On the limitations of Singapore’s conception of education and the question of the ideally educated citizen

by

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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to explore Singapore’s conception of education through an examination of key government documents and speeches in order to show the impact and influence of education progressivism and constructivism in Singaporean classrooms. I describe the conception of the (ideally) educated citizen that underpins Singapore’s “ability-driven” model of education and more recently, the “student-centric, values-based” phase of education. I also explore the dichotomy of individual versus community, and citizen as object to be created and subjects to be realised in the Singapore narrative. How limiting a particular conception of education is, in this case progressivism, and how it may run counter to the government’s ideally educated citizen, are the main questions this dissertation attempts to address.

In the case of Singapore, by disregarding the individual in a fundamental sense, yet projecting a concern for the individual in an education premised on the constructivist paradigm, the conception of the “ideally” educated citizen is fairly easily theorised, conceived and implemented. However, the realisation of this ideal rests on unstable ground due to the lack of attention paid to questions on the purpose of education and the citizen as subject not object. While constructivist principles are adopted sincerely, the implementation has been somewhat simplistic and unrealistic in the realm of the pre-determinist nature of society and politics in Singapore, creating a disconnection between the ideal and actual educated citizen.

Keywords: Progressivism; constructivism; conception of education; citizenship education in Singapore
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List of Acronyms

ADE Ability-driven Education
ALP Applied Learning Programme
CCA Co-curricular Activities
CCE Character and Citizenship Education
EPMS Enhanced Performance Management System
ICT Information and Communications Technology
LLP Lifelong Learning Programme
MOE Ministry of Education
NE National Education
NEB National Education Branch
PAP People’s Action Party
PERI Primary Education Review and Implementation
SERI Secondary Education Review and Implementation
TLLM Teach Less, Learn More
TSLN Thinking School, Learning Nation
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WPS Work Plan Seminar
Chapter 1. Introduction

This dissertation represents the most recent step in my journey to seek answers to questions I have had since I was a beginning teacher to my time in the Ministry of Education Singapore as both a National Education officer and Senior International Relations officer. In the midst of the humdrum activities of daily school life, which included carrying out the formal and informal curriculum, I found myself asking questions that were beyond what the school and ministry could satisfactorily provide me. I lacked the vocabulary and knowledge of educational theories to articulate clearly even to myself what I found problematic and troubling.

As a beginning teacher, I was not comfortable with the emphasis on examination skills rather than content, and that I had to teach in a certain way in order to be seen as a ‘good teacher’. As an officer in the ministry, I marvelled at the level of detailed planning and foresight by the government in every aspect from content to implementation. Yet, I was uncomfortable with the way things were done in terms of citizenship education and the general trajectory in which our education system was heading. In essence, I did not agree with the government’s conception of education and how it had been translated in the classroom.

Having been fed a steady diet of education rhetoric premised on education for economics, writers of education I have encountered during the course of my studies, such as Gert Biesta and Kieran Egan, have broadened the ways in which I think and talk about education. Their work has also highlighted my own assumptions and how strongly language shapes our understanding and ability to think and do education. As with most beginning teachers, I was concerned with the practical aspects of being a teacher. This included acquiring information and knowledge that was immediately applicable in the classroom like scaffolding structures in lesson plans and participatory activities which I could use to be prepared for lessons on a day to day basis. The training I received as a
student teacher also focused on the more practical aspects of classroom instruction like writing schemes of work, lesson plans and teaching strategies for the subjects we were assigned to teach in schools. The hectic life in school made it difficult to stop and think about the larger questions of the profession, what the word ‘education’ meant, how I conceived it to be in clear terms, and whether what I did in the classroom matched my beliefs. Perhaps time and familiarity aided in my maturing as a teacher and allowed me in due course to focus on and think more deeply about what troubled me throughout those years in school and in the ministry.

In addition to broadening the ways in which to talk, think and do education, I kept coming back to questions of the purpose and aims of education. The writers I came across in the course of my studies led me to consider more deeply what I thought education is and should do for an individual and led me to question my own conception of education and my value system. Consequently this questioning led me to explore what it means to be in this world. I therefore wish to start this dissertation by describing the education system in which I grew up, participated, and subsequently worked. In order to answer the questions I had, I had to find ways to talk and think about this system that, while I am grateful for, I am also vexed with. It is not unusual for educational practice and rhetoric to be based on many educational theories and philosophies which might overlap and at the same time contradict each other at some level. That, I feel, is the case in Singapore where the borrowing of ideas from a wide array of other education systems around the world and not explicitly stating any recognisable education belief except the one espoused by the ministry is an acceptable practice. There is nothing wrong with learning and adapting from others, and in some cases, it might be necessary.

In order to ascertain the educational philosophy and theories that the Singapore education system espouses, I will be examining major initiatives and policy speeches by three ministers of education since 1997 to the present. 1997 has been acknowledged as a significant turning point in Singapore which signalled the change from an efficiency-driven system of education to an ability-based, aspiration-driven system. The nation-wide call for “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” was the beginning of a change in government rhetoric where emphasis was placed on the passion and interests of students and for the school system to nurture those interests. Following the rhetoric were education policy
changes that aimed to show how serious the government was about change in terms of providing more flexibility and choice in the once rigid school system. While these changes can be seen as a step in the right direction, my contention is with the overriding, unquestioning belief that economics ought to drive education. This belief is not necessarily wrong and is perhaps legitimate for education to prepare people for a life of meaningful work and effective contribution towards society. However, if the belief that the purpose of education is solely for economics is taken as common sense, it prevents the conversation from expanding and limits other questions or considerations of what the purposes of education could or should be. While it would seem that the general strand of educational rhetoric is progressivist in nature, policy-makers and the government also seem to subscribe to what they deem as the positive aspects of other philosophies like pragmatism. What we have is a system that wants it all, and thus is flexible and accommodating to any belief or principle that might bring about the best economic outcome for the future of Singapore. What we are left with is a system held together by ill-defined buzzwords and theories, and that puts tremendous pressure on teachers, students and administrators because the school is seen as the solution to all of society’s problems, a rather common predicament of schools in other systems as well. Hence, in my attempt to understand and critique the Singapore government’s conception of education, I wish to introduce a conversation that considers the losses of adopting a primarily progressivist conception of education, to talk about its fundamental limitations in terms of ideology and implementation and in its aim of creating the ideal citizen. Essentially, my thesis is that the philosophical underpinnings and educational theories employed by policy-makers run counter to the goals that the government wants with regard to the cultivation of the ideal citizen.

Given the historical circumstance of Singapore as a former British colony, one way of approaching the question of Singapore’s conception of education and the ideally educated citizen could have been through the lens of postcolonial theory. In some ways, the language of postcolonial theory would shed light on the ways in which the trajectory of education in Singapore during decolonialization has shaped policy decisions as a means to distance and break away from her colonial legacy. I have chosen instead to focus on critiques of constructivism and progressivism insofar as they have informed Singaporean education policy from the position as a teacher in the system; a teacher who was trained
in constructivist theory and a teacher who has been involved in and had to navigate through the system with what seemed to be education rhetoric based on progressivist principles. In many ways, this dissertation is a critique of myself, my thought-process, my approach to education. I find that I can do this best with the language of education of which I am familiar.

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I will set the context for my research by expanding on my experiences in education as a student and as a teacher in both the school system, and the wider system of the ministry. By tracing my journey and reflecting on my experiences at important junctures, I want to raise questions that I had at each stage of my journey in education which have contributed to the trajectory and focus of my inquiry. I will provide an overview of the existing literature which both lauds and critiques the Singapore education system in an attempt to give a balanced view of what is generally written in both academic circles and the public media. Academics such as Ho Li Ching and Warren Mark Liew (2012) criticise the effects of a system which purports equality and equal opportunity but subtly (and not so subtly) discriminates. Jasmine Sim (2011) has tried to make links between realism and pragmatism in education reform throughout the decades. However, they do not attempt to trace deeply the educational philosophy and theories that underpin the system, and so are unable to offer a critical discussion of the fundamental limitations of adopting a mixture of philosophies in the pursuit of a coherent conception of education. Since Singapore’s education system is closely linked to the politics of nation building, the theories that are critiqued are usually seen from a political standpoint. I, however, would like to employ the methods of philosophical inquiry in terms of locating what is missing and questioning the fundamental premise to preconceptions (in many ways, my own) to approach the study of education in Singapore. In addition to introducing a new conversation about Singapore education, the scope of philosophical inquiry will allow me to analyse the system from an angle other than logical empiricism. I am more inclined towards this approach because it departs from the hegemony of quantitative data and logical empiricism that has governed the way the education system has been analysed and, more importantly, I feel that education is not something that can or should be discussed and deliberated purely on numbers and measurable processes and outcomes.
What is education? From a student's perspective

My decision to become a teacher stemmed from my own experiences as a student in the classroom and school. The way I think about school and education in general was very much influenced by the way I was brought up. My parents, in particular my father, did not pressure me to excel academically. Getting an “A” was less important to him than enjoying my time in school. Even though my mother hoped that I would top my class academically, she never plied me with tuition lessons or forced me to study. In many ways, my parents did not fall into the stereotype of the “Asian” parent and their expectations of me played out in the decisions I have made. The fact that we were a middle-income family meant that I was also rather comfortable in life and did not have to worry about my next meal. This meant that my education experience was not about elevating myself or my family economically.

School in the 1980s in Singapore could be described as routine, academically-focused, with rote-learning and memorisation being common features of a teacher’s pedagogy. In primary school, there was a lot of rote-learning in mathematics where we had to memorise the multiplication table, and in English where we had spelling and dictation every week with grammar and vocabulary exercises to do as homework every day. Mandarin was no different as we had to memorise the various characters with spelling and dictation as well weekly. We had to sit silently and listen to the teacher talk in class. If we wanted to answer a question, we had to raise our hands and wait for the teacher to call on us. While the teacher did not discourage us from asking questions, it did not seem like a natural thing to do. The teacher-student relationship was clear, they taught the prescribed national syllabus and, we listened and learned. We proved that we learnt by giving the right answers in tests and examinations.

My secondary school experience was similar to primary school with the classroom structured in the same way and the teachers teaching in the same way. There was still a heavy emphasis on content mastery and memorisation of facts, but with more practice and repetition. Writing English compositions and other essays for subjects like geography, history and literature, as well as repetitive practice in mathematics was the norm.
Education in a broad sense was learning content, memorising it, and learning for the major national examinations after secondary school.

The school experience however comprised more than just academic pursuits in the classroom. In addition to honing one’s academic abilities, school was a social place to meet friends, to do things other than study and we could participate in a variety of after school activities like camps, excursions and sport. I remember spending a lot of time after school pursuing my love for music as a member of the school band. These made up the whole school experience which I had grown to appreciate in my teenage years. I learnt to manage my experiences, how I felt and how I expressed my feelings about them. These experiences and the way I responded to them have informed much of how I approached school as a teacher when I went back to the classroom ten years later.

From a teacher's perspective

The memories of the routine in school and focus on academic learning in the classroom stayed with me and I made a conscience effort not to recreate that same environment for my students. In my own simplistic way, I looked to do things contrary to what I had experienced or remember having experienced as a student. I did not focus on the textbook, I did not read off any book, I asked questions, I planned ‘fun’ activities and I endeavoured to create an environment that did not feel restrictive. That was my simple solution in order for my students not to feel the same way I did when I was their age. Time as a teacher did not permit me to delve any deeper than ‘rebelling’ against what I experienced in the classroom. However, the first incident I encountered as a beginning teacher in my first year made me consider more deeply what I was doing in the classroom and as a teacher in general.

I started my teaching career on 2 May 2000 in a secondary school. Even though I had gone to various schools as a student teacher, entering the profession as a fully trained professional was a daunting and new experience for me. As new teachers, we were told stories by experienced teachers and students about school and education in general. A story that was often told to us was the one about the star fish. Meant to manage our expectations as new teachers and to help us cope with disappointment, the story was told
to us by our professors just before we graduated from teacher’s college and in the school we worked at by the principal. You could also see many principals wearing a small star fish brooch on their jackets at various functions. The story was about a girl who was on a beach filled with thousands of star fish stranded on the sand after a storm. One by one, she picked them up and threw them back into the ocean. A man approached her and told her that it was impossible to save all of them. She picked one up and threw it back into the ocean and said, “I’ve made a difference to that one.” Through this story, I learned how to cope as a new teacher and I developed a mindset that I couldn’t ‘save’ everyone and that I should be happy if I managed to positively influence just one person in my classroom. Other stories spoke of successes and failures, in and out of the classroom, told by fellow teachers. Students too shared their stories of their favourite and most hated teachers, their favourite subjects and projects they enjoyed doing. Now when I look back, these stories helped me to approach this new world I had just entered and relate to those around me (parents, students, teachers etc.). The story also served to remind me of my own experiences and in many ways, was a comfort to me. 

During those early years, I was filled with enthusiasm and energy, and with little of supervision and guidance, I did what I thought was right and beneficial for my students. Quickly, I was shown the “rights” and “wrongs”, the rules of the game, what was deemed appropriate and what was not, what and who was “good” and “bad”. This new world had a language and culture of its own, one I had to learn quickly in order to be accepted and successful in the school and teaching fraternity. 

I learned one of the “right” or “good” things to do in my school at a humanities department meeting. The head of department was sharing the analysis of the results of a recent test and she was worried about the students’ less than stellar performance. She then said something that I have not forgotten to this day. We, as humanities teachers, must focus on examination skills more than content. It was our responsibility as teachers to ensure that our students could pass the end-of-year school examinations and more importantly, the national Singapore-Cambridge ‘O’ General Certificate Examinations at the end of secondary school. While I understood the importance of being able to understand a question and answer it appropriately, as a beginning teacher, I was uncomfortable with the notion of skills over content because it went against everything I believed education to
be. I joined the teaching profession in the hope of instilling in my students a love of history and literature, not to help them ace examinations. This struggle stayed with me from henceforth. I constantly checked myself to see if I was leaning too much to one side because sometimes the pressure got to me and I did feel guilty if my students did not do well on tests and examinations. As time went by, three years to be exact, I began to get comfortable in this world of school and was successful at mediating this discomfort I felt in the first year. I also accumulated stories of my own to tell.

From an administrator’s perspective

After three years in school as a teacher, I was presented with the opportunity to work at the Ministry of Education. I could have stayed in school and continued with my life without disruption but I wanted to get out of my comfort zone and learn new things outside the confines of the school. I wanted to and felt that I could make a difference beyond the walls of my classroom. I felt that the world outside of school, that is the Ministry, would enhance my understanding of education and I wanted a broader experience of education. What would it be like to see education from a larger perspective, to think of education for schools instead of education for a school? What if I could change the way things were done not only in my school but in all schools? These questions fascinated me and pushed me to make the move to leave school as a teacher and take up the challenge of policy and implementation work as a Ministry officer. After several rounds of interviews, I was fortunate to be accepted into the National Education Branch (NEB). The NEB looked at citizenship education policy and programmes for all public schools in Singapore. In this new world, I found other stories and metaphors. There were new rules to learn and conventions to be followed. Contradictions were present at every corner. We were asked to be creative, to speak our minds and change things where possible. However, there were challenges at every point, as one would expect in a large bureaucracy. In my tiny world of school, we often saw persons working in the Ministry as faceless entities, separate from our experience. We felt that they were “against” us and were always pushing unrealistic policies on schools that were unworkable. For the first time, I became one of those faceless entities. For the first time, I met some of faceless entities who were my colleagues and bosses. As I gradually got to know them and understand their motivations
and considerations, my worldview widened. While I might not have agreed with them all of the time, I understood why they made certain decisions and how difficult it was at times to be in their shoes. Often times they had to make difficult decisions, decisions based on “the greater good”, but at the heart of it, they had to be governed by what they felt was right. At times I would try to fight for what I thought was right, but reality would set in and I would realise that there were things beyond my control. That was when I was introduced to the politics of education. I also realised how personal education was. Everyone brought with them their own experiences, just as I have done, and no two experiences were the same.

The nearly three year stint at the Ministry allowed me to make more connections in this world that I had chosen, teaching. I was able to see how and why policy was conceived, how it was being communicated, its intended purpose and how it was translated and implemented in schools. I had a deeper appreciation for how things were done or should be done in schools. During my brief return to school as a classroom teacher, I was tasked with creating frameworks that would result in better synergy of programmes since I had experience on “the other side”. My experiences thus far had created a new sense of reality, and I was more cognizant of Ministry announcements and their nuancing of certain messages to school. This affected the way I approached my teaching and how I related to my colleagues and students. I went back to school with a renewed view of things – I was able to connect my practice to the theories of education I had gathered, something I did not do or was unconscious of in my first few years of teaching.

Intrigued by my experience at the Ministry, I jumped at the chance to go back after a year in school. This time, the opportunity presented to me opened up new avenues of learning and experience in education and international relations. As an International Relations officer, I was responsible for education relations between Singapore and other countries. What I learnt and saw validated what I had always believed education to be, strengthening the connections and general schemes I had created previously that governed my actions and decisions. Politically and economically, Singapore was often seen by our foreign counterparts as doing something right in education. Meetings often ended with them applauding our political will, the efficiency with which education was run.
and the amount of foresight we had in planning. I felt proud to be part of this enterprise and was rather convinced that the approach to education taken by the government was the right one, that is, preparing students for the global economy. However, despite these feelings, the approach to education as preparing a person fit for the economy continued to trouble me. The rhetoric on education included character building, social and emotional well-being, and instilling the love for learning but these appeared to be in the periphery because the main aim of education was still based on the economy. I learnt that education planning extended to ensuring that post-secondary courses and places were aligned to the needs of the economy. Planning at the macro levels included working with the Ministry of Manpower to ensure that there were sufficient students trained for industry needs. This entailed expanding or curbing vocational, polytechnic, university places so as to control the number of students taking up particular courses. The aim, I assume, as to ensure that students could find employment easily in their chosen field upon graduation. While I understood the potential social implications of youth unemployment, I nevertheless found the lack of personal choice somewhat troubling. There must be more to education than having the ability to obtain a job and be a financially independent in order to contribute to the economy and not be a liability to the state. I do not dispute the importance of being financial independent and possessing the hope of breaking out of one’s social status especially if one is living in poverty. However, focusing the endeavours of education on economic independence and fulfilment alone limits other conversations and possibilities in education as this only addresses one aspect of a person’s life.

These thoughts and feelings brought me to Simon Fraser University and the Faculty of Education’s Philosophy of Education programme. While other education systems had earlier validated my general scheme of things, they also showed me aspects which were lacking in the Singapore system. These countries may not dominate international league tables but they were doing exciting, different things in schools and their students possessed qualities that were mostly absent in ours. Many also had a less utilitarian view of education, one which I felt more attuned to. Could there possibly be something wrong in what was normally perceived as a very successful system? Could I expand my thought process and rethink the definition of success in an education system other than in terms of economic growth and productivity?
Outline of Dissertation

It is with these thoughts and experiences in mind that I write this dissertation. And it is with these thoughts and experiences that I ask the following questions: What is education for? What are the gains and losses of pursuing a certain conception of education? Subsequently, what kinds of citizens should an education system produce? And should education’s aim be to produce “good citizens”? In Chapter 2, I focus on Singapore’s conception of education and the history and evolution of the education system. By providing a historical context of education in Singapore, I attempt to locate the education theories and philosophies the Singapore system favours through an exploration of major policy initiatives announced and implemented in the last decade or so. On the surface, it appears that Singapore subscribes to the educational theories of progressivism and social reconstructionism, with constructivism as the predominant theory of knowledge for teachers to consider in the classroom. This progressivist trajectory in education can be seen as mirroring the pragmatist approach of the government in all other aspects of society. The evolution of the education system is tightly linked to the growth of post-independence Singapore, hence no description of the education system would be complete without an understanding of the growth of Singapore as a nation. Through a reading of key nationwide initiatives like “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” and education policies outlined in policy speeches made by the last three education ministers at the annual Committee of Supply budget debates or the education ministry’s Work Plan Seminar, I show the alignment of education objectives with the economy.

In Chapter 3, I focus the limitations of progressivism mainly because these are not part of the education narrative in Singapore. In particular, I discuss writers who question progressivism’s promise that progress is the only way to change society for the better, as well as the effects of progressivist thought in talking and thinking of education, and how this is translated into a loose interpretation of constructivism in the classroom. In Getting it Wrong from the Beginning, Egan (2002) traces contemporary progressivist ideas of education to those of Herbert Spencer and points out what is wrong about them. He takes issue with the biologising of the mind and the use of the theory of evolution as the basis for human development. The idea of progress entails a constant positivity, and that a departure from past practices is the answer. In education, progressivists’ central belief is
that “to educate children effectively it is vital to attend to children’s nature, and particularly their modes of learning and stages of development” and for educators to “accommodate educational practice to what we can discover about these” (p. 5). Progressivists find the “artificiality and passivity of schooling tasks a problem” and they believe that “learning ought to be natural, tied in with the meanings of children’s daily lives” (p. 65). Egan’s views are interesting to consider in relation to Singapore’s education system because they disrupt the education narrative which highlights the system’s strengths and never its fundamental weaknesses. Egan’s line of questioning, while contentious and itself not without criticism, gives me a way in to disruption of the all too familiar narrative of strength.

To set the stage for the discussion on constructivism in Singapore classrooms, I attempt to navigate the large terrain of constructivist literature in order to trace its roots and identify its main ideas through a discussion of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. My approach and focus towards the study of constructivism, focusing on its criticisms, stems from my previous experience in my teacher education programme in Singapore in the mid-1990s, and throughout my time as a teacher in a secondary school where the merits of constructivism, like progressivism, were unquestioned. However, the ideas of constructivism were relatively well-known but were loosely defined and implemented. Many teachers believe in its ideas without question. I would go so far as to say that some ideas of constructivism are so in-built in how we think about education that the term does not accompany its ideas anymore. As a result, constructivism and related concepts like knowledge, learning and active participation have been loosely defined and implemented in the classroom. I would also argue that because of its ill-definition and lack of exposure to its potential drawbacks, constructivism has led to the ways schools are currently run in Singapore, resembling businesses instead of educational institutions. With industrialisation as the backdrop, constructivism as a learning theory under the progressivist agenda has highlighted the divide between the importance of knowledge and skills. Along with Biesta’s (2006) observations about the “learnification of education”, constructivist principles (e.g. emphasising skills, group work, and learning by doing) are seen as the best way to cultivate the individual for work and society.

