

---

Title	The influence of western theories on educational practice in Singapore: The case of curriculum planning and development
Author(s)	Ho Wah Kam
Source	AERA Annual Meeting Symposium: Influence of Western Theories on and their Relevance to Educational Practice in Hong Kong and Singapore, 16 – 20 April, Boston, USA

---

Copyright © 1990 The Author

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Citation: Ho, W. K. (1990, April 16 - 20). *The influence of western theories on educational practice in Singapore: The case of curriculum planning and development*. Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting Symposium: Influence of Western Theories on and Their Relevance to Educational Practice in Hong Kong and Singapore, Boston, USA.

This document was archived with permission from the copyright holder.

**THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN THEORIES ON EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE IN  
SINGAPORE: THE CASE OF CURRICULUM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

by

**Ho Wah Kam**  
Institute of Education, Singapore

Paper prepared for the AERA Annual Meeting  
Symposium: Influence of Western Theories on and Their Relevance to Educational Practice  
in Hong Kong and Singapore  
16-20 April 1990, Boston, USA

*Acknowledgements: The assistance of Mrs Wong Yin Mee and Mrs Mahalakshamy Sripathy of the Institute of Education in the administration of the questionnaires and the interviews is gratefully acknowledged; appreciation is also extended to other colleagues for help received, viz. Mr Poon Tsui Yeong, Mrs Kamsiah Abdullah, Mrs Hadijah Rahmat, Mr Teo Choo How, Mr Neo Eng Guan, Mr K Ramiah, Dr Chia Lian Sai, Dr Goh Ngoh Khang and Dr S Gopinathan.*

## Introduction

This paper will attempt to examine the extent to which theories derived from the West have influence on educational practice in Singapore, particularly the way the school curriculum is planned and instructional materials developed. Since the school curriculum, defined in terms of syllabuses and sets of learning experiences made available to students in school, is essentially a response to questions about the purpose and nature of schooling, the paper will necessarily take into account the historical experience of Singapore, the social and cultural environment, the aims of education and the indigenous educational infrastructure.

The paper has been developed along two dimensions, ie. time and levels. On the time dimension, the paper took into account both the *synchronic* (one point in time) and *diachronic* (across time) aspects of curriculum development. The other dimension encompassed the *macro* and *micro* perspectives, ie. firstly at the *macro-level* of Western influence on educational practice in general and curriculum development in particular, and secondly, to get a better idea of the influence of Western theories on and their relevance to a specific subject at the *micro-level*, an investigation was made of curriculum planning as evidenced in the syllabuses for English Language and of the nature of curriculum development in two language-based projects. A major assumption underlying this paper is that language, especially English as the medium of instruction, is central to all of the activities that we associate with schooling, and in the Singapore system with its bilingual education policy, language has probably attracted greater attention than in any other education system. Another assumption is that since teachers follow the syllabuses, textbooks and instructional materials rather closely (and often more closely than they should), the concepts and theories that have influenced the thinking in these documents and materials (and embedded in them) are likely to have the greatest impact on practice in the classroom. As Tyler (1990) puts it, "The decisions made, consciously or unconsciously, in developing the curriculum greatly influence what is taught, what students learn, what teaching procedures are used, what learning activities students carry on, and how instruction is organised to facilitate continuous and integrated learning". The *central* question, then, is whether curriculum planners and developers themselves have been influenced by theories derived from the West.

A definition of terms follows briefly. 'Curriculum' is used as an umbrella term to cover the courses of study in a school system, the syllabuses and the instructional materials that come between the teacher and the pupils, while the term 'syllabus' is a statement for achieving the objectives of a specific subject - it includes the topics to be studied in a subject. Although the term 'curriculum development' is often used to cover both curriculum *planning* and *development*, it would be clearer, as the story unfolds in the Singapore setting, to make a distinction between planning and development. At the *planning* stage in a syllabus-dominated centralised curriculum like Singapore's, the objectives of learning a subject and the types of experiences needed to achieve those objectives are defined. The product is usually a syllabus and related

1. Bilingualism at the policy level is understood as English plus an Asian mother-tongue, which is usually Chinese, Malay or Tamil.

2. The tacit assumption here is that the *planned* curriculum affects the *resulting* curriculum (ie. teachers' and pupils' activities), which is supported in a few studies. See Frey et al. (1989).

guidelines. The *development* phase involves the provision of specially prepared materials to bring about qualitative improvements in students' learning - in a sense, this stage is interventionist as it leads to change in teaching practices. 'Western' is used in the title as a broad geographical term to refer to the sources of theories in countries such as North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps, more than geographical entities, they constitute a set of references.

No attempt will be made to summarize the discussion on the nature of theories. Admittedly, the term 'theory' is used loosely here to cover concepts, constructs, schemata and models. A theory functions to describe, explain or predict, and the theory that is of most interest to the practitioner in education is one which gives structure and coherence to his practice. Concepts and theories are probably interdependent although the terms are not intended to be synonymous, but each in turn represents a certain degree of abstraction. If a theory is interpreted as an explicit generalisation, a model is seen as a representation which selectively focusses on certain elements and processes critical to a theory. In turn, a schema refers to a person's conceptual framework, and constructs, such as intelligence and motivation, are concepts which are inferred to exist. Theories in education, such as they are in any complex set of phenomena, are usually expressed in terms of analogy and metaphor and are often predictive in intent.

### Transfer of Ideas from One Culture to Another: Exogenous Linkages

The paper locates itself in the broader context of the movement of ideas from one culture to another and also of the process of *indigenization*, and will try to draw pertinent insights from the social science literature. In a free marketplace of ideas in an increasingly interdependent world, such as it is today, theory borrowing and adaptation has an important place in the diffusion of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> This transfer of knowledge from institutions in the developed countries (the *centre*) to those in less developed countries (the *periphery*) has been characterised as part of the *centre-periphery* paradigm (Altbach, 1981). It is a useful descriptive term, but it necessarily suggests a certain amount of dependency of the periphery on the centre and also the absence of cross-influences. In criticising the dependency theory, Raggatt (1983) notes that "there is no space in the paradigm to explore how important ideas and models, as they pass through different levels in the system, interact with deep-seated cultural commitments and notions of cultural identity...it assumes 'fidelity' when 'mutual adaptation' by planners and implementers is the reality". In turn, Raggatt calls for detailed studies of "how educational ideas and actual reforms are transmitted through the system, how they are negotiated with different audiences and at different levels, and how they are modified in the

---

3. On this point, Altbach (1978:301) has declared that "No nation or culture is truly independent in terms of its intellectual life, and all depend to some extent on an exchange of knowledge. The more "modern" a nation is in terms of involvement with technology, industrialisation, and current political and social thought, the more dependent it tends to be on an international network of creation and distribution of knowledge".



in the process". Whether or not this one-way flow of knowledge has been a good thing is a topic of extended debate among social scientists sensitive to what has been called "the dynamics of imperial expansion" (Silva, 1980). Not a few of these social scientists have called for indigenization of the social sciences (Atal, 1981), although there is general recognition that as a result of the inherent inequalities in the distribution of expertise and wealth, the means of knowledge production are inevitably located in prestigious centres in the West.

In the debate, the question of the relevance of Western ideas to indigenous contexts constitutes an important aspect of this call for indigenization. For example, in the foreword to an early volume on the Relevance of the Social Sciences in Contemporary Asia, Shiozuki (1968) recalls that as early as 1949, a group of Asian leaders meeting in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) expressed the general feeling that much thinking about Asia was "too Western to be very relevant to the Asian setting" (p.vi). In the same volume, Espiritu (1968) reminds his readers of the "limits to the applicability of Western concepts, values and methods to Asian realities" (p. 43). Agreeing with the main thrust of Espiritu's paper, Lee of Singapore (1968:52) elaborates on the point, "If we are not to receive indiscriminately all Western thought, we should not at the same time throw out all Western thought; we should know what to select for our use and what not to select. In view of our scarce resources, it is in fact preferable to leave to Western universities and governments those items of research which can best be carried out by them and we should merely draw the results from time to time".

In the light of Lee's (1968) statement, it is useful to think, as Kumar (1979) did, in terms of three types of indigenization (as applicable to the social sciences), viz. *structural*, *substantive* and *theoretical*. The controversy has been over theoretical indigenization, ie. whether or not certain theoretical frameworks formulated in a particular society carry with them the normative values and dominant ideologies of that society, which has led to questioning the premises underlying the social sciences. Structural and substantive indigenization is much less controversial. According to Kumar (1979:104), structural indigenization refers to the "institutional and organisational capabilities of the nation for the production and diffusion of social science knowledge", while substantive indigenization has to do with the content focus of the social sciences.

Kumar's concepts will be employed when I generalize from the specifics, but the terms will be used *devoid* of the connotations associated with the dependency theory so fashionable in the 1970s. In developing the general theme of this symposium, which is on the influence of Western theories on indigenous education systems like Hong Kong's and Singapore's, a threshold level for discussion must be determined first. The threshold level is this: the pull of the metropolitan centres (in the West) remains as strong as it was in the colonial period principally because they are still the centres of knowledge creation and development - this is as true in the case of education as in the hard sciences. There are other factors, too. English, a major metropolitan language, is increasingly the medium of intellectual communication, and through it the countries in the periphery get to know about basic research in education coming out of Western universities and research centres; they look to the same sources for up-to-date journals and state-of-the-art books. Educational technology is Western in nature, and it brings with it not only a paraphernalia of hardware but also a philosophy and a set of views about

teaching. Even the textbook as we know it today is a Western concept, according to Altbach and Gopinathan (1985:17), who have explained it this way: "The idea that books should have full-colour illustrations, be printing on long-lasting paper, be accompanied by workbooks printed on poorer quality paper, and should generally be hardcover rather than paperback are all Western concepts".

The theme under which this paper is developed permits four possible strands for discussion interwoven in this essay, viz. (1) the process of curriculum planning and development in Singapore, (2) the transfer of ideas from one culture (Western) to another (non-Western), (3) the type of indigenization that takes place when theories from one cultural context are applied to situations in another context, and (4) the relationship between theory and practice in curriculum planning and development.

### **Sources of Data for This Study**

In using data for this paper, I have tapped three sources, viz. a questionnaire survey conducted among curriculum officers in the Ministry of Education, which provided the empirical data; interviews with a small group (30%) from the sample of respondents, which yielded some very useful qualitative data, and official reports and conference papers produced locally, from which documentary evidence of official decisions and the personal insights of decision makers were culled. The questionnaire (see a copy in the Appendix) has a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Of the 40 curriculum officers, whose responsibilities collectively spread over 13 school subjects, seven were also involved in the development of instructional materials.

### **The Context of Singapore: A Past-Present Continuum**

Any discussion of education in Singapore should start with a statement of the context - geographical, political and sociological. Located at the crossroads between the East and the West, Singapore is in many ways unique in the Southeast Asian region. Unlike neighbouring countries, Singapore, favoured by its central position along traditional trade routes, is highly urbanised. And despite its poor resource endowment in terms of land size, it has made impressive economic progress in the last twenty-five years. There are probably very few theories derived from a Western social science literature that could have predicted its success as a city-state.

Singapore's political backdrop tells a story of domination by foreign powers and of political struggles among certain groups based on ideological identification and occasionally ethnic interests. From 1819 to 1959, Singapore was ruled by the British as part of a larger entity known as British Malaya, except for a brief period (1942-45) when the Japanese occupied the territory. Self-government was granted in 1959, after which Singapore experienced a gradual but eventful transition to full independence in 1965. The development of Singapore as a city-state is conditioned as much by its urban context as by the characteristics of its multiethnic population. Among the three main groups [Chinese (76%), Malay (15%), and Indian (7%)] that make up the population, there is a distinctive lack of common bonds, either historical,

cultural or linguistic. Its independent political institutions are relatively new.

With a population of 2.65 million, Singapore has developed a national school system using English (considered an ethnically-neutral language) as the main medium of instruction, which has in turn evolved from a four-language model (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) inherited from the British colonial administration. Although the educational policy of the British in the former Straits Settlements was clearly to provide education in Malay for the Malays, there was, however, a certain amount of ambivalence. What resulted was that official policy provided free education for the Malays in their own language, while the provision of English education was left initially in the main to the initiative of missionary bodies. Education in Chinese and Tamil, largely ignored by the British colonial policy up till 1920, was provided by private initiative such as that of clan associations and communal interest groups. This *diversity* in the colonial school system (if it was a system at all) extended beyond structure to what was taught in the schools. Each type of school had its own cultural orientation. The Chinese schools, for example, staffed largely by teachers recruited from China, were influenced by what was happening in China then.

In response to a growing demand for English education, English primary schools were established as feeder schools to one government-run secondary school. This development of English education, emphasising a wider use of English, brought about certain consequences which were not anticipated at that time. Political stability since 1959 and complete independence since 1965 has allowed the government to make decisions on education in its own terms. Although the curriculum remained largely academic, there were modifications to meet the needs of a new nation. These modifications will be discussed later in the paper. The evidence seems to support the view that the language factor, providing differential access to status, power and material resources, has operated independently of ethnicity because of the larger concern for national economic development and national identity. The concern for economic development (using English as the language of administration) as well as cultural identity has brought about a policy of bilingualism, and at the same time, without what Kuo (1985:184) has called a "strong indigenous host culture and host language", English has become the dominant language of education and communication which has enabled Singapore to be open to ideas from the West.

Universal primary education was achieved by the mid-1960s without having at any time to make schooling compulsory. The education system from 1959 until 1979 (when there was a drastic organisational re-structure) was really geared to the needs of the above-average and average pupils. A common structure (6-4-2) provided for six years of primary (elementary) education, four years of secondary and another two years of pre-university schooling, with nationally conducted examinations at different points along the way. Organisationally little or no allowance was made for pupils who could only work at a slower pace. This changed in 1979 with the introduction of academic streaming.

In brief, then, the system has been highly centralised, but more recently with five large schools accorded an 'independent' status in the last two years (from a population of some 375 primary and secondary schools and junior colleges), the Ministry of Education has taken an



important step towards greater decentralisation.<sup>4</sup> In the system that currently prevails, the Ministry is responsible for making major policy decisions including those for the national curriculum. Such a curriculum, which spells out educational goals and in turn the main objectives for each subject syllabus, is followed by all schools within the system. The primary school curriculum stresses basic literacy skills (in two languages), numeracy and science. The attention given to language learning continues into secondary school, and the prominence accorded to English, in particular, makes clear the importance of the use of English in programmes for skill and knowledge generation. The aim of education has been spelt out very succinctly by the Prime Minister (1979), which is "To educate a child to bring out his greatest potential so that he will grow up into a good man and a useful citizen".

Since 1959, education policy was built on three main principles, viz. equality of educational opportunity for all, attainment of unity in a diversity of ethnic origins and mother tongues, and the development of human resources through educational provision. More recently, the education system in Singapore recognises (see Goh, 1979:6-1) that the academic and intellectual abilities of children vary; therefore the pace appropriate for bright children would not be so for slower learners. There is provision for the slower learners to proceed at a rate appropriate to their ability, and for the late developers to join the brighter pupils when they are ready for a faster pace of work.

At the same time, much effort has been directed at incorporating education into the economy, with considerable success as borne out by results (see Skolnik, 1976) but with the economy in the 1990s moving into a technologically more advanced system of production the call has been "to teach students to think critically and analytically, to cooperate and communicate as well as to compete, to assume responsibility for themselves, to solve problems and to continue to learn throughout their working lives" (Tan, 1986). The implications for the school curriculum are obvious. Speaking in 1986 on the relationship between economic change and the formulation of education policy, the Minister for Education (Tan, 1986) stressed the need to develop in the young an openness to new ideas and "a life-long process of learning and re-learning skills to keep oneself up-to-date". As for the school system itself, the Minister argued for having conditions in schools that will allow for innovation and creativity. That message also came from the Economic Committee set up in 1985 to examine the longer term prospects of the country's economy, identify new growth areas and define new strategies to promote Singapore's future growth. One of the Economic Committee Report's principal conclusions was that Singapore's economic future lies "plugged into the international network of trade and communications". To underscore the point that schools will be expected to provide the imaginative and intellectual (manpower) resources needed for a high technology future, the Report specifically called for a more "broad-based" education to develop the "whole person" who will have flexible and creative skills. So, further economic growth and the ability

---

4. In contrast, Apple (1988) notes that "a number of countries in the West are moving from somewhat more democratic styles of leadership and educational policies and practice to more centralised and authoritarian models". The development of a national curriculum in the UK is probably a case in point.



to compete in a global market would have to be underpinned by what is conceived as high quality schooling.

In summary, the influence of the British colonial period remains strong, as seen in the use of the British model of English, the structure of the education system, commercial and political institutions and the legal system. A strong civil service and a resilient economic infrastructure are some of the more tangible assets that the British colonial government left behind in Singapore. As Lee (1989:42) observed, after having analysed the colonial legacy, "One hundred and forty years or so of British rule have etched on the Singapore consciousness certain principles and values which have become part of the national ethos". In social terms, the country intends to combine the best of Western-initiated technology with the moral values of the indigenous cultures. The experience of Japan in maintaining this balance is often cited as a possible model. It is clearly to preserve the family as the primary social unit, strengthen the community feeling and avoid the excesses of laissez-faire individualism which have plagued other societies in the West. In brief, Singapore society today should be seen against the complexities of modernisation, a multi-ethnic population and a British colonial past.

### **Western Influence on Educational Practice: The Macro View**

The British colonial legacy in countries like Singapore is neatly characterised in this statement made by Perren in 1963 at a conference in Cambridge, UK, when he noted that "In Commonwealth countries where English is a second language, the influence of practice in Great Britain has been considerable. It has been exerted very largely through two agencies: British examinations taken overseas have set the syllabuses and largely controlled the teaching of literature in schools; British trained teachers and inspectors have, often without question, assumed that what was believed right for Britain (especially anything which concerned the English Language) would also be valuable overseas". He identified two major factors, viz. the examination system with its prescribed syllabuses and expatriate personnel.

While it can be said that the heritage of a British colonial past has to a large extent determined educational practice in Singapore at least until independence, as in the dominant use of English in instruction and in many aspects of the school curriculum, in reality such influences were not uniform on each of the four language streams of education. The response of non-English-medium streams to Western influence, having used different reference points, was a complex combination of determination to preserve indigenous values and traditions and a general reluctance to learn from the West. For example, for a long time in the early days, textbooks for Chinese schools were brought in from mainland China; those used in Malay schools had a strongly indigenous cultural content. There was clearly a lack of fit between a Western orientation and the educational traditions of the Chinese, Malay and Tamil communities.

For the English stream schools, however, the use of an exogenous language with grammatical and lexical norms set by educated native speakers in the UK and codified for teaching purposes in terms of Latin grammar, of textbooks imported from the UK and written by overseas authors employing a curricular orientation and principles of teaching more relevant to English-speaking children in England, of expatriate lecturers in the only teachers training

college and of examination syllabuses determined by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate based in UK would collectively be the clearest example of the transmission of Western theories of teaching and their values from the centre to the periphery. The continued use and, indeed, spread of English (the maintenance of the language of administration of the colonial period was in itself unique among former colonial territories in Southeast Asia),<sup>5</sup> the continuance of the Overseas Cambridge Examination system and the undoubted superiority of these texts are often cited as reasons for the situation (see Gopinathan, 1989:182). Until an indigenous textbook publishing infrastructure was built in the late 1960s in the private sector, English-medium schools depended almost exclusively on books from publishing houses in the UK especially when all the secondary school subjects were tied to the requirements of external examinations conducted by the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate. Then later some encouragement was given by established publishers in the UK to practising teachers here to adapt some of the textbooks for local use when there was evidence of local expertise to write textbooks. This was the first stage of the process of indigenization in textbook provision.

In the hands of well qualified teachers, the textbook remains a very powerful tool in classroom instruction, but for the less qualified, it is the only source of school knowledge, and so very often it determines the way a subject is conceptualised, taught and understood. Seen in terms of a worldwide knowledge-distribution network, the publication of textbooks for export from the centre (where the world's major textbook publishing houses are located) to the periphery provides another example of the way Western theories in teaching were (and are) being transmitted to countries like Singapore, which gives some justification to Altbach and Gopinathan's (1985:15) statement that "Colonialism structured an international system that emphasized the power of the metropolitan centres and a dominant-dependent relationship between these centres and their peripheries. The publishing enterprise reflected this unequal distribution of material and intellectual resources".

However, as Raggatt (1983) has suggested, the centre-periphery mechanism can be modified with the development of regional centres sponsored and sustained by international organisations, linked through a network. Such a centre is the Regional Language Centre (RELC) established in Singapore in 1968, the outcome of decisions made at the first meeting of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Council (SEAMEC) to train "key personnel" in language education and to organise seminars on various issues of concern to the region on linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic topics. Writing in 1984, Noss reported that besides the financial support RELC received directly from SEAMEO in the form of capital and operating funds, it received some assistance from countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK. RELC's annual regional seminars are widely known as important occasions

---

5. Watson (1982:190) records that former colonial territories in Africa like Botswana, Lesotho, Senegal, Kenya, Malawi, Ghana and the Ivory Coast etc. "have deliberately maintained English or French as the national language, the language of communications, law and administration, as the most neutral language to bind together the disparate linguistic and ethnic groups within their territories".

"to exploit the results of research and to synthesize the efforts of an international community of scholars in related disciplines in an attempt to search for solutions to present day language teaching and language learning problems in Southeast Asia", among other objectives. Topics for such seminars have ranged from language education in a multilingual society (1977), bilingualism (1979) to communicative language teaching (1984). Take the 1984 topic of communicative language teaching, the concern for which, according to Paulston (1984: 14) who spoke at that seminar, had already "surfaced on both sides of the Atlantic as early as the late sixties ... partially ... a reaction against the mechanical nature and boring activity of drills in the audio-lingual method ...". She traced the development of the notion of communicative competence and language teaching to Dell Hymes (1972) and to her own article in 1974. It is difficult to be precise when giving a date to the stages of influence and transfer, but at the 1978 RELC annual seminar, there were already two papers (Di Pietro, 1979; Prabhu, 1979) which discussed at some length the notions of linguistic competence and communication with reference to language teaching under the general theme of *Applications of Linguistics to Language Teaching* (1978). Then the 1983 seminar, under the rubric of *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*, brought together some internationally known language teaching specialists, among them J. Munby who spoke on the communicative syllabus design and N.S. Prabhu who explained the rationale underpinning his Communicational Teaching Project in Bangalore, South India to which reference will be made later in this paper. At that seminar, R. Mok of Singapore, talking of the 1983 revised version of the English syllabus for secondary schools, reported that "Within this structural design we have incorporated a built-in flexibility that allows a communicative methodology.... A number of our language teachers have undergone recent in-service courses and are familiar with a communicative methodology". In the following year (1984), the annual seminar was devoted entirely to communicative language teaching, which attracted papers on the application and adaptation of communicative language teaching in different indigenous contexts within the region. So, the idea publicly introduced in 1978 was in a sense reinforced in 1984, by which time a teacher trainer (Kirkpatrick, 1985) working in Singapore then was able to report at the 1984 seminar that "Singapore's grammar-based syllabus and communicative language teaching need not be enemies but can work together quite happily". In this case, a theory transferred from the West underwent some changes as it interacted with a slightly different cultural base.

Although historical factors continue to weigh heavily in areas such as maintaining a national examination system and adopting curricular orientations that are subject-based, Singapore has in many areas taken a direction seemingly against trends in mainstream Western practice if they do not suit its purposes. The suitability of the model remains an important factor. An excellent example is the introduction of academic streaming and the provision of different curriculum tracks in the schools after 1979, which created a lot of debate in the local press and attracted some adverse criticism from abroad. For example, Hunt (1987:117) called streaming in Singapore "retrogressive in comparison with practices widely adopted elsewhere" but he nevertheless recognised that the "adoption of a policy of streaming is a clear statement of priorities... [it] must be seen as primarily instrumental in the achievement of economic goals and to have been adopted substantially on economic grounds". In fact, such functional, academic streaming, with the provision of lateral transfers, can be seen to provide the student population with greater access to learning opportunities within the system than was the case before as fewer students leave the system prematurely. On the other hand, it was the British



psychologist, Hans Eysenck, who reportedly was in favour of the Singapore streaming system (*The Straits Times*, 1987). Singapore has developed a model of academic streaming that takes full advantage of pupils' differential learning pace.

