

REVIEW

Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in Singapore: building Chinese elitism or settling on meritocracy, Singapore style?

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Since the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power in 1959, there has been a series of tensions and tussles between the Chinese educated in their vernacular and the western-trained Chinese, whose own mother tongue is Chinese but who embrace western values such as liberty and western religion. The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in Singapore – for example, Hwa Chong Institution and Catholic High School – were introduced in 1979 and remain the result of an elite education system built to ensure that there remains a core of Chinese-educated elites in Singapore who are educated at the first language levels in English and in Mandarin (Putonghua). This is to offset the balance between the dominant English-educated Chinese and the Chinese-educated Chinese in Singapore. Several problems are associated with the SAP schools, which are analyzed in this study. This study concludes with the power of Kuan Yew Lee and his PAP and provides several possible solutions to the SAP school problem and how they may be fixed over the short term for all Singaporeans alike. Raffles Institution, Anglo-Chinese School, and St. Joseph's Institution have long histories in Singapore but are not SAP schools, thus proving that SAP schools may not even be necessary in the first place in the globalized world.

Keywords: Special Assistance Plan (SAP), Singapore schools, Hwa Chong Junior College, Catholic High School, elitism, meritocracy

Introduction

In the People's Action Party (PAP) under Kuan Yew Lee won the first post-independence General Election (GE) in Singapore. Lee took over as the former Chief Minister and head of the pro-British Legislative Assembly (LA). There were already large social problems in Singapore, such as a lack of education, health facilities and hospitals, public housing, and occupation. The country was ready for violent extremism and race riots. Nevertheless, the Lee-led PAP achieved independence through a political merger with the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, a landslide victory for the PAP. Lee said in his London speech in 1962, "Therefore, the Tungku is adamant that with merger – which he sees no escape from – he must have Malaysia. For then he will have 1 million Malays, Dusuns, Dayaks, Muruts and others, to add to the 3.5 million which will make it 4.5 million, and

the Chinese would be 3.6 million plus 4,00,000 in Sarawak and North Borneo to make it roughly 4 million. In other words, merger without Malaysia lands him in a situation which he fears: a Chinese-led Communist party . . . Part of the Chinese are English-educated and would fit in with the Malayan scene – anything between 30 and 40 per cent. The balance are not English-educated, and half of that balance will probably have their loyalties tied up with the country of the origin of their ancestors." In 1965, Singapore was kicked out of the Federation of Malaysia by Malaysia's first PM, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who decried Singapore's large Chinese population. He said that the large population would tip the vote in favor of the Chinese Malaysians. The racist Tunku (or prince in Malay) said that Malaysia was considered "Tanah Melayu," or the "Land of the Malays," a racialized epithet to the idea that Malaysia belonged to the Malays *inasmuch as* Southeast Asia belonged to China because it was part of the South China Sea, which is a ridiculous claim.

Since Malaysia was Tanah Melayu, it could not be led by a Chinese.¹ So the Tunku's racism would soon leave Singapore cold and insular with big problems in health, housing, education, and especially occupation. Malaysia was arranged along politically racial lines, referred to in political science as "elite accommodation." This means that all the large ethnic communities were organized according to their ethnic origins and based on class and wealth. This arrangement had its roots in British Malaya under the Kapitan System. Not surprisingly, Singapore too was organized along such racial lines. It is a colonial era arrangement that continues to exist today in both countries. The *Kapitan system* was first introduced over 500 years ago after those early medieval Portuguese invaded and sacked Malacca and ruled it for over 180 years until the Dutch take over (1). The local Chinese, Indian, and Malay captains were powerful figures who represented great influence over their local co-ethnics. The four-race model was a sign of things to come.

Since 1959, the Singapore government only recognizes four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. English remains the language of government and business. English was encouraged as the language of science and technology and reflected the country's Bilingual Policy in 1966, a year after the merger with Malaysia failed. Lee said in his 1962 speech in London that "whatever the policy was designed to achieve it certainly helped me, because it convinced the Tengku that he had to come to terms with immediate realities – that was Singapore. It has got 1.6-million people of which 1.2 are Chinese, 2,00,000 Malays and about 2,00,000 Indians, 2,000 Eurasians and others."

This study analyses SAP schools in Singapore and how these schools exist in Lee's brand of meritocracy. It attempts to situate Singapore within the context of a globalized world according to such scholars as Narayan, Said, Levitt, Freedman, Giddens, and others.

Vernacular roots: Chinese-medium and English-medium schools and communist activism in Singapore

Lee had a burgeoning fear of Chinese chauvinists and Mao's brand of communism. Lee was right. Not as in a Right-Winger but as in correct about the immoral and illegal intentions of the local Communists in Malaya, Thailand, and Singapore. Lee had firsthand experience in combating the Communist trade unions and their infiltration of the bus unions and was Chinese-educated, whose children study at Chinese-medium high schools. Lee intended to break the Communist hold over the educated Chinese.

