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Title of Paper: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Mission Statement of Education in Singapore –SNG 01002

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Critical Discourse Analysis of the Mission Statement of Education in Singapore

I. Objectives of this Paper.

The history, politics, social circumstances and economics can have a deep influence in shaping the aims and ideology of education in a nation. This is especially the case for a small nation like Singapore where people are the only resource she has to ensure a growing economy. The first part of this paper gives a brief history as well as social, political and economic background of the country, showing how these factors shape the aims, focus and ideology of education. A linguistic tool, discourse analysis, is applied to the examination of two articles: a speech by the Minister of Education in Singapore on the direction of Higher Education, and a Missions Statement, produced by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, to understand the ideology of education embedded in these articles. An analysis is then made on the implications that such an ideology have on management of Higher Education. This is then compared to views on educational management found in other writings.

II. Critical Discourse Analysis

A. A Definition

According to Widdowson (2000), critical discourse analysis is the uncovering of implicit ideology in texts. It exposes underlying ideological bias and therefore, the exercise of power in texts.

Fairclough (1993) explained that critical discourse analysis begins with a view of language as a social practice, in other words, it is a kind of action. In a sense, it is a historically and socially placed action, both in itself socially shaped and socially shaping, what Fairclough called 'constitutive'. Fairclough raised three elements that language is constitutive of: i.social identities, ii.social relations, and iii.systems of knowledge and belief. Critical discourse analysis explores how discursive practices, events and texts

arise from, and are ideologically shared by relations of power and struggles over power. It explores relationships between discourse and society, and society in itself is seen as a way of securing power and hegemony. For the purposes of this paper, the uncovering of ideology in texts on education mission statement and objectives are helpful in understanding the environmental influences and pressures on Universities as organizations and how these forces shape

the perception of both Universities as organizations and their purposes.

B. Ideology – A Definition

Dijk (1995) explained that ideologies are ‘cognitive’, in the sense that they involve mental objects such as ideas, thought, beliefs, judgments, values and belief systems. Ideologies are social in that they relate to groups, group positions and interests, touching on topics such as class, gender or race struggles, social power and dominance. They are also shared beliefs, held by members of a group. Ideologies are neither true nor false and lastly, they are evaluative, in that they provide a basis for judgment of what is

good or bad, right or wrong and the basic guidelines for social perception and interaction. Dijk pointed out that ideological categories consisted of norms or values, position, resources, attitudes, more specifically, social representation shared by members of a group, and lastly, models, in terms of stored episodic memory or mental representations of personal experiences of specific actions, events or situations.

III. Background of the History of Singapore and how it Influences Policies Regarding Education

In an opening address of a conference organized by the Education Research Association, S. Gopinathan, the dean of the School of Education, National Institute of Education, described the history, social, political and economic factors of Singapore, and how they shape the emphasis and objectives of education in Singapore. The political consciousness of Singapore is very much determined by threats to social and racial stability of the country in the 1950s. When Malaysia gained independence, Singapore remained a colony, and a merger with Malaysia was recommended in view of the fact that Singapore could not withstand the communist threat. This happened in 1963, and in 1965, Singapore was separated from Malaysia unexpectedly. In this period, Singapore was vulnerable to communist subversion, and plagued with ethnic tensions as well as racial riots. At the same time, the British began withdrawing their armed forces which were stationed in Singapore. This gave rise to a sense of crisis and insecurity that marked the nation’s birth and early years and became major factors in the construction of her political and economic policy, what Gopinathan called ‘politics of survival’. It led to an overriding concern on the government’s part of maintaining racial harmony in the State. The government is therefore constantly examining possible threats to this ethnic harmony, and this includes policy relating to the choice of language as a medium of instruction, as well as teaching of religious studies and values in schools. This also leads to formation of one of the two important objectives in education, that of shaping an identity in the people, an identity that is marked by a cultural distinctiveness as well as nationalistic values. The government would like the people to preserve their cultural values, at the same time, put the community before the individual. The second, and equally important, objective is that of economic reconstruction, which is seen as a way of solving the political problems that resulted from a poor economy. It is believed that a strong government is needed to take these nations through such challenges. Gopinathan quoted Rajaratnam (1977), the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said that for third world countries not to fall into anarchy as development gathers speed, more authority and discipline were necessary.

In the 1970s, therefore, the government began to implement policies for inculcating values in schools and laying emphasis on the economic imperative of education. With a large population of Chinese, as well as such a preference for economic development and strong government, Confucianism provided a suitable ideological framework for education in Singapore. Confucianism gave the people a natural ideology, with the State’s emphasis on social discipline. This led to the introduction of religious studies in schools, which in 1990, became abandoned when it was found that it led to divisions in religion and ethnic identity. This was replaced by the study of core values of the nation, known as ‘shared values’. These consisted of placing the nation before the community and self; seeing the family as a basic unit of society; giving of community support and regard for the individual, consensus, instead of conflict, as a way of making decisions and racial and religious harmony. Here, Gopinathan quoted Goh Keng Swee (1993), once Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister, in saying that ‘education’s social purpose’ ‘is to promote cohesion and group solidarity and its economic purpose, to create wealth of its nation by the provision of appropriate knowledge and skills.’

These external influences also give rise to a heavy emphasis on assessment in the school system. Assessment is seen as a tool for the meritocratic selection process. It allows people from poorer families who possess the ability to climb up

the social ladder. In addition, it helps students and their families see that their effort in the education process pays off in the workplace, that success in school leads to success in life. It is a way of placing suitably qualified people in the professions, and all these, done with a low education expenditure of 4% of GNP.

Education is viewed pragmatically. The investment in education must have its payoff in the economy. It is believed that education has a two-fold purpose: that of training the people, and providing a link with the industry. Education allows a workforce to be trained and for the economy of the State to thrive. Social stability, a healthy industrial relations climate, and excellent macroeconomic policy planning are held to be the ingredients for a continued growth of the country. Singapore therefore sees a strong relation between capital and labour.

To cope with the labour needs of an industrial economy based on mass production, vocational education was introduced in the 60s and 70s. While this met the economic needs 30 years ago, it has now become inadequate in the face of a fast changing global economy. According to Gopinathan, in 1990, 53% of the workforce had 6 years and below of education. Now, however, with the growth of information-based industries, a workforce of much higher specialization needs to be raised. This leads to higher investment in the engineering sciences and a heavy emphasis on enrolment in engineering in the University. The education system in Singapore has always centred around a common curriculum and a mastery of content. This is now inadequate in a globally competitive economy. It has become imperative to train students in lifelong learning skills with a shift to knowledge-based industries that place an emphasis on research and development. Porter (1996) stated that the development of human skills has become important in the present age. Technology has eliminated many jobs, such that there are now rapid increases in jobs which demand higher skills, such as the areas of the professional, technical, managerial, sales and service. Lower ranking jobs such as machine tenders, assemblers, however, are declining.

It is therefore this concern for survival that the small nation-state is constantly trying to ensure that the educational system is successful in training students to meet the needs of the economy. This theme is reiterated in speeches by ministers of objectives of education in Singapore as well as mission statement produced by the Ministry of Education. A speech given by the Minister of Education, Teo Chee Hean, has been selected for analysis in this paper. The strengths and weaknesses of documentary analysis as a form of research method are also examined, with a particular focus in uncovering ideology in a text.

IV. An Analysis of Two Texts: A Speech and a Mission Statement

Relation Between Higher Education and the Economy

In an economy that is wholly dependent on people as resource, education is seen to play a crucial role of training people to sustain the economy. A concern for survival is seen in one of the headings contained in the mission statement, 'The Basis For Survival And Success'. The underlying assumption in this heading is that training of human resource is an essential requirement, that there is no other option available. There is also an association of both notions of 'survival' and 'success', such that effectiveness of training of people will mark both survival and success for the nation. This has become a powerful ideology in Singapore and a message that is reiterated in the speeches by ministers. In the Minister of Education's speech, he described the Universities as 'valuable sources of "brainpower" needed to drive the new economy. The connotations of the semantics here are: 'valuable' or 'value', 'sources' which call to mind 'resources' and 'brainpower', power, implying technology, all of which carry an ideological assumption of people as assets of the economy. In his speech, he uses terms borrowed from economics, like 'graduate manpower' and Universities seen as 'systems' which allow for 'divisions of labour'. The combination of two nouns, 'graduate' and 'manpower' to form a compound noun, 'graduate manpower' is also an ideological vehicle, the idea of graduates being an economic resource is now a taken or assumed fact. The coining of the term 'graduate manpower' allows for the formulation of an ideology that can be passed on. Mr Teo Chee Hean described the changing role of the University in the present age, as that which encompassed 'key nodes in the complex network in which ideas clash and intermingle, get refined and commercialized, or consigned to the dust-heap'. The metaphors used here of 'nodes', 'network', 'clash and intermingle', 'refined' and finally, 'commercialized', are those of the production process of a product. In other words, the education process has become equated with the production process. The education process is now seen as an automated, assembly-line procedure that is devoid of the influence of human agent. Not only are Universities taken to be service centers in its role to train manpower for the economy, their management is seen to

function like a production process.

The need to make a match between what the Universities teach and what the industries need is clear in Mr Teo's speech. He begins his speech by outlining the global economic development, from agriculture, to trading, mass production, and in the present age, it has evolved to a knowledge economy. In his speech, Mr Teo used metaphors that relate to the production process of goods. He talked about "'hard infrastructure" to plug into other networks', infrastructure being one of the basic requirements of economic development. He added that the country is now looking into 'developing the soft infrastructure'. The adjectives 'hard' and 'soft' have become common usage in Singapore, hard, referring to the tangible, to machinery etc., and soft to Information Technology. Both of these are the basic foundation for economic growth to take place.

Mr Teo proceeded to say that 'In a knowledge economy, intellectual capital is a prized resource.'. Here, there is an association of capital with people, and their intellect is seen as an investment and resource, very much like capital is an investment and resource in the economy. Again, the coining of the compound noun, 'intellectual capital' makes the concept of people's intellect being synonymous to capital an ideology. The same ideology is contained in the Mission Statement, the very first line reads, 'The wealth of a nation lies in its people – their commitment to country and community, their willingness to strive and persevere, their ability to think, achieve and excel.'. Here, the phrase 'The wealth of a nation lies in its people' does not refer to the fact that the people are the ones who possess the wealth, but that the people are the only resource the nation has. This will necessarily mean that there is a lot of pressure on the people in Singapore to perform well, both in the education system, and at work. It also means that the organizational structure, teaching approaches and syllabus of educational institutions will constantly be under review, in line with changes in the economy and industries.

Mr Teo was candid about the roles that the Universities play in the nation's drive for economic development. He said these consisted of firstly producing the graduate manpower for the nation's high-tech, knowledge economy; secondly, of educating Singaporeans to be global workers, who could still contribute to the local economy at the same time, and thirdly, 'to be creators of new knowledge and new applications.' In other words, the Universities play a major role in three aspects of the new economy 1. training human resource; 2. training the workforce for a new direction in economic development toward internationalism; and 3. preparing the people to be innovators and entrepreneurs.

Part of the vision in this whole venture is to develop Singapore into a 'Boston of the East, 'an oasis of talent', 'a knowledge hub, an "ideas-exchange", a confluence of people and idea streams, an incubator for inspiration.' This move has its roots in a recognition of Singapore's strategic geographical position in the East. When Singapore was founded, it was discovered early that the island was strategically located for trade. The economy therefore boomed from all the trading, of spices for example amongst other goods that took place in the East. The government continued to capitalize on this strategic geographical location by developing its airport, convention centers for world conferences, tourist industry, and finally, in this Information Age, as a center for the exchange of expertise and knowledge. The two resources available to Singapore are therefore, human resource and its geographical position.

V. Importance of Having A Nationalistic Set of Values and Attitude and The Influence of Confucianism

According to the Mission Statement, education also plays a role in moulding students 'into good citizens, conscious of their responsibilities to family, society and country.' It went on to state that it is important for Singaporeans to have 'a strong social conscious'. Such an ideology matches that of Confucianism, which sees the individual as a social being, having obligations through relationships, such as the individual as a citizen to the state, and parent and child. A person is expected to place collective interests before self, and through a process of education and moulding, serve the common good of society (<http://www.index-china.com/>). Confucianism serves a role not only because its roots in the Chinese thinking and history, but also in its preaching about the individual serving the state, since the degree of contribution of people mark the survival and success of the nation.

This issue of survival is something the government deems Singaporeans should not forget. The Mission Statement states that the people should not forget the nation's

'common history, our vulnerabilities and constraints. They must develop a sense of shared identity and destiny, the instinct to defend Singapore's national interests, and the resolve and confidence to stand together as one people, to

overcome threats and challenges.’ Education is said to play the crucial role of preserving ‘cultural roots’. Still present are the political threats, and Singapore is still in a vulnerable position. Not only is a national identity critical to the nation’s survival, such an awareness of Singapore’s vulnerabilities is a reminder to Singaporeans that we must pay attention to defense of the country. History therefore must always serve as a reminder to the people, and history can repeat itself.