From the macro point of view of Singapore’s conception of education and its subsequent effects in terms of policy and implementation, I explore in Chapter 4 the
consequences of a progressivist agenda in the Singaporean classroom. Since it is not explicit in any policy literature that the principles of constructivism and social reconstructionism are being employed as a framework for classroom teachers, I draw on ministry reports (Primary and Secondary Education Reviews) and key ministerial speeches made during the annual Work Plan Seminar to link rhetoric and practice to theory. These reviews and policy changes signal some attempt to move to a less rigid system and to cater more to the individual. However, Singaporean academics have criticised the ways in which the education system falls short of its intended goals, and I also discuss what is missing in a conception of education premised on a progressivist agenda. This chapter is less of a policy analysis and more of an exploration of the ways in which certain educational conceptions have informed policy and practice.

Chapter 5 focuses on the question of the ideally educated citizen. The beginning of the chapter explores concepts of citizenship and citizenship education through the work of Derek Heater and Ian Davies. After establishing Singapore’s conception of education, examining its successes and exposing its limitations in both political rhetoric and thinking, and actual practice in the classroom, I describe the (ideally) educated citizen that underpins Singapore’s “ability-based, aspiration-driven” model of education and more recently, the “student-centric, values-based” phase of education. I draw upon earlier discussions on important national and school initiatives under the former model such as “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, National Education and “Teach Less, Learn More” and their roles in the creation of the ideal citizen. While individualism is seen as a western notion, it is relevant in the context of Singapore given its history. The dichotomy of individual versus community, the citizen as object to be created and subjects to be realised is interesting to explore. For example, can these ideal citizens find ways to express their subjectivity when they, as subjects, have already been pre-defined? The constructivist paradigm further complicates this question by giving the illusion of power, space and openness for the individual, which is strengthened by the rhetoric of equality and emancipation. Constructivism also defines education in a particular way, paying attention to the student as learner. While there are merits to viewing the student as a learner in terms of introducing another way to approach teaching for the teacher, prioritising the learner above other aspects in education can potentially limit the discussion and definition of education. In the case of Singapore, by disregarding the individual in a fundamental
sense, yet projecting a concern for the individual in an education premised on the constructivist paradigm, the conception of the “ideally” educated citizen is easily theorised, conceived and implemented. However, the realisation of this ideal rests on unstable ground due to the lack of attention paid to the fundamental question on the purpose of education and the citizen as subject not object. While constructivist principles are adopted sincerely, the implementation is simplistic and unrealistic in the realm of the pre-determinist nature of society and politics in Singapore, creating a disconnection between the ideal and actual educated citizen.
Chapter 2. The evolution of Singapore’s education system

In this chapter, I focus on the evolution of Singapore’s education system and discuss briefly the history of Singapore which cannot be separated from how the education system came to be. It is clear that the Singaporean government values education and the Ministry of Education receives the largest share of the yearly budget, second only to the Ministry of Defence. Singapore’s education system in the nation building era (post 1960s) resembled the ideas of Plato’s *Republic* in the belief that different people had different abilities and purposes in a state and still is true today. For decades, public education, especially after the withdrawal of the British in the 1970s, focused on creating workers for various sectors of the economy and “rulers” to serve in the government. It was perceived as essential in this “survival-driven” phase of Singapore’s history for education to serve the purpose of powering the economy. Students were either channelled to the vocational/technical or academic streams in order to achieve an efficient distribution of manpower and resource allocation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s (known as the “efficiency-driven” phase for education), as the system matured, tweaks were made, such as granting greater decentralisation and autonomy for the schools and school leaders.

The most drastic of changes happened in the last two decades; changes which attempted to recognise the aspirations of individuals as opposed to merely fitting them into the economy based on their academic prowess or lack thereof. Despite the changes, the main purpose of education was and still is the same, that is, to serve the larger interest of the state in terms of enabling the economy and producing “good citizens” who would actively contribute to the economy and share the state’s belief that education was for this purpose. This system worked well in general if the purpose of education was to filter students to fit neatly into society according to their economic contributions. However, in the previous decade or so, sentiments had begun to change. As people became more educated, they started to express their dissatisfaction with the system, more so with the advent of social media, and those who had other interests and leanings ventured abroad and stayed there after finding acceptance and oftentimes, success which was not measured solely on academic grades. That was when the education landscape widened and became less rigid under the “ability-driven” model (Chen, 2000), giving students more
choices and recognising talents other than academic excellence. Despite the widening of choice through systemic changes, there was still a social and mental boundary because ultimately, the economic imperative still guided education efforts.

This chapter will discuss the evolution of Singapore’s education system against the backdrop of post-independence Singapore. A historical context of the country’s education endeavours alongside the relevant major events in history will provide a background to how education was conceived and conceptualised. I also identify important initiatives like “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN) (1997), “Teach Less, Learn More” (TLLM) (2005) and “National Education” (NE) (1997), and look at major policy speeches from the three Ministers for Education during the “ability-based, aspirations-driven” phase (Teo Chee Hean, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, and Dr Ng Eng Hen) and more recently, the “student-centric, values-driven” phase of education (Heng Swee Keat) where the slogan “Every School a Good School” underpinned policy decisions.

By providing a historical context of education in Singapore and locating the education theories and philosophies the Singapore system favours, it would seem that on the surface, Singapore subscribes to the educational theories of progressivism and social education, with constructivism as the predominant theory of knowledge for teachers to consider in the classroom. This progressivist trajectory in education can be seen as mirroring the pragmatist approach of the government in all other aspects of society. A careful reading and linking of the major initiatives and speeches to these ideas will be done in a later chapter, but since the evolution of the education system is tightly linked to the growth of post-independence Singapore, no analysis of the education system would be complete without a brief understanding of the growth of Singapore as a nation which I outline in the following paragraphs.

**Brief history of Singapore and the education system**

Only 52 years old, Singapore can be considered a young nation. Since the introduction of mass public schooling in the 1960s, education had a utilitarian function which was to equip Singaporeans with the necessary skills for the newly industrialised economy. Education’s purely utilitarian purpose is not a recent phenomenon but a colonial
legacy left by the British since 1819. With the rise of industrialisation in Britain in the mid-
19th century, Singapore played an important role as a British colony and port-of-call in
Southeast Asia, enhancing British interests in the region. As more British and European
companies opened in Singapore when the Colonial Office gained control over the colony
in 1867, business activity increased and with it, the demand for education (Gopinathan,
1991). At that time, schools were mostly set up by Christian churches and offered only
primary education in English. A greater link between the British education system and
local system was later forged with the institution of the Queen’s Scholarships in 1889 and
the use of the Cambridge Examination in 1891. It was only in 1902 that the British took
more control of education in the colony through the Education Code which decreed for
more English-medium primary schools to be set up (Gopinathan, 1991). Those who knew
English could then find jobs in the colonial offices and European businesses.

Besides being closely tied to administration and the economy, education also had
a political dimension in the early 1900s. Primarily a migrant society where people from
Asia went in search of a better life, the increased number of Chinese migrants to
Singapore changed the educational landscape. Influential Chinese businessmen and
intellectuals advocated for and funded Chinese-medium schools that used textbooks from
the mainland and followed its politics. Singapore was often host to Chinese exiled
reformers and revolutionaries and Chinese-medium schools for the longest time were
used to spread political ideas (Gopinathan, 1991).

After World War Two and tussles with the British for full control of Singapore, the
decades of the 60s and 70s saw education in the hands of the People’s Action Party (PAP)
which made up the government. Only a small section of the population went to English
and Chinese-medium schools and other vernacular schools. The majority of the school-
going population was not in school at all. For the government, the first thing to do was to
standardise educational administration with the enactment of the Education Ordinance in
1957 followed by new School Regulations. All schools had to have standardised systems
of primary (six years) and secondary education (four years) and more schools were built
during that time to accommodate the vast number of students starting or returning to
school. The next issue for the government was the apparently divisive cultures that existed
due to the different types of schools and migrant families in Singapore at the time. The
language policy of bilingualism served to appease the various ethnic groups and further
the government’s aim of inducting Singapore into the world economy. English was made
the medium of instruction for most subjects, except civics and moral education, which was
taught in Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

After separating from Malaysia and seeing the final departure of the British in the
mid-60s, survival became the key area of concern for the Singapore government. Since
1965, the year Singapore achieved full independence, survival was the basis of
government rhetoric. There were immediate measures taken to ensure that Singapore
was able to survive economically. Education then played a major role in manpower
development with a shift from import to export and manufacturing industries. There was a
need to shift the focus from academic to the technical education hence, in addition to
ensuring that there were enough schools for all eligible children to attend, emphasis was
placed on developing the post-secondary sector to adequately offer technical and
vocational education in the polytechnics (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999). Seen in tandem with
the industrialisation of Singapore, education was a tool to meet the demands of the
economy and provide the necessary skills for work in various industries (Gopinathan,
1991). This mentality of education for the economy was steadily strengthened in the midst
of societal and political turmoil in the early years of Singapore’s independence.

One can understand why the Government took such an approach towards
education. This sense of urgency and uncertainty without the security of being a British
colony propelled law and policy makers to ensure that people had jobs and were able to
contribute to and stabilise the economy. This pragmatic approach can be criticised but the
benefits should not be underestimated. Putting aside personal aspirations, which possibly
only the well-off could afford to dwell upon, the majority of the population was guaranteed
a livelihood and were able to support themselves and their families. Being meaningfully
engaged in work also meant less time for idleness and unlawful pursuits. However, it was
this pragmatic, utilitarian mentality that characterised the government’s overall approach
towards building a modern industrialised state (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999).
Phases in the education system

“Survival-driven” and “Efficiency-driven” phases

To understand the education policy decisions made by the Singapore government, it is useful to consider the phrases used to describe past and current ways of dealing with the issues in education through the decades. Education in the early years of Singapore’s political independence (late 1960s – 70s) has been described as the “survival-driven” phase. During this time, the preoccupation of the government was to focus on developing skilled workers for Singapore’s industrialisation efforts. The Deputy Prime Minister then, Mr Goh Keng Swee, led a study team to thoroughly review the education system. The result was the Report on the Ministry of Education published on 9th February 1979 of which two key policy recommendations were put forth, streaming and bilingualism. They remain the cornerstone of Singapore’s education system to this day. Streaming entailed channeling students to either an academic or vocational streams at an early age in primary school. The bilingual policy ensured that students were literate in English as a first language and a second language (also known as the Mother Tongue). The former was to be used as a working language and a common means to communicate amongst the various races and nationalities in Singapore while the latter served to transmit and preserve culture and values of the prominent populations (e.g. Chinese, Malay and Indian) who reside in Singapore.

Both utilitarian in their purposes, the former to ensure minimal wastage of human resources and the efficient channelling of this resource to appropriate sectors of the economy; the latter, a matter of economic necessity for Singapore to engage in world commerce and at the same time, be true to its heritage. These measures addressed three areas which the study team identified as weaknesses of the system: (1) high education wastage, (2) low levels of literacy and (3) ineffective bilingualism.

The changes in the 1980s were largely influenced by the recession in 1985 which affected Singapore. Singapore’s economy took a serious hit and with negative growth for

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1 A brief history of the report can be found on the National Library Board's online resource guide: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/8f0a445f-bbd1-4e5c-8ebe-9461ea61f5de
the rest of the year, the government had to find ways to learn from the experience and pre-empt future occurrences. With the school system being standardised and adequate resources and infrastructure stabilising the schooling process, there was a shift in the paradigm from 1986 based on the recommendations by another high-level committee formed in 1985 (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999). The committee laid out the following principles:

1) Education policy must keep pace with the economy and society.

2) The basics, i.e. languages, sciences, mathematics, and the humanities, will be stressed to encourage logical thinking and life-long learning.

3) Creativity in schools must be boosted through a “bottom-up” approach whereby initiatives must come from principals and teachers instead of from the Ministry. (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999, p. 105)

Termed as the “efficiency-driven” phase, the focus of policy-makers was to continue reducing education wastage through the streaming of students into different educational routes that would fit different manpower needs in the economy (Chen, 2000). With some level of success at stabilising the system and having a “one-size-fits-all” approach, attempts were made to give schools greater autonomy in the implementation of policies at the ground level. Policies that defined this era were the introduction of autonomous and independent schools. Still considered as part of the public school system, these schools had more government funding to pilot new programmes for their students, enhance training for school leaders so as to improve the quality of education. The idea was borne out of a study trip made by 12 senior principals to high performing schools in the United Kingdom and the United States of America to “identify factors which would make for a good and effective school” (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999, p. 105). If successful, the idea was for these schools to share their best practices with the rest, and lift the entire system as a whole. This gradual decentralisation of control from the government to the schools was to prepare and give them space to innovate and try new things and was also a way to move away from the “one-size-fits-all” mentality, and recognise that different schools had different needs and strengths. These measures were in part a reaction to the economic downturn as Singaporeans needed to be able to solve problems quickly, creatively and independently. The three principles, not new or groundbreaking, would continue to run through the education narrative for years to come.
This phase, fine-tuned in the 1990s, also saw the government running like businesses and this approach trickled down to the school system where school leaders were encouraged to run schools like businesses; have implementable solutions (preferably easy and quick) that would produce observable results and provide accountability to the stakeholders in education. Since then, education has been viewed as a “service provider – customer” relationship between the government and its citizens. Administratively, the education ministry’s customers were the schools, where curriculum support in the form of training and materials were provided so that teachers could easily implement the syllabus; the school’s customers were its students and parents, where every possible need and interest could be catered for. Business tools like the “European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model”, “Balanced Scorecard” and “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats Analysis” are still not uncommon in Singaporean schools and the ministry, not to mention the use of customer satisfaction-type surveys and the “360-degree feedback” as a means to measure the performance of school and ministry leaders. It is quite a common practice for schools to organise year-end strategic planning retreats and planning sessions where strategic thrusts and their accompanying measurable outcomes are discussed. Partners in education like parents and non-governmental organisations and the immediate community were called “stakeholders” whose engagement with schools must also be measured. In addition, schools and government ministries also strove to attain international certifications like the “ISO900 – Quality management” which attested to the quality of their “services and products” and high customer satisfaction.

“Ability-based, aspiration-driven” phase in education

In 1999, the education ministry put in motion the next phase of education (late 1999 – present), known as the “ability-based, aspiration-driven” phase which acknowledged the need to move away from a cookie-cutter system of education to one that catered to nurturing the interests and talents of individuals and maximise their potential. The priority of education was to meet the “uncertain future of a knowledge economy” through policies that focused on equipping and preparing students “to meet the challenges in a knowledge economy by taking into consideration their individual abilities and talents” (Tan, 2005, p. 447). In a speech dedicated to detailing what this phase in
education was about, then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean explained that “ability-driven education” (ADE) aimed “to help each individual recognise and make use of his talents and abilities” (Teo, 1999). ADE entailed a two-prong approach to create citizens for the future. The first was to identify and develop individual talents and abilities and second, to harness those talents and abilities. By fulfilling the aspirations of the young, and giving them opportunities in school to excel in areas other than the academic, Teo expressed the wish of inculcating “in our young national values and social instincts so that they will be committed to the nation and actively contribute their talents for the good of the society” (Teo, 1999). The school environment would be made more conducive for the “holistic development of the pupil as an individual and as a citizen” (Teo, 1999). ADE was to permeate all aspects of public education in Singapore with a systemic approach that encompassed the improvement of physical infrastructure of schools, classroom practice, teacher education, pre-school and university education. This phase saw considerable changes to the education system in terms of student choice and diversification of the education landscape with the setting up of new specialised schools for the arts, sports, mathematics and science and technical education, as well as new universities in partnership with Yale University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the years to follow. The two main changes that drove educational policy during this time were greater flexibility and choice in educational programmes, and greater autonomy at the school level for them to exercise creativity and innovation (Tan C., 2005).

The foundation of the push towards ADE in the late 90s was revealed in the 7th International Conference on Thinking where former Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong launched the TSLN initiative as a vision for all Singaporeans with the explicit aim of “developing creative, innovative and life-long learners who will rise to the challenges presented by a knowledge economy” (Tan, 2005, p. 446). “It is a vision for a total learning environment, including students, teachers, parents, workers, companies, community organisations, and government” (Goh, 1997). To quote Charlene Tan (2005):

The ADE, launched as part of the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation vision in 1997, has the explicit aim of developing creative, innovative and life-long learners who will rise to the challenges presented by a knowledge economy. (p. 446)
The premise was that the future was unpredictable and that change was inevitable, and Singaporeans had to be prepared by being life-long learners so as to keep up with and be ahead of the rest of the world. The political tool of the survival rhetoric has long been used to galvanise the people to accept and respond to policy decisions. 1997 was no different than the 1970s but was nevertheless the turning point in many ways for the education system, with many new initiatives introduced and implemented, all in the backdrop of the uncertainties of the future. Along with TSLN came ADE. While a top-down nation-wide initiative, the premise of TSLN was aimed at schools at all levels, the leadership, teacher and student and was a starting point of other policies introduced in the years to come. That was how important education was to the Singapore government in terms of ensuring Singapore’s economic success. TSLN required the Ministry of Education to rethink curriculum content and policy and to include skills that would, in Goh’s words, “prepare students for the uncertain, constantly changing future” (Goh, 1997). TSLN not only targeted the general populace in terms of encouraging them to continuously upgrade their skills for the workforce but also redefined teachers’ roles, pushed them to revisit their “moral purpose” and brought them out of their comfort zone. Teachers should no longer be passive and deliver the curriculum just so that students would do well in examinations. Instead, they were encouraged to “fire in our students a passion for learning… (so that) they have the desire and aptitude to continue discovering new knowledge well after they leave school” (Goh, 1997, p. 21). Schools would be the sites of continuous learning to find new ideas to improve pedagogy and the schooling experience, with the support of the Ministry which promised to give more autonomy to the schools. Essentially, TSLN mapped out the general dispositions the citizenry of Singapore should possess, which were curiosity, enthusiasm for learning and life-long learning.

It would seem then that TSLN was an attempt by the government to mobilise everyone to change their mind set about learning, that learning did not start and end in school but was a continuous process if one wanted to be successful in life. TSLN has gained a foothold in schools and the ministry ever since its introduction. It is now a common practice for schools to review their programmes every year in their year-end strategic planning sessions where all school staff are involved. New pedagogies, classroom practices and theories, especially from America, have found their way into Singapore classrooms. For example, the homeroom system, social-emotional learning,
multiple intelligences, the flipped classroom, "Understanding by Design", have all had a stint (some have stayed) in the Singaporean classroom and school. At the ministry, scheduled curriculum reviews are conducted every three to six years involving curriculum specialists, principals, teachers and education professors to ensure that curriculum content and practices are kept up-to-date. And every September, the Minister for Education would provide the general direction and focus for the coming year, most of the time, with the introduction of new initiatives and school programmes.

As part of TSLN and ADE, a new initiative introduced in schools in 2005 attracted much attention from the media and public. "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM) was seen as a major departure from what Singapore education advocated for a long time which was rigour through the study of the traditional disciplines with the other necessities like values and character education through sports and after-school activities. TLLM called for changes in the curriculum through actions by the ministry and schools, and questioned the moral purpose of teachers for the purpose of engaging students' interest and maximising their potential. With the principles of the "ability-based, aspirations-driven" phase as the backdrop to TLLM, flexibility and choice for students were introduced in the system with the creation of new pathways in terms of new schools that catered to specialised interests like the arts or sport. The expansion of pathways also included more routes within the system for students to move upwards. In addition, teachers were urged to put in more thought in their lesson planning and overall engagement with students in the classroom to make learning more meaningful and experiential. The once rigid structure of linear progression from one stage to another in the system measured by academic achievement was dismantled to pay more attention to the individual abilities and interests of students. On the surface, the pathways introduced through TLLM did give students more choice than before, but within the parameters set by the ministry because the choices, while there, still revolved around serving the needs of the economy. For instance, instead of pursuing a curriculum heavily focused on the academic disciplines, a student could now choose a more vocational pathway where previously that choice was not available. Despite all the changes made, the end goal was still academic achievement in the form of a diploma or degree and these were controlled and tied in with the job market.
In order to support schools in their implementation of TLLM, the ministry sought to reduce curriculum content, as promised by Teo in 1999, to give more “space” for teachers to reflect on their practice and to shift the “focus from quantity to quality, and from efficiency to choice in learning” (Tharman, 2005). The traditional academic disciplines were to remain intact, only the content within the disciplines would be reduced. This was to enable teachers to spend more time thinking about their pedagogy and finding new ways to deliver the content in a way that would engage the interests of students and plan activities in the classroom that would involve the students. Schools were required to provide “white space” which was protected time for teachers to reflect on their teaching and “customise the curriculum to meet the needs of their students” (Tharman, 2005). The TLLM initiative focused on the student by encouraging a change in the way lessons were traditionally taught in the classroom and placing greater emphasis on the impact of the teacher on student learning and achievement.

