

A Life in Singapore Education: Explorations in Policy, Research and Practice[†] (as of 19 Nov 09)

Salutations

I want to begin by thanking Prof Lee Ong Kim, President, ERA for this opportunity to speak before such a distinguished audience and on a platform I helped create in 1986; I am a founder member & was president from 1995 to 1997 and served as a committee member till 2003. In 1987 I led the planning for the ERA's first annual conference with the theme: *Research in the Service of Education Excellence*; we can be proud that ERA has held a successful conference every year since. I am glad to see that ERA has grown in stature and is now a member of APERA. ERA went regional when we held a joint conference with the Australian Association for Education Research in 1996 and with the Malaysian ERA in 1999. As Minister pointed out yesterday ERA is a valuable platform in the dissemination of research and in promoting practitioner-research interactions.

This keynote address will seem to some of you as a bit of an indulgence as the personal dominates, and for this I ask your forbearance. Take comfort that this is a "This is iT" "I did it my way" type performance. Fittingly, it has been scheduled for the end of the conference! But I do hope that this accounting of a rich life in Singapore education will serve to remind us of the journey of Singapore education

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because many aspects of its past are unfortunately forgotten; it is a journey that I hope will be of interest as well to our foreign guests.

Though the title speaks of policy, research and practice, it is first about the personal and the political. I have been singularly privileged to be a beneficiary, participant and observer of Singapore's educational journey; this is an accounting of that as much about my personal journey.

Like MM, I have listened to 4 national anthems, Japanese, British, Malaysian, and Singapore. After all, I started school in the late 40s in the former British Naval Base. Truthfully, the only thing I can recall of that period is that we had a day off on the royal birthday and that my primary school teacher was of the opinion I would not amount to much because I talked too much!

Key Themes

The key themes I wish to explore today are the role of the state, and at least in Singapore's case, its commitment to enhancing education provision and quality, secondly, language policy in education, and thirdly the issue of knowledge generation, indigenization and transfer. In any intellectual journey there are mentors. In exploring this I wish to acknowledge the seminal influences of my father, Dennis Enright, Johore Professor of English at the University of Singapore, Raymond Brammah, Publisher, Oxford University Press, and Philip Altbach, Charles Monan University Professor, Boston College, formerly SUNY, Buffalo, and my Ph.D thesis supervisor. Few have been as fortunate as I have been to have had such wonderful mentors.

1940s - 1974

I began schooling as the British reasserted power after the end of the World War II. It was the beginning of the post-war rearrangement of political and economic power in Asia as elsewhere. The war, however, was one of wasted opportunities for Singapore's youth and near total devastation of the education infrastructure. The **10 Years Plan** was the trigger for education reconstruction, and very importantly, the expansion of schooling in the English medium. This single factor explains the impressive social mobility my siblings and I have benefited from. My brother and I attended university in the 60s on government scholarships and my sister and I went on to earn doctorates. My parents, when they arrived from India in the early 40s, were literate only in Tamil, but they were not unfamiliar with English as India had experienced two centuries of British colonial domination. In political terms, my father was an Indian nationalist but pragmatic enough to realize where his family's fortunes lay in Singapore. Indeed, my father mastered enough English subsequently and counted Bertrand Russel as one of his favourite authors.

Another seminal education report of this period was the **All Party Report on Chinese Education**. Few remember just how turbulent, politically and linguistically divisive Singapore was then. Some Chinese schools had been subverted and students radicalized; I was caught up in riots in the early sixties when a university undergraduate. I refer you to 2 statements from MM Lee. MM Lee has remarked that the Chinese were activists, intent on building a new socio-political order while the English educated were subservient and keen on maintaining the status quo. In comparative terms, this situation was not dissimilar to those in India, Sri

Lanka, Malaysia, later Vietnam where colonial languages once reigned supreme and were challenged by indigenous ones. In personal terms, I recall my schooldays in Bartley Secondary School which was no more than 300 yards from an all girls Chinese medium school. Two systems, two languages, two cultures divided us.

