

Oon-Seng Tan · Ee-Ling Low
David Hung *Editors*

Lee Kuan Yew's Educational Legacy

The Challenges of Success



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Foreword

In this volume, Profs. Oon-Seng Tan, Ee-Ling Low and David Hung, and their colleagues at the National Institute of Education in Singapore set out to explain how much of the trajectory of Singapore's education system was influenced by the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The result is a highly readable and informative account of Singapore's education journey, since the nation achieved limited self-government in 1956, and independence in 1965, to the present. The authors offer a nuanced and balanced view, from the vantage point that their perspective as insiders and as academic leaders in Singapore's flagship education institution affords them. They examine Singapore's educational achievement across the four 'eras' of the education system, and expand upon the tensions and challenges facing the system, particularly as the nation continues to progress rapidly into the twenty-first century.

The book is of interest because of Singapore's well-known improbable trajectory and because of the key role played by education in that trajectory. A small nation-state, ejected from Malaysia just 2 years after it had merged with Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak, lacking in natural resources and with a poorly educated population, Singapore went on to achieve extraordinary economic and social progress as a result of state-led policies that fostered economic development, rule of law, meritocracy and the formation of human capital. At the helm of those reforms for 31 years was the man who faced the unilateral vote of Malaysia's Parliament to expel Singapore with tears and anguish over the future of a small nation-state lacking in natural resources.

The book makes clear that the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was directly implicated in many of the early critical education policy decisions of Singapore, from the language policy pursued by the country, the focus on multicultural policies aimed at fostering racial harmony, to the policies to cultivate high-quality teachers. The biographical analysis of Lee Kuan Yew, interspersed throughout the book's chapters, shows how Lee's interest in effort and in the cultivation of talent had roots in his biography, particularly, in his experience of seeing family members affected by the economic depression of the 1930s. The authors show Lee Kuan Yew as a

person who took charge, vividly exemplified when he literally took charge of the Ministry of Education to oversee the implementation of the bilingual education policy.

But even as it shows how critical Lee Kuan Yew was at various pivotal points in Singapore's education system, the book illuminates how his greatest legacy was the construction of professional institutions, staffed by highly capable individuals, well selected, cultivated and supported. Singapore's education history would be far less interesting if it were all about the charismatic leadership and the ideas of a visionary leader. It is interesting precisely because this leader knew how to build teams to govern, in education and other fields, and how to build institutions that would outlive the remarkable founding generation of the young nation. The construction of a nation governed by laws, merit and institutions, so crucial to Singapore's contemporary's narrative, is well reflected in the various chapters of this book. Today, the strong partnership between Singapore's schools, the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education, and the effective loop of communication stemming from frequent interaction and by the interpersonal relations and strong ties between many of the education professionals, produce a remarkable level of unity of purpose and coherence and consistency in efforts to achieve that vision. It is arguably that strength of the system that has emboldened its leaders to take on ever more ambitious goals for the education system in the four 'education eras' of the nation, from the first era focused on providing access to education for all, to the more recent era focused on helping students gain the competencies necessary for social and economic participation in the twenty-first century.

The predictable outcomes of such rapid transition towards increasingly ambitious goals would be a growing gap between policy aspirations and practice, stemming from the fact that the basic grammar of schooling is resilient and slow to change, and that much of teacher practice is rooted in the apprenticeship of observation and in initial teacher education. It would thus be reasonable to expect that Singapore's most recent aspirations to offer an education that is relevant to the twenty-first century education would face considerable resistance from parents, educated in years past, and even from teachers, particularly those educated in previous eras. Given Singapore's cultural appreciation for consensus, collectivism and respect for authority, it is furthermore possible that such opposition would not be expressed openly but in the subtle resistance of those who go on with a practice more reflective of the goals of the past, than of present goals.

It is conceivable that parental pressures centred on preparation for the PSLE might undermine the best-laid goals of Singapore's exemplary curriculum anchored in the development of an ethical person, with a well-rounded set of attributes designed to equip them for innovation, citizenship and global citizenship. One could imagine practices of teachers anchored in a grammar of schooling shaped by some of Singapore's earlier education goals, too recent after all, undermining the current purposes to support personalisation, differentiation of instruction, and attention and support to all students. It would not be inconceivable, in a system which has intentionally changed so much in what it aspires to and in how it prepares new teachers, to find teachers who still subscribe to dated notions of talent, heavily influenced by

academic performance of students on a narrow set of metrics, focusing most of their efforts on the ‘most talented’ students, and neglecting, if not stigmatising or ridiculing, those who perform poorly on those narrow views of human talent. At greater risk, perhaps, of neglect would be children with special learning needs.

