

## Modernizing Madrasah Education: The Singapore 'national' and the global

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### Introduction

If we are to understand better the unique role of Madrasah education in Singapore, it is necessary to understand both the historical and wider Singaporean context within which this unique educational provision is embedded. Calls to modernise curriculum and pedagogy in madrasahs are to some extent echoes of proposals at the national level. As we shall see below; Singapore's education roots are principally from Britain and China. Britain was the colonial power and Chinese schools that served the majority community drew their textbooks, teachers and ideals from China. But what has evolved is a distinctly Singapore model. In a similar fashion, Singapore's madrasahs combine both non-national and national features, and with curricular modernisation are evolving into something unique and special.

This chapter seeks to place efforts to modernize Madrasah education within the wider context of education reform in Singapore from 1987. The key focus of these reforms is to ensure that schooling experiences and outcomes are appropriate to 21 century knowledge economy contexts. Given that the twin goals of education policy have been social cohesion and economic development via schooling it is inevitable that there would be a necessity for schooling in the Madrasahs to be modernized as well.

The current strength of the Singapore system is due in large part to key policies implemented post-1965. An understanding of developments during this period will enable us to become aware, not only how thoughtful and courageous some of the policies were, but also that well-intentioned policies often have unintended consequences and leave a legacy of issues that will have to be confronted later on.

There are three key features of the past that are significant. The first is that the colonial inheritance in education was of a segmented (by medium-of-instruction) system with English and Chinese medium schools dominant. While Malay and Tamil medium schools existed, they were relatively small. Across all aspects, such as funding, government supervision, curriculum and assessment, teacher preparation and service conditions, etc., difference rather than similarity was the norm. Further and more significantly, the non-English educated felt discriminated against with education providing limited access to higher education and jobs. Political activity and anti-colonial sentiment was rife, especially in Chinese-medium schools (Gopinathan, 1974; Wilson, 1978; Singapore Government, 1956).

A second feature of the system was that the system was much more diversified and decentralized then, with a wider variety of schools/school types/sponsors. These features were largely the consequence of a colonial 'hands-off' policy towards education provision, and a desire on the part of ethnic-religious groups to provide specific types of educational experiences. Most of the English medium schools were government-financed or run by Christian groups. Chinese schools had a range of sponsors – some were government-aided, others run by clan associations, yet others by philanthropists. Indigenous education institutions, like madrasahs, catered to specific religious communities. The education system thus

mirrored societal diversity and difference, well suited to colonial needs to divide and rule but incapable of uniting and fostering social cohesion that the post-colonial Singapore state needed.

Singapore's madrasahs are unique institutions representing a blend of the global and the national. Though indigenous in the sense of owing nothing to British educational precepts and practices, they were influenced by international trends, then as now. The Madrasah Al-Iqbal, established in 1907 was influenced by reformist ideas from the Middle East. Today, Madrasah Al-Junid has special ties with Middle Eastern institutions in that their graduates can go on to further education in these institutions. Reform-oriented madrasahs in Singapore serve as models for others in the region. According to a New York Times (NYT) article (Onishi, 2009); Al-Irsyad's curriculum is considered sufficiently innovative to have been adopted by two madrasahs in Indonesia.

It was the lure of secular schooling and extended exposure to instruction via English, linked as this was to social mobility that reduced enrolments in the madrasahs and made them principally a source for producing religious teachers; this inevitably has implications for curriculum and pedagogy.

### **The Survival Phase**

The first task that confronted policy makers in self-governing Singapore was a settlement on the place of language, both in the wider society and in schooling. A multiplicity of languages, dialects, some in use in education, some not, English, the colonial language and dominant in administration and law but not spoken with sufficient proficiency by the vast majority of residents was then the 'linguistic map' of Singapore. The situation demanded rational choices. But language issues were emotive as well, tangled as they were with ethnicity, culture and identity. The 1956 *All Party Report on Chinese Education* which made recommendations on this issue was hugely significant, signalling a political and socio-linguistic settlement. It laid the foundations for Singapore's unique answer to the dilemmas of multilingualism – a four language formula with Malay as the National Language and English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil as official languages. It was also to lead to Singapore-style school bilingualism, with English as the main medium of instruction and a compulsory mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) to be studied as a subject from grade 1 and with students needing to meet specified standards of proficiency to proceed to the next level of education. While this solution reduced linguistic complexity, it squeezed out languages like Arabic and widely spoken dialects like Hokkien.

