*Wi*READ Trial 3 Texts

Text 1 – Our Education System

WHY CAN'T WE SIMPLY EMULATE FINLAND'S EDUCATION SYSTEM?

BY GERALD PANG

THE SINGAPOREAN BABY IS BORN INTO:

A multi-cultural society with issues on integration
29% of the population are foreigners.

High population density results in larger teacher to student ratio
7,618 people per square kilometre.

Progressive structures to support parents
4 months of maternity leave and baby bonuses/ subsidies.

Strong emphasis on academics and national assessments of learning.
Confucian-influenced society based on meritocracy.

Three landmark examinations: PSLE, GCE 'O' levels, GCE 'A' levels.

A varied educational landscape
Multiple pathways for post-primary education.

ARE WE GETTING IT RIGHT?

In the recent OECD 2015 global schools overall ranking, Singapore emerged as the top performer for Mathematics and Science.

Singapore ranked higher than Finland (6th), the UK (20th) and US (28th). The analysis, based on test scores in Mathematics and Science, is a much wider global map of education standards than the OECD's Pisa tests, which focus on more affluent industrialised countries. This ranking has not come without criticism, with many citing it as skewing schools and national education systems towards repetitive rote learning.

Everyone agrees that Singapore's education system can be improved, but how? One of the hottest trends in education reform lately is to look at the stunning success of the West's reigning education superpower, Finland. Trouble is, emulating an alternative system of education is not a simple case of copy-and-paste. A more accurate analysis of the apparent reasons for Finland's success suggests that particular environmental factors such as political systems and socio-cultural factors play a major part in their success.

THE BABY FINN IS BORN INTO:

A homogeneous population
Only 3.1% of the population are foreigners.

No high-stakes examinations and an egalitarian culture with an emphasis on special needs education/ remediation
The first matriculation examination takes place at 18 years. 50% of all students who complete their compulsory Finnish education would have been in special education at some point in their school careers.

Low population density and therefore small class sizes
17 people per square kilometre.

Strong recognition for vocational skills and professions
50% of Finnish youths apply for vocational programmes.

A strong support system for parents
3 years of maternity leave and subsidised childcare.

HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN

In the years following the release of the 2001 and subsequent PISA results, Edu-tourists visited Finland hoping to uncover their secrets. In the most recent survey, Finland's position had slipped from 2nd to 5th in reading, from 6th to 12th in Mathematics and from 3rd to 5th in Science.

Pasi Sahlberg, the former Director General of CIMO (Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation) at the Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture comments on this issue:

"The situation in education in Finland appears to be similar to the situation at Nokia, Finland's international champion in the telecommunications industry. When Apple came out with the iPhone, Nokia had the dominant position in the cell phone industry and, blinded by its success, failed to recognise the challenge. Nokia had invented the touch screen, but failed to take the next step, which Apple did, leapfrogging Nokia. This is similar to the situation in education. The huge flow of foreigners from all over the world to visit the remarkably successful Finnish schools made the authorities fearful of changing anything. The drive of the 1990s activists in education has been extinguished."

Text 2 – Wombs Become Tombs?

When Wombs Become Tombs

by Mathew Pereira (The Sunday Times, 23 July 2006)

A few days ago, I bumped into a friend who told me she had been going for a series of medical tests. She is 35 and it is her first pregnancy, thus the more than usual number of check-ups, she explained. “It is to make sure the baby is normal,” she added.

“And what if it isn’t?” I asked.

“Abort,” she replied at once.

She would not even think of keeping it. “No. Would it be fair to bring him into this world if he cannot experience the full range of thoughts and feelings?” she asked. “Besides, who is going to look after him when my husband and I die?” she added.

I know a number of people like her who go for every test available when they are pregnant with the full intention of aborting the foetus if there is a sign the baby may not be normal. They strongly recommend it to others, too. When my wife was pregnant with our third child, I was terribly anxious because she would be just days away from hitting 35 on her due day. The chances of a mother having a Down’s syndrome child rise dramatically when she hits that age. These children experience early mental difficulties and suffer from childhood heart disease and leukaemia. Most also develop Alzheimer’s disease by the age of 40 and would need close attention all their life.

I never discussed my fears with my wife although I found out after her delivery that she, too, had harboured similar fears and, like me, decided not to discuss it. Our concerns were similar – would we be able to cope with a child who had special needs? Still, we decided against the tests. My wife and I do not believe in aborting and we did not want to put ourselves in a position where we would start considering it. It was better not to know.

Years earlier, a friend was in that kind of predicament and caved in at the last moment even though she was against abortion. She was newly married and had taken her Rubella jab to immunise her against German measles – a disease which could cause a pregnant mother to miscarry, have a stillbirth or for the unborn child to suffer from a range of birth defects. She

was told to avoid getting pregnant for six months following the jab or risk having a deformed child. But she conceived. She struggled with what she should do – abort or not to abort, and finally she decided to get rid of the foetus. A test on the aborted foetus showed that the child would have been normal. She took a long time to get over it.