Because different students had different needs and abilities, schools had to distinguish themselves by having something special (not to mention, different) to offer students as they moved from primary to secondary school. This behaviour conformed to business practices of attracting customers, in this case, students to the school. Schools had the autonomy to decide how to implement TLLM in their schools, and the Ministry hoped that schools could be innovative and creative in the way TLLM played out in their schools. This flexibility would produce “many prototypes, different designs of TLLM, eventually spreading into a mosaic of practices across our schools” (Tharman, 2005). TLLM also involved a study into the feasibility of niche programmes in schools. These programmes were designed for schools to work with post-secondary institutions to see if there were pathways for students to seamlessly progress to after their secondary education. The term niche soon expanded to mean a school’s strengths in a particular area in sports or the arts and became a way of distinguishing one school from another. This move looked like an expansion and extension of the “efficiency-driven” phase in education with decentralisation and the transfer of more autonomy to schools in terms of implementation of education policies. While these changes signalled a significant shift in how education was conceived, the underlying purpose of education remained unchanged, that is, to prepare students for the economy. Past and current efforts at change involved tweaking what was perceived as an already successful system, not so much altering the
foundations of Singapore’s conception of education because the economic imperative has and still drives education.

2008 to 2011 saw reviews of primary, secondary and junior college education to support the rhetoric of the ADE in tandem with its promise of widening student choice and pathways, and having “space” to explore and pursue one’s passions and talents. Effort was made to move the emphasis away from academic grades to recognising other forms of success and achievement like sporting or artistic talents. For the primary school review concluded in 2008, the curriculum for lower primary (Grades 1 – 3) would give students the chance to explore their interests in art, music and physical education, and schools were encouraged not to have any semester or year-end examinations. The Integrated Programme was also implemented in more secondary schools where students could skip the major milestone national examination, which in turn gave teachers the flexibility to customise the curriculum to the needs of their students and not be pressured to teach to the test. In addition, the Direct Schools Admission exercise gave schools the flexibility to admit students based on their non-academic achievements, thus sending the signal to the public that the Ministry was staying true to its word of de-emphasising the focus on grades and that other talents were also prized.

“Student-centric, values-driven” phase in education – “Every School a Good School”

More recently, in the years of 2010 to 2015, there have been more serious attempts to shift society’s mindset away from the emphasis on academic grades as the only measure of success, and to broaden society’s definition of success in general. This is most definitely an uphill task given Singapore’s predominantly Asian culture and the aspirations of parents for their children to do well in life. Previous policies have laid the groundwork for this shift in mindset but the tweaks made to the system were largely cosmetic, minor improvements to what was perceived to be an already successful system due to Singapore’s rankings (top five) in international benchmarking tests like the “Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study” and “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study” administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.
The policies put forth by the Minister for Education in office at the time, Mr Heng Swee Keat, could be seen as not ground-breaking, but the intended effects of these changes were meant to change deep-seated perceptions and its results may not be seen immediately, but may take decades to realise. Even so, the underlying premise of education for the economy was still entrenched and unquestioned. In his 2013 speech for the annual Work Plan Seminar, Mr Heng said, “…our success in education and our success as a society are deeply intertwined.” “Every school a good school” was Heng’s main slogan and from there a plethora of initiatives were rolled out during his tenure as education minister. While he continued to place emphasis on values education, character and citizenship education, he did not discount the importance of having a solid academic foundation. To this end, he believed that every student had to “acquire a broad and deep foundation for his lifelong journey” (Heng, 2013), echoing what was outlined in TSLN. Breadth in education was defined as having an inclusive and open system where students could pursue their interests, something which was put in place more than a decade ago by Tharman. Breadth was also about continuing to move the focus away from an obsession with grades and academic excellence and embracing a broader and holistic conception of education. Depth was defined as instilling in students “a strong core of values and character” and for them to have “a strong commitment to Singapore and fellow Singaporeans” (Heng, 2013). Under this theme, Heng also defined depth as having a deep foundation in literacy and numeracy skills as well as 21st century competencies. Since the economy was at the forefront of education policy, the idea of lifelong learning communicated to the public was that it was important to keep learning throughout life, and that learning did not stop once a student left school.

A fundamental issue for Heng was the perception that some schools were better than others. In some ways, that was true. While all public schools were resourced equally based on the number of students they had, and all teachers were centrally posted by the Ministry to schools, the autonomous and independent schools were treated differently. With more government funding for specialised programmes, these schools gained an even stronger reputation for themselves over the years and attracted certain types of students. These students were stronger academically, so they raised the status of the schools by achieving good academic results at national examinations. Parents then hoped that their children could enter these schools and gain an advantage for university placement later.
on in life, and thus (re)began the chase and obsession with academic grades. While this has always persisted throughout the decades, the general public, having become more educated and affluent, were more vocal about their aspirations for their children and were willing to pay for their children’s academic success. This attitude has spurred a growing tuition industry with tutors cashing in on parents’ insecurities, and has increased the level of stress for both students and their parents. The solution, for Heng, was to provide a level playing field for all schools, hence the slogan “Every school a good school”. The endeavour was not to make every school the same, but to have all schools be able to offer something for students with different aptitudes and strengths, so that parents did not feel compelled to send their children to a select group of schools only.

Heng then embarked on a campaign to change parental and societal mindsets. First, he moved principals from perceived “good” schools to schools that were not performing well in many respects. This was unprecedented and was met with enthusiasm by both the education community and general public. Second, Ministry-level awards given to schools for academic excellence, or any other forms of recognition, were removed from the system as he wanted schools to not chase awards but to place more emphasis on school programmes that would add value to students. Third, the Applied Learning Programme (ALP) and Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) were introduced to all schools. The ALP encouraged schools to utilise their existing strengths (e.g., physical education, robotics, business, journalism) and create a specialised programme where all students can learn to apply the knowledge learnt in the classroom in the real world. The LLP was focused on enabling students to learn more about themselves and how to relate to others through arts, sports, volunteer work, etc. The ALP and LLP then served a dual purpose, to create stronger niche areas for all schools to level the playing field and also to equip students for the economy. On the surface, these new programmes and the general rhetoric of education gave the impression that education was finally heeding the call to cater to students’ needs and aspirations, and not just prepare them for economic success, which in turn meant Singapore’s success. However, these programmes also further strengthened the link between education and the economy by marrying student interest with a potential job or vocation at an even earlier age.
Conclusion

Singapore’s education system has received international accolades in the last decade through benchmarking tests like Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Programme for International Student Assessment. Constantly in the top three positions in these tests, Singapore has garnered much attention from countries that want to improve their scores in these tests and their education system in general.

Despite the perceived success of the education system as defined by these tests and the government, Singaporeans seem to be wondering if there was more to education than just fulfilling the needs of the economy. The emphasis on the business model of education with its accompanying ideas of competitiveness, continual innovation, quick responses, efficiency, strategies and measurable results, seemed to be taking a toll on Singaporeans in terms of their quality of life and perception of self. In the “Our Singapore Conversation” conducted in 2012, which was the government’s attempt at gaining feedback on a large-scale from the public about their vision for Singapore in the future, Singaporeans identified two themes that could be related to education. They wanted a society that “has diverse definitions of success” and “a Singapore with a more fulfilling pace of life”\(^2\). The first theme that emerged from the national conversation suggested that Singaporeans were no longer willing to be defined by their own and the country’s economic success, which in turn implied that the education system’s utilitarian purpose was no longer accepted as fact. One way to explain this shift in perception was the increase in the number of Singaporeans who went through the education system (some of whom went abroad for higher education), as opposed to the older generation of Singaporeans who had their school experience disrupted by the war or other circumstances in life. The second theme alluded to the over-emphasis on the economy and the business-like manner that had permeated so many aspects of public life, including schools. It would seem that the cracks which were previously hidden by economic success are now beginning to be felt, perhaps accelerated by social media which gave people an avenue to express their views more openly and anonymously. An education based on

\(^2\) Details can be found in this link: (https://www.oursgconversation.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/OSC_newsletter.pdf)
business talk and models with a purely utilitarian purpose has its merits, but the losses (quality of life and, perception of self and self-worth) may soon outweigh the gains of economic prosperity and success. Ironically, one of the other themes that Singaporeans raised was that they wanted “a Singapore with a strong and vibrant economy.” It would seem that the political rhetoric of survival has been deeply entrenched after decades of emphasis so much so that Singaporeans genuinely believe that economic success equates to Singapore’s success.

Can we have it all? Perhaps, the question Singaporeans need to ask themselves is what they are willing to give up for a ‘strong and vibrant economy’. So far, education and consequently, knowledge, is seen as a commodity and not intrinsically valuable in itself. It is transactional and temporary, an exchange for a decent or well-paying job, a betterment of the self for the economy. Is that what Singaporeans, ultimately, really want education to be?

At the core of quality in education, are the things we cannot easily measure. Teachers and schools leaders will have to touch the hearts of their students, and engage their minds. This is what we all know gives the real quality that shows up many years later, well after we have measured what we can in our schools. (Tharman, 2005)
Chapter 3. Limitations of progressivism and constructivism

In this chapter, I look critically at the limitations of progressive education and the subsequent appropriation of constructivism in the classroom by discussing writers who question progressivism’s promise that progress is the only way to change society for the better, as well as the effects of progressivist thought in the talking and thinking of education. In Hyslop-Margison and Strobel’s article *Constructivism and education* (2008), they express their concern with “the rhetorical employment – or slogan-based application – of the term constructivism in contemporary teacher education,” commenting:

In the absence of understanding more about constructivism, many teachers and teacher educators may claim that knowledge is constructed, without fully understanding what this claim entails from either an epistemological or a pedagogical perspective. Constructivism represents a multifaceted and contested epistemological mindset with important implications for classroom teaching, but it amounts to little more than an educational slogan in the absence of conceptual understanding and clarification. (p. 73)

There is a lack of critical exploration and reflection which leads to a loose link of definitions, theories and educational ideas. In the current climate of the Singaporean education system, with a packed curriculum of both academic and non-academic activities, it is understandable, though not ideal, that teachers and school leaders do not take sufficient time to reflect critically on the purpose and impact of their practice. They do not ask, often enough, the fundamental question of “why” Singaporean education is the way it is. There is not enough consideration or talk on the aims of education, and the reason is because it is personal and therefore difficult. There can never be a consensus. Nevertheless, I believe it is a subject with which we should engage.

To set the stage for the discussion on progressivism and constructivism in Singaporean classrooms, I attempt to navigate the large terrain of constructivist literature in order to trace its roots and identify its main ideas through a discussion of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. My approach and focus towards this discussion of constructivism stems from my previous experience in my teacher education programme in Singapore in the mid-1990s, and throughout my time as a teacher in a secondary
school. The ideas of constructivism are relatively well-known but loosely defined and implemented, leading many teachers to believe in its ideas without question. I would go so far as to say that some ideas of constructivism are so in-built in how we think about education that the term does not accompany its ideas anymore. I am certainly guilty of this as a beginning teacher where I adopted general concepts of constructivism (e.g. students can construct their own knowledge) without really delving into the intricacies of what they actually mean, and applied them where convenient in classroom. One example is a loose interpretation of the idea of “active learning” and its inherent association of “group work” or “group activity” for many teachers, including myself. As a result, constructivism and related concepts like knowledge, learning and active participation have been loosely defined and implemented in many a classroom. I would also argue that because of its ill-definition, constructivism has contributed to the ways schools are currently run in Singapore, resembling businesses instead of educational institutions. I would like to suggest that the educational enterprise and the move from talking about education to talking about learning explored in Biesta’s work *Beyond Learning* (2006) provides another way of understanding the current trajectory of education practice and thinking. The purpose of education driven by the Enlightenment ideal of the rational, autonomous human, according to Biesta, places limitations on the potential of and approach to education. The underlying premise and criticisms point to the lack of attention we pay as educators to the very people, our students, we hope to enrich.

**A thumbnail sketch of constructivism**

Progressive education, of which constructivism is said to be the modern form, arose out of certain circumstances in history. The late-18th and 19th centuries saw developments in science that changed considerably how the world was conceived. The advent of the scientific revolution and, subsequently, centuries later, the industrial revolution changed societies fundamentally in terms of the economy, politics and life in general. In particular, the theory of evolution made a strong impact on science and also in education. Traditional education did not seem to work in this newly industrialised world because of the shift in how knowledge was conceived. There was a reaction against passivity and the mere reception of knowledge. Historically, one can trace constructivist
ideas to classical Greece where Socrates challenges his students through dialogue and questioning, never telling them the answers directly. John Locke’s work also has strands of progressive education ideas in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1996) even though some of his beliefs can be seen as traditional like the authority of the parents and children possessing a certain passivity in observing and receiving information. While not an obvious constructivist, he believes that knowledge production relied on an individual’s passive absorption (Phillips and Early, 2000, pp. 7-8), and advocates for parents to observe the natural aptitudes of their children for they have innate capabilities and talents. He also argues that they have reasoning abilities and that parents should instil habits of reasoning early on in life.

Descartes was another influential figure on the beginnings of constructivism. His *Discourse on Method* presents an idea that can be considered constructivist, that is human beings are thinking substances (Kenny, 2010). Phillips (2000) also calls Descartes a “rationalist epistemologist” who is “more of a constructivist” (p. 8). As editor of *Constructivism in Education*, Phillips distinguishes between two broad landscapes of constructivism. The first is termed social constructivism in which bodies of knowledge accumulated in the course of human history are considered human constructs and the form that knowledge has taken (disciplines) has been shaped by external forces (p. 6). The second landscape is known as psychological constructivism and includes writers such as Kant and Piaget who have been influenced by Descartes. Psychological constructivism refers to views that are concerned with how individuals learn, and is premised on the belief that learners actively construct their own meanings, and that knowledge is not passively acquired or absorbed by transference or transmission (p. 7). Others like Howe and Berv (2000) have broken down constructivism as epistemology and pedagogy. According to Howe and Berv, two incomplete epistemologies, empiricism (Locke) and rationalism (Descartes), have dominated western philosophy. Empiricism bases all knowledge on experience with knowledge construction coming after experience has been ordered, whereas rationalism gives credit to the mind for contributing to the construction of knowledge at each level (p. 20). The problem with empiricism is that experience is considered detached from the workings of the mind. The problem with rationalism is that a coherent connection cannot be established between reason and experience if the mind operates independently with its own rules (p. 21). It is Kant who manages to synthesise
and link the connection between empiricism and rationalism, experience and reason, to establish a “true constructivist view”:

It denies that there can be any raw sensory experience that the mind takes as given and then performs its formal operations on (empiricism). Alternatively, conceptual schemes are not pure (rationalism), but have meaning only as they construct experience. (Howe & Berv, 2000, p. 21).

By delving into the origins of the purposes of education, that is to produce rational, autonomous human beings, and for socialisation into the existing order, Biesta posits that thinkers like Kant have inevitably defined education according to their conception of “humanism” (pp. 4-5). In Beyond Learning, Biesta (2006) traces the evolution of the change in how we talk about education to our attempts at answering the question of what it means to be human. The criticism that arises as a result of achieving the ideals of humanism is that the concept is flawed if we look at world events of the past and in the present, and hence Biesta quotes Levinas: “humanism has to be denounced…because it is not sufficiently human” (p. 5). Heidegger’s contention with humanism was that it did not acknowledge the human as more than a rational and autonomous object. This is limiting for education because as Biesta explains: “Humanism specifies what the child, student, or ‘newcomer’ must become before giving them the opportunity to show who they are and who they want to be.” (p. 6).

Constructivism in the 20th century

Phillips’ article The Good, the bad, and the ugly: The many faces of constructivism (1995) provides a starting point for newcomers to constructivism or those seeking clarity amidst the vast literature on the subject. Essentially, most writing on constructivism can be seen to address epistemological or socio-political and educational concerns. Generally, constructivists do not believe that individuals have inbuilt “cognitive data banks” and that most human knowledge is constructed not “acquired, ready-formed, by some sort of direct perception or absorption” (p. 5). Phillips further distils from constructivist literature three domains that most writing about the subject fall into and the key theorists in each domain:

1) Individual versus public discipline (Piaget and Vygotsky);
2) Humans the creators versus nature the instructor (Locke, Popper and von Glasersfeld); and

3) Construction of knowledge is an active process (Dewey and James).

(pp. 7-8)

Constructivist writings categorised under the first domain are concerned with how individual learners construct knowledge in their own cognitive apparatus. Works that concentrate less on the individual and more on the construction of human knowledge in general also fall under this domain. The second, and Phillips feels, the most crucial domain, contains works that try to answer the question, “Is individual knowledge made or discovered?” The answer to this question also helps to define whether a thinker is a constructivist. According to Phillips, most writers in the 20th century fall under the “humans as creators” category and base their work on the claim that “knowledge is produced by humans, in processes that are unconstrained – or minimally constrained – by inputs or instruction from nature” (p. 8). The third domain contains works that see the construction of knowledge as an active process but differ in the definition of the activity (individual cognition or social and political processes or both). Within these domains, are further sub-domains and writers spanning the edges of the spectrum which will not be discussed in this dissertation. I have chosen to focus on domains one and three and avoid the second domain not only because the second domain is difficult to work with, but that the themes of first and third domains are most present in contemporary educational discourse and in classroom practice, and relevant in Singapore’s context. This focus has influenced my choice of theorists and texts. The impact of Dewey and Piaget’s ideas on classroom practice is worth exploring and as a contrast, Vygotsky, who focuses more on social factors that influence learning. On balance, I will also discuss Kieran Egan’s criticisms of Dewey and Piaget as well as Wolff-Michael Roth’s critique of constructivism in general in order to consider more deeply constructivism’s limitations.

John Dewey

In this section on Dewey, I will focus on two of his works, *Experience and Education* and *How We Think* and discuss how the concepts of experience and reflection which he advocates as part of his constructivist paradigm have been interpreted and implemented
in the classroom. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey describes his philosophy of experience as a reaction against traditional education. He calls this the new education or what we know as progressive education. Dewey believes that “the organic connection between education and personal experience; or that the new philosophy of education is committed to some kind of empirical and experimental philosophy” (Dewey, 1997, p. 25).

Experience, according to Dewey, is the cornerstone of progressive education and it is not only the necessity or activity that matters but the quality in experience. Putting a concept like quality to describe an experience implies a certain degree of judgment on the part of the provider of the experience, that is the teacher, and the possible impact a current experience might have on future experiences and actions. The two most important principles of Dewey’s theory of experience are continuity and interaction (p. 33). The former is an attempt to “discriminate between experiences that are worthwhile educationally and those that are not” (p. 33) and relies on habit (interpreted biologically) that covers the formation of attitudes and basic sensitivities and ways of responding to the world we live in (p. 35). The teacher then is responsible for promoting and providing quality experiences that arouse students’ curiosity, strengthen their initiative to learn and set up desires and purposes that can carry students into the future. “It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading” (p. 38). The principle of interaction takes into account two factors that make up any normal experience – objective (external) and internal conditions. These two conditions taken together is called “situation” by Dewey, and are inseparable as “an experience…a transaction taking place between an individual and what (at the time) constitutes his environment…” (p. 43).

Education for socialisation is integral to Dewey’s theory of experience because the experience he pushes for is not for the sole fulfilment of the individual but the society in which the individual lives. Apart from parental control in a child’s life, Dewey argues that social control in the form of experiences arising from a social enterprise is more effective in engaging children in schools. These experiences naturally feed into children’s need to be sociable and more importantly, gives them the opportunity to contribute something (Dewey, 1997, p. 56). In Dewey’s description of progressive education and the need for a clear theory of experience in order for progressive education to fare better than traditional education, the importance of the participation of the learner in charting the purpose and
direction of activities in the learning process is reiterated at the end of Experience and Education.

From this text, we can distil four main ideas of constructivism. First, the value of students’ experiences; second, the need for teachers to provide quality experiences in school so that learning is meaningful and experiential; third, the importance of socialisation in education; and fourth, the participation of the learner in the learning process. In order to give these ideas credibility, Dewey uses examples of traditional education to show how these constructivist principles are more appealing. The passive and active debate still exists and the idea of passivity has now been transferred from the student to the teacher. The term "active participation" seems to work both ways, students should be seen actively participating in the classroom and this oftentimes is determined by physical movement (e.g. group work, role-play, presentations). There has to be a “show” of learning. The teacher too needs to be seen as active by not only planning lessons that allow for “participation” but also avoiding traditional “chalk and talk” lessons of passing down information. A lesson is not a successful one if a teacher is talking all the time.

Egan (2002), in his critique of progressive education, suggests that these ideas themselves are not the problem but the way they have been interpreted and implemented has oversimplified and corrupted their original intent. In his view, the interpretation of “active participation” has the danger of degenerating into debate/questioning (as opposed to the traditional method of telling) or group/hands-on activities without real consideration for the quality of the activity or experience. I am sympathetic to this view because I am guilty of it myself. Having planned many lessons based on this premise, and being given positive feedback by peers or Heads of Department for incorporating such activities further perpetuates such practices in the classroom. That the diversity and disparity of experiences make it difficult to make a judgment call of what is a good, worthwhile experience is seldom considered due to the pace of school. Since the quality of experience takes into account its impact on future experiences, the place of so-called bad experiences cannot be totally discounted for they might have a positive impact on future ones as well.

Dewey's How We Think (1910) describes in detail what thinking and thought are and focuses more on the individual cognitive apparatus that should be at work when
constructing knowledge. The text reads like a manual for teachers on how to think about thinking and how to cultivate habits of mind and thinking in students. The book is neatly organised with the first section focused on what thought is and to a certain extent, what constitutes a good thought. Here he distinguishes between different types of thought and ways of thinking. A reasoned and rational mind, able to exercise discernment on different information and influences is prized – “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought.” (p. 6). Good thinking searches for truth or verification of facts with other facts and is not easily swayed and is not baseless. The ability to think in an organised, scientific manner frees one from impulses and drudgery and allows experiences one has to have a value that is different if one did not employ reflective thinking. For teachers, the chapter on school conditions and the training of thought is most relevant where the teacher’s own habits of mind are brought to bear in the classroom, and the need to balance teaching methods that focus on individual traits and potential, with the subject matter itself needs to be done in relation to the school environment.

