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## Embracing Compulsory Education: The Case of Singapore

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

EMBRACING COMPULSORY EDUCATION:  
THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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## ABSTRACT

Singapore is a late adopter of compulsory education (CE). Six years of schooling for all children became compulsory in Singapore in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2009). Surrounding Southeast Asian countries passed compulsory education legislation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Countries such as the Philippines adopted compulsory education in 1899 and Thailand in 1921. However, Malaysia, similar to Singapore, adopted CE legislation in the early-twenty-first century. In order to explain Singapore's adoption of CE legislation, we must look further into each country's reasons for implementing it.

Singapore reported in 2000 that its dropout rate was 0.4 percent at the primary level and 3.5 percent at the secondary level (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000). These findings indicate that school attendance was virtually universal even before the time CE legislation was implemented. By one measure, then, CE may be considered unnecessary; however, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stressed the importance of every child attending school and being granted the "same head start to developing her or his potential to the fullest" (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000). His concerns were dealing with two emerging trends during 1999, which would undermine Singapore's efforts to become a world-class economy and home to its citizens (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000). One trend reported the population rate was declining. A second trend reported an increase in Singaporeans living overseas. The prime minister



believed that enacting CE legislation would reverse the aforementioned trends by requiring children to attend school.

The research question of this thesis is “How do we explain Singapore’s adoption of CE legislation in 2003?” In order to answer my question, I will provide some background and context to the Singaporean case by first discussing the passage of CE legislation in four other Southeast Asian countries. I will compare and contrast each case by examining the different roles that CE legislation has played in each country for the purpose of better understanding Singapore’s implementation of CE legislation. Another way to further my comprehension of Singapore’s adoption of CE legislation is to examine general reasons for the adoption of CE legislation through analyzing theoretical perspectives based on Western ideologies. The thesis will also include a literature review, which will provide background information on the past two decades of the educational systems in Singapore to reveal further details on Singapore’s education and how CE legislation is related. I will analyze policy statements, speeches, and popular press releases to illuminate the implications of CE legislation in Singapore.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines Singapore's recent legislation of compulsory education (CE) in 2003. There are two specific reasons for my interest in CE legislation in Singapore: 1) Singapore is a late adopter of compulsory education compared to surrounding Southeast Asian countries that adopted CE in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and 2) In 2000, Singapore reported that its primary school dropout rate was 0.4 percent (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000), indicating its attendance rate was nearly universal. These reasons sparked my interest with regards to the timing and impact of CE legislation. The overall research question for this thesis is "How do we explain Singapore's adoption of CE legislation in 2003?" To answer this question, this thesis will illuminate factors contributing to Singapore's adoption of CE legislation.

#### *Research Methodology*

In order to answer my research question, I will first examine reasons for CE legislation being supported in other countries. Doing this examination will provide background and context in relation to Singapore's adoption of CE legislation. I will then thoroughly examine the possible reasons for Singapore's adoption of compulsory education from a Westernized perspective and apply it to the Singaporean context. The possible reasons will further aid our understanding of the adoption of compulsory education within a larger theoretical framework of local and global constructions of

educational policy. Overall, this thesis will be based on my analysis of policy statements, speeches, and popular press releases.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE ADOPTION OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION LEGISLATION  
ELSEWHERE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Philippines*

In the Philippines, formal education was established by the Spanish conquistadores as early as 1582 (Santos, 1952). Spain wanted the Filipinos to learn the Spanish language and be taught the Catholic faith. With the influential movement of free elementary education in the late eighteenth century within Europe, Spain felt it necessary that all Filipinos have access to education as well (Santos, 1952). However, the parish priests who also taught classes were against teaching Spanish to Filipinos. They believed that the Filipinos were only good for menial labor and farm work (Santos, 1952).

When the United States occupied the Philippines in 1898, they were more lenient on students as compared to Spain; the Spanish felt that learning could take place most effectively through rigid discipline (Santos, 1952). The American education philosophy focused more on the students' needs, and because of this students felt more favorably about attending school. Compulsory education during the American occupation was thus considered unnecessary (Santos, 1952); however, for regulatory purposes, CE legislation was still enforced to ensure that all students would have the opportunity to attend school.

*Thailand*

In 1921 Thailand passed CE legislation requiring all children to complete six years of schooling. This built on an 1892 proposal for universal public education and has been attributed to a push for modernization under King Chulalongkorn, who believed that all of his people needed to utilize education for modernization (Bhuapirom, 1977)—which was essentially the widespread desire of the King to adopt Western models of universal schooling. The abolition of slavery in 1905 (Klein, 1993) was also tied to the push for CE legislation that began a process of modernizing the country: in order for former slaves to be able to fully function in society it was necessary to educate them.

British influence was also important in Thailand's passage of CE legislation in 1921. The British had been commercially trading with Thailand during the years of European colonialism in Asia. Great Britain's presence greatly influenced Thailand to take measures towards modernizing the country and implementing CE legislation. The British had been utilizing CE for more than 40 years prior to Thailand's implementation of it. In 1919–20, a British ambassador stated his recommendation that no great increase in Thailand's primary school attendance may be looked for in the future unless primary education was made compulsory and free (Ministry of Education, 1919–20). With the Compulsory Education Act, Thailand did in fact see an increase in the number of primary school students. Data show that in 1919–20 there were 170,052 total students in primary school. By 1922–23 this number had risen to 425,604 students (Ministry of Education, 1922–23). In the case of Thailand, the passage of CE legislation led to an increase in school attendance, which was considered a step towards modernization.

### *Malaysia*

Like Singapore, in 2003 Malaysia passed CE legislation; but Malaysia passed CE legislation for reasons focusing more on ensuring equitable access to education regardless of ethnic background. Malaysia was colonized by Great Britain in the late nineteenth century, but the British were not interested in establishing an education system in Malaysia. The British were satisfied with the *intent* of having a structured education system for the Malay, but did not care for implementing it. Education was not needed in Malaysia for non-Europeans due to rigidly defined social roles, which were designated according to ethnicity. Malaysia is made up of three ethnicities: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The British were in charge of governing and administrating the Chinese and Indians laboring in its extractive industries and commercial sector, which included the rubber industry (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The Malay tended the fields as farmers (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Over time educational expansion increased for all ethnicities, but not evenly among the ethnicities: Malays did not have the same educational opportunities as non-Malays (Chinese and Indians). Between the years of 1938–1949, Malays' secondary education attainment was approximately 31 percent compared to 50 percent for non-Malays (Pong, 1995). Postsecondary education attainment was 10 percent for Malays and 15 percent for non-Malays. During 1950–1959 the ethnic discrepancies in educational attainment started to change (Pong, 1995). Each ethnic group was obtaining approximately 90 percent primary education within their respective ethnicity. Malays, Chinese, and Indians were all attaining the same amount of education at the secondary and postsecondary level—approximately 60 percent and 10 percent, respectively. During

1965–1969 Malays took the lead in educational attainment for secondary education, with approximately 90 percent attainment, Indians with approximately 80 percent, and Chinese with 70 percent (Pong, 1995). Postsecondary education was a smaller gap, but Malays still led with approximately 25 percent, Chinese with 20 percent, and Indians with approximately 15 percent (Pong, 1995).

Presently there is still a gap between educational attainment among the three ethnic groups in Malaysia. *Bernama: The Malaysian National New Agency* quoted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, “I don’t want to see anyone in the country, regardless of race or whether he is rich or poor, to be deprived of education ... this is unfair. As Prime Minister and leader of the government, I have made [education] compulsory for all our children” (Unknown, 2008). The long-term effects of CE legislation in Malaysia are yet to be seen.

#### *The Uniqueness of Singapore*

Singapore has different reasons to support its adoption of CE legislation when compared to the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Compared with the Philippines, Singapore did not have to enforce compulsory education for religious purposes; but like the Philippines during the American occupation, it enforced CE legislation for regulatory reasons. Similar to Thailand, Singapore’s education has been influenced by the British; however, the British left Singapore to become its own sovereign country many years before CE legislation was implemented. In comparison to Malaysia, Singapore’s population is mainly Chinese; therefore, a gap in educational attainment due to ethnic background does not impact the country as heavily as it would in Malaysia.

## CHAPTER THREE

### GENERAL REASONS FOR ADOPTION OF CE LEGISLATION

This section moves from the empirical examples discussed in the previous section to examine some general explanations for why countries adopt CE legislation. I contend that CE legislation is explained by its perceived links to social order, social mobility, overcoming poverty through school attendance, a knowledge-based economy, and a world model of schooling.

#### *Social Order*

Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal (1992) note that the political construction of society begins with its individual members. In a social state, individuals and activities within a society are systematically interconnected and oriented toward collective goals (Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992). These collective goals consist of national related purposes and identity that create future citizens in the image of the current state (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). It is with this end in mind that governments utilize education to support collective goals that are oriented toward nation-building.

Education for the individual begins during childhood. Ramirez and Boli (1987) state that certain values are promoted by the government to establish good, loyal, and productive children, who in turn become good, loyal, and productive adult citizens who produce a better, stronger, and more developed national society. Ramirez and Boli also



argue that children are systematically exposed to and taught key values by way of schooling.

An important component of the spread of government-endorsed values is through civic education. Pratte (1988) states that one way to perceive the purpose of civic education is to note that civic education influences its students to pursue their obligations and responsibilities as citizens—to always be active, engaged, and committed to seeking the public good. Pratte contends that the function of civic education is to systematically produce citizens possessing a national loyalty, a sense of obligation to country, and a strong desire to serve it honorably—prepared, if and when necessary, to die in its defense. Civic education can cover many national agendas, which can sometimes obscure its purpose. Pratte mentions three goals that pinpoint specific reasons for teaching civic education.

The first goal of civic education, as outlined by Pratte (1988), relates to educating students in the historical perspective. The historical perspective involves students learning cultural traditions, including philosophy, law, language, government, economics, architecture, literature, etc. (Pratte, 1988). In Pratte's example, the historical perspective can educate on the history of a nation's complex culture. The second goal of civic education relates to "social action skills" or communication skills, in which Pratte explores the ability of citizens to confer, discuss, debate, argue, plan, negotiate, and compromise with each other to gain a democratic society. Students can be taught social action skills through civic education so they may effectively participate in a future society made up of citizen that have reciprocal accord among each other, shared

knowledge, and mutual trust (Pratte, 1988). The third goal of civic education relates to the reduction of ethnocentrism. Civic education can culturally condition students to be accepting of other ethnicities within their nation. Eventually the goal is to eliminate any ethnocentrism a student may have in his or her presuppositions of others (Pratte, 1988). In sum, government-endorsed values, such as civic education, could be supported by CE legislation, which in turn would create social order among children entering adulthood.