Every time someone mentions abortion to me, it never fails to make me think of several couples who stuck firmly with their belief that they should never abort. One was a woman who got pregnant at the age of 43. It was unplanned. Despite her age and having two children who were much older, she decided that she would keep the child. As she progressed in her pregnancy, she took various tests and, after one of them, found out that she was going to have a Down's syndrome child.

The next few weeks were among the most difficult that she and her husband ever went through as they constantly fought the temptation to abort. She wept, suffered mood swings and became one depressed mother-to-be. Finally, they decided they would abort. She went to the clinic on the appointed day, but pulled out at the last minute. Today, she talks about the joy her Down's syndrome son brings to the family and how he has brought the family closer. The child's siblings love him dearly and enjoy taking care of him, she said. She has no regrets. "It's God's reward for keeping the child," she once said.

Another couple I know also found the news that they were to have another child difficult to accept. The eldest child was 18 then. The mother said she cried for weeks on hearing the news. She felt that she and her husband, both in their late 40s, were too old to go through another child. But she, too, kept the baby.

I know of several other couples who decided that they would bite the bullet and have the child. Never have I ever heard them say it was a mistake. Some did end up having to make lifestyle changes or had to give up their jobs. Another child set them back in terms of time and money, but almost always these sacrifices were repaid with the joy that the children brought. While some people have no qualms aborting an unwanted child, it would be sad if, like my friend, it becomes an almost reflex action.

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

Text 3 – Filial Piety?

Rethinking what it means to be filial

by Jeremy Lim (TODAY, 4 April 2014)
http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/rethinking-what-it-means-be-filial?

While most seniors say they hope to age in place and continue living in their current home, what they really mean might be that they want to maintain their current relationships and social circumstances. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

In Asian culture, children are expected to welcome their ailing parents into their homes instead of placing them in residential facilities such as nursing homes.

That is being filial, but have we misunderstood filial piety? At the recent Economist Health Care In Asia 2014 conference, a speaker challenged the conventional wisdom, revealing results from a survey where seniors living with their children described their living situation as “no choice” and the children separately surveyed bemoaned their parent(s) living with them as “burdensome”.

Half tongue-in-cheek, he declared this a most unhappy situation, with the “parents unhappy, the children unhappy and both suffering shortened lifespans”.

“No choice” and “burdensome” — these are terrible words in the context of acting upon filial piety.

Perhaps in more than a few cases, parents do not want to live with their children, but have no choice as they are financially dependent, while children act almost purely out of a sense of duty to house their parents, but with deep unspoken resentment.

Is Institutional Placement still 'extreme'?

As children, we want our parents to be happy, secure and comfortable in their golden years and this is often unthinkingly taken to mean parents living with us if they are unable to live independently.

Institutionalisation, or placing one's parents in an aged care facility, is seen as what the 1982 Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Ageing Population describes as a last resort and most "extreme measure". Three decades have passed, but I doubt this stance has softened.

As heretical as this sounds, there is merit in at least re-examining what filial piety operationally should look like and asking about the role of residential retirement facilities.

Is a senior living with children who are out working most of the day, with only a television for companionship, really happy? And secure?

Or is the senior in an aged-care facility constantly surrounded by peers and like-minded seniors under the watchful eye of trained health professionals better off?

In my work, I interact regularly with many individuals in their 50s and early 60s and I am struck by how many ask me about the availability of retirement homes in Singapore or the region. Are they close to their children? Yes.

But do they want to live with their children? Not really. Many are also mindful that work opportunities are global and are loath to "chain" their children to Singapore and "lesser" careers because of filial piety.

There are 200,000 Singaporeans living and working overseas, mostly between 20 and 54 years of age, said the National Population and Talent Division. The World Bank in 2010 estimated there were 300,000 Singaporeans considered migrants. It is likely that some of them have parent(s) living in Singapore with no other children here.

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

Redefining Ageing in Place

One point about “ageing in place”, which is a near-universal mantra of governments, is that while the vast majority of seniors report intent to live in their current residence as they age, I suspect what they really mean is that they want to maintain their current relationships and social circumstances.

Physical locality is only one factor in the overall consideration and perhaps not even the most important. Interestingly, Professor Angelique Chan of Duke-NUS in a recent study highlighted the paradoxical nature of loneliness in Singapore as sometimes being alone in a crowd, saying: “You can live with a big family and still feel very lonely. Or you could live alone, but feel wanted by family and friends.”

What then are the options? Around the world, retirement villages and their variants are gaining in popularity. A useful learning point I garnered from a recent study visit to Australia is the deliberate planning for aged care facilities to be five to 10 minutes by car to one’s original home. This promotes familiar social interactivity, while enabling appropriate medical supervision. There is no NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) Syndrome in the community; I even learnt that many relatives visited the seniors on a daily basis.

However, it is really not about the physical options. The crux, as articulated by Mr David Collins, an active adult and assisted-living consultant, is the need to take the “sense of guilt” out of the equation and focus on what Dad or Mum will be getting.

