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OPENING SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG AT THE GIFTED EDUCATION PROGRAMME'S CREATIVE ARTS SEMINAR 28 MAY 96, NUS AT 10.30 AM

WE NEED TO BE CREATIVE

1. Singapore has no natural resources. The task of surviving and thriving as a small nation is formidable. We succeed only by making the most of our human talent, and by responding creatively to our challenges.
2. For 30 years we have prospered. This has not been by accident. It was brought about by creative problem solving, by coming up with policies and ideas to overcome our difficulties and address our needs – the HDB home ownership programme, the CPF savings scheme, the strong and credible SAF, the hard-headed land transport policies which have kept our roads free flowing. If Singapore had really been the sterile environment devoid of innovation that our foreign critics claimed, we would have gone under long ago.
3. Such ingenuity will be even more important in the next phase of nation building. Our standards of living are higher than many developed countries. Yet we lack the strength and resilience of developed countries like the US, Japan or Germany. To sustain our rapid growth will require

exceptional performance. We cannot just follow a trail blazed by other developed countries. We must not only be good learners, but also innovative path-breakers.

4. Creativity cannot be confined to a small elite group of Singaporeans – a few policy-makers, academics, and top businessmen. In today's rapidly changing world, the whole workforce needs problem solving skills, so that every worker can continuously add value through his efforts, and make a good living for himself and his family. To cope with national challenges, individual Singaporeans must understand what is at stake and respond intelligently. They cannot just follow their leaders without thinking or understanding.

FACTORS AFFECTING CREATIVITY

5. Three primary factors influence creativity: innate talent, which sets a natural limit to how creative one can be; the social environment, which should encourage and reward innovation; and a sound education system, which should stretch our students' creative potential. Let me elaborate.

Innate Talent

6. Creativity and imagination depends firstly on the innate talent of the people. The more talented our people are, the more education can bring out the potential in them. This is most obvious in artistic fields – very few of us have the potential to become a world-class violinist like

Yehudi Menuhin, or architect like I M Pei. But it is true in all fields of endeavour.

7. The great cities of the world – New York, London, Tokyo, Shanghai – have emerged because they gather their talent from a wide catchment. They do not depend solely on people who were born and grew up in them, to sustain their cultural, scientific and intellectual life. Singapore too must become like these cities, and draw in talent from abroad. If we depend solely on our own population of only 3 million, we will be no different from any number of provincial cities of this size in India or China. It will be very many years before we produce a Yehudi Menuhin or I M Pei.

8. Take for example the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. When Dr Goh Keng Swee started it in 1978, most of the musicians were imported from Eastern Europe, America, China and Japan. After nearly 20 years, Singaporeans now officially make up almost 80% of the orchestra membership. But this includes many foreign players who have since been naturalised! Compare ourselves with Tokyo, which has 9 symphony orchestras, or London, New York, Paris, and Tel Aviv, each with several renowned orchestras plus a multitude of cultural, dance, opera, and theatre groups. Singapore does not have a surplus of talent.

9. We must therefore continue to attract talent to Singapore to expand our talent pool. Every year 25,000 foreigners become permanent residents, and about 10,000 permanent residents become new citizens. This is quite many, compared to the 50,000 babies born in Singapore every year. But this inflow is absolutely necessary for our future success.

10. I know some Singaporeans are uneasy about this inflow. They feel that as citizens, they should not have to compete against foreigners for jobs, for places at university, or when buying houses. Male citizens especially feel that they bear a heavy burden, as they have to do National Service, whereas PRs do not.

11. We should never treat non-citizens more favourably than citizens. Whether it is subsidised HDB flats, Singapore Telecom shares, asset enhancement schemes, or the education system, citizens take priority. We also make a special effort to reward National Servicemen, not to compensate them for their sacrifices – which is not possible – but to recognise their vital contribution to our security.

