EMERALD STUDIES IN TEACHER PREPARATION IN NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Teacher Preparation in Singapore

A Concise Critical History

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Teacher Preparation in Singapore

Emerald Studies in Teacher Preparation in National and Global Contexts

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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We hope that our book contributes in some small part to the historiography of education in Singapore, as well as adding to the literature on Asian histories of education written in English. In the broad sweep of historical events, smaller stories are often lost. Fortunately, enough of them may remain that they might be reconstructed and retold.

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Introduction

Singapore is regarded as an education powerhouse, as seen in its impressive performance in various international rankings, such as those provided by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). One of the key determinants of this performance, as frequently highlighted by the academic literature, is teacher quality (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016).

While the academic literature is replete with accounts of contemporary teacher education in Singapore, there have been in this century only a few books or articles concerning the history of teacher preparation in Singapore, or monographs on Singapore's educational history (Blackburn, 2017; Chia, 2015; Gopinathan, 2015; Kho, 2013; Wong, 2002). One of the most comprehensive books to date on Singapore's educational history is Harold Wilson's *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change, 1819–1972* (1978), but teacher education received very little emphasis in the book. Likewise, T. R. Doraisamy's edited book, *150 years of education in Singapore* (1969), spent much more time on education policy and reforms, and curriculum content, than on the history of teacher education.

There have been studies on Singapore's teacher education (for example, Sim & Ho, 1990; Goh & Lee, 2008), including two recent books (Goodwin, Low, & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Tan, Liu, & Low, 2017). However, these works tend to be uncritical and celebratory, and have very little historical overview. The most recent book on the history of Singapore's teacher education is the edited volume commemorating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of local teacher education in Singapore, *Transforming Teaching, Inspiring Learning: 60 Years of Teacher Education in Singapore* (Chen & Koay, 2010). Contributing authors to this edited volume are former and current faculty members of the National Institute of Education (NIE) and its predecessor institutions. While it provides a good account, it is rather celebratory and uncritical.

This book aims to be the first non–celebratory-based and non–institution-based account of teacher preparation written with a critical academic lens. It will critically discuss the history of teacher preparation in Singapore from the colonial era, when Singapore was the centre of British Malaya, right to the present day. It, therefore, includes the pre-professional era of informal approach to teacher education, before the establishment of formal teacher training. The role of the colonial state and post-colonial state in the provision of teacher education will be discussed, as will

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issues such as policy borrowing, diffusion of educational philosophies, developments paralleling those in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Beyond providing the official state narrative of teacher education, we will also discuss the parallel and alternative histories of teacher preparation outside of formal teacher training. These serve to complement and disrupt official state-sanctioned historical narratives. Thus, this book contributes to the historiography of Singapore, as well as the general history of teacher education.

Developmental State and Education

The book is framed by Green's (1990) notion of education and state formation, which has been adapted and refined by Wong (2002) and Chia (2015) for the Singapore's context. The idea of the developmental state is intrinsic to understanding the socio-economic motivational forces behind Singapore's education and higher education policies. The choice of Singapore later of going along with the wave of globalisation might at first seem counter-intuitive to the thrust of the developmental state mode that Singapore had been known for. Nevertheless, it was precisely the notion of 'performance legitimacy' at the core of the Singaporean developmental state that also led it to the realisation that no country big or small can be immune to the impact of economic globalisation in the age of the knowledge-based economy.

The first use of the developmental state concept in the context of East Asia was made by Chalmers Johnson in his seminal book *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982), where he argues that

> …the state's role in the economy is shared with the private sector, and both the public and private sectors have perfected means to make the market work for developmental goals. (p. viii)

Johnson built upon the scholarship of Dore (1973) on Japan to come up with his 'developmental state' concept. The widely read World Bank research report *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (1993) gave credence to the key role played by the developmental states of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in contributing to their stellar economic growth from the 1970s to early 1990s, concluding that 'in one form or another, the government intervened – systematically and through multiple channels – to foster development, and in some cases the development of specific industries' (p. 5).