What is important is that the political settlement in which the All Party Report promised 'equality of treatment' was honoured by subsequent governments. When the Malaysian experiment failed in 1965, the government of the day resisted attempts to privilege the Chinese language and honoured the commitment to Malay as the National language. These acts of political courage and leadership, resisting political expediency, are unfortunately all too rare elsewhere.

I am a product of the bilingual education policy; as a consequence of the **All Party Report** I studied Tamil for 4 years in secondary school and I passed standard one Malay which was, in the late 60s, a requirement for confirmation as a civil servant and a teacher. And I obtained an honours degree in English Literature, tutored on Shakespeare by non-other than Dr Enright. And I came from a home in which little English was spoken.

In my own research and teaching I have made the exploration of the development and enactment of language policy in education a central concern. I continue to be fascinated by how the personal, the political and policy environments intertwine. MM often refers to his experiences in learning Mandarin, and how he sent his children to Chinese-medium schools to enable them to have a strong foundation

in Mandarin. My son found the learning of Tamil difficult and chose to continue his schooling in Australia; he seems unaware that Australia is probably more multilingual than Singapore! Until recently, the lack of rigorous data on the effects of policy, and the pedagogical practices of teaching and learning languages in Singapore classrooms meant that policy continued to be driven by political considerations, and the personal experiences of the elite. The latter is important because Singapore's political and administrative elite are effectively bilingual. Is there anyone here who remembers the *Mirror*? This was a publication of the Ministry of Culture in which key news items from the vernacular press were translated into English for required reading by senior civil servants....who is not moved by old TV clips of Lee Kuan Yew addressing election rallies in Malay. Lee Hsien Loong, the son can address political rallies in English, Mandarin and Malay.

I began my university education at the University of Singapore's Bukit Timah campus – I mention the location because this campus, that of the old Nanyang University, represented the height of the Chinese-educated's aspirations in education; it was the only Chinese medium university outside of China and Taiwan; even today, there is some pressure to drop the 'technological' in Nanyang Technological University. The University of Singapore was the colonial university, not yet national. I went there on a government scholarship and if I can be forgiven a bit of boasting, qualified in my very first year for honours in English, History and Philosophy. That a boy from the Naval Base could aspire to read English Literature on a government scholarship surely says something about enlightened administrators in the early 60s in Singapore. But times have changed – engineering and business studies are all the rage now. I studied the entire canon-

Chaucer to Eliot, developed a love of reading and the skill of close reading of text, which was to prove valuable in a later career as book and journal editor. I stayed back to do a Diploma in Education and was an editor of the Education Journal.

My time at the university coincided with what became known as the “battle for merger”; I witnessed intense political debates between Lee of the PAP and the Barisan Socialist leader Lee Siew Chor on the lower quadrangle of the university – language policy and control of education were important elements in the merger negotiations, as the Singapore authorities had to pacify a large Chinese-educated majority in Singapore. My choice of thesis topic for my M.Ed. – the creation of a unified system of schooling reflects both an important phase in the development of public schooling in Singapore and my own fascination with the policy-politics relationship in post-colonial societies.

The latter half of the sixties was a period of quick changes. I taught school for 2 years, and joined Oxford University Press as a textbook editor in 1968. The wider educational landscape was one of Singapore gearing up for life as an independent nation – the period known as the ‘survival period’. This was a period when OUP, Heinemann, Macmillan, Longman, the leading colonial-era publishers dominated textbook publishing. There is not much written about textbooks and their influence on pedagogy and practice – which is a pity. Which classroom is devoid of text materials? Versions, alternative interpretations of the founding narratives are often hotly contested. There is still debate about Japan’s responsibility for the Pacific War control over textbooks is hotly contested.

Education policies for post-colonial Singapore had to be translated into curricular and pedagogic frameworks – new syllabi was required for a Singapore and region-centric-history and citizenship curriculum, geography textbooks that focused on the Mekong and the Ganges rather than the Rhine or the Nile, historical accounts that moved away from glorifying the British empire and an English language syllabus that took account of the fact that the homes were predominantly non-English speaking and that the mother tongues had their own space in the curriculum. The authorship, design and production of textbooks to help relatively underprepared teachers deliver a more nation-centric curriculum was a major but important challenge.