Ethnic pluralism – multilingualism was an essential expression of this – also posed challenges which the school system – yet to be unified – had to resolve. What key elements would constitute the political identity of the new nation? What core values could be distilled from the cultural traditions represented by the various ethnic groups, and what place, if any, could religions play in this? And what balance (and how) should be struck between tradition and custom and the need to modernize? As with bilingualism, social cohesion issues were a major preoccupation with education policy makers in the immediate post-1965 period. As a consequence there has been much experimentation with values/citizenship education curriculum (Ong, et al., 1979; Gopinathan, 1980). One core tenant has been that widespread exposure to English would weaken attachment to and an understanding of traditions.

The political elite believed that Singapore society would become enfeebled as a result and thus unable to overcome Singapore's limitations and build a strong and progressive Asian society. *Education for Living, Being and Becoming, National Education* and more recently, *Character and Citizenship Education* are some examples of these efforts.

In the context of madrasah education, it is relevant to consider the one curriculum effort that explicitly acknowledged the place of religion in values education, and education more broadly. The Religious Knowledge Syllabus was introduced in 1982, an effort to anchor values teaching on a religious foundation. The initiative was an effort to underpin Singapore's rapid socio-economic transformation within the emergent Asian Values discourse. As early as 1972, then PM Lee Kuan Yew had stated "it is basic we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about and what we want to do... only when we first know our traditional values can we be quite clear that the western world is a different system, a different voltage, structured for purposes different from others" (Lee, quoted in *The Straits Times*, 8 Feb 1972, cited by Gopinathan, 1995, p. 17). The offerings – Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies, Sikh Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge and World Religions – were offered from 1984. The pedagogic orientation was knowledge of religion, not initiation into the faith. The initiative was abandoned in 1989 both because the vast majority of students for whom it was intended chose Buddhist studies and Bible Studies and amid concerns that Singapore society was being exposed to a "heightened consciousness of religious differences" and that in this context it was not prudent to have religious knowledge present in the school curriculum (Gopinathan, 1995; Tan, 1997a). The irony was that this was the period that more Malay-Muslim parents were sending their children to madrasahs, precisely because they wanted their children to be provided with a strong, values driven educational experience.

### **The Efficiency Phase**

The policy of bilingualism was not without adverse consequences. For many children the languages of the school were not the home languages. Neither English nor Mandarin were principal modes of communication in Chinese homes. Many children failed to master the languages sufficiently well, resulting in low proficiency and substantial attrition. Via the Report of the Ministry of Education 1978 (The Goh Report) streaming was introduced into the system. Though modified substantially it remains a dominant feature of the system.

Another curriculum initiative had to do with the need to reform the academic-oriented curriculum prevalent in English medium schools to a system-wide emphasis on English, Science, Mathematics and technical education. The need for an efficient system rose from the fact that socio-political cohesion was a work in progress and the state needed to gain legitimacy through economic growth and investment in social goods. The industrializing Singapore economy needed a skilled labour force which the schools had to provide. Even though there was some resistance, the government prevailed with its policies; outside the school system the government built up capacity through investment in vocational skills via the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB), and later the Institute for Technical Education (ITE) and increased the number of polytechnics. This capacity building for economic growth and modernization was

more successful than in many other newly industrially economies and played an important role in Singapore's stellar economic growth between 1965 and the late 80's (Gopinathan, 1999).

A very important principle is that of meritocracy. At least one reason for the failure of merger with Malaya was Malaya's insistence on affirmative action on behalf of the Malays. In Singapore with a Chinese majority and a history of educational discrimination by the colonial powers such a policy was a non-starter. The government's commitment was to equalize educational opportunity, promote social mobility, reward talent and effort, irrespective of social class or ethnicity. Merit, effort, and a healthy dose of competition were deemed essential for high quality performance, both at an individual and system-wide level. A second core principle, represented in the efforts to build up the skills base via education, was that of curriculum relevance to socio-economic needs. A third has been a commitment to multiculturalism, seen as significant-for building social cohesion, and given how politicized the system was in the fifties and sixties, education policy formulation in the last three decades has been more technocratic and less politicised than in many other systems.