He said to online resource Perspectives@SMU: “One social stumbling block is that people don’t want a family member to be put into an institution. Getting away from the institutional feeling and the institutional mindset, and realising that what you’re doing for a member of your family is really a wonderful thing. You’re giving that person the opportunity to be with other people of their own age, (who have) similar ideas, similar discussions about life and health and happiness, and it can be a very happy experience.”

What then filial piety? An opinion piece in Ethos, the publication of the Civil Service College from almost a decade ago, puts it in its proper place and context: “The concept of filial piety can be used to raise awareness and garner support for a family approach towards caring for the elderly, but the provision and regulation of community and institutional care may need to be expanded, and should not be seen as an arrangement of last resort.”

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

Let us think about filial piety in terms of outcomes, regardless of location and false notions of "abandonment". What should matter is what our parents want, be it living with us, living with their peers or living independently.

What should not matter is what we think they want or what will make us look and feel filial.

Text 4 – Legalizing Euthanasia?

Doctor-assisted suicide is gradually becoming lawful in Americal

by Keerthana (Biotechin.Asia, 10 July 2016)
https://biotechin.asia/2016/07/10/doctor-assisted-suicide-is-gradually-becoming-lawful-in-america/

Credit: Pixabay

Assisted suicide refers to suicide committed with the aid of another person, sometimes a physician and is becoming more common and lawful in America. On June 9th, California became the 5th state to legalize doctor-assisted suicide, where 75 percent of the population support this way of ending one's life, out of one's own will.

It must be remembered, that this is different from the term euthanasia, that refers to the practice of intentionally ending a life in order to relieve pain and suffering and is governed by different euthanasia laws in every country.

Doctor-assisted suicide simply refers to the act of a medical practitioner (i.e. physician or surgeon) in bringing about the voluntary death of a patient suffering from a terminal illness or incurable disease. It is also crucial that the patient making this decision is of a sound mind before the physician or doctor administers the drug to them.

The End of Life Options Act in California allows such terminally ill patients who have less than six months to live to receive the drug dosage, which is prescribed to end their life.
This method of dying has sparked many debates. Proponents of doctor-assisted suicide will argue that it is up to one's personal discretion on whether he or she wants to live his life. They may perceive it as an issue of human rights- the fundamental right that every individual person has to live his or her life the way they want it to be.

There are also certain reasons why such forms of doctor-assisted suicide are increasingly preferred by patients:

- Unbearable pain or suffering caused to patient

- Recurrent physical conditions (i.e. Nausea and vomiting, paralysis, difficulties in breathing and swallowing)
- Psychological or emotional factors (i.e. Depression, feeling like a burden to loved ones)

In fact, according to several studies, more than half of the oncologists polled in a survey, have received requests from a patient wanting to end their life.

President of National Right to Life, Carol Tobias, said that this law however, demeans and disregards the lives of Californians.

This strongly suggests that there are ethical implications of assisted suicide to be considered and raises ethical arguments and debates on the right to live, since lives are being forcefully ended or stopped.

In Singapore, assisted suicide, is deemed illegal unlike the US. However, there is an Advance Medical Directive (AMD) which is a legal document that people sign to indicate that they do not want the use of any medical assistance or life-sustaining treatment which would prolong their life, in the event the person becomes terminally ill and unconscious and where death is imminent.

However, AMD is slightly different in the sense that it does not directly end one's life, but slowly causes death eventually.

Singapore is known for its rapid ageing population over the years. With the falling birth rates and increasing life expectancy, the proportion of elderly in our population is increasing. The government is taking many measures to lighten this increasing burden on our society, families and instead promote active ageing.

Should it become lawful in Singapore too? Well, any talk associated with death is considered as taboo in many cultures and Singapore is no exception. The views remain polarised, as expected. Only time will tell.

According to Wiki, as of June 2016, human euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Colombia, and Luxembourg. In Asia, Japan is the only country to have approved voluntary medical euthanasia. On the other hand, Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, Germany, Japan, Albania, Canada, and in the US states of Washington, Oregon, Vermont, Montana, and California.

This article was written based on a recent article by The Economist dated 13th June 2016

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

Text 5 – Schools Kill Creativity?

Can we educate future generations of Singaporeans to solve problems creatively?
By Elson Ng (MUSE, 18 April 2015)
https://blog.nus.edu.sg/uspmuse/2015/04/18/can-we-educate-future-generations-of-singaporeans-to-solve-problems-creatively/

In his TED Talk "How schools kill creativity" (most viewed TED Talk of all time), creativity expert and education reformer Sir Ted Robinson challenges us to rethink the fundamental principles on which our education system is based on. Rather than trying to stifle the creativity of students, Robinson believes that we should be actively trying to promote it instead.

How schools kill creativity

Our education system, Robinson asserts, is predicated on two main ideas. The first idea is that the most important subjects are the ones that are most useful in the workplace. This can be attributed to the historical origins of the public education system, which arose out of the need to fulfil the demand for labour created by industrialisation. The second idea is that academic ability equates to intelligence, and this is a result of universities constructing the education system to suit their own needs.

