

Education for Living: Epitome of Civics Education?



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Forging a sense of national identity has always been high on the agenda of the Singapore Government. Ever since the country's independence, various civics and citizenship education programmes have been set in motion, only to be subsequently discontinued and replaced with other initiatives. Education for Living (EFL) was regarded as the de facto civics education programme in 1970s Singapore. We look at the reasons that led to the emergence of the programme and why it was abandoned.

ADVENT OF EFL

Developed for the purpose of imparting social and moral education, EFL integrated Civics with History and Geography. This was considered necessary to “help pupils to understand and live under the changing conditions” (Chew, 1988, p. 72; Ong, 1979, p. 2).

The objectives of EFL were as follows:

- To help pupils become aware of the purpose and importance of nation building and their duties as loyal, patriotic, responsible and law-abiding citizens.
- To enable pupils to obtain a better understanding of how [Singapore] developed and of [its] geographical environment
- To help pupils to understand and appreciate the desirable elements of Eastern and Western traditions
- To guide pupils to perceive the relationship between man and society and in turn, between society and the world, so that they would be able to live in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society in peace and harmony. (Ong, 1979, p. 3)

It is interesting to note that while the EFL syllabus aimed to introduce students to the best of Eastern and Western values, there was to be a shift in orientation towards the end of the 1970s wherein the west was demonised and the east valorised.

Like Civics, EFL was taught in the mother tongue. The government believed that “Asian moral and social values, and the attitudes such as closeness in family ties, filial duties and loyalty (could) be conveyed and understood better in Asian languages”, and that pupils would become more aware of their cultural roots and develop a stronger sense of nationhood “if they knew their own language” (Gopinathan, 1991, p. 279). Christine Han (1996) challenged this assumption:



Students of Tanjong Rhu Integrated primary school attending an Education for Living class, 1974. Source: The Straits Times/The New Paper © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Reprinted with permission.

The insistence for moral and civic values to be taught in the mother tongue raises questions, first, as to whether there is a necessary link between language and values and, second, as to whether there is a conflict between attempts to build a nation and the fostering of ethnic culture and identity through an emphasis on ethnic values and languages.¹

Introduced to all primary schools in 1974, the instructional materials for EFL came in the form of 12 textbooks, which worked out to two textbooks per grade level, with accompanying teacher's guides. The themes covered in the syllabus included the following: our family, our life, our school, our culture, our environment, how our people earn a living, our public services, our (role) models, our society, our community, our country, our world, and our moral attitude. The chapters in the textbooks were written in the form of short passages, like previous civics textbooks, with questions for discussion at the end of each passage. Although the EFL syllabus was organised more systematically than the previous primary school civics syllabus, it covered most of the contents of the previous syllabus, including topics associated with history and geography.

Dr Lee Chiaw Meng, the Education Minister went to great lengths to explain why "the teaching of civics and moral education" was not "an examination subject". This was because "[Singapore's] examination system is ... too examination-oriented. By adding another subject, we could make matters worse. They might learn it by heart without really wanting to know why certain things ought to be done" (*Parliamentary Debates*, 34, 26 March 1975: Col 1000). Moreover, the subject matter of the EFL syllabus was rather extensive since it incorporated the study of civics, history and geography.

It was clear that the MOE intended EFL to be the epitome of the civics curriculum. This was clearly indicated in the MOE's Addendum to the Presidential Address at the opening of the Fourth Parliament:

Moral and civics education is mainly taught through the subject Education for Living (which is a combination of Civics, History and Geography) in the pupils' mother tongue. The aim of the subject is to inculcate social discipline and national identity and to imbue in pupils moral and civic values (ibid., 36, 8 February 1977: Col. 40).

The addendum conveniently ignored the presence of the existing civics syllabus for secondary schools, giving the impression that the subject was only taught at the primary level.