What have been the implications for the evolution of madrasah education in the context of the above? While the rejection of Malaysia-style affirmative education for Malay-Muslims in Singapore was initially disquieting, it is widely accepted today. Malay leaders continue to urge the community to earn a place through effort and merit. While achievement differences between the different ethnic groups have narrowed over time, gaps persist with Malays under-represented in Singapore's universities and possibly over represented at the ITE. The effort to make the curriculum relevant to socio-economic needs has also impacted madrasah education. From the policy perspective, the objective was to ensure that graduates from the madrasahs would have the knowledge and skills to join an increasingly skilled labour force in an economy from the eighties characterised by a growing service sector and higher value added manufacturing. A tradition-oriented curriculum and a teacher dominant pedagogy would not have met this objective. Mukhlis (2006) notes that madrasahs in the past were focused on socialising students into Islam. He adds, "They follow a juristic methodology that has remained virtually unchanged since medieval times...Religions knowledge is accepted as revealed and unchallengeable and is mostly memorised..." (p. 31). Further, there was a need to ensure sufficient proficiency in English; the main media of instruction at the madrasahs was Malay and Arabic (Tan, 1997b) when at the national level the economy was rewarding students proficient in English. Also, English is a link language between ethnic groups and a lack of proficiency would mean an inability to communicate, thus hampering social cohesion.

This picture of education development since 1956 has been one of successful transformation. And this is borne out in TIMSS and PISA data of academic achievement. In a global context, Singapore students' performance in English, Mathematics and Science has been outstanding. Singapore has done consistently well in raising achievement levels for all ethnic groups and reducing achievement gaps. This is to not to say that no policy mistakes were made. Bilingual demands imposed heavy burdens on learners. As noted earlier, the 'failure' of the Religious knowledge curriculum (Gopinathan, 1995; Tan, 1997), a poorly skilled workforce, in comparison with other East Asian economies as reported in various economic review committee reports, an overly-economistic view of the ends of education, a strong focus on academic achievement leading to a content-dominated curriculum and the promotion of test-taking expertise,

neglect of the humanities and aesthetics in the curriculum, etc., all point to unintended consequences. Notwithstanding the above, government policies have enabled the education system to undergo radical transformation. A culture of effort and excellence has been institutionalised in the system and strong foundations laid upon which to build for the future.

### **The Ability Driven Phase**

With the publication of the TIMMS results in 1995, the Singapore education system woke to a realisation of just what had been achieved in three short decades. A robust and high achieving system had been created. But it was essentially an industrial model system, focused, efficient and concerned with academic outcomes; it mirrored a strong state-centric model of governance which privileged merit and effort, feeding skilled labour into an economy that had successfully industrialised. Principally the Singapore education system was designed to facilitate the developmental state's ideology and practices. However, globalisation trends had begun to impact society and the economy. A short recession in the late 80's exposed weaknesses in Singapore's export driven model, relatively high cost of labour and small internal market. Economic competitiveness and the capacity to recognise and exploit newer economic opportunities was now a major policy concern. Policy makers realised that Singapore had to reshape its economy to leverage on technology, enterprise and knowledge capital. Once this was decided upon, major changes to an already efficient education system were inevitable.

The ability-driven phase began in 1987 with a move towards decentralisation, leading to the creation of independent, later, autonomous schools. The key rationale underpinning this reform was laid out in the *Towards Excellence in Schools Report* (Goh, et al., 1987) which pointed to over-standardization in the system, the need for school level autonomy to better meet diverse student needs and to stretch the brightest and the best. This was built upon in the decade of the nineties by initiatives in reducing content and promoting critical and creative thinking, policies to extend use of ICT in schools and policies on values and citizenship education. The PM Goh's landmark *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* speech in 1997, and in 2004 Lee Hsien Long's *Teach Less Learn More* speech explicitly tied the demands of a globalising economy to the need to move the education system beyond industrial-style effectiveness. The key intent behind all these reforms was to make the system flexible and responsive, to encourage greater diversity in curriculum and pedagogy and to better tailor schooling to meet the needs of a wider range of talent and ability (Gopinathan, 2007).