### *Social Mobility*

Ramirez and Boli (1987) note that social mobility has been institutionalized through education. They give an example of this in the “embourgeoisement” of European society in the late nineteenth century (see Ellul, 1967). The bourgeois were using education as a means of keeping their noble status. However, the state wanted to create social progress. Thus, mass schooling was further recognized as a means to improve the state. Mass schooling would help educate the people to work in the new emerging European economy (i.e., New Economy of Exchange) in the late nineteenth century. This emerging economy needed individuals to become autonomous in a way that would enable them to conduct their own activities, but still contribute to the state financially (Ramirez & Boli, 1987).

In the modern economy, Green (1997) mentions meritocracy as playing a major role in social mobility. Many nations use meritocracy as a way to level the playing field, in which education and occupations are equalized among all social backgrounds (Roemer, 2000). All young children are given the same amount of education regardless of socioeconomic background. Students who have the attributes to perform well keep

advancing until they graduate and enter the workforce. Within the context of meritocracy, students entering the workforce submit their applications in the same pool of applications. They are hired, advanced, and respected in the workplace based on performance. Ultimately, CE legislation could promote social mobility by requiring attendance to the many schools created by the mass schooling system and through the education needed to prepare students for a meritocratic society.

### *Poverty*

It is unquestionably clear that poverty affects educational attendance rates. For example, during the establishment of the cotton mill in England's Lancashire County, the poor depended on their children for their earnings (Stone, 1969). People would send their children to work in the mills starting at age eight or nine. Children would work full time six days a week. There was no time for school unless it was during their day off, which was Sunday. Stone reported that in Lancashire, Sunday school had better attendance than regular day school. According to Stone:

The attendance rate is greatly affected by the work force in which a plethora of job opportunities may adversely affect education, since a high demand for child or adolescent labor will tempt parents and children to leave school at an early age. Today, the high wages offered to unskilled adolescent labor in the factories and service industries act as a powerful deterrent to the spread of secondary and higher education in England. In the same way the demand for child labour in mine and factory one hundred and fifty years ago was one of the main hindrances to the spread of elementary education, and for a period may have led to a positive decline (p. 76).

In another case relating to Thailand, there are children from poor farm families who must tend to the farm rather than go to school (Ministry of Education, 1919–20). There have also been studies in China that report the issue of decentralization of school

resources. The national government gave the job of financing education to the local governments and communities (Hannum, 2003). Due to decentralization, local governments were on their own, giving them fewer resources to finance education. With financial decentralization, private costs for schooling in China rose. With the rising economic value of child labor, poor rural families decided to pull their children out of school (Hannum, 2003). Overall, CE legislation would prohibit primary school aged children from working. CE legislation would further support the values of obtaining an education over monetary earnings given for rigorous labor at a young age.

#### *Knowledge-Based Economy*

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 1996) notes that a knowledge-based economy (KBE) results from a full recognition of the role of knowledge and technology in a nation's economic growth. Knowledge embodied in humans and technology has generally been central to a nation's economic growth. Specifically, tangible items such as computers and technology are heavily invested for economic growth; therefore, intangible investments, which are the skilled (i.e., educated to perform specific tasks) workforce and technical expertise, are also heavily invested to utilize computers and technology (OECD, 1996).

OECD (1996) discusses the investments for KBE in more detail by mentioning four components: knowledge distribution, employment, science system, and knowledge-related indicators. Knowledge distribution in the "information society" is knowledge codified to be used in computer and communication networks (OECD, 1996). Users interacting with computer and communication networks are driven to be innovative with

their codified knowledge in order to develop a productive economic output. Employment in the knowledge-based economy is considered the “skilled workforce.” The change and upgrading in technology is creating large demand for highly skilled employees (OECD, 1996). Science system pertains to the new generation of scientists and engineers that carry out key functions in research laboratories and institutes of education. OECD is in favor of supporting collaborations between industry and the schooling of knowledge and technology to the new generation of scientists and engineers (OCED, 1996). The knowledge-related indicators are general constraints that serve as indicators to look for improvements in the knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1996). Overall, countries would use education as a means to produce the key components of KBE and drive economic growth. The adoption of CE legislation could then be prompted by a society’s concern for education and its production of the key components that drive economic growth.

#### *Adoption of World Model*

Anderson-Leavitt (2003) observes that there is a “world culture theory of schooling” that shows the spread of similarities in schooling around the world. Meyer (1997) states that schools around the world are becoming more homogenous over time (p. 173). An example of this homogeneity can be seen in global agreements about the value and the maintenance of education. Global agreements state that education is a universal right, has positive effects, creates a universal increase in marginalized groups’ participation, should be a centralized policy, favors cluster or group learning, and implements a core elementary curriculum (Anderson-Leavitt, 2003).

A world model of schooling would also relate to a nation's economic development. There is interdependency among nations or economies in which capital, goods, services, and information are exchanged (Green, 1997). Free-market and mixed socialist economies are investing in the distribution of education and training for fierce competition in the global market. Educational policies that are being adapted vary among different nations; however, a nation's position in the world economy can influence an exchange of best educational policies to be adopted (Baker & LeTendre, 2006). As a result of many developed nations adopting CE legislation, developing and developed nations without CE are influenced to embrace the policy, and thus in affect promote a world culture of schooling.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LITERATURE REVIEW ON EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

This literature review discusses the ways in which Singapore's culture impacts its education system. The permeating effects of English language education will be discussed, as well as the dominant subcultures that impact Singapore's education system. Another issue that will be covered is education reform from a global/economic perspective. Singapore's educational reform will be viewed during its struggle to become an industrial nation initially, and later a more global nation. Thus, the tension between the historically specific educational values a particular city-state and a more globalized hegemonic system of learning serves as a focal theoretical space for the present analysis.

#### *Education and Culture*

Peter Mortimore, an educational scholar at the University of Denmark, wrote a book called, *The culture of change: Case studies of improving schools in Singapore and London*. In it he discussed Singapore's educational culture thoroughly by analyzing the methods essential for improving school culture in Singapore as contrasted with methods for improving school culture in London. This study showed how schools "against the odds" were able to make progress through education (Mortimore, 2000). Mortimore's study looked at two secondary schools in London and two secondary schools in Singapore, each with a different head teacher. These head teachers had similar goals with respect to what they wanted to achieve: they aspired to raise student results on public

examinations and embody a belief that “no child was unteachable” (Mortimore, 2000). All four head teachers (i.e., principals) from each school encouraged their teachers to share the vision of achievement among themselves by altering the predominant culture or beliefs that inhibited the schools from reaching its goals. Similarly, the belief that setting realistic, challenging goals would be an important part in improving students’ motivation and achievement were evident in the two educational contexts. A third similarity noted in the study was that both cultures were optimistic about the progress and the achievements of individual students.

However, both countries’ philosophies of how to reform and achieve success differed. One of the key differences was that Eastern teaching philosophy takes the view that everyone can obtain the same level of success through education, although some individuals must work harder. In contrast, Western teaching philosophy takes the view that not everyone can obtain the same success because certain individuals have “born abilities” or are naturally more gifted (Mortimore, 2000). Another difference between the schools in London and Singapore was the relationship that existed between the students and the teachers. The students in London had a more relaxed relationship with their professors in which they could ask questions, give their opinions, and question authority. However in Singapore, the teachers were stricter and discouraged independent thought (Mortimore, 2000). Students generally understood that they were being pushed to work hard in Singapore. Another difference was that London teachers were not honored, while the Singaporean teachers received a great deal of respect. On Teacher Day (a major holiday in Singapore), citizens praised teachers for their role in society, stressing their



important positions. Singapore had some similar traits to Western practices; however, a strict relationship between students and teachers remained an integral part of the education system. Teachers in Singapore were well respected, but were perceived to be authoritarian.

Studies like Mortimore's (2000) suggested substantial differences in historically and culturally contingent ideologies about what it meant to "properly" educate a nation's citizens. This study prompted a closer examination of the culturally particular circumstances and values that moved the Singaporean education system to support specific policies and measures.

Saravanan Gopinathan, a professor at Nanyang Technological University, observed in "Language policy changes, 1979–1997: Politics and pedagogy" that Singapore is a pluralistic society composed of three main cultures (Gopinathan, 1994). Four different languages are spoken in Singapore, but English is the official language. However, the country was struggling with language education. Initially, English was considered the major language of administration, commerce, and education. In the 1970s the government became concerned about individual cultural values and decided to implement a bilingual policy in which children were encouraged to learn their mother tongues (the types of languages will be discussed below) in addition to English (Gopinathan, 1994).

The Chinese in Singapore could not initially communicate with each other because many of them spoke different dialects (e.g., Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.). In the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese in Singapore were predominantly speaking English in their

households instead of any Chinese language for communication (Gopinathan, 1994). Concern arose from the Singaporean government and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew because the Chinese citizens were not maintaining a language from their own culture (Gopinathan 1994).

During the 1990s the Ministry of Education (MOE) determined that the bilingual educational system needed to assist pupils weak in bilingualism (Gopinathan, 1994). MOE decided to add additional class time so that more time could be dedicated to achieving a successful bilingual school curriculum.

As noted previously, Singapore has three dominant cultures that influence its education system: Chinese (which is the most dominant), Malays, and Indians. Each culture has its own education-related issues within the education system. Maha Sripathy, president of English Language and Literature Teachers Association (Singapore), reflected on the issue of cultural mismatch that existed between home and school culture in her paper, “Language teaching pedagogies and cultural scripts: The Singapore primary classroom.” The interaction between practices (pedagogic approaches to teaching) was a significant factor impacting total graduation rate for many schools. Sripathy mentioned two key pedagogic approaches: Share Book Approach (SBA)<sup>1</sup> and Language Experience Approach (LEA).<sup>2</sup> However, she focused on SBA and CDS<sup>3</sup> (Class Dictated Story).

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<sup>1</sup>SBA (Share Book Approach): Attending to the development of language through reading. A style of teaching that is supported by the principles of text repetition, with the print itself being the focus of attention and under the control of the teacher (Sripathy, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>LEA (Language Experience Approach): Teachers observe children talking about their experiences and guiding them to write about these experiences (Sripathy, 1994).

SBA and CDS are based on linguistics. Chinese and Indians in Singapore have a hierarchal philosophy with respect to the relationship between parents and their children; however, Malays believe that children should be given more respect because they are innocent beings that require guidance from more experienced adults (Sripathy, 1994). Adult teachers with Chinese and Indian backgrounds may feel that a child's perspective is irrelevant. However, Malay teachers believe in a more divergent approach (as opposed to the Chinese and Indian approach) where the teacher strives to understand a child's perspective and integrates it with her or his own understanding to form a collaborative meaning. Based on Sripathy, it seems that Singapore may need to implement different pedagogies to cater to students with different cultural backgrounds.