The Singapore SAP schools have their roots in Chinese vernacular high schools where everything was taught in Mandarin and where British English was learned as a foreign language. The ethnic roots of the Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians go back to pre-colonial times and are deeply rooted in the overall psyche of many Southeast Asian people. These psychological roots highlight the racial and ethnic differences between the Southeast Asians and the others. When one makes such racial highlights, the ethnic distinctions between and among the ethnic groups become magnified, as well as their ethnic differences.

However, according to Dr. Goh Keng Swee, the architect of Singapore's economic miracle, the primary function of the vernacular roots was to make English not a foreign language but a neutral language that would not merely be applied as a dispassionate language for all ethnic communities in Singapore. This was articulated by the Singapore Foreign Ministry and its first Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam. It was also a significant benchmark for S. Rajaratnam's personal ideology as a local journalist *par excellence*.

On the contrary, Lee himself did not articulate any particular or specific distaste for Chinese education, the Chinese high schools, or the Chinese-dominant trade unions. Lee merely stated that the Chinese vernacular was akin to communism. They were easily manipulated by the Chinese Communists under Mao Tse-tung Thought.

Lee said in his 1962 speech, "Let me explain this: 99 per cent of the Malayan Communist Party is Chinese. They have fought for the last 17 years, since 1945, to establish a Soviet Republic based on the efforts and sacrifices of the Chinese. They cannot conceive of a situation in which Communism can come to Malaya without their efforts; and they use the obvious and the simple method of winning more people over to Communism by pointing to the illustrious example of China. The result is that they win more recruits from the Chinese into the Malayan Communist Party and present Communism to the non-Chinese in Malaya as Chinese Imperialism, and so they get themselves more and more isolated in this Chinese world. . . the Malayan Communist Party pursues this stupid policy of augmenting their strength on the basis of the prestige and reputation of China, making an appeal only to the Chinese."

This was Lee's view of the Communists and their Chinese supporters in Southeast Asia, in Malaysia, and most certainly in Singapore. This would include his dangerous meeting with the man code-named "The Plen" and other local Communist leaders. The NLB describes Mr. Fong Chong Pik (1926–2004) a.k.a. Fang Chuang Pi, as a political activist and member of the Communist Party of Malaya or the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). He was the MCP's representative who tried to convince Lee to form a united front against the British in the late 1950s in an underground struggle against the British imperialists. After Lee revealed his intolerance of the Communists from the MCP, CPM, and their fledgling Thai counterpart known as the CPT, the local Communists were

¹ The Tunku was the seventh son of Sultan Abdul Hamid Shah. Abdul Hamid Shah was himself the 24th Sultan of Kedah. According to Lee's book, *The Singapore Story*, Tunku Abdul Rahman was a Malay-Muslim prince from Kedah who apparently loved his golf as much as he loved his whiskey.

rounded up by Special Branch and Lee under Operation Cold Store. China under Mao withdrew its support, and the entire networks of Southeast Asian Communist parties collapsed under their own weight. “The Plen,” who was born in 1929 in China, died in 2004 in Hat Yai (south Thailand), never having realized his dream of a Communist utopia in Southeast Asia. By 1980, Lee had become so powerful that he managed to breakdown Nantah (the Shining light of the China Seas, as some called it) and separate its staff, sacking them, closing down their departments and programs, or displacing them to the University of Singapore (SU) campus at Bukit Timah. The Nantah campus was eventually merged, along with the faculty and students, into the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1980.

English-medium versus Chinese-medium schools

The Chinese High School was established in 1919, after the end of the First World War in Europe. During the 1970s, parents, educationists, educators, and political leaders argued over the advantages of English-medium education versus Chinese-medium education. The media refers to the basic stream of language that is used to teach the main subjects. One could teach mathematics in Chinese or in English too. One could teach science in the Chinese language, but it was more accurate in the English language. With the PAP government’s backing, more people believed that it would be of greater import to have their children educated in English-medium schools than the so-called Chinese alternative.

By 1975, English-medium schools gained ascendancy, and many parents inclined to send their children to English-medium schools. This would adversely affect Chinese-medium school enrollments. In fact, between 1974 and 1978, admission levels to Chinese-medium vernacular schools made up less than 10% of the entire birth cohort in Singapore. This was in stark contrast to a decade earlier, when the number of applications to Chinese-medium high schools such as Chinese High and Tao Nan School was high. Hwa Chong Junior College (HCJC), the first Chinese-medium Junior College (JC), was founded in 1974. It was the second JC to be established after the National Junior College (NJC). NJC was an English-medium JC.