### **Curriculum Planning and Development in Singapore**

If ideas can be used to mark out certain historical trends, then, curriculum planning and development in Singapore may be seen in terms of *three* phases. The early phase up till about the early 1970s essentially involved the maintenance of a selective, highly academic curriculum with the periodic updating of subject syllabuses. The major achievement then was the provision of common content in the four language streams of education. Then in the 1960s, a few new subjects were introduced with a technical-vocational slant. In form the syllabuses collectively represented a subject-defined curriculum. From the early 1970s to the 1980s, the influence of a liberal, humanistic approach recognising the centrality of the learner became evident. Probably taking the cue from the progressive movement in the UK, the syllabus designers introduced ideas focussing on student interests and activities in learning. New subjects in civics and moral education were introduced, reflecting social and political priorities at that time. In structure the syllabuses carried more details (on the *what* of content, *how* of method, and *where* of objectives), thus helping to define the relationship between a syllabus, teaching, learning and their organisation. The third phase, starting with the establishment of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) in 1980, saw the introduction of the project team model in curriculum development, which brought together experienced teachers, subject specialists, materials writers and external consultants (usually from the mainstream of education in the West) to produce subject-specific, attractive, multimedia learning packages. It was also during this period that the introduction of new subjects like religion and Confucian ethics into the curriculum led the Ministry of Education into some of the more sensitive and difficult areas of social policy.

### **The Practice of Curriculum Planning: Sources of Influence**

In the Singapore context, the curriculum is best seen as an example of centralised organisational planning and management to which the principles of rational curriculum development can be applied. Early advocates of this view of curriculum planning were Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962) in the US. However, unlike the situation in the UK (where school-based curriculum development in the 1960s and 1970s was very much in vogue), US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, curriculum planning in Singapore is highly centralised within the education system with subject syllabuses drawn up by the Ministry of Education. This structural development is clearly a legacy of the colonial experience. Although the school system itself is largely patterned on a British model, with students working towards taking nationally conducted examinations, this aspect of the planning mechanism has developed through much local improvisation because the colonial administration did not leave behind any special expertise in curriculum development for a centralised system nor did it have much experience in administering such a system. In 1979 when the Ministry of Education underwent restructuring, a team led by the then Minister of Education visited the Centre National



Documentation Pédagogique (among other institutions) in France instead of the largely Anglo-Saxon countries to learn how the CNDP functioned for the production of instructional materials for schools in their country. That visit resulted in the publication of a widely-distributed report and certain decisions related to the setting up of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. While the French system could not be copied wholesale as it was, the then Minister (in Lau, 1980:iii) declared that "our understanding of how it [the French system] works confirms the conclusion I reached earlier about the pivotal role of curriculum work in a centralised system of education". The main conclusion was that the main task of curriculum development (defined as the elaboration of syllabuses, the production of teaching materials) was to be carried out by a newly established institute, the CDIS. The indigenous characteristics of CDIS make it very much an innovation (see Yeoh, 1983:5). As in the early days, the Ministry through its Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) retained the authority to determine the subject syllabuses.

As evident from existing records, the formulation of subject syllabuses in Singapore has always been centrally determined. For example, prior to 1969 there was first the Textbooks and Syllabuses Committee (1959-1966), then the Committee on Curricula and Syllabuses (CCS, 1966-69), followed by (between 1969 and 1976) the Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development (ACCD), which having replaced the CCS, was given the responsibility to advise the Minister on all aspects of curriculum development and supervise the implementation of such recommendations as might be approved by the Minister. The ACCD was in turn replaced by the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) in June 1976, and among its terms of reference revised in 1979 were the following: To translate national needs and educational policies into curriculum specifications, to clarify the objectives and needs of the curriculum with reference to education policy, and to guide the development of curriculum materials according to educational objectives. In designing the syllabuses, Ministry officers were assisted by the Subject Advisory Committees (SACs), which comprised subject specialists drawn from schools, the teacher training institution and the university.

It was Ruth Wong (1974), trained at Queen's University, Belfast, Ireland and at Harvard (for her master's and doctorate) and the first chairperson of the ACCD, who gave a detailed account of how the ACCD operated. Under Wong's leadership, the ACCD saw its most important functions as giving direction to the course of curriculum planning and coordinating the work of its subject committees, concentrating initially on four tasks, namely, (a) the analysis of the context of curriculum changes (social, cultural and national), (b) analysis of needs (the individual's, society's and the world's), (c) stating objectives such as could be gleaned from policy papers and ministerial speeches or parliamentary statements, and (d) operationalising the objectives. The objectives were related to four categories of concern: the individual's, society's, the nation's and the world's, reflecting Wong's understanding of the social purpose of schooling. Objectives from these sources seemed to have some authority external to the classroom. With these objectives, curriculum development was seen in terms of two dimensions, the *horizontal* dimension representing widening circles of concern between the individual and the environment, and the *vertical* dimension dealing with aspects of learning (knowledge, skills and attitudes). Experiences for students had to be structured. In many ways, this statement from the ACCD represented an important shift in educational constructs. Standing committees were formed for different subjects, drawing into a "collaborative effort" represen-

tatives from professional organisations interested in curriculum development. As explained by Wong (1973:5) again, the various committees were "exhorted to relate the overall objectives identified to their specific subject objectives as much as possible; these objectives were to be defined and analysed to the extent that they eventually permeated every lesson in the classroom, at which level, each objective would appear operationally in instructional and behavioural terms". In the US, the objectives movement was prominent during the periods, 1920s and 1960s. As in the US, the emphasis on objectives in Singapore was in reaction to the highly academic curriculum that was patterned on the expectations of subject or content specialists. However, the major difference between the doctrine of specific objectives as espoused in the US and that advocated by Wong of the ACCD was that the former (in the US during the 1960s) was quite mechanistic while Wong's was based on a holistic view of child development and humanism. An inspiring teacher herself, with a strong sense of mission, she was against a lifeless curriculum and ossified methods of teaching, and the roots of her humanism might be traced to Dewey.

Nevertheless, the ideas of curriculum planning as practised at that time were clearly influenced by those advocating what may be called rational curriculum planning in the UK and US. The characteristics of this approach were explained by Hirst (1969), a British educational philosopher, in this way: "I propose...to highlight three crucial demands of rational curriculum planning.... The first demand is that educational objectives be clear and precise....The second demand is that we do not confuse questions about objectives and questions about content and questions about method....The third demand of rational curriculum planning is that we begin first with questions of objectives and only then move on to questions about content and method". Skilbeck (1972) called this approach "rational deductive decision taking" which is often realised in a "centrally-dominated curriculum system, where policy directives, detailed syllabuses, learning resources, examinations, personnel are controlled through a hierarchy from the centre".

Although there has not been any explicit statement in the official documents on the theory that was/is used in curriculum planning in Singapore, it seems clear that the characterisation of rational curriculum planning given above fits quite well the situation in Singapore before 1980. Furthermore, three of the curriculum planners in the survey mentioned Tyler's (1949) and Taba's (1962) theories as having an influence on their work. Hilda Taba elaborated on Tyler's model. A few other respondents identified some of the features of curriculum planning found in Tyler's model, which would appear that a likely source of influence would be that of Tyler's curriculum theory, known generally as Tyler's rationale. This is understandable, as Tyler's book, *I understand*, has been translated into several languages, and together with Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, is probably one of the two most influential books on curriculum thought and practice.

A brief word about Tyler's rationale is in order here in view of its widespread influence on curriculum development. The rationale is systematic, proceeding from means to ends, as Tyler believed that any curriculum should be organised around pre-determined, explicitly defined objectives, which would collectively serve as a guide to the selection of instructional materials and procedures and for the evaluation of the curriculum's success. As is well known, the rationale revolves around four principal questions which the curriculum planner in the

Singapore situation would ask or had asked using different words when the curriculum was revised in the 1970s. Tyler defines education as a process of changing the behaviour patterns of people. The process consists of a series of learning experiences aimed at fulfilling carefully considered educational objectives. The selection of appropriate objectives, goals and ends is a major feature of the Tyler model of curriculum planning. The four functions in curriculum development (*identifying objectives, selecting ways of achieving these objectives, organising the means, and evaluating the outcomes*) were seen by Tyler as moving in a sequence.