12. But we must also never turn away foreign talent, or make them feel unwelcome. We need them to thrive. Their skills are in demand everywhere. If instead of coming to Singapore, they go to Hong Kong or Sydney or Toronto, they will still be competing against Singaporeans in

the global economy. Far better to have them here in Singapore, on our side and contributing to our growth, than to turn them away, and strengthen our competitors while weakening ourselves.

13. We are all descended from immigrants. The first generation retained many links to their ancestral homes, in China, India or the archipelago. They did not think of themselves as Singaporeans. But we, their children and grandchildren, do. So too will it be with this generation of immigrants.

The Social Environment

14. Secondly, the social framework must value and encourage creativity. People should feel encouraged to venture, to try something new, and if they are unsuccessful, not to have their failure held against them. An entrepreneur whose business fails is not necessarily a bad entrepreneur, provided he did not fail because of dishonesty or skulduggery. Indeed, a good entrepreneur is one who takes calculated risks, makes some honest mistakes, but perseveres and learns valuable lessons from them.

15. Social values evolve only gradually. Ours are built on firm pragmatic foundations, putting economic well-being first. However, there is certainly room for us to recognise creative excellence as another significant yardstick of success. The government influences the tone, by the way it recognises those who innovate but do not succeed for

legitimate reasons. So do parents, who greatly influence the way their children grow up.

16. Most Singapore parents are practical. They want their offspring to pursue studies which will get them good jobs with promising prospects. But at the same time, parents should not apply excessive pressure on their children to go for the most prestigious or best paying professions, for example medicine or the law. They should leave some space for their children to develop their aptitudes, and excel at what they are naturally good at.

17. There are many paths to success. Some of the shrewdest entrepreneurs, both in Singapore and abroad, have succeeded because of what they learnt in the school of life, without obtaining academic honours. Bill Gates famously dropped out of Harvard University to found Microsoft. I am not suggesting that students should drop out of school in the hope of becoming another Bill Gates. But I hope parents will keep an open mind and encourage their children to fully exploit their talents as far as possible.

The Education System

18. Thirdly, the education system must bring out the best in our children, and develop their creativity and talent. We have done well in guaranteeing a uniform good standard of education in all our schools. Our students are staying in schools longer. In each successive cohort,

more are reaching higher educational levels. The physical facilities in schools have improved tremendously. Computers, Internet access, audio-visual rooms, well-stocked libraries, all have become standard fixtures. The rickety desks and dilapidated buildings which I was knew in school are now a thing of the past.

19. But despite these significant achievements, we must not become complacent. We must constantly be on the lookout for further improvements.

20. I believe that we must improve two aspects of the system. Firstly, we need to make a quantum leap in the quality of education in Singapore schools, across the board. We need more good teachers, properly trained, motivated and rewarded, because they are the ones who actually educate the pupils. We need to give schools more resources and more autonomy, so that principals and teachers have the leeway to innovate and improve on the education they provide. We must create an attitude in our schools of constantly trying out new and different ideas. Pupils will benefit not only from the new ideas, but from the spirit of innovation and the constant desire to do better.

21. The independent and autonomous schools have shown what can be achieved with resources and imagination. We have to get other schools to learn from their experience, discover what works, and

improve on it. Then pupils in all schools will benefit from the independent and autonomous schools, and not just those who happen to be studying in these schools.

22. This is why we recently made drastic changes to the teaching service, to improve the terms and promotion prospects, and attract more talent into teaching. The problem is not money, but how to recruit and retain the talent we need, to come up with good ideas and implement them, and most importantly to teach well.

23. Secondly, we need to re-look at how we assess our students. Our 'O' and 'A' level examinations results have been improving year by year. Half the candidates who take Mathematics and Additional Mathematics at 'O' levels receive distinctions. At 'A' levels, 60% of those taking Mathematics C receive distinctions.