The authors of the book identify and engage with these tensions in open and critical ways. In so doing, they render the greatest homage to an extraordinary leader who devoted his life to building a nation of independent and self-reliant individuals. They honor him by facing squarely the challenges that loom in the horizon for an education system that could just as easily rest on the laurels of the successes of the past as it could become complacent in the cult of the personality of the late Prime Minister. In eschewing this temptation, in favour of the riskier but necessary confrontation of the gaps between aspirations and educational practice, between the present educational practice and the needs of the future, with courage, openness and honesty, the authors of this volume demonstrate that indeed Singapore succeeded in building education institutions that stand on the firm ground of the continuous and always unfinished search for truth and understanding as their leaders seek to provide each Singaporean with an opportunity to develop into full human beings with the same fear of complacency that Lee Kuan Yew had.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Oon-Seng Tan, Ee-Ling Low and David Hung

Abstract Like all developing ex-colonial states, Singapore faced, upon the onset of limited self-government in 1956 and later full independence in 1965, the twin challenges of creating a cohesive and robust sense of nationhood, and economic growth. Fifty years ago, Singapore was a picture of poverty, with insufficient natural resources and fracturing ethnic fault-lines. Independence in 1965 marked a major transition period in Singapore's nation-building efforts: the recognition that economic and social development had to rely on the rapid educational advancement of Singapore's burgeoning and largely immigrant population. Throughout the five decades, the late Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew played the pivotal role in pushing Singapore to become the economically powerful and diplomatically influential modern city-state that it is today. He recognised that education was key and central to the success of Singapore's next generation. This chapter begins with a biographical account of Lee Kuan Yew's formative years and his educational trajectory before describing Lee's contribution to the success of Singapore through his education vision and ideas. Finally, an outline of the chapters in this volume is provided.

Keywords Education · Lee Kuan Yew · Biography · History · Educational ideas

Introduction

Fifty years ago, Singapore was a picture of poverty, with insufficient natural resources and fracturing ethnic fault-lines. After Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence in 1965, Singapore's leaders were confronted with the task of nation-building in order to ensure its political and economic survival. Given

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the country's absence of natural resources, the only hope lay in the development of its people. Key to people development was the establishment of a strong education system backed by a strong educational workforce.

In 1966, Singapore's longest serving Prime Minister, the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), spoke to a gathering of school principals:

I have not come to address you. I have not come to give you a lecture or give you instructions. I have really come to discuss a problem with you, a problem which can be solved only, when ultimately not I, the Ministry officials or you understand it, but when the teacher understands it. Because the most important digit in what we are trying to do is the teacher. There are two factors in the formative influences of a young man or a young woman's life: one is the home; the other is the school. We cannot do very much about the home, but we can do something about the school. (Lee 1966)

Lee Kuan Yew laid the foundations for the creation of a first-world education system with his visionary education policies and deep insights on the pragmatic issues pertaining to the powerful influence of the teacher and the learning environment of the school in shaping the future of the nation. He found it absolutely necessary to do so for Singapore's survival. In the post-independence period, there were high levels of unemployment and the population was mostly unskilled with low literacy levels. The goal of education then was to ensure survival by creating mass education quickly in order to build a strong labour force for the country. By the late 1970s, education in Singapore moved into the efficiency-driven phase with the beginnings of high standards of curriculum and assessment. From 1997, Singapore moved into the era of ability-driven education with the emphasis on "thinking schools" and "learning nation". Education was poised to prepare a workforce suited for a globalised market.

