Institute of Policy Studies

Full report on the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series: Roundtable on the State of Literature Education and its Implications

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INTRODUCTION

Together with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a roundtable discussion on 29 May 2015 to critically reflect on the state of literature education and the wider implications for educational, national and cultural policy. More than 40 participants attended the roundtable, which included policymakers, scholars, teachers and arts practitioners.

The roundtable was chaired by Mr Tan Tarn How, Senior Research Fellow at the Arts, Culture and Media Cluster at IPS. First, Associate Professor (A/P) Angelia Poon and Assistant Professor (Asst. Prof.) Suzanne Choo from the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE) presented their paper on "Literature Education in Singapore: Contextualising Developments, Envisioning Possibilities". Next, four speakers — Asst. Prof. Charlene Rajendran from the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group at NIE; Mr Simon Charles Reynolds, Deputy Director at the Ministry of Education; Mr Khor Kok Wah, Senior Director in Sector Development (Literary Arts) at the National Arts Council; and Ms Pooja Nansi, writer/poet and former schoolteacher and Head of Department in Literature — were invited to share their responses to the paper. Finally, there was an open discussion for all participants.

A summary of the proceedings can be found here.

LITERATURE EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE: CONTEXTUALISING DEVELOPMENTS, ENVISIONING POSSIBILITIES

BY A/P ANGELIA POON AND ASST. PROF. SUZANNE CHOO

Abstract

Over the last two decades, enrolment in literature education at the upper secondary level in Singapore has declined to a critical point. As the nation celebrates its 50th birthday and looks to the future, one key question is: What is the public role of literature education in Singapore society?

The first part of this paper aims to contextualise the current state of literature education by examining root causes underlying its decline — particularly in relation to significant education policies such as bilingual education and National Education. These policies, implemented both to support and counter Singapore's globalising ambitions, have resulted in the marginalisation of literature education.

The second part of this paper then aims to envision possibilities for the future of literature education that involves a holistic reconceptualisation of its philosophy, areas of study, text lists and pedagogical approaches. This reconceptualisation is vital because literature education has implications beyond that of education, including the development of the arts and creative industries, and the nurturing of a more inclusive, participatory and cosmopolitan society.

1. Contextualising Developments

1.1 The state of literature education today

Literature education at the secondary school level in Singapore is in a precarious state even though the subject is compulsory at the lower secondary level. Enrolment for the subject at the O-Level stood at 47.9% in 1992, 21.8% in 2001, before dropping to 9% in 2012.

The Normal (Academic), or N(A), candidature for Literature as a full O-Level subject was 26.5% in 1992, 4.2% in 2001, and 2.5% in 2012. In 2012, only 50% of secondary schools or 77 schools in Singapore offered "full" Literature at the O-Level. Only 13 schools — 10% of the total number of schools with N(A) course — offered it at N(A)-Level.

Since 2002, Literature enrolment has been fairly stable. Each year there are more than 3,000 (9%) O-Level students and more than 200 (2.5%) N(A)-Level students for full Literature. In addition, there are about 3,000 (9%) "O"-Level students and about 400 (3.5%) N(A) Level students for Elective Literature (Heng, 2013).

The decline in the study of Literature, while not new, was raised most recently in 2013 by Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Janice Koh in her speech in Parliament during the Budget Debate. Much ink has been spilt on the reasons for the decline in literature education at the secondary level, but we may frame the problem in terms of three root causes that overlap and reinforce one another: a culture of pragmatism, our bilingual policy, and our National Education policy.

1.2 Reasons for the state of literature education

Culture of pragmatism

The culture of pragmatism is one of the principal reasons why Literature has suffered such a decline at the secondary level in Singapore. Such a culture is highly entrenched and pervades all sectors of life. When it comes to the crunch, many parents, students and schools think that Literature is simply not a "useful" subject. This is in comparison to subjects like Science and Math, which many feel open doors to courses of study at the tertiary level, leading to more promising job prospects. No one, for example, ever questions the need to study Math to such a high level in secondary schools or at junior college (JC). Generally, students who opt to study Literature at the O-Level are those interested in further study of it at JC. Many students who see themselves bound for the polytechnics also fail to see the relevance of Literature to their next course of study.

The culture of pragmatism we find ourselves in has been fuelled by specific measures and acts, such as the introduction of the annual public ranking of schools according to academic results in 1992. Ranking led to a drastic drop in the number of secondary

school students offering Literature, because schools were afraid students would not score well for the subject and would hence adversely affect the school's overall position. Some top schools even stopped offering Literature as a subject or reduced the number of Literature classes they had (*The Straits Times*, 1995, May 24; Lee, 2000).

In the 1990s, there was widespread debate in the media following the drop in Literature enrolment. Expectedly, factors cited in the media included the fact that students were opting for Geography and History because they perceived that it was easier to score in these subjects compared to Literature (*The Straits Times*, 1995, October 7).

Although schools are no longer ranked in such a narrow and public way, education in Singapore is still conceived of in strongly pragmatic and instrumentalist ways. Thus, students who have imbibed the culture of pragmatism tend to view the pursuit of education as the means to better jobs and higher standards of living — rather than about studying a subject for the love of it. Literature is seen as a difficult subject to score well in and continues to be a casualty of the premium placed on grades and high-stakes exams in Singapore. Students and parents prefer "easy-to-ace" subjects even though pass rates for Literature are similar to those for History and Geography. "Performance in Literature at the O- and N-Levels has been consistent with 90% passes and over 30% distinctions. There has, in fact, been a slight upward trend in the pass rate for Full Literature, from 90% in 2002 to 95% in 2012. The percentage of students scoring distinction grades has also risen from 35% to 40% over the same period" (Heng, 2013).

The statistics show that among N(A) students, the fall in Literature enrolment has been even more drastic than it is among Express students. Again, the probable reason for this — that N(A) students are academically weaker or weaker in English to handle the subject — reflects the culture of pragmatism at work.

Bilingual policy

As part of the Singapore state's official policy on multiracialism and the formal recognition of four racial groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others, or CMIO) in Singapore, English Language is positioned in Singapore as a working and bridge language among the races. A bilingual policy where students offer English as a first language and their "mother tongue" as a second language has been the cornerstone of the education system since Singapore's political independence. The "mother tongue" language is supposed to provide cultural ballast, while English is valued solely for its communicative and functional purposes. Thus, civics and moral education is conducted in the mother tongue language in schools while English as the medium of instruction and first language takes on connotations of mere functionality.

The naturalising effect of Singapore's bilingual policy has made it hard for us to think of the English Language as our own language and part of Singapore's culture. Instead,

many think of it as a "working language", something to adopt for pragmatic economic reasons. This instrumentalist view of English affects curriculum and pedagogy where English is seen in terms of effective communication. Thus, instead of a Language Arts curriculum in schools when it comes to the teaching of English Language, an ESL pedagogy ("English as Second Language") is still at work in the bulk of mainstream schools because of the essentially functional view of English. Within such a system, English Literature is marginalised and seen as altogether a separate subject, suitable only for those strong in English Language, and hence only for an elite few. In many schools, excellence in English is seen as a pre-requisite for taking Literature as a subject.

