English literatures in post-colonial Singapore

Rozita Dass†

University of Western Australia
Taylor's University

The emergence of a vibrant literary, culture and arts scene promotes Singapore's claims as a hub for arts and culture in the Asian region, and as a global arts city by the 21st century. The richness and variety of Singapore literature from the early post-colonial years are evident in the evolution of a Singapore literary culture. The diaspora of Singapore writers and their facility with English as a global language simultaneously allows them to contribute to world literature and to internationalization of Singapore's literary heritage as transnational writers. Despite this, there seems to be a disconnection between literature education in schools and the broader literary and arts culture of Singapore. This paper explores the state of the subject Literature in secondary schools in the context of this progressive, vibrant and diverse Singapore environment.

Introduction

This paper explores the position of Literature as a subject in Singapore secondary schools. The aims and objectives of the Literature syllabus and examinations have remained almost unchanged since colonial times, and do not fit comfortably in "one of the world's best performing school systems" (McKinsey Report, cited in MOE Corporate Brochure, 2010) in a highly competitive economy. Recent research on Literature education in Singapore has highlighted the ambivalence of the Literature curriculum (Choo, 2004); suggested possibilities for its reconceptualisation to reflect the contemporary Singaporean

---

† Address for correspondence: Rozita Dass, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, Taylor's University, 1, Jalan Taylors, Subang Jaya, Selangor 47500, Malaysia. Email: rozita.dass@taylors.edu.my.

environment and the impact of globalisation (Holden, 2000; Choo, 2011); and has proposed an alternative curriculum (Poon, 2007).

This study addressed the role of Literature as a school subject in relation to Singapore's current political, economic, social and educational climate, and analysed teachers' and students' perspectives on literary studies to generate theory about how teachers and students in Singapore deal with Literature in English. In-depth interpretivist case studies were conducted at five sites, purposively selected to incorporate the range of school types in Singapore. Data collected from official documents, focus group interviews and written protocols with students, semi-structured interviews with Heads of Department (HODs), and questionnaires from teachers, were inductively analysed. The findings supported the research referred to above (Choo, 2004; Poon, 2010). Emergent themes included: the insignificant impact of local literature on the study of Literature; the low status of the subject; and the lack of desirability of Literature as a course of study. The themes led to the formulation of four key propositions supporting development of theory on ways in which teachers and students deal with Literature in English studies in Singapore secondary schools.

The Development of Singapore Literature in English

English Literature (nomenclature until 2000) studies in secondary schools focused substantially on canonical British texts. Singapore literature was not prominent in the school syllabus until recently. This paper explores reasons for this exclusion. Poon, Holden and Lim (2009), provided a thorough account of the development of Literature in English in Singapore over three major periods, pre-1965, 1965 to 1990 and 1990 to the present. The last of these periods is the most important for the purposes of this study. A brief historical outline of that history presented here provides insights into the availability of Singapore Literature and helps explain why Singapore Literature does not have a prominent place in the secondary school curricula.

Even though Singaporean novels had been published in English, it was commonly thought that there was no substantial body of *Singapore literature in English* before 1965, or that there were Singaporeans before the nation state was officially established in that year. Before then, literature was mainly colonial literature. Holden identified two "clusters of Singapore-based literary activity" (Holden, 2009, p. 8). Straits Chinese, considered "cultural hybrids" - ethnic Chinese who had adopted Malay cuisine and dress - produced the first cluster between 1897 to 1907 and the early 1930s. Their writing, mainly poems and short stories oscillated between supporting colonial power and calling for a sense of Asian consciousness. Holden noted that Straits Chinese writing was more regional than Singaporean in character. It "reached out beyond Singapore" (ibid., p. 9) to Penang, Malacca and Batavia, Manila and Rangoon and raised the profile of English language as the second *lingua franca* after Malay. The first Singaporean novel in English was Lim Boon Keng's *Tragedies of Eastern Life* published in the late 1920s. The second cluster of writing was Malayan Literature in English, mainly written or published in Singapore in the late 1940s and 1950s. The poetry and stories reflected the political situation of the Malayan Emergency[1]. Although written mainly by Malaysian authors, they were significant contributions to Singapore's literary history by virtue of the shared colonial history of the two countries.