24. These results reflect the hard work put in by teachers and pupils in the schools to master the subjects. But teachers have also become better at preparing pupils for the examinations, cramming and spotting questions, i.e. they have become exam smart.

25. Our better results also reflect the decline in academic standards in Britain. Standards of marking have gone down and grades are becoming inflated. Increasingly, British examiners want to help pupils to

pass, rather than rigorously assessing whether they deserve to pass, or to get distinctions. The British themselves have acknowledged as much.

26. When I was in school, perhaps 50 pupils would get 4 As in the 'A' levels per year. Now more than a thousand do. I know pupils are getting progressively smarter, but I am not sure that my generation was so much dimmer than today's pupils!

27. Hong Kong has been setting its own 'A' levels for over 30 years, for language and other reasons. Hong Kong academics reckon that a British 'A' level B-grade pass is only equivalent to a Hong Kong version C or D-grade pass, and the Hong Kong 'A' level papers are equivalent to British first or second year university examinations.¹

28. The issue is not just how difficult the examinations are, but more what sort of learning experience pupils get. To maximise the potential of bright pupils, it is crucial to give them the right challenges and stretch them properly. They must learn to analyse non-standard problems from fresh perspectives, and not just meticulously recall book answers to standard questions. The examination system must reinforce this education process.

29. The Ministry of Education has been studying this problem for some time. They are looking for ways to improve the curriculum and the

¹ ST 16 Feb 96, pg 3.

assessment methods to encourage independent learning, for example through project work and greater use of information technology. We will take time to implement any changes we decide on, to train the teachers, prepare the pupils, and get the parents on board. Our education system must encourage pupils to be creative, and reliably test their ability to innovate and solve problems.

ENCOURAGING ARTISTIC CREATIVITY

30. Artistic talent is one important aspect of creativity. We should not neglect this dimension, as we strive to become a truly developed country. We should never denigrate material success, for without material success we cannot talk of the finer things in life. But material success should not be the be all and end all of life.

31. The local arts scene has become much more active in the last few years. Dramatists, painters, music groups, and film-makers are full of new ideas and ferment. The audiences are also developing, and local performances and productions are better attended, even when integrated with the international film and arts festivals.

32. In schools too, pupils take part in a wide range of artistic activities. Our pupils have considerable creative talent in various artistic fields - music, literature, drama, painting, etc.. Schools, polytechnics, and university halls of residence put up many polished performances and exhibitions. We should encourage pupils who have a flair for the arts to

develop their talents. Rather than focus only on academic achievements, we should treat excellence in the arts as another important indicator of all-round creative ability.

33. In fact, the two are closely inter-related. The journal *Nature* recently published a study which shows that children who have been exposed to music and the arts go on to exhibit superior language and mathematical skills.

34. The participants of the Creative Arts Seminar are among our most able students. Many of you will go on to make your mark in the professions, in the private and public sectors. Few will grow up to become full-time writers, musicians, sculptors or actors. Your parents will probably advise you against it, and they will probably be right.

35. Just ask Dr Cham Tao Soon, who is the President of the Nanyang Technological University. He is a gifted musician. As a teenager he wanted to study the piano and music composition. His parents insisted that he take up engineering instead. He did, became a professor, and is now President of NTU. He now agrees that his parents were right. But he kept his interest in music and the arts. His daughter is similarly talented, and was also contemplating studying music as a career. As a concerned father, he was greatly relieved when eventually she decided to study economics.

36. Singapore will find it difficult to support many pianists, painters, or dramatists. Many of our best musicians live abroad, because that is where the audiences are, and will always be. But we can never have too many engineers who are also accomplished pianists, entrepreneurs who are skilled painters, or scientists who are good dramatists. Perhaps that is what some of you will become when you grow up.

37. Our future depends on creative minds being brought to bear on our the tough challenges we will face. I hope participants of the Creative Arts Seminar will take full advantage of this opportunity, to experience the joy of learning and the freedom of discovery.

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