SAP schools

In 1979, the Ministry of Education (MOE) allowed Chinese High School to become a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school. This not only allowed a continuation of the 1966 bilingual policy initiated by Lee Kuan Yew (in the immediate post-merger years) but also enabled some of the top students to study both Chinese and English at the first language level

(this was to be renamed, of course, in the years to come but remains effectively the same thing). Bilingualism meant “poor English grammar and worse pronunciation,” as many English-medium elites from Raffles Institution, Marymount Convent School, and Raffles Girls School maintained. When it came to hiring and work, the choices were clear. Nevertheless, the SAP schools gained greater autonomy in terms of curriculum planning and fund sourcing (from alumni and other funding institutions).

In 1979, MOE designated nine Chinese-medium secondary schools as SAP schools so that the top performers from feeder primary schools could study both English and Mandarin at the first language level. These were known as L1 levels. There was also an S-paper available, but that idea was scrapped and shifted (at first to the Pre-U level and then to the JC level). The first Pre-University centers were eventually renamed junior colleges. These included Raffles Pre-University, which became Raffles JC, and St Joseph’s Pre-U, which became Catholic JC.

In a new move, MOE allowed a change in the student-to-teacher ratio, with fewer students per teacher that would enhance the personal contact time with each student and hence bring about higher returns on investment (ROI).

Not surprisingly, these SAP schools with all the new bells and whistles performed well with at least 5 out of 9 making it to the top 10 list. The new SAP schools included Nan Chiau High School, Chinese High School, Nanyang Girls’ High School, River Valley High School, Dunman High School, and the Catholic High School. A new integrated program (IP) was established in 2013, beginning with CHIJ (St. Nicholas Girls’ School) and the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (SCGS).

Some 26 years after the introduction of the SAP school policy, the Chinese High School was allowed to merge with HCJC in 2006. These two schools were renamed Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) that offered what became labeled as a 6-year IP that covered both the secondary school and JC curricula. This was back in the mid-2000s, over 7 years before the CHIJ (St. Nicholas)-SCGS IP program. In 2006, it was indeed considered cutting-edge, educational policy worldwide. Today, Hwa Chong remains the top educational institution be/for/e university entrance and continues to graduate many top scholars, including the children of New Singaporeans or Chinese migrants given special status for settling in Singapore.

Analysis of SAP school policy

What can we say about the SAP school policy? In terms of a neoliberal ethos, certain political pressure that arises from the globalized world strongly affects national education systems resulting in what appears to be a proliferation of “homogenous” national curricular frameworks across countries bearing salient commonalities in structure and language (2). This view is also shared

by Goodson (3) and Beattie (4). Ng argued that, “The situatedness of particularistic local contexts can only mean that cosmopolitanism has emerged in diverse and varied forms across countries and schools. Elite schools, in particular, can be seen to be offering an ironic inflection to this new global curriculum imperative. This is because stratification structures and distributive rules at the national level, on top of elite schools’ class articulation and class-remaking capacities, often ensure that elite schools remain the most prolific and successful at reproducing this cultural capital among their students. Eventually, this curriculum initiative, when rearticulated and enacted within schools, can be said to be reproducing, if not reinforcing, extant power relations instead of providing intended moral and political checks to ameliorate social inequalities” (5). So on one hand, the SAP schools policy has created a large educational space that facilitates greater state control over inherent social inequalities that emerge when students enter high schools and compete with children from different (and often higher) social and economic statuses. It is therefore not surprising that such events occur at the global level and are not only limited to the national demographic in Singapore but within Southeast Asia as well. Therefore, if SAP schools are superior, why do they need to be based on race? Why not performance alone? Why should language criteria such as English and Chinese form any part of its basis?

Analysis: meritocracy

Meritocracy poses as an idea of neutrality and achievement based on unbiased, unprejudiced, and objectively attained rewards. It therefore becomes consistent with the selection of the best of the best based on their performance in public examinations rather than on personal criteria such as social class, family connections, and whether the student’s parents are part of the existing political and economic elite. Quantitative American political scientists, such as Harvard’s Kenneth Arrow, argued that meritocracy while often bundled with equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, has all faulted in the United States. This includes such “egalitarian initiatives from progressive taxation to support for single parents have come under attack and many redistributive programs are now less widely supported among the U.S. public than a decade or two ago” (6).