Today, Singapore is recognised as possessing one of the best performing education systems in the world. Singapore's education system has received worldwide interest and attention because of its consistently high student performance in internationally benchmarked assessment. In the most recent release of the results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) held in 2011, Singapore emerged top in fourth grade for both Mathematics and Science achievement while at the eighth grade, Singapore emerged top for Science and second for Mathematics achievement. In the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, of the 65 participating education systems in the paper-based assessment component, Singapore was ranked among the top five in Mathematics, Reading and Science Literacy skills. These are remarkable achievements in a span of 50 years. Yet, in contemporary times, it is well recognised that education must go beyond academic skills and new competencies are needed for the increasingly interdependent 21st century world fuelled by technology and new cyber social media. As Singapore's nation-building project continues, educational development remains influenced by many of Lee Kuan Yew's ideas, and systemic improvements seek to address hard questions such as: What can we learn about evolving education from mass education to one that is student-centric and anchored in values? What are the foundations for preparing a population to not only cope with but actively leverage

upon technological affordances and globalisation? How can a system move from zero resources to one that is heavily driven by factual information, analytics and research?

This volume provides insights into Lee Kuan Yew and his education vision. Incorporated in these chapters are the implementation journeys and the overcoming of apparent philosophical paradoxes. Central questions are asked to help frame Lee's educational ideas: How did Lee's vision and educational policies result in a system that attracts the right and best people to become teachers, develop them into effective teachers, specialists and leaders, and ensure that the system is able to deliver the best possible learning for every child? What can the world learn from Lee's educational policies particularly in relation to language policies, bilingualism, and mathematics and science education? At the end of the day, it is not slogans of alleviating poverty, peace and human rights that will turn societies around. It is the integrity, intelligence, innovation, inter-culturalisation, interconnectedness of the people regardless of racial, linguistic and religious differences, coherence of the different educational phases and initiatives implemented with great intentionality and temerity that brings about a nation's progress at a meteoric rate. Such are the educational legacies of Lee Kuan Yew and this book aspires to share these learnings with the world.

This chapter begins with a biographical account of Lee Kuan Yew's formative years and his educational trajectory, before describing Lee's contribution to the success of Singapore through his education vision and ideas. Finally, an outline of the chapters in this volume is provided.

Lee Kuan Yew's Education

It is a little known fact that the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew was the Minister of Education for four months, from July to October 1975 (Lee 2012). Calling the education ministerial position as "not the most popular of portfolios" and a "job where angels fear to tread" (Lee 1977), the education landscape at that point in time was complex and challenging, linguistically, culturally and politically. High attrition rates was a serious problem; constant politicization of Chinese language by "Chinese language chauvinists" (Lee 2012, p. 62), poor teaching standards in both English and Chinese language education, and discontent with the bilingual language policies. All these arguably compelled Mr. Lee to take charge of the Ministry of Education so that he could "ensure adjustments to the bilingual policy were duly implemented" (Sim 2015). So important to Prime Minister Lee was education in general, and bilingual education in particular, that he took on the extra education ministerial portfolio. To understand why education was crucial to Lee, it is important to understand the social milieu that Lee was born into, and the educational trajectory he went through in his formative years.

Singapore can be notoriously seen as the site of the end of the British Empire, when Fortress Singapore was captured by a bicycle-borne Japanese army who had

just swept their way down the Malayan Peninsula with frightening ease. Prior to World War Two and the Japanese Occupation, Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, had recognised that Singapore's deep harbour and strategic position at the junction of the Pacific and Indian Oceans were the only natural assets and was determined to maximise them. He made Singapore a free port geared for entrepot trade, linking India, China and Britain. He also determined that Singapore would be open to anyone of any race who wanted to work, thus opening the door to a flood of Chinese and Indian sojourners, many of whom stayed to make Singapore their home. By the time Lee Kuan Yew's great-grandfather, Lee Bok Boon, arrived in 1863, Singapore's population had grown from a few hundred to 80,000 of whom 62% were Chinese, 16% Indians and 14% Malays. By the time of the 1947 Census, the population had grown to 945,000, of whom 79% were Chinese, 7% Indian and 10% Malay; proportions that did not vary drastically over the next decades (Han et al. 1998; Josey 1980).