As in the Tyler rationale, the data for educational objectives in the Singapore example were derived from three sources: the learners themselves, the community, and the content of school subjects as recommended by subject specialists. There were two 'screens' which served as filters to these objectives: a *philosophical* screen and a *psychological* one. The philosophical screen was best encapsulated in Singapore's aims of education, and the psychological screen used was probably underpinned by learning principles as understood then. Curriculum development was characterised by Wong (1973:6) as a series of "*specify-implement-evaluate-improve cycles*". She stressed the importance of objectives: "... the purpose of the curriculum cannot be clear except through thinking through these objectives and specifying them". Since the early 1970s, the use of educational objectives has been a dominant feature of curriculum planning in Singapore, and the question of how instructional objectives should be appropriately used at the next level by teachers in lesson planning and instruction was recently the focus of a series of school-based workshops (see STU Report, 1987).

The Singapore curriculum has been undergoing continuous reassessment, synthesis and revision since the first major syllabus revision exercise in 1962.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally subject-centred, it has taken on a more child-centred orientation. From the open-ended replies of the 40 curriculum planners in the questionnaire survey, it is clear that there is now greater emphasis on the interests of the child which the curriculum is aimed at enriching. Together with what would be perceived as the needs of the child, the child's interests seem to constitute a strong motivational base for the curriculum.

The closed-ended responses are briefly analysed next (see Table 1 in the Appendix). All the respondents agreed that their curriculum planning would have a theoretical foundation based on concepts pertinent to a particular school subject. Also, 90% of the curriculum planners acknowledged that their conceptualisation of the syllabuses was strongly influenced by theories and thinking from Western sources, but they (90%) also agreed that theories were not used without adaptation, taking into account the cultural factors and social conditions in the local situation. There was therefore a certain amount of what Kumar (1979) has called 'substantive indigenization'.

When asked to identify the theories that influenced their work and that were perceived to be relevant, the non-language officers mentioned, among other concepts, Bruner's theory

---

6. For instance, according to Mok (1984), work on revising the earlier English syllabus for secondary schools started in 1978, and the revised version was introduced to schools in 1983.



of instruction, Piaget's stage development theory, the theories of Ausubel and Gagne, and the work of Dewey and Benjamin Bloom, but it was the language specialists who were most specific, identifying Krashen's monitor theory, the schema theory in reading comprehension, process writing theory and the communicative competence approach. Some of the current theories pertinent to second language acquisition in the West were also mentioned as being influential by those involved in planning the syllabuses for teaching endogenous languages such as Chinese, Malay and Tamil. While it is true that language syllabuses have always been influenced by a theory of language and a theory of language learning prevalent at that time, the language syllabuses in Singapore have been more eclectic, consisting of a combination of structural, situational, skills-based and task-based features. Nonetheless, there has been a shift in thinking, with increasing attention to language use and decreasing attention to language form. In arguing for a revision of existing syllabuses in English, Mok (1987:148) said that "The fact that the present syllabuses are out of step with the firmly held views of Singapore language specialists on language teaching gives a valid reason for considering revision". The general shift of view of language learning is probably the result of what has happened in the West over the last 15 years in the area of language pedagogy. When the older behaviourist model of language acquisition was gradually abandoned as a result of what has been called the Chomskyan revolution in linguistics, Krashen's monitor theory came into the picture. This shift in thinking (and also in practice) on the part of local curriculum planners is interesting especially when we recall that the behaviourist model of language learning (as exemplified in the audio-lingual approach) was uncritically accepted in the 1960s in Singapore, introduced by Western experts and returned scholars. The audio-lingual approach, although not completely abandoned, has been adapted in Singapore to emphasise the oral aspects of language learning and to encourage regular use of the language in a communicative context. According to Mok (1987:148), schools, under the guidance of curriculum specialists from the Ministry of Education and training institutions, have been keeping pace with "current approaches and practices" - a phrase to be interpreted as following trends in the mainstream of language teaching. For example, the learner is now at least an *active* user of language - "Many school English programmes are slanting towards a view of language teaching that places the learner at a focal point with the teacher seen in the role of a facilitator who provides creative contexts for language learning" (Mok, 1987:148).

In recent years, there has been clear recognition of the centrality of the learner, a position which seems to be tied to the liberal, humanistic tradition of the West that started with the progressive education movement in the 1920s in the US. This is evident in the open-ended responses to the questionnaires, which affirmed that the move has been in the direction of the learner-centred approach, building on students' interests and needs. There has always been this tension between the subject-centred and learner-centred approaches in an attempt to make the curriculum more relevant to the life experiences of the learner. And although clearly the source of this idea is Western, the interpretation of it is different from how it is conventionally interpreted. Even in the West, curriculum theorists did warn against total reliance on students' interests. The respondents in the survey recognised that the students' interests and needs, the basis of motivation to learn should be the starting point in the curriculum, although at the practical level, the interpretation may entail different ways of making topics interesting and



acceptable to the student. Nonetheless, the idea that students must be intrinsically (rather than extrinsically) motivated is central to any educational theory.

In general, a number of basic theoretical ideas have influenced to some extent the construction of the syllabuses and educational practice. In the mid-1970s, for instance, the concept of *learning as inquiry* influenced in particular the science syllabuses. The work of Benjamin Bloom and his associates in developing the taxonomy of educational objectives threw into relief the lack of attention in many syllabuses and classrooms to the higher-order cognitive objectives. In the 1980s, more attention was being drawn to the development of higher-order cognitive skills, which resulted in the revival of interest in teaching thinking skills. The introduction of the recent Ministry-initiated CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust) Thinking Programme is a case in point. Introduced into a few pilot schools in Singapore in 1987 and designed by Edward de Bono, well-known for his book on lateral thinking, it consists of a series of 60 lessons intended for the direct teaching of thinking as a skill, but the next stage of integrating all the thinking tools into the subjects is regarded as crucial. So far a total of 45 primary and secondary schools have joined the programme. This project has generated a number of other school-based thinking projects designed to adapt the general principles and tools of CoRT to suit certain school subjects and local conditions.

### The practice of curriculum development

Before 1980, the development of materials for subject teaching was confined to the production of curriculum guidelines and manuals for teachers and instructional materials for one or two pilot-scale projects while commercial publishers, some of them foreign, produced textbooks written to given syllabuses. In the practice of curriculum development, then, structural or infrastructural indigenization did not take place in Singapore until the establishment of the CDIS. Set up in 1980 to "produce teaching materials of all kinds" (Lau, 1980:iii), the CDIS has been active in developing a wide range of instructional materials covering practically all school subjects. According to Lim (1988:2), a former senior staff member in CDIS, curriculum development was re-interpreted to include "needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus design, materials design, language programme design, teacher preparation, implementation of programmes in the schools, monitoring, feedback and evaluation". Although the visit to France made by a team of curriculum specialists (see Lau et al, 1980) did confirm the need for a new system of curriculum development in Singapore, there is probably no parallel organisation in education systems in the West. As originally envisaged, CDIS has taken on "the pivotal role of curriculum work in a centralised system of education" (Lau, 1980:iii). Over the last nine years, CDIS has developed a large number of instructional packages for practically all school subjects. Although the conceptualisation and writing of these materials have been assigned to local specialists and experienced teachers, CDIS continues to draw upon foreign expertise (usually from UK and the US) as consultants to their projects. In a sense Singapore is now much less dependent on Western publishers for teaching materials and textbooks but inevitably curricular perspectives from centres overseas have been adopted. This last point was confirmed by Lim (1988) who coordinated a large number of the language projects. She referred to a hierarchy of factors taken into account in materials development in Singapore, among which she called the "goals" (or what Tyler would call the psychological screen): "The goals are the sum of goals, largely humanistic, in language teaching as represented in current

theory and practice, which focus on the learner, and which form the rationale of all the language materials produced by CDIS. They emphasize the learner as an active participant in the learning process, rather than a passive recipient, as an individual with special needs..." (Lim, 1988:3). These goals are *moderated* by what she called "Givens" and "Constraints". The "Givens", or the philosophical screen, are national goals formalised in national policies, such as working towards a bilingual ability, the need to develop a cultural identity based on multiculturalism, and the inculcation of social and moral values. These form what Lim called the "ideological framework for materials development" (1988:4). The "Constraints" constitute the realities of the language situation, eg. relatively large class size, the actual amount of curriculum time (which is less than desired), the heterogeneity of students' language background, etc.