Therefore, it came as no surprise when a Member of Parliament suggested that the MOE extend "Education for Living to the secondary schools and that the historical development of Singapore, in particular, the periods of crises and hardships be included in the curriculum ... [and] should be taught as a compulsory subject in the secondary schools" (ibid., Col. 90). The Senior Minister of State for

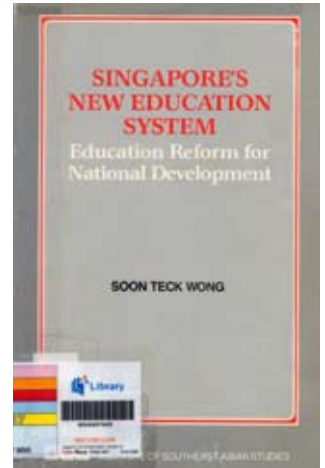
Education responded to this by stating that subjects like Civics, History and Geography assumed the role of EFL by imparting values to students at the secondary school level (ibid., 23 February 1977: Col. 390-1).

By 1976, MPs were beginning to raise concerns with EFL during the annual budget and Committee of Supply debates. Chang Hai Ding, who advocated the teaching of history in schools, while acknowledging that "[patriotism] is ... included in our Education for Living" (ibid., 37, 20 March 1978: Col. 1226), argued that "the misbegotten subject *Education For Living*" was unable to inculcate patriotism amongst students (ibid., 36, 14 February 1977: Col. 68). Another MP criticised EFL for developing into "neither a civics lesson, nor an *Education for Living* lesson but in many schools, it has become a second language lesson", and called it "a failure" (ibid., 23 March 1976: Col. 830). There was a call for "*Education for Living* [to] be taught by Education-for-living teachers, not by second language teachers" (ibid., 35, 23 March 1976: Col. 821). One MP sarcastically even referred to it as "Education for the Living" (ibid., 15 March 1976: Col. 292). The Senior Minister of State for Education did not address the criticisms of EFL in his reply. He merely reiterated the aims of EFL, "to inculcate moral and ethical values in our young pupils" (ibid., 23 March 1976: Col. 855), and gave an overview of the EFL topics.

The criticisms of EFL by MPs were echoed by Leong in his study on youths in the army, where he argued that the teaching of EFL in Chinese essentially became a second-language lesson rather than a civic one. Students in the English stream of the English-medium schools would be more focused on deciphering the language rather than contemplating the message of the lesson because of their predilection towards English learning. Another reason for the ineffectiveness of the teaching of EFL in Chinese is that only teachers proficient in Chinese could teach it, which could result in the concepts of being taught within a language lesson framework instead of through a civics lesson paradigm (Leong, 1978, p. 9).² In short, Leong was highly critical of EFL, contending that "the explanation of aims is couched in generalities", of which "[s]ome of the generalities are nebulous in character" (ibid., p. 8).

DEMISE OF EFL AND CIVICS

Leong's criticisms of EFL found resonance with the report published by the Education Study team, more popularly known as the Goh Report, as the team was chaired by



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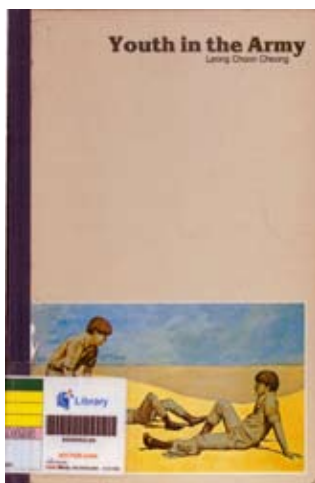
Dr Goh Keng Swee, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence:

Much of the material in the EFL text books, particularly those for lower primary classes, are useful in inculcating useful attitudes such as respect for honesty, hard work, care for parents and so on. A good deal of it, however, is irrelevant and useless. Subjects such as the use of community centres, functions of government outpatient clinics are of little value in inculcating moral beliefs in children (Goh, 1979, I-5).

