GP Education Notes 2: Singapore Education System

1. Overview
	1. Development
	2. Current features
2. Strengths of our education system
3. Issues with our education system
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.