The school system is now much more diversified than it was in the nineties; it is a system characterised by multiple pathways. There are now specialised schools for sports, performing arts, science and mathematics, technology, and schools to cater to academically weaker students. School-based curricula-enrichment, remedial activities and action research led by teachers at the school level are now more common. The old 6-4-2 structure has been modified with the introduction of the integrated programme schools at the secondary level. While streaming remains in place, it is now less rigid and more porous. A 'bridges and ladders' system can be said to have evolved linking the K-12 system with the ITE, polytechnics and universities. Teachers have been encouraged to be more innovative in their pedagogies and to be more activity and student-centred (Hogan & Gopinathan, 2008). These examples suggest that

Singapore's education system was being restructured in line with the changes being made to the economy in response to globalisation.

Some of the changes in education policy and practice noted above also being attempted in the madrasahs, according to Y. Ibrahim, Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs "... the underlying philosophy embodies an integrated and holistic learning of both religions and academic subjects, rooted in progressive Islamic traditions as well as the Singaporean mission of developing every student to the best of his or her potential." (2013).

Changes which will come into effect from 2015 include; (a) At Al-Arabiah an option for students to choose a 4 year route leading to the 'O' levels or a 5 year route leading to 'N' levels and then the 'O' levels. (b) At Madrasah Al-Junid, one class of 15 will be able to skip the 'O' levels and prepare for the International Baccalaureate (IB). It is reported that "Al-Junid will also adopt a new model of teaching and learning ...that will involve the current 18 subjects being integrated into 6 groupings to strengthen interdisciplinary learning and encourage students to deliver more deeply into their topics, also included in a module on Islam and society to expose students to such issues as gender, poverty, the environment and human rights." (Davie, 2013).

### **Leading the Way for the 21 Century**

Two key themes will dominate considerations of Singapore education as this second decade of the 21 century unfolds. The first has to do with the question 'How well is the Singapore system adjusting to the challenges of globalisation?', and the second 'What role will education play in the new challenges that confront state and society?' (Gopinathan, 2007). These questions are relevant to madrasah education as well for the challenge of globalisation is not just economic competitiveness but a capacity as well to accommodate diversity as echoed in the call for an inclusive society. Efforts to modernize the madrasah curriculum will need to grapple with both global trends and 'local needs'.

What are the challenges posed by socio-political factors? In 2015 Singapore will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Ours is now a mature society and economy. A well-educated middle class has been created which wants greater consultation and involvement in decisions that impact upon their lives. Increased income inequality and diminished social mobility and anxiety over increased immigration needed to grow the economy are now 'hot' political issues. Increased income inequality is seen as limiting education option such as in access to quality pre-school education. The government has responded by promising extra funding to substantially improve the quality of childcare and early childhood education available to low income citizens. While social mobility is not completely extinguished, some closure and narrowing of equality of opportunity has occurred. One policy response has been to consider initiatives to target low achieving students earlier to ensure that learning deficits are successfully attended to. Under pressure the government has also agreed to increase access to tertiary education. And the prospect of increased immigration has raised questions about what it means to be Singapore and what constitutes the 'Core'? As our classrooms become more diverse there will be profound consequences for the curriculum. What is to be done with the languages, cultures, histories and voices the new migrants will bring? Will the

bilingual formula need to be reconsidered? How will the values and citizenship, social studies curriculum need to change? How do we avoid the perception that in the interests of maintaining the “Singapore core” the state favours assimilation?

It is almost 16 years since former PM Goh Chok Tong launched his “Thinking Schools Learning Nation” initiative (1997) and almost 26 years since system devolution through the independent schools initiative. And as noted above, substantial changes have occurred in the system. The question is not if change has occurred but if it has been substantial enough. Several major questions need answering with regards to Singapore’s education system at the present time. Is the SES relationship to education performance exacerbated by the present model of streaming? Is education for 21 century competencies available to all students? What policies are needed to reduce overlaps between SES, ethnicity and achievement gaps? How can the goals of an inclusive society be met, one that meets the needs of the national and the needs of specific groups? Do teachers feel they are more professional and thus more empowered? Are teachers routinely using a wider range of pedagogic strategies – is the school-learning experience substantially different from two decades ago?