In sum, 'behind the economic performance of the Asian Tigers [and Japan] breathes the dragon of the developmental state' (Castells, 1992, p. 55). Building and drawing upon Johnson, Castells (1992) proffers the following definition of the developmental state:

> A state is developmental when it establishes as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development, understanding by development the combination of steady high rates of economic growth and structural change in the productive system, both domestically and in its relationship to the international economy. (p. 56)

Castells, thus, renders the notion of 'performance legitimacy' and 'crisis legitimation' at the heart of the developmental state (Habermas, 1976; Stubbs, 2005). As Chia (2015) puts it,

> …the developmental state arose out of the crisis of survivalism, and is perpetuated by the generating and solving of crises. Economic development is the means to attaining the [goal] of nation building and the legitimation of state power. (pp. 9–10; Heng & Devan, 1995)

The developmental state, therefore, gains political legitimacy from its citizens by harnessing education for its economic growth aims.

One form of legitimacy is success, and in the context of education, this is determined by a range of various educational criteria: measures such as basic literacy, average educational level and percentage of population who have undergone higher education. To persuade potential investors that Singapore possessed a good investment climate and a local workforce capable of supporting their offshore assets, the city-state had to ensure that such measures of educational success would show strong positives when compared against the corresponding statistics for modern industrialised nations. The fact is that Singapore's response to global economic trends continues to be based largely on market forces (actual or perceived), and in particular, the requirements of major investors for a well-educated workforce (Goh, 1995, pp. 34–55).

Beginning with this approach, Singapore's philosophy has always been to develop a global brand based on what the international community has determined to be benchmarks and other criteria of success (see, as a detailed example, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, 2017). This of course includes education, in its multiple roles of providing skills, intellectual capital, an educated workforce and a politically stable environment. Brown and Lauder (1996) saw these as crucial factors in their analysis of education's role in the globalising economy.

Green (1997) explicitly mentioned the case of Singapore as a rapidly developing educational hub, made so by global economic imperatives and an inclusive learning culture that considers education to be important across all levels and sectors of society. Ashton and Sung (1997) in turn mapped out the relationship between Singaporean governance, education policy and economic growth, comparing this with the equivalent relationships in the United Kingdom and United States. They analysed the mechanisms by which Singapore achieved a higher level of educational–economic integration than states such as Germany and Japan, and concluded:

> The reality of the Singaporean system is very different, and is best conceptualized as a new form of government intervention, in which the government has sought to understand the operation of market forces and use them to realize its political objectives…. (pp. 216–217)

The result of this co-ordination of education and training with the requirements of the productive system is that we are likely to witness a closer link between investment in education and training and economic growth in societies such as Singapore than we have witnessed in the older industrial societies of the West.

Singapore is plainly a somewhat unusual case, perhaps unique, in the globalising world. It seems obvious that in the light of its situation, Singapore, therefore, invested extensively in educational infrastructure over the forty-odd years since independence.

The general purpose of Singapore education could, thus, be summarised as the meeting of market demand for educated labour with high-quality supply through the development of new and existing educational institutions and mechanisms. This would at the same time boost the rate of knowledge and technology transfer, and in the overall perspective, enhance the economic growth of the nation-state (Goh, 1995, pp. 237–258). It is very much like Spring's (2009) Human Capital World Model, but with tighter state control.

The educational infrastructure also served other purposes of nation-building, either directly or indirectly, through 'hardware' – engineering and technological output, 'software' – expertise and processes, and 'wetware' (or 'heartware') – attitudes and public relations. It was one of the factors that have made Singapore's defence industry 'the most substantial, sophisticated and diverse in South-East Asia' (Huxley, 2000, p. 185). It was used to upgrade Singapore's capacity for military innovation and planning (Huxley, 2000, pp. 109–111) and to develop social cohesion and a sense of national identity through a National Education Programme (Tan, 2005).

The implementation of this educational infrastructure, or education system, to some extent can, therefore, be considered a direct response to both the development of a global economy and the pressures of globalisation. The former response can be characterised as, 'What can we do which will make us have greater impact on a globalised/globalising world?' The latter response can be characterised as, 'What can we do which will reduce the impact of the globalised/globalising world on us?' In some ways, the Singapore experience shows the tension between the desire to leave an imprint upon the world and the desire to resist being imprinted upon – a theme discussed in full by Koh (2010) in *Tactical Globalization: Learning from the Singapore Experiment*.