It is interesting to note how Dewey’s structures of thought and inquiry and the terminology he uses (e.g. scientific induction/deduction, inference, judgment, experiment, contrast factors, evaluation, classification) is very much a part of how teachers are encouraged to organise their teaching of subjects across the disciplines. It is not uncommon for teachers to plan lessons, which would be observed by school leaders, that revolve around group activities where students solve problems together using Dewey’s structures of thought and inquiry, and the teacher is seen not to be giving them the answers. These processes can be seen as constructivist in that students, through this method of thinking, are constructing knowledge for themselves with the teacher as a guide or facilitator. While this approach in itself is not without merit, doing so consistently without deeper considerations of the quality of the activity and quality of student and teacher interaction takes away the potential of Dewey’s ideas. However, this kind of thinking is prized as important in Singapore’s schools and is evident in discourses in the civil service and political life in general. Perhaps this is common and nothing new, but while these structures might be useful in education, there could be a danger of them being too stifling and narrow if followed too strictly for every discipline and for every public discourse. The
emotional and the relational aspects of education and life are not given any prominence and are seen as mostly undesirable. However, they are nevertheless present and should not be ignored.

Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky

In this next section on Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, I will focus on three texts; *To Understand is to Invent*, written by Piaget (1973), *Conversations with Jean Piaget* co-written by Bringuier (1980) and Susan Pass's (2004) comparative study of Piaget and Vygotsky titled *Parallel Paths to Constructivism*. The ideas in these texts allow us to explore some of the common beliefs which are held and practiced in Singaporean classrooms. *To Understand is to Invent* is a translation of two texts *Ou va l'education* (Where is Education Going) (1971) and *Le droit a l'education dans le monde actuel* (The Right to Education in Today's World) (1948), both written for UNESCO as part of a series of studies on education. *Conversations with Jean Piaget* is a series of 14 conversations between Bringuier and Piaget which attempts to reveal snippets of Piaget's main ideas. I chose this particular text because the conversations are organised according to themes that give the reader insight into what influenced Piaget and how he rationalised his way of thinking. In the first conversation “What is Psychology?”, we see the influence of biology on his theory of intelligence and how he believes that “structures of intelligence come from structures of organisms” (p. 3). He argues that philosophy is dangerous because it is ambiguous psychology as the science of behavior is a way to obtain the facts to study epistemology “objectively” (p. 7). In the fourth conversation, titled “Experiments with Children: The Discovery of Developmental Stages”, we get a glimpse of what is still being taught in many teacher preparation programmes today. One of Piaget's main ideas in this text is that “children, regardless of their society and their historical period, go through a series of stages in the evolution of intelligence that is always the same” and that is because “each stage is necessary to the following one. It’s called a ‘sequential order, and the order stays the same” (p. 25).

In a similar vein to Dewey's comparisons between traditional and progressive education, Piaget's *To Understand is to Invent* is about education for the future. The first section of the book "A structural foundation for tomorrow's education" was written as part
of a series of studies prepared for the International Commission on the Development of Education at UNESCO. Piaget focuses on a concept of education based on his arguments against traditional education and the need for structure and psychology in what he terms as education for tomorrow. Piaget describes constructivism as an affirmation of a “continuous surpassing of successive stages…placing all educational stress on the spontaneous aspects of the child’s activity” (1973, p. 10). The juxtaposition of traditional education and education for the future clearly reiterates Piaget’s preference for “active methods” and the belief that children are spontaneous and naturally curious. Traditional education has failed to cultivate children’s observational strengths and has stifled their ability to (re)discover or (re)construct knowledge.

On the need for structures, Piaget brings in the idea of the increasing multidisciplinary nature of society. He disagrees with how the curriculum and the various disciplines within it are compartmentalised, leaving students to “make syntheses” for themselves (p. 29). Here, the importance of science and its place in everyday life also makes way for the structure that should be in place in its teaching. “…if the teaching of the sciences is to adapt to the conditions of scientific progress and form creative rather than imitative minds, it should stress structuralism” (p. 28). Education in the future then advocates for a broadening of the curriculum with less boundaries within and across the disciplines. Piaget argues that “psychology is connected without a break to biology and animal psychology or zoological ethology”, and puts forth the idea that in education, structuralism can similarly connect the various disciplines so that “students can pass freely from one section to another and give them the choice of many combinations” (p. 31).

Regarding his stages of cognitive development, Piaget states two factors in the development of the human being. One is hereditary, the other biological. In this short section, he compares human development with that of animals, drawing the conclusion that “logic is never innate to the child” (p. 48). Traditional education following the ideas of Rousseau and Descartes was carried out with the idea that logic and reason were innate and simple instruction would enable a child to discover them through the accumulation of knowledge (pp. 46-7). However, according to Piaget, formal logic only begins to be formed at age 11-12 and complete achievement at 14-15. Hence, the task of education was to form reasoning.
Bearing in mind that this text by Piaget was commissioned by UNESCO, it might be politically correct to focus on science and society in his conception of education and what having a right to education might mean. Psychology and the need for the school to mirror society form the basis for Piaget’s new education. This means that a teacher should be well versed in psychological research so that “active methods” and a child’s stages of development can (and should) factor into the curriculum to combat the ills of traditional education. The responsibility and success of the child has shifted from the home to the school since school is likened to society and school is deemed to failure if it does not develop students according to Piaget’s definition:

The right to education…the right of an individual to develop normally, in accord with all the potential he possesses and the obligation that society has to transform this potential into useful and effective fulfillment. (p. 56)

Based on Piaget’s constructivist mode of teaching and learning, teachers should always have an inter/multidisciplinary point of view, be less compartmentalised, be knowledgeable in their subject matter, incorporate active methods to harness children’s natural curiosity, and engage their observational powers so that they can discover or construct knowledge. Psychology is the means by which teachers can do this in a structured way. While structures provide some form of framework for teachers and schools and are useful to consider, they tend to limit and de-emphasise the fluidity of relations inherent in education and should not override the entire education process. The rhetoric of the importance of the sciences, I feel, has contributed to the overwhelming need to have structures and processes in education and to have actions based on research (evidence), preferably psychological research. In addition, Piaget’s stages of development are still very influential and his theories are not absent from pre-service teacher preparation programmes today. While his cognitive stages might provide teachers with some insight on how and when children learn, they limit the potential of children. It is not uncommon for teachers to plan lessons with these stages in mind and, if done so unquestioningly, could underestimate the diversity and opening up of possibilities in children’s thinking.

The right to education implies…the utilization of the psychological and sociological knowledge of laws of mental development and methods and techniques adjusted to the innumerable basic principles that these studies provide the educator. (p. 54)
In *Parallel Paths to Constructivism*, Susan Pass traces the lives of Piaget and Vygotsky and compares how each differ in their approach to cognitive psychology. Pass considers how their childhood experiences, parental influence, social status and economic backgrounds have made an impact on their research and thinking, and eventually the formation of their theories. Chapter 5, titled “Origin of Ideas”, is the most useful of the chapters as it highlights both their influences and ideas. For example, Piaget learned about the chronological stages of development, assimilation, and equilibration and was paid in specimens as he worked in the Neuchatel Museum of National History. Through his study of the specimens and reading of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, it is suggested that he could apply the evolutionist approach to studying the psychology of knowledge (Pass, 2004, p. 62). Vygotsky’s economic and social circumstances on the other hand led him to focus more on the social rather than individual aspects of pedagogy (p. 63). The main differences between Piaget and Vygotsky are summarised in the table below (Pass, 2004, pp. ix-xii):

**Table 3.1 Differences between Piaget and Vygotsky**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Mind/Psyche</th>
<th>Piaget</th>
<th>Vygotsky</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural product of evolution</td>
<td>Helps find equilibrium within the environment</td>
<td>Result of the acceptance of cultural-historical experience of humanity by the child resulting from interaction with adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps one adapt to different conditions of life</td>
<td>Development a biological process</td>
<td>Determined initially as a social factor and later internalised as part of his nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has its own rules that are developed as a result of the constant transformation, and socialisation of natural and biological mechanisms</td>
<td>Education cannot change development and should follow the rules of</td>
<td>Education is about organising a child’s interaction with adults, without which, no development can take place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Development</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Egocentric speech of a child</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A transitional stage from natural individual speech to social speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Undeveloped form of communicational speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Form of origin and early beginning development of inner dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Development begins not from egocentric speech but speech directed to adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Process of the formation of speech as a transition from social to individual speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the summary above, it is clear that Vygotsky’s work pays more attention to the impact of social interaction than the subject-object interaction of cognitive development evident in Piaget’s work. Social settings play a more important role in a child’s development compared to Piaget’s emphasis on an individual child’s interaction with objects. Under Piaget’s constructivist theory, “knowers are constrained by both the general structures of mind we all possess and by the nature of the objects we encounter” (Noddings, 2012, p. 129). Vygotsky’s work then seems to broaden Piaget’s work in some ways by allowing the consideration and influence of factors outside of an individual cognitive self.

**Against progressivism and constructivism**

In *Getting it Wrong from the Beginning*, Egan (2002) traces contemporary progressivist ideas of education to those of Herbert Spencer and points out what is wrong about them. He takes issue with the biologising of the mind and the use of the theory of evolution as the basis for human development. The idea of progress entails a constant positivity, and that a departure from past practices is the answer. In education, progressivists’ central belief is that “to educate children effectively it is vital to attend to children’s nature, and particularly their modes of learning and stages of development” and for educators to “accommodate educational practice to what we can discover about these” (p. 5). Progressivists find the “artificiality and passivity of schooling tasks a problem” and
they believe that “learning ought to be natural, tied in with the meanings of children’s daily lives” (p. 65). To counter traditional education’s methods of forced learning of irrelevant information and where authority resided with the teachers, Spencer advocates for an education process based on new scientific principles that would be efficient and pleasant for the child, and for the curriculum to be relevant and of use to the future lives children will lead. The child is now the center of the curriculum and not the teacher.

Since Spencer has used the theory of evolution as a framework for a child’s development, he applies those laws in explaining how education should be like. Ideas like “simple to complex”, “concrete to abstract”, “homogenous to heterogenous”, factor into Spencer’s education process which he argues would make the whole process “more efficient, effective, and pleasurable to the child and teacher” (p. 16). Direct experience also plays a critical role for Spencer and children should become active inquirers or self-instructors in making sense of their own experience as they do naturally in the home, street and field (p. 17). His 7 principles of intellectual education are summarised below:

1) Should proceed from the simple to the complex
2) Development of mind, as all other development, is an advance from the indefinite to the definite
3) Lessons ought to start from the concrete and end in the abstract
4) Recapitulation as a process for children: education of the child must accord both in mode and arrangement with the education of mankind, considered historically
5) In each branch of instruction, we should proceed from the empirical to the rational
6) Process of self-development should be encouraged to the utmost
7) In the new education scheme, the teacher will be the facilitator of the child’s active learning

Egan then examines how Piaget's and Dewey's ideas took a leaf from Spencer (from the list above). Having argued against Spencer’s theory of education in the first half of the book, Egan attempts to show how Piaget and Dewey's ideas are similar to Spencer’s and that we should be critical of what they propose as well. The key ideas that Egan stresses are that (1) the mind-body metaphor as with the notion of progress/progressivism has its limitations and are not appropriate in education, (2) the ways in which Spencer’s ideas have been overly simplified or taken too far or simply not considered deeply enough (e.g. what do “active” and “passive” really mean?), (3) how these ideas have become our
presuppositions and how people are so used to thinking with these ideas about education that it is now difficult to think about them and hence, question them, and (4) the need for a more serious consideration and careful definition when one talks about “knowledge”.

Egan’s chapter on “the useful curriculum” talks about how utility in education has triumphed over humanity with the emphasis on what is considered “useful” and relevant for daily and future life. As a result, the arts and humanities are seen as less important because their immediate utility cannot be ascertained. The question of what is valuable versus what is useful comes to mind. Then again, the question of valuable/useful to whom and for what purpose. In trying to fulfil too many of society’s needs, the school is spread too thin and is hence ineffective in achieving any of its aims. Academically, skills are seen as more important than content to which Egan’s point here is worth noting because the practices in Singaporean classrooms also seem to pride skills over content – that knowing something and knowing how to look for something are very different. Here, his explanation on knowledge and how having knowledge of something impacts us in ways we cannot predict or anticipate, that it stays with us and becomes part of us in how we see the world and express ourselves, is often forgotten or not given its due. To him, having this Spencerian (by extension, Piagetian and Deweyan) thinking and approach to education trivialises children’s minds and intelligence, and impoverishes their education experience. While he might be accused of being a traditionalist, he cautions us of the limitations and losses of any educational approach or way of thinking, something that the notion of progress doesn’t really allow. I find Egan’s views on progressivism useful to consider when looking at the Singaporean education system because of the general lack of critique or questioning on what it means to ‘progress’ in education and what we might not consider as a result of taking ‘progress’ to mean a certain way, which seems to be the case in Singapore.

Another critique of constructivism comes from Wolff-Michael Roth. In his book Passibility: At the Limits of the Constructivist Metaphor, Roth takes issue with the over-reliance and limitations of intellectualism in the constructivist metaphor in science and mathematics education. His critique is important to consider for education in general because it shows the ways in which we think about knowledge and how the curriculum is written and enacted. Intellectualism’s focus on cognitive dimensions misses the
“performative dimensions of human actions and its affective, valuative and deontological dimensions” (Roth, 2011, p. 3). What the constructivist metaphor ignores, according to Roth, is the “performative/practice approach to cognition (which includes) the active and radically passive focus on life”, in other words, the emotions and passions in one’s life, and in hence, one’s “capacity to be affected”, that is passibility (pp. 3-4). Roth identifies five problems with the constructivist metaphor:

1) The learning paradox – refers to the question of how any cognitive organism can construct a mental organisation more complex than its current one in a world that is of the same complexity as the mind.
2) The impossibility to aim at the construction of knowledge that is inherently unknown from the perspective of the learner.
3) The constitutive role of the living/lived body in knowing.
4) The role of passivity in learning from experience.
5) The inherent otherness of knowledge and self. (Roth, 2011)

Roth sees learning as “appropriating the unintended, something other, something that lies outside of the horizon of the known, something that is foreign/strange” (p. 8). Therefore, the constructivist metaphor cannot be correct because “in terms of its own discourse it is ‘non-viable’ – as human consciousness could not have begun with a subject that constructs its cognition. Being always already is ahead of itself, producing order and orderly behavior prior to recognising and conceptualising this order. There is no order before schemes and the question is how schemes emerge from a situation without order – from the perspective of the learning organism” (p. 8). Learning also involves the notion of receiving, or something that comes to us (i.e. subject to and subjected to), something foreign and unknown. Hence, we cannot aim towards something that we do not know. If we could, that would imply that we already have some form of prior knowledge of content and of how to apply it to come up with something new.

Another problem with the constructivist metaphor is in intentionality, for intention “cannot aim at which it doesn’t know” and “cannot ever constitute its own condition of possibility” (p. 14) because intentionality requires a direct object. Constructivism, with its emphasis on intellectualism, also separates the affect and cognition such that notions like motivation tend to be seen as subordinate to cognition and not part of it.
Hyslop-Margison and Strobel (2008) discuss, at a more fundamental level, the problems of employing a constructivist mindset in the classroom without truly delving into its concepts and understanding its pitfalls – that is epistemic relativism, where one equates “constructed individual belief with knowledge” (p. 74) that should not be questioned. They posit that due to teachers' narrow understanding of constructivism, they (as Philips has pointed out) “tend to focus on the idea of individual cognition and active participation...(and) also adopt unreflective assumptions on the role of both processes during the actual learning experience” (p. 74). By adhering to the claim that all knowledge can be and is constructed by the individual, they lose sight of the difference between knowledge and belief (p. 76).

Our acknowledgement that people’s understandings of the same historical events or contemporary concepts may be constructed differently is not to fall into the trap of epistemological relativism that Phillips warned against. The ability to ground one’s understandings and knowledge claims in evidence or to supply a supporting warrant remains essential, as does an appreciation of the distinction between fact and value. (p. 77)

On learning and against learning

In light of what has been discussed so far in this chapter, Biesta’s observations on the shift in the language we have been using to describe education make sense. The use of the word “learning” to replace education is interesting because it provides a means to understand the language and trajectory of current education systems around the world, especially those that anchor education policy with economic outcomes. Biesta’s descriptions of the values associated with “learning” echo Egan’s views on the limitations of progressivism which frame discussions on education to what a child cannot do (e.g., developmental frameworks that suggest children can only do so much at certain stages of their lives and the impact of outcomes-based curriculum on what is expected of a teacher and student respectively). This new language of learning and its subsequent “redescription of the process of education in terms of an economic transaction” (p. 19) has people looking at education in a particular way.

Perhaps learning is an easier term to define and measure than education since the latter’s baggage is often deemed too personal and difficult and therefore time-consuming
to ponder (e.g., what does it mean to be educated? what does an educated person look like?). The term learning, according to Biesta, conceives of knowledge and students as units, “things” to be understood and able to be tested. There is an assurance that students as learners will gain something and, through tests and exams, will be able to show for it – accountability. The term education, on the other hand, goes beyond mere acquisition of “something” and is more often than not, immeasurable. In the discourse of learning, the role of the teacher has also been relegated to that of a facilitator, not a professional but as a service-provider of sorts working with customers (students) to customise a curriculum that meets their needs. These observations are poignant, and while successful education systems might not perceive them as problems, the opportunity cost of not being aware of how this “technological framework and attitude” (p. 22) limits the conversation and potential of the education endeavour is something worth considering.

The more subtle aspects of the relationships in education are also hidden from view with this new language of learning. Under a technological framework where efficiency and effectiveness are the main focus of learning, relationships turn into transactions focused on input-output and demand and supply. The relational aspects of education are no longer in the forefront and are pushed to the periphery, as a secondary consideration in the larger discourse of accountability and outcomes. This is not to say that school leaders and teachers do not value the personal relationships inherent in their profession, but it is questionable how much these relationships are discussed in staff planning sessions where target and goal setting in terms of academic and non-academic achievements, and creating rubrics to measure outcomes, dominate.

It might be too much of an endeavour to pinpoint when exactly education took this turn towards learning, as Biesta does not trace the historical roots of this change in language. Suffice to say that the impact of industrialisation in the late 19th century and the start of mass schooling probably prompted talk about efficiency and effectiveness as large numbers of people went to school in preparation for work in the newly industrialised economy. This is true in the case of Singapore where the link between the economy and education has been stated upfront by the government and this relationship is, unabashedly, the purpose of Singapore’s education system. Nevertheless, Biesta provides a convincing argument for how the change in focus from education to learning
has resulted in practices that should be questioned. Understanding the workings of this new language of learning also provides a means by which one can look at and talk about education in a different way.

Through the discussion of humanism, Biesta wants to shift the conversation of education from a closed conception of what it means to be human to an open one. Biesta delves into the history of how the subject is conceived and this historical discourse is useful as it plots the trajectory of our understanding of the subject and how education has helped to shape the conception of the subject through time. Modernity's subject is both an autonomous and rational being and, at the same time, linked to the larger community. This conception of a person, our student, as “a relational being...historically and socially situated” (p. 37) locks our perception of the subject and affords us certain ways of going about “releasing its potential”. And as Biesta points out, “we continue to rely at the level of theorising on the totalising gesture of a consciousness that claims to be able to overlook and know the field in which the subject emerges” (p. 37). That is precisely what a technological framework of education does: it assumes that we can know, that effort can be seen and measured, and that method and evidence are proof that we are doing things right. His descriptions mirror the policy decisions and practices of Singaporean schools and classrooms where every single aspect of the system has to have some form of measurable outcome, and sometimes with cost-benefit analysis. The relational aspects of education are then pushed to the side or forgotten in these policies or practices because we cannot ‘see’ it, and so we cannot measure it. The subject and its accompanying subjectivities have now become an object identifiable by objectives. Here, as Biesta points out, Foucault's idea of transgression and possessing a different attitude is powerful and relevant for any education system looking for reform or a re-examination that will be deep and meaningful; the exploration of an ontology of ourselves. Transgression involves:

...a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying in order to separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do or think. (p. 41)
Conclusion

Constructivism, while a familiar term in educational discourse, is both a familiar concept and a foreign one due to the multiple interpretations of what it means, how it fits into philosophy and education, and the sheer amount of literature on the topic, with various groups of scholars concerned with different aspects of constructivism. Even if one is unfamiliar with the details, much political rhetoric on education and practices promoted in schools hold some semblance to constructivist beliefs. In some ways, constructivism has taken root in education systems in a way that the term is no longer used to describe classroom practices. It is common for teachers to believe that students construct their own knowledge and that knowledge is not gained through passive reception; that teachers as facilitators should encourage students to be active learners and to determine their own learning; that knowledge should be future-oriented; and that the teacher should use students’ prior experience as a starting point so as to engage their interest in the subject. What is evident in classroom practice is the proliferation of these ideas so much so that the theorists and the concept from which these ideas arose need not accompany their ideas anymore. Education has come to be defined through these ideas. This has resulted, in some ways, in an indoctrination of sorts about education through either teacher education programmes or a careless spreading of practices loosely based on these ideas. Once education is thought of in what feels like common sense ideas, it is difficult to be critical of these ideas and to think about them differently (Egan, 2002). We have objectified education, put in place structures and defined its goals to measurable ends.