Jason Tan, an educational scholar at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, explained in "Joint Government-Malay Community Efforts to Improve Malay Educational Achievement in Singapore" the problem of the Malay community lagging behind other dominant cultures with respect to educational achievement in Singapore. In the 1980s Tan (1995) discussed the underrepresentation of Malays in the professional/technical and administrative/managerial classes (see Khoo, 1981). The prime minister recognized that Malays would need a sound education in order for them to become productive members of Singaporean society. In the 1980s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew urged Malay leaders and educationists to work together to advance Malay education (Tan, 1995). This resulted in the formation of the Council for Muslim Children

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<sup>3</sup>CDS (Class Dictated Story): The child dictates a story from an experience (or from one they heard). The teacher helps the class or student transcribe it into a piece of writing using the targeted language. Teachers focus on the grammatical aspects of the language as they are transcribing the dictated story (Sripathy, 1994).

(MENDAKI). MENDAKI started off poorly in its efforts to assist Muslim children, but was well perceived by the government because Malay Members of Parliament (MPS) were well connected within the Singaporean government. MENDAKI sponsored, or assisted in sponsoring, scholarships for students. For example, there was a “Home Tuition Scheme” introduced in 1987 for students that needed extra individual attention with their preparation for public examinations (Tan, 1995). However, few Malay parents utilized MENDAKI services because many were unaware of the existence of the organization. Another problem that MENDAKI encountered dealt with the dilemma concerning how to gauge Malay educational achievement—whether to compare achievement to Indians and Chinese or only among themselves.

Even after educational achievement was achieved, Malays were still being discriminated against. They were seen as lazy, which made it extremely difficult for them to obtain employment and social equity (Tan, 1995). Malays were still viewed negatively because of past educational performance. Their loyalty to Singapore was even questioned by the Singapore government. Overall, the desire to lessen racial tension was an integral component in Tan’s work. If Malays were not provided with the means for upward mobility, Tan believed it could spark ethnic riots (Tan, 1995).

#### *Educational Reform for Economic and Global Objectives*

Paul Cheung, a senior lecturer at National University of Singapore, acknowledged in his article “Educational development and manpower planning in Singapore” that Singapore was advantageously geographically located for exporting and importing, but that the country did not have any natural resources. This lack of natural resources is a

further concern for understanding issues related to education in Singapore: due to the lack of natural resources, greater emphasis is placed on citizens as national resources. Singapore was initially impoverished after separating from Malaysia and following the withdrawal of the British military in the mid-1960s. However, technical training became important in helping jump-start the nation's economy. Many companies had onsite and overseas training funded by the government in order to further the necessary manpower integral to the economic progress of the country. Both skilled and professional workers were flourishing; however, there was high incidence of educational attrition by the 1960s and 1970s (Cheung, 1994). Many students did poorly in school because of their lack of interest, failure to achieve academic standards, and poor employment prospects. The situation was largely rectified after changes that occurred in the 1980s. Students were streamed into three courses of study at the end of primary three. Two of the courses were used to prepare students for the primary school leaving examination (PSLE) (Cheung, 1994), while the third course prepared students interested in prevocational training. In the 1980s the percentage of those passing PSLE and General Certificate of Education (GCE), which is a test after secondary education, was increasing annually up until the early 1990s. School attrition no longer seemed to be an issue. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education Review Committee set up a ten-year general education system for all students up to secondary education. Those interested in vocational schooling after secondary education were given opportunities for post-secondary education. The Council for Professional and Technical Training closely monitored enrollment in polytechnics at the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. This

monitoring was used to ensure that there were a sufficient number of students graduating in disciplines relevant for Singapore's economic restructuring and technological advancement.

In a National Institute for Research Advancement review, Jason Tan and Saravanan Gopinathan (2000) suggested that Singapore's attempt to reform education for the purpose of fueling the economy with skilled workers was a pragmatic concept. However, numerous educational researchers, especially those in Singapore, worried that Singapore's educational system was insufficient to prepare its students for the twenty-first century. Society was becoming more global, and therefore education had to prepare the country for national economic competition (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000). Since the mid-1980s, the marketization of education was manifested through increased school autonomy and interschool competition within Singapore. The Ministry of Education established independent autonomous schools which were allowed to recruit its own staff, manage its funds, implement incentives for its employees, and establish its own curriculums. In the late 1990s the Singapore government implemented an initiative called "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation." An integral part of this initiative focused on developing all students into active learners with critical thinking skills (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000). The independent and autonomous schools progressed successfully, becoming well-established schools that served as educational standards for the rest of the Singaporean educational community.

Aside from improving educational standards within the nation through competition, the previous educational goals (i.e., educating for an industrialized/

manufacturing nation) became less important for Singaporean education. Leo W. H. Tan, an educational scholar at Nanyang Technological University, discussed students having to be innovative and autonomous in problem solving in order to survive in the twenty-first century's global economy (Tan, 1999). According to Tan, Singapore wanted to emphasize its education system as being world-class and recognized for its intellectual capital as well as its creative energy. In order for this to happen, Singaporean educational researchers suggested using an education system similar to the one used in the United States. Pak Tee Ng, an educational scholar at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, stated that Singapore perceived the United States as utilizing a constructivist view of education (i.e., construction of knowledge built by learning) that was well known among modernized countries. Singapore wished to have schools such as MIT in the United States, and wanted to be revered for its innovative ideas and application (Ng, 2005). Tan concluded that Singapore's government, private sector, and citizens needed to provide ample resources for schools, and that teachers should be re-educated so that they could properly educate students for the twenty-first century global economy (Tan, 1999).

### *Summary*

We can see that Singapore is an ideal site to examine the tensions in educational policy between historically, culturally specific concerns and the pressures of a more globalized economy. Singapore made or has planned to make reforms to its education, and we can understand these motives through a detailed analysis of local values and intentions that Singapore has for its citizens. In many instances the reforms are related to the country's cultural and global/economic objectives. Singapore is a society that is

divided into many cultures. The London/Singapore case study tells us that Singapore has retained an Eastern way of schooling. However, the bilingualism article exemplifies English education as a permeating force that can both unify and erode the different independent cultures that exist within Singapore. Ethnic tensions have resulted from the discrimination and disparity in the education offered to each ethnic group. The Chinese majority has been accused, for example, of being responsible for discriminating against Malays, who are minorities.

Singapore did positive work on making the country a leading economic nation in Southeast Asia through education. Singapore's reform on education after Great Britain and Malaysia left the nation increased its productivity by using education as a means of preparing citizens to enter the workforce. Recent preparations for competing in a global society consisted of autonomizing the schools to encourage global competition, teaching students to be creative, and enforcing a constructivist view of education. Singapore wanted to be ranked with countries such as the United States in making innovative products, with the goal of becoming a worldwide educational hub. Yet as we have seen, the trajectory of these goals has been rife with contention. In order to understand why, we must take a more systematic and nuanced look at the specifics of Singapore's multiple influences and initiatives in constructing a particular kind of society.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CE ADOPTION IN SINGAPORE

*1993*

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong observed a problem with dropout rates reaching 2,500 primary and secondary students (Speech-Text Archival and Retrieval System, 1993).

*1994*

Education Minister Lee Yock Suan refused to administer CE legislation. He stated, “We should help pupils overcome these problems, rather than depend on legislation and enforcement to compel unwilling or unable pupils to remain in school against their will” (Ng, 1994).

*1999*

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong recommended that the first four years of elementary education be compulsory (Unknown, 1999).

The government set up a committee to see whether CE should be introduced in Singapore (Ministry of Education, 2000).

*2000*

In April, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean insisted that the government take into account the views of all people from all sectors regarding the issue of compulsory education (Unknown, 2000, April 2). Examples of the different issues were the effects of

CE legislation on Madrasah schools, children with disabilities, and students who studied overseas.

On August 3, the Ministry of Education accepted the recommendations from the committee on CE legislation (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000).

On August 17, Ahmad (2000) of the Singapore *Straits Times* reported Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Senior Parliamentary Secretary of Foreign Affairs, as stating the Singapore government succeeded in exempting six private Madrasah schools from the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). This agreement promoted the Malay-Muslim community to support CE legislation (Ahmad, 2000).

#### 2001

Ho Peng of the Ministry of Education stated that compulsory education should encompass “special needs” children to attend specially tailored programs (Lee, 2001).

#### 2002

MOE tried to locate 312 missing children and their families to attend Primary 1 schooling before CE legislation began in 2003. The largest portion of children unaccounted for included 220 students born and raised overseas (Davie, 2002).

#### 2003

Singapore implemented CE legislation on January 1 (Ministry of Education, 2009).

CHAPTER SIX  
DATA ANALYSIS  
*Policy Statements<sup>1</sup>*

The Committee on Compulsory Education (CCE) was established to research whether or not compulsory education (CE) should be recommended to the Ministry of Education (MOE). This section discusses certain issues that CCE witnessed during the developmental stages of CE. CCE reported the importance of CE to meet key objectives and research issues, including the balance between the parents and the state's responsibility in relation to CE, the duration of CE, the minority communities affected by CE, the special needs students affected by CE, and the enforcement of CE legislation.

CCE recommended the introduction of CE to the MOE in 2000. The reasons were to uphold two objectives given by the Singapore education system: 1) “giving our children a common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education,” and 2) “training to prepare them for a Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) and giving our children a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion” (CCE, 2000). CCE created focus groups to question the two objectives and to discover the extent to which CE would support the two objectives. The majority of participants in the focus groups agreed with the two objectives and

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<sup>1</sup>Committee on Compulsory Education. (2000). *Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.).

supported the enforcement of CE. The focus groups consisted of community leaders, members of the public, and interest groups.

CCE stated that an emphasis on CE did not replace the parents' responsibility to send their children to school. CCE stressed that parents must send their children to school and if they neglected the responsibility, they would be penalized. The focus group concurred with CCE; however, they suggested a system in which families and community members could assist parents who did not comply in sending their children to school, rather than having the state dole out a punishment.

Like many other countries throughout the world, the duration of CE in Singapore would be adequate at ten years. However, ten years would cover secondary education, and CCE believed this would not work. CCE stated that children at the secondary stage of education had complex issues. One issue was the lack of motivation to attend school. CCE concluded that six years of CE would be adequate, and students who did not have an interest in secondary education should consider vocational skills training. In addition, CCE claimed that six years was enough time for students to be socialized among the diverse ethnicities in Singapore.