The Goh Report's observations on the secondary schools' civics syllabus were even more scathing:

Much of the material taught relates to information, some useful, others of little permanent value. For instance, it seems pointless to teach secondary school children the details of the Republic's constitution, much of which is not even known to Members of Parliament. It is better that children are taught simple ideas about what a democratic state is, how it differs from other systems of Government and what the rights and responsibilities of citizens of a democratic state are (ibid.).

In 1978, the Prime Minister commissioned the Education Study Team to conduct a major review of the problems faced by Singapore's education system. A reading of Singapore's Parliamentary Hansard in the 1970s revealed that many aspects of Singapore's education system were heavily criticised by the MPs during the annual Committee of Supply debates — the criticisms of EFL were but one of many items over which the MPs took issue with the MOE. What prompted the review was the high drop-out rate following the implementation of mandatory bilingual education, which the Goh Report termed as "educational wastage". The major recommendation of the study team was the streaming of students at the Primary Three level according to English language ability. This was to have major implications on Singapore's educational landscape in the years to come. The resultant education structure was referred to as the "New Education System".³



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While the Goh Report commented on EFL and the civics syllabus, the teaching of civics was not the primary focus of the Education Study Team. The Prime Minister's open letter to the Education Study Team, which was published in the Goh Report, reflected his thinking on the role of education in general, and on civics and citizenship education in particular. In his letter, the Prime Minister pointed out that the Goh Report did

not touch upon moral and civics education. He regarded a good citizen to be "guided by moral principles" and imbued with "basic common norms of social behaviour, social values, and moral precepts which make up the rounded Singaporeans of tomorrow" (Goh, 1979, pp. iv-v). Thus, "[t]he best features of our different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups must be retained.... No child should leave

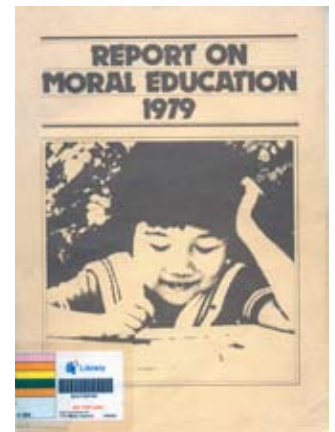
school after 9 years without having the 'soft-ware' of his culture programmed into his sub-conscious" (ibid., p. v). This is reminiscent of a speech he delivered in November 1966 where he decried the lack of social and civic responsibility in school children. The Prime Minister's main concern was evidently based on the importance of instilling a sound moral upbringing in students, and not so much on teaching the theoretical aspects of civics and democratic values. Moreover, he apparently found the existing civics education programmes wanting in the teaching of moral values.

In response to the Prime Minister's concerns on moral education, in October 1978, the Deputy Prime Minister appointed Mr Ong Teng Cheong, the Minister for Communications and Acting Minister for Culture, to head a team of parliamentarians to "examine the existing moral education programme in schools" (Ong, 1979, p. i). The objectives of this Committee were as follows:

- To identify the weakness and strengths of the existing moral education programmes in schools.
- To make recommendations on the content of moral education programmes and teaching methods to be used in both primary and secondary schools.
- To make recommendations on the selection of suitable teachers to carry out moral instructions in schools (ibid., p. 1).

Unlike the Education Study team, which had no terms of reference, the Moral Education Committee had specific guidelines. First, it had to determine the best ways in which to instill within students desirable moral values (honesty, industry, respect for family, cleanliness and thrift). Next, it had to reassess the existing Education for Living Program in primary schools and the Civics syllabus in secondary schools. The Committee also had to make recommendations on how to select teachers who could teach the moral education program in schools (ibid.).

In July 1979, the Moral Education Committee released its report, popularly referred to as the Ong Teng Cheong Report or Ong Report. The report observed that "Civics



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Press Conference on Moral Education, 1972.
Collection of Ong Teng Cheong, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

and EFL are two different and distinct programmes handled by two different subject committees”, resulting in a lack of continuity and reinforcement of “the inculcation of desirable moral and social attitudes in Primary and Secondary Schools” (Ong, 1979, p. 4). This was because “each committee works on its own, each with a different approach and emphasis” (ibid.).