Constructivism should be seen as only one way of looking at knowledge and cognition, but currently in Singapore it seems as though it is the only way. Its dominance is what both Egan and Roth are trying to dispel by highlighting its limitations. Constructivism, for Roth, only works when one already has the resources and tools at hand. For Egan, the way its ideas have become many teachers’ presuppositions is problematic because it is difficult to dismantle the ideas and be critical of them. Many of the main ideas put forth by Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky exist in classrooms today. It will be difficult to find educators who said they did not believe that children should be active participants in their learning. But perhaps they should stop and ask what active participation might look like in education. What does passivity mean and what happens
when a student is passive? It does not necessarily indicate the absence of a meaningful exchange. How can we enrich the relational aspect of education to see our students for who they are instead of making them who we want them to be? The problem is not in the ideas themselves, but in the way these ideas have been and should be analysed, interpreted and implemented so that education can be a meaningful endeavour for both teacher and student. As Hyslop-Magison and Strobel (2008) have pointed out, the dangers of having a simplistic view and implementation of constructivism in the classroom “may regress to the relativist view that one perspective is necessarily as good as another and leaves student concern for evidence sadly lacking” and a tendency towards a “distrust – even dismissal – of rival epistemic theories and possible ways of learning” (p. 73).
Chapter 4. The progressivist agenda in the Singaporean context

In Chapter 2, I traced the evolution of the phases in Singapore’s education system through the decades from independence to the present day. It is clear from speeches by the education ministers and ministry policy documents that education in the Singapore context was and continues to be tailored to suit the needs of the economy. The political rhetoric of survival has been a staple in key speeches and initiatives that defined each phase which in turn gave direction to schools and educators. While tweaks have been made, and the tone of a centralised, one-size-fits-all model has slowly evolved to an education landscape that is more vibrant in the last few decades, the flexibility and choice given to students are still grounded in the needs of the country’s economy. This utilitarian conception of education has led to a certain way of administration and view of education that reinforces concepts of accountability, academic excellence and pursuit of efficiency without wastage, rather than a broader view of education not solely associated with economics.

In Chapter 3, I tried to distil the limitations of having a progressivist and subsequent, constructivist mindset as it plays out in the ways policy makers and teachers approach education in the classroom. This is not to say that the concept of constructivism is irrelevant. It is but one way to think about how we in education can enrich the experiences of our students. To take it as the only way, and a good or better way than others would limit the definition of education. Useful concepts which are being simplified, like active learning and regarding students as learners, as well as the progressivist mode of thought that progress means discarding past practices because they are uncritically regarded as “not as good”, reduces our concept of education in general and restricts our practices and limits the way we think about and approach education.

In this chapter, I discuss in greater detail key policy speeches, initiatives and reports borne out of reviews of primary and secondary education in order to link progressivism and constructivist pedagogy to the overall conception of education in Singapore. My intention is not to provide a policy analysis as usually understood, but to trace the ways in which these conceptions have potentially informed policy and practice.
To start, I explore the idea of progressivism in education by looking what the term “progressivism” means politically. It is not my intention to go into the details of different political groups and ideologies but rather to highlight how the terms “progress” and “progressive” are used and perceived. This is an important point to establish because Singapore’s conception of education is largely a political endeavour meant to advance and prepare for the country’s continued economic success and prosperity. It would also appear that Singapore’s approach to using education as an economic tool in the name of progress is not a novel idea. Having established what the term implies for education, and the examples from the early 1900s in the US of how progressivism in education looked like, I move on to the key narrative of the education system in Singapore and how progressivist ideals have been embedded in the narrative and policies since 1997. I show the strands of progressivist thought and its limitations. Through this discussion, I hope to bring to the fore a certain clarity about the consistent rhetoric of the government, how this rhetoric plays out in schools and classrooms, and more importantly, what we are ignoring as a result of a conception of education based on utilitarian, economic ends.

Progressivism and education

I find Freeden’s views on progress and progressivism (2014) useful to consider with regard to how these terms play out in analysing Singapore’s conception of education. According to Freeden, the idea of progress connotes improvement, stability and forward movement. The term is also usually paired with “opposites” often seen as negatives like “stasis”, “retrogression” and “inertia”. Quoting J.S Mill and Robert Nisbet, progress is seen as “inherently good” and “inherently stabilising” (p. 68) and implies, in historical terms, a moving forward or advancement “through the foreseeable future” (p. 68). For conceptual historians, progress was perceived through the lens of time – past, present and future. Freeden referring to renowned German historian Reinhart Koselleck’s views on progress explained the idea as a “cognitive and deliberate occurrence”, that “time was not merely happening…. Rather, the presence of continuous novelty opened up the possibility of a qualitatively different future, and one that could be planned” (p. 69). Unable to function independently as an ideology due to the lack of recognisable and durable narrative, the
concept of progress seems to be embedded in existing ideologies (e.g., liberal) and is conceived in different ways by different people (politicians, academics, the general public).

Politically, Conservatives, according to Freeden, use “progressive policies” to establish “legitimacy, attractiveness and political momentum” (p. 71). There are several ways to use “progressivism” and several ways to view what “progressivism” means. Freeden says, being progressive could relate to the following:

1) Political and constitutional reform;
2) Distributive justice, locally and globally;
3) Igniting the machinery of development and commerce, through technology, markets and rising standards of living and comfort; and
4) Certain patterns of civilised conduct that aspire to universalism, however parochial and even paternalist they really are. (p. 72)

We can draw certain links between Freeden’s exposition of progress and progressivism and the general narrative of the role of education in Singapore. How the idea of progress plays out in the Singaporean context is how improvements and tweaks in an already (perceived as) successful education system implies a moving forward for the better. The stability quotient in the progress narrative lies in how education is conceived, its main goal of ensuring Singapore remains the economic powerhouse that she is. Her people, if meaningfully engaged in economic activity, will then solve societal problems of unemployment and subsequent crimes of the economically disengaged.

The link between education and the economy is not a new or uncommon phenomenon, but perhaps no country is as explicit in its intent for education to serve this purpose as Singapore. According to Joel Spring (1970), in his piece titled “Education and Progressivism”, progressive tendencies in education can be described as a reaction to the rise of industrialisation. His paper attempts to link the political movement of progressivism to education reform in the early 1900s in America. Progressivism sought to “improve the lives of individuals” through reform that aimed to define a particular type of society and the individuals within that society through the work they did. Critiquing Lawrence A. Cremin’s award winning book, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education*, Spring writes that progressive education had no particular features except that it represented something new (p. 53). Social and political reformers had one common vision, that was a “corporate society dependent upon specialisation and cooperation” (p.
54), and this in turn drove education reform to respond to this vision. This meant that the aim of education was to educate students in a specific economic skill and hone character traits that supported this kind of social organisation. What this also meant was that schools had to change. Education was no longer for individual development per se, but a collective social endeavour (p. 54) for the benefit of society as a whole. Spring also cites educator William C. Bagley who, in 1904, declared that “the goal of education should be social efficiency” (p. 55). American progressivism’s impact on education was then a change in mindset from desiring individual economic gain to working unselfishly for the good of society. A person’s individual identity was defined not by self-interest but by the way one contributed to society through the job one performed. Social education was thus borne out of this ideal, with a change in classroom practice to focus more on activities that promoted cooperation than individualistic tendencies. Spring mentions examples from the Francis Parker School in Chicago which stated in their 1912 yearbook that they made a concerted effort to change school environment to focus less on “selfish individualism” and more on “cooperative group ideals” (p. 58). Notable changes in the classroom included more group activities, dramas, projects and games, and individual endeavours, such as studying alone, were no longer seen as positively.

The momentum of social education was fuelled by the Social Education Congress in 1907, where the objective of the association was to emphasise that the main goal of education was to “prepare the child for a useful service as an active and creative member of the social organism” (p. 59). Aside from the school environment, curriculum content was also changed to include social problems and the importance of cooperation (e.g., Social Studies) so that students were made aware of their future role. Other activities that were promoted under the social education movement were extra-curricular activities like clubs, societies and team games. This mentality of education as a social endeavour in terms of social efficiency also saw the creation of vocational guidance. The aim of vocational guidance was “to increase efficiency in the social order by matching individual talent with an appropriate job” (p. 64). Eli Weaver, another advocate of vocational guidance and chairman of the Students’ Aid Committee in New York City had teachers work with students on career guidance between 1905 and 1910. He proposed setting up a bureau to define the type of training and dispositions needed for various vocations. This information would then be cascaded down to schools so that they could align school
programmes and curricular to prepare students for the work place. To enhance efficiency, the bureau would also encourage or discourage training of particular occupations and fields (p. 65). What was of utmost importance in this movement was the dispositions or social character traits students needed to possess to be efficient workers, working for the good of society. Education as defined by this “guidance movement” was that it served to equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions through an appropriate course of study which best matched their “vocational destination” (p. 67).

For Spring, the junior high school was the epitome of social education reform with the environment tailored to nurture individuals for group and social efficiency. The 1918 report *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* was an important document that advocated the “idea that the purpose of education was to socialise the individual and place him in his social niche” and that “individualism now had to be conceived of in terms of what one did for society” (p. 68).

What happened to education reform in the early 1900s in America under the banner of progressivism seems to be strikingly similar to Singapore’s approach to education since independence till the present day. With the rise of industrialisation, the individual was now redefined. The emphasis on the social aspect of education and its relevance to the economy is the common narrative.

**Progressivism and Singapore’s education system – An analysis of key initiatives, speeches and reports**

In this section, I will draw links between what “progress” and “progressivism” connotes and how these concepts which played out in American education reforms in the early 1900s are strikingly similar to the Singaporean education system after more than half a century, especially in terms of the purpose of education for the economy and socialisation. Through an analysis of the themes and concepts of key initiatives, speeches and reports since 1997, which I started to lay out in Chapter 2, I wish to show the progressivist tendencies that focus on the idea of “progress” and a moving forward through economic development which the education system is used for, as a driver for the economic success of the country.
1997 has been recognised as a turning point in Singapore’s education system despite the constant rhetoric of the government that education was to serve the economy since the country gained its independence from the British in 1965. It was considered the turning point because of what were deemed rather bold policy changes. The narrative has been very consistent since then, with several themes being reiterated by the Ministers for Education since 1997.

To be seen as progressive or to make progress, the education system has to always adapt and evolve against the backdrop of a global environment that is portrayed as volatile, unstable and constantly changing. The economic imperative of education underlies all initiatives, speeches and reviews of the system. What former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong advocated through the TSLN initiative set the stage for the trajectory of policy changes after 1997. The TSLN appealed to Singaporeans to constantly strive for an innovative and inquiring mindset. The TLLM initiative in schools served to reinforce this need to innovate and be creative within education and the school context. This consistent narrative then filtered down to the reviews of primary and secondary education embarked upon almost 10 years after TSLN.

**Thinking Schools, Learning Nation**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the TSLN initiative marked the turning point for systemic changes to the education system and its themes still guide decision-making for the Ministry to the present day. The subtitle of the beginning of the speech ‘Future Wealth Will Depend on Capacity for Learning’ underscores and reiterates the government’s unwavering stance that an economic imperative has driven and continues to drive the educational endeavour in Singapore.

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. We have to equip them for a future that we cannot really predict. (Goh, 1997)

Goh explains the need for schools and the country to adopt a mindset of learning by outlining three reasons which have been the basis for any change to the education system in the last 20 years. A knowledge-based economy will need a workforce that is
prepared to rise to the challenge. In a global future, where change will be a constant, one needs to have knowledge and be innovative in order to cope and thrive. This “intensely global future” is described in economic terms, with “diminishing barriers” for goods and services, where we will face intense competition with other cities, countries and regions.

We cannot assume that what has worked well in the past will work for the future. The old formulae for success are unlikely to prepare our young for the new circumstances and new problems they will face. We do not even know what these problems will be, let alone be able to provide the answers and solutions to them. But we must ensure that our young can think for themselves, so that the next generation can find their own solutions to whatever new problems they face. (Goh, 1997)

To move forward, new changes had to be made to the existing system. TSLN, as a national movement, aimed to mobilise the entire populous from students, teachers, and parents to workers, industry and the government to adopt a “learning” attitude. By encouraging a “total learning environment” TSLN as a movement avoided a state of stasis and inertia. Schools were at the forefront of TSLN with the heavy responsibility of developing students into “thinking and committed citizens, capable of making good decisions to keep Singapore vibrant and successful in the future” (Goh, 1997). The curriculum was to be reviewed to include the explicit teaching of thinking skills and creativity through project work and teachers were encouraged to incorporate activities that would develop these skills in their lesson planning. This also meant a reduction in curriculum content to provide more time for teachers to incorporate the learning and application of these skills in the classroom. Information and communications technology (ICT) also featured very strongly in the drive towards innovation in schools. The onus has been put on the teacher to change and find new ways to ignite passion and a curiosity for learning which was perceived to be lacking in students at the time. Teachers and school leaders were encouraged to find new ideas and practices, and continuously refresh their own knowledge so as to set in motion this spirit of continuously learning throughout the school and beyond to the wider community.

To encourage innovation and creativity, school principals were given greater autonomy to make decisions as the Ministry began to further embark on decentralisation by dismantling the school inspectorate system and instilled instead a cluster-superintendent system (Ng P., 2008). Principals were to see their roles as CEOs
managing their schools as companies, which included being accountable to their “customers” and “stakeholders” by producing results. This era, as discussed earlier, saw schools having vision statements, using the business tools like the “Balance Scorecard” and establishing marketing and public relations strategies to “attract” students who were considered customers of the school. The role of the Ministry was no longer to “police” and inspect the schools through the inspectorate system but to also treat the schools, students and parents as customers and to serve their needs. The relationship was to be symbiotic, with the Ministry crafting policies to help schools, and schools giving feedback on what worked and what did not. However, there still had to be some form of accountability and the “School Excellence Model” (SEM) served this purpose. The SEM was a tool for schools to appraise and evaluate themselves annually with ministry assessors going to schools every four to five years to ensure that the schools have put in place appropriate structures and processes to achieve their goals. To place less emphasis on results (which was part of the evaluation criteria), the SEM looked at “enablers” which were the strategies that the school employed to address issues. These issues included school leadership, teacher and student engagement and teaching and learning.

Singapore, often referred to as a nanny state, had established an efficient system of governance with people of exceptional intellect in government. With much efficiency and will power, the government transformed the country rather remarkably within a short 52 years. However, due to a number of factors, the citizenry became passive recipients of government policy and soon expected the government to solve all their problems. TSLN’s larger purpose was to create a more active citizenry, one which was innovative and creative, and would take the initiative, alongside the government to ensure the continued success of the country in the future. Learning Nation was an attempt to push the concept of education (i.e., learning) beyond school to the larger society so that Singapore can continue to be that efficient economic powerhouse in the region.

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. Instead we want to bring about a spirit of innovation, of learning by doing, of everyone each at his own level all the time asking how he can do his job better. With such an approach of always looking out for improvement, always asking what is the purpose of our job and whether there is a better way to accomplish that purpose, we will achieve our ambition of national excellence. Excellence
does not simply mean "outstanding": excellence means each of us at our own level, being the best that we can be. (Goh, 1997)

These are not trivial concerns and I would not say that they should not be addressed in some way through education in schools. The TSLN initiative goes beyond the school but it has come to be expected by the general public that schools are responsible for preparing our students for the workplace. This includes ensuring that students have sufficient academic ability and possess the necessary social and emotional skills to function as a contributing citizen to society.

**Key Ministerial Speeches**

We've got to teach less to our students so that they will learn more. (Lee, 2004)

The Teach Less, Learn More initiative was first mentioned by the Prime Minister during his annual address to the country in 2004. It was his first speech as the Prime Minister and he dedicated a substantial part of his speech to education. Following the trajectory set by his predecessor through TSLN, Lee’s speech on education focused on developing a culture of innovation, daring to do things differently, to try new things and encourage group activities that would help build students’ character.

An important platform for the minister to speak to and engage with school leaders and the general education fraternity is the annual Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar (MOE WPS). One month after Lee mentioned TLLM, Education Minister at the time, Tharman, spoke about TLLM at the MOE WPS. Under the subtitle of ‘Nurturing Students’ (Tharman, 2004), the details of TLLM were communicated to schools and the larger education fraternity. In order for innovation, creativity and initiative to take place in schools, there was a need to introduce more flexibility and choice in the system. For Tharman, this meant reducing curriculum content and reviewing pedagogical practices so that both teachers and students had the time and space to explore new ways of teaching and learning, and assessment of group activities like project work. There would be a trimming of curriculum requirements while still maintaining rigour so that content knowledge was not compromised, reducing homework by having a policy in place for schools and a push for more innovative teaching approaches. Other system-wide policies included more
choice for students in terms of new subjects offered at the Ordinary Level (O Level) Cambridge-Singapore examinations taken at the end of secondary school. Subjects like economics, computer studies and drama were traditionally offered at the higher Advanced Level (A Level) examinations. Schools were also encouraged to come up with other subjects that students could take at the ‘O’ Levels, subjects that schools, in consultation and upon approval from the Ministry, could create in partnership with industry and institutes of higher learning to meet the interests of their students. These policy changes aimed at changing mindsets, from a fixation on following tried and tested ways of doing things and achieving academic excellence in school, to focusing teacher and student effort on the quality of teaching and learning rather than the quantity.

This period of the “ability-driven education” (ADE) saw a widening of the education landscape with more porosity and flexibility, where students could move laterally or vertically with greater ease within the school system which was not possible before. There was also more student choice to pursue personal interests in the arts, sports or mathematics and science, with specialised schools being set up alongside choice in more subject offerings. One could see these as an attempt to get students to take more ownership in their education journey and for them to be enthused in the process by allowing them to be more involved in their education choices.

Aside from the economic imperative in education, the social aspect played a big role in the government narrative as well. Education was often seen as a means for social mobility. The responsibility of schools was to ensure that opportunities were provided for all students, regardless of their social-economic backgrounds. The “flexibility and choice” narrative still ran through the next administration under Dr Ng Eng Hen.

Our education system creates opportunities for all our students. Regardless of which school they are in or what background they come from, our students are able to learn at their own pace, and develop in areas they are passionate about and can excel in, and achieve their maximum potential. Customisation and differentiation of education pathways are key reasons for our robust and responsive education system. (Ng, 2011)

During his tenure as Education Minister, Ng built on the foundations laid by Tharman and the education system was made more porous. This was in line with maintaining the image of the system as being less rigid, with more decentralisation and
autonomy at the school level so that students could pursue their interests. In addition, primary and secondary education underwent a full review under his tenure so as to align with the messages of TSLN and TLLM. The Primary Education Review and Implementation Committee (PERI) was convened to look into how primary education should be like in order to prepare our students for the 21st century. The aim was to see how to “strike a balance between enduring knowledge and values, and the necessary 21st century skills and dispositions which will equip our children to thrive in a fast-changing, globalised world, while remaining uniquely Singaporean” (Singapore, Report of the Primary Education Review and Implementation Committee, 2009, p. 3). The conclusions drawn by the committee echoed the ideals of TSLN:

It is clear to the Committee that our children should grow up to be confident persons, adept at working in teams and able to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively. They should be self-directed learners who view education as a life-long process. They should also be innovative and enterprising individuals, able to cope with ambiguity and adapt well to change. At the same time, Singapore needs citizens who are morally upright, have a strong sense of civic responsibility and who will contribute actively to society. (Singapore, Report of the Primary Education Review and Implementation Committee, 2009, p. 3)

The recommendations of the Committee focused on holistic education with more emphasis on non-academic examinable subjects like physical education, art and music, and a more holistic assessment of students other than academic achievements. This included a school-based assessment system that took into account skills development and provided qualitative constructive feedback. A new programme “Programme for Active Learning” (PAL) was also introduced at the lower primary level (Grades 1 and 2). Conducted during curriculum time, PAL consisted of modular activities for two hours a week in two broad areas of sport and outdoor education, and performing and visual arts. PAL served two important functions for the education narrative: first, to de-emphasise the relentless pursuit of academic excellence and grades and encourage innovation and initiative as well as the development of social skills; second, for students to be exposed at an early age to more varied experiences in order for them to discover their interests. The proposed approach to pedagogy and classroom practice centred on a loose interpretation of constructivism. Teachers were encouraged to employ a diverse range of teaching methods to actively engage students and enhance their “learning experiences”. These
methods should focus on skills like independent learning, working with others and communication, and values which were not explicitly defined.

The Secondary Education Review and Implementation Committee (SERI) in 2010 also built on the ideals of TSLN and Tharman’s policies. Taking into account the differences of primary and secondary students’ ages, and stages of development, the Committee’s recommendations focused on the social-emotional development of adolescents and the need for a more concerted effort in career guidance at the secondary level. Non-academic subjects in the form of programmes were also given greater emphasis, for example Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) and student participation in Co-Curricular Activities (CCA). These again, served to inculcate the skills and values that were necessary for the continued economic success of Singapore, as espoused by Goh, Lee, Tharman and subsequent Education Ministers.

SERI also recognises the need to strengthen the nexus between secondary education and post-secondary education, given the increasingly variegated tertiary education landscape which also responds to changing industry needs. Hence, SERI recommends that a platform be established to facilitate regular dialogue between the secondary school principals and the post-secondary educational institutions, particularly the polytechnics and ITE (Institute of Technical Education). This will tighten the feedback loop between our mainstream school system and the post-secondary education system, and facilitate greater understanding as well as strengthen the educational delivery in each of these sectors. (Report of the Secondary Education Review and Implementation (SERI) Committee, 2010, p. 8)

Through SERI’s recommendations, the education landscape continued to broaden to provide student choice and flexibility. Termed “multiple pathways for success”, these measures were also an attempt to redefine the traditional notion of success which was achieved only through academic grades. What was interesting to note in the SERI report was the section on ‘Lessons from other education systems’ (p. 18). The Committee did a comparative study of education systems from other countries and listed seven observations:

1) Continuous learning aligned with the developmental stages of the child;
2) Prescribed national curriculum with flexibility at the school level and interest-driven learning;
3) Differentiated learning within the curriculum;
4) Integrated, experiential and authentic learning;
5) Embedded career guidance;
6) National assessment at the end of secondary education; and
7) Intervention programmes and strategies for the less academically inclined.

Apart from stating that learning needs and education outcomes had a strong link with the developmental stages of a student, there were no further details. For both reviews, the basis for the recommendations is similar – how we can best adapt to and thrive in a fast-paced, changing global economy. The narrative is also similar, that we cannot stick to old, tried and tested ways of doing things, that our students have to be prepared, and prepared well for the world of work. While there is some mention of personal development, the end goal of these reviews and, in essence, the education system, was to prepare for a 21st century workforce. For example, in the SERI report, social connections and values are mentioned, but from the point of view of schools and teachers and how they can help guide students to “live in an increasingly complex socio-economic environment” (p. 18).