Indeed, meritocracy has often been touted as a key principle of Singapore’s governance. This principle purportedly provides equal opportunities for all and rewards individuals who demonstrate merit in terms of talent, effort, or a combination of both, whether natural or cultivated with social position, privileged employment positions, higher earnings, or social recognition (7). Of course, there are many in Singapore who claim that Singapore’s success is directly attributable to its meritocratic principles. Two authors can claim that this is true to an extent since both have emerged

from working-class families, one Chinese-Peranakan and the other Eurasian-Chinese. Indeed, the meritocratic approach was reiterated by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on having to leverage on the national educational system “reel in and retain talent” and haul in “a core of its ablest citizens, those with both the intellectual and social acumen, to play leadership roles in the economy, the administration, and the political leadership” (7). Indeed, according to the Singapore-style merit-based system, all a student has to do is to perform well academically. Note that even in the US, many merit-based systems have at their core various facts, such as is the person of European-white origins, Asian-Pacific origins, or African-American origins? But the difference in the US is that while administrators of admissions to colleges and universities are fully aware of pre-existing ethnic divisions and cleavages, these never become part of the question bank when administering entrance exercises, at selection interviews, and the like. To make the whole process more color-blind, the US ought to ban face-to-face interviews where questions of race and ethnicity will not be asked but can always be interpreted. In the Singapore case, interviews at the Public Service Commission level that are face-to-face in nature cannot hide obvious selection biases.

Nevertheless, it is clear from our analysis that SAP schools, meritocracy, and ethnic biases are all linked to the nature of elitism in Singapore’s education system. Narrowly defined criteria in Singapore schools have been used, in fact, to delineate between and among New Singaporeans themselves as well as among Singaporeans and between New Singaporeans and Singaporeans.

How is this done and why is this necessary?

It is done in the normal course of student selection exercises – dates that are selected and fixed by the MOE for parents and schools to get down together for such exercises. It is necessary because of the narrowly defined criteria that are so refined that many students qualify for the same space in a given SAP school. It has never been the case where the MOE announces that no qualified SAP student shall be turned away. Instead, there are many more qualified SAP school students than meets the eye. Thus, each school has to rely on non-academic rationale. These include the location of home (the closer the better). Volunteer work is done for the school or college. These include monetary donations. These are not known to be published, even if MOE requires them to be reported to MOE HQ. Another old non-academic criterion is alumni status, otherwise known as “the old boy policy.” Was the father or mother an alumni of the school or college? One wonders if such questions as to the biological status of the parents concerned are ever raised. Given the gamut and hubris of competition for

SAP and popular schools in Singapore, it is not surprising that these elite schools tend to make use of their own MOE-approved autonomy to conceptualize and design their curricula, curriculum, and assessment policies to the extent of including non-academic criteria for admission. Therefore, as Anna Ng-M argues, while the maxim of meritocracy proposes that all young Singaporeans are given equal opportunities, it has become increasingly evident that Singaporeans are categorized according to abilities and capacities. These abilities and capacities, we argue, are directly related to the socioeconomic statuses of student applicants to its elite schools and colleges.

Conclusion

By and large, Lee had assessed the situation adroitly and accurately. He weakened the Chinese trade unions, worker's unions, and bus unions. He halted the Communist infiltration of Chinese-medium schools, divided Nantah, and displaced staff to the University of Singapore (SU). In 1980, Lee ensured that the merger between SU and Nantah resulted in what Lee referred to as the National University of Singapore (NUS). Lee described it as a national university with national interests, national democratic interests and not Communist ones. Then, he turned to focus on the SAP schools to prevent the next generation of elites from falling by the wayside.

How about students who qualify for SAP schools based on public examination performance? Why can't they opt to learn their own mother tongue? And it is not for the want of practicality. In fact, a student who desires to learn his mother tongue can do so at the newest JC, Eunoia JC. Part of the Joint IP (JIP) students from Eunoia JC has partner schools in Catholic High School, CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, and Singapore Chinese Girls' School. But is it not an SAP school? This means that it does not have access to the same level of quality and funding as an SAP school. Of course, SAP schools that admit New Singaporeans (Chinese from China) have a natural advantage because of their native tongue.

This is meant to assist both the local students to improve their Chinese language and allow the New Singaporeans to improve their English language. In conclusion, there are several means of ensuring a level playing field where qualified

students gain entry into such elite schools and colleges based on the integrity of academic performance (90%), rather than non-meritocratic or non-academic abilities and socioeconomic status. There are several solutions to ensure this situation: in lieu of the lack of spaces where spaces in classrooms are limited and the applicant-to-desk ratio is abnormally skewed in favor of the student applicants, there ought to be an on-site pop quiz or written examination, all of which ought to be proctored. This will enable only the most qualified applicants inside. No applicant ought to be rewarded based on social class, economic class, or political connections. Neither should anyone be invited to learn nor study based on the "old boy network," as this merely perpetuates elitism. Neither should anyone be invited to learn nor student based on race, ethnicity, or religion.

Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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