Lee's parents, Lee Chin Koon and Chua Jim Neo, were very young when they married, and were twenty and sixteen respectively when their first child, Harry Lee Kuan Yew, was born on 16 September 1923 (Lee 1998). Each came from a wealthy Baba family that had lived in British Singapore for generations. The Baba culture is indigenous to the Straits of Malacca, and is the direct result of early intermarriages between Chinese men and Malay women. The culture is quite distinct from other strands of Chinese tradition, being a blend of Malay and Chinese cultures entwined during the British colonial rule. The Babas were a significant minority in pre-war Singapore and stood apart from the dialect-speaking Chinese who were usually first- or second-generation migrants. Like most Baba families, the Lees spoke little Chinese and conversed with each other in English and Malay (Lee 1998). Kuan Yew's father was a man of modest ambition who was a storekeeper and later, a middle manager for the Shell Company (Han et al. 1998). Lee's mother decided that Harry, as Lee was called by his family, should receive an English-language education so that he could succeed in Colonial Singapore. Harry entered Telok Kurau English School (TKES) at the age of six, and continually topped his class with effortless ease. Given his natural ability and his family's money, both life and school were easy for Harry (Han et al. 1998).

Soon after his entry to TKES, however, both of Lee's grandfathers lost their wealth in the Depression (Han et al. 1998). Although Lee's family was far from destitute, seeing relatives and presumably the parents of school friends lose their houses, properties and jobs must have had a profound impact on young Harry. The Depression must have taught Lee that life is neither fair nor easy. Like many other Depression children around the world, Lee acquired a new resoluteness of character in this period. Lee himself has attributed two features of his life directly to the Depression (Lee 1984). First, he cites this experience as the basis for his propensity to plan for worst-case scenarios, and never to assume that the good times will last. Second, when Lee's parents pointed out that the people who were doing well despite the Depression were the doctors and the lawyers, he made a conscious decision to pursue a career in law (Barr 2000, p. 9).

In 1936, Lee entered Raffles Institution (RI), which accepted only the top ten boys from each English-language primary school in Singapore (Barr 2000). In RI, Lee found a completely different environment to TKES: A highly competitive, streamed education system, in which his academic supremacy could not be taken for granted (Han et al. 1998). Lee worked hard at RI and after three years of coming second in his form, he finally topped the Cambridge Senior Exams, not only in RI but throughout the whole of Malaya. Yet, Lee did not concentrate on his academic work to the exclusion of all else. He played some sport, was a member of the school debating team and generally threw himself into the school's extra-curricular activities. Although Lee did not decide to enter politics until after the Japanese Occupation, by his final year at RI, he had already developed an interest in politics, which appears to have been cultivated by his teachers (Barr 2000). The 1937 RI *Syllabus of Instruction* reveals that the school deliberately set out to develop in the boys "an intelligently critical attitude towards public affairs" and encouraged a sense of public spirit towards the broader community (Barr 2000, p. 9–10). Such seeds are arguably planted in the formative years of Lee's political thinking. In Lee's final year at RI, each of the boys in the form was asked to write an essay on the future of the world. When the principal, D.W. McLeod, was handing back the essays, he observed to Lee's class that "out of this class one of you will be Prime Minister of this country" (2000, p. 10). No one had any doubt that McLeod was speaking of Lee.

Lee matriculated from RI in 1940. His mother had planned to use her savings to send Harry straight to England to enrol in an English university, but this ambition was frustrated by the outbreak of war. Instead he entered Raffles College on scholarship. At College, Lee studied English literature, Economics and Mathematics (Lee 1998). At the end of his first year, he chose Mathematics as his area of specialization. Lee's study at Raffles College was cut short by the Japanese Occupation, and since he did not enrol after the British returned, he studied there for less than a year and a half. Lee himself attributes little significance to his time at Raffles College, crediting it merely with giving him a background in economics (Josey 1980).

Crucially, the Japanese Occupation shattered Lee's world and destroyed all of the assumptions on which the young Lee had planned his life. Until this moment, he had held the British in awe, and his highest aspiration was to imitate them (Barr 2000, p. 4). This cataclysm ended the world he knew and the world in which he expected to make his way as an English-educated Chinese. Survival became the only priority, and Lee proved to be a survivor. In the Occupation years, Lee was subjected to bullying and beatings by Japanese soldiers on two occasions, and narrowly escaped being rounded up for summary executions on a third (Lee 1998). Lee decided that it would be prudent to learn some Chinese characters to enable him to understand Japanese notices. Subsequently, he enrolled in a Japanese school, learnt Japanese properly and worked as a clerk in two Japanese companies. Late in 1943, he began working as a transcriber in the Japanese Propaganda Department (Han et al. 1998). Importantly, Lee marked the Japanese Occupation as the catalyst that gave birth to his anti-colonialism: