English Education in Singapore and Malaysia -- An insaider's view, an outsider's view

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Introduction

Singapore and Malaysia: two nations with a shared past, but with very different futures. A portion of each population has its roots in Malaya, both culturally and linguistically. Both have an economically vibrant Chinese population, which does not share the Islamic ideals of the Malays. Both have a small population of Tamil Indians who must not be overlooked. In 1963 Singapore broke off from Malaysia and became a separate nation. Subsequently Malaysia "reverted" to using Bahasa Malaya as the medium of instruction in schools, while Singapore took exactly the opposite approach, eventually using English as the medium of instruction.

As Malaysia's colonial period drew to a close in the 1950s, the new government pledged to restore Malay as the official national language. The Abdul Razak Report of 1956 proposed the introduction of a common syllabus to all schools, in which the main medium of instruction would be Malay. It was hoped that divisions caused by the four-parallel school system (English, Chinese, Tamil, Malay) would be eliminated, leading to the formation of a united nation. English was not targeted for elimination, mainly because of its traditional role of encouraging ethnic tolerance; it would help minority groups accept the inevitable absorption of their schools into the Malay system. The government hoped to win the allegiance of all ethnic groups by educating them according to a common philosophy.

The National Education Act of 1961 recommended that there should be two types of primary schools: "national" schools, whose medium of instruction is the Malay language; and "national-*type*" schools, whose instruction is in English, Chinese, or Tamil. However, the long-term goal was aimed at replacing all other instructional languages with Malay. Chinese secondary education was abolished, leaving only English national-type secondary schools. When Malay became the official national language in 1967, English was allowed to continue as the national *second* language. The downside of this development was that the English-medium schools were required to undergo a conversion to Malay by 1980. From that time on these schools would offer English Language as a subject, but other subjects (mathematics, history, geography and science) would have to be taught in Malay.

Malaysia's education system is modeled after the British system. The primary school achievement test (UPSR) qualifies pupils for lower secondary classes called "Forms I, II, III." The lower secondary assessment (PMR) leads to upper secondary courses called "Forms IV, V, VI," which culminate in pupils' being awarded the certificate of education (SPM). Post-secondary institutions vary according to the goals of the students. Some attend the colleges or polytechnics; some attend academic sixth form; some enter matriculation, a program in which Malay "sons of the soil" may bypass Form VI and begin pre-university studies on campus. The higher school certificate (STPM) qualifies students for university admission.

The history of Singapore paralleled that of Malaya until it broke off in 1963 and became a separate nation. While the Singaporean government had been involved in both the bilingual streaming policies in the schools and in manipulating (for better or for worse) the Chinese-speaking populace (which constitutes about three-fourths of the population in Singapore), ironically the parents brought about the demise of the Chinese school system by way of a grass-roots movement. In 1983, noting that fewer than 1 per cent of those eligible for primary school had enrolled in Chinese-medium schools, the MOE announced that by 1987 all pupils would study English as their first language.

In 1997 the Goh report, entitled "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation," prompted a change in the curriculum. Textbooks published after 2001 now feature explicit inclusion of critical and creative thinking skills (CCTS). Schools urge teachers to modify their teaching methods according to the principles of learner centeredness, process orientation, integration, contextualization, and spiral progression.

The Goh report was followed by major structural changes in the school system. A primary 3 streaming examination places students in "normal," "extended" and "monolingual" streams. At the secondary level pupils are placed in "special," "express" and "normal" streams.[1] The former system of streaming pupils *by language* was replaced by streaming them in different ability bands within the school on the basis of language and mathematics examinations given at the end of primary 3. English, (Higher) Mother Tongue, mathematics, science, and one humanities elective are compulsory. In the Singaporean education system, an attempt was made to revolutionize the culture of learning in schools by refurbishing audio-visual facilities, assessing students' competence according to two national exams: Grade 4 (10 y.o.), and Grade 6 (12 y.o.), encouraging classroom and extracurricular innovation, and shifting toward an individualized learning framework.

Several developments ensued. The National Education Program (1997) focused on implanting a sense of belonging among pupils. The Information Technology Master Plan (1997) implemented programs to upgrade the IT facilities at educational institutions, as well as to upgrade the competence of teachers and students. The Desired Outcomes of Education (1998) spelled out the goals for students at various levels in terms of cognitive and affective domains. In 1999 the Ability-Driven Education

paradigm (1999) attempted to integrate the foregoing initiatives, educational outcomes and discussions. Most recently the School Excellence Model (2003) was introduced to empower schools to identify staff members' strengths and weaknesses.

This paper examines views given on the education systems of both countries. The view on Singaporean education is written by an educationist living in the country, hence the term "insider." The "outsider" is a native Malay who was educated both in Malaysia and in the West, and who now resides in California.

The Insider

A-g Tan (henceforth known as the "insider") is an associate professor in the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. In her rather long introduction, she lays out the theoretical background for her five studies of children's perceptions of learning in Singapore. She calls upon child psychology, needs analysis, studies of childhood development, and applied "action research" (i.e., field work) for the purpose of answering both quantitative and qualitative research questions.

While Piaget was concerned with causal explanation, Vygotsky was concerned with interpretation and understanding. Tan claims that Bruner synthesized these two theories by asserting that "the opposite of great truths may also be true" (Bruner may have been one of the greatest minds of the late twentieth century, or one of the most dangerous). Tan adheres explicitly to Vygotsky's social constructionist approach to language learning. She believes that in Singapore language learning and teaching should be organized around three major areas: 1) language for information, 2) language for literacy, 3) language for social interaction.

Based on the foregoing theoretical and social background, A-g Tan and her colleagues conducted five studies on what makes a lesson interesting, qualities of a good and creative teacher, elementary school English language learning, choral learning, and learning in general.

The first study concerns children's perceptions of the desirability of learning activities, based on classroom observations and dialogues with teachers and/or pupils.

First, an open-ended question entitled "Learning Through Playing" generated 270 responses from children aged 7 to 12. The researchers invited pupils to write down activities they liked and wished to have. Their instructions revealed a definite bias towards fun:

> "You definitely wish to attend interesting lessons that are full of fun. To help us to design activities that you will enjoy, we would like to invite you to share with us activities that have brought you happiness. Please let us know by describing or drawing activities (as many as possible) that you like best, and that you wish to be carried out in the classroom."

The second study consisted of a paper-and-pencil survey, given to 410 children aged 9 to 12. Its

research questions were:

➤ What kind of learning activities do children like?

➤ Are there gender differences in children's perceptions of learning?

Tan then made several observations pertaining to the Singaporean context. During the linguistic development phase, children were less confident in articulating their views (written or oral) using either English or their mother tongue. Activities that require pupils to perform (verbal presentation, role-play, story telling) require more instructional time than individual seatwork. Teachers are less likely to organize such activities during streaming examination years (Grades 4 and 6). Children did not rate project work highly. During the study, schools introduced project work as extracurricular activity, so students were as of yet unfamiliar with this type of activity.

Concerning gender diversity, girls rated routine activities significantly higher; reading (whole school reading exercise took place once a week); correcting mistakes, doing worksheets, teacher demonstration, and learning grammar. Tan concludes that females like routines and are linguistically inclined. Boys preferred interactive activities such games and riddles.

A second study attempted to determine children's perceptions of the characteristics of a good teacher. The author began by outlining the mind of the child, with particular reference to Piaget. With an obvious bias towards creativity, the author proceeds to outline the qualities of a good teacher. Citing studies in Trinidad (of all places), she states that children think a good teacher should be good-looking, have good attendance, be caring and kind, exert positive control of the class, be well-trained, able to draw students into the learning process, and know how to build successful relationships with students.

She believes that creative teachers are inclined to be flexible and get off the beaten track, they are resourceful in finding new ways to present materials to children, they enjoy good relations with all children but particularly good relations with highly divergent children [!], they are likely to be non-conforming and even fault-finding with their colleagues, they are often dissatisfied with themselves and with the system in which they are operating. The researchers (A-g Tan, Rasidir Raslinda and Ee-Li Hong) then asked two research questions:

➤ What are children's perceptions of characteristics of a good teacher?

➤ Are there gender differences for children's perceptions of a good teacher?

In order to answer these questions, the researchers devised a questionnaire. A pilot survey asked one hundred student teachers and eighty elementary school students to list the qualities of 1) a good teacher, and 2) a creative teacher. Based on these views, plus views supported by the literature, a questionnaire was devised. 320 pupils aged 8-11 participated in the experiment.

Students reported that a good teacher should have good appearance, personality, social image, humor, non-academic traits [!], talents, inventiveness, be knowledgeable, hardworking, individu-

alistic, enhancing creativity. Student teachers thought that a good teacher should demonstrate good use of multi-media, new methods, discourage rote learning, do group work, project work, have a clear voice, be a good communicator, be unconventional, a risk-taker, open-minded, motivated, spontaneous, innovative, optimistic, inquisitive and imaginative. The literature reported that a good teacher makes up rules as he goes along [!], is carefree [!], day-dreams [!], is non-conformist, makes connections, makes unique things with materials at hand, questions norms and societal assumptions, is goal-oriented, energetic and inquisitive, resourceful, and has good relations.

Tan concludes that compared to the qualities of a *good* teacher, which seem to be more culturally embedded, the qualities of a *creative* teacher seem to be less culturally oriented. Two explanations are given for this: first, nationwide creativity education has not been ingrained into children's everyday life; second, the concept of "good" is a fundamental human concept learned by enculturation, acculturation and socialization.

Concerning the second research question, gender differences, Tan suggests that female children rated the following traits higher: decorating the classroom, flexibility, outfit, helpfulness, outdoor activities, competence in music, cleanliness, clarity of voice, group/project work, hardworking, arts and crafts, friendly, caring, and giving interesting lessons.

A third study examined children's experiences in the English language classroom. It attempted to uncover desirable activities, to consider views of the English classroom that has adopted creative techniques, and discover English language performance in an innovative learning environment. The researchers (A-g Tan and Dianaros Ab Majid) ask the following research questions:

 ➢ What is the pupils' understanding of the term creativity?
 ➢ What types of language learning activities promote creativity?
 ➢ Do creative strategies help pupils learn English better?
 ➢ How do pupils want English to be taught?

An action research project was carried out by co-author A.M. Dianaros, in which 77 children ages 10-11 were asked to identify words associated with a creative lesson, describe activities that encourage creativity, and list activities they wanted to increase. Words that were associated with "creativity" included interesting, fun, imaginative (most answered); challenging, unique, new, different (mid-range); rigid, common, boring (least answered). Activities in class that had an impact on their creativity included group work, projects (highest); games, brainstorming sessions (mid-range); composition exercises (also-ran); Internet searching (slightly below average). Activities that pupils wanted to have increased in the classroom included activities that involve active participation (role play, drama, word games, debate, Internet searching); activities that give opportunity to practice oral / aural skills.

Pupils were also asked, separately from the survey, whether they thought that the English lessons

had been taught differently from those in the past, and if they thought this had helped improve their English. All responded that the lessons were interesting, and that the teacher was supportive and enthusiastic, and has made learning English meaningful and exciting. Among examples of "creative" activities - making posters, newsletters and pamphlets, surfing the Internet, playing language games, debates, quizzes and role plays. Overall, students seemed to prefer a balance of "creative activities" and "drill and practice" exercises.

A fourth study was conducted on secondary school students' perceptions of choral learning. In this study, the authors first conducted a pilot study in which they asked students what they liked and disliked about the choir. From this study they developed a questionnaire having two parts. The first part solicited demographic information about the students. The second part asked students to describe their choral learning experience in terms of personal attitudes, the instructor as classroom manager and facilitator, their peers, the school, and choir contents. The researchers (A-g Tan and Flora Yee) asked the following research questions:

➢ What are secondary students' perceptions of choral learning?

➢ Are there gender differences in these perceptions?

➢ Are there any interscholastic (school-school) differences?

The study produced varied results. The ratings were moderately high in terms of the choir itself and of the instructor's roles, moderate in terms of their own interest and in contents and structure, and rather poor in terms of their peers' social competence and confidence.

Only two schools took part in the study. Both were public secondary schools located in the suburbs. Minor differences would be expected due to demographic factors such as socio-economic status of the pupils, but other differences became clear when the author revealed the fact that one school had an established choral program (more than five years), while the other school had a developing program. Other differences in students' attitudes resulted from the varying degrees of voluntary participation in the program. Co-curricular activities were required in each school, but in the school having the established program, a choral culture contributed to a 2/3 to 3/4 voluntary participation rate. At the school whose program was still in its development stage, voluntary participation was only forty per cent. The instructor in both programs was the same person, possibly lending a control factor to students' responses.

Gender differences were evident, with female participants in the study rating all categories higher than their male counterparts. Pupils' suggestions of how to change things included trivia, such as "playing board games before choral activities begin," as well as more meaningful comments, though sometimes contradictory, including class discipline and choice of materials, both factors amenable to motivation.

In a fifth study, Tan analyzes three strategies developed by co-researchers Ai-Hua Lim and Chee-

Yuen Tan to elicit children's views and integrate them into learning. This study picks up the theme of the first study, but approaches it from a different vantage point. The three strategies included integrated brainstorming, the "3-2-1 approach," and the "challenge corner."

1. Integrated Brainstorming was an experiment performed during writing lessons conducted over five class periods on the subject of "My Ideal School." The first lesson (2 periods) included brainstorming, vocabulary, ideas, text type; slides of an overseas school downloaded from Internet. The principles of brainstorming (non-critical, non-judgmental) were introduced. Groups elicited ideas about an ideal school. Roles included the Leader, the Recorder, and the Presenter. A worksheet entitled "My Writing Plan" was distributed to each group. 15-20 minutes of brainstorming elicited 3 ideas about the subject. An outline of the paragraph was constructed. In the second lesson (also 2 periods), group writing, group presentation, and the 1st draft was produced. Homework was assigned, individual writing, in order to produce the second draft. In the third lesson (1 period) the third draft, or final product, was produced.

   Each lesson consisted of five parts. The first ten minutes was spent in "tuning in." The second ten minutes was spent in instruction. The third ten minutes was spent reading the "information text." Then, for twenty minutes, the children "brainstormed." The teacher reminded them of the time frame and of their specific roles: the speed captain, super supporter, super recorder, synergy guru, chief of wacky ideas.[2] The last ten minutes of each lesson was spent in "closure," in which the teacher concluded the lesson by reviewing what was learned. The assignment was limited to three aspects, because the requirement for PSLE (Primary School Leaving Exam) is 150-250 words.

2. The 3-2-1 Strategy provided a means for pupils to evaluate the lesson. On an A4 sheet of paper, students were asked if they enjoyed the lesson and understood the contents. They were asked to list three things they learned after the lesson, two interesting things they learned during the lesson, and one question they had after the lesson. For example, "How did you feel when the teacher…"

used the square grid to talk about fractions / percent?	☺	☺	☹
asked you to observe patterns (e.g. 9/100 = 9%)?	☺	☺	☹
asked you to convert fractions to %'s and vice versa?	☺	☺	☹

The 3-2-1 strategy was modified somewhat to fit lesson contents: the math class focused on mastery of content knowledge; the English class was broadened to social domains. Students felt they could relate well to the theme, they found the new tool of brainstorming useful to guide them in writing compositions. When asked how they could improve their own learning, 62% answered "effort," 15% thought they should imitate what teachers say or do, and 23% said brainstorming. Questions students had after the lesson were related to the education system, how to learn better, self-improvement, the PSLE, and core learning objectives and materials.

3. Challenge Corner aimed to find out if children could master content knowledge by asking them to

design a quiz question for their friend. First they were exposed to a content-related question asked by the teacher, then they were encouraged to generate their own questions. For example: create a word problem in mathematics:

> "Create a story sum to quiz your friends. The story sum should require your friend to use the strategy 'Guess and Check' that we learned during the lesson. You are to provide the answer with all workings clearly to assist your friends who may face difficulties in solving the sum."

This task demanded that the children move from the role of learner to the role of teacher. Children were given homework (in the math lesson) to create two word problems. Working cooperatively, they were able to complete exercises in worksheets. This activity was tantamount to peer teaching, with students delivering lessons according to the teacher's instructions.

Evaluation

"Good research on human optimal functioning," Tan writes, "begins with precise questions, relevant perspectives and plausible methods" (p. xxviii). In light of this statement, we should rethink the research questions that Tan and her colleagues asked in doing these five studies. Several of the questions were very general in nature, e.g., What kind of learning activities do children like? What are children's perceptions of the characteristics of a good teacher, or of choral learning? and How do pupils want English to be taught? Other questions concerned creativity, the pupils' understanding of it, types of activities that promote it, and whether creative strategies help pupils learn better. Several questions pertained to gender differences in children's perceptions of learning, of a good teacher, and of choral learning. The only "precise" question was whether there was a difference in perceptions of choral learning between the school that had an established choral program and the school that did not. Tan thus exposes the poor quality of her own research which, though interesting, does not contain precise questions relevant to children's perceptions of learning. More aptly, her book should have been titled *Exploring Children's Perceptions of Creativity in the Classroom*.

Tan's perspectives do appear to be relevant in light of initiatives in Singaporean education, the information technology processing master plan, "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation," and the stated attitudes of cultivating creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. She seems interested in gender differences in various aspects of learning, but nowhere in her book does she present any socio-cultural justification for this. We are left to draw conclusions about her attitudes based on conjecture rather than fact.