CCE listed minority communities being affected by CE legislation as: Madrasah students, San Yu Adventist students, and home-schooled students. Madrasah students were the largest community affected because they made up 90 percent of all minority communities in Singapore. Madrasah schools' curriculum was religion oriented, and some of the students became religious scholars and teachers. CCE stated that Madrasah associates did not agree on having CE force their primary students to attend national

schools because it would affect enrollment for their secondary schools—since Madrasah schools were essential to produce religious scholars and teachers, CE would cause an adverse affect. However, CCE was concerned that Madrasah students who did not become religious scholars or teachers would not be prepared for a KBE society. There were two approaches suggested by the Muslim/Malay community. The first approach was extreme, and suggested that primary Madrasah students attend national schools, and attend Madrasah schools as an after-school program. The second approach was less extreme, and suggested Madrasah students attend Madrasah schools, but must prepare to take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). In its report, CCE mentioned that it supported the extreme approach; however, it formally suggested the less extreme approach, which was popular among the Muslim/Malay community. This approach allowed students to be individually exempted from CE. The next step was to figure out the benchmark for Madrasah students' PSLE scores. CCE conferred with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to decide on a benchmark. MUIS suggested that PSLE results should be paralleled to EM1 and EM2<sup>2</sup> Malay students attending Singapore's six lowest performing national schools. CE agreed to the MUIS recommendations. The final step was to decide on the number of students allowed to be in Madrasah schools. Four hundred prospective students entered Madrasah schools each year. Of those 400 students, 110 become religious scholars or teachers. CCE believed that the ratio between the number of students that enrolled in Madrasah schools and the number of students who became religious scholars or teachers would suffice. CCE was

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<sup>2</sup>EM1 and EM2 are the top two streams to follow in Singapore national primary education curriculum.

satisfied with this ratio because between 60 and 70 percent of the students would meet Singapore's first educational core objective.

CCE reported on the San Yu Adventist school as another minority community exempt from CE. The San Yu Adventist school was operated and funded by the Seventh Day Adventist Mission. CCE stated that the San Yu Adventist schools offered a core curriculum very similar to national schools; therefore, like Madrasah students, they must take the PSLE and score parallel to an average score of 33 percent among EM1 and EM2 students to stay exempt from CE. CCE also demanded that San Yu Adventist schools continue to teach the national curriculum.

Home schooling was another minority community that CCE considered exempt from CE. The majority of parents of home-schooled students who advocated for exemption were Christian. There were CCE members that did not believe home-schooled students should be exempt; however, enforcing punishment under CE would not be reasonable. As mentioned by the CCE report, parents of home-schooled students had strong views about their children's education; therefore, they would not be lax about educating their children. CCE recommended home-schooled children take the PSLE similar to the minority communities mentioned above; however, they must score within the same range as the San Yu Adventist students. CCE also recommended that home-schooled students be closely monitored by MOE. CCE believed that MOE should test home-schooled students at certain times during their education. If MOE witnessed parents not providing a curriculum within MOE's standards, the student should not be exempt from CE.

By the same token, special education students were another minority community CCE recommended to be exempt from CE; however, in contrast with the other minorities, they were also exempt from the PSLE. Special education students have needs and abilities that vary depending on the individual. Some students have mild disabilities that enable them to attend mainstream schools. These mainstream schools were supported by MOE with facilities and resources that assisted students with special needs to attend school as normal students. Special needs students who could not attend mainstream schools would need to register for special education schools. Special education schools catered to special education students through specially trained teachers and para-medical personnel. Special needs students who were not able to attend school outside of their home would be schooled within a home-based program. Supporters for special education schools and home-based programs were the National Council of Social Services (NCCS), Voluntary Welfare Organization (VWO), and MOE. There were 17 education schools reported and managed by eight VWOs. MOE and NCSS provided funding for each special education student at four times the cost of a normal student. MOE funded 90 percent of a new purpose-built school for special needs students. MOE planned to build 15 additional purpose-built schools in the future. In conclusion, CCE believed that MOE, NCSS, and VWO would keep funding special education whether or not CE was introduced. CCE recommended that MOE review funding for special education schools and provide assistance to VWO to manage the current 17 special education schools. CCE also recommended that NCSS and MOE collaborate to create programs that special

education and national education schools could participate in together. CCE believed this would strengthen social integration between special needs and normal students.

CCE acknowledged that the majority of feedback was in support of CE legislation. If CE would be legislated, then enforcement would be the next step to consider. CCE reported there was concern that the sanctions under CE would be too harsh toward parents. Legal punishments under CE consisted of fines up to \$5,000 (Singapore dollars), jail time up to 12 months, or both. CCE reported that supporters for CE also believed an adverse affect would take place if parents were punished too severely.

Despite the disagreement about punishing parents under CE legislation, CCE recommended that enforcement was necessary. CCE claimed that parents would have low regard for CE and Singapore's legal system if there were no sanctions. However, CCE believed that the sanctions should not be enforced until all efforts to rectify the issue had been attempted. Certain measures of rectification included counseling and community assistance. Regarding community assistance, CCE recommended that MOE assist in setting up a "board" for CE by community members. This board would keep watch to see who in the community had neglected CE, and would report to the Director General of Education (DGE). CCE also recommended that the board have the power to investigate parents if they were not abiding by CE legislation. In addition, CCE addressed the issue of exclusion. There could be times when students seemed unfit for school. CCE believed that disruptive and/or disobedient students needed to be excluded from school. CCE recommended certain measures be developed to tackle the issue of exclusion.



*Summary*

Overall, CCE reported on the different issues that would exist if CE were to be implemented. CE served the purposes of meeting two key objectives, which would support common core knowledge for a strong foundation for further education and training that would prepare students for KBE. The two objectives were well perceived by CCE's focus group along with CE being the legislation that supported the objectives. However, CCE stressed that CE should not take the place of the parents' role. CCE believed that the parents must still be involved with their children's school attendance and that the state would step in only if other means had failed to rectify the issue. The duration of CE was discussed, and a decision for six years was recommended. CCE reported four minority communities as affected by and exempt from CE. Madrasah students, San Yu Adventist students, and home-schooled students would be exempt, though they would all need to take the PSLE. Madrasah students' scores must match their EM1 and EM2 peers who were enrolled in the six lowest ranked national schools. Both San Yu Adventist students and home-schooled students would need to score in the 33rd percentile of EM1 and EM2 national school students. Contrary to the three minorities mentioned above, special education students would be exempt from both CE and the PSLE; they would be tested on their own accord. The report concluded with an emphasis on enforcement. CCE believed enforcement necessary for parents to take an interest in the legislation and the integrity of the country's legal system. On a final note, CCE recommended CE legislation because of their strong belief that it would uphold the two key objectives: 1) "giving our children a common core of knowledge which will provide

a strong foundation for further education,” and 2) “training to prepare them for a Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) and giving our children a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion” (CCE, 2000).

### *Speeches*

There were four speeches that discussed the reasons for CE. The first and second speeches featured below were delivered by Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean during the opening and closing segments of the “Second Reading of the Compulsory Education Bill on October 2000.” The third speech was given by the Senior Minister of State (SMS) to the Ministry of Education (MOE). Minister of State Chan Soo Sen replied to the third speech with the fourth speech featured below on CE.

#### *October 9, 2000, Opening Speech*

Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean highlighted two key objectives of the Singapore education system: to prepare citizens for the workforce and to provide a common educational experience. He mentioned the highly praised international reputation Singapore’s education system was receiving for Math, Science, and IT. However, despite this praise, there were urgent matters regarding children’s futures. According to Hean, Singapore needed a higher level of education to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy. CE was thus the next step to meet the demands. However, there were minority communities of people that did not fit the standards of national schools. For instance, Madrasah schools were heavily focused on religion, unlike national schools that were focused on math and science. Teo Chee Hean recognized the importance of the different communities and their cooperation. He spoke about their exemption to CE, but noted that

certain conditions needed to be met. The conditions were for every student to pass the Primary School Learning Examination (PSLE).

The different communities of students that took the PSLE were Madrasah school students, San Yu Adventist school students, and home-schooled students. Teo Chee Hean stated how each community would meet the standards on the PSLE. Another minority community exempt from CE was special needs children. Special needs children would reach their full potential in accordance to their individual abilities. Therefore, they were exempt from CE and the PSLE, but were recommended to attend special education schools to learn at their own pace.

Teo Chee Hean also emphasized the state and the family working together to ensure school attendance. He discussed the importance of parents sending their children to school regularly, and recommended they not rely on CE to enforce their obligation. He warned the parents who were not fulfilling their obligations that they would be sanctioned to an appropriate extent.

Teo Chee Hean discussed the importance of CE as a bill. The bill would give power to the minister and the Director-General of Education (DGE) to enforce CE and apply punishment. The bill would also regulate the key objectives of CE.

The Rear Admiral's concluding thoughts emphasized the importance of CE supporting young Singaporeans to gain an educational foundation for their future. He also stressed a CE bill would provide a common education that would support the unification of all communities for a future Singaporean society. On a final note, he stressed the

importance of commitment from the different communities and parents to make CE work (Teo, 2000a).

*October 9, 2000, Closing Speech*

After the meeting had ended on the second reading of the CE bill, Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean gave a closing speech. He thanked the committee for its views on CE legislation and started with a focus on the consequences of the legislation. The Rear Admiral was concerned that members of the House did not agree on the disciplinary consequences that fell under the CE bill. The members believed that prosecution should not be implemented. Members of the House also acknowledged disciplinary actions would create an adverse affect that would cause parents to disregard CE. However, Teo Chee Hean rebutted by stating that some sort of disciplinary legislation must be part of the bill in order for it to be enforced and taken seriously. Before parents were to be fined or charged, they would be visited by a counselor who would assess their situation. MOE would make several attempts with parents before taking the matter to the DGE. He or she would determine the extent of and mete out the punishment. The punishment could range from paying a fine up to \$2000, or, if the issue took a turn for the worse, the DGE could take the parents to court. The Rear Admiral also recognized the importance of parental participation. The CE bill clearly stated that parents had the responsibility under the law to send their children to school. The bill also reinforced the government's commitment to the children's education for their future role in society (Teo, 2000b).

*MOE, FY2002*

The Senior Minister of State discussed the matter of CE briefly in the fiscal year speech of 2002 (FY2002). The speech consisted of the reminder that CE legislation would be implemented the following year. Several announcements were made for the July and August 2002 registration for Primary 1. Parents would have to comply, otherwise suffer the consequences that were planned during September 2002. Before any kind of punishment did take place, though, there would be visits from MOE officials to counsel parents or solve any financial issues related to sending the child to school (Unknown, 2002, May 21).

*MOE, FY2004*

Chan Soo Sen, Minister of State for Education, noted that CE would be applied to national schools; therefore, special schools (SPED) students were exempt. SPED students were also exempt because punishment inflicted on them under CE legislation would be too harsh. This claim suggested that the families were already suffering from the financial and emotional burdens of caring for their SPED students. The real focus would then be funding support for SPED schools (Chan, 2004).

*Summary*

The speeches here illuminate certain issues that pertain to CE being a bill. Legislating CE would create positive and negative implications for every student. On the one hand, CE supported the national agenda of every child reaching his or her potential. On the other hand, CE inflicted the condition of PSLE on minority communities. However, SPED schools were a minority group exempt from the condition enforced by

CE, and the focus for them shifted toward funding their programs. Another issue featured here was the consequences of not obeying CE. It can be seen that there were disagreements as to whether to inflict punishment on parents for neglecting CE. The closing speech by Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean also entailed the power given to the DGE to determine and mete out punishment. Overall, CE becoming a bill would support the agenda of every child reaching his or her potential and would support a common educational experience. The main causes for concern were the minority communities and parents affected by CE being a bill.

*Popular Press in Singapore*

I gathered and analyzed thirty-four different newspaper articles from Singapore that pertain to issues relating to the country's legislation of CE in 2003. The different issues are arranged chronologically by year and date. Each time period emphasizes the different topics that were affected by the inception, implementation, and aftermath of CE legislation.

*1994*

Ng Wei Joo of *The Straits Times* reported an analysis from Education Minister Lee Yock Suan on March 11, 1994. Table 1 details the decreasing dropout rate in schools. In 1981, 1,100, or 2.6 percent, of 42,000 students were dropping out of primary school (Ng, 1994). Data from Minister Lee Yock Suan stated most of the dropout rates occurred during Primary 7 and Primary 8. However, the percentage of dropout rates lessened to 714, or 1.7 percent, in 1985 (Ng, 1994). The Education Minister also had other data from a cohort of one through six levels of primary school. In 1981 he

mentioned that 340 pupils, or 0.8 percent, in the cohort were dropping out; however, the number of dropouts lessened to 154 pupils, or 0.4 percent, in 1985. Secondary schooling had different results—1,700 pupils, or 4.1 percent of the cohort, did not complete schooling, and the same with the past six secondary cohorts (Ng, 1994). In accordance with the previous theme, in 1992, Primary 1 to secondary cohort 5 had 1,600 students not completing and in 1993 the number of absent students lessened (Ng, 1994).

<b>Table 1</b>		
<b>Dropout Rates in School Out of 42,000 Students Between 1981–1993</b>		
Primary 1	1981	2.6% did not complete
Primary 1	1985	1.7% did not complete
Primary 1–6	1981	0.8% (340 pupils) did not complete
Primary 1–6	1985	0.4% (154 pupils) did not complete
Secondary	1981	4.1% (1,700 pupils) did not complete.
Secondary	1985	“Same for the past secondary cohorts”
Primary 1–Secondary 5	1992	1,600 pupils did not complete
Primary 1–Secondary 5	1993	1,100 pupils did not complete

(Ng, 1994)

It is then seen that the majority of each greater year presents an increase in pupils completing different grade levels. This gave the education minister reason to believe CE was not necessary. Any problems with dropouts were being tackled through proactive measures. For example, there were pastoral care programs, counseling of potential dropouts, monitoring of schools with high dropout rates, and flexibility in allowing

dropouts to rejoin the education system (Ng, 1994). Measures being taken resulted in a change in policy toward the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) in which all students from primary school must take the exam before moving on to the secondary level, while before students might have to spend extra years in primary school if they did not do well on the PSLE (Ng, 1994).

*1998*

CE legislation was perceived differently from Ng in Singapore. Bertha Henson of *The Straits Times* reported a story on December 20, 1998, about an impoverished student who dropped out of school only to return two years later. She stated that a student named Sebastian Chary left school at age 15 because his parents could not financially support it. There were entities such as religious groups, community bodies, and clans that would help fund Sebastian's education; however, his parents were not the industrious type (Henson, 1998). Due to education not being compulsory, Sebastian's parents had an alternative to let their child quit school and work at a Burger King to help support their family.

*1999*

Certain government officials also saw things differently from Ng. In response to Education Minister Lee Yock Suan, an article by an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on October 14, 1999, stated that Prime Minister (PM) Goh Chok Tong asked the Ministry of Education to consider the introduction of CE legislation. The PM claimed that it shocked him to learn that each year around 1,500 children, or 3 percent of a cohort, were not even registered for the first year of elementary school (Unknown, 1999). The PM had



introduced his request during a Parliament meeting, which resulted in several members of the House to applaud.

2000

The introduction of CE legislation was expanded by 2000. An article from an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on January 1, 2000, listed concerns by the “Feedback Unit.”<sup>3</sup> Concerns included the economic crisis, manpower development, the Singapore 21 vision, and CE. There was strong support for the Prime Minister’s proposal to make education compulsory with some people suggesting CE legislation be extended to secondary education (Unknown, 2000, January 1). If there were an extension for secondary education to be compulsory, then the total duration would be ten years.

In contrast to prolonging CE, an unknown author in *The Straits Times* reported on March 18, 2000, that ten years of CE was not recommended by MP (Member of Parliament) Chiam Pasir. He saw the United Kingdom’s unsuccessful implementation of it<sup>4</sup> and was worried that Singapore would succumb to the same issues (Unknown, 2000, March 18). The majority of people felt that Singapore should support six years of CE legislation.

In addition, in the March 18, 2000, article the author reported that the national education system encompassed the inclusion of all students to attend national schools for the purposes of imparting knowledge, skills, and developing a common experience to bolster national cohesion. However, Loh Meng See, MP, stated concerns with different

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<sup>3</sup>The Singapore government’s official feedback channel for its citizens to air their views and suggestions on government policies.

<sup>4</sup>The article does not go into the UK’s unsuccessful implementation of ten years of CE.

minority groups that might have issues with national school attendance. The different groups were children in Madrasah schools, special needs children, and students who received part of their education overseas (Unknown, 2000, March 18).

The People's Action Party (i.e., representatives of different ethnic communities in Singapore, also known as PAP) had a similar view in which certain issues would affect the parents under CE legislation. An article from an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on April 3, 2000, reported an announcement was made to “go easy on parents.” The compulsory education law gave punishments to parents who did not send their children to school. PAP believed that the government should raise awareness among parents about the importance of early education for their children (Unknown, 2000, April 3). PAP members and other Singaporeans also believed that compulsion and legislation should only be used as a last resort, and harsh punishment should not be enforced (Unknown, 2000, April 3). Those who favored CE worried that too many resources would be focused on CE for solving a three percent dropout rate (Unknown, 2000, April 3).

In relation to the previous article on March 18, 2000, in regards to different groups having issues with CE, an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on May 24, 2000, talked of adapting Madrasah schools into the compulsory education system. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong considered the fact that Madrasahs were necessary to produce Islamic teachers and leaders to guide the community on religious affairs (Unknown, 2000, May 24). Muslim Singaporeans were given a choice of having their students take the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examinations) and being exempt from the compulsory education system—a system that obligated children to attend national

schools or remain at religious schools. In other words, as long as the students took the PSLE examination like everyone else, they could have their own type of schooling. The government would also take into consideration the fact that Madrasahs might perform differently on the PSLE compared to students from national schools. Therefore, PM Goh decided that the PSLE passing rate should be based on the community and the compulsory education committee (Unknown, 2000, May 24).

In continuing the report on Madrasah schools, a newspaper report by an unknown author on June 4, 2000, in *The (Singapore) Sunday Times*, stated that a steering committee would propose the PSLE standards for Madrasah schools (Unknown, 2000, June 4). The steering committee was led by Majilis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), and it included full time principals from six Madrasah schools (Unknown, 2000, June 4). Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's previous consideration of letting Madrasah students be exempt from compulsory education legislation as long as they passed the PSLE was given a month previous to this current report, but Malay-Muslim leaders and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong concluded with a new agreement that the PSLE served as a benchmark. Malay-Muslim leader Abdullah Tarmugi believed that choosing a PSLE standard would only leave room for different parties wanting different standards. Abdullah then recommended that the committee on compulsory education should make its decision on whether to include or exclude Madrasah schools within CE legislation and start coordinating an effort to help Madrasah students pass the PSLE at the national standard. Overall, a proposal was made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to have

Madrasah students be excluded from CE legislation on the condition they passed the PSLE (Unknown, 2000, June 4).

Special needs children were another minority group affected by CE legislation. An article in *The Straits Times* by an unknown author on August 16, 2000, reported that children with disabilities were exempt from compulsory education (Unknown, 2000, August 16a). The author stated that the Committee on Compulsory Education believed enforced punishment on parents of special needs children would be too harsh (Unknown, 2000, August 16a). The author also reported that teaching resources and special programs to accommodate special education students might not be available by the time CE took effect (Unknown, 2000, August 16a). Overall, the compulsory education report that was given by the Committee on Compulsory Education in July 2000 recommended the Education Ministry constantly fund and update special programs and teacher training for special education (Unknown, 2000, August 16a).

Correspondingly, another article written by an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on August 16, 2000, concluded that the introduction of compulsory education would be a fact in Singapore. The reporter claimed that Dr. Aline Wong, senior Minister of State for Education, stated that the committee had discussed extending compulsory education to include secondary education but decided against it because it would be difficult to force unmotivated students to remain in school (Unknown, 2000, August 16b). Dr. Wong also mentioned that it would require a lot more resources and severe penalties as well (Unknown, 2000, August 16b). In addition, the committee was concerned with benchmarking PSLE results. Exemptions to CE legislation were given to

students in Madrasah schools, San Yu Adventist schools, and home-schooling programs (Unknown, 2000, August 16b). These students would still have to take the PSLE and score within a certain range. Malay students attending Madrasah schools must obtain aggregate PSLE scores equal to Malay students attending the six lowest performing national schools. Dr. Wong stated a Compulsory Education Board would be set up to enforce the compulsory education laws (Unknown, 2000, August 16b). Representatives on the board consisted of community development councils, self-help groups, and voluntary welfare organizations. Cases were referred to the Director-General of Education who would have the authority to decide if parents would be prosecuted at the subordinated courts (Unknown, 2000, August 16b).