I claim that these efforts laid some of the foundations for the indigenous knowledge generation process and the distinctive nature of Singapore schooling. Time does not permit me to detail my involvement in the Singapore Book Publishers Association, the National Book Development Council and the Festival of Books. Over a 20 year period, it has been my privilege to have contributed to the development of a reading culture, and widespread recognition of its importance, in and out of school. It was during this period as a book editor that I came under the influence of R. Brammah, as civilized an English gentleman as one could find, a scholar with a deep knowledge and love of antiques, and addicted to the decadent habit of drinking pink gins at 10 in the morning. More significantly, he pioneered the development of the Oxford Reprints which brought back into circulation works of colonial scholarship, most notably, Raffles two volume History of Java. I am proud to have commissioned *Singapore: Society in Transition* published in 1976. For me the six years of publishing was an

unforgettable initiation into the commerce and culture that is publishing. I shall return to the topic of *knowledge indigenization* a little later.

1974 - 1991

Having completed my M.Ed., which OUP published as a monograph I joined the newly established Institute of Education as a lecturer in 1974. Teacher education had entered an exciting phase of development with Ruth Wong, Lau Wai Har and Sim Wong Kooi, with a strong education (as opposed to training) orientation and evidence based teacher preparation. I was asked to teach the historical evolution of education in Singapore and its contemporary significance. I sought to shift the teaching of the history of education from a rendering of history to an analysis of the factors that shaped policy and implementation. On the broader education front issues in the implementation of bilingual education led to a review and the publication of the *Goh Report* in 1979.

In August 1980 I left for graduate studies in the US SUNY Buffalo was a great place but the city was the butt of late night comedian's jokes and in January it was minus 10 degrees without the wind chill factor. And I had lived all my life in a city where it was 30 degrees in the shade. But the intellectual challenge was invigorating-systematic introduction to the sociology of education, curriculum theory, higher and comparative education and Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives in education. P. Altbach, G. Kelly, L. Wies introduced me to the rigorous and analytical studies of education. There were very few of us with this background in Singapore education, even in the early eighties. Surprisingly, then as now the University of Singapore had little interest in education analysis, though it had strong departments of History, Sociology, Economics, Political Science. This

too is a matter for regret. Serious research into education policy and practice cannot remain disconnected from the frameworks and concepts that animate social science. For too long there has been neglect of the study of education processes examined through the lens of history, politics sociology, and economics. Are the problems of bilingualism purely pedagogical? Can minority underachievement be understood without reference to history, race relations? Can the workings of Singapore's model of educational meritocracy be understood without reference to class?

With Philip as my thesis supervisor and using his centre-periphery framework, I studied the processes of knowledge indigenization in the context of language change; I studied these processes in NUS and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia – like Nanyang University, an oppositional Malay-medium institution. I am one of a handful of NIE faculty to have done fieldwork outside of Singapore. I assisted Prof Altbach in editing *Comparative Education Review*, then as now the leading journal in comparative education. I am very proud to have published in it in 1987.

In a decade, from a system in crisis in the late seventies Singapore education, maturing on the back of successful human capital policies and a rapidly diversifying economy was ready to reinvent itself. In a sense the efficiency period was also a period that marked the beginnings of depoliticisation in education. The system engineers and technocrats had taken over! I have often asserted that the publication in 1987 of the *Towards Excellence in Education* (rather than 1997) marks the true beginnings of education reform in Singapore. The decision to shift the PSLE from a selection to a placement examination, had in 1991, tremendous

consequences for student progress in the system. I have wondered why it took so long – a good research question for PLS. But seriously, the consequences for the quality of the labor force has been considerable. Many older workers have low educational qualifications and cannot cope with the demands of the knowledge economy?