In assessing the effect of the invigorated curriculum development process after seven or eight years, Lim (1988:7) declared that "A combination of factors, including the worldwide trend towards a humanistic approach in language teaching, the advent of the communicative approach, a new emphasis on oral-aural skills, a new consciousness of the vast educational potential of technology ... have all contributed towards a greater willingness on the part of teachers to explore ways of removing barriers to make teaching more innovative". Lim cited, among other successful projects, REAP (Reading and English Acquisition Programme), a project based in the Ministry of Education (MOE).

REAP and the language arts component in LEAP (Learning Activity Programme, formerly based in CDIS) will be examined for the way Western theories have been adapted to suit local needs and conditions. Both programmes took seriously Dewey's advice about starting where the child is. In both cases, language was seen as central to learning, and both recognised the movement in language teaching towards strategies "based on communication, the use of real language and real situations and a reliance on the pupil himself to set some of the parameters of his own learning" (Somerville-Ryan, 1985:15). Both adapted what is broadly known as the whole language approach, each to suit its own specific purposes. Whole language teaching, eclectic in its theoretical underpinnings (attribution has been made to Dewey, Halliday, Vygotsky and Frank Smith, among others) "operate from an examined theory of how language, thought, and knowledge develop holistically and in support of each other" (Goodman, 1989:209).

Briefly, REAP was developed in 1985 after some extensive field work, and has since been introduced to the lower primary classes in practically all the primary schools in Singapore. The objective of the programme was to guide lower primary teachers away from their rather structured teaching strategies towards methods incorporating the teaching of both oral and writing skills. The concepts underpinning REAP came largely from the Language Experience Approach to Reading (LEAR). Although REAP takes as its model LEAR, which is built on the use of the language resources which children bring to the learning task (Lee and van Allen, 1963:35), the approach had to be modified to take into account the largely EL2 (English not as the mother tongue) situation in Singapore by adopting additional features from other language programmes, which has resulted in REAP relying on books much more than the original language experience approach would require. This was regarded as necessary because the language used in print was likely to be more precise and exact than what is often heard in the classroom. The two additional features are the Shared Book Experience and Book Flood

techniques. The Shared Book Experience, developed by Holdaway (1979) in New Zealand, seems most effective with young children as it emphasises the enjoyment of reading that can be shared with another reader and in an EL2 setting it compensates for the lack of such reading experiences in the home with another adult. The idea of a book flood strategy was taken from the Fijian Book Flood experiment reported in Elley and Mangubhai (1983), which showed how children exposed to a great variety of high-interest, illustrated storybooks made improvement in their reading and listening after only eight months of such exposure. Elley, an external consultant to REAP, is a professor of education in New Zealand. This project has had a very strong impact not just on a particular subject like English but on the whole rationale of the school curriculum. According to the (internal) project consultant (Ng, 1987), the decision to implement the project was based on evidence derived from the pilot study that the language experience approach was suitable for the local primary school children on linguistic and psychological grounds. Two features in the adaptation have made this version different from the original one: (a) the local version offers more structural elements in language than would be warranted in the original approach, and (b) the incorporation of features from the teaching of English as a second language.

In the case of curriculum development, then, the model of influence from the West is one that is both direct and indirect. An interesting variation of this indirect influence is found in the language arts component of the Learning Activity Programme (LEAP) designed for academically weaker pupils. It was developed on the principle that students learn differently and that the weaker students in particular have different interests. The main aim of the LEAP curriculum was "to inculcate basic literacy and numeracy while providing skills training to prepare students for the world of work" (Quah, 1985:8). LEAP has several subject components but I will confine my discussion to the language arts component. Three features of the language arts component in this programme are worth noting. Firstly, it involved an L1-L2 transformation, ie. while the original idea of a language experience, task-based approach came from the West, the procedures were adapted from a project carried out in Bangalore, India, where the pupils were weaker in English language which was learnt as a second language. It was called the procedural approach, and according to Somerville-Ryan (1986:1), one of the developers of this component of LEAP, "[LEAP] has incorporated the crucial elements of the procedural approach, but is structured around a broad model of skill development". While Somerville-Ryan (1985:1) fully acknowledged that the language component in LEAP owed much to the theoretical basis of the Bangalore Project<sup>7</sup> and the work of its director, N.S..Prabhu, the local team also made several important changes in the design of the language learning tasks. Secondly, it was this *synthesis* of theory and practice which proved most challenging to the materials writers. Thirdly, the result was an approach which was marked by a move away from

---

7. Prabhu (1984:275) explained that the Communicational Teaching Project, the cumulative result of major ideas and insights acquired in the last fifteen years or so, was based on the assumption that "language-structure is best acquired when the learner's attention is on meaning - when, that is to say, the learner is preoccupied with understanding, working out, relating or conveying messages, and copes, in the process, as well as he can with the language involved".



the content/grammatical specifications of the traditional language syllabuses and which required the pupils to be involved in tasks or activities which encouraged them to express themselves in English. While it kept to the criteria of the procedural or task approach, it differed in terms of methods and techniques (see Somerville-Ryan, 1985:10). The starting point of the programme (see footnote 7) is the belief that language is best acquired through use, and that the communication of meaning is more important than the teaching of form - characteristics shared with other approaches advocated in current second language teaching methodology. In assessing this challenge in synthesising theory and practice (and touching implicitly on the indigenization issue), Somerville-Ryan (1985:1) said, "While most of the theoretical issues which have influenced these developments have originated in Europe and America, the nature and complexity of language policy and curriculum change in Asia has meant that it is one of the most exciting arenas for practical research into language learning and curriculum implementation where the synthesis is made real".

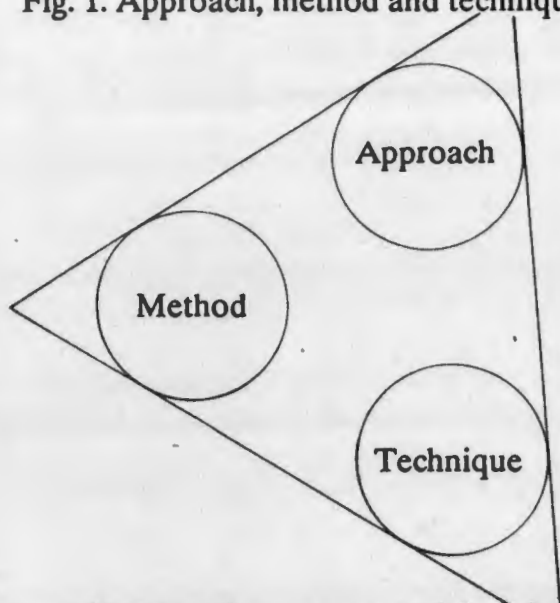
#### East-West Perspectives in Education

McLean (1983:25) has warned of the dangers of theory borrowing. Other than the question of cultural relevance, there are inherent problems, as he points out, in a model of direct transfer. For instance, the conceptual factors may be different in important ways in the two (donor and recipient) settings to allow for effective transfer, but more importantly users of a theory in the recipient setting may fail to take into account the debate about the theory and the modification made within the parent theory itself after the transfer has taken place. The "ossification" of theories is a special danger, and therefore it is necessary for theories used in the recipient setting to be re-evaluated against the wisdom of practice. Furthermore, according to McLean, transfers of theories from the centre to the periphery may inculcate "local elites with metropolitan values". In the Singapore situation, the kind of direct transfer that McLean warns against occurs less frequently because of the greater consciousness of the inappropriacy of direct transfer. It is clear from the replies of the curriculum specialists that much store is set by adaptation; indigenous mediating factors are inevitably taken into account. In the nature of adaptations, Widdowson's (1989:128) advice seems valid, when he says: "...the influence of ideas does not depend on their being understood in their own terms. Usually it depends on their being recast in different terms to suit other conditions of relevance. The more influential an idea, the less dependent it is on the particular context of its conception".