Accordingly, on October 10, 2000, Leslie Koh, Sharon Vasoo, Tracy Quek, and Ahmad Osman reported on a four-hour debate among 16 Members of Parliament, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean, and Senior State Minister of Education Dr. Aline Wong. It turned into a question-and-answer segment with Dr. Wong defending the bill against Members of Parliament. Some of the questions were concerning punishment for parents that did not send their children to school. Penalties, such as jail time, were seen as counterproductive because they would incur resentment for the bill (Koh et al., 2000a). Teo Chee Hean defended CE as influencing guidelines for counseling parents not interested in sending their children to school (Koh et al., 2000a). The authors stated strict punishment would also influence the government's seriousness in the value of education. They believed CE was itself a law, and to give it power for certain sanctions such as jail time were necessary to enforce the law. However, there was no assurance as to how far

the government would push the punishment for parents disobeying CE legislation to the point that the parents did not want to cooperate. Dr. Wong stated implementation of community help, counseling, mediation, and so on would be available, but parents that did not cooperate must be punished. Dr. Wong believed that compulsory education was a law, and those not abiding needed to be reprimanded; otherwise, the reputation of the legal system might be disputed (Koh et al., 2000a).

There was a different emphasis within the same article on special needs and home-schooled children. A debate emerged as to whether or not special needs children and home-schooled children should be exempt from CE legislation. Member of Parliament, Dr. S. Vasoo, questioned the exemption of CE legislation for special needs children. He contended that special needs children might benefit from CE; however, Dr. Wong disagreed. She claimed that inflicting consequences from CE legislation onto the parents of special needs children was "a bit harsh" (Koh et al., 2000a, p. 39). These families, according to Dr. Wong, already had financial and emotional issues for their special needs children. She also believed that the Ministry of Education (MOE) had invested enough resources to facilitate special needs children attending either national schools or special schools. For this reason, including special needs children within CE legislation in order to gain the benefits of a public education would not be necessary. In regards to home schooling, Members of Parliament Dr. Wang Kai Yuen, Zulkifli Baharudin, and Claire Chiang, worried about home-schooling parents taking advantage of being exempt (Koh et al., 2000a). Dr. Wong was stricter on this issue in which home schoolers were prescribed certain criteria that must be met before MOE would continue

to grant them exemption (Koh et al., 2000a). Home-schooled children must exhibit that they could meet PSLE standards. They must also pass a national-education quiz (Koh et al., 2000a).

In regards to the Committee for Compulsory Education (CCE) associates, Member of Parliament Chiam See Tong took notice that the number of members who were politicians was abundant (Koh et al., 2000a). Politicians would politicize the issue; however, Dr. Wong mentioned there were Members of Parliament on the committee (Koh et al., 2000a). Representatives from the PAP were on the committee as well as Dr. Jennifer Lee, a nominated Member of Parliament. She also stated the presence of educationists on the committee and closed-door focus groups consisting of people representing all walks of life in Singaporean society (Koh et al., 2000a).

On the focus of poverty, Members of Parliament Mr. Tan Boon Wan and J.B. Jeyaretnam questioned CE legislation consequences on parents who could not afford schooling for their children. Dr. Wong mentioned the involvement of the school and community to help with financial issues. Students, before becoming technically dropped due to an issue like money, would still be advised by school counselors and social workers (Koh et al., 2000a).

In addition to the debate, the duration of CE legislation was discussed. On October 10, 2000, Leslie Koh, Sharon Vasoo, Tracy Quek, and Ahmad Osman from *The Straits Times*, questioned the six-year period for compulsory education in a separate article. Among different Members of Parliament, six years of CE was either adequate or inadequate. Dr. Aline Wong claimed CE was adequate because six years was practical.

Covering secondary education would cause complex issues to arise (Koh et al., 2000b). Students in the secondary stage might be unmotivated to study; therefore compelling them to stay would take more resources (Koh et al., 2000b). However, it was argued by Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Claire Chiang that six years was not adequate. She felt the country was known to be a knowledge-based economy; therefore, primary education alone was not enough. A knowledge-based occupation required many high-level skills that secondary education might cover. It was also the policy of CE to ensure a young Singaporean would have adequate education to live reasonably; in which case NMP Claire Chiang believed the cut off level should be secondary education (Koh et al., 2000b).

In response, an article by an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on October 11, 2000, gave an in-depth view of the recent October 10, 2000, article discussed in regards to the 16 Members of Parliament and the two key members of the house, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean and Senior Minister of State/Education Dr. Aline Wong. Here were two different viewpoints:

1. Dr. Wang Kai Yuen, an MP and chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee, asked, “Why is Singapore introducing compulsory education now, thirty five years after independence?” (Unknown, 2000, October 11). He was comparing historical legislation of compulsory education against other nations. Compulsory education started among Western countries (Unknown, 2000, October 11). It then appeared amid many nations in the last fifty years; however, Singapore, being a progressive country, had not made education



compulsory. In other words, among many progressive countries, compulsory education was made a law so it was an anomaly that in the past fifty years it was not made a law in Singapore (Unknown, 2000, October 11). Dr. Wang Kai Yuen also stated, “one can only guess as to why we did not implement compulsory education in the early years of nation building” (Unknown, 2000, October 11). However, Dr. Wang Kai Yuen understood that compulsory education being a law might be interpreted differently among the different ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious society, but nevertheless Singapore as a country wanted every child to be given an opportunity to gain the education they needed to fulfill their potential in society (Unknown, 2000, October 11). Not being given the opportunity was a waste (Unknown, 2000, October 11).

2. Mr. Ahmad, an MP, expressed his concerns with the Madrasah schools being exempt from CE. He worried that even though the government had accommodated to the needs of Madrasah students, just passing the PSLE might not be enough. Singapore was a knowledge-based economy in which Madrasah students must be as adequately equipped as national school students. Madrasah students needed to be religiously inclined as well as fully existing in a knowledge-based environment that was rapidly changing (Unknown, 2000, October 11).

*2001*

In the same regards for Dr. Yuen’s previous remark about potential, on January 4, 2001, Alex Lee Ka But of *The Straits Times* wrote of Ms. Ho Peng, from MOE, and

argued that “children with special needs were exempted from compulsory education to enable them to take advantage of specially-tailored programs offered by institutions not within the compulsory education ambit” (Lee, 2001). Therefore, it was up to the parents’ discretion as to whether or not they would like to take advantage of the specially tailored programs (Lee, 2001). Then the author pointed out the ideal of CE, from the Singaporean perspective, was to ensure that every child would be given the opportunity to maximize her or his potential; therefore, Ms. Ho Peng stated, “can we also apply the same legislation for special education students to attend specially-tailored programs so they may maximize their potential?” (Lee, 2001) In other words, under the ideal purpose of CE legislation, parents were required to send their special needs children to special education schools. The author mentioned an example in which disabled people, who were intellectually inclined, might have a better life living among their families if they attended special education schools when they were young (Lee, 2001). Going to special education schools could teach special needs students interpersonal and daily living skills, allowing them to continue living with their families in the future; however, without the education, many of them were sent to institutional homes when they were adults (Lee, 2001). Overall, the author favored CE legislation to require special needs children to attend special education schools.

2002

Continuing the focus on the necessity for CE, an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on January 9, 2002, reported many low-income children skipping school. Beyond Social Service, a social services organization in Singapore, interviewed 147 families consisting of 239 children in the impoverished neighborhood of rental flats on Henderson Road. The survey reported that one in four low-income children were not in school (Unknown, 2002, January 9). Another report stated that one in five seven-to-twelve-year-olds were not registered in school (Unknown, 2002, January 9). Just over 30 percent of pre-schoolers, ages four through six, were not in kindergarten or preschool (Unknown, 2002, January 9). A different report discovered two out of three children that attended Primary 1 could not spell three syllable words simply because their parents could not afford to send them to preschool (Unknown, 2002, January 9). Beyond Social Service found that many of the households did not have adult supervision. Mostly teenagers or teenage parents were taking care of primary aged children (Unknown, 2002, January 9). Parents surveyed seemed to be more interested in earning money than in the importance of education (Unknown, 2002, January 9). Ms. Ng Bee Leng, director of Beyond Social Service, was alarmed at the way parents thought about education, especially considering CE would be enforced the next year (Unknown, 2002, January 9).

Another article, with emphasis on Primary 1 registration, and in relation to impoverished children, by an unknown author in *The (Singapore) Sunday Times* on March 3, 2002, stated that the number of children failing to register for Primary 1 was rising. According to figures by the Ministry of Education (MOE), 1,677 children did not

register for Primary 1 in the year 1997, 1,708 in 1998, and 1,921 in 1999 (Unknown, 2002, March 3). The author stated they could not find records for the year 2000 and 2001, but assumed that it would likely be 2,000 children that did not register given the number of births for each cohort (Unknown, 2002, March 3). In tracking down the children that had not registered, or “missing children,” MOE decided to look at recorded births and match children that were supposed to register for Primary 1 that year (Unknown, 2002, March 3). Parents guilty of not sending their children to school were visited by counselors. There were parents found guilty that still did not want to send their children to school for different reasons. Examples of these reasons included saving money for living expenses, and lacking income to afford school uniforms, textbooks, and shoes (Unknown, 2002, March 3).

Above all, an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on June 23, 2002, reported the government’s warning to parents about registration. All children eligible for Primary 1 must be registered in July (Unknown, 2002, June 23). If children were not ready to attend then parents had to complete a form on MOE’s website (Unknown, 2002, June 23). If parents did not abide by the compulsory education act, they were subjected to a \$5000 fine or could serve one year in jail, or both. Parents had the opportunity to choose a school based on priority. A child with first priority either had a parent or older sibling that attended the school of their choice before, or the parent was part of the school staff (Unknown, 2002, June 23). Second priority was given to parents who had done 40 hours of voluntary service, were active community leaders, or were members of a church or clan that was affiliated with the school (Unknown, 2002, June 23). The rest of the

available spots were given to children whose parents were not eligible for prioritization (Unknown, 2002, June 23). A child registered at two different schools might lose her or his slot to pick a school of her or his choice (Unknown, 2002, June 23).

With more attention on impoverished families, an article by an unknown writer in *The Straits Times* on July 1, 2002, told the story of a family having financial issues with sending their children to school during the time of CE legislation. Arisah Salleh was a housewife with a six-year-old son named Abdul Rahman Noordin, who had to be registered for primary school. With a household monthly income of \$800, she was not able to pay for additional education expenses. She believed his school expenses would be \$30 a month. Arisah also had to care for two other boys, ages one and a half and eight months. Her husband was a delivery assistant. She knew that if she could not afford to send her child to school she would go to jail. An organization called the Voluntary Welfare Organization (VWO) had heard Arisah's story from people having similar financial difficulties. The VWO helped many parents with financial aid so that they would not stop their children from attending school. The VWO stated that parents with a steady income were more willing to send their children to school (Unknown, 2002, July 1). VWO reported its awareness of parents who did not register their children for Primary 1 asking for financial help. From another perspective, money was not always the case with parents not sending their children to school. An executive director from Beyond Social Services stated that culturally many parents had not attended school and grew up on the streets; therefore, they did not expect their children to be educated (Unknown, 2002, July 1). Some children that did make it to school might tend to dropout due to

family problems. In the case of Arisah, she was willing to ask organizations for help and was determined to have her children attend school. She stated the major reason for wanting her children to obtain an education was related to social mobility.