At the annual budget debate (Committee of Supply) in 2011, Ng (as with his predecessors and successors) focused his speech on the investments to be made to enable all these policy recommendations to take place. More importantly, how the government paid attention to those who belonged to a lower social-economic status so that they would not be left behind. Resources for training, infrastructure and programmes were given to increase the number of teachers in the system under the ambit of creating greater social mobility through education. This emphasised the view that education promised equality, at least economically.

The next minister who took over the reins from 2011 – 2015 sought to push for more impetus to change mindsets but never wavering from the economic imperative of the education endeavour. Heng coined his policies under a “student-centric, values-driven” education which was characterised by four attributes:

1) Every student, an Engaged Learner;
2) Every School, a Good School;
3) Every Teacher, a Caring Educator; and
4) Every Parent, a Supportive Partner.

Heng’s policies in the five years he was Education Minister, were guided by these four attributes which were unveiled at this MOE WPS speech in 2012. As mentioned
earlier, many of Heng’s policies hinged on the slogan “Every School, a Good School”. In many ways, the policies enacted by his predecessors also had some semblance to these attributes. The education system under his charge saw a few moves to dismantle existing policies which, in hindsight, did not serve their intended purposes. The idea that every school was a good school was actually something perpetuated since 1997. The intention of decentralising power to the schools, and giving them greater autonomy was in the hope that schools would innovate and create niches for themselves which would serve the needs of their students and cater to their interests. This, however, created an over-competitive culture amongst schools who became increasingly fixated on academic excellence and chasing awards given by the Ministry so as to attract quality students. This behaviour ran counter to the original intention of school-based autonomy. Heng then proceeded to abolish the ranking of schools through academic bands based on academic results. As he explained:

School banding has not only served its purpose; it now gets in the way of “Every School a Good School” as it creates a public perception that MOE measures our schools strictly by academic grades. (Heng S., 2012)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, to gain more buy-in of the concept of “Every School a Good School”, Heng moved principals from well-established schools (i.e., autonomous schools) to less well-known schools or those which were struggling in many aspects. These moves sought to show how serious the Ministry was about changing mindsets. However, two schemes remained for schools to still be encouraged to achieve excellence, the SEM and the numerous awards given by the Ministry to recognise schools in various academic and non-academic ways, which he abolished before the end of his term.

For Heng, as with the other ministers, character and values education was meant for the greater good of society. He links “Every Student, an Engaged Learner” to:

…how committed a student is in developing the values and character that will enable him to succeed in life and contribute to others. Knowledge and skills can become outdated, but a mature social-emotional core, deep values and strength of character will enable our children to continue to thrive as they grow. It is not cognitive skills alone, but character traits of empathy, graciousness, responsibility and integrity that will enable our kids to succeed. A strong sense of citizenship will drive them to come together to write the next chapters of the Singapore Story. That is why we must
sustain our efforts in Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). (Heng S., 2012)

Heng also concentrated his effort on trying to shift the focus away from academic excellence and grades, and tried to further broaden the definition of success for Singaporean students and parents. In his MOE WPS 2013 speech, he spent a substantial amount of time talking about success and what success meant in education. He wanted “every child to succeed” and to “give every child every chance at success” (Heng S., 2013). Not deviating from the concerns first mentioned in TSLN, and subsequent Education Ministers before him, Heng reiterated that the purpose of education was to provide social mobility and economic success for the country. Citing feedback from the public, Heng states:

Many reaffirmed the important role of education in providing opportunities for all, even as they expressed concerns that we were becoming more stratified as a society. Some worried about the over-emphasis on academics and grades, the increasing reliance on tuition, and the high levels of stress faced by our students, but acknowledged the importance of ensuring our children are well prepared for the rigours of work and life. Some felt that our definition of success needed to be broadened, so that we will value each child for who they are, regardless of what grades they achieve. (Heng S., 2013)

Outlining the underlying beliefs which have been espoused consistently, Heng spoke about “how every child can learn”, how different talents (other than academic) should be valued and how “our success in education and our success as a society are deeply intertwined”. Global companies were also viewing the world through the framework of VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. A VUCA environment, according to Heng, would not require students to be academically excellent, but to be adaptable, willing to learn and to deal with problems that may not have clear, simple solutions. They had to be able to work well with others, to work with others from other parts of the world and to communicate effectively. These were the same concerns mentioned by Goh in 1997.

Another important aspect of TSLN was the need for people to adopt a mindset of lifelong learning. Heng termed it “Learning for Life”. 
While we want our students to succeed in their chosen field, life is not just about careers. It is also to unleash our human spirit, to find purpose in life, to explore the truth, beauty and goodness around us, and to contribute towards adding to that, all our life. (Heng S., 2013)

Heng attempted to expand the concept of lifelong learning to encompass something more than learning relevant knowledge and skills for employment as suggested by past narratives. Amidst this concept of “Learning for Life”, schools at the primary level were once again encouraged to help students discover their interests and strengths, to conduct lively lessons utilising information technology (ICT) where students can be seen as active learners, learning together with their classmates. Heng’s narrative continues to reinforce Tharman’s and Ng’s narratives of the importance of holistic education through a de-emphasis on grades and for schools to provide more qualitative feedback, and was in line with the recommendations of the PERI Committee. For students at the secondary level, in line with the SERI Committee’s recommendations, Heng reiterated the importance of helping students pursue their interests, and for teachers to be innovative in their teaching methods (e.g., using inquiry-based learning and IT). In this regard, there were no substantial changes in policy but a reiteration and enhancement of changes implemented in the last few years. What was perhaps noteworthy as mentioned earlier, was the implementation in all secondary schools of two programmes that cemented Heng’s push under “Learning for Life” – the Applied Learning Programme sought to bring the knowledge and skills students learnt in the classroom closer to real-life applications; and the Learning for Life Programme, which was a programme where students could engage in non-academic pursuits like arts, sports, and outdoor education. The latter programme was also meant to address the ways in which education could be more holistic.

It is clear that in the 20 years since TSLN was introduced in 1997, and even when the purpose of education was conceived when Singapore gained her independence from the British, that there has been and continues to be a strong progressive strain in the government’s narrative on education, focused and defined in economic terms and nation-building.
Some criticisms

The efforts of the government to create a less restrictive education system through decentralisation and granting schools more autonomy to be more innovative in their practices have received some criticism from Singaporean academics mainly because these policies, in the long run, ran counter to their original intent. Tan and Gopinathan (2000) argue that since the 1980s and more so with the introduction of TSLN in 1997, the push for creativity and innovation in schools has resulted in the marketisation of education (p. 6). The shift from schools as education institutions to organisations under a more technological framework focused on efficiency and output, also contributed to a culture of competitiveness. The effort to encourage schools to think out-of-the-box, to create niche programmes to suit their students’ interests and provide more flexibility and choice for their students so that education was seen as more enjoyable and embracing diversity, inevitably led to increased pressure on schools to outperform one another. Tan and Gopinathan asked “to what extent will these ambitious strategies and initiatives result in a genuine flowering of creativity and innovation in schools and students?” (p. 8). They posit that choice and diversity were still limited by the Ministry’s strong influence on the flexibility of the curriculum. Schools were still measured by academic results and so school leaders could not allow their curriculum to deviate too far from the norm. It was also questionable whether increased competition led to improvement in quality of education and the creation of more choice and flexibility for students. Better established schools like the independent and autonomous schools created in the 1980s under the efficiency-driven phase of education would naturally have an advantage over other schools that could not compete on a level-playing field. What the marketisation of education has done to the system is that it leads to un-educational decisions. Perhaps what is most important to consider, and is a central concern of this dissertation, is that the goals and policies run counter to one another. Tan and Gopinathan state:

The larger problem for Singapore’s educational reform initiative is that Singapore’s nation-building history resulted in an omnipresent state that cherishes stability and order. A desire for true innovation, creativity, experimentation, and multiple opportunities in education cannot be realised until the state allows for civil society to flourish and avoids politicising dissent. (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000, p. 10)
Charlene Tan has argued that the government’s response to globalisation through education has “introduced an array of neo-liberal educational strategies” and that the “tactic of performativity” is used as a means of control in spite of the rhetoric of greater decentralisation (Tan C., 2008, p. 111). Characterising TSLN’s education strategies in the areas of critical and creative thinking, the use of ICT in education, character and citizenship education and administrative excellence as neo-liberalist, Tan argues that the policies which were meant to devolve autonomy to the schools were actually a form of reregulation instead of deregulation of the system. Citing Ball (2003), Tan suggests that his notion of performativity describes the impact of the education policies enacted since 1997.

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. (Ball, 2003, p. 216)

This meant that deregulation was just an illusion and, in actual fact, control was established through other means, i.e., performativity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the move to decentralise was to improve efficiency and effectiveness of school governance and to encourage schools to be innovative in their approaches. Tan puts it succinctly, that it was “a pragmatic consideration to facilitate reform to meet economic challenges” (p. 116). Schools were responsible for making decisions on curriculum implementation, creating niche areas, resourcing and deployment and thinking of themselves as organisations serving customers. Amidst this environment of decentralisation, Tan suggests that “the reform processes of deregulation, within a culture of performativity, are actually processes of reregulation where the state establishes a new form of control” (p. 116). This is done through the SEM for schools, and the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS) for teachers. This civil service-wide performance appraisal system introduced in 2001, tied teachers’ performance with their yearly bonuses and contributed to their promotion prospects. Under the EPMS, teachers had to set targets and goals, and review them with their “Reporting Officer”, often the Head of Department, biannually to see if they had managed to achieve their targets by the year
end. The easiest targets to identify and measure were student results. Together, the SEM and EPMS controlled and regulated what schools and teachers did. The question of how much innovation is possible comes under scrutiny with these processes of central control still in place. For Tan, a “performative culture is also antithetical to the promotion of educational equity in Singapore” (p. 119). With the marketisation of education, school leaders as CEOs would be tactical and invest their resources “in areas that promise the greatest measurable returns” (p. 119) rather than seek to advance diversity, innovation and creativity.

What I have tried to lay out in the preceding paragraphs is the influence of progressivism in Singapore’s conception of education, and the descriptions of the expected behaviour of schools and teachers as a result. Through TSLN and TLLM, a constructivist approach to teaching is preferred, though not defined, with teachers engaging students through active learning. Experiential learning (Dewey) is also preferred as a means for students to construct their own knowledge through activities and the guidance of the teacher. This is supposed to result in students becoming independent learners. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the four main ideas of constructivism are (1) the value of students’ experiences; (2) the need for teachers to provide quality experiences in school so that learning is meaningful and experiential; (3) the importance of socialisation in education; and (4) the participation of the learner in the learning process. With control measures like the EPMS, these ideas, loosely translated, lead to activities that constitute “performances”, things that can be seen, and thus, easily measured.

What is missing?

My contention with this entire approach to defining education is that there is no room for discussion on what the aims of education should be since they have already been decided. It is also assumed that everyone agrees with the aim of education for economic survival and success, hence the focus is always on ways to enhance this belief, and the ways the government is seen to be moving the system forward in this regard. At this juncture, I would once again like to turn to Biesta and his views on how we might approach the question of what good education might mean and how we might go about thinking about education educationally.
In order to speak and think educationally about education, Biesta feels that the question of purpose, what education is for, should guide educational practice, policy and research (Biesta, 2010, p. 3). He raises this question in the midst of a culture of measurement in many education systems and argues that “measurement of educational outcomes” can never replace answering the question of purpose in education” (p. 5). A culture of measurement tends to encourage the need to use information on educational outcomes solely to inform educational practice. While that may not seem like a bad thing, Biesta argues that we can only use factual information to make decisions about “what ought to be done” and “what ought to be done can never be logically derived from what is the case” (p. 12). There is no way to avoid making value judgements when deciding what ought to be done in education, hence factual information or data alone is inadequate without considering views of what is thought to be desirable. Another problem Biesta points out is the “technical validity of our measurements – i.e., the question whether we are measuring what we intend to measure…This has to do with the question of whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure.” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13).

He suggests a framework where we can begin to consider and engage with the purpose of education. There are three domains of educational purpose that guide what we do in education – qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification has to do with providing students with knowledge, skills and dispositions to “do” something in terms of a job or profession (p. 20). This domain features strongly as a rationale for state-funded education. The next domain of socialisation has to do with creating particular social, cultural and political “orders” according to Biesta. Socialisation can also involve the transmission, as is the case of Singapore, of “particular norms and values, in relation to the continuation of particular cultural or religious traditions, or for the purpose of professional socialisation” (p. 20). The third domain has to do with individuation or “subjectification” which is the opposite of the domain of socialisation.
The subjectification function might perhaps best be understood as the opposite of the socialisation function. It is precisely not about the insertion of “newcomers” into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders, ways of being in which the individual is not simply a “specimen” of a more encompassing order. (p. 21)

It can be argued that education can do without the domain of subjectification as defined by Biesta. However, it could also be argued that education would inevitably affect the individual and so what would matter in this case is the quality of subjectification, that is, the “kinds of subjectivity that are made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements…” (p. 21).

Biesta argues that the domains of qualification, socialisation and subjectification are at play all the time with one domain possibly dominating over the others. The challenge is to balance the three and use judgment in the balancing act. By separating the purposes of education into three domains, Biesta has in effect highlighted the tendency to focus our attention solely on one or two domains and made it difficult to divide curriculum time and space across three domains as opposed to two. What’s more, the domains of qualification and socialisation, to a certain extent, can be measured in terms of results or processes to achieve results. Qualifications can be measured in terms of how well students perform academically in national examinations, and socialisation can be seen in terms of participation in the many non-academic group activities in and out of the school. Suitable qualifications allow one to have a wider choice of jobs in society and earn a potentially higher salary. They can help “free” one from a certain economic station in life, or in Singapore’s context, help in social mobility.

In contrast to the other two domains, subjectification, which deals with “the question of the human person”, is impossible to measure. It is contentious and difficult to discuss, with possibly no conclusion or consensus. What actual impact the pursuit of qualification and socialisation, on the part of both the teacher and student, has on subjectification is unknown but, according to Biesta, it is most certain to happen. These domains provide a framework for teachers to think about what they do and more importantly, how they balance the tension between these domains that would consequently show what they believe education to be. If one feels that subjectification has
no place in education, then one can ignore it, even though an impact will be felt by the student.

We can perhaps say that subjectification is taken into consideration in the education narratives and in Singapore’s conception of education. There is talk of the pursuit of interests and passions, inculcation of values and character, diversity and choice. However, these do not seem to address what Biesta suggested about the purpose of subjectification, that is, not to insert people into an existing order, which is the case here, but to help individuals be with themselves and with others. That, I want to suggest, is what is missing in the conversation.
Chapter 5. The question of the ideally educated citizen

In the previous chapters, I laid out a brief history and evolution of the education system in Singapore, and discussed the ways in which progressivist ideas are embedded in the education narrative. I also considered how an education system based on a progressivist technological framework limits the definition of education where the main recipients of the education effort are not seriously considered as independent beings but pre-conceived entities to be introduced, prepared for and expected to contribute as active and responsible citizens in the existing order.

Citizenship and nation-building have been the preoccupation of the government ever-since independence from the British in 1965. Aside from the strong economic strand in the education narrative, the other key purpose of education is for citizenship education, in particular, a special brand of citizenship education that suited the Singaporean context (Tan J., 2008) aligned to the government rhetoric of economic survival. Several programmes were put in place in the school curriculum since the 1980s to inculcate the values that the government felt were essential for students to be good, productive citizens. They were “Good Citizen” for primary schools and “Being and Becoming” for secondary schools. These locally designed programmes were made compulsory and attempted to inculcate a “sense of national identity, an awareness of Singapore’s recent history, an awareness of Singapore’s developmental challenges and constraints, as well as a confidence in the country’s future” (Tan J., 2008, p. 73).

In this chapter, I focus on the question of the (ideally) educated citizen, in particular the National Education initiative launched in 1997. Through the existing education narrative, the (ideally) education citizen is described against the backdrop of Singapore’s conception of education. I will explore the dichotomy of the individual versus society and the citizen as object to be created rather than subjects to be realised. The constructivist paradigm, which defines education in a particular limiting way, seems to complicate this question of the (ideally) educated citizen by giving the illusion of power, space and openness for the individual, which is strengthened by the rhetoric of equality and emancipation through economic stability with education’s role in social mobility. In the
case of Singapore, by disregarding and not recognising the individual in a fundamental sense, yet projecting a concern for the individual in an education premised on a progressivist, constructivist paradigm, the conception of the (ideally) educated citizen can be easily theorized, conceived and implemented. However, the actual realisation of this ideal rests on unstable ground due to the lack of attention paid to questions on the purpose of education and the citizen as an individual. I will once again revisit Biesta’s ideas on the three domains of education, focusing on subjectification and discuss the “weakness” of education, in particular, the idea of emancipation in education to show the ways Singapore’s conception of education may fall short of attaining its ideal citizen. But I will first begin with a discussion of perceptions of existing concepts of citizenship and its enactment in the classroom.

Conceptions of citizenship

Derek Heater provides a useful overview of the evolution of conceptions of citizenship from the Greeks to the present day. He traces the origins of the idea of citizenship back to the Greek city-state whereby the notion of the state lays the political foundations for citizenship. It was in the interest of those living within the state, the citizens, to participate and show loyalty for the state and its government to function (Heater, 2004). Underlying the political need for a concept of citizenship are three factors. The first is the philosophical where the beliefs about the nature of man are called into question.

All theories of citizenship based on the notion of popular sovereignty assume that the exercise of power by any individual or group is legitimate only if, in the last resort, it is sanctioned by the people as a whole. No human being has a right totally to dominate another. Citizenship evolved as a means of institutionalising this basic belief. (p. 164)

The second and third factors for the rise of the concept of citizenship are the military and economic under which the notion of the state has been built upon. The defensive nature of the Greek city-state meant that citizens would bear arms to defend their polis. In modern nation-states, this has been translated to the duty of military service for citizens. The economic factor has been integral in the early phases of citizenship because, according to Heater, it was those who were economically privileged that led the
status of "citizen" (p. 165). These three factors combined lay the foundation of how the concept of citizenship has evolved through the centuries in the midst of political, social and economic change, but interestingly, these factors are still being debated when it comes to citizenship in the present day.

Since the 17th century, citizenship as social contract has been strengthened due to a number of factors which are useful to consider. One was the rise of the middle classes who in the 19th century, “took the lead in the revolutionary crisis in demanding a juster, freer and more participative political system” (p. 171). The 19th century also saw the growth of capitalism which changed society considerably “making room for the unconstrained operation of the market mechanism” which encouraged “the accumulation of private wealth and the selfish pursuit of private interests” (p. 171). This ran counter to the altruistic nature expected of a citizen and created tension in the relationship between capitalism and citizenship, but at the same time introduced the notion of vested interest in citizenship.

The expansion of capitalism and the extension of citizenship particularly required new answers to the age-old question of the relationship between citizenship and property....The assumption was that the commitment required of citizenship could be realistically expected only of those with a tangible stake in maintaining stability. (p. 171)

The combination of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation of the state in the 20th century further influenced conceptions of citizenship and called into question relationships between citizenship and the state, for example with the bureaucracy, with different types of politics and nation-states adapting citizenship ideas that best suited them.

Ian Davies (2012) discusses citizenship education through two perennial questions: “what is citizenship?” and “how may citizenship be taught, learned and assessed?”. He outlines six areas of debate regarding citizenship and describes them in dichotomous terms not to simplify the argument but to show the extremes and invites us to consider the grey areas of the debate. The first is “fundamental philosophical perspectives” whereby citizenship can be viewed as “an arena in which there are two competing perspectives that focus variously on rights and duties in the private or public...
contexts” (p. 32). The liberal perspective is where individual rights take precedence in an environment that is has government presence. The civic republican view, on the other hand, places emphasis on the “duties and responsibilities of citizens to those in the community” (p. 32). Using the terms liberal and civic republican to describe these dichotomous perspectives is not meant to simplify but allows us to explore further the potential and limitations of conceptions of citizenship.

The second debate centers on the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of citizenship. This political debate centers on the definition of citizenship as having membership in terms of legal and political status of citizenship whereby one’s rights are protected. However “it is also possible to identify through this process those who do not belong” (p. 33). In more recent times, we can see this debate play out in immigration issues facing Europe with the influx of refugees and asylum seekers where those who do not belong can be removed because they do not possess any legal status (p. 33).

The third debate is about location and the perception of citizenship as having a membership to a “place” or “community” (p. 33). The status of citizenship is oftentimes tied to the concept of the nation state. Much like the political debate described above, the location debate also involves the legal status of citizenship but the rights, duties and privileges are usually localised to the nation state which is further complicated by larger transnational frameworks (e.g., British versus European, Singaporean versus Southeast Asian). For Davies, “it is important to see the literal nature of the use of the word international – or, between the nations – and to reflect on whether other forms of citizenship – with more overarching global perspectives – are possible” (p.34).

The fourth debate is about “morality, religion and doing the ‘right’ thing”, that is “the motivations for and formulations of citizenship are connected to the business of thinking and doing the right thing” (p. 34). In the UK, the Advisory Group for Citizenship Report, commonly referred to as the Crick Report was published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 1998 and was influential in changing citizenship education in the UK. Ideas like social and moral responsibility espoused by the report, and questions like what it means to do the right thing, and is there a “right” when it comes to issues of citizenship dominate this debate. While notions of goodness and virtue are upheld in this
perception of citizenship, their vagueness makes it difficult for anyone to dispute their importance.

The fifth debate, related to the second (belonging) and fourth (morality), centers on “identity”. Davies again refers to the Crick Report whereby support was given to “an approach to politics which saw matters broadly in a commitment to justice” (p. 34) and did not address other issues in citizenship to do with identity like gender, disability and ethnicity.

The sixth and last debate with regard to citizenship education was about “action, involvement and engagement” (p. 35). For Davies, “if we want a vibrant democracy then people have to engage” (p. 35). However to subscribe to the notion that rights would only be available if responsibilities are enacted would inevitably exclude those who are unable to “enact” or engage—for example, the young, the old, and people with disabilities. This is especially so when we talk about active participation.