National Education

In 1997, National Education (NE) was introduced to foster greater national cohesion and pride as well as help Singaporeans develop a shared national identity. Six NE messages had to be infused into the official secondary school curriculum through such subjects as Social Studies, History, Literature, Geography and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). NE in Singapore is a "citizenship education initiative [by the state] aimed at socialising the young into a set of desired attitudes and values" (Tan, 1998, p. 29). What tends to be missing from NE discourse in Singapore are ideas about participation in a democracy, the cultivation of civic values, and the goal of social justice.

In 2001, as a crucial and strategic vehicle for NE, a new Combined Humanities subject was offered as a compulsory subject at the upper secondary level with Social Studies as the fixed and mandatory component. Thus, at the upper secondary level, students had to take a combined Humanities subject comprising Social Studies and one other elective chosen from among Literature, Geography or History. These electives are taken as a "half subject". Students could also opt to take another full Humanities subject (again either Literature, Geography or History).

It is clear that Literature has declined as a subject as a direct result of the way NE was conceptualised, structured and organised. In 2001, the year that Social Studies was made mandatory, Literature enrolment for O-Level Literature was halved (from 47.9% in 1992 to 21.8% in 2001). Since Social Studies is compulsory, students need only take a "half subject" from Literature, Geography or History to fulfil the Humanities stipulation at the O-Level. The subject often chosen to pair with Social Studies — because it is deemed most compatible for study — is Geography, followed by History.

National Education and Social Studies in Singapore are narrowly centred on "The Singapore Story" and the six NE messages. According to then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "The Singapore Story" is about "how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation" (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1997). It represents in effect the state's view of Singapore history and essentially the triumph of the PAP as the ruling party, together with its ideology and policies. At the same time, there is

also a need to equip students to navigate a globalised world and its complexities. As a result, "citizenship education through social studies has become a complex task; the tension is between rapidly changing social, economic and political circumstances on one hand, and the PAP government's conservatism on the other" (Baildon & Sim, 2009, p. 410).

Literature, with its potential for increasing students' capacity for imagination, vicarious experience, and empathy has not been seen as having a central role to play in NE. Furthermore, the kind of critical thinking and questioning of authority that Literature can foster through its pedagogic practices makes it less conducive to MOE's plan for NE if NE continues to be presented in a top-down manner, requiring adherence to a single dominant narrative and with little room for discussion, debate and dissent. As Warren Mark Liew (2013) argues:

> *The study of Literature, then, is consonant with the aims of a liberal education that seeks to develop citizens' critical reflection, independent judgement, intellectual skepticism and sensitivity toward multiple perspectives. Concomitantly, a Literature-infused NE curriculum founded on this liberal-humanist paradigm should sponsor critical examinations of the ideological assumptions underpinning Singapore's nation-building efforts. (p.186)*

In 2011, it was announced that NE would be subsumed under a new Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) framework, which would also incorporate the existing Civics and Moral Education (CME) and co-curricular activities. Then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat emphasised that "NE will remain a cornerstone of the CCE curriculum because our children must know Singapore's vulnerabilities and constraints as well as what makes Singapore tick" (Ministry of Education, 2011). It is possible with this new framework that a broader understanding of citizenship education could prevail, which would also allow a greater role for Literature and its capacity for cultivating a cosmopolitan imagination.

2. Envisioning Possibilities

The dismal state of literature education points to an urgent need for revitalisation, and perhaps it is the possibility of a cosmopolitan literature curriculum that provides the most compelling vision today. What would this look like and why does it matter?

Let us first start by describing the opposite of a cosmopolitan literature curriculum. In 2015, an interview with Yale University's Professor Harold Bloom was published in *Time* magazine. When asked his opinions on reading and increasing public online discussions about books, Bloom replies, "Reading is not in that sense a democratic process. It's elitist. It has to be elitist" (D'addario, 2015,). To Bloom, literature education should centre on close reading and appreciation of a few canonical and traditional texts. Bloom's views exemplify the paradigm, termed aestheticism, which continues to

have a huge influence in the way literature is taught in Singapore and which is demonstrated in three key features: the idolatry of the text, anti-democratic pedagogy grounded on aesthetic taste, and elitist selection of texts. Aestheticism is antithetical to the philosophical premise of cosmopolitanism — taken from the Greek term meaning "citizen of the world", connoting hospitable openness to others and inclusivity. In what follows, we will show how a cosmopolitan literature curriculum counters these three features.

2.1 From idolatry of the text to an orientation towards the other

At the heart of literature education in Singapore today is what we term, the idolatry of the text. This is most clearly observed in the first two sentences of the MOE Literature in English syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2013a): "Literature is the critical study of literary texts. Central to the subject is the critical analysis of how language is purposefully and creatively used in texts in order to create meaning and explore issues or themes" (p. 2). It is also demonstrated in other ways.

First, the two central theoretical paradigms that continue to inform the curriculum are new criticism and reader response criticism emerging in Britain and the United States during the 1930s and 1960s respectively. The former centres on a disinterested, distanced close reading of texts while the latter emphasizes the role of the reader as he or she transacts with the text. Essentially, these paradigms prioritise aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic reading (as a form of engaged as opposed to instrumental or "efferent" reading of texts) (Rosenblatt, 2004).

Second, even though the syllabus lists other aims of teaching literature such as to encourage students to "draw connections between self, texts and the world in order to develop intellectual, emotional, socio-cultural and global awareness" (Ministry of Education, 2013a, p. 6), this is contradicted by what the syllabus defines as key areas of study which centre on five aspects of the text — plot, character, setting and atmosphere, style and theme. As a result, particularly at the upper secondary level, teachers tend to focus on these five areas of the text in their teaching.

At its historical root, this idolatry of the text is inherited from colonial practices of literature education. Literature education as a subject was introduced in schools in Britain in the late 18th century to replace Religious Studies, and its core aim was to civilise the masses and instil Englishness or values of the English middle class. When the system of mass education was appropriated to Britain's colonies, literature education was a core part of a colonial project to fashion a class of local elites who would be "English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1965, para. 34). In the 1920s in Singapore, a colonial government report on education in the Straits Settlement describes how respect for English culture was growing among the local Chinese population and advocates that "it is the part of [English-medium] schools to do more — it is to educate the youth — the father of the man — to teach them our system and our language and with it to instil an admiration for most of what belongs

to us" (Nagle, 1928, p. 105). In an examination of the curriculum in schools such as Raffles Institution in the 1930s, one notes how the principal had strongly advocated a close study of canonical British authors such as Shakespeare, to initiate students into "the subtleties of language and thought and imagination, which make for true appreciation" (McLeod, 1937, p. 30).