One way of explaining the impact of Western theories on local educational practice is to see it in terms of Anthony's (1963) conceptual differentiation between *approach*, *method* and *technique* (see Fig.1 on the next page) as a kind of hierarchy.



Fig. 1. Approach, method and technique



The term 'approach' covers the concepts and theories pertinent to the chosen way of teaching a particular subject. Such theories are related directly to method (an interaction of content and the selected principles of teaching the subject) and technique (a procedure implemented in the classroom). A method refers to an overall plan in presenting and teaching the subject or topics in the subject, taking into account the nature of the content and the relevant principles of teaching. A technique is what Anthony (1963) has called a device or strategem. In language teaching, for example, if communicative competence is the theory adopted, then it is located within the approach and reflected in the method(s) used. The techniques are made visible in the classroom as activities or practices introduced. Usually the influence is felt at the level of *approach*. The process of *indigenization* often occurs at the levels of method and technique.

Educational practice in Singapore has benefited from the dynamism of the West in theory development and basic research in education, but what are the long-term effects on the system given the transmission of thought forms, values and ideas that come with the influence? This question has been publicly addressed at the political level. Lee (1989), in an important speech on the problem of Westernisation, has said, "Because of this Westernisation, Singapore society has become different from other East Asian countries, like Taiwan or Hong Kong. As a people, we have also changed, in outlook and attitudes, from what we were 10 or 20 years ago. This is an objective fact, and not just nostalgia for a vanished past. Even today, the process is not complete. Our people's values are still changing rapidly. With universal English education, we have become a totally open society. The next generation is not growing up with the same values and outlook as their parents. Nor is it acquiring updated values which their parents' generation have carefully thought out and imbued in them. As a society, we are absorbing ideas from outside faster than we can digest them, and in danger of losing our sense of direction". This problem of response to Western influence is one faced by all non-Western developing countries, but Lee adds "Singapore's problem is: How to be cosmopolitan, but yet not be rootless; how to have an open mind and be forward and outward looking, but still keep a clear sense of identity and self-confidence?". The solution, Lee says, is in building a strong sense of Singaporean identity, a "characteristic ethos and spirit of a people".

This argument can be traced to the roots of the bilingual education policy and the Prime Minister's concerns which he expressed as early as 1966. The values-language-culture link was made explicit by the Prime Minister when he spoke to members of the Singapore Teachers' Union in 1972: "And it is not just learning the language. With the language go the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact". It was basically this fear that the traditional cultural norms might be eroded as a result of rapid modernisation and Westernisation that led to the teaching of moral education in schools to promote a set of values perceived as Asian in nature. There were curriculum initiatives such as *Education for Living* (citizenship education in the context of Singapore's historical and cultural heritage), introduced in 1974 and replaced in 1981 by *Good Citizen* and *Being and Becoming*, two moral education programmes for schools. In addition, a religious knowledge curriculum, offering electives such as Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics, was later introduced and is now being phased out to give greater attention to a new civics and moral education course based on a set of meta-ethnic tenets which may well form the basis of a national ideology when such an ideology is finally formalised.

As the Western theories and ideas get selectively indigenized in a way described in the preceding pages, the final form of the original ideas is going to look much different, which should add richness to the pool of educational ideas and theories. While the term *Western* is often used to describe a theory's place of origin, is there really a clear Western/non-Western distinction? My own view is that some of the Western theories and concepts are probably *etic*, in that they are applicable across cultures and settings, while other concepts may have a unique ethnocentric (Western) bias and can be described as *emic*. This *etic-emic* distinction, drawn from linguistics, is a useful characterisation for the purpose of studying how certain theories and ideas can be adapted more readily and re-shaped to support approaches in non-Western settings. The ideas that are transferred are likely to be *etic* rather than *emic*, irrespective of their geographical origin.

### Summing-up

As explained earlier, the course of curriculum planning and development in Singapore may be seen in terms of *three* phases. The first phase involved the maintenance of a selective, academic curriculum with the periodic updating of subject syllabuses. Then in the early 1970s, the influence of a more liberal, humanistic approach recognising the centrality of the learner became evident. New subjects in civics and moral education were introduced. The third phase, starting with the establishment of the CDIS in 1980, saw the introduction of the project team model in curriculum development, which brought together experienced teachers, subject specialists, materials writers and external consultants (usually from the West) to produce subject-specific, attractive, multimedia learning packages.

Several factors have been identified as having promoted the continuing influence of Western ideas in education during the post-colonial period. These are: the continued use of an exogenous language like English which has made Western ideas very accessible to educators here, the importation of expertise from the West for projects, etc, and the postgraduate training of subject specialists in academic centres in the West. Even for specialists who earned their

first degrees at the local university, the situation was not very different - the Western intellectual perspective influenced much of the work at the local university, too; for example, the texts used to teach courses came from the West (see Gopinathan, 1984).

In this paper, I have tried to show the *process* of indigenization in curriculum planning and development in Singapore. It seems clear that what is called theoretical indigenization takes place less readily in the Singapore setting than structural and substantive indigenization. This is understandable. Until we are in a position to set our own research agendas to develop theories specific to the local context, we would continue to make use of imported theories and approaches. In the real world, it is too simple-minded to imagine that in the social sciences, the vast resources of prestigious research centres in the West and what they can produce will not continue to exert a power on the thinking of scholars and educators at the periphery. However, as Raggatt (1983) has suggested, with the setting up of regional centres with indigenous networks, supported nonetheless by international organisations, the centre-periphery model can be modified as it is being modified in the process I have described in this paper.

## References

- Altbach, P.G. The distribution of knowledge in the Third World: A case study of neocolonialism. In P.G. Altbach and G.P. Kelly, *Education and colonialism*. New York: Longman.
- Altbach, P.G. (1981). The university as center and periphery. *Teachers College Record*, 82.
- Altbach, P.G. and Gopinathan, S. (1985). Textbooks in the third world: Challenge and response. In P.G. Altbach, A.A. Arboleda and S. Gopinathan, *Publishing in the third world: knowledge and development*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Apple, M.W. (1988). On the dangers of importing educational models: The deskilling of teachers and teacher education. Paper presented at the First Asia Pacific Conference on Teacher Education: New Directions for a Changing World, 11-14 July, Bangkok.
- Atal, Y. (1981). The call for indigenisation. *International Social Science Journal*, 33(1), 189-196.
- Di Pietro, R. J. (1979) Linguistic competence and what lies beyond. In Jack Richards (Ed), *Applications of Linguistics to Language Teaching*. Anthology Series 6. Singapore: RELC.

- Elley, W.B. and Mangubhai, F. (1983). The impact of reading on second language learning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19 (1).
- Espiritu, A.C. (1968). The limits of applicability of Western concepts, values and methods in the social sciences to the concrete realities of Asian sciences. In World Student Christian Federation, *The relevance of the social sciences in contemporary Asia*. Tokyo: Japan Publications Inc.
- Frey, K., Frei, A. & Langeheine, R. (1989). Do curriculum development models really influence the curriculum? *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 21(6). 553-59.
- Goh, Keng Swee and Team. (1979). Report on the Ministry of Education 1978. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Goodman, Kenneth S. Whole-language research: Foundations and development. *The Elementary School Journal*, 90(2).
- Gopinathan, S. (1984). Intellectual dependency and the indigenization response: Case studies of three disciplines in two third world universities. PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Hunt, F.J. (1987). *The incorporation of education*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kirkpatrick, T.A. (1985). The role of communicative language teaching in secondary schools with special reference to teaching in Singapore. In Birkram Das (Ed). *Communicative Language Teaching*. Anthology Series 14. Singapore: RELC.
- Kuo, Eddie C.Y. (1985). Language and identity: The case of Chinese in Singapore. In Tseng Wen-shing and David Wu Y.H. *Chinese culture and mental health*. Orlando: Academic Press, Inc.
- Hirst, Paul H. (1969). The curriculum development, *Western European Education*, 1(1). Cited in J. Walton, Rational curriculum planning.
- Kumar, Krishna. (1979). Indigenization and transformational cooperation in the social sciences. In K. Kumar (Ed.) *Bonds without bondage: Explorations in transcultural interactions*. Honolulu, Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii.
- Lau, Kam Cheong et al. (1980). Report on the working visit to France. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Lee, D.M. and Allen, R.V. (1963). *Learning to read through experience*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Lee, Edwin. (1989). The colonial legacy. In Kernial S.S. & P. Wheatley, *Management of success: The moulding of modern Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.