On the same token, there were children who needed to be tracked down because they were not supported by their families and might be unaccounted for in the education system. An article by Tracy Quek in *The Straits Times* on November 24, 2002, described Koh Yong Teng, an Education Ministry liaison who tracked down children of families that were not registered for school. He knocked on the doors of 70 homes during the month of October 2002 (Quek, 2002). There was only one family out of the 70 homes that had not registered their child for primary education. He also ran into grandparents in which the children had immigrated to another country. This meant his work was finished because CE legislation did not pertain to overseas children. Since mid-September 2003, two weeks after Primary 1 school registration, 15 liaison officers, including Koh Yong Teng, had visited 800 homes (Quek, 2002).

In addition to the previous report on accounting for attendance, an article by Sandra Davie in *The (Singapore) Sunday Times* on November 24, 2002, reported 178 children who would attend Primary 1 as “uncontactable” (Davie, 2002). MOE was still trying to contact another 312 children. The problems the Ministry of Education encountered included homeless families with no fixed address; children that might have emigrated overseas, but MOE did not know for certain; and “gypsy families” that did not have permanent homes. “Gypsy families,” defined by the Children’s Society’s—a social welfare organization in Singapore specialized to help children—director Alfred Tan,

were Singaporeans that did not have a permanent home, and who were living from place to place with relatives, friends, or anyone that would have them for a given period of time. “Gypsy” parents were likely to have drug or alcohol problems. Forty-seven thousand children had registered to enter primary education by 2003; however, as of the time of this article (August 2002), 1,973 registered compared to 2,000 three months prior, and 1,900 in 1999 resulting in an influx of those who had registered (Davie, 2002). Of the 312 children sought, 220 were born overseas and might still live there (Davie, 2002). MOE’s director, Mr. Liew Choon Boon, stated, “The ministry yesterday was proud to recognize their efforts and have felt that there was no more that can be done about the ‘uncontactable’ children, other than wait for the parents to show up” (Davie, 2002). Educationists, parents, and MPs expressed their concern for the missing children (Davie, 2002). Government Parliamentary Committee member (Education) Amy Khor, noted, “We should do everything possible to achieve the aim of the Act—to ensure that every child in Singapore has a minimum of six years of education” (Davie, 2002).

### 2003

CE legislation was implemented in Singapore on January 1, 2003. Certain issues have arisen since, such as one concerning culture. On January 8, 2003, Ritawillis Selamat wrote in *The Straits Times* about a cultural issue with CE legislation and rules that abided with national schools. Selamat’s daughter was forced to attend school due to CE legislation, yet she might not be given the freedom to wear a tudung. The choice was still not settled as to whether to let women wear a tudung in national schools. Now that CE legislation had taken place, Selamat proposed a steering committee from both public and

private sectors to see what they could do to accommodate the Muslim community (Selamat, 2003).

An update on Primary 1 registration was reported by Sandra Davie in *The Straits Times* on June 10, 2003. She stated there were 49,000 students eligible to register as of November 2002; however, 1,973 students did not register (Davie, 2003). Four hundred ninety-five students that did not register entered Madrasah schools, 223 students went overseas, 134 students deferred for medical reasons, 112 students registered late, three died, three had not registered but were being consulted by the MOE, and three could not be found (Davie, 2003). The three students that could not be found were searched for by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (Davie, 2003).

MOE enlisted the help of the Singapore Children's Society to discover in further detail how Singapore had supported CE legislation, and to gather information on who had registered for Primary 1. An article by an unknown author in *The Straits Times* on June 25, 2003, reported that the executive director, Alfred Tan, felt that since his organization was well experienced working with disadvantaged children, he wanted to play a small role in making sure every child had an education (Unknown, 2003). The organization prepared six social workers to talk with parents who refused to send their children to school. They were well versed in speaking different dialects and had been specially trained to deal with difficult parents (Unknown, 2003). MOE met with several welfare organizations such as the Singapore Children's Society, but their collaboration marked the first formalized effort among other organizations (Unknown, 2003).



In continuation from Sandra Davie's article on June 10, 2003, Lynn Lee, reported in *The Straits Times* on October 29, 2003, on the three missing children that were not registered for Primary 1. Two of the children were expected to attend Primary 1 during the month of January 2004. A third child was being evaluated to see if he could be placed in a mainstream school (Lee, 2003). The families of the three children were contacted by the Singapore Children's Society after MOE put an alert out to the organization (Lee, 2003). In further detail, Ms. Sue Lee, the society's head of research and outreach, went to each of the three families' homes and convinced them she was there to help their children and not to blame them. The society, due to its strong links and experience with welfare assistance, helped the MOE's Compulsory Education Unit when families needed more than counseling or persuasion to send their children to school (Lee, 2003).

Sue-Ann Chia wrote in *The Straits Times* on March 10, 2005, about four MPs who supported the struggle for students with physical or learning disabilities. Nominated MP Eunice Olson believed that education should be compulsory for children with disabilities (Chia, 2005). Group Representation Constituency (GRC) member Mr. Gan Kim Yong and GRC member Mr. S. Iswaran considered more government support should be given to students with disabilities (Chia, 2005). GRC member Ho Geok Choo believed that slow learners needed additional support with their schoolwork. Slow learners were also taunted and jeered by regular students who attended the same school (Chia, 2005). As a result, many slow learners belonged to a support group within mainstream schools called Learning Support Program (Chia, 2005).

Minister of State for Education Chan Soo Sen said Olson, Young, and Iswaran's previous statements were "impassioned," but quickly added that the government had been supporting special education over the years. Examples included:

1. The Education Ministry supported 20 special education schools, which accommodated 4,500 students with disabilities.
2. Four times more funding was given to special education schools per student than mainstream schools. There was also greater funding given for building development.
3. In September 2004 the Education Ministry increased its support for special education from 90 percent to 95 percent.
4. MOE extended help to 2,500 children with mild disabilities.
5. Fifty-nine schools were renovated to accommodate children with disabilities.
6. Planning for the Special Needs Officers were dispatched to 20 primary schools and 30 secondary schools to help slow learners (Chia, 2005).

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that the government would support special needs children in special education schools and mainstream schools with \$55 million per year until 2008. Chan Soo Sen believed that special schools and mainstream schools should be physically next to each other so students could learn about each other and to promote a more accepting society. That said, Chan Soo Sen disagreed with CE legislation. He believed the number of special needs children was small; therefore, implementing CE legislation would be a waste of resources. He would rather make the resources available to assist special needs children with their own education.

More broadly, in reference to Singapore's international stance, the "Global Competitiveness Report," issued by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum (WEF), reported the ranking of Singapore. Chua Mui Hoong wrote on October 7, 2005, in *The Straits Times* that the WEF did a composite picture of 100 countries on different economic and social related categories, such as higher education and training, market efficiency, innovation, and technological readiness. Singapore scored very well in almost all the categories, giving it a rank of sixth most competitive economy following Finland, the United States, Sweden, Denmark, and Taiwan (Chua, 2005). However, looking at individual categories, Singapore was ranked 69 in health and primary education. According to the WEF 2004 report, Singapore was 88 in primary school enrollment (Chua, 2005). Singapore was ranked 30 in the Competitiveness Report just five years earlier in 1999 for primary education enrollment (Chua, 2005). It should be noted that while CE legislation might have been implemented in 2003, the 2004 results were taken from data gathered well before 2003. Overall, the author felt that once compulsory education evolved as a policy, low primary school enrollment should resolve itself (Chua, 2005). The author acknowledged that CE legislation might very well be the way "global considerations" can have a bearing on domestic issues (Chua, 2005). In other words, the international rankings might have played a factor in having CE become legislation in Singapore. To support the author's claim on "global considerations," market investors do use the WEF ratings to see how much they would like to invest.

2006

Tan Kee Yao, in *The Straits Times*, on August 17, 2006, disapproved of the idea for preschool education to be compulsory. She felt that preschool was a good segue to primary education; however, she did not agree that preschool should be compulsory. Yao believed in the parents' rights to make the decision and not the government. Parents could always home school their children with the same curriculum taught in preschool (Tan, 2006). Overall, Yao supported a few more years for children to have fun before commencing the rigorous curriculum of primary education (Tan, 2006).

Another perspective on special needs children and their relationship with CE legislation was presented by Lee Lay Hong in *The Straits Times* on October 7, 2006. Hong asserted that a CE legislation act to include special needs schools, or "special institutions," was essential. The National Council of Social Service and MOE visited special needs schools to give financial audits and evaluate the curricula respectively. However, many employees from both organizations were not experts in special education; therefore, certain requirements to fully develop special needs schools went unnoticed (Lee, 2006). In return, parents did not know that there was room for improvement. The author recommended that MOE officials be trained in special education and become familiar with the educational processes of special needs students (Lee, 2006).

The importance of having CE legislation include preschool education was brought up again by Elaine Ong Mei Lin in *The Straits Times* on October 18, 2006. Lin reported that CE legislation started at Primary 1. Students in Primary 1 must learn the alphabet, be

able to read common words, and perform mathematical tasks (Lin, 2006). This education was very rigorous and required advanced preparation (Lin, 2006). However, there were a small number of parents who did not see the importance of preschool education. As noted in the previous article by Tan (2006), preschool prepares children to advance to Primary 1. Since the Primary 1 curriculum was rigorous, CE legislation should cover preschool so no child would be left behind when he or she began Primary 1 (Lin, 2006). The author also suggested that MOE thoroughly research the number of preschool students who did not enroll in school and parents unable to school them at home (Lin, 2006). Lin believed the figures would inform MOE and benefit the students lacking the preparation needed to enter Primary 1.

2007

CE legislation serving special needs schools was still an issue in 2007. On March 17, 2007, Ho Swee Huat wrote in *The Straits Times* about the importance of focusing on special needs children. Particular attention was drawn upon MOE supporting special needs children with organizing and financing their particular educational needs. Ho Swee Huat did not believe people who volunteered to care for special needs children had the expertise to properly care for them (Ho, 2007). The government stated that it could hire and pay ministers or civil servants close to the private sector rate for meeting the needs of special education children (Ho, 2007). However, Ho Swee Huat believed these employees would not participate out of civil responsibility, but rather for financial incentives (Ho, 2007). It was to this effect that Ho Swee Huat recommended CE legislation include special needs children in order to progress the situation.