The idolatry of the text essentially means that the curriculum focuses on an in-depth study of singular texts. For example, elective literature students at the upper secondary level spend two years studying a prose text in detail. Now this is not to say that training in critical close reading is wrong. The point is that the curriculum is emphasising what we would term extreme close reading. For example, the compulsory prose section of the O-Level paper includes a passage-based question in which a passage from the text is given and students are required to know which part of the book this is taken from and be able to explain its context and significance well. The result is that students are pushed to be familiar with every part of the text; teachers also encourage students to memorise important quotes since they must cite evidence in the essay section.

The idolatry of the text results in the text becoming disconnected from the world. However, as postcolonial scholar Edward Said has reiterated, "texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society — in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly" (1983, p. 35). In other words, all texts, even canonical texts, must be seen as constructed, inhabiting particular cultural values and ideologies. They therefore need to be interrogated, interrupted and put in conversation with other texts that can expand or provide alternative perspectives.

A cosmopolitan literature curriculum counters the idolatry of the text. On a philosophical level, it is centred on the idea of "ethics as first philosophy", which does not mean that literature should be utilised for didactic moral training (Levinas, 1989). Instead, ethics is premised on the essential question: How shall I live in relation to others? This is also to return to a different philosophy of language, which perceives language not merely as a means for communicating meaning but a means for reaching understanding of others (Habermas, 1984). Thus, a main aim of a cosmopolitan literature curriculum is for students to be exposed to as well as to empathise and engage with multiple and marginalised others in the world. Here, ethics rather than aesthetics become the philosophical premise of literature education. Ethics was a significant aspect of education during the time of ancient Greece and China with philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and Confucius calling us to contemplate such essential questions about human existence and purpose. The interest in virtue ethics, particularly in relation to such virtues as justice and care contributed by key philosophers of the late 20th century, has led to a shift away from the self's occupation with living a moral life to the question of how the self can be attentive and responsible for others in the world, particularly those who are victimised,

marginalised and oppressed. This is the kind of "new, dirty cosmopolitanism" that calls us to be active rather than passive, accountable rather than disengaged readers of our world and its cultural texts (Robbins, 2012).

2.2 From anti-democratic pedagogy grounded on aesthetic taste to democratic pedagogies of connection and interruption

As mentioned, the current preoccupation with the aesthetic objective has led to the literature curriculum revolving around five areas of study — plot, character, setting and atmosphere, style and theme. Between 1990 and 2013, the proportion of questions in the O-Level Literature in English examination paper requiring students to analyse the style of the writer increased from 4.3% in 1990 to 16.2% in 2000 and to 91.1% in 2013, while the proportion of questions requiring students to discuss issues related to key themes in the text decreased from 8.5% in 1990 to 5.9% in 2000 and to 0% in 2013 (Choo, 2015, Figure 1). Further, most questions continued to centre on the analysis of textual features. While the proportion of questions requiring students to evaluate the text's ideological issues and the ethical implications of an event increased from 6.4% in 1990 and 4.4% in 2000 to 16.1% in 2013, this was still far below the proportion of questions emphasising close analysis of textual features which increased from 48.9% in 1990 to 60.4% in 2000 to 83.9% in 2013 (Choo, 2015, Figure 2).

The preoccupation with the five areas of study, especially the aesthetic style of the text, has resulted in an anti-democratic pedagogy where the over-emphasis on appreciation leaves little room for critical evaluation of the text, its politics, ideological values, the way it positions and influences the reader, as well as the socio-cultural contexts that shape it. While questions such as "How does Miller make this passage such a powerful ending to the play?" or "How does Shakespeare make Mercutio a dramatically compelling character?" (Ministry of Education, 2013b, p. 8) may be useful in drawing attention to the craft of the writer, it also results in classroom pedagogy becoming fixated on aesthetic originality and confined to the life-world of the author's fictional imagination.

What is an alternative? A cosmopolitan literature curriculum involves the de-centring of text and is reoriented towards the development of a critical hospitable imagination. Gayatri Spivak argues that aesthetic education — including literature education — should fundamentally provide what she terms "the training of an imagination for epistemological performance", which means training the imagination to interrogate the ways in which knowledge of self and others are constructed and interpreted as well as testing the limits of the imagination's attempts to know and perceive otherness (Spivak, 2012, p. 101).

In practice, a cosmopolitan Literature curriculum would support the development of democratic and inclusive classrooms through pedagogies of connection and interruption. First, the current five areas of study could be expanded to foreground the idea of connections involving connecting texts to other texts, to real-world issues in

society and the world, and to theories about human nature, justice, suffering, etc. The following is one example from our observation of a teacher in the United States, who was part of a larger study on global education. This was a Grade 10 (equivalent to Secondary 4) Language Arts class and the unit's title was "Poverty in the United States". The anchor text was Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. The teacher spent several months conducting the typical close analysis of the plot, character and style of the text. However, in the second part of this unit, she turned the focus to the issue of poverty. She had students work in groups to consider Charles Dickens as a social critic who wrote about poverty in his time. Students were asked to find out about current social critics writing about poverty and social justice in their country. They researched *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist* and other sources, and ranked what they thought were the best articles and writers. Following this, they compared the contemporary writer they chose with Dickens on how effective they were as social critics on poverty. Towards the end of the unit, she had students think about themselves and their own role as social critics of society. What do we notice here? The teacher did not compromise on teaching the skills of critical close reading of the text, but she moved beyond it. She connected the text to larger, pressing social issues and she made students think about how they themselves could play an active role in countering social injustice.

Aside from a pedagogy of connection, cosmopolitan literature education can also encourage a pedagogy of interruption that recognises what Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Adichie terms "the danger of the single story" (Adichie, 2009). In early 2015, we observed a teacher in an independent school. The anchor text in her unit was *Frankenstein*. She had taught the same text the previous year but said she wanted to get students to move beyond "sparknotes kind of responses". She decided to do something different. Once again, following the typical close reading of *Frankenstein*, she interrupted this canonical text with a new and relatively unfamiliar short story titled *The Moon Above His Head* by Yann Martel, which revolves around the struggles faced by a Somali worker after he has gained asylum in Canada. She had students compare the process of "othering" the monster experienced in *Frankenstein* with modern-day forms of "othering", such as the experiences faced by asylum seekers. At one point in the discussion, students talked about how marginalised others were represented in public discourse, bringing examples of recent incidents in the local media. The teacher then challenged them to think about how their own construction and reading of the foreign other has been influenced by public mass media representations. What we observe here is the shift from singular text study limited to the fictional world to comparative text studies connected to issues of real-world global concerns.

2.3 From elitist text selection to inclusive text selection

The current literature curriculum's concern with fostering aesthetic taste has led to an elitist and narrow selection of texts. For example, in the list of texts included in the English Literature examination from 1990 to 2013, authors originating from England

and the United States accounted for 68% of the texts, compared with authors originating from Africa and Singapore, which accounted for 11% and 10%, respectively (Choo, 2015). The most frequently included author was William Shakespeare, who was also the only one to be included at least once for each year of the examination, followed by Arthur Miller. The most frequently included texts were two anthologies of poetry titled *The Calling of the Kindred* and *Touched with Fire*, with at least two-thirds of these texts containing poems by long-established writers from England.

An obvious consequence is the lack of cultural representation so that a large part of the world is left out, including texts by authors from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Presumably, the inclusion of such texts requires the use of translated literatures in English, which would be perceived as a compromise to the aesthetic "authenticity" of the text. The fact that translated texts are excluded in Singapore's secondary-level national literature curriculum perpetuates the reading of similar cultures, because the texts studied are predominantly set in and written by authors originating from English-speaking economically advanced countries. This is unlike the International Baccalaureate Literature syllabus, which includes a compulsory translated text section requiring students to study at least two works in translation as well as a prescribed literature in translation list, which includes a wide selection of classical and contemporary texts stretching over 92 pages.

Further, while a few Commonwealth authors from Africa, India and Singapore have been included in the text list from 1990 to 2013, the majority of these, such as Alan Paton, Chinua Achebe, R. K. Narayan, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, are "first-generation" Commonwealth writers who gained prominence in the 1960s rather than contemporary international writers. These postcolonial texts, while attempting to critique colonialism, provide a reminder of the continued influence of colonial power and may themselves perpetuate recolonisation rather than decolonisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

Another consequence of elitism is the tendency to stick to tried and tested texts, resulting in the lack of contemporary representation of texts. Take for instance, the compulsory prose section in the GCE O-Level Literature in English text list for 2016. Schools must select one of these seven texts:

1. *Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. Published in 1989. Chinese-American families set in 1920 to 1980s.
2. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Published in 1954. Set in the context of WWII.
3. *Here and Beyond: 12 Stories* by Cyril Wong (Ed.). Anthology of Singapore short stories published in 2014.
4. *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. Published in 1948. Focuses on pre-Apartheid South Africa.

5. *The Road to Memphis* by Mildred Taylor. Published in 1990. Set in the context of 1941 and highlights the effects of racism in the American south.
6. *The Midwich Cuckoos* by John Wyndham. Published in 1957. Dealing with the alien/foreign.
7. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* by E M Forster. Published in 1905. English middle-class, social class distinctions.

We can make several observations here:

- Six out seven texts are published before 1990. The texts are therefore out of date. How will our students be exposed to contemporary writers around the world beyond tried and tested authors?
- Six out of seven stories are set predominantly in the 1940s/1950s or before this period. Issues discussed appear less relevant to current realities of our time, particularly when we think about what we term urgent global issues such as terrorism, immigration, climate change, asylum seekers, etc. This perpetuates the view that literature is out of touch with real world concerns.
- With the exception of *Here and Beyond*, the texts mainly deal with race relations between blacks and whites, Chinese American culture, and the British middle class. What about less distanced contexts such as race relations among other groups as depicted in texts such as Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches*?

The point is not that canonical texts have little value in our classroom. Rather it is that we need to create an inclusive space that allows for other voices and other cultural representations.

The crisis of literature education in Singapore provides an opportune moment for a repositioning of its goals no longer centred on propagating a bounded notion of culture or an exclusionary emphasis on aesthetic taste. Rather, literature education should be conceived as a significant global positioning site to grapple with the many cosmopolitan aporias facing our world today as borders that demarcate cultures and nations are constantly challenged resulting in rising xenophobia, ethnocentrism and fundamentalism. As countries such as Singapore strive to fashion themselves as influential global cities that manage and coordinate the flow of capital and business networks around the world, they must also cultivate dispositions of hospitality among citizens. This is precisely the reason why we need to remove the shackles of aestheticism and strive to develop a literature curriculum in which its philosophy, pedagogy and texts for study are grounded on cosmopolitan ethical principles.

3. Literature Education and Arts and Culture Policy

The development of arts and culture policy in Singapore is largely determined by the city-state's desire to strategically cultivate its identity as a global city while still adhering to more traditional nation-building goals. This is apparent from the Renaissance series of reports on arts and culture. In 1989, the *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture*

and the Arts recommended a series of measures, including major infrastructural changes and the establishment of key institutions like the National Arts Council (NAC) to make Singapore more culturally vibrant. In 1999, the *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* by the Ministry of Information and the Arts further set out a vision for Singapore as a global city for the arts brimming with culture, creativity and innovation. At the same time, it stressed that it was building upon an older nation-building initiative where the arts would provide "cultural ballast" and enhance national identity. As a cultural document, the *Renaissance City Report* is significant for counteracting the government's earlier neglect of the arts in its headlong pursuit of rapid economic growth and intensive urban development. The arts was now a cornerstone of the country's economic strategic plan; it served as an "economic catalyst" to produce a "multiplier effect" in the economy (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000a, p.47).

The Renaissance plans were the manifestations of the government's desire to maintain Singapore's competitive edge in the 21st century, by transforming it into an interesting, "cool" and vibrant place that would attract and retain foreign talent and tourists while also grooming a more creative and entrepreneurial local population for the new global economy. Arts and cultural policy have become part and parcel of the government's suite of policies for what Kenneth Paul Tan has described as "sexing up" Singapore, policies that ran the gamut of boosting the birth rate to deliberately investing in "sexy", non-traditional industries like the biotech and life sciences industry (Tan, 2003). Situating Singapore on the larger world stage, we see how its espousal of a "discourse of neo-liberal/ liberated cosmopolitanism" (Liew, 2014, p. 712); and its re-orientation towards the arts allow it to chime with the growth of the cultural or creative industries in the global North from the last third of the 20th century onwards, and the increasing recognition that these industries "could be an important way of reinvigorating post-industrial national economies" (Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005, p.4).

In 2010, Lui Tuck Yew, Acting Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, announced the formation of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) Committee to map out policy directions for further developments in the arts and culture sector until 2025. Lui made clear a policy shift for the arts away from the building of physical infrastructure towards enhancing the "creative capacity" of the populace and developing areas of artistic excellence with which to distinguish Singapore as a global city (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2010). Unveiled in the same speech was the Literary Arts Plan worth a total of S$24 million "to develop writing talents to enrich our cultural scene and give voice to our unique national identity." In 2012, the ACSR Committee published its report, which in some respects represented a significant departure from the *Renaissance City Report* and plans. Less exuberantly embracing of the global in its tone perhaps, the ACSR report reflects a greater community emphasis on the arts and expresses more pointedly the intention for the arts to be an essential component of everyday life. It proclaims as its goal the development of "[a] nation of cultured and gracious people, at home with our heritage,

proud of our Singaporean identity" (Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, 2012, p.15). It also expresses the desire for a gradual withdrawal of the state to allow the private sector and the arts and culture community a larger leadership role.