The consequence of this is that many highly talented and creative people go through the education system without realising their own ability, because their talents are neither recognised nor valued. And this is not a good thing. If we think carefully about it, education is meant to prepare students for the future, but do we really know enough about the future to prepare them for it? According to Robinson, this is the main problem. If we cannot even predict the future in the next few years, how can we presume that we will be able to adequately prepare children to deal with the future in the next 50 years?

> "If you think of it, children starting school this year will be retiring in 2065. Nobody has a clue, despite all the expertise that's been on parade for the past four days, what the world will look like in five years' time. And yet we're meant to be educating them for it."

In a future that is highly unpredictable, Robinson argues that we can no longer rely on the current outmoded model of education. Without creativity, students will not be able to adapt to the challenges of the future:

> "Our education system has mined our minds in the way that we strip-mine the earth: for a particular commodity. And for the future, it won't serve us. We have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we're educating our children."

If we agree with Robinson's assessment, that relying on the current education system which hampers creativity bodes ill for the future, then what does this mean for the Singaporean education system?

Are Singaporean schools killing creativity?

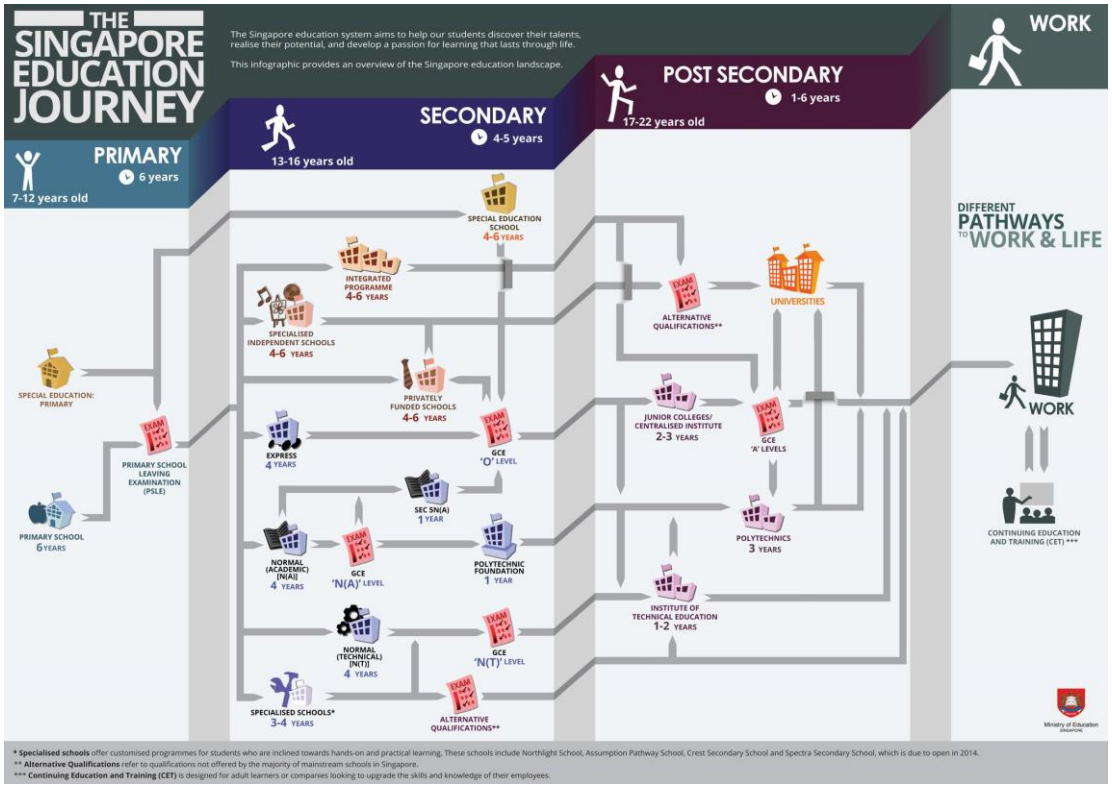
While Robinson's criticisms of the education system centre on examples in the West, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, the same arguments can be applied to Singapore's context.

In an interview with the BBC, Apple Co-founder Steve Wozniak argued that a company like Apple could not have emerged in a country with a structured education system like Singapore. He says:

> "When you're very structured almost like a religion… Uniforms, uniforms, uniforms… everybody is the same. Look at structured societies like Singapore where bad behaviour isn't tolerated. You are extremely punished. Where are the creative people? Where are the great artists? Where are the great musicians? Where are the great singers? Where are the great writers? Where are the athletes? All the creative elements seem to disappear."

Indeed, this is a problem that has been long recognised, even by Singapore's own Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, who has acknowledged that Singapore's education system is "too structured, too pressured, too competitive."

A quick look at the structure Singapore's education system as shown in the infographic below reveals as much. Upon reaching schooling age, the average child would have attended between 12-13 years of formal education, sat through 3 major examinations and been "streamed" into an educational path that has been pre-determined for them based on their academic performance.