Tan attempts to build a case for embracing multiplicity in order to develop plausible methods. Embracing Bruner's concept of multiplicity, she proceeds to give a quasi-academic justification of qualitative and quantitative methodology, arriving at such a "brilliant" conclusion: "One way to generate a research question is to sit and watch, accumulate knowledge, and conceptualize the matter." It

is too bad that she didn't take her own advice (or that of Marshall and Rossman, whom she cites) and ask questions such as What is happening? What are the salient themes and patterns that emerge in participants' meaning structure? How are these patterns linked? What events, beliefs and attitudes are shaping this phenomenon? and How do these forces interact? Instead Tan employs mundane methods such as asking the pupils open-ended questions and developing questionnaires. Only in her study of the English teaching program does this effort appear worthwhile; all of the remaining four studies fall far short of the mark. At any rate we are left wondering what, if anything, multiplicity has to do with developing plausible methods.

The Outsider

The outsider's view is given by M. Bakri Musa, a physician who was raised in Malaysia but who now resides in California. Professionally, Bakri Musa is not concerned with the "nuts and bolts" of educational pedagogy, as is the insider. Personally, he has witnessed problems in Malaysia's education system and has had a chance to compare it with the systems of other countries. Not threatened with censure or other consequences that might hamper a resident's free speech or criticism of government, he has a unique opportunity to vocalize his constructive criticism of Malaysia's educational system.

After a lengthy introductory discourse on his philosophy of education, M. Bakri Musa details what he thinks is wrong with the present Malaysian system. Then he examines education in America (especially the State of California), Canada, Germany, Brazil and Chile in search of solutions that may be applicable to Malaysia. He goes on to outline specific changes that he thinks should be made at all levels of instruction, putting to use the lessons learned from studying other countries. He concludes that Malaysian education should shift away from central, powerful control by the MOE towards a more flexible, decentralized model.

The author gives seven major points of greater or lesser significance that he thinks trouble Malaysia's educational system. These include Malay nationalism, persistent segregation, double sessions in rural schools, lack of air conditioning, problems with religious schools, the matriculation system, and problems inherent in the universities.

Social problems appear to be the most insidious of the ailments that plague Malaysia's education system. In many developing nations, economic progress is hindered by nationalistic forces, which more often than not pit the benefits of learning English (in Malaysia, associated with imperialism) against the pride factor (earned in having cast off the yoke of colonialism). Malaysia, however, is a multi-cultural society, and segregation, according to author Bakri Musa, is a persistent ill which needs to be overcome before true progress can be made.

Many of the ailments can be associated with facilities and materials. The shift in medium of instruction from English to Malay (1970-1982) necessitated an adaptation of materials to the new medium.

Poor textbook translations and the low quality of audio-visual materials are a major deficiency of the current system. In addition overworked teachers, a result of double (a.m. / p.m.) sessions, and classrooms that have not been climatized add to the misery in rural schools.

Religious schools constitute a separate Islamic stream, whose goals are the very opposite of Malaysia's national aspirations. These schools aim to segregate students rather than integrate them; education is concerned with the hereafter, rather than equipping students with relevant skills that can help them enter the workplace. These schools have untrained teachers, a narrow curriculum, no academic rigor, there is no place for inquisitive mind, and the thought process is actively discouraged, with an emphasis on rote recitation and memorization. Bakri Musa, who might be regarded as one of the new breed of modern, secular Muslims, does not criticize the Islamic faith per se, only the medieval attitudes of its clergy towards a liberal education.

Matriculation was intended as a type of "affirmative action" program, resulting from the multitude of Malay Form 6 graduates not being accepted into universities. The University of Malaya embarked on an imaginative outreach program where selected students were brought on campus after Form 5. Today this *matrikulasi* has effectively supplanted Sixth Form.

Problems with the universities in Malaysia are many and widespread. Deficiencies occur in management, academic offerings, and personnel. In general, the Ministry of Education (MOE) still calls the shots. Most trustees of the universities are either civil servants or discredited politicians. Specifically, the MOE is notorious for its micro-management. For example, universities still have to get the Education Minister's permission to invite outside speakers. It is still very much a top-down system, which in character and ambience resembles the old Soviet system.

As for academic offerings, undergraduate programs are too narrowly focused and rigid. For typical liberal arts majors, the last time they studied math, science, or English was in Form 5. Islamic Studies majors are worse, yet these graduates will eventually enter the civil service and run the treasury and trade ministries. At the graduate level, a Malaysian PhD is earned entirely by research. Malaysians enter medical school or law school directly from high school. Moreover, Malaysian universities lack extension and continuing education programs.