The answer is, not yet. The reasons for this are complex. The Singapore system is perceived, nationally and internationally, to be a good system – so, why change? For policy makers anxious not to destabilise the system, the dilemma is also knowing what elements need to be retained and what changed? Some structural elements, like streaming, also play a part. Teachers are bound to draw inferences about student ability from the streams students are placed in and to adjust their pedagogy accordingly. Research evidence suggests that a hybridic pedagogy has replaced the teacher-dominated classrooms of the past (Hogan & Gopinathan, 2008). An effort to ensure that the able and talented were stretched, which led to the Gifted programme and to the creation of independent schools, and more recently, the integrated programme schools, has made the system appear elitist; while efforts have been made to cater to low achieving students, a lack of effective early intervention and a preoccupation with making such students employable is leading to early vocationalisation. Finally, as noted earlier, there has been limited assessment reform. Examinations are the visible sign of Singapore’s commitment to meritocracy, excellence and transparency in education allocations. It is understandable that the MOE would tread carefully. But high stakes examinations on which so much depend promote a ‘teaching to the test’ pedagogy, thus limiting pedagogic innovation (Kapur & Huey, 2013, Curdt-Christiansen & Silver, 2011).

Given the slow change towards a looser pedagogical regime in mainstream schools, what are the prospects for successful curriculum modernization in Singapore madrasahs? Unlike mainstream schools which are well resourced, teachers well prepared and a clear focus on academic performance, recent changes notwithstanding, the madrasahs face daunting challenges. Curriculum integration and relevance is a difficult enough task but when the secular and the religious are to be meaningfully integrated, it is obviously much more difficult. Selection, sequencing, coherence, among others, need to be carefully attended to. Next, secular and religious subjects draw from different epistemological and pedagogical traditions. Both teachers and students will be challenged by the need to both keep subjects separate as well as integrated. The greatest challenge will be felt by teachers who will feel the need to own and do justice to their subjects as well as be part of the wider madrasah community (Mukhlis, 2006, p. 2). All this

suggests that teachers will require special preparation, continuing support, as well as enlightened leadership.

A related aspect has to do with parental choice and preference. As noted earlier Singapore society has matured. Parents have raised, loudly, a variety of issues in education they find troubling; greater choice in and say in how children are to be educated will be the norm. The government has made some private schooling options available. Singapore has currently three schools, Anglo-Chinese School (International), Hwa Chong Institution (International) and St. Josephs Institution (International) in which Singapore students may enrol (Lee, 2005). Home schooling options are also allowed. This widening of choice could also provide space for Madrasahs to show that they too provide a choice option and that by modernizing, they continue to remain relevant. The disquiet over the compulsory Education Act and its consequences for madrasah education has not gone away; it is likely that more authentic, ground up, community led initiatives are likely to be needed if Singapore's unique brand of madrasah education is to thrive, and in good time, be a model to others. That there is ground for optimism in the attempt to restructure Madrasah education is seen in evidence that Madrasah students did well in the 2014 PSLE examinations. It was reported that 98.4 percent of 311 Madrasah students from Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah qualified for secondary education. Madrasah Wok Tanjong which was deemed by MOE as not of sufficient standard from 2012 – 2014 had students who scored an average PSLE aggregate of 197, well above the benchmark of 171 (P. Lee, ST, 9.12.2014). The turnaround in several Madrasahs occurred because school leaders and teachers rose to the challenge to make Madrasah education more relevant to the times.

There is reason to be cautiously optimistic that Singapore will successfully confront these challenges. Our record as a nation is one of successfully confronting challenges, not least in education; the challenges in the mid-sixties were enormous and could have easily overwhelmed the fragile state. And the government has already indicated willingness for prompt responses. Certainly, education policy will be a more politicised and contested area. More alternatives, even seemingly radical ones, will have to be considered. And policy makers will have to listen more diligently to stakeholders. Upon such new and more equal partnerships will Singapore's madrasah education's future depend.

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