("The Singapore Education Journey" by Ministry of Education)

While there are advantages of streaming students by academic ability, such reduced dropout rates, streaming reduces the alternative paths of education that a child can take and consequently limits their educational choices. If we are going to prescribe what children can learn according to their academic ability, how can they ever learn to be creative?

In addition, the high number of national examinations that the average student has to go through not only adds to the stress of learning, but also limits creativity in what students can learn, as there is added pressure to stick to the syllabus and teach to the exam so that students can do well. In fact, this is precisely the reason why the Integrated Programme, which allows students to skip the GCE 'O' Levels, was introduced, so that additional time would be freed up in the curriculum to "stretch pupils and provide greater breadth in the academic and non-academic curriculum". Unfortunately, this option is only available to a minority of students.

But the main issue here is not the structure of the education system, but the structured ways in which children are educated that impedes creativity. In his talk, Robinson highlights the focus on academic ability and prioritising of subjects that contribute to the workplace as two ways in which creativity is suppressed. In Singapore, we see that these in fact happen to be the most salient features of our education system.

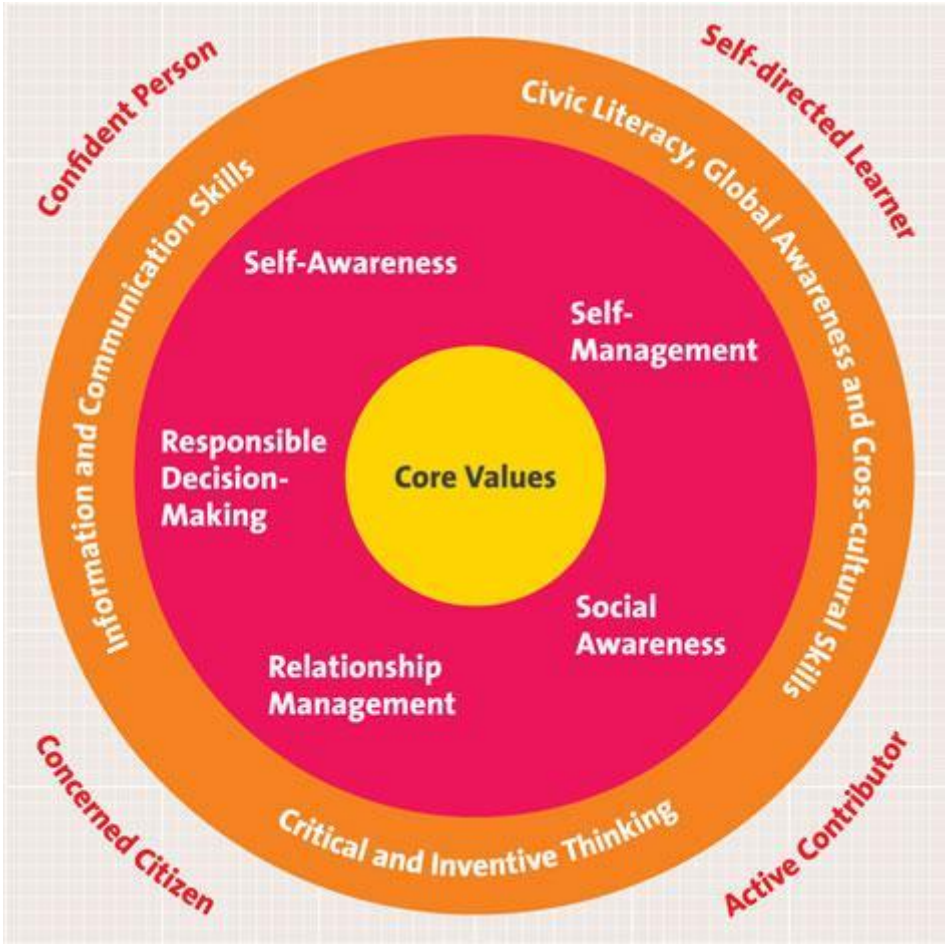
Singapore's education system focuses heavily on academic excellence, and this is evident when you look at policies such as nationwide examinations and streaming that focus on maximising the academic ability of students. In addition, there is also immense pressure on students by parents to do well, because academic success is perceived to be the prerequisite for future success.

As a result, Singaporean students do exceptionally well on the international stage, ranking amongst top countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, an renowned international study of students' academic performance worldwide. But at the end of the day, will this test-taking ability translate into skills that will help them cope with our rapidly changing world?

In the first place, what is the aim of the academic skills we are teaching students? According to the Ministry of Education syllabus for Primary School Math, numeracy skills are taught because they "are valued not only in science and technology, but also in everyday living and in the workplace. The development of a highly skilled scientifically — and technologically-based manpower requires a strong grounding in mathematics." If the aim of teaching students skills is to succeed in today's workplace, will they be adequately prepared to succeed in tomorrow's workplace? After all, jobs that exist today such as app developers, social media manager and sustainability experts did not exist 10 years ago. So if we only focus on teaching the same skills we have been teaching the past 100 years, how will we ever move forward?