Bakri Musa also cites personnel problems as adding to the woes of Malaysia's universities. Aloof Third World professors result in Malaysian students being passive listeners. The students become "silent stenographers." In addition, students suffer from the "going to class, turning in homework" syndrome. They do not appear interested in learning.

In an effort to inject new life into Malaysia's ailing system of education, Bakri Musa looks to successful models from the United States (in particular California), Canada, Germany, Brazil, Chile, and the International Baccalaureate Program. Because both the U.S. and Malaysia have ethnic problems, Bakri Musa's whole thesis is to convince readers that following the American system is the only

option for Malaysia.

Having lived for some time in California (he practices medicine in Gilroy), Dr. Bakri Musa makes the cogent evaluation that in reality, America has a K-14 system of education. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of Americans go on to post-secondary institutions, with two years of study being the norm. American community colleges provide 1) a high-school finishing school; 2) vocational training; 3) pre-university instruction (my evaluation; in fact, junior colleges offer better instruction at the lower-division level than is available at many larger universities where basic courses are taught by inexperienced teaching assistants).

Bakri Musa then gives an overview of many reforms in American education. The modern uniform system was started in the 1950s by James B. Conant, president of Harvard University. However in 1983 David Gardner, in *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, lamented the declining academic standard, the proliferation of teaching consumer math and driver education courses.

School districts have responded to this criticism in several ways. Magnet schools are public schools that provide specialized curriculums and instructional approaches to attract students from a variety of neighborhoods, operating at the school, district, city, or state level. Enrollment is controlled by establishing admissions criteria, such as first-come, first-served applications, lotteries, or percentage set-asides for neighborhood residents.

Charter Schools are a joint venture between the public and private sector. The underlying concept is to empower the ultimate consumers of schools (students and their parents) by taking control away from the central bureaucracy and giving it to the schools. The government is concerned with monitoring quality, compliance with rules and regulations, and setting the standards. The schools are concerned with providing an education that is appropriate to their localities.

The Coalition of Essential Schools was started by Theodore Sizer of Phillips Academy. Instead of an assembly-line system of parading students in front of a steady succession of specialists, a modular system divides students into groups that are taught by teams of teachers.

Though Bakri Musa praises the Canadian bilingual immersion system, he does not give more than a cursory view of how it works. He rightly mentions that there are two school boards, one Public and one Separate (or Catholic), with common exit examinations. In Canada both Protestant and Catholic schools contribute towards the common goal of educating citizens. Here I would like to add some details concerning this system:

Canadian French Immersion Programs

Early	Middle	Late
Begins in K or Grade 1. French 100% to Grade 2. Grade 3 - introduces English; by Grade 12 50% - 50%. Decision to enroll is made by the parents.	Begins in Grade 3 or 4. French instruction 80%	Begins in Grade 6 or 7. French 60-75%. Core subjects of Math, Social Studies, Science, are taught in English. Decision to enroll is made by students, not parents.

In 1998 a grass-roots movement in California resulted in the passing of Proposition 227. This effectively legislated an end to bilingual education in California. Now students take an immersion class similar to that of Canada for a maximum of one year, then they are assigned to regular classes.

In Germany's dual system of vocational training, students spend part of every day or week in school, the rest working in industry. It is a joint government-industry endeavor. The salient features include 1) manufacturing and service industries provide 90% of jobs; 2) the German workplace is highly regulated and the workforce unionized; 3) industry controls the vocational component, sets the curriculum, standards, rules and examinations; 4) vocational training is not seen as an impediment to entering university.

Brazil's school bursary program, *Bolsa Escola*, was established in 1995 to pay poor families to keep their children in school. In this program parents (often single mothers) are given a monthly income equivalent to the prevailing wage if their children attend school 90%. In order to eliminate graft, recipients are now given ATM cards to collect money without facing local petty bureaucrats.

In 1980 Chile's military government dismantled its entire educational system: administration, financing, and accountability. This broke the stranglehold of the powerful teachers' union by forcing negotiations with many local bargaining units instead of with the central government. The military did not meddle with curriculum, pedagogy, or teaching. Instead they actively sought private sector participation and encouraged competition between public and private schools. By giving responsibility to local governments, they ended state monopoly. These changes came in tandem with other reforms in the economy and society. The government pushed Chile towards an open market.