The beginnings of Singapore Literature in English can be attributed to a publication in the late 1940's of the journal, "The Cauldron", by the Literary and Debating Society of the King Edward VII Medical College Union. It was the first journal to publish literary work in English in Malaya and Singapore (Vethamani, 2001). The literary scene between 1965 and 1990 was characterised by themes of nation-building and modernisation. Many of Edwin Thumboo's 1970s works were "poems of social commentary and moral exhortation" (Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009,

---

[1]   The Malayan Emergency was the term used by the colonial government to refer to the guerrilla war fought between Commonwealth armed forces and the Malayan Communist Party, from 1948 to 1960.

p. 175) and used a balance of Standard International English and local references and idioms. In contrast, Arthur Yap's poems made use of Singlish and were more satirical in nature. The "very elitist position" of Singapore writing appealed "to a remarkably small audience of readers" (ibid., p. 176). Political constraints and a focus on technological growth and the economy did not "support a robust and open literary community" (ibid., p. 177). Many local writers were unable to make a living from writing, and wrote while working professionally as journalists, doctors, teachers and university professors. This affected the quality of the local literary scene.

Noted works of this period included Catherine Lim's *Little Ironies* which, as "the most influential of the short story collections" (ibid., p. 179), became an examination text in the Singapore education system, thus affording it equal standing with British canonical works. Lim's novels were published internationally. In this period, Singapore literature explored gender issues, race and identity. One example is Stella Kon's play *Emily of Emerald Hill* which won the Singapore National Playwriting Award in 1985. It was taught and performed in Singapore and internationally and acclaimed as a "pioneering text" that established drama as "the preeminent literary genre" in Singapore. Playwright and director Kuo Pao Kun, transformed the local drama scene with his "avant-guard, postmodern and experimental concepts" (ibid., p. 180). His influential play, *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1984) was an allegory of the problems faced by leaders and the populace of a city-state positioning itself in a globalizing economy. In their analysis of literature from this period, Poon, Holden and Lim argued that it demonstrated "seriousness, wit, intelligence, elegance, and power of individual expression" (ibid., p. 181).

This flowering of Singapore literature coincided with a national economic surge. Singapore was forging ahead as a nation state to become a global city and the literary arts scene was aligned with government economic, political, social and cultural policies. From the 1990s an "explosion in writing across all three genres" (ibid., p. 358) emerged from a younger generation of writers. Poon,

Holden and Lim (2009) attributed this to a number of factors. First, Singapore's First World status and standards of living and education and the commitment of certain publishers to support and invest in Singapore literature helped improve the cultural scene. Second, English was a natural choice as language of younger writers who did not regard it as a colonial language. Singlish, now considered an effective way of injecting humour as well as conveying a "more subtle emotional range" (ibid., p. 360) was used effectively by writers and dramatists. Third, the shift towards a more consultative and participative leadership style encouraged a more liberal arts scene.

A focus in the 1980s and early 1990s on Asian values to counter the negative and corruptive influences of the West ended with the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Singapore emerged as a more cosmopolitan global city. Recommendations of the *Renaissance City Report* (Ministry of Information and the Arts (MICA), 1999) offered an economic justification for promoting the Arts in Singapore contending that, "a vibrant cultural and arts scene is crucial to maintaining a high quality of life and attracting the best and the brightest" (Poon, Holden & Lim, 2009, p. 361). Initiatives included establishment of a National Arts Council (1991) to administer the Cultural Medallion award, the state's highest honour for excellence in the Arts; the Singapore Literature Prize; the Golden Point Award and the Creative Arts Program which paired aspiring young writers with established writers. The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay officially opened in 2002 with the purpose of showcasing musicals and hosting internationally renowned artistes. Although not everyone favoured this "embrace of… commercialisation of the Arts" (ibid., p. 362), by 2009 the Singapore theatre scene was vibrant with a variety of dramatic works and musicals.