Development of 21st century competencies – is it enough?

Recognising the need to implement policy changes that would foster creativity in students, in 2010, the Ministry of Education announced the implementation of a new framework that would help prepare students to "thrive in a fast-changing and highly-connected world", by enhancing the development of "21st century competencies".



("21st Century Competencies and Desired Student Outcomes" by Ministry of Education)

Under this framework, which is depicted above, students would be prepared for challenges of the future, such as globalisation, changing demographics and technological advancements through the development of:

- Civic literacy, global awareness and cross-cultural skills
- Critical and inventive thinking
- Information and communication skills

While this appears to be a laudable move on the Ministry's part, what this policy change actually entails is the improvement of the quality of Art, Music and Physical Education through investment in new infrastructure and increasing the amount of curriculum time devoted to these subjects.

Although Robinson argues for placing of greater importance on the teaching of the arts in schools, is this sort of structural, top-down approach really enough to promote creativity and prepare students to deal with future challenges such as globalisation?

A bottom-up approach to fostering creativity

In an opinion article written for the Straits Times, Nominated Member of Parliament Laurence Lien provides an alternative approach to fostering creativity in students. He

suggests that more radical change needs to adopted, such as a shift in paradigm from results-oriented learning to a more process-driven and holistic form of learning. This, he says, would mean the scrapping of assessments that compare students with their peers, such as streaming examinations, which would lead to the desired outcomes in terms of promoting creativity and critical thinking in students.

But more importantly, instead of structural changes, which involve a top-down approach, Lien thinks that the "classroom of the future should bear little resemblance to the teacher-dictated, industrial-age classrooms of today". Rather, "student-initiated and peer learning, with teachers as facilitators" should be the way forward.

> "If excellence in creativity, collaboration and compassion are regarded as more desirable qualities in Singaporeans of the future, then diversity and inclusiveness should be embraced instead of eschewed. Mixing children of different abilities is a strength, not a weakness."

In a series of papers published by the International Academy of Education (IAE), one of the principles identified that promote creativity is collaboration, which is the key outcome of peer learning. Collaboration can develop creative thinking through the interaction and mutual exchange of ideas between students. This not only hones their ability to think independently, but also their ability to consider a multitude of perspectives and think as a group, because creative thinking is property of both groups and individuals.

So, perhaps peer teaching in schools and collaborative learning is one way in which we can adopt a bottom-up approach that promotes creativity among students. But is this just one possible approach – the IAE lists at least seven other ways to promote creative thinking which we could adopt – such as allowing for mistakes and sensible risk-taking and learning how to assess and reward creativity amongst others.

Addressing future challenges directly through futures thinking

But if the aim of fostering creativity in students is to prepare them to handle future challenges, is there a more direct way of doing this? Instead of just equipping them with creative thinking skills that enable them to solve future problems, why not get students to think directly about their future, so that they can anticipate and solve these problems even before they happen?

Futures thinking is perhaps a tool that will enable students to do precisely this. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), futures thinking is a methodology that allows one to reflect in an informed manner, the changes that will happen in the future. It is also a multidisciplinary approach that uses a variety of methods – quantitative, qualitative, normative and exploratory, to identify and understand the dynamics that shape the future.

Simply put, it is about training people to think about the future in a structured way. It is about asking questions about what possible futures will look like and why they will look like that. It is also about asking questions about how we can respond to possible futures and shape the future in ways we would want to see it.

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

("Futures Thinking" by Sustainability Science Education)

In engaging in futures thinking, students will not only develop intellectually, but also gain informed insights about their future and possible future challenges. This could ostensibly lead them to take actions that would affect their future in a positive manner, which is the overarching goal of education.

How would we do this? For one, futures thinking could be an integral part of the curriculum as a subject to be taught. Unlike subjects like mathematics or even arts, futures thinking would not be taught for the sake of addressing present needs, but rather, to prepare students directly for future challenges.

Alternatively, as futures thinking utilises a multidisciplinary approach, it could easily be incorporated into various subjects. For example, if we teach biology, we could ask students to think about the implications of disruptive technologies such as cloning, and how this would affect their future as well as how they would respond to this future.

As Robinson mentions in his TED Talk, "we may not see this future, but they [our children] will. And our job is to help them make something of it". If we rethink the way we educate children, by focusing less on helping them live in present and more on equipping them to deal with the future, perhaps we can really help them to make something out of their future.

(Cover image by Expherience)

Text 6 – Less Testing More Thinking?

Here are some questions to prompt your reading and discussion of Text 6:

1. What are some assumptions being made in the article? Do you agree with all of them?

2. Is Singapore's education system 'too structured'?
- *Why does Singapore need a system in the first place?*
- *What are the advantages and disadvantages?*
- *Do the changes in the system allow for special cases (i.e. exceptionally gifted and creative students)?*

3. How have certain subjects or opportunities offered in Ngee Ann Secondary encourage creativity in students? How many schools in Singapore do you think offer the same subjects or opportunities?