The privileging of physical engagement over cognitive reflection may not always be entirely wise (if we do not recognise this then we will find ourselves in the same difficulties as those who proposed active learning without seeming to include critical analysis). (p. 35)

Davies points out that in many ways, the aims of citizenship are in general, the aims of schooling as a whole and that is “about understanding, and helping to develop, contemporary society”. Yet the status accorded to the teaching of citizenship education is low, with teachers not properly trained to teach it, and is usually not reflected in the curriculum.

**National Education as citizenship education**

This ignorance will hinder our effort to develop a shared sense of nationhood. We will not acquire the right instincts to bond together as one nation, or maintain the will to survive and prosper in an uncertain world. For Singapore to thrive beyond the founder generation, we must systematically transmit these instincts and attitudes to succeeding cohorts. Through National Education, we must make these instincts and attitudes part of the cultural DNA which makes us Singaporeans. (Lee, 1997).
From Heater’s and Davies’ work, we can see that Singapore’s approach to citizenship education is not entirely novel or particularly ground-breaking. Being a relatively young nation, the government could create a narrative and its conception of education, which are not that different from what other nations have done for centuries. In the early years of Singapore’s independence, there was the introduction of compulsory military service for young men, and adequate public housing to enable every Singaporean to own their homes. We could argue that these play into the ideas of loyalty and vested interest in protecting the country and having a certain responsibility and sense of belonging as a citizen of Singapore.

For schools, a key initiative under the TSLN banner was National Education (NE), Singapore’s form of citizenship education and launched in 1997 (the same year as TSLN) by former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Given Singapore’s relatively short history both as a former British colony and as an independent nation state, a “true national identity has remained elusive” (Chia, 2012, p. 3). Through surveys and interviews, the Singapore government discovered that students and the general public lacked basic knowledge and understanding of Singapore’s history. “They did not know how we became an independent nation, how we triumphed against long odds, or how today's peaceful and prosperous Singapore came about” (Lee, 1997). Without this knowledge, it was believed that Singaporeans could not fully understand and appreciate the decisions that were made and which had to be made to achieve the success that the country has attained in a relatively short period of time. Former Prime Minister Goh also spoke about the importance of NE at the Teachers’ Day rally a year earlier in 1996. For Goh, “NE needed to become a crucial part of the education curriculum in all schools.” (Tan J., 2008, p. 73).

The introduction of a formalised citizenship education programme in schools was the solution. According to Chia (2012), citizenship education generally included civic education whereby students learnt about their country’s political, legal and economic systems and structures, their rights and responsibilities as citizens and how governance and the government worked (p. 4). Underlying this knowledge were values that placed emphasis on the good for the community and society in general rather than the individual. Civics also covered topics like decision-making and leadership and involved “participation in and awareness of the benefits, privileges and responsibilities of community life” (Chia,
2012, p. 4). Social justice and democratic engagement were and are still missing from NE. As explained by Chia (2012), the emphasis on moral and communal values as well as national identity for most Asian states, especially those that were colonised and involved in World War Two, was not unusual given the short history they had as independent states.

In Singaporean schools, the aims of NE were threefold: to develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in Singapore’s future. NE in schools would instill these aims through the following:

- by fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans;
- by knowing the Singapore story -- how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation;
- by understanding Singapore’s unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries; and
- by instilling the core values of our way of life, and the will to prevail, that ensures our continued success and well-being.3

Schools were to refer to the six NE messages which encapsulated the aims and values of the programme (subtext in italics) and “infuse” them into the formal and informal curriculum:

1) Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong. *We treasure our heritage and take pride in shaping our own unique way of life.*

2) We must preserve racial and religious harmony. *We value our diversity and are determined to stay a united people.*

3) We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility. *We provide opportunities for all, according to their ability and effort.*

4) No one owes Singapore a living. *We find our own way to survive and prosper, turning challenge into opportunity.*

5) We must ourselves defend Singapore. *We are proud to defend Singapore ourselves; no one else is responsible for our security and well-being.*

6) We have confidence in our future. *United, determined and well-prepared, we have what it takes to build a bright future for ourselves, and to progress together as one nation.*

3 Taken from the Ministry of Education’s National Education website, http://www.ne.edu.sg.
Every aspect of the NE programme which also included visits to key institutions (e.g. transport, the arts, government installations) can and should be linked to the messages so that a coherent and consistent rhetoric could be communicated to students.

Since it was discovered that students did not know much about Singapore’s history, the first issue was to tackle the apparent lack of knowledge and understanding of the past. These historical facts were taught through the formal curriculum. Students, through subjects like Social Studies and History, had to learn the history of Singapore more commonly termed now as the “Singapore Story” – “how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation” (Lee, 1997). Key facts in the story included Singaporean society under the rule of the British, the impact of World War Two, the political strife in the 1950s and 60s, and the events that led to Singapore’s independence from the British and Malaysia. Primary school students would learn about Singaporean society through the Social Studies curriculum, and values and character education through the Civics and Moral Education curriculum. For students at the secondary level, the history of Singapore is studied at great depth at the lower level (Secondary One and Two) and a new subject was created at the upper level (Secondary Three and Four) which was compulsory for all students. Termed Social Studies, it was a subject that focused on governance and included case studies from around the world. Students also learnt about the major policies that the Singaporean government made in history so that they could understand how their country was being managed and the decisions that the government had to make at certain points in time. Chia (2012) made an interesting observation about the numerous times the Singapore story was taught and retaught at various levels in the school curriculum and how the lessons learnt through history are unapologetically linked to the NE messages. He quoted Souchou Yao’s description of the constant retelling of Singapore’s history in the curriculum as symptomatic of the “culture of excess” where the story became “the dramatic, violent experience of national struggle – in the way people remember it…the Singapore Story is experienced as trauma” (as cited in Chia, 2012, p. 12). It served as a constant reminder of Singapore’s vulnerabilities as a small nation and that people should never take what they had for granted.

However, one had to wonder about the compatibility between the NE initiative with TSLN, positing that the success of NE hinges on a common understanding between the
government, teachers and students (Tan J., 2008). Where TSLN encouraged a
divergence of sorts in terms of creativity and innovation and new ways of thinking and
questioning, NE required a convergence of emotions and passions.

One might argue that the patriotic nature of NE requires a certain degree
of convergence among teachers and students in terms of the emotions and
passions that are officially deemed desirable. In other words, a common
set of responses is deemed more worthy than all others. However, it might
be said that this sort of convergence of thought is somewhat incompatible
with the sort of critical thinking skills that TSLN would appear to encourage.
(Tan J., 2008, p. 82)

Hill and Lian (1995) have noted that education was a powerful vehicle for nation
building “partly because it straddles the symbolic and instrumental dimensions and partly
because education has the potential to transform one generation into sharing a common
identity” (p. 4). Symbolically, NE and the values the government hoped students would
learn and practice was better implemented through the informal curriculum. Certain rituals
were instituted in schools to build a sense of loyalty to the nation, such as the singing of
the national anthem and recitation of the national pledge every morning at the start of a
school day. There were also four days set aside in the school calendar to commemorate
important events in the past and celebrate the peace and harmony the nation had. For
example, Total Defence Day on 15 February focused on the fall of Singapore to the
Japanese during World War Two and emphasized NE messages 4 and 5. Racial Harmony
Day on 21 July celebrated Singapore’s multi-racial society and reminded students of the
fragility of racial and religious harmony through historical events like the racial riots of the
1960s. Other ways in which NE was infused in the informal curriculum was through the
schools’ co-curricular activities like sport, uniformed groups and aesthetics after-school
programmes. NE as experienced in the informal curriculum helped to instil in one a sense
of loyalty and belonging to Singapore. Here values deemed important to the Singaporean
psyche were emphasised so that students not only had a shared knowledge base but also
a common understanding of what values a citizen of Singapore should hold. Respect,
responsibility, integrity, care, resilience and harmony were values that every child would
be familiar with in school as teachers were encouraged to incorporate them in lessons as
much and as far as possible.
The ideally educated citizen

The definition of a good citizen has evolved over time. Heater outlines some major thinkers' views:

Aristotle defined the good citizen as someone who lived in harmony with the constitution; for Cicero, civic virtue implied public duty; for Machiavelli, virtù is almost translatable as “valour”; Robespierre spoke of incorruptibility; while T.H. Green gave it a Christian connotation. And when today’s conservative speaks of good citizenship he usually emphasises deferent and orderly behaviour, while the liberal stresses active involvement in public and community affairs. (Heater, 2004, p. 198)

Hence, a good citizen is someone who has a “paragon of multiple virtues, who brings to the fore different qualities according to circumstances” (p. 198).

Charlene Tan (2008) has described a “good citizen” in Singapore as “one who contributes to society and supports a set of prescribed values” (p. 134). She argues that the concept of harmony underpinned Asian societies and that its key feature was “the preference of collectivism to individualism” (p. 134). This preference of collectivism was evident in the initiatives discussed earlier as well as the principles and messages of NE. Considering the major initiatives of 1997 and after, and the different aspects of education that these initiatives sought to improve, it is not difficult to describe the ideally educated citizen which the government aimed to construct. Ideally educated citizens had to have a good foundation in terms of knowledge that would provide them the means to continually improve themselves and be “life-long learners”. These included literacy and numeracy skills, knowledge in the various disciplines from both the sciences and the arts, and a strong foundation in the history of Singapore. The introduction of ADE gave these citizens more flexibility within the school system so that they could pursue their interests and nurture their talents. Hence, ADE should produce students who would be more content with the education system since the parameters of success had been widened and there was more emphasis placed on non-academic pursuits. Aside from possessing a solid grounding in literacy and numeracy, a positive attitude and love for learning while being meaningfully employed in the workforce, the ideal citizen would also be active and participating in the community in order to make Singapore a better place. However, the
inherent contradiction between educating the individual as opposed to the citizen is the current dilemma of the government.

The constructivist paradigm and the (ideally) educated citizen

At this juncture, I would like to revisit and expand on Dewey's ideas on constructivism as discussed in Chapter 3, as his ideas can be easily found in many policy documents, teacher sharing sessions, and ministerial speeches. In the following paragraphs, I reiterate on these general constructivist principles and how they proliferate in major policy speeches and how they dictate schools' teaching and learning approaches in order to explore the extent to which constructivism as a learning theory helps or hinders the creation of the ideally educated Singapore citizen.

Through the descriptions of TSLN, TLLM and to a certain extent NE, I have argued that education in Singapore has been modelled after progressivist ideals. Rote learning, though still in existence in some classrooms, is frowned upon, and terms like “student-centered” and “experiential learning” are commonly used in school planning documents and ministry policies. There has been a move away from what Dewey described as traditional education, where “(t)he subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation” (Dewey, 1997, p. 17). The new education, Dewey said, “emphasises the freedom of the learner” and that “the kind of external imposition which was so common in the traditional school limited rather than promoted the intellectual and moral development of the young” (p. 22). Even though he posited these statements as conjectures in the introduction of Experience and Education, these statements were made in contrast to what he opposed in traditional education and formed the basis for the rest of the book. The focus of school shifted from being teacher-centered to student-centered, whereby the needs and interests of the student would take precedence in the new, progressive education. With the student at the center of the educational endeavour, attention shifted from what the teacher wanted students to know to what the students knew already (experience) and were interested in knowing more about. Learning by experience would characterise progressive education
and it was the educator’s job to “arrange for the kind of experiences which…engage his activities….to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (pp. 27-28). As mentioned earlier, progressive education also emphasised socialisation and contributing to society. Dewey felt that most children were naturally “sociable” and it was the teacher’s job to harness this natural behaviour.

The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (Dewey, 1997, p. 56)

An early advocate of critical thinking, Dewey also promoted the need for reflection and thinking before action, a “union of observation and memory” and, in some respects, of experience so as to curb impulses and postpone immediate action (p. 64). This form of thinking represented the power of self-control which Dewey felt was one of education’s purposes. Reflection would also allow one to examine and analyse one’s thoughts and beliefs and give room for change. This way of internal control over one’s thoughts was a reaction to traditional education’s external form of control through authority.

The four basic principles of Dewey’s philosophy (see Chapter 3) are not foreign to teachers in Singapore. It is taken for granted that constructivism should be the way forward in education and there is seldom any resistance to the idea that students should “construct” their knowledge, that teachers should always pay attention to students’ prior knowledge (i.e., previous experience) when planning lessons, and that teachers should always try to engage their students’ interests in a particular subject. Many teachers also feel compelled to have activities where students can be seen to actively participate in the classroom either through group work activities, “hands-on” activities and any other activity that does not show students sitting at their seats and listening attentively to the teacher. In fact, during yearly classroom observations made by senior school leaders of classroom teachers, no teacher would plan a lesson without any kind of group or “hands-on” activity. In Singapore, teachers were not considered very good if they did not subscribe to and implement any of the four principles of Dewey’s constructivism.
There is therefore an obvious tension in Dewey’s philosophy of education, how it is being implemented and what it is being implemented for. Going back to Heater’s (2004) historical tracing of the evolution of citizenship, he posits that since Rousseau’s Emile “the concept of education as a ‘leading out’ of the individual personality has vied with the belief that its prime function is a preparation or moulding for life in society” (p. 106). For Dewey and his “problem-solving” technique, his education of the democratic citizen requires an environment where people possess a “socially generous attitude of mind”, and it is the responsibility of the schools to nurture this attitude (p. 106).

For Dewey, the mode of learning was more important than the content: indeed, he felt that good citizenship was more likely to be nourished through art and recreation than any formal political training. Insofar as Dewey’s work encouraged citizenship education through subject teaching, it was to promote among his Progressivist followers the inquiring form of Social Studies...as an alternative to rote-learned History. (Heater, 2004, pp. 106 - 107)

Herein lies the tension between Singapore’s trajectory in education and the educational theories being subscribed to by the Ministry, teacher colleges, and schools.

Dewey’s ideas are consistently communicated to schools through other major platforms of the Ministry of Education during the Work Plan Seminar (MOE WPS) held every year in September. Therefore I will next revisit the WPS speeches of 2004 and 2013 to discern constructivist principles in relation to NE and explore the extent to which constructivist principles help in the creation of the ideally educated citizen according to the Singaporean government.

In MOE WPS 2004, Tharman’s speech focused on policies that would pave the way for TLLM. He emphasized three aims of the ministry for the coming years. First, to reduce the emphasis on examinations; second, to give students more choice so they could “shape and enjoy their learning; and third, to support teachers in bringing quality and innovative practices in the classroom and school” (Tharman, 2004). Examinations represented traditional education, one reliant on the transmission of information and rote-learning to retain the information. By de-emphasizing examinations so that teachers could focus more engaging students’ interests rather than focus on examination preparation, the ministry had effectively moved towards to what was thought to be a more “student-
centered" education where student interest was given more consideration than before. The second priority can also be considered "student-centered". By widening choices within the school system, students would be able to learn subjects that they enjoy and are interested in. By allowing them to exercise choice and take responsibility for their learning and education journey, Tharman hoped that they, "as a generation, (can) shape the kind of Singapore they want for the future" (Tharman, 2004). The third focus of Tharman's speech was to support teachers so they could provide more meaningful experiences for their students in the classroom. The "white space" afforded to teachers under the TLLM initiative was meant to give them more time for reflection on their practice and for them to be more innovative in their approach to teaching. This move towards more quality teaching rather than quantity in terms of content transmission is indicative of progressive education and the constructivist principle of quality of experience as espoused by Dewey. These ideas are reiterated year after year through the WPS, a high-profile platform which gathers the education fraternity.

In the speech titled Student-Centric, Values-Driven Education: A Broad and Deep Foundation for a Lifelong Journey, Minister Heng declared that the core of a student-centric, values-driven education was placing the "student squarely at the heart of what we do." (Heng S. K., 2013). In painting a picture of what the future of education would be like, Heng described a school environment that would nurture the interests of students, enable them to learn independently, have effective teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning, and promote critical and inventive thinking. The landscape of secondary education would be further diversified so that schools could offer more programmes that would be of interest to students. Like his predecessor promised 10 years ago, Minister Heng has continued to work at de-emphasizing examinations by tweaking the existing national examinations. The overall rhetoric and policy direction has been consistent and follows quite closely what Dewey advocated as part of his vision of progressive education and consequently, constructivist theory. It is hoped that students who are more engaged and have more choice in their education journey would feel a greater sense of belonging and have a greater stake in Singapore.

But what exactly is a "student-centred" / "student-centric" education? What does it mean to place the student in the centre of what teachers do? One could argue and
interpret student-centric education as purely altruistic in terms of nurturing students' interests with no economic or tangible end in mind. In Singapore’s education narrative of placing “the student squarely at the heart of what we do”, the interpretation of student-centric education is still based on capitalising on students' interests to see how best those interests can serve the economy. Student-centric education is confined within the boundaries of an economic-centric education narrative which neglects the individual as an autonomous subject and, in this way, distorts what a student-centric education might and could mean.

What of the individual?

What does this mean for education, citizenship education and the (ideally) educated citizen? It would seem that progressive education and constructivism treat the student as subject rather than object. With such a strong emphasis on students in terms of their needs, interests and what they value, the individual is seen as non-static, growing, and capable of “constructing” their own knowledge. Students are encouraged in school to find their own paths, to pursue their interests and nurture their talents individually, but eventually for the common good, that is, to ensure the economic success of Singapore. However, under the rhetoric of flexibility, diversity and freedom of choice comes a fixed object, that of the ideal citizen. The ideally educated citizen, according the Ministry of Education’s “Desired Outcomes of Education”, must know and love Singapore, believe in Singapore and know what matters to Singapore, and be proud to be Singaporean and understand Singapore in relation to the world4. In some ways, the word “construction” is taken most literally, with the illusion that the ideally educated citizen can be “constructed” with the right approach and “materials”. It appears that constructivist principles are fundamentally at odds with what the Singapore government wishes to achieve through NE and education in general. A citizenry that has been encouraged from a young age to explore their interests, to inquire and learn by experience, to construct their own understanding and knowledge with the promise of social mobility and equality, must eventually become something that has been pre-determined. This contradiction is

4 Taken from the Ministry of Education Singapore’s website http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/desired-outcomes/.
confusing and frustrating. The double-sided nature of how constructivism is used presents a conundrum. Can an individual be “constructed”? Should an individual be constructed?

The questions I have asked point to the lack of attention paid by the education narrative on what it means to live in this world. It is more than being economically self-sufficient and successful through one’s passion or interests, contributing to the country’s well-being and thus being able to adapt and work with others in a fast-paced environment. This limitation in the narrative impoverishes the experiences of students in the education system, and in many ways, shortchanges them of the realities of life. An education described in terms of a technological framework, where accountability has to be measured and proven does not deal with “weakness” but with strengths. This can be seen in the political rhetoric whereby it is a norm to state that policy changes are based on an already strong system. There is no place for “weaknesses”, especially in education, to be discussed. It is at this point that I would like to once again turn to Biesta and his discussion on the weakness of education.

The weakness of education

Yet we live in impatient times….The call to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an expression of this impatience….It is this misguided impatience that has resulted in the medicalization of education, where children are being made fit for the educational system, rather than that we ask where the causes of this misfit lie and who, therefore, needs treatment most: the child or society. (Biesta, 2013, pp. 3-4)

Biesta’s book The Beautiful Risk of Education (2013) addresses the tendency of education systems to be risk-averse especially since education has recently been communicated in terms of a technological framework – i.e. “a situation where there is a perfect match between ‘input’ and output” (p. 1). For Biesta, education cannot be education if the risks are removed and the question of how individuals can “come into the world” in their “uniqueness” is not considered. It is the weakness of education, the moments that are not within our control, the things we cannot measure and the relationships we have with those we meet, that should be embraced and not eradicated.
In a system where measurements and accountability dictate behaviours, I am drawn to the various aspects of education which Biesta describes as “weak”. The impact of constructivism in the classroom on the teacher is interesting to explore because the fundamental relationship in education is between the teacher and the student, and is often described in ways that are concrete or too simplistic. In the following sections, I focus on two aspects which explore the concepts of teacher and student more deeply.

**The teacher in education**

...we should understand the teacher as someone who, in the most general sense, brings something new to the educational situation, something that was not already there. (Biesta, 2013, p. 44)

Central to the education endeavour is the teacher. However, Biesta argues that the teacher has been removed from education especially in this age of learning. When education is defined by learning and the learner, the teacher becomes a facilitator, or someone who makes an environment conducive for learning. The concern is not that this should not be a part of education, but that it is used to describe and replace education. And the ideas of constructivism and how they are enacted in the classroom have a part to play in the so-call disappearance of the teacher.

The impact of constructivism in the Singaporean classroom is widespread and, as alluded to in this chapter, disrupts the teacher/student relationship, and places focus on student activity and learning. The assumption many have about constructivism is that “students have to construct their own insights, understandings, and knowledge, and that teachers cannot do that for them” (p. 45). While these constructivist beliefs may be more relevant and have more impact in the classroom for certain disciplines, according to Biesta, what is problematic is that constructivism is not taken only as a learning theory but a pedagogy, a theory of teaching, which it is not meant to be. His argument augments my earlier discussion of Roth’s critique of constructivism and the learning paradox—that is, the question of how any cognitive organism can construct a mental organisation more complex than its current one in a world that is of the same complexity as the mind. By adopting constructivism as a method of teaching and as a theory of education, instead of just a theory of learning, Biesta outlines below the implications this has on the teacher:
Constructivist thinking has, on the one hand, promoted the idea of teaching as the creation of learning environments and as facilitating, supporting, or scaffolding student learning. On the other hand it has, in one and the same move, discredited the “transmission model of teaching” and thus has given lecturing and so-called didactic teaching a really bad name. Constructivism seems, in other words, to have given up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and that students have something to learn from their teachers. (pp. 45-46)

Hence, constructivism as a teaching and learning theory, more often than not, may give the illusion that students have created “new” knowledge, when perhaps students could have re-discovered something they already knew or built on their existing knowledge.

For Biesta, the notion of transcendence is important in the consideration of the teacher in education, in that teaching involves “something that comes from the outside and brings something radically new” (p. 52). This idea places the teacher and the student in a position where outcomes cannot be predicted, where the student receives this “gift of teaching” not knowing if and when she is ready to be taught by and not learn from, the teacher. Biesta distinguishes between the two, the former suggests that the student is “able to give (such) interruptions a place in one’s understanding and one’s being”, and the latter where the teacher is a resource and “within the control of the student” (p. 57).

To open oneself for such a possibility begins, perhaps, by acknowledging that the school is not and should not be understood as a place for learning – if one wishes one can, after all, learn anywhere – but that what makes the school a school is the fact that it is a place for teaching… (p. 58)

**Education and emancipation**

The idea of emancipation is interesting to consider in Singapore’s context given the use of economics as a means to achieve equality, that education somehow can free people from their current status, to be better than what one was before. The government’s rhetoric of social mobility can be conceived in terms of Biesta’s account of the language and politics of learning, and his discussion of Rancière’s critique of the modern logic of emancipation. His views on education and emancipation gives us another way to think about and “do” education especially since social mobility in order to attain equality is one
of the promises of Singapore’s education narrative. Education for economics promises the possibility of equality through moving up the social ladder. The trend toward what Biesta calls “learnification” has changed the relationships inherent in education. I believe that Biesta’s conception of emancipation is also worth exploring more deeply in terms of looking at the student as an individual, and if the premise of Singapore’s conception of education is to achieve equality through social mobility, which the education system promises. This understanding or consideration could be the first step in the attempt to reconceptualise what student-centricity could mean, and how we could start to pay attention to how we might bridge the gap between acknowledging and recognising the individual and the expectations of the ideally educated citizen. The concept of equality in education will have more meaning beyond social mobility once we acknowledge and recognise individuals as autonomous persons who possess their own “uniqueness”, desires and wants.

Using Rancière’s work on emancipation Biesta explores the power of the modern logic of emancipation (more on this below) and its inherent limitations on ideas and approaches of equality. Despite its limitations, I argue that an understanding of the modern logic of emancipation is useful in considering how we may approach the individual in education. The challenge for the teacher is to navigate the fine line of its limitations in order for students to come into the world in their own uniqueness. One way to do this is to see the workings of the logic by revisiting Biesta’s three domains of the purpose of education and work through the tensions between them in order for the “doing” of emancipation to be possible and meaningful for both the teacher and the student. I will also argue that the concepts of freedom and equality associated with emancipation are often not clearly articulated and it is freedom that is most often referred to when people talk about emancipation, not so much equality. The modern logic of emancipation is strengthened by a lack of understanding and clarity of freedom and equality. The following discussion will trace how the modern logic of emancipation has taken over education and its impending limitations and why education cannot ignore emancipation because of education’s inherently relational nature.

We have to find ways to be with others in the world. Therefore, to know and understand knowledge as prescribed by the modern logic of emancipation is not enough.
Biesta is making an existential call for action. His conception of a world-centred education provides a means for us to consider this call to act in the world. In order to speak and think educationally about education, Biesta’s suggestion of the three domains of educational purpose guide what we can do in education. As mentioned previously, he has argued that the domains of qualification, socialisation and subjectification are at play all the time with one domain possibly dominating over the others. The challenge is to balance the three and use judgment in the balancing act. By separating the purposes of education into three domains, Biesta has in effect highlighted the tendency to focus our attention solely on one or two domains. In terms of citizenship education, the purpose of qualification tends to have the loudest voice in “providing children and young people with the knowledge skills and dispositions… that are considered to be essential for their citizenship (Biesta, 2010, p. 23). I am inclined to agree with Biesta that this approach of citizenship education depoliticises the intent and focuses citizenship education on “more progressive approaches, with an emphasis on developing the ability to critically analyse the dynamics of political processes and practices” (Biesta, 2010, p. 23). This is precisely what NE does. Together, what Singapore’s conception of education and its accompanying narrative promise is that the domains of qualification and socialisation can help “free” one from a certain economic station in life, which in turns connotes success for both the individual and the country.

Subjectification which deals with “the (immeasurable) question of the human person” is still missing from the narrative. The question of the human person, how that person will act in the presence of others who are different, what that person takes away from the experiences of qualification and socialisation, will not be known unless the person decides to reveal them. Equality, and the false sense of having secured it through qualification and socialisation, finds its place in subjectification and reveals itself through action. Biesta’s three domains of educational purpose thus provide a useful way to think about and approach the concept of emancipation. The modern logic of emancipation seems to favour the domains of qualification and socialisation, and focuses on the concept of freedom rather than equality. However, the freedom being spoken of here is a freedom

References made to Biesta’s conception of world-centred education are taken from his lecture at the University of British Columbia on 22 July 2013 with the presentation title “UBC Session 1b world centred education”.
from something with inequality still firmly in place. Being free from a situation or social status does not necessarily equate to being equal in that new situation or status. Even though the modern logic of emancipation entraps the one to be emancipated, and the knowledge of its limitations will not emancipate us; the action that results from this knowledge can help us figure out how to navigate the fine line between perpetuating inequality and making equality possible. That is only if we are conscious of and able to move beyond, not give in to, the modern logic of emancipation.

Despite the drawbacks of dependency and the reliant relationship of the emancipator and the one to be emancipated in the modern logic of emancipation, I still feel it is important to continually pursue knowledge that will help broaden one’s perspectives, especially knowledge that is difficult and interrupts one’s worldview. Perhaps instead of waiting to be told, one should be active in this pursuit and not rely on someone else who “knows”. Is this possible in the Singaporean classroom? One would think so given the tendency for progressivism and constructivism in rhetoric, but classroom practice, not surprisingly, has been uneven. It would be difficult to break out of the narrative told for the last 52 years by people who appear to know and have the knowledge to help the others – the government as emancipator, and the ideally education citizen as the one to be emancipated.

Conceptions of emancipation

For Biesta (2013), emancipation is a key concept in education and he argues that our current understanding of emancipation is based primarily on the work of Marx and Engels. In the modern logic of emancipation education requires explanation by someone who knows for someone who does not. It starts on the premise of inequality and relies on “an intervention from the outside by someone who is not subjected to the power one seeks to overcome” (p.82). This logic then is inevitably stuck in a cycle of inequality with dependence and mistrust inherent in its relationality. Emancipation here is seen as an attainable outcome, a freedom from something, either an undesirable social or class

References made to Biesta’s discussion on emancipation are taken from his lecture at the University of British Columbia on 29 July 2013 with the presentation title ‘UBC Session 6 Emancipation’.
standing, or from a state of mind or situation. This conception of emancipation as freedom from does not seem to have a meaningful place for equality.

In his essay *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Rancière (2010) clarifies his notions of the ignorant schoolmaster and intellectual emancipation. He describes the ignorant schoolmaster as "a teacher who teaches that which is unknown to him or her" (p. 1). Rancière points out that most educational relationships start from the axiom of inequality governed by a pedagogical logic that is based on two axioms, "First, one must start from inequality in order to reduce it; second, the way to reduce inequality is to conform to it by making of it an object of knowledge" (p. 4). What has been commonly understood as a good intention is being turned on its head by Rancière for it appears that the very act of emancipation by explication destroys any hope of its attainment because of its limitations of dependency, ironic confirmation of inequality and mistrust of the one who does not yet know (Biesta, 2013). Besides interrupting our usual notions of emancipation, Rancière (2010) goes further to state that equality "is not an end to be attained. It is a point of departure, a presupposition to be verified by sequences of specific acts" (p. 9). This presents a dilemma to the educational institution of the school. While it is a common argument that the structure of education and its institutions restricts the attainment of emancipation (freedom), the premise of the argument remains the axiom of inequality. A fundamental shift in thinking about our conception of emancipation and what it might mean to take equality as a starting point is required if Rancière’s ideas are to be taken seriously. It starts in the classroom, just as Jacotot started as “the ignorant schoolmaster” for his students. Emancipation and the emancipatory act is not freedom or its attainment but is an existential way of being that goes against the modern logic of emancipation. This means that one should not depend on another’s explication on how to live and think or that one should not relate with another on the basis of inequality. What one should do, in fact, is act on the basis of trust in the other.

**Conclusion**

What does this discussion on emancipation mean for the teacher? More than just being conscious of our actions and pedagogical logic in the classroom, it may be more
pertinent to question the source of these actions and why we believe in the things we do. If we really care about education, we should dwell in its difficulties and ask questions that will not have easy answers, questions that can take us to the brink of despair. But, at the same time, we cannot not think about them, because they are important. We can try to think differently about education, or as Biesta says “to think educationally about education”, instead of focusing on limitations that disciplines like psychology tend to do. We can try Biesta’s and Rancière’s approach to education which empowers both teachers and students, and we can embrace the “weak” aspects of education, aspects that we cannot control and measure, but have faith that they will prevail because they are important and ultimately matter most in education.

So far, education and the citizen have been seen as commodities and objects not intrinsically valuable in themselves. NE with all its intents and purposes is an ambitious endeavour, with the aim of instilling feelings, emotions and instincts in students, addressing the domains of qualification and socialisation of the purposes of education. The constructivist paradigm, while useful for enhancing the school experience and education in general if done carefully and conscientiously, is, at best, confusing to the government’s endeavour of creating the ideally educated citizen if the citizen does not have the chance to be an individual. The promise of equality through social mobility which is espoused by the education narrative disguises layers of control from which the constructivist paradigm promises to help one break free. What is being avoided in the conversation is the educational purpose of subjectification – the question of the human person – the individual, the unpredictable, the immeasurable, the unknown and ultimately, the “weakness” of the educational endeavour. Hence, the illusion of the ideally education citizen.
Chapter 6. Concluding remarks

In this concluding chapter, I wish to bring this dissertation to a close by briefly summarising what has been discussed in chapters 2 to 5 in order to synthesise the main ideas I have put forth so far with regard to the influence of progressivism and constructivism on Singapore’s conception of education and how that has made an impact on how we think about education. Consequently, how we (I) think about education has a bearing on how we (I) “do” education and our (my) perceptions of how a citizen of this country should be like. I will proceed to discuss what the future of education in Singapore would be like with two new Education Ministers who have taken office on October 2015. Through their maiden speeches in parliament and the policy initiatives that have been put in place so far, we can see a further entrenchment of the existing education narrative with a stronger impetus towards the economic imperative as an end goal of education. As with all conclusions in dissertations, it is also important that I address the gaps and limitations inherent in this piece of work. I am cognizant of what I have left out and the position I am in, in order to write this dissertation the way I wanted. I will then end with the “so what” question and share my hopes and aspirations after this chapter of my life comes to a close.

Summary

In order to answer the question on the limitations of Singapore’s conception of education and the impact this conception has on the ideally educated citizen, I began by tracing the history and evolution of Singapore’s education by first discussing the history of Singapore as a British colony and then as an independent country. In many ways, education in Singapore cannot be delinked from the history of the country as education featured prominently in the growth of Singapore as a nation especially since 1965, when Singapore became independent from Britain. Education evolved in tandem as the country grew economically, hence the inextricable link between education and the economy was forged from the very beginning. By looking at key ministerial speeches, I outlined in Chapter 2 the various phases of education that corresponded with the country’s economic needs and focus at the time throughout the last three decades and highlighted the key features of each phase. I looked critically at the limitations of progressive education and
focused Chapter 3 on the historical roots of constructivism by discussing the ideas of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky as their ideas are prevalent in teacher education courses and in classrooms. My main criticism, drawing from the work of Kieran Egan, Wolff-Michael Roth and, in particular, Gert Biesta, was not that constructivism in itself is not a bad theory, but that it seems to have become the only theory by which teachers think about education. In Chapter 4, I delved deeper into how the progressivist agenda drives education in the Singaporean context. By studying key policy speeches and ministry reports on the reviews of primary and secondary education, I focused on progressivism and its impact and limitations on the overall conception of education in Singapore, and more generally, how education is played out in schools and in the classroom. I then addressed the issue of the ideally educated citizen in the Singaporean context and showed how the education narrative ran counter to the goals set for achieving this ideal by the sheer neglect of recognising the individual as an autonomous human person. I turned to Biesta again for another way to approach this deeply entrenched technological educational narrative because I was drawn to his ideas on the difficult, intangible, immeasurable aspects of education, something that is not done often enough in the Singapore context.

The future of education - Stability

The education narrative is not likely to change with two new Education Ministers being tasked to look after basic education (pre-school to junior college) and higher education since October 2015. This is partly due to the strong pragmatic approach adopted by the ruling party, and this would also explain the consistency in belief of the role of education. In some ways, other systems might be envious of Singapore’s ability to sustain an education system due to a one-party political system. There would not be attempts to dismantle the existing system but only build on it. This continuity has made the system “strong” but, at the same time, does not allow other views, especially opposing ones, to gain prominence. On the surface, one could say that important changes are being made to the existing system to take the focus away from an over-emphasis on examinations and academic grades and further shift the narrative accordingly. Following past Ministers like Tharman and Heng, the current Minister for Education (Schools), Mr
Ng Chee Meng, is advocating for more emphasis on balancing academic and non-academic pursuits, with renewed rhetoric on the joys of learning and the need to build resilience and other NE values through sports and outdoor education. In his inaugural speech at the Committee of Supply Debate in parliament on 8 April 2016, he spoke of placing “more emphasis on non-academic learning” (Ng C., 2016) through co-curricular activities in sports, arts, societies and other school-based activities, as well as outdoor education. He unveiled plans to enhance school outdoor camps for secondary school students under the “National Outdoor Adventure Education Master Plan”. These are not new initiatives. However, Ng is particularly focused on them in order to try and shift society’s mindsets, and emphasise the importance of character and citizenship education. For Ng, camps provide "a unique opportunity for students from different schools to collaborate and overcome challenges in the outdoors." (Ng C., 2016). Like his predecessor, his plans aim to reduce stress in the system and also broaden the definition of success, one not based solely on academic grades.

In an extensive interview with Ng in early 2017, education reporter Sandra Davie quoted Ng’s response to Singapore’s continued strong performance in international benchmarking tests:

Education ministers from other countries often ask me what are the key ingredients. I tell them that we have forward-looking policies and good systems in place. But really the key thing is our teachers and the first-rate work at they do. You can have the best policies, but without the commitment and dedication of teachers, we will not be able to deliver real outcomes. (Davie, 2017)

The fixation with education for the economy remains, with Ng stressing that “to thrive in the new economy, Singaporean workers need to move up the value chain” (Davie, 2017). The government has been keenly aware of the needs of the global economy which relies less on knowledge (as in a knowledge-based economy) and more on the ability of those entering the workforce to be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial (whatever that means). “It’s a mindset. An attitude of wanting to do better, find breakthroughs, of wanting to innovate…chiong”, not a reckless chiong, but taking into account the risks involved and

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7 The word “chiong” originates from a Mandarin dialect known as Hokkien which means in general “to dare to do something”.

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Ng’s comments aim to dismantle, as Heng had tried to do as well, parents’ heavy emphasis on academic results which has caused in some ways an inertia to be daring, take calculated risks and to always find the shortest and safest route when it came to education. One telling example of this attitude was written by Choo and Holden (2016) about the state of English literature in schools where parents objected to the violent content in contemporary literary texts for youth like The Hunger Games. This mollycoddling of students is but one example of how such attitudes ran counter to the government’s efforts to encourage an entrepreneurial innovative spirit in Singaporeans.

In tandem, the narrative is brought to the higher education landscape with the Minister for Higher Education and Skills, Ong Ye Kung, helming a nationwide movement called “SkillsFuture” which aims to promote lifelong learning and emphasise the importance of learning throughout life so that one is always ready to adapt to the changing global economy. Ong is also looking at ways to bring the industry closer to academic institutions by creating schools within university catering specifically for adult and lifelong learning. While his maiden Committee of Supply speech mentions the need to understand the individual, it is once again framed against the needs of the economy.

…from the perspective of understanding the individual. In this age of possibilities, we make room for a universe of purposes – encouraging our young to find meaning in new and unimagined ways. New ways to deliver services, to entertain the masses, power our industries, protect our environment, protect Singapore, or build machines to do things better and faster. How Silicon Valley became a crucible for innovation, how the Swiss became leaders in watchmaking, how Singapore became a food haven – these are not plans drawn up by Governments. They happened because enough people were interested about something. They congregated and made it happen. It is organic, ground-up, and even haphazard. (Ong, 2016)

The larger intent of these measures is laudable as they seek to broaden society’s definition of success and change society’s mindset of the need to pursue higher degrees (e.g. Bachelors, Masters, PhD) for the sake of the paper chase. The aim is to focus on mastering a skill and find meaningful ways to acquire updated qualifications or skills specific to one’s vocation or profession. These could also come in the form of certificates or short-term courses, not always university degrees. The stress of academic excellence would hopefully lessen in time as people and companies/employers adjust and assess potential employees based on their experience, skills and dispositions, rather than the
degrees they have. The trajectory set forth by Ng and Ong thus serves to extend and reinforce the current education narrative, not change it dramatically.

Gaps and limitations

In the following section, I explore some of my biases and shortcomings in writing this dissertation, from my methodology to an awareness of my positionality as someone who has achieved relative academic success, and as someone from what can be considered a middle to high socio-economic status.

It might be unreasonable to expect any political rhetoric to focus on uncertainties or dwell on the philosophical, the what-ifs. After all, political rhetoric is meant to persuade and to assure. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the idea of progress needs to be delivered to the general populous in palatable, concrete terms, and the changes made to education must have visible, tangible economic benefits. The sources cited in this dissertation are drawn largely from government speeches and reports, hence it might be insufficient to discern other substantial critiques, even though I cited some criticism from academics in the education field. However, the choices I made were not haphazard as they were acknowledged to be key documents and were also often used by Singaporean academics to critique the system, though not through the lens of progressivism. The political structure of Singapore was also considered when selecting these sources due to the relationship between the government and people. This was something I did not specifically delve into, but only alluded to when I mentioned Singapore as a nanny state.

There are also other ideas by influential writers on education which I did not include to further my discussion on the student as an individual. While I mentioned the changed relationships inherent within education due to the language of learning, more could be said about the responsibility of the student in the education process. The education narrative currently places a heavy responsibility on the government, schools and teachers. What of the student? It would have been interesting to explore further William Pinar’s work on study and how the quiet, almost religious act of self-reflection leads to self-formation and has the potential to contest conformity (Pinar, 2005). His work on study could have added value to the discussion on what a “student-centred” education might mean and a
different dimension to the current conversation, placing the focus on the student as an individual with a larger responsibility in the education endeavour. Kieran Egan’s conception of another approach to education through what he terms “Imaginative Education” and his “Learning in Depth” programme currently being implemented in some schools in British Columbia, might also have been interesting to consider with regard to the discussion on viewing education from the perspective of the student in ways that are different from what schools and teachers are currently doing in classrooms. Perhaps these writers’ works could be considered for further exploration on this topic in the Singaporean context so as to enrich the education narrative beyond the purposes of qualification and socialisation.

I am aware that my selection of texts, authors and views can be seen as too one-sided and limiting, focusing too much on the criticisms of progressivism and constructivism, and not giving a fuller picture or giving due credit to these ideas. I do admit that my discussions of the theories of progressivism and constructivism are incomplete in that respect. In retrospect, I made this choice to structure and present my dissertation this way (too zealously perhaps) in an attempt to understand and criticise my own thinking and practice—to disrupt as strongly as possible my way of thinking.

Lastly, my decision to embark on this dissertation topic could be considered as a luxury. I was able to take time off from work and still afford to pursue this study because of my position in society. Having gained relative success academically, and having a stable job with the Ministry of Education has given me the time and financial resources to pursue a higher qualification, one that is purely pursued for personal development and satisfaction, without any tangible economic benefit. I feel my positionality in this endeavour is important to establish because I am trying to advocate for something which might not be important to a majority of Singaporeans. I am in a position where I have the luxury to say that education should be more than just for economic success and gain. Many others might not be able to claim this luxury, nor would they want to. They value the government’s conception of education for the economic gains which they want to reap in order to lead a more comfortable life. That is perhaps the reason why challenges for more “subjectification” come in the form of sporadic news articles and commentaries on the need for more emphasis on the arts and literature in schools to broaden perspectives and
better engage with the world, or for the school curriculum to be less rigorous so that students can enjoy learning and school experience. I alluded in Chapter 2 to a growing discontent amongst Singaporeans on the utilitarian view of education and that a broader conception of education was important to them. Singaporeans have expressed their desire for a society that has a wider definition of success and for a more fulfilling pace of life. The bottom line, however, is still economic survival through having a strong and vibrant economy.

Questions and aspirations

Can the ideally educated Singaporean citizen ever be achieved without addressing the fundamental question of what is means to be an individual? Possibly. If the promises of education to provide social mobility and economic success which leads to some sort of fulfilment in life that can be attained, people might internalise the NE messages, and also exhibit the Desired Outcomes of Education. However, within every citizen lies an autonomous human person, an individual. If education is fundamentally relational, that is, individuals interacting with other individuals, would it not be an injustice not to acknowledge individuals for who they are? In this case, shouldn’t “subjectification” as a purpose in education, feature more strongly, at the very least, in the awareness of everyone involved in the education endeavour?

The language of progressivism in Singapore’s conception of education and loosely defined constructivist ideas enacted in the classroom have limited the narrative and conversation to what is measurable or seen as progress – a moving away from the past, down to how an individual should act, feel and behave – the ideal citizen. This dissertation is my humble attempt to introduce a conversation that may disrupt this narrative, to just stop for a moment to ask the fundamental questions, those that do not have any answers. That, to me, will enrich the experiences of our teachers and students. That, to me, is what education should be about.

Perhaps in the next phase of my journey in education, I will find the courage to start this conversation, to disrupt and interrupt what has long been taken as the status quo.
References