The Moral Education Committee found the EFL syllabus to be “on the whole quite appropriate and acceptable”, apart from these shortcomings:

- Since EFL combines the teaching of Civics, History and Geography, some of the so-called social studies topics and concepts such as the public services and the history and geography of Singapore are irrelevant to moral instruction.
- There is not sufficient emphasis on the more important moral concepts and values.
- Some of the moral concepts dealt with at the lower primary level such as concepts of “love for the school”, “service” and “duty”, are highly abstract and may pose difficulties for the six-year olds conceptually. They should be deferred to a later stage.
- It was also too early to introduce situations involving moral conflict situations at the primary school level in the manner adopted in the EFL textbooks. It will probably be more effective to tell stories of particular instances of moral conflicts with particular

solution or solutions, leaving generalisations to a later stage in the child’s intellectual development (ibid., pp. 4-5).

With regard to the EFL textbooks, the committee found that at the lower primary level, EFL textbooks are adequate, although some lessons ought to be replaced with more suitable ones. In particular, more lessons in the form of traditional stories or well-known folk tales should be included in the text to convey the desired moral values and concepts. At the upper primary level, the textbooks are dull and unimaginative, and it is doubtful that they can arouse the interest of the pupils. The link between the moral concepts being conveyed and their relevance in terms of the pupils’ experience is tenuous (ibid., p. 5).

Like the Goh Report, the Ong Report was more critical of the secondary schools’ civics syllabus:

- It has insufficient content on the teaching of moral values. It includes too many varied subjects which have little or nothing to do with morality ... unnecessarily detailed descriptions of trivial topics tend to take up an inordinate amount of time at the expense of other more important areas ... key issues such as good citizenry, the need for national service and the inculcation of desirable moral values are not given sufficient coverage and emphasis.

- The subjects and topics are repeated at each level from secondary one to four without any substantial changes or graduation of depth of treatment. This makes the lessons uninteresting and boring ...
- Some subjects are far too advanced and are therefore beyond the comprehension of the students, e.g. topics like the constitution, legislation and international relations (which are introduced as early as Secondary one and two) (ibid., p. 4).

As for the Civics textbooks, they were found to be “generally dull and somewhat factual and dogmatic There is also insufficient illustration of the desired moral values ... through the use of stories Where this is done, it is ... boring and unimaginative” (ibid., p. 5).

In short, the Ong Report criticised “[t]he present moral education programme [to be] inadequate and ineffective, particularly in the case of the Civics programme in the secondary schools” (ibid., p. 8). The only saving grace lay with the objectives for EFL and Civics, which were deemed “appropriate and relevant” (ibid., p. 4). In the light of the strong criticisms from the Moral Education Committee, its recommendation came as no surprise:

It is recommended that the present EFL and Civics programme be scrapped and replaced by one single programme covering both the primary and secondary

levels under the charge of a single subject standing committee. The subject should be called “Moral Education” and it should confine itself to moral education and discipline training of the child (ibid., p. 8).

Thereafter, the affective aspect of civics and citizenship would be imparted by moral education, while the more cognitive domains would be covered in social studies and history.

CONCLUSION

Introduced with much promise, the EFL programme was initiated with the objective of combining history, geography and civics, in addition to imparting moral values. However, it was eventually scrapped since the government was more concerned with instilling strong moral ideals rather than offering theoretical lessons in civics and democratic values. Another reason for the programme’s failure was the fact that EFL lessons were used to teach Chinese — since the booklets and the accompanying teachers’ manuals were published in Chinese. EFL was the epitome of civics education in Singapore in the 1970s, but only for a very short time.

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ENDNOTES

1. This assumption continues to this day. See also Bokhorst-Heng (1998)
2. Leong was examining the problems faced by the conscript soldiers, and found that the failure of bilingual education was one of the contributing
3. For an explanation of streaming and the New Education System, see Soon (1988).
- factors. Leong’s criticism of EFL meant also that bilingual education was not working as well as it should.

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