4. "In an interview with the BBC, Apple Co-founder Steve Wozniak argued that a company like Apple could not have emerged in a country with a structured education system like Singapore."
- *What if we compared Korea (LG / Samsung) and Japan (electronics / robots) to America (Apple)?*
- *How similar is Korea's and Japan's education system to Singapore's?*

5. Who do you think is the target audience of this text? What evidence can you find from the text to support your response?

6. What is the intended purpose of this text? (Use the PURPOSE FORMULA to help you in your answer: [purposeful verb] + [target audience] + [message])

7. What sort of outcome do you think the writer hopes to achieve from writing this article? Support your response with evidences found in the passage.

Education system 'has to evolve' to spur creativity

By Ng Jing Ying (TODAY, 4 July 2015)
http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/education-system-has-evolve-spur-creativity

(L-R) Fareed Zakaria hosting a conversation with DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam during the SG50+ Conference at the Shangri-La Hotel. PHOTO: TODAY.

SINGAPORE — The Republic's educational system has served the country well in increasing social mobility, but it will also have to evolve to spur innovation and create a sense of individuality among Singaporeans, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam yesterday.

Speaking at a dialogue session during the SG50+ conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Tharman, who was Education Minister from 2003 to 2008, said he "makes no excuses" for what the system had done to uplift the Singapore population. "But that spirit of individuality, that free play of the mind, isn't best developed in a system that is highly competitive and focused on tests," said the minister.

He was responding to a question from American journalist Fareed Zakaria, who chaired the session, on whether Singapore needs to shift away from a system of testing to encourage creativity.

Mr Tharman said: "The toughest question to ask ourselves … is not what we add to the education system, but what we subtract." He pointed out that the task "requires some courage", given that Singapore is doing well, including in international tests.

Nevertheless, there is a need to make room for experiences outside the curriculum, such as the time to reflect, explore and build fellowship with others, he said. "We've got to take something out, accept that there is going to be a trade-off, we are not going to be as good in certain things. But we've got to provide that space and watch it as we go," said Mr Tharman, who noted that Singapore is starting from a strong foundation in education.

He added that having a sense of individuality is not at odds with having a sense of fellowship as one grows up with people from different backgrounds.

Dr Zakaria noted the importance of instilling in people a “sense of challenging authority”. “Is it not tied with a political system that does not encourage dissent either?” he said.

In response, Mr Tharman agreed that there must be a culture “starting from young, pre-school, primary school, where kids speak up”.

He said: “You don’t need to always make sense at that age, you don’t need to speak logically, but you’ve got to develop a mind of your own. There’s something to it.”

He added: “I think what it implies for political culture or the broader culture — we need some humility on this. You look at Switzerland, a highly innovative place, they’re not just tinkering with watches you know, they’re highly innovative people.”

Noting that the Swiss culture is different from the American culture, Mr Tharman said there are very strong social norms in Switzerland and its people have very deep respect for one another. “You don’t create noise beyond a certain hour at night, you don’t make life difficult for your neighbours ... there’s a certain sameness about us (Singaporeans),” he said.

Dr Zakaria referred to how the United States had fared poorly in international academic tests, but is highly innovative as a country.

However, Mr Tharman noted that the success stories in the US had come from a small portion of the population, who typically had gone to private schools and Ivy League universities.

While there is inequity in the American public-school system, Singapore focuses on meritocracy to give everyone a fair chance of success regardless of his background, he said.

Still, Mr Tharman recognised the need for a new culture and new set of skills for Singaporeans to spur innovation, as the Republic moves into its next phase of development. The younger generation is already showing greater willingness to venture into the unknown, he added.

(Featured Image: “Priprema Za Školu” by dework is licensed under CC BY-NC 3.0)

Text 7 – Compassion Deficit?

Does Singapore deserve its 'miserable' tag?
by Charlotte Ashton (BBC News Magazine, 14 March 2014)
http://bbc.in/1iM9Ux0

Singapore's reputation as a wealthy, aspirational and hi-tech country ensures it attracts a great deal of foreign talent - so why is it labelled the world's least positive country?

It was Christmas, but as my husband and I waited for our luggage in the shiny arrivals hall of Changi airport, the internet delivered tidings of no joy.

"Check this out," posted one friend on my Facebook wall, with a link to a survey of 148 countries in which Singaporeans were revealed to be the least positive people on earth. We were at the bottom of the happy pile along with Iraqis, Armenians and Serbians. "Good luck in misery city!" he wrote.

Over the next few months a happiness battle kicked off around us. Singapore's politicians reinforced their commitment to well-being and Starhub - a mobile network provider - launched an advertising campaign called "happiness everywhere", full of smiling Singaporeans dancing to plinky-plonky guitar music.

On the other side there emerged, mostly on the internet, an army of discontented souls who applauded the survey for validating their sense that life just seems to be getting harder and more expensive as Singapore gets richer.