The International Baccalaureate is a Geneva-based NPO established in 1968 to cater to needs of children of internationally mobile families. At present 112 countries subscribe. The curriculum is both broad and deep, integrated, and emphasizes critical thinking. It revolves around six core areas: primary language, second language, social sciences & history, mathematics, natural sciences, plus an elective. There are three common core elements:

    1) Theory of knowledge that emphasizes critical thinking;

    2) In-depth study culminates in an extended essay;

    3) Community project that involves creativity, action, and service.

The secret of IB's success is a strict adherence to standards. The emphasis on class participation and group projects means that IB cannot be obtained through home schooling. IB is sufficiently flexible to meet the national needs of various countries.

Bakri Musa begins his suggested overhaul of Malaysia's education system with a mission statement. He recommends replacing that of the MOE, replete with pompous phrases such as "to inculcate positive values... developing the potential of individuals... who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious" with a more down-to-earth statement, specifically, "students

should be able to read and write in our national language as well as [in] English, do basic computations, understand the physical world around [them] and the living world within them, and have an appreciation of our history and our diversity."

Secondly, he believes that the government officials and bureaucrats are not the sole proprietor of education, nor is the government the only entity that can provide quality education. He calls for private sector participation in education at all levels. With school-based management (SBM) the headmaster would nominate trustees, but there would also have to be a mechanism to revoke SBM in case of mismanagement.

Amidst the diverse models he believes there must be a core of commonality. All students must study four core subjects - Malay, English, mathematics and science. Every faculty member should be provided a free computer, and unlimited Internet access (fixed fees for unlimited access versus hourly rates.) A LAN must be set up, and faculty encouraged to post assignments. Students should submit assignments electronically.

Currently Malaysia relies exclusively on an end-of-year assessment. Bakri Musa would eliminate the Year 11 exam (SPM), leaving the UPSR (Year 6), PMR (Year 9), and STP (Year 13). He would limit standardized tests to the four core subjects, use standardized tests to evaluate both the schools and teachers, and modify scoring so the final test contributes 70%, and GPA 30%. The examination results should be released earlier, eliminating the "dead time" spent while students wait for their results. He believes that the *matrikulasi* should be eliminated, restoring the primacy of Sixth Form. If matriculation must be kept, it should be used strictly as an outreach program, serving only Bumiputras, science students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Bakri Musa's greatest change would be streaming the high schools: Academic, Regular, Vocational. Divide the present large schools, streaming on the same campus. Teach the same 4 core subjects: Malay, English, math, science. The level or depth would vary according to streaming. Pattern academic schools after American prep schools; vocational schools after the German Dual System.

He would revamp the entire Islamic stream. Schools must be modernized; they must prepare students for the modern economy. They should teach the same four core subjects: Malay, English, math, and science.

He advocates a broad-based and liberal undergraduate curriculum in the American tradition. Students in the sciences must be exposed to humanities, and vice-versa. Law and medicine must operate as graduate programs.

Bakri Musa's proposal calls for private sector involvement at all levels. Charter schools operate as joint ventures between the public and private sectors. The underlying concept is to empower parents and students, and give them control. Vocational charter schools would prepare students for Arabic or Chinese universities, providing scholarships for the poor, as well as hostel facilities. Private schools

would not get state funding, but still require the student body to reflect society, and require that students demonstrate competence in Malay.

He would restructure Malaysia's 27 teachers' colleges, training teachers for preschool to Year 9. High school teachers should have a bachelor's degree plus 1 year teacher training. Bakri Musa disagrees with the American system of all teachers having a degree. He also disagrees with the American emphasis on pedagogy, not specialty. He suggests creating incentives for attracting talented teachers. These include raising pay to attract talent, building teachers' quarters for rural schools, establishing a mechanism to identify superior performers and reward them, and giving merit pay increases ("merit" being defined by teachers). Bakri Musa would reduce the activities of the MOE, specifically the Literature and Language Agency (DBP), the National Accreditation Board (LAN), and the two Examination Syndicates.

Evaluation

This book was written by someone who came through the Malaysian system of education, was a product of it, yet now lives outside the society and is not afraid to criticize it. The writing style is not unlike a letter to the editor; in fact the author has written essays in the *Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek, International Herald Tribune, Education Quarterly*, and the *New Straits Times*. He has also commented on (Malaysian) National Public Radio's *Marketplace*, and he writes a regular column called "Seeing It My Way" in *Malaysiakini* (dot com).

The author favors decentralization as a solution to Malaysia's ailing education system. This attitude stems from his belief that the government, through its MOE, micromanages education to such an extent that needed reforms cannot be made. Throughout his book he emphasizes the theme of relying on a core curriculum of Malay studies, English, science and mathematics, applied in different doses to students having various goals. However he misses a golden opportunity to suggest adapting the American concept of military schools, with their effective disciplinary programs for inner city students with behavioral problems, to the Islamic schools, which have no disciplinary problems.