Writing of this period was characterised by "politically charged and socially relevant themes" (ibid., p. 366). The marketing of Singapore as a global city, aggressively promoting businesses, increasing materialism and consumption among the people, influenced writers who began to question the effects of

globalisation on traditional, national and cultural identities of the people. Critique of Singaporeans' lifestyles, materialism and affluence was common in literature of this period. An increasing sense of the importance of historical consciousness, cultural memory and ethnic identity emerged. Daren Shiau's novel, *Heartland*, for example, explored class, racial tensions and urban living in the HDB heartlands. Themes examining life and tensions in a constantly changing urban space characterised the work of much poetry of this period. Transnationalism characterised Singapore writing during this time. Poets wrote about travel which "serves as an escape, an adventure, as a means to define home, even as a necessity of life" (ibid., p. 375). A growing group of "diasporic writers" (ibid.) wrote about Singapore from other places like Australia, United States, Canada and the United Kingdom where they had chosen to live. The contributions of such writers added to the variety of meanings and complexities of Singapore writing today.

In summary, a rich variety of Singapore literature emerged after independence in 1965. The evolution of Singapore writing responded to prevailing political, economic and social conditions. Economic pragmatism always had priority for Singapore and, until recently, development of the literary arts scene was deemed a luxury. The work of local writers did not feature prominently in the literature studied in schools despite the quality of writing available. The research on which this paper draws sought to understand the reasons for this from the perspectives of teachers and students.

The Singapore Education System

Types of Schools

Government and government-aided schools, as the main types of educational institutions in Singapore, receive the same funding from the Ministry of Education (MOE), ensuring comparability in staff qualifications, salaries and fees. Staffing in both government

and government-aided schools remains the responsibility of the Director of Education. Government-aided schools must ensure that the standards of "physical facilities, student attainment, and student discipline and behaviour" (Mok & Tan, 2004, p. 83) equal those of government schools.

There are three types of government and government-aided secondary schools: mainstream, autonomous and independent schools. Mainstream schools teach a standard curriculum and employ teachers assigned by the MOE. Independent schools, established in 1988, have greater autonomy in educational management of fees, staff recruitment and student admission. They are managed by Boards of Governors and the Principal, and serve as models for improving quality of education (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000). Autonomous schools were established in 1994 to provide students with "quality education within the framework of a non-independent status" with greater autonomy and additional funding "to develop a holistic education that stretches each pupil to his fullest potential" (MOE, 2005). Autonomous schools charge more affordable fees than independent schools, but offer a wider range of choices for parents and students than mainstream schools. Currently there are 11 independent schools and 156 autonomous and mainstream secondary schools in Singapore (MOE, 2011). The MOE School Information Service (SIS) lists 26 autonomous secondary schools on its Directory of Schools 2011 website (MOE, 2011).

At the IBAS Teachers' Conference (March 31, 2007), the Minister of State for Education, Rear Admiral Lui Tuck Yew, spoke about the introduction of "new educational pathways to encourage a diversity of student talents". Schools offering International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, specialised independent schools like the National University (NUS) High School of Science and Mathematics, the Singapore Sports School and the Singapore School of the Arts, were all part of a "forward-looking curriculum" intended to increase Singapore's future competitiveness in the global market economy. Diversity in the education system was considered essential to "keep (Singapore's)

attractiveness as a destination and home for all families of all backgrounds" and to be a city that is "the world in Asia" (Shanmugaratnam, 2007, para 9).

The NUS High School is geared to nurture "well-rounded and world-ready scientific minds" (NUS High School, 2011) to secure Singapore's future in the field of innovation. From 2008, five schools were selected to participate in the FutureSchools@Singapore project, an MOE initiative to harness ICT effectively for engaged learning, and to keep the education system and programs relevant in preparing students for the future. The Future Schools were to serve as models for the "seamless and pervasive integration of ICT into the curriculum" (MOE, 2007).