1991 - 2009

The next growth phase 1991 – to the present is one characterized by growth/innovation/internationalisation. By now a substantial literature on East Asian development, based on the ‘developmental state’ concept had become available; in the analysis of East Asian economic growth, universal access to high quality education and training played a vital part. I was very attracted to it for the ‘gloom and doom’ articles I had vetted for CER, largely on L. America and E. Africa had ignored the rising evidence of the powerful role state-sponsored education could play in contributing to political stability and socio-economic and human capital growth. Singapore’s own education and training policies which are characterised by a tight coupling of educational output to emerging labour market needs was leading to sustained GDP growth of between 6-7% over 2 decades. Singapore, coupled its K-12 streaming policies with the development of high quality technical and polytechnic education. Nanyang Technological University was established in 1991, Nanyang Polytechnic on 1 April 1992, Singapore Management University in 2000, and Republic Polytechnic on 2002. A brand new university, The new Singapore University of Technology and Design, will enrol students in 2011. Note that planning for the university was made in the midst of Singapore’s worst economic downturn, and a Singapore confident of its own maturity is making this a collaborative effort with MIT and a leading Chinese

university. It would be well high impossible to conceive of this happening elsewhere. My papers detailing this development in the *Journal of Education and Work*, and *Globalisation, Societies and Education* remain widely cited.

International attention on Singapore's 'education miracle' took a decisive turn with the 1997 *Thinking Schools Learning Nation* conference, which I co-organised with Dr Esther Tan. We did not know then that PM Goh was intending to make a hugely significant education policy speech. In my view, 2 reports *Towards Excellence in Education, Improving Primary Education* and Mr Goh's *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* speech laid the foundations for the reconstruction of Singapore education in the nineties.

Singapore in typical fashion was not content celebrating TIMSS (the first results featuring Singapore were published in 1997) but preparing its education system for the knowledge society and economy. The inclusion of Singapore education in McKinsey's *How the World's Best Performing School System's Come Out on Top* (2007) and a World Bank publication *Towards a Better Future* (2008) have further cemented Singapore's reputation.

Teacher education got a major boost when the NIE was formed in 1991, and became an autonomous, institute within Nanyang Technological University. I was involved in deliberations in the development of the BA/BSc (Education) programme, a move intended to attract better quality students, to improve teacher preparation quality, and to improve the proportion of graduates in the teaching force. A decade earlier, both Reagan in the US and M. Thatcher in the UK

had proclaimed their education systems 'broken' – remember '**A Nation at Risk**' – and asserted that university based teacher preparation and poor teacher quality was the primary cause. UK's Training and Development Agency for Schools has been advocating more school-based preparation and specifying literacy and numeracy pedagogies. Singapore, typically, was bucking the trend. However, we did invest much more in building strong campus-school partnerships to provide students with a much more effective practicum experience. I was appointed Dean of the Education in 1994 and concurrently, Head, NIE Centre for Educational Research. The School of Education had responsibility for implementing the PGDE and Diploma programmes. We established the Principals Executive Centre and in order to undertake research and facilitate PD, the Singapore Centre for Teaching Thinking. We laid the foundations for today's emphasis on evidence-based designs of teacher education curriculum.

While the establishment of CRPP in 2003 is rightly seen as a major milestone, not least for the money it brought into the conduct of education research, the roots go back much earlier. Prof Sim Wong Kooi, invested a great deal of his energy and considerable creativity in capacity building. The 80s and 90s saw a spike in the number of faculty earning doctorates, many in Australia. Prof Sim also established the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) in 1991 and unfortunately, since no one much cared, I revamped it as NIECER in 1991. An early research publication entitled *The Third International Mathematics and Science Studies TIMSS: A Look at Singapore Students' Performance and Classroom Practice* examined Singapore's performance in TIMSS.

That said, the successful embedding of education research within NIE since 2003, with the establishment of the Centre for Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) gives us much credibility with the MOE, the potential to influence policy and practice, and international respect. The MOE's generosity and confidence in NIE should be acknowledged. The research funding 2003-2013 is in the region of 100 million Singapore dollars, probably the highest on a per capita basis than many OECD economies. Note that this happened in spite of the fact that in the 90s education research in the UK and US was being thrashed as not being rigorous enough and needing to follow the medical model. Given the turn to evidence based/informed teacher preparation, NIE is well positioned. Some 100 research papers and conference presentations provide a rich and detailed account of Singapore pedagogy. The Redesigning Pedagogy conference launched in 2005 has provided an innovative platform for linking researchers and practitioners.

