GP Education Notes 2: Singapore Education System

1. Overview
   1. Development
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2. Strengths of our education system
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4. Overview

* Core values / concepts
  + Meritocracy
  + Instrumentalism
    - Education fulfils the purposes of the government at the time.
  1. Development
* Foundation stage (1960s-70s):
  + A competent workforce for export-oriented industrialization
    - Context: severe unemployment, high birth rate, gaps in basic education and technical skills
    - Focused on quantity and standardization
      * 1960: PSLE introduced, replacing school-based selection
    - Bias towards scientific and technical skills
      * Technical classes, renaming of Ngee Ann College to Ngee Ann Technical College with focus on technical diplomas
  + National unity
    - Context: young nation, few common denominators
    - Beginnings of unified language policy, basic national education elements (e.g. flag raising)
      * 1966: bilingual policy
* Maximisation stage (1980s-90s):
  + Maximising our human resource, raising our average
    - Context: move towards high value manufacturing and services, second industrial revolution, falling birth rate
    - Focused on maximising efficiency and getting the most out of every student (as society defines it)
      * 1979: streaming
      * 1984: GEP
    - Emphasis shifted to higher-value white-collar skills such as engineering, as well as a gradual acceptance and response to the need for managers and professionals skilled in the humanities.
      * 1980s: Humanities Programme and Scholarship
  + Dealing with a changing society
    - Context: socioeconomic change, rise of upper-middle-class “Western” values, increasing societal division
    - Further development of Mother Tongue policy, abolition of other language streams (late 1980s)
    - Moral and national education programmes—core values etc.
      * 1987: Pastoral Care Programme
      * 1992: Singapore Shared Values
* Individualisation stage (2000-present):
  + Self-actualisation, soft skills, developing diverse peaks of excellence
    - Context: further structural shifts, decline of manufacturing and competition from overseas, need to develop “game-changers”
    - Schools / programmes tailored to students’ needs, aiding in cultivating passion
      * MEP, AEP, Bicultural Studies Programme, LEP etc.
      * Singapore Sports School, SST, NUSHS, SOTA etc.
    - Focus on soft skills (e.g. H1 project work)
  + Responding to globalisation and cultural shifts
    - Context: globalisation, varied cultural influences, emphasis on individuality and space for development
    - “Every school a good school”, enhancements to neighbourhood schools, ITE etc.
    - Teach less learn more, reforms to assessment (e.g. PSLE)
    - Emphasis on holistic individualised development
  1. Current features
* Meritocracy
  + Better gets more—outcomes, or, in educational context, opportunities
  + Perennial, founding principle of not just education system, but also country
  + Born of need for efficient allocation of educational resources
  + Manifestation: streaming, educational admission, scholarships etc
  + Definitions of merit have evolved from narrow definitions, to broader but still pre-set definitions, to highly flexible and almost self-defined definitions.
* Content-intensive
  + Compared to Western countries, though less so than many Asian countries’ (e.g. China, Japan)
  + Need to ensure high average quality of human resource
  + Manifestation: heavy syllabus content, practice-intensive especially for Maths / the Sciences
  + Slow but steady move towards applied skills—H1 Project Work, reforms to Polytechnic and ITE education, SPA for H2 Sciences, General Paper as a compulsory subject etc.
* Bilingualism
  + Longstanding policy (1966)
  + First a means for national unity and to appease the non-English-speaking population, later an economic advantage with China’s rise
  + Broad (covers students of all inclinations) with potential for depth (HCL, CLL etc)
  + All students study Mother Tongue for 10-11 years. Every student must attain a D7 for O-level Higher Mother Tongue or S for A-level Mother Tongue to enter a local university.
* ICT programme
  + The pioneer in SEA
  + Maximise students’ future readiness
  + From basic computing to web design, specialised software (e.g. Photoshop, 3ds Max) and even coding.
* National education
  + Omnipresent, evolved as our state and society evolves
  + Shifting priorities, but also shifting attitudes
    - Increasing distrust and scepticism
  + E.g.s
    - Flag raising
    - Total defence
    - Various campaigns (e.g. Speak Mandarin Campaign)
    - 5 shared values
    - Social Studies as an examinable half-subject
* Prevalence of private tutoring
  + Omnipresent, with particular growth in the 80s
  + Present at all academic levels from Primary to Junior College, in a variety of subjects from the ordinary to the unusual (e.g. China Studies in English tuition?!)
  + Benefits include a more individualised pace of learning, personal attention and broader perspectives, especially for Arts subjects
  + State efforts to convince parents that it is unnecessary have not substantially affected the market’s growth

1. Strengths of our education system

* High degree of content and skills development
  + Students are equipped with a relatively high level of content knowledge and skills, making them highly suited for both further education and employment.
  + Result of content-focused curriculum and intense competition
  + Students of higher aptitude (e.g. A level graduates) are generally on par with their peers from first-world countries, while even students from less academically-oriented streams are literate, numerate, and employable at entry-level positions
  + Evinced by widespread acceptance of Singapore A levels and Diplomas for university admission, as well as a variety of rankings (THE, PISA etc)
* High degree of IT skills
  + Students have the basic technological skills to adapt to the technology economy.
  + Every Singaporean student possesses basic computing skills (e.g. MS Office)
  + Manifestation of success of ICT programme
  + Tech further used as force multiplier (e.g. tablet PC programme in ACSI, e-learning portals)
* Emphasis on bilingualism
  + Singaporean students are (at least theoretically) conversant in at least one language other than their own, making them more employable in our global economy
  + Business knowledge of a second language, a valuable skill in such sectors as Law and Foreign Affairs, is much easier to attain with prior experience learning the language
* Well-trained educators
  + Compared to most developing and some developed countries, Singaporean teachers are very well-trained
    - All teachers at the secondary level and above, and the vast majority of primary school teachers, hold a Postgraduate Diploma in Education together with a 4-year Bachelor’s Degree
    - Teaching scholarships and sponsorships are prestigious and in high demand
  + Educators are equipped and incentivised to teach effectively.

1. Issues

* Too result oriented
  + Fixation on results, which are necessary for progression and access to opportunities
    - Inherent result of meritocracy, focus on “merit”
  + Leads to a very instrumental way of studying
    - Rote-learning, “exam smarts”
    - At the expense of in-depth understanding of subject matter
* Elitism and its social costs
  + The “winners” in our meritocracy fixate on the traits that helped them win—exam smarts, intelligence etc
  + Over time, negative and even discriminatory attitudes against the “have nots” who have not been as successful in our education system
  + Leads to social disunity and tension. Elites are out of touch, whereas the “masses” are resentful.
    - Also leads to difficulty in maximising the varied and often unexpected talents of those outside the narrowly defined “elite”
* Conformist culture
  + Over-standardised content: emphasis (especially in early years) on acquiring the same knowledge in the same way discourages unusual approaches to issues
  + Pyramidal structure: real or perceived lack of options leads to a societal expectation that these options must be adhered to for success
  + Students are ill equipped for the creative age, which values individual thought and conviction.
* Risk adversity
  + Pyramidal structure: students are constantly reminded that a very select number of options are the only “safe choices”, while not being exposed to other options for future development
  + Educators motivate students by engendering a fear of failure.
  + Students reluctant to take risks and diverge from tried and tested paths
  + Difficult to reap outsize gains for individual and country.