The Asian Values Debate

Much of the ideological underpinning behind Singapore's trajectory of economic development lay in the exposition of 'Asian Values', though that began to lose traction after the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The story of the Asian Values debate presents a very salient case of how 'Asian' cultural–political elements were reconciled with what was a relatively 'Westernised' mode of economic development – especially vis-à-vis the rest of Asia – if for political expediency as its sceptics would allege.

The term 'Asian Values' became popular in the political discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. The most vocal proponents of Asian values are Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir and their deputies and government officials, as well as post-Tiananmen Chinese leaders (Mendes, 1996). In a nutshell, the Asian Values argument was advanced on cultural, economic and state sovereignty grounds. The cultural argument states that Asian cultures and traditions are inimical to Western liberalism. The economic argument posits that strong paternalistic government is needed for rapid economic development, and liberal democracy could impede economic growth (cf. Langlois, 2001). Thus, the advocates of Asian values argue that liberal democracy is not applicable to Asia, and they stress 'good governance' and traditional 'Asian values' such as filial piety and obedience to rulers.

The three 'Asian Values' models can be merged to define the substance of the concept as follows: respect for hierarchy and authority including a deference to such authority, centrality and cohesion of the family, social consensus including an avoidance of overt conflict in social relations, an emphasis on law and order and a desire not to have individual liberty undermine personal security concerns, an emphasis on stability to promote economic and social development, a reverence for traditional values and culture, an emphasis on education and self-discipline, and acceptance of diversity of spiritual and philosophical authority in theory, but enforced social consensus among such diversity in practice (Mendes, 1996).

Finally, the state sovereignty argument contends that without a strong and authoritarian government to preserve national unity, centrifugal forces of religion, race and ethnicity would potentially tear the countries apart. The racial and religious riots in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in the 1960s are cited as evidence to support this argument.

The Asian Values discourse has its roots in the notion of Confucian ethics as a key to the economic success of Japan and the Asian Tiger economics of the 1970s–1990s. Proponents of this Confucius ethics notion assert that

> …both Japan and the newly industrialized countries of East Asia belong to the broad area of influence of Sinitic civilization, and there can be no doubt that Confucianism has been a very powerful force in all of them. (Berger & Hsiao, 1988, p. 7)

This argument was first articulated by Reischauer (1974) in his seminal essay 'The Sinic World in Perspective'. For instance, Berger and Hsiao (1988) state that

> Confucian ethics, as reflected in government leadership, competitive education, a disciplined workforce, principles of equality and self-reliance, and self-cultivation, provides a necessary background and powerful motivating force for the rise of East Asia. (p. 7)

This is echoed by Ezra Vogel in his seminal work *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia* (1991) where he outlines four Confucian

institutions and cultural practices responsible for the East Asia economic miracle – meritocratic elite, entrance exam system, the importance of the group and the idea of self-cultivation.

Similarly, Tu (1996) argues that

> …the social and cultural capital that has sustained the economic dynamism of Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons has been at least commensurate with Confucian ethics, if not thoroughly Confucian in nature. (p. 10)

One key Confucian trait he notes is 'the centrality of the family in East Asia, not only as a basic social unit but as a metaphor for political culture'. While Tu acknowledges the considerable variation in Chinese, Korean and Japanese family structures and functions, he notes that

> …the family's supreme role in capital formation, the classic Confucian vision that 'only when families are regulated are states governed' (stated in the opening passage of the Great Learning) is still taken absolutely seriously in East Asian political culture (Tu, 1996, p. 8)

Critics of the Asian values discourse view them as 'largely precipitated by the government leaders of countries from the Southeast Asian region who desired to legitimise their practices of "good governance" in the eyes of the international community' (Langlois, 2001, p. 159; Lingle, 1996; Patten, 1998; see also Barr, 2002). Kim (1994) and Lee (1995), former Presidents of South Korea and Taiwan, respectively, disagree that liberal democracy is incompatible with Asian Values. They argue that democratic traditions and precedents exist in Asian cultures and traditions. For Bell (2000, p. 8), the problem with the official Asian values discourse lay in its theoretical shallowness.