A consistent theme in Bakri Musa's work is the need for racial desegregation. Implied in this attitude is a strong resistance among Malaysians to integrate. He often points to the American model for emulation, but he fails to note historical differences which may not apply to the Malaysian situation. For example, he suggests that state funding should be withheld from schools that do not cooperate. He says this in spite of his first-hand experience with the California schools that his children attend.

In California, local property taxes support the school districts; state and federal governments fund special programs. The now-famous Lau vs. Nichols Supreme Court decision threatened to withhold federal funding from the San Francisco School District not because it failed to integrate, but because it failed to provide education for a significant minority in the pupils' native language. Bilingual

education was begun within a few years. Two decades later Proposition 227 scrapped bilingual education in favor of a one-year immersion program. The bilingual education program had created a system whereby a supposedly integrated school was re-segregated by federal language interference.

The value of this book lies in its author's emulation of non-Malaysian (primarily American) education systems, and his suggestions of how to modify these in order to adapt them to a Malaysian setting. Some of his proposed improvements were actually implemented at the end of Mahathir's term, yet Bakri Musa questions whether these reforms will truly benefit the people, as they were made by executive mandate rather than through public discussion and parliamentary debate. Isn't he "looking a gift horse in the mouth"? Whether by accident or by design, science and math are now taught in Malaysia using English as the medium of instruction, one of the main points Bakri Musa makes in his book.

Given the many social problems cited, the title of this work feasibly could be changed to *A Malaysia Worthy of an Education System*. For those interested in Southeast Asian English education, however, the book provides a fresh outlook written by someone outside the system. For those interested in education in general, it offers numerous insights into educational systems throughout the world, examining successful approaches and reforms experienced by various nations.

Conclusion

In Tan's call for creativity I see more than a feint hint at the political correctness (PC) movement that menaced American college campuses during the 1990s. The nagging question then was "Whose politics are correct, yours or mine?" If a student didn't happen to concur with the self-appointed "correctness police," he or she would have been hounded, badgered or bullied into eventual submission, or else dropout status. In Tan's case (i.e., in Singapore), who is to decide *how* creative is creative *enough*? Is creativity for creativity's sake really going to produce good education? Though it may achieve a certain shock effect, it is more likely that this approach will result in witch hunts that drive decent teachers from their classrooms in favor of a nouveau establishment of "creativity elites." In effect it will stifle education rather than promote it.

Bakri Musa, on the other hand, without mentioning the term "creativity" even once (concerning teachers) in 268 pages, seems to convey a cheerful confidence which, as evidenced in several anecdotal examples, effortlessly achieves the very essence of creativity that Tan's approach lacks: freedom of choice, freedom of expression, freedom of enquiry. Bakri Musa shows how this approach can break down teacher-student barriers that are prevalent in Asia. He shows how the politics of "Malayism" have consistently served only to hinder educational endeavors. He shows how decentralized systems in other countries have overcome problems that in Malaysia are both created and perpetuated by a strongly centralized MOE.

In the case of both Singapore and Malaysia, it appears that education in the post-Colonial period suffered from a Carter-like national malaise. Singapore has responded with a "creativity" campaign. Malaysia has yet to respond, which is surprising in light of its many truly inspired economic solutions. It leaves us wondering what, if anything, will "shock the system," leading Malaysia's educational system out of the mire and into the twenty-first century.

Notes

) Students are placed in different secondary education tracks or streams, based on results of the PSLE. "Special" and "Express" are four-year courses leading up to the GCE O-level exam. In the "Special" stream, students take a course called "Higher Mother Tongue" (Chinese, Malay, Tamil). "Express" students simply take "Mother Tongue." "Normal" (Academic or Technical) is a four-year course leading up to a GCE N-level exam, with the possibility of taking a fifth year followed by an O-level exam.

) The expected behavior of each leader: the speed captain keeps track of time, controls noise, says "Let's get more ideas," or, "Let's move forward," etcetera; the super supporter encourages all ideas, offers no criticism, and says, "That's a great idea," or, "Another fantastic idea"; the super recorder takes notes on paper and places it on a table for all to see; the synergy guru encourages teammates to build on one another's ideas, and says, "Let's combine these two ideas"; the chief of wacky ideas sets the tone of creativity in order to increase the range of ideas. (S)he may say, "Let's have a wacky idea."

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