The discourse of ecology and eco-system is prevalent in much contemporary discussion of arts and culture policy. An eco-system suggests an organic whole of many inter-related and interdependent parts. This is recognition of the fact that in terms of promoting a flourishing and sustainable literary culture, for example, we need to do more than just grow writers. Writers cannot be thought of separately from readers, editors, literary agents, librarians, publishers and literature teachers. Adopting this view of a larger whole, it is clear that literature education has a vital role to play in the growth of readers and audiences as well as the other members of the eco-system. It is also key to the continued development of the cultural and creative industries in a way that would combine excellence and access. Indeed, the potential for literature as a subject to enhance students' imagination and allow their creative expression has not been fully exploited. We need to adopt a concerted and integrated approach to the problem of low literature enrolment with school educators working alongside the arts community, and MOE alongside the NAC. With literature education policy and arts and culture policy moving in the same direction, we can foster a conducive environment for a thriving arts and literature eco-system.

RESPONSES

Response 1: Assistant Professor Charlene Rajendran

Asst. Prof. Rajendran is from the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE). She focused on the gaps that drama education could fill by making it part of the core curriculum in schools. Below is her response in full:

Like literature, drama is an art form that has a very weak place in the Singapore school curriculum — but even more so. Unlike music and art, which are compulsory at primary school, and then widely available at secondary school and JC, drama does not make it into the core curriculum that all schools must provide. It has recently been re-classified as an Applied Subject, which means that there is an emphasis on "real-world situations, experiential learning, practical application and industry links." It has thus far been regarded as an OSIE subject — O-Level School Initiated Elective — which means that it is up to individual schools to take it on, and bid for it, at their own expense. There is little done to support this area of learning at present. But with it being made an Applied Subject, together with PE (Physical Education) and Computer Studies, there is meant to be more support and encouragement. Also the MOE has indicated a desire to increase the profile of drama by aiming to have 12 schools take it on for the O-Level, when the new locally developed syllabus, targeted to be ready by 2017, is available. (It has thus far been a Cambridge exam — highly unsuited to local needs)

The landscape of drama education in Singapore is highly complex due to a wide range of practices that informs and produces it. Also, much happens without anyone's knowledge as only the O- and A-Levels are kept track of consistently in secondary schools. In the primary sector, it is used widely as part of PAL (Programme for Active Learning), but this is not yet fully monitored — which is not always a bad thing. Admittedly, the Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI) and Secondary Education Review and Implementation (SERI) reports, as well as the PAL and STELLAR (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) initiatives have led to increased acknowledgement of the value of drama in education, but this has been largely — as in literature education — to service a functional service to develop better citizens, improve orality, and enhance self-confidence. As with literature, critical questions are: How does this subject really work to advance an education system in a global urban society? What is the nature and potential of having drama in the system, such that students gain a crucial literacy that is otherwise lacking in their formal education? How do the arts play a crucial role in thinking about needed paradigm shifts in education?

There are critical gaps in the current learning environment — both formal and informal. Due to extreme screen interaction and very little live interaction, we are getting more problems that result from disembodied responses, contextual illiteracy and cultural insensitivity. These impact not only on socialisation, but in a service and knowledge-based economy, they affect the profit margins as well! Not that the profit margin is my main concern. But I do think this is a serious matter that needs to be taken seriously by those who are looking at financial viability as much as artistic vibrancy.

Here are three short responses to what has been presented, in relation to drama education in Singapore and how the issues are closely related and yet a little different to the literature case:

1. Space for Democratic and Dialogical Processes

In addition to creating spaces for democratising processes in education, that enable students to understand the importance of participation and ownership in the life and workings of their society, it is critical to have dialogical processes that advance their ability to listen to each other, and communicate clearly, with intent and with empathy. Drama as medium entails the need to listen to others, not just in rehearsals of an already scripted play, but more importantly in the improvisation process that is central to much drama learning. Listening not just to words, but to the body, spatio-temporal dynamics and visual signs, means attending closely to what is happening — and then offering a response that is considered and intended. This is part of a call-and-response process that occurs through any drama work; a to-and-fro that means being able to negotiate multiple perspectives and appreciate the value of difference — a capacity that is becoming increasingly important in a global society where change and plurality are common, and yet the pressure to conform to a neoliberal hegemony is also

imminent. Kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence are fast declining due to the extreme use of virtual interaction that reduces a need for the corporeal and the live encounter. As such, drama redresses that imbalance, and it is important to consider the implications for not doing so. The capacity to dialogue is not just about an understanding of words, it is about listening and participating in the work of building coherence. In connection with others, and in relation to the material or ideas being worked on. The physicist David Bohm wrote about dialogue as a participatory process that led to coherence and proprioception of thought, a capacity to look into the workings of thought and not just assume that action occurs without reason. Dialogue enables participants to gain this skill, one that is much lacking in the system.

2. Collaborative Learning and the Aesthetic Imagination

Through the process of dialogue, collaborative skills are also developed. Not just groups of people finishing a task by dividing up the work without actually working together, but groups of people learning to draw from one another and creating new understanding and communicating shared meaning. The capacity to deal with difference, without fear of disagreement or dissensus, is crucial to drama learning. No two individuals are expected to perform a task in exactly the same way, and varied interpretations can enrich the work rather than disrupt it. Thinking through the multi-dimensionality of staging and performing, the work gains value when there are a range of skills and approaches to problem-solving as there is no singular answer that needs to be adhered to. When a critical pedagogy is consciously developed to give priority to the voice and agency of students, then the aesthetic imagination (as described by Spivak) is not about cultivating “taste” according to an elitist frame, but becoming attentive to the associations and connections that produce meaning. It is a “re-distribution of the sensible” (coined by Jacques Ranciere), that encourages aesthetic engagement that is political in is reworking of meanings and associations, connections and configurations. This also means producing drama work that communicates symbolically — thus able to exceed the limits of what is literal and bounded. So while the particular aspects of culture, identity, history and ecology are important, they are also transcended as aspects of the human condition. This capacity to recognise symbolic meaning through shared experience and collaborative negotiation is crucial, when so much mediatised communication invades the public space and shrinks the opportunity for students to produce, attend to and interrogate their own voices. In a collaborative environment, each voice is critical and necessary to the process at hand. Everybody matters — something that counters the top-down and monologic.

