

# From the Upgrading Nation to the Learning Nation



- Cultures of Lifelong Learning in Singapore
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# Two cultures of lifelong learning

- 'The Upgrading Nation' (1965-1997)
- 'The Learning Nation' (1997-present)

# Singapore: 'the little red dot'



# A brief look at history

- 1819-1959 British colony
- 1959-1963 Self-government
- 1963-1965 Independence as a part of Malaysia
- 1965 Independence as a sovereign nation

# Impossible nationhood?

- Lack of economic viability (no natural resources, strained relations with neighbours)
- Lack of socio-cultural viability (no national identity: multi-racial, migrant population (CMIO))

# The politics of survival

- ‘Surviving against the odds’: rise of the developmental state
- ‘Nobody owes us a living’ (Lee Kuan Yew): rise of the competition state

# The 'politics of survival': the economic version

- Plugging into global capitalism: Export-Oriented Industrialization through alliances with MNCs
- Vying MNCs for technology and knowledge transfer (EDB)
- Catch-up development

# The 'politics of survival': the cultural version

- In a multi-racial society national identity cannot be based on racial identity
- What (most) Singaporeans of all races have in common: migrant origin.
- The 'migrant ethos' as the underpinning of national identity

# The 'migrant ethos' as national identity

- The imperative of continuous self-improvement (of the individual, the family and the nation)
- Pragmatism as a national ideology: 'we are a very results-oriented people'
- 'The rugged society': competition as the law of life
- Meritocracy as a national creed (Lee Kuan Yew: 'from each his economic best, to each his economic worth')

# The Upgrading Nation

- Individual upgrading (the migrant ethos) and national upgrading (the developmental state) linked through the principle of meritocracy.
- The developmental state provides opportunities for individual self-improvement
- These opportunities are circumscribed by the strategic objectives of the developmental state
- Individual upgrading is a matter of responding rationally to incentives offered by the developmental state

# Housing: home ownership as 'a stake in the nation'



# Education

Restructured in accordance with the needs of economic development:

- English as the language of instruction
- Overwhelming focus on science and technology
- Ability-based streaming (from early 1980s) ('effectiveness' perspective)

# 1997- The Learning Nation

- Asian financial crisis
- ‘The Knowledge-Based Economy’ (OECD)
- The US as the ‘comeback kid’ in the (new – see above) global economy

# Goh Chok Tong 1997

“A nation's wealth in the 21st Century will depend on the capacity of its people to learn. Their imagination, their ability to seek out new technologies and ideas, and to apply them in everything they do will be the key source of economic growth. Their collective capacity to learn will determine the well-being of a nation.”



# Goh on the consequences for education

“Education and training are central to how nations will fare in this future. Strong nations and strong communities will distinguish themselves from the rest by how well their people learn and adapt to change. Learning will not end in the school or even in the university. The task of education must therefore be to provide the young with the core knowledge and core skills, and the habits of learning, that enable them to learn continuously throughout their lives.”

# 'Passion for learning' redefined

Goh 1992: 'Our school system has always been competitive. Pupils get tested regularly and ranked in class... As a result everybody studies hard... Our strength has been the passion of our parents and students for learning and education.'

Goh 1997: 'I must say this passion is generally lacking among our students... [We must] fire in our students a passion for learning, instead of studying for the sake of getting good grades in their examinations... Their knowledge will be fragile, no matter how many A's they get, unless they have the desire and aptitude to continue discovering new knowledge well after they leave school.'

# Reviving the criticism of exam-centered education in Asia

- Encourages 'extrinsic' motivational structures (learning for rewards extrinsic to learning itself: honour rolls, scholarships, monetary rewards etc.). Not 'sustainable' learning
- Encourages unimaginative, repetitive modes of learning ('cramming', 'rote learning' ('ten-year series' etc.))
- A waste of human resources: rewards only a narrow range of talents and demotivates the rest

# Reform initiatives to promote an ethos of LLL:

- Reducing the curriculum ('white space')
- Student-centered, explorative learning (thinking skills rather than transmission of information)
- Project work: collaborative, inter-disciplinary and application-oriented forms of inquiry and learning
- Holistic education: sports, arts, building resilience and leadership ('broadening the definitions of success')

# What are the 'obstacles' to reform?

A Singapore teacher:

'I think there is a conversation going on now about whether we want to hothouse our kids, whether we want to sacrifice the ability for future generations to solve complex problems rather than to master lots of information. I think there is an understanding and enlightenment, that to some extent I don't think the majority of parents are seeing yet.'

Parents do not see the big picture.

# Rigour vs. rigidity

- Rigour: well-designed and demanding curriculum, clear and objective measures of performance
- Rigidity: few educational pathways, early determination of educational fate, inflexible and one-sided measures of success

Does excessive fear of loss of rigour lead to the persistence of educational rigidity?

# Beyond the developmental state?

Goh 1997: 'We will bring about a mindset change among Singaporeans. We must get away from the idea that it is only the people at the top who should be thinking, and the job of everyone else is to do as told.'

The need to go beyond the developmental state is clearly identified, but still takes the form of an injunction on the part of the developmental state itself: Singaporeans are told not to do as they are told!

The paradox: the injunction to go beyond the developmental state clearly is identified and initiated in the 'strategic perspective' of the developmental state itself

# Vulnerability vs. Resilience (Low/Vadaketh)

- Vulnerability as the developmental state narrative: divergences must be overcome
- Resilience as a post-developmental state narrative: divergences must be put to use for the common good

Is a wider societal narrative of resilience necessary for the educational narrative of resilience (a culture of lifelong learning) to really get off the ground?