2008

This year marked the first in which the parents of six children were reprimanded for not sending their children to school. Theresa Tan in *The Straits Times* on February 15, 2008, reported that the parents had been counseled by social workers, the Singapore Children's Society, and the schools involved with their children's education. MOE reported the six children came from dysfunctional families. The parents were also indifferent toward their children's education (Tan, 2008). Some of the children might have been influenced by their uneducated siblings to not attend school (Tan, 2008). MP Ellen Lee suggested that in the interest of the child, the state must intervene because the child's right to an education was being compromised (Tan, 2008). Denise Phua, another MP, warned that even though these parents might be punished, they might have an indifferent mindset that led them to repeat the issue of not sending their children to school (Tan, 2008). MOE utilized the Children's Society to assist on 98 cases relating to children needing to attend school (Tan, 2008). However, the situations of these six students not attending school were rare cases.

Another recent article took a look at the first batch of home-schooled children taking the PSLE. Ho Al Li reported in *The Straits Times* on April 18, 2008, that 25 home-schooled children would take the PSLE for the first time. They needed to score well to justify their exemption from CE, which meant scoring in the 33rd percentile aggregate scores of EM1 and EM2 students (Ho, 2008). This score requirement also applied to San Yu Adventist students. In comparison, Madrasah students had to score better than other

EM1 and EM2 Malays attending six of the lowest performing national schools<sup>5</sup> (Ho, 2008).

On a topic that was never mentioned before in this thesis, CE could have a correlating effect with a couple's decision to have children. An article by Chua Mui Hoon in *The Straits Times* on August 15, 2008, stated the importance of preschool education. She reported that there were policies being formulated to raise birth rates. The concern was the aftermath in regards to childcare. There was "Baby Bonus" cash and "paternity leave" from work as incentives to convince couples interested in having more children (Hoon, 2008). Chua Mui Hoon also mentioned state support. The article compared Singapore with Sweden and France, which had state-funded daycare or preschool for its children, but Singapore did not support preschool education. However, if Singapore's CE legislation were to cover preschool education, then the state would provide provisions. Chua Mui Hoon stated there was also a growing movement in developed countries in which early childhood education and care (ECEC) was to be a shared responsibility between the state and the family (Hoon, 2008). A growing ECEC movement occurred for three economic reasons:

1. Preparing a child to be a productive member of society.
2. Helping reduce the socioeconomic gap.
3. Increasing women's labor force participation rates (Hoon, 2008).

Hoon argued that having a state-supported preschool program would help build a child's cognitive skills, increase better learning skills, and aid children to adapt better socially. A

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<sup>5</sup>There were Madrasah students that consisted of Malay students attending Islamic schools, and there were Malay students attending national schools.

state-supported preschool education would also reduce the socioeconomic gap and increase a child's opportunities from a dysfunctional or poor socioeconomic background to get out of the poverty trap (Hoon, 2008). Women's labor force participation rates would also be affected (Hoon, 2008). Without CE legislation for preschool education, many children would stay home. Therefore, women left the workforce during their childbearing years. This created an economic loss for a country in high demand for workers (Hoon, 2008). In terms of government funding, the Singapore government gave parents a subsidy of \$150 a month for each child (Hoon, 2008). However, full-day childcare was \$565 dollars a month, causing parents to pay more than \$400 dollars per child (Hoon, 2008). This largely impacted low-income families who benefited most from having an appropriate environment for their children to grow up (Hoon, 2008).

2009

Singapore, like many other world economies, is in an economic slump. However, one thing to look forward to is Singapore's education system. Chua Mui Hoong wrote in *The (Singapore) Sunday Times* on January 1, 2009, that amid the harsh economic times of 2009, Singaporeans could look positively at their education system. The CE legislation act of 2003 gave every child in Singapore the right to attend school. Furthermore, Singapore's educational achievements typically topped the charts in international rankings (Hoon, 2009).



*Summary*

Singapore's CE legislation has dramatically affected different minority groups in the population. In respect to the popular press releases, I identified three groups that have been heavily influenced: Islamic students, special needs children, and families in poverty. Singapore is economically competitive as a knowledge-based economy. Madrasah schools focus on Islamic education; however, the Singaporean government agreed to encompass CE legislation for Madrasah schools. The government acknowledged that Singapore lacks natural resources, and thus its greatest resource is its people. For this reason, the government's focus is on getting students to be highly skilled in the core subjects of math, science, and English; therefore, Madrasah schools are to incorporate the preferred government curriculum and students are to test out of the national PSLE before advancing to secondary education.

Special needs children were mentioned frequently in the press in reference to their inclusion or exclusion. There was controversy surrounding this issue because on the one hand, if these students were included they would get the benefit of a public education. On the other hand, special needs schools already existed, so including them in the legislation would seem unnecessary. If CE legislation were to include special needs schools, parents would be required to send their special needs children to school. CE legislation reprimands parents, forcing them to either pay \$5,000, go to jail, or both, for not sending their children to school. This legislation would place an additional burden on families who are already stressed financially and emotionally. It is an ongoing debate that will take more time to settle.

Families in poverty need money for school related items, such as textbooks and uniforms. Some families consist of teenage parents living in low socioeconomic neighborhoods that need further guidance or counseling to send their children to school. Due to CE legislation, the appearance of welfare organizations, like the Singapore Children's Society, has helped increase school attendance among impoverished children.

Besides the three minority groups mentioned, the potential of CE legislation to encompass preschool also made headlines. There was an author that believed CE legislation should be implemented to give children a head start. However, another author asserted that children needed to enjoy the comfort of staying a child before starting the rigorous Singaporean education program. There was also minor mention of CE affecting birth rates. If CE would encompass preschool, then couples might be more willing to have children immediately, rather than wait to be more prepared financially.

Not many articles featured home schooling or San Yu Adventist schools. Students in both systems of education need to do well when taking the PSLE. Students must achieve an aggregate score in the 33rd percentile of EM1 and EM2 students. Again, it did not seem that there was much of an uproar due to CE legislation being implemented. One reason could be that the two school systems have the least amount of students.

The last minority group was overseas students. They were no longer counted as students needing to be schooled under the CE legislation act. However, much effort was made by MOE to find out if these students had left the country.

In regards to economics, Singapore scored low on the 2004 "Global Competiveness Report" in the categories of health and primary education. CE would be a

means to boost attendance rates, which initially decreased Singapore's rankings among other nations. If Singapore were to increase its status within the rankings, there might be more outside market investors investing in Singapore. In any case, the last article examined mentioned the world economy being in a "slump" (Hoon, 2009). One of Singapore's recent achievements was its education system, which usually does well in international rankings.

In the end, CE legislation by the government achieved positive and negative results depending on which perspective was utilized. On the one hand, CE legislation encouraged "the right for every child to reach his or her potential" (Unknown, 2000); on the other hand, it could be a hindrance for groups that did not have the same interests as those of the national agenda.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: HOW DO WE EXPLAIN SINGAPORE'S ADOPTION OF CE LEGISLATION IN 2003?

Singapore's adoption of CE legislation in 2003 is explained through relating my data analysis with the following: 1) the implementation and utilization of CE elsewhere; 2) general reasons for adopting CE; and 3) literature review. To reiterate, my data analysis consisted of policy statements, speeches, and popular press releases.

The policy statements from CCE highlighted the reasons for implementing CE legislation and certain elements that follow it. CE would be utilized to help Singapore meet two objectives: 1) prepare citizens for the workforce, and 2) provide a common educational experience. In comparison with the Philippines and Thailand, Singapore's utilization of CE to prepare its citizens for the workforce is fairly similar in some ways and different in others. Spain utilized CE to teach Filipinos Spanish and Catechism, and Thailand used CE as a means for its people to adapt to Western civilized standards. However, the idea is similar in regards to preparing youths to succeed in a society influenced by colonialism, or in Singapore's case, a global capitalistic society.

From the contents of Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean's closing speech, it is perceived that punishing parents for their children's lack of attendance has both positive and negative aspects (Teo, 2000). Under CE, the parents of students would be punished through a fine, jail time, or both if their children fail to attend school. Therefore, poverty

is related to CE because typically poor parents cannot afford the fines. CE would also be a detriment to a family that is dependent on income derived from their children. Even families that are not impoverished may be negatively impacted by the requirements of CE. For example, special needs children are expensive to care for; if they were bound by CE requirements, many parents would be subjected to fines in addition to other costs associated with their children's disabilities. However, CE can better equip children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds with a means to gain social mobility. Meritocratic systems, like Singapore's, consist of skilled workers that receive more pay for their skills. Singaporean youth participating in the education system may greatly benefit financially from a good education.

In regards to the popular press, the focus would be on Madrasah students. Madrasah students are heavily impacted because their work load is doubled—they must study for both Islamic courses and also prepare for the PSLE. However, if Madrasah students do not focus on core curricula, they would not survive in a KBE and globalized market. This strongly relates to a world model of education in which the market or capitalism is tied into the results of students gaining some type of skill to be utilized for that market.

Singapore's education system ties into the country's economic welfare. As previously mentioned in the literature review, Singapore has no natural resources; therefore, the citizens are the greatest resource Singapore has to compete in the global market. Education is thus the means to fully develop the country's most valuable asset. However, not everyone can contribute equally—certain minorities follow a different

structure of preservation. Therefore, a national educational standard is upheld to assist them in surviving within the country and in turn benefiting the country. CE is not for everyone because it is part of a national agenda; however, without it, Singapore may not reach its economic potential in the twenty-first century.

On a final note, I would like to relate back to my theoretical concepts, which assist in the reasoning of Singapore's adoption of CE legislation. One concept, social-order, has proven to relate with the collective goals that give education a purpose to interconnect different societies within Singapore. Singapore's national schools differ from other schooling systems within the country. In particular, Madrasah schools, which focus on religion, while national schools focus on secular subjects. Singapore's implementation of CE provided a national mandate for everyone to take the PSLE. Thus Madrasah schools would also be on par with the secular subjects of national schools. A second theoretical concept, social mobility, has been institutionalized in education. With support from CE legislation, every Singaporean citizen may have the opportunity to increase their social status depending on their skills. Another theoretical concept, Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE), can be related to Singapore's greatest resource being its citizens. One objective of CE is to have every citizen be equipped with the skills to partake in KBE. Poverty, which unquestionably deters youth away from schooling, would lessen its disadvantageous affect because of CE. With CE, youth would acquire an education that would give them the necessary skills to work in Singapore's meritocratic society. A final concept, world culture of schooling, has the reverse effect due to CE legislation in Singapore. World culture promotes homogeneity, in which there are global

agreements that education is a universal right. However, Singapore does not abide by this concept because of its unusual rationale to promote CE legislation for a society that already nearly had universal education.

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