Personally, I chose to ignore the public hyperbole and concentrate on what I encountered personally. And sure enough we have found plenty of apparent happiness.

In the free public barbecue pits of Singapore's beautifully kept parks, for example - always full of jolly families and groups of friends enjoying an evening in the tropical heat over a coolbox of beer.

And in the broad, toothless grin of the septuagenarian vendor at our local food court, who served me my daily dose of delicious, fresh pineapple juice.

And at dinners with our Singaporean friends who did not seem to moan any more than the rest of us - sure they are battling soaring property prices and the tedium of the corporate ladder, but coming from London that was hardly unfamiliar.

We got on with life on the immaculate island, where social housing estates look like spotless toy towns, crime is pretty much non-existent and you can get a delicious bowl of noodles for $3 (£1.50). If we were living in the misery capital of the world it certainly was not affecting our own sense of happiness.

Until I got pregnant.

Ten weeks of morning sickness ensued, turning my daily commute into a 45-minute gauntlet. One morning the nausea finally got the better of me just as I had stepped on to a packed train. Worried I was going to faint, I crouched to the floor, holding my head in my hands.

And so I remained, completely ignored, for the full 15 minutes it took to reach my station. Nobody offered me seat or asked me if I was OK.

For the first time Singapore had made me feel unhappy. I had been vulnerable - completely reliant on the kindness of strangers. Singaporeans, I felt, had let me down.

As I sat recovering on the platform, I wondered if this was part of the story behind those Gallup poll results. By this time a follow-up to the original survey had been published and according to the figures, Singapore had apparently cheered up quite a lot.

But all I could see was a massive compassion deficit. Or were my fellow passengers that day just unusually uncaring?

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

"Oh no, I am not surprised at all," said a Singaporean friend later that day. "My sister is seven months pregnant and she fell down a packed escalator the other day and had to crawl to the nearest railing to heave herself up. Nobody helped."

Another Singaporean friend was equally unsurprised. "I slipped down a drain last year and cut my leg," she said. "It was bleeding badly but nobody stopped to help. Perhaps they were all in a rush."

Our friend Marcus offered deeper analysis over brunch in a trendy retro cafe. That is not his real name by the way - in this authoritarian democracy, the majority of people are very reluctant to go on the record with anything remotely negative about Singapore.

And negative Marcus is: "We are programmed to think only about ourselves," he exclaimed. "The only thing that matters is money - helping people is not important."

Marcus is Chinese Singaporean but was educated in Canada. After five years back home he is desperate to leave again, because, he says, Singapore makes him unhappy too.

"In Canada people were helpful and friendly and they respect each other regardless of whether you are a manager or a bus driver.

"The problem here is that we measure everything in dollar bills - personal identity, self-respect, happiness, your sense of worth - it is all linked to how much money you have. But only the top few per cent earn serious cash - so everyone else feels worthless and apathetic."

We went on to discuss the numerous theories about whether it is materialism making Singaporeans unhappy or uncaring - or the fiercely competitive education system, or Confucianism, or the government's historic emphasis on economic growth above all else.

The debate certainly has not gone away despite the latest set of survey results.

Happily my morning sickness has passed, but despite becoming visibly pregnant, it was still rare for anyone to offer me a seat on the packed commuter train without my having to ask first.

I do not know if I would have had a better time in London, but in the Singaporean rat race you are certainly on your own. An unhappy conclusion, I am afraid, from misery city.

Charlotte Ashton, BBC News Magazine, 14 March 2014

Source: Dr Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan, Research Project NRF2013-EDU001-EL019 funded by eduLab, National Research Foundation. Adapted by Knowledge Mobilisation Unit, Office of Education Research, NIE, 2017.

A local response:

"Younger generation lacks graciousness"

by Richard Chin Koon Fong (ST Forum, 19 March 2014)
http://bit.ly/2ce6doX

I am a 68-year-old who wishes to add to Ms Charlotte Ashton's observations ("'Massive compassion deficit' in S'pore?"; Sunday).

On Sunday night, I boarded a train at Potong Pasir station. Unable to find a seat, I stood by the train door next to a reserved seat occupied by an elderly woman.

At Serangoon station, a woman seated three seats away stood up to alight from the train. As I walked towards the empty seat, a young woman rushed past me and sat down, all the while playing a game on her mobile phone.

The elderly woman on the reserved seat quickly stood up and offered her seat to me. All this while, the young woman just continued playing her game.

In another instance, during the morning rush hour, I was sitting on a reserved seat when a pregnant woman entered the train at Hougang station.

A foreign worker quickly stood up and offered his seat to her. But a well-dressed young woman who was playing a game on her phone quickly took the seat, and I had to offer my seat to the pregnant woman.

In these two incidents, the other passengers just kept quiet even though they were aware of the situation.

It seems that foreign workers and senior citizens know how to be gracious, but not our younger generation.

View this video for more diverse perspectives on this issue:

("Behaviour on public transport dominates kindness dialogue" by Mediacorp, 16 November 2013)

For more local and international opinions on this issue, see http://bit.ly/2ce6doX.