The official rhetoric claims that meritocracy offers everyone fair educational opportunities and is the most efficient way to select talent based on individual hard work

and merit (as demonstrated through individual performance in a series of competitive high-stakes national examinations). It is important to recognize that meritocracy explicitly promises unequal educational outcomes.

- 8 The second feature is the belief in ability-based streaming, as part of the belief that individual differences in ability require unequal curricula. Streaming was institutionalized at the primary level at the end of 1979 and at the secondary level at the end of 1980. Based on their performance in national examinations, students would be divided into various streams, with access to different subjects, different levels of complexity in subject coverage, and different terminal examinations.
- 9 The third feature is the balance between the heavy centralization of policymaking that was mentioned earlier and the gradual devolution of decision-making to school heads. The institution of greater school autonomy began in the 1980s in the form of independent schools and autonomous schools at the secondary level, and has now evolved into more decision-making freedom in terms of staff deployment and curricula offerings.

Emerging dilemmas and contradictions

- 10 Over the past decade, there has been growing evidence that the claims of a level playing field have yet to be realized and that in fact, the system of meritocracy as practiced has fostered elitism (through the privileging of high-ability students and prestigious schools). The government itself has been forced to publicly acknowledge this phenomenon in the face of growing income inequalities. In response, it has attempted over the past decade to replace streaming with banding at the primary level, and to blur the distinctions between streams at the secondary level. One unfortunate face of income inequalities is their overlap with ethnic inequalities. In this connection, Singapore's largest ethnic minority, the Malays (comprising about 14 percent of the population), and to a lesser extent the Indian ethnic minority, has fared relatively worse than the majority ethnic Chinese in national examinations. Over the past three decades, the government has offered assistance to various ethnic community-based self-help groups to improve educational achievement. However, these efforts have yet to result in a substantial narrowing of educational gaps.
- 11 The interschool inequalities and social inequalities may have been exacerbated by the rapid marketization of education (e.g. in the promotion of school choice and competition) since the 1980s. The advent of aggressive interschool competition for students, and for academic as well as non-academic results, has led to a stratification of students and schools, especially at the secondary level. The further diversification of education choices and pathways over the past decade has done nothing to lessen these inequalities. Despite government claims that "every school is a good school" and that different forms of educational success are to be valued, there is little evidence that the middle-class rush to engage private tutors and to enroll their children in prestigious schools has abated.
- 12 Another problematic aspect of education in Singapore is the impact of these inequalities on social cohesion. Furthermore, the large-scale immigration over the past two decades has raised questions over national identity and whether new immigrants can successfully be integrated. A major government response has been the institution of a revised "Character and Citizenship Education" curriculum in 2011 that has broadened the meaning of citizenship to incorporate cross-cultural competencies.



- 13 This article has surveyed Singapore's education system and has pointed out several key features and trends. Singapore's early successes in boosting students' educational achievement are probably evidence of the value of centralized and focused education policymaking. However, far from offering easy answers or models for the rest of the world, Singapore's example highlights the existence of social and educational inequalities even in a system that is lauded for its relative success. It also brings into focus the difficulty of undoing or reversing social beliefs once they have become entrenched.

INDEX

Geographical index: Singapour

Mots-clés: curriculum, inégalité sociale, pédagogie, performance, politique éducative, système éducatif

Palabras claves: desigualdad social, pedagogía, rendimiento, política educacional, sistema educativo

Keywords: educational policy, social inequality, pedagogy, educational system

AUTHOR

JASON TAN

Jason Tan completed his Masters in Education in education and national development at the University of Hong Kong and his doctoral studies in comparative education at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is currently associate professor in policy and leadership studies at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Jason is an international editorial board member of several international journals, including *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* and *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. His most recent publications include *Education in Singapore: Taking Stock, Looking Forward*, Pearson, Singapore, 2012. E-mail : engthye.tan@nie.edu.sg