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# Singapore: Review of Educational Events in 1992

S. Gopinathan



1992 continued to be a busy year for policy-makers in education, in particular in determining ways in which the major recommendations of the **Improving Primary School Education (IPSE) Report** could be implemented and the aims of the Edusave Scheme achieved. 1992 also saw Mr Lee Yock Suan's first year in office.

### Primary and Secondary Education

One of the major proposals of the IPSE Report was that streaming at the primary level should be delayed by one year to primary four and the upper primary streams should be organised largely on the basis of second language competence, hence the naming of streams as EM1, EM2, EM3. In the year of implementation, 1992, 13.8% of the cohort was posted to EM1, 75.2% to EM2 and 10.4% to EM3. Apparently, there were no takers for ME3.

Over the years the government has been concerned both to preserve the best of the Chinese-medium schools and to provide suitable environments for those who want to study Chinese at first language level. To this end it created the Special Assistance Plan (SAP)

schools. In 1992 the government announced its intention to convert five more primary schools to SAP status, raising the number to 15.

The government also announced a pilot programme to gauge the appeal of full-day primary schools. However, by the end of the year it concluded that the idea was not viable and scrapped the scheme.

### Financing Education

In the debate following the presentation of the 1992 Budget it was revealed that the education budget for 1992 would amount to 2.8 billion dollars or 16.9% of total government expenditure. The figure of 2.8 billion would be 3.3% of GDP.

The government also gazetted the Education Endowment Scheme Act in 1992. Under this fund, the government will give grants of about \$1,000,000 each to 130 secondary schools, as well as hand out \$3 million worth of scholarships to pupils in government and independent schools. Mr Goh Chok Tong had earlier proposed an amendment to the original concept to tie in the grants to effort and ability. Part of the fund, he said, would be used as scholarships for the top students in independent and government schools.

## Major Committee Reports

In 1991 Dr Tony Tan had requested the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, to head a committee – **The Chinese Language Review Committee** – to seek ways to improve the quality of the teaching of Chinese in schools. The committee presented its report in 1992. Among the recommendations of the committee were the following:

- (1) CL1 to be renamed Higher Chinese and C2 Chinese Language;
- (2) Chinese characters to be grouped in three blocks - Pri. 1-4; 5-6; Sec 1-4/5. Hanyu Pinyin to be taught earlier than Pri. 4;
- (3) Equal exposure time to EL and CL for Chinese children in pre-schools and kindergartens;
- (4) Preparation of new instructional materials, and the setting up of a committee to vet and endorse supplementary reading materials;
- (5) A language centre to be established for CL teachers and opportunities provided for professional upgrading of Chinese Language teachers; and
- (6) More weight to reading and listening comprehension to be given in examinations and the use of dictionaries to be allowed in examinations.

## Improving Educational Quality

Several new initiatives and concerns related to improving educational quality made the news. The Senior Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, urged the establishment of a good school in every Group Representative Constituency to ensure easier access to quality education for the deserving. This idea is likely to find expression via the "government autonomous schools" scheme in

which a small number of government schools are likely to be given additional funds, flexibility in staff selection and greater curriculum flexibility to innovate and provide better quality education.

Another major innovation was the publication of a school ranking list by the *Straits Times* with the assistance of the MOE. The rationale given was that parents and education are better served by information on school quality being more widely available, and that ranking would reward and encourage better performance. The *Straits Times* had anticipated that objections would be raised to using just "O" level results to rank schools, irrespective of quality of pupil intake, and had used the concept of "value added" to take student quality into account.

The old chestnut of class size and its relation to educational quality was also in the news. An opposition member of parliament had brought up the issue during the budget debate but the appeal for smaller class sizes was rejected on a number of grounds, among them the difficulty of recruiting more teachers, the fact that evidence was inconclusive about the link between class size and educational quality and that countries like Japan had large classes and yet provided high quality education.

## Higher Education

1992 saw the establishment of Singapore's fourth polytechnic, Nanyang Polytechnic, intended to broaden access to economically productive post-secondary education and to establish newer courses like nursing. The government also announced that it was aiming to have 60% of the secondary cohort go on to post-secondary education, with about 40% going to the polytechnics and about 15-20% going on to universities.

The government also made a surprise change to earlier announced plans to establish the Singapore Open University. After announcing plans to register new students in 1993 and even the appointment of a V-C, the government announced that it had approached the Singapore Institute of Management to manage the Open



University. It noted that SIM had expertise in managing continuing and adult education programmes and was therefore more suitable to handle the project than the MOE.

### **Education and the Communities**

1991 had seen the establishment of the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) to spearhead programmes to improve the education and welfare problems of both

communities. While the government has argued that such community-based self-help groups were a viable way of addressing shortcomings, others argued against creating new community-based associations, and involving them in educational activity. It was feared that unnecessary rivalry could result from a competition for funds and resources. Perhaps in response to these concerns the MOE announced the formation of the Joint Consultative Committee on Education with representatives from MENDAKI, SINDA, CDAC, AMP and MOE.