

Prime Minister

Singapore

10 March 79

DPM & Minister of Education

REPORT OF EDUCATION STUDY TEAM

1. I refer to your letter 9 Feb and your report.
2. Last August, when I asked you to look into the problems of the Ministry of Education with a team of your choice, I did not confine your investigations by spelling out the terms of reference. The field was vast, the problems innumerable, the objective simple. It was, and is, to educate a child to bring out his greatest potential, so that he will grow up into a good man and a useful citizen.
3. Language and education are sensitive issues. They became particularly so after World War II with the anti-colonial movement. Reassertion of one's own language and culture was the other side of the revolt against foreign

domination. The emotions of our people were often held in thrall by the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil language chauvinists.

4. Twenty-five years ago, the Chinese middle-school students rioted in 1954 over Chinese education. For years we had sporadic outbursts of violence and strikes, supposedly in defence of Chinese language and culture. In June 1956, Singapore witnessed its most massive demonstration of emotional commitment to Chinese culture and education when Nanyang University was formally opened. They are recent history. A quarter century of political battling has roughed up the education system. Fortunately, it has not damaged the majority of students who went through this turbulent period. I must admit to an occasional twinge of regret that we did not do better, for I am sure that at least a third of our students could have been more literate and fluent in at least one language, had we been able to resist the language pressure groups, and to allow these students to go at their own pace in only one language and so do justice to themselves.

5. I was a member of the Committee of the Singapore Legislative Council, appointed in 1955, to look into the problems of education. This committee recommended the integration of the different and separate kinds of schools then in Singapore. Many today do not know that in 1955 the Chinese schools

were outside the control of the Government. They existed entirely on their own resources, with their own syllabi, teachers, principals, and management committees comprising the leaders of the clan association which founded and financed the school. They issued their own individual certificates of graduation.

6. The Committee recommended the maximum that was then possible, namely, to bring all the schools under the jurisdiction and control of the Ministry of Education. To this end, the government offered to pay for all teachers in all schools. The Chinese school committees responded cautiously. Only gradually did the Ministry of Education acquire the right hire and fire teachers and principals. Even then, the right was exercised gently, for fear of arousing defiance! It was several years after the PAP took office in 1959, before the Ministry of education could assert the right to determine what was to be taught in the schools.

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7. Asserting the authority of the Ministry was a difficult and dangerous task. For their political ends, the communists exploited the Chinese voters' natural pride in language and culture. As a former Minister of Defence, you can imagine what an impossible undertaking it would have been, had you been asked to take charge of the SAF which had two battalions, 1 and 2 SIR, and

to take over control of a larger force of three battalions of guerilla and irregular forces. Imagine these three irregular battalions fully armed, with more combat experience than the two SIR battalions you had. In order to establish your authority over the three battalions, you would first have had to ask them to hand in their assorted weapons, promising to issue them with standard weapons. You have to retrain, and then integrate them into the SAF as 3, 4, and 5 SIR. And you must be sure that they would obey your orders. Few would have had the temerity to embark on such an enterprise.

8. This was the parlous position of the Minister of Education and his Director in the 1950's and 60's. There were periodic arrests and detention of communist school teachers and students. Students suspected of being government informers were assassinated. Hapless school principals who valiantly tried to assert their authority were beaten up. It was in the late 1960's before our authority was established.

9. The grave problem you spotlighted in your report, the unwillingness of officials in the Ministry to take hard decisions, to make difficult choices, springs from this history. An irregular group of forces was nominally brought under one command in the 1950's. The government commander's authority was for some time tenuous and ambiguous. The irregular officers had their

own supporters, and they wielded considerable political clout. The habits of caution and consensus are not easily changed. Hence your discovery of endless committee meetings in search of unanimity, when there should have been firm decisions by the officer in the chair.

10. We must be flexible in implementing changes. Parents must be free to choose between the standards they want their children to achieve between L1 and L2. They must be made aware that every child has his limits. It is not possible for a child to be as good in L2 as in L1. There is a trade-off, namely, a higher standard of L2 comes with more time and greater effort. The cost is less time for, and lower standards in , L1. No child can have his cake and eat it, not even a prodigy. Any student who wants to achieve higher standards in L2 can spend an extra year in school at the end of his 'O' or 'A' levels. He can cover the same or similar subjects in order to achieve a higher standard in

L2.
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11. One point is worth drawing to parents' attention: children from English-speaking homes will be more bilingual if during their primary schooling they were taught more Mandarin in CL1 schools. Such children are already and will stay fluent in English. They can switch to EL1 schools at Sec 1.

12. It is foolish to believe that we can ever completely divorce language, culture, and education from the passions with which people jealously guard their personal identities. It has taken 20 years to convince all that no one is being asked to surrender his personal identity. The present political and emotional climate allows for frank and calm discussions on policies which will decide the kind of men and women our children will grow up to be.
13. If we are to be one nation, we need at least one common language in order to communicate with each other. Eventually, we shall share one culture. Meanwhile, we can only hope to share more values and social attitudes in common.
14. I have long suspected what your study team has concluded, that for the next one or two generations, we cannot hope to get everyone to understand and speak English. For about 20% of the Chinese, Mandarin is the only language they can master. Notwithstanding the difficulties, we must try to equip them with simple oral English to cope with working situations. I share your view that for the slower 20% Malays and Indians, we should try to teach them oral and written English.

15. Languages and their daily use are decided first by parents and second by the society in which their children grow up. A language can be taught in the schools. But unless what is taught in the schools is reinforced by daily use, it cannot become a natural part of their lives. We must try to reduce the numbers of those who cannot master English and Mandarin of their exclusively dialect home and neighbourhood environment. Given another decade, with most people living in new towns, English should become the common language between different racial groups, and Mandarin the common language between dialect groups. In such an environment, where dialects do not complicate learning, perhaps even the slower 20% can become bilingual, adequate for their daily work needs.

16. For the indefinite future, there is a considerable portion of our workforce, some 60%, to whom the supervisors and managers must speak in dialect or Mandarin, or Malay. Gradually, we must help Mandarin to prevail over dialect.

17. During this period of transition into effective bilingualism, we should encourage those who cannot be bilingual to be “translingual”, that is, to speak to each other in different languages, and to understand each other without translation. This requires less ability and little effort. It is easier to

understand what is said in a second language than to express one's thoughts in it. 'A' speaks to 'B' in Hokkien. 'B', who understands Hokkien, replies in Mandarin, and is understood by 'A'.

18. I am in broad agreement with your conclusions. However, your report has not touched upon two crucial subjects over which we have had frequent and intense discussions in Cabinet. It is useful to set them out : first, moral and character aspects of education; second, teachers who set good moral examples and who care for their pupils.
19. The first subject concerns a good citizenship and nationhood. What kind of man or woman does a child grow up to be after 10-12 years of schooling? Is he a worthy citizen, guided by decent moral precepts? Have his teachers and principals set him good examples? Imparting knowledge to pass examinations, and later to do a job, these are important. However, the litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures citizens who can live, work, contend and cooperate in a civilised way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier, ready to defend his country, and so protect his wife and children, and his fellow citizens? Is he filial, respectful to elders, law-abiding, humane, and responsible? Does he take care of his wife and children, and his parents? Is he a good neighbour and a trustworthy

friend? Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions? Is he clean, neat, punctual and well-mannered?

20. We have a mix of immigrants from different parts of China, India and the Malay world. We have to give our young basic common norms of social behaviour, social values, and moral precepts which can make up the rounded Singaporeans of tomorrow. The best features of our different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups must be retained.

21. The best of the East and of the West must be blended to advantage in the Singaporean. Confucianist ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos must be combined with sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry, the open discursive methods in the search for truth. We have to discard obscuranist and the superstitious beliefs and practices of the East, as we have to reject the passing fads of the West. Particularly important are intra-family relationships.

We must reinforce these traditional family ties found in all Asian societies.

But we must excise the nepotism which usually grows out of this extended family net of mutual help.

22. The principal value of teaching the second language is the imparting of moral values and the understanding of cultural traditions. Except for the top

8%, a wide vocabulary and high language manipulative skills cannot be the primary aim of L2. Its teaching must be interesting and related to their lives. It must not be taught like Latin, a dead language, swotted for examinations and forgotten soon thereafter. From many meetings with many officers in the Education Ministry, I have discovered that they believe the teaching of Chinese must concentrate on correctness of expression or proficiency in the language. They probably reflected the views of many Chinese language teachers. I had difficulty in convincing them that with English as our working language, for the average student, emphasis on Chinese diction, idiom and style will be too much for them to cope with. If we insist on this, we will risk making the learning of Chinese a dull and arid exercise. The greatest value in the teaching and learning of Chinese is in the transmission of the norms of social or moral behaviour. This means principally Confucianist beliefs and ideas, of man, society and the state.

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23. This is painlessly taught through stories, the myths and mythology of their culture. What is taught in school must be related to what they see, hear, and do at home. Much of this folklore is being transmitted orally from parent to child, and until recently by roadside storytellers. Before the days of television, talented storytellers broadcasted over Rediffusion exciting traditional stories in never ending weekly instalments to both adults and

students. These tales were part of the Chinese semi-historical pageant of heroes and villains, philosophers and jesters, statesmen and warriors, cowards and fools. Children in their impressionable years would read of these same characters in the “comics” borrowed for a few cents from the roadside libraries.

24. It would be a tragedy if we were to miss this and concentrate on second language proficiency nearly equal to the first language. Malay students should know their proverbs and their folklore, like Sang Kanchil. For the Indians, the Ramayana and the Mahabaratha provide marvellous and inexhaustible sources of stories. They are interesting in themselves. That they also carry a moral message is the genius of the culture. No child should leave school after 9 years without having the “software” of his culture programmed into his subconscious.

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25. To achieve this, we come to the second subject, how to get teachers who are good examples of good citizenship. Fast economic development has resulted in startling social transformations. This makes more important the teachers’ role as moral and social anchormen. Teachers must be respected members of our community. They must be selected as much for their potential as moral guides as for their efficiency as transmitters of knowledge.

26. The English schools established by the British prudently blurred nationalist ideas. They played down group identity and national defence reflexes. What the colonial system needed were clerks, storekeepers, teachers, and a few doctors. They needed non-political assistants who were not educated beyond their subordinate roles. So the early English-educated teachers were deliberately de-politicised.

27. On the other hand, the Chinese-school teachers were the result of the 1911 anti-Manchu revolution in China. Indeed, the early teachers, together with their textbooks, were imported from China in the 1920's. they were part and parcel of a revival movement of a down-trodden people who were determined to abolish backwardness. The textbooks aroused national pride. They recounted tales to inspire patriotism, and to restore confidence in themselves, so that they could catch up with the West. The teachers devised group activities, from choir singing to mass games, which fostered pride in group achievement. They taught children of immigrants the importance of mutual help and common loyalties for group survival. They had to, for the colonial system paid little attention to their welfare.

28. Now, 90% are registering for English schools. They must imbue the young with these same, or similar, responses for group achievement. It is more difficult to this in English schools with students of different ethnic groups and cultural traditions. But it can be done if we adjust and modify the methods. Our students can be more politically aware. They must be made to place group interests above individual interests. Unless our teachers have these feelings and thoughts, they cannot generate them in their students.
29. There are a few findings in your report I do not agree with. For example, your team concluded that LET (Language Exposure Time) did not improve standards of English in Chinese-stream schools although Science and Mathematics were taught in English. There must be an explanation for this paradox. This is contrary to my own learning experience and my personal observation of students. The more you hear a language spoken, the easier it is for you to understand and to speak it. That is the principle of learning by “immersion”. That is why scholars sent abroad quickly pick up languages of the people they live with. I suspect the explanation could be that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in Chinese schools, supposedly in English, was by the same Chinese-speaking teachers who were not trained to teach in English, and therefore frequently switched back to Mandarin. Of course there

could be other simpler explanations, namely, that the exposure to English teaching in Science and mathematics was not long enough to show results.

30. The professional problems of teaching are the easier to solve. Our teachers, including those in the English stream whose English is less than good, can be re-trained to teach in the English language. Tighter management will make the Ministry more sensitive to what is happening to its policies in the classrooms. It can then respond to feedback quickly, and take remedial action. However, the most fundamental principle of good education is recognition by the Ministry that the basic teaching organisational unit is the school. Therefore, as you have already discovered, the principals know the problems of the students better than the Ministry officers. Often, it is the principals who suggest practical solutions to these problems.

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31. All said and done, inspite of the shortcomings of our system of education, our performance as a community has not been found wanting. Traditional attitudes to learning and cultural values, implanted by parents and grandparents, and reinforced by relatives and friends, they have saved our students. These are precious assets. Our schools must reinforce these family transmitted values.

32. I have reflected on your proposal that your letter and report be tabled in Parliament for discussion and debate. I accept it. To be able to publish your findings and this exchange of letters is a watershed in our history. A generation of Singaporeans is coming of age.

Signed

(LEE KUAN YEW)

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