

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

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Over the last two decades, enrolment in literature education at the upper secondary level has declined to a critical point, from nearly 17,000 in 1992 to 3,000 in 2013. As Singapore celebrates 50 years of independence and looks to the future, it is an opportune moment to ask: what is the public role of literature education in Singapore society?

On 29 May 2015, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a roundtable discussion at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) to bring together more than 40 policymakers, scholars, teachers and arts practitioners to critically reflect on the state of literature education and the wider implications for educational, national and cultural policy. This roundtable was also the first discussion in the [IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series](#) — a new platform to discuss arts and cultural policy-related issues in Singapore.

### MAIN PRESENTATION

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Senior Research Fellow chaired the roundtable and invited Associate Professor (A/P) Angelia Poon and Assistant Professor (Asst. Prof.) Suzanne Choo, both from the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE), to present their paper, titled “Literature Education in Singapore: Contextualising Developments, Envisioning Possibilities”.

The paper first provided an overview of factors that have contributed to the decline in enrolment in literature. These include:

- Parents’ and students’ perceptions that literature is an impractical and difficult subject to do well in.
- The foregrounding of mother tongue languages as the centre of students’ cultural identity, which has caused the English language to take a much more functional role.
- The introduction of Combined Humanities, with students most often picking Geography as their “half” subject of choice.
- The colonial legacy of literature education, resulting in an elitist approach towards text selection and reduced appeal of literature to students.

Next, the speakers explained how the current paradigm of literature education (aestheticism) emphasises the centrality of text, resulting in a system where students study a few select works in great detail. They suggested that an approach rooted in cosmopolitanism — de-emphasising the text itself and emphasising skills such as critical thinking and imagination — would be more suitable as this would allow for greater flexibility in text selection, as well as discussion of pertinent current issues, thereby increasing the immediate relevance of literature.

A/P Poon and Asst. Prof. Choo rounded off the presentation by highlighting the value of literature to Singapore. They noted that the decline in literature enrolment has come at a time when Singapore has been making a push to be recognised as a global city for the arts. They argued that literature is a necessary and vital part of a vibrant ecosystem that allows arts and culture to flourish here, and called for greater alignment in the overall philosophy of arts and culture here.

## RESPONSES

Four speakers were then invited to share their responses to the paper.

The first respondent was Asst. Prof. Charlene Rajendran from the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group at NIE. She suggested that the time was due for a rethink in the paradigms of education in arts and humanities. In particular, she advocated the teaching of drama in schools as a means towards better understanding of literature, as well as to fill gaps in the current educational system.

Asst. Prof. Charlene noted that the current system incorporates very little live interaction, which results in disembodied responses, contextual illiteracy and cultural insensitivity among students. She argued that drama fills these gaps by allowing for: (1) space for democratic and dialogical processes, where students learn to listen intently to others, to pick up on non-verbal cues, and to boost kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence; (2) collaborative learning and the aesthetic imagination, where students learn from one another and are better able to appreciate symbolic meaning through shared experience; and (3) embodied learning and contextual literacy, where students better understand cultural contexts and differences between them and others without becoming fearful or judgemental, thereby helping them to develop essential skills to deal with multiplicity and uncertainty.

The second respondent was Mr Simon Charles Reynolds, Deputy Director at the Ministry of Education (MOE). Mr Reynolds sought to provide a policymaker's perspective on the current state of literature. He stressed that MOE understood many of the concerns that were raised, and concrete steps were being taken to address some issues, such as changes in syllabus and teacher training. However, he noted that policy change and movement does not always immediately transmit itself to the classroom, as implementation takes time. Mr Reynolds also cautioned that while it may be tempting to overhaul the subject, literature must also be understood in the context of the wider curriculum taught in schools, and not overtax students.

The third respondent was Mr Khor Kok Wah, Senior Director in Sector Development (Literary Arts) at the National Arts Council. Mr Khor spoke about the importance of non-English languages in relation to literature. He argued that supporting the mother tongue languages (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) in the study of literature and adopting works in these languages into English would allow students to better understand different perspectives in society, in keeping with the recommended cosmopolitan approach towards literature.

Mr Khor suggested that texts in the four languages mentioned should be incorporated into the curriculum, with MOE supporting the publication of teaching resources for these texts. He also highlighted creative writing classes as a possible channel for stimulating interest in literature, as these classes hold value for students' personal reflections, development and self-understanding.

The final respondent was Ms Pooja Nansi, a former schoolteacher and Head of Department in literature and currently a writer/poet who has performed both locally and abroad. Ms Nansi touched on issues faced by literature teachers. One major issue she highlighted was that of qualified literature teachers being posted to schools that did not offer the subject, while others with no literature background were conversely assigned to teach literature.

Ms Nansi added that school culture and support play a major role in supporting literature. She noted that some schools gave more freedom to teachers, allowing them to experiment with different methods of teaching literature to stimulate student interest. Meanwhile, other schools told their teachers that literature was a luxury that cannot be afforded. She agreed that some students and parents held the perception that it was hard to score well in literature, and called for more research into why this perception exists. She also called for more support for the publication of teaching resources for local texts.

## **OPEN DISCUSSION**

### ***The Relevance of Literature as an Academic Subject***

There was heated debate on the necessity and relevance of retaining literature as an academic subject for study. A participant asked, are we more interested in saving literature as a subject to be taught; or in the values and benefits that literature is meant to impart? A few participants felt that the outcomes of learning literature, such as the development of critical thinking and literacy skills, can be taught in other subjects such as English language, Social Studies and Character and Citizenship Education. Others suggested that non-literature subjects should include more reading of printed texts. In fact, a participant wondered if reading should be made a compulsory subject rather than literature.

On the other hand, there were participants who argued that literature was an indispensable subject that should continue to be taught, as it highlights the societal importance of according space and time for critical reflection, and the necessity of developing analytical and open minds. They also noted the unique capacity of literature to empower students with the values required to navigate the challenges of contemporary society, including empathy, social awareness, tolerance and the ability to grapple with human complexity.

### ***Building a Culture Conducive to the Learning of Literature***

Numerous participants spoke about how the culture of education in Singapore is not the most conducive environment for the learning of literature. For instance, many students tend to look for straight answers, and are not comfortable with ambiguity and asking questions. The competitiveness of the school system, particularly the stresses of school performance and examinations, has also contributed to the unpopularity of literature as a subject to be taught and studied.

Participants also noted the constraints of nurturing a culture conducive for the learning of literature. A participant reiterated Ms. Nansi's point on inadequate teacher training. More than one participant cited how the growing popularity of the Internet and social media has meant that students are less likely to prefer reading printed texts.

Many participants believed that the literature syllabus could be refined and improved upon, to increase the appeal of literature. In particular, they agreed with A/P Poon and Asst. Prof. Choo that the selection of literature texts could be updated and made more inclusive. Since 1990, the majority of the texts included in the list for literature examination originate from England and the United States, and are published before 1990. Teachers also tend to stick to tried-and-tested texts, which have contributed to the lack of contemporary representation of texts. In response, participants generally felt that the literature syllabus should be made more culturally representative and include more contemporary, local, foreign and translated texts.

However, one participant felt that the issue does not lie with the choice of texts. Rather, the challenge lies in how literature is being taught. This concurred with another participant's point on how the relevance of literature needs to be more effectively taught to students.

### **CONCLUSION**

Mr Tan rounded off the discussion by reemphasising the importance of literature to Singapore society, and the dire need for further study on the value and impact of literature education in Singapore.

*A full report of the discussion, thoughts and ideas exchanged at the roundtable will be published on [the IPS website](#) in July 2015.*

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