I referred earlier to some of the gaps in our research efforts. Beyond doing high quality research we need to get it out in a manner that policy makers and practitioners can find useful. That is a challenge to which OER has been addressing itself.

Beyond dissemination there needs to be steady effort to building and indigenous knowledge base to inform especially teacher preparation. Caro talked yesterday of the importance of culture – education processes, whether for mainstream or marginalized groups are deeply embedded in culture and history. While we should not ignore developments elsewhere we need to avoid intellectual dependence. The following slides show some examples of how we are doing this.

Internationalisation has always been a hallmark of teacher education in Singapore. Prof William Taylor of IE, London and then Chairman of the National Foundation of Educational Research for England and Wales was a consultant at critical points in the evolution of teacher education in Singapore; Richard Pring, the first professor of education to be appointed at the University of Oxford was an external examiner; Ruth Wong and Sim Wong Kooi were Harvard alumnus, Eng Soo Peck and Ho Wah Kam earned their doctorates from the University of Chicago and we are probably the only institution in East Asia to boast a dual Ed.D with IE, London.

My own background in comparative education contributed to 3 innovative international partnerships. In the eighties, with Sim Wong Kooi and John Yip, then Director of Education I was involved in the ***Southeast Asia Research Review and Advisory Group*** (SEARRAG); the team, replicated in all Asean countries involved a researcher, a practitioner and a senior policy maker. One of the many projects we did was ***Education Research Environments in Asean*** (1988). Another, the 6 Nation Consortium drew institutions from the US, China, Switzerland, Germany, Japan, and Singapore; topics we researched included language education, higher education, technical education. Our efforts were published in ***Learning through Collaborative Research***. Finally, the International Alliance with participation from the University of Melbourne, Beijing Normal, Seoul National University, OISE, University of Ontario, IE, London, Danish Education School, University of Sao Paulo, Wisconsin and NIE. I led the first project on teacher education, published as ***Transforming Teacher Education***; it is now being translated into Arabic! These

efforts have raised Singapore education, and NIE's profile tremendously; Singapore education is punching well above its weight!

Now, briefly, 'exporting the Singapore model', NIE has a bigger footprint in Vietnam, China and the Middle East than almost any other teacher education institution in the world. For someone critical of 'academic colonialism' I am somewhat ambivalent but I can confirm that there is admiration and a genuine desire to learn from our success. There are NIE-inspired institutions in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Vietnam, Indonesia; we are partnering with Temasek Foundation in the Philippines and in Indonesia.

The OED defines 'prophetic' as "a message of divine truth"; I am too much of a Social Scientist to attempt that; will use it in the sense of 'looking ahead'. What are prospects for reforming Singapore education from an industrial era model to one more suited to the challenges of 21st century societies and economies? Can Singapore's policy makers, principals and teachers imagine and realize a system in which deep disciplinarity co-exists with mastery of communication and group work skills, where out-of-school learning, fuelled by new technology platforms is recognized as a vital partner to in school learning, and where teachers build and share freely in knowledge communities that alone will guarantee's schooling's relevance. It is a formidable challenge and while it is true that the success of the last 30 years does not guarantee the next, Singapore, in my view has a better chance than most.

That should not lull us however, that as academics we are required to remain informally skeptical. We all know that streaming was controversial; many of us argued against it, in the firm belief that academic ability could not be determined early. MOE's advocacy of streaming, still a strong feature of the system, led to much controversy. MM Lee has now publicly acknowledged that he and other policy makers were mistaken in their belief that intelligence was equated to language ability. In his words "I intervened successively over the years and insisted that my experience should guide the policy. I was taking risks. I started wrong and I put it right'. This is a candid admission, even if it is 30 years late. But streaming decisions were made on the basis of achievement in English, Mother Tongue (MT), Maths, Science, and poor ability/performance in the MT had huge psychological and educational consequences for many children. Mr. Lee again... "nobody can master two languages at the same level. If you think you can you are deceiving yourself." But, it was policy that implied that this was the goal. Research was inadequate and silent in the face of strong assertion. And practice and achievement suffered.

We need to remember that in all our educational efforts, be it policy making, research, teaching, it is about the children. If that be the case, as researchers let us always seek to speak truth to power.