Nonetheless, the focus on the family and the community by the proponents of Asian Values parallels the communitarian critique of liberalism by scholars in the United States and Europe, a decade earlier (in the 1970s). The philosophical roots of Asian values debate come from the communitarian critique of liberalism. In other words, the Asian values discourse is part of the larger philosophical debate between the communitarians and the liberals (see Bell, 2004; Bell, Brown, Jayasuriya, & Jones, 1995; Berkowitz, 1997; Fukuyama, 1992).

Subsequent Chapters

This book is arguably the first book length monograph of the history of teacher preparation in Singapore. It aims to fill a lacuna in the studies of Singapore's educational history as well as the history of teacher preparation in Singapore. We situate the history of teacher education in Singapore within the broader narrative of Singapore's educational history, and thence to some extent the overall history of modern Singapore. Nonetheless, the book does not claim to be a

comprehensive and definitive history of teacher preparation in Singapore. Rather, it is a *contextual and critical* history of Singapore's teacher preparation from the colonial era to the present day.

With this introduction laying out the conceptual framework for the book, the subsequent chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1 – An Overview: Education and Teacher Preparation in Singapore during the Long Nineteenth Century

This chapter provides an overview of Singapore's history of education and teacher training for the first 100 years after the East India Company created a trading foothold on the island in 1819. The British colonial experience will be the key context that foregrounds this chapter. As Singapore was also the centre of British Malaya until 1945, the discussion will also reference the educational history of Malaya in this period. During this period, there was no unified system of education, and so a diversity of schools and teacher training existed.

Chapter 2 – Singapore through the Wars: Education and Teacher Preparation up to 1950

This chapter overlaps with the previous one in covering various key points in the development of a formal education system in Singapore. However, it examines the different evolution of education in various communities, attempts to train teachers and the further development of the educational threads put in place before the 1920s and up to the period immediately after the Second World War to 1950.

Chapter 3 – Singapore's 'Struggle' for Independence and Educational Policy Implications

The two decades following the end of the Second World War were eventful for Singapore. This chapter will discuss Singapore's political history from the 1950s to 1965s and its impact on Singapore's education in general and teacher education in particular. Major themes include decolonisation, self-governance and the move towards an integrated national education system.

Chapter 4 – Singapore's First Decade of Independence and Expansion of Teacher Education: From TTC to Institute of Education (IE)

The challenges of post-independence Singapore set the context for this chapter. This period is sometimes referred to as the 'survival' phase of Singapore's history. Singapore witnessed rapid industrialisation and economic development, and its education system underwent several reforms. This sets the context for the discussion of the expansion of teacher education and the establishment of the Institute of Education to replace Teachers' Training College (TTC).

Chapter 5 – Universitisation of Teacher Education: From the Institute of Education and College of Physical Education to the National Institute of Education

This chapter continues the discussion of the development of the Institute of Education from the previous chapter, as well as the establishment of the College of Physical Education. Both institutions merged to form the NIE, an autonomous institute within the newly established Nanyang Technological University in 1991. This universitisation of teacher education in Singapore has to be understood and discussed in the context of higher education in Singapore, as well as Singapore's educational policies in the 1980s and 1990s. The chapter also points out major developments at the NIE during these two decades.

Chapter 6 – The National Institute of Education in the Twenty-first Century

Chapter 6 discusses how teacher education at the NIE has evolved in the twenty-first century. Among the key themes in this chapter are the continuing tensions associated with the universitisation of teacher education. The nature of the relationship between the NIE, Nanyang Technological University and the Ministry of Education is explored.

Conclusion – Present and Future Challenges

The concluding chapter of the book discusses the current state of teacher education in Singapore in the context of the historical narrative in the previous chapters. Legacies of the past will be highlighted, as well as the current challenges. Future trends in teacher education will also be discussed.