- Lee, Hsien Loong. (1989). The national ideology: A direction and identity of Singapore. Speech delivered at the Alumni International Singapore's Third Singapore Lecture on 11 Jan, reproduced in full in *The Straits Times* of 12 Jan.
- Lee, Kuan Yew. (1972). Traditional values and national identity. *The Mirror*, 8(47).
- Lee, Soo Ann. (1968). Comments on Dr Espiritu's paper. In World Student Christian Federation, *The relevance of social sciences in contemporary Asia*. Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc.
- Lim, Catherine. (1988). Producing materials in the heterogeneous educational setting of Singapore: Strategies of accommodation. Paper presented at the Seameo Regional Language Centre 23rd Regional Seminar, 11 April.
- McLean, M. (1983). Educational dependency : A critique. *Compare*, 13(1), 25-42.
- Mok, Rebecca. (1984). The English secondary syllabus in Singapore - its design and development. In John Read (Ed), *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*. Anthology Series 13. Singapore: RELC.
- Mok, Rebecca. (1987). Likely directions for the revised English syllabuses in Singapore. In M.L. Tickoo (Ed.) *Language syllabuses: State of the art*. Anthology Series 18. Singapore: Regional Language Centre.
- Morris, R.W. and Thomson, G.P. (1979). Curriculum development in Singapore: A brief review 1979. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Noss, R.B. (Ed) (1984). *An Overview of Language Issues in Southeast Asia 1950-1980*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Ng, Seok Moi (Ed). (1987). Research into children's language and reading development (Jan 1983-Dec 1986). Singapore: Institute of Education.
- Paulston, C.B. (1985). Communicative competence and language teaching: Second thoughts. In B.K. Das (Ed), *Communicative Language Teaching*. Anthology Series 14. Singapore: RELC.
- Perren, G.E. (1963). Teaching English Literature overseas: Historical notes and present instances. In John Press (Ed), *The Teaching of English Literature Overseas*. London: Methuen.
- Prabhu, N.S. (1979). The teaching of English and notions of communication. In J.C. Richards (Ed) *Applications of Linguistics to Language Teaching*. Anthology Series 6. Singapore: RELC.

- Prabhu, N.S. (1984). Procedural syllabuses. In John Read (Ed) *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*. Anthology Series 13. Singapore: RELC.
- Quah, May Ling. (1985). The revised monolingual curriculum. *Teaching and Learning*, 5(2).
- Raggatt, P. (1983). One person's periphery ... *Compare*, 13(1), 1-5.
- Shiozuki. (1968). Foreword. In World Student Christian Federation, *The relevance of the social sciences in contemporary Asia*. Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc.
- Silva, E.T. (1980). Cultural autonomy and ideas in transit: Notes from the Canadian case, *Comparative Education Review*, 24 (1).
- Singapore Teachers' Union Report. (1987). *Survey on the writing and use of specific instructional objectives*. Singapore: STU.
- Skilbeck, M. (1972). School-based curriculum development. Unpublished paper, University of Ulster, cited by J. Walton in Rational curriculum planning.
- Skolnik, Richard L. (1976). The nation-wide learning system of Singapore. Occasional paper No. 42. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Somerville-Ryan, R.B. (1985). Designing tasks for slow-learners in L2. Paper presented at the First International Conference in Language and Literacy, 14-15 August, Seoul, Korea.
- Somerville-Ryan, R.B. (1986). Taking slow learners to task. Mimeographed paper.
- Streaming is best way to teach, says British psychologist. *The Straits Times*, 9.9.87.
- Tanner, Daniel and Tanner, Laurel. (1990). *History of the school curriculum*. New York: Macmillan
- Tyler, Ralph. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Walton, J. (1976). Rational curriculum planning. In J. Walton and J. Welton, *Rational curriculum planning: Four case studies*. London: Ward Lock Educational
- Watson, Keith. (1983). Educational neocolonialism - the continuing colonial legacy. In Keith Watson (Ed) *Education and the Third World*. London: Croom Helm.

Widdowson, H.G. (1989). Knowledge of language and ability for use. *Applied Linguistics*, 10(2).

Wong, H.K. Ruth. (1973). Curriculum development in Singapore with special reference to the revised primary syllabuses. Paper presented at the Singapore Book Association Seminar on the Role of Educational Materials in Singapore Schools, 14-16 March.

Yeoh, Oon Chye. (1983). Curriculum innovations and the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. Unpublished paper.

Singapore  
28 March 1990



## INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

QUESTIONNAIRE  
ON  
THEORY AND PRACTICE  
IN EDUCATION

Thank you for your help in completing this questionnaire, which is used as part of the Institute's a survey among curriculum planners and developers of the extent to which Western "theories" have influence on and relevance to their work.

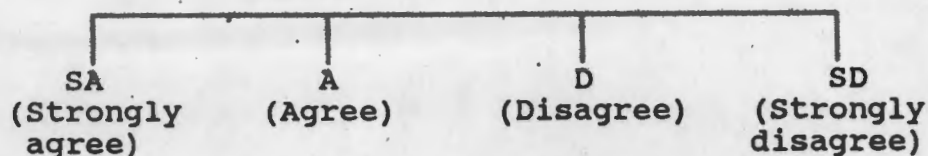
The term "theories" is used loosely here to refer to beliefs, concepts, constructs or schemata. In turn, the adjective "Western" is used in a neutral way, with no positive or negative connotations and it refers specifically to the sources of such "theories", particularly American, British, Canadian, European, Australian or from New Zealand.

It would be useful if you would kindly state your name on the form so that we could, if necessary, follow up with an interview with a small sample of the respondents. But please rest assured that the information from completed questionnaires will be kept strictly confidential and no respondent will be referred to by name or designation in the report.

- 
1. Your name : \_\_\_\_\_
  2. The subject area you work in : \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Division : \_\_\_\_\_
  4. Nowadays, we hear a lot about "building on students' interests". Please say briefly how this idea might or might not have influenced your work.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Using the 4-point scale below, please indicate your level of agreement (or disagreement) by circling one of the four responses, represented by upper case letters, provided against each item.



- |   |    |   |   |    |
|---|----|---|---|----|
| 5.1 I work on the assumption that curriculum planning has a theoretical foundation.   | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5.2 A subject syllabus should be developed on the basis of concepts or theories pertinent to the particular subject.            | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5.3 Some "theories" have directly influenced the way we have planned the syllabus/we have developed the curriculum materials.   | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5.4 Other "theories" remain <u>implicit</u> in the way we have planned the syllabus/we have developed the curriculum materials. | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5.5 My work has been strongly influenced by theories derived from the West.   | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5.6 It is always necessary to adapt the theories to suit local conditions.  | SA | A | D | SD |

6. If your response to item 5.3 above is SA or A, please indicate some of the "theories" you have in mind.

---



---



---



---

7. If your response to item 5.4 above is SA or A, please indicate some of the "theories" that you might have used unconsciously.

---

---

---

8. Following your response to item 5.5 above, please indicate the "theory(ies)" that has(have) influenced your work but has(have) not come from Western sources.

---

---

---

---

9. If your response to item 5.6 above is SA or A, please indicate the kind of modification or adaptation that you would find necessary to make in using the "theories".

---

---

---

---

---

THIS IS THE END OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU AGAIN FOR YOUR COOPERATION



**Table 1: Influence of Theories : Level of Agreement (n=40)**

	SA (Strongly agree)	A (Agree)	D (Disagree)	SD (Strongly disagree)
1. I work on the assumption that curriculum planning/development has a theoretical foundation.	20	20	0	0
2. A subject syllabus/curriculum materials should be developed on the basis of concepts or theories pertinent to the particular subject.	13	27	0	0
3. Some "theories" have directly influenced the way we have planned the syllabus(es)/curriculum materials.	15	25	0	0
4. Other "theories" remain <u>implicit</u> in the way we have planned the syllabus(es)/curriculum materials.	6	28	1	0 (5=NR)
5. My work has been strongly influenced by theories derived from the West.	4	32	3	0 (1=NR)
6. It is always necessary to adapt the theories to suit local conditions.	17	19	3	1