3. Embodied Learning and Contextual Literacy

Which leads to my third point, about embodied learning and contextual literacy. Drama requires active and engaged bodies. This means that physical, gestural, sonic and spatio-temporal details, such as how bodies move, what voices sound like, how people touch and what rhythms work. These are crucial to the way a drama happens. Each

cultural context is particular, and each individual's culture, informs the way these vocabularies are wielded. Such that drama students become aware and then literate about each other's norms, and thereby sensitive to the needs of difference without having to become either fearful or judgmental about difference. They learn about culture, values, conflicts and tensions as necessary to the development of thinking and questioning through a critical pedagogy that deepens their historical consciousness (as described by cultural critic Henry Giroux). A critical dimension of 21st century competencies, as identified by the MOE and other educational bodies, is the ability to negotiate inter- and intra-personal skills — and thus, becoming able to deal with multiplicity and uncertainty, rapid change of social norms and increasing flux. This is not something that can be taught from books, but is skill that is gained through enactment. When students develop insights about selves and others through becoming other, and examining selves. Little in the current educational environment allows space for this kind of learning. Where the work of intelligent transformation towards playing a character and performing a context then leads to insights about what alternative world-views and value systems mean. Young people are becoming increasingly disembodied as a result of addictions to the screen that produce poor communicative capacities and weak voices, literally and metaphorically. This impedes their ability to take ownership of their advancement as individuals and societies. And to address this imbalance is to take seriously the call to holistic learning — one that recognises the skill of dialogue, collaboration, communication and cultural insight as central.

So the question that needs to be asked in relation to the place of literature and drama, is: What kind of education are we emphasising and what are the consequences of not making a paradigm shift towards a more dialogical, collaborative and embodied process of learning that enables students to learn critical skills for their empowerment?

Response 2: Mr Simon Charles Reynolds

Mr Reynolds is Deputy Director at the Ministry of Education (MOE). He provided a policymaker's perspective on the current state of literature education in schools.

He said that personally, he agreed with the points raised in A/P Poon and Asst. Prof. Choo's presentation. Specifically, that the culture of pragmatism and the introduction of the bilingual policy are some of the factors that caused the decline in the number of students studying literature. However, he did want to add that despite the low number of students, 80% of mainstream schools — excluding schools that offer the Integrated Programme — do literature in some form of the other. Additionally, literature is one of the "most popular" subjects among the humanities at the JC level, with students receiving "very good results" on the subject.

He did not, however, agree with A/P Poon and Asst. Prof. Choo's recommendation that schools should do away with the current aestheticism approach and adopt the cosmopolitan approach to literature education. Instead, he said that it could be an

accommodation of both, but only if the students are at an age to be able to understand the two approaches. If the approach is too demanding, students may not want to study the subject.

On which literature texts should be used in the curriculum, Mr Reynolds listed several challenges.

First, how to decide on the number of local literature texts to be included in the curriculum, given the small number of texts offered. These texts must also be available as teachers are not able to teach the text if it is not available. The list of texts, however, does not include translated texts as the curriculum has to be "scoped somehow".

Second, how to decide which texts should be included. He said that teachers have to be "won over" as he has faced "opposition" when "selling" texts to the teachers". For example, people were afraid to use more modern books as they have not read it, choosing instead to use books such as *Animal Farm*.

Third is the issue of making sure that texts used are age-appropriate and do not contain homosexual themes or violence, otherwise they would have to deal with parental complaints.

Besides just deciding on which texts to use in the curriculum, Mr Reynolds also said that it is a "painful decision" to decide how to allocate time to the different subjects. MOE thus takes a macro view of the situation, to see how literature fits in with the demand from other subjects, while keeping in mind that students are already overtaxed.

However, he said that there is "no stopping any school from offering literature". But the reality is that there are not enough trained teachers. Training teachers take time, and the training is focused on what teachers can cope with. Teachers may also not understand the cosmopolitan approach as presented by Asst. Prof. Choo.

Mr Reynolds said that teachers — passionate teachers — have a role to play in sparking student's interest in the subject especially at the lower secondary level. This way, even if a school does not offer O-Level Literature, students who are interested may request their principal for it.

Because of all these issues, Mr Reynolds said that the job of implementing curriculum policy is a challenging one that requires maintaining the balance of interest between all stakeholders. This includes senior management, academics, parents and students. And when changes are made to the curriculum policy, such as introducing a new syllabus, the changes are not immediately reflected in the classroom. One thing that will not be done away though is exams. Mr Reynolds said that as much as it would be great not to have exams, it is a "necessity". Exams are needed not just for education, but other socio-political reasons.

Mr Reynolds also said that the reading of poetry, plays and, unfortunately, the act of reading itself is a minority interest. He said that we must come to terms with the fact due to the nature of the world today, the average person is not going to read poetry, or go to see plays and read plays and probably not read that many books. He said that the Internet and social media present a challenge to the very act of reading.

Lastly, he said that moving forward, there needs to be greater collaboration between NIE and MOE, starting with both institutions being nearer to another and located within the same campus.

Response 3: Mr Khor Kok Wah

Mr Khor is Senior Director in Sector Development (Literary Arts) at the National Arts Council (NAC).

Mr Khor said that he sees "both sides" of the two different approaches to literature education: aestheticism versus cosmopolitan. However, for him and his colleagues at the NAC, they are more inclined towards the cosmopolitan approach to teaching literature. This will allow students to learn about and understand current issues instead of just focusing on the craft of writing.

Mr Khor also said that though the topic of the roundtable was focused on English Literature and the decline in the enrolment, there is probably also a decline in the enrolment for mother tongue languages, be it as a language subject and even more so for literature in the mother tongue language.

Unlike Mr Reynolds, Mr Khor said that it was important to include translated texts in the English literature curriculum, as Singapore is a multilingual society. Writers writing in their mother tongue language also have their "own stories to tell" and offer a different perspective about society. These writers should not just be writing for their only communities, but to have the confidence that their writings can be "translated into English and appreciated by other communities." This way, the richness of local literature also comes not only from the English language but mother tongue as well.

However, he said that just having local texts is insufficient. There needs to be teaching resources for teachers to teach the text as well. As such, the NAC has also supported the production of teaching resources. An example is the book *Ku,lit: Asian Literature for the Language Classroom*, which NAC hopes can promote the "appreciation of literature" in the English language classroom.

The writing of literature is as important as teaching literature and learning literature. Mr Khor said that students should take up creative writing, perhaps as a non-examinable subject, and start writing their own stories for their own reflections, personal development and for their own understanding of themselves and the environment. Creative writing classes could then possibly stimulate a student's interest in literature. Even more so, writing could be an outlet for students to create mass

awareness on social problems, just like how Charles Dickens wrote about poverty. There are also literary organisations who are encouraging novelists and writers to write about issues such as climate change so that there will be greater awareness.

There is however a sense that the number of home-grown writers is declining, be it in the Chinese, Malay or Tamil language. What is on the rise, though, is writing by new immigrants who write about their experiences in Singapore as migrants and their experiences from their countries of origin. This means that there are still legitimate writing from Singapore, but from a different group. This has turned into a “big issue” among the local literary community, as there is a divergence in content and style of writing. But migrant writing exists in all societies, as all societies would have a migrant population.