VI. DISCUSSION

A Comparison of the Ideologies Found in the Two Texts and Crucial Characteristics of Education Management of Higher Education

1. Management of Higher Education tends to foster diversity rather than promote uniformity.

Burnham (1994) explained that where education differs from other organizations is that management is about clear goals, but in education, the goals are ‘diffused, varied and conflicting’ (p. 21). In addition, the long-term outcomes of education cannot be measured, for example, the learning of the students. The rewards the students obtained from their courses in the University may be obvious only after the students leave University and establish their careers. Different groups of people, with their different specializations and roles in the education institution, such as faculty members, who have a concern for how students learn, and have their own perspectives on the skills and knowledge they need in life, have their own say and influence in their areas in the institution. It would be very hard to conceive of Universities as commercial organizations, to function in a straight-forward process, where you add the input, in terms of financial and other resources, and in a simple process of production, produces the outcomes you desire. Such a metaphor can be a successful vehicle for ideology where a tremendous emphasis is placed on economic and industrial development. When it comes to education, however, it is important to consider that large and varied groups of people (deans, faculty members and students included) are both affected by and affect education policies and decision-making. Decision-making, therefore, cannot take place in a detached manner. In fact, the whole issue of learning involves understanding of human psychology and areas of subjectivity, such that it is impossible to say one can maintain total control of outcomes of education institutions as organizations.

2. It is a decentralized management with interdependent decision makers.

Gill (1992) pointed out that an unique feature of higher education is that although the organization of higher education is based on a hierarchical structure, they are significant players who do not fall into the organizational structure or hierarchical lines who have a stake in the decision making process. This may include people like faculty members and student bodies. If recommendations are taken into account without bearing these people in mind, they will probably fail to be implemented (p. 25). In contrast, the ideology implicit in the Mission Statement of Education in Singapore, and the speech by the Minister of Education presents Universities as service centers of training and imparting of knowledge and sees the management of Universities as an automated mechanism, not affected by human influence. In fact, many individuals in the organizational structure of the Universities affect and are affected by policies, decisions and changes. Different matters relating to academic and administrative issues of the University are handled by committees, who bring with them different background, training, knowledge from specific disciplines, and perspectives on the issues. It is therefore hard to conceive the management of Universities to function like an automated mechanism such that we do not need to take into account the subjective and diverse influence of people. In this age that we live in, that exalts Science and Technology, we are convinced by the ideology of objective knowledge. Therefore, the objectivisation of education process and management fit into this ideology. Yet, both the process and management of education involve people, affect and are affected by people. A paradox is therefore created here.

3. A strong and united statement of mission and objectives is not as prominent in education as other organizations.

The mission statement of education in Singapore and Mr Teo’s speech emphasizes the importance of Singaporeans standing with a united purpose, and educational institutions of possessing clear objectives of responding to both global and local economic changes. Bell (1998) quoted March and Olsen (1979) in saying

that a characteristic of decision making in higher education is that decisions and choices are often not made by a close matching of means to ends. Instead, decisions are often the result of unforeseen factors like 'oversight, accident, flight or loose association, none of which is a rational or a strategic process.' (p. 454). It was also pointed out that to reach an agreement on the nature and interpretation of objectives, ways of achieving them and staff to be involved is difficult if not impossible (Bell, 1989). For a small nation like Singapore, however, there is a strong pressure to co-ordinate its economic and educational activities, and move them towards a direction of development in pace with global developments. Due to this, there is also a pressure to conform to a set of ideologies and purpose, and the outcomes of education are measured in terms of economic growth. This will mean careful macro planning, a tight control over the implementation and administration in the educational institutions, and a repression of individual viewpoints in favour of achievement of common objectives.

4. Universities have a large and undefined number of clients, extending beyond immediate boundaries.

Universities affect and are affected by other bodies such as alumni, surrounding communities, state systems, governing structures, legislators, donors as well as business and industry. It is therefore hard to determine where its allegiance should lie.

5. Relation between environment and Universities as organizations

Bell (1998) pointed out the fallacy of the belief that 'organization activity' can be 'a rational response to an analysis of the environments.' He questioned the fact that there exists a range of actions which match environmental circumstances from which rational decisions can be based. He quoted March and Olsen (1979) in saying that although organizations operate within certain constraints in an environment, a set of environmental factors could produce different responses from organizations, and 'the same organizational action may produce different environmental outcomes at different times.' (p. 454). How a University respond to environmental factors is therefore ambiguous.

VII. Conclusions

There appears to be a conflict of education management of Universities in reality, which is based on a collegial model and seeks diverse views, and the need to make Universities function like a commercial organization as well as responding to economic needs and changes. This may mean that the second drive will lead to more control being exercised on the management of Universities, both in terms of deciding what courses to teach students and the way learning outcomes are measured. It may be said that to make Universities a means of meeting economic needs is to narrow the definition of education, but in a small country like Singapore where human resource is the sole survival means, it feels it has no other alternative. (4,000 WORDS)

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