Lastly, at the regional level, Mr Khor said that Singapore is well placed to be a centre for the writing and translation of literature for the region. In this role, Singapore will also be able to discover regional writing, especially to explore the relationship between Singapore and the region. Specifically, how does writing from the region relate to Singapore, and vice versa.

Response 4: Ms Pooja Nansi

Ms Nansi is a writer, former schoolteacher and former Head of Department in Literature in a school. She spoke about the realities that literature teachers face.

She said that qualified literature teachers were being posted to schools that did not offer literature as a subject. On the other hand, schools that did offer literature had English graduates, sociology graduates or history graduates as literature teachers. This resulted in literature taught as reading comprehension. Yet, when former students of hers wanted to apply to MOE as teaching scholars to teach literature, they were told that there was no demand for literature teachers.

There is also a lack of school support for literature as a subject, the teachers who teach it and the students who study it. Literature is not accorded the same importance as Math or Physics, despite it being an A-Level subject and carrying the same weightage. Literature teachers have to defend the subject as it seen as a “book club” where students “talk about feelings” instead of being seen as a discipline. Despite this, the subject is perceived as being hard to score. Literature students also have to fight stereotypes that they are “emotional-type kids who need to read and find therapy in novels”.

Literature students and teachers must also deal with the consequences of a culture of pragmatism. She gave the example of how while teaching A-Level Literature, she met “bright kids who loved doing literature” and should be pursuing a literature degree, but were dissuaded by their parents and told to do a business degree instead. This is

because the parents think that their children might not be able to pursue anything with a literature degree, except to be a teacher.

In this culture of pragmatism then, there is a need to think about the instrumental value of literature as a subject. What are the marketable skills in today's economy? How does a literature degree contribute to the building of such skills and thus help graduates land good jobs?

As for whether literature should be taught via a cosmopolitan or aestheticism approach, Ms Nansi said that this depends on two things. First, the extent to which teachers have the freedom to craft their own curriculum. Second, teacher effectiveness to craft said curriculum and teach text, as no two teachers would teach the same text the same way. Teachers will bring very different things out of text, depending on how confident they are in teaching the texts. At the same time, she also wonders if teachers are equipped to handle the challenges of a cosmopolitan curriculum. If they are not, what sort of support would they need to prepare them for such a curriculum?

On the use of local literature in the curriculum, Ms Nansi said that she had previously used local text in her literature classroom. However, she received a parent complaint that local literature "does not have much value." She has also, together with a colleague, wrote a teaching resource for local literature for lower secondary students. Though she is not sure how often it is being used, she said that occasionally, teachers do tell her to say that the resource was useful.

On the lack of reading culture in Singapore, she said that though people are quick to say that Singaporeans do not read, there has been great interest in writing festivals such as the Singapore Writers Festival (SWF). She said that at SWF in 2014, poetry events were full and events that were about "weird experimental poetry and music" also played to a full house. She also gave the example of the collective of young poets that she runs and how each time she puts out an open call, she receives more applications than spots to fill. There are thus youths who are reading and want to write who may not be literature students. How are these students gaining an interest in literature outside of literature classrooms?

She also said that there are realities that youths have to face, such as the difficultly in making a living as a writer in Singapore, especially if a writer is not supported by an arts-creating fund. She then said that work needed to be done on creating an eco-system where writers can survive by writing.

DISCUSSION

1. The Purpose of Literature

Several participants said that literature is viewed by many as “highbrow”, because the everyday man may not be able to relate to the subject. However, this could be because people do not understand the importance of literature.

Literature goes beyond who did what and when, but asks why and hones thinking skills. And this asking of questions is very foreign to our students, who just want answers. One participant added that there is a decline in students’ analytical and thinking skills in the approach of who they are and what they are, giving a sense of disembodied learning.

Another participant said that if we are unable to show the significance of literature and how important it is to build a more aware and tolerant society, the everyday man will not think about why we should even privilege the study of literature over geography or history. Already, students find that they do not need literature to meet the O-Level requirement of L1R5 (1 Language and 5 Relevant Subjects). This is because of the Combined Humanities options, of which every student has to count Social Studies as a half-unit, she said.

A participant suggested understanding literature as a skill that is required for a deeper level of understanding and tolerance. This way, it can be integrated into other subjects. Literature is thus no longer confined to classics or an ancient form of English writing, but as a discourse that allows for discussion on issues such as terrorism, social exclusion or new migrants. Another participant said that instead of integrating literature into other subjects, it could be a form of Social Studies or civic and character education.

Another participant said that if literature is perceived as a form of appreciation, then perhaps it is fine some appreciate it and others do not. This could also explain the “natural take-up rate” of literature. But such an approach also means that the discussion on the decline of literature remains a “very elite conversation.”

Another participant quipped that society should also not fear that literature students will end up being “poor writers or poor literature scholars”, because the culture of pragmatism is so deeply rooted that “even literature students cannot be swayed.”

A participant said it is useful to ask what business leaders think about literature and if they understand the outcomes produced by literature. This is because, in the United States, when business leaders discuss how literature or liberal education might be interesting from an employer’s perspective, more people listen.

2. Should We be Concerned about the Decline in O-Level Literature Enrolment?

The participants were divided on whether or not drop in literature enrolment for the O-Level is a cause for concern.

For one, the loss of literature does not signify a loss of an art form. It will also not impact society in any way. As it is, despite the declining number of literature students, there already exists a thriving literary writing scene in Singapore. He noted that Singaporeans today are also "not less gracious, … not less tolerant of foreigners, have not become more politically conscious and active, are not less involved in the arts because of the lack of literature in schools."

Asst. Prof. Choo replied that the decline is significant and we must be concerned about it. A/P Poon also said that we should be "energised about the decline of literature." This is because the decline is given less weight than if it were any other subject. Nobody questions why students need to study mathematics to such a high degree when arguably, literature will teach things that will equip you for life. If there were a decline in the study of mathematics, government ministers would be changing policies right now, she said. And what would happen if we were to give up the space for literature? Would there be more mathematics or more science?

A participant said that although the government is worried about the decline, they do not want to "force people to take it". A/P Poon did not agree with this view as she saw that the problem was created by the government in the first place, because of ranking and the pragmatic view on education.

3. Should Literature be Taught Together with Languages in Schools?

Several participants suggested teaching English language and literature as one subject instead of the current two. English language teachers should thus take up courses in literature. One said that in Australia teachers are expected to teach plays, film text and books as part of English language.

Asst. Prof. Choo noted that in Singapore, English is taught using a functional approach. That is, it focuses on language as a tool and language valued solely for its communicative and functional purposes. This makes it hard for Singaporeans to value the English language as their "own" language and to see it as part of Singapore's culture.

Mother tongue language on the other hand, has been "relegated to second place" compared to the English language, especially with the introduction of the B syllabus. This syllabus has a less demanding and more conversational approach to mother tongue learning.

Mr Reynolds disagreed and said that literature should not be taught together with languages, as both require different skills from students. There is also not enough time to increase teacher's proficiency in language, "let alone introduce literature".

Another participant also disagreed of teaching both subjects together because of the poor quality of mother tongue literature texts. He felt that Tamil literature texts and perhaps Malay texts were not good enough to be used in classrooms. To this, another participant disagreed, saying that there were good Malay texts that should be translated into English and used as texts even in English literature. An example is the novel *Konfrontasi*, a Malay language novel by Cultural Medallion writer Mohamed Latiff Mohamed which has also been translated into English by Epigram Books.

4. Justification for a Small Number of Literature Students

A participant seemed to be sceptical that government wanted the positive effects of literature for that many students. The current approach to literature education is "working as intended", which is to have only a small pool of "potentially elite thinkers", he said. The cosmopolitan approach to literature education as described by A/P Poon and Asst. Prof. Choo promotes the sort of thinking that the government does not want to encourage en masse, he added.

Mr Reynolds disagreed, and said that there is no limit on the number of people who can think and that the government needs more of these people.

5. Differentiated Curriculum

A participant said that neighbourhood schools and elite schools tend to use different texts when teaching literature. Neighbourhood schools use local texts because they are more culturally relatable to students, while elite schools choose more difficult texts. Thus, students from different schools have exposure to different books. The participant suggested pairing texts to reduce the difference in exposure, for example, by asking students to compare global texts with local ones.

6. Changes to Examinations

A participant said that the current literature exam papers do not include comparative questions that ask students to, for example, compare two poems. These questions were part of exam papers from 2008 to 2010. Now, students are asked "focused questions" based on one text.

A participant also responded to Mr Khor's suggestion that creative writing should be included as a non-examinable subject. The participant said schools that had provided creative writing or narrative writing subjects stopped doing so, following changes to the English Language syllabus in 2013. The participant also said that General Paper — a compulsory subject for all A-Level students — does not include creative writing either. Therefore, "Singapore will not produce a Nobel Prize winner in Literature",

despite years of winning the Angus Ross Prize for the top literature A-Level candidate outside of the United Kingdom.

7. Teacher Effectiveness

There was general consensus from the participants that teacher effectiveness and confidence play a part in sparking student's interest in literature.

A participant said that teachers should move away from emphasising close reading of the text to making connections beyond the text. Teachers could do so by asking students how they are able to relate to the text and how is it relevant to their lives.

Teachers should also choose texts by living authors. This way, if there is no teacher resource for the texts, teachers can invite the author to conduct a class. However, Mr Reynolds said that MOE does send authors to schools, but the take-up rate is "disappointing" with only international schools "snapping them up."

A participant said that teachers have to take the initiative to attract students by making literature enjoyable. This way, it is not MOE who has to convince schools to offer literature, but it is up to the students to ask their principal to offer the subject at the O-Level. A participant said that this happened in a school in Singapore, which had stopped offering O-Level literature because of fewer students were interested and because it was seen as difficult to score in the exams. A student then rallied other students and school leaders to form an O-Level literature class. This was also possible because of the supportive school culture and the students' desire to learn.

8. Lack of Reading Culture

Participants agreed that there is a lack of a reading culture in Singapore and a change in the nature of reading. However, they were unsure of what caused the change — was it social media or a result of the over-crammed curriculum?

A/P Poon said that teachers should push students to read more, and to push them to read challenging texts. This is also where the literature teacher and the literature classroom are essential. However, a participant said that teachers are not infusing students with a love for reading. The participant said that to encourage reading in her classroom, students spend one lesson a week in the library to read and write book reports. Another participant added that she would force students to borrow books.

Mr Reynolds said that he is open to suggestion on how to get students to read more as the decline in readership after primary school is a "headache."

A participant suggested extending the primary school STELLAR programme — which aims to infuse a love of literature and stories — to the secondary level. Another participant suggested making reading a compulsory subject by allocating time in the school time-table for students to read.

9. Future of e-books

There was also a short discussion on the future of electronic books (e-books) in Singapore.

A participant said that the e-book market in Singapore is still untested, but could grow in the future. Currently, e-books are not sold by Singapore companies. MediaCorp and StarHub did set up e-book stores, but these were closed down despite publishers putting up e-books for sale. Online stores such as Amazon and Apple are also not available to locals unless they have an overseas credit card. However, there are still publishers who are experimenting with e-books. Libraries have also started an e-book collection as well. Even the Tamil community is in the process of digitising Tamil literature books published between 1965 and 2015, a participant said.

10. Need for a Wider Selection of Texts in Curriculum

The participants agreed that there needs to be a wider selection of texts in the curriculum.

For example, mother tongue language texts should be translated into English and taught during English literature. This sends a signal that texts used in English literature should not only be limited to English texts. Asst. Prof. Choo said this will be more inclusive.

Asst. Prof. Choo also suggested that students read literature from other countries, as it helps students understand those countries. This is especially useful in understanding countries that are stereotyped by the media, or places that they are less familiar with, such as Afghanistan, Syria or North Korea. She said that MOE should consider moving from literature written in English language curriculum to a world literature curriculum. For a start, MOE could look at the recently launched world literature curriculum at the equivalent of the O-Level in the United Kingdom, which includes translated texts as a key part of the curriculum.

Participants and respondents also spoke about the text selection process. Respondents alluded to the difficulty in adding different books to the curriculum, while participants called for transparency - who decides on the use of text and are we able to identify them?

A participant said that it is difficult to include mother tongue books to the curriculum because of gatekeepers. The participant said that *Konfrontasi* could have been included as part of the Malay literature curriculum, but on the condition that the author changed the ending because MOE had deemed it to be too politically sensitive. As the author disagreed, the book was not included.

In response, Mr Reynolds said that he is horrified when people say “rewrite the ending of the book”, but also reasoned that it may have been “well-intentioned.”

The same participant also said that there must be some sort of committee that MOE should consult before deciding on texts to be included to the curriculum. This committee should include writers and authors instead of just MOE teachers.

In response, Mr Reynolds said that the process of selecting text is a complicated, bureaucratic process, and that the committee will read the texts and meet with teachers. He added that MOE could perhaps consider inviting more people to be on this committee. However, he said that there is still a “grand committee” that gives the final approval.

CONCLUSION

Mr Tan concluded the session and said that we could look at the discussion from two perspectives — that of policy, and that from pedagogy, curriculum and teacher training. He said there is a need for further study on the value and impact of literature education in Singapore. An example would be for MOE to look at where the literature students are two years after they have sat for the O-Level literature exam and what are the presumed effects of literature. Additionally, the NAC could also survey writers to find out why they write and whether that had to do with taking literature or is it due to other factors. Perhaps this could explain why despite the drop in literature enrolment, there is a thriving literary scene in Singapore.

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