A sixth Future School, the School of Science and Technology, was set up in January 2010, to complement the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science, the Singapore Sports School and the School of the Arts. Students enrolled in this 4-year program were to study "regular academic subjects" and "a range of options in applied areas related to technology, media and design" (MOE, 2008), and have the opportunity to sit the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level examination. The Integrated Humanities subject offered at the school comprises History and Geography. Through "innovative teaching methods" the school is intended to help students better appreciate the "real-world relevance of what they learn" (MOE, 2008).

Following recommendations of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee (2002), three privately-funded schools were established to promote greater diversity through "alternative curricula and qualifications, different mix of schools, and different programs" (Shanmugaratnam, 2002, para 10). The research on which this paper draws was undertaken in secondary schools which offered a 4 to 5 year GCE 'O' level program, leading to junior colleges/centralised institutes which offer the 2 to 3 year GCE 'A' level program.

Curriculum

Singaporean youths experience at least 10 years of general education, including six years of compulsory primary education. The national curriculum has major examinations at the end of the primary, secondary and junior college levels. The Ability-Driven Education policy (1997), offers students leaving primary schools a range of educational institutions, depending on their abilities and interests. The Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) of the Singapore MOE is in charge of syllabus implementation and assessment at all levels and provides the Approved Textbook List from which schools choose basic texts for the various subjects. Texts for the Cambridge GCE 'O' Level examination in English Literature are prescribed by the CPDD in consultation with the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES). Heads of Department, literature coordinators and teachers review potential texts before making their selection from the prescribed list.

The Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' and 'A' level examinations and curricula are regarded as possessing "rigour and consistency of standards" (Shanmugaratnam, 2007) and underpin teaching and assessment.. New subjects in niche areas are developed within the Singapore-Cambridge qualifications framework. The IB and the new diploma program for the NUS High School offer alternatives to the mainstream system to cater to students with different intellectual styles and preferences. Another movement away from the mainstream system was the Integrated Program introduced in 2004, and currently offered in 11 schools, designed to provide "a seamless secondary and Junior College enriched education without requiring pupils to sit the GCE O-Level Examination" (MOE, 2011).

An annual school ranking exercise was introduced in 1992 to "induce a healthy competition among secondary schools and junior colleges" (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002, p. 156) through the comparison of schools' performances in the 'O' and 'A' level examinations. Results published in local newspapers provide

better information for parents to make intelligent and informed choices about the schools they might choose for their children. Achieving results became the top priority for schools and gave rise to a number of tensions. To improve school ranking, teachers were pressured to achieve high results in their subject areas. In an effort to attract students and parents schools focused narrowly on outcomes relevant for public ranking. Some schools made the study of Literature optional for graduating students as the subject was seen to be one in which it is difficult to excel (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000). The Straits Times (1997) reported the percentage of students taking Literature at 'O' level fell 17.8% in the special and express streams and 15.7% in the normal stream between 1992 and 1996.

Though the practice of school ranking was heavily criticised by the 1997 External Review Team, MOE modified, but did not abolish it. The range of indicators used to assess schools was broadened by including a School Excellence Model (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000). In 2004, ranking lists were replaced with School Achievement Tables to provide "a more holistic view of performance", using "both academic and non-academic subjects" and also highlight schools' achievements in terms of Academic Value-Add, Character Development, and Physical and Aesthetics Achievement (School Accountability Framework Review, 2006). Schools with similar academic performance were placed in the same band, reflecting the average students' aggregate scores in their First Language (English or Higher Mother Tongue) and their five best subjects. It is too early to evaluate its influence on the number of students taking Literature at 'O' level.

Factors Affecting the Teaching of Literature

Political and Economic Factors

As the research on which this paper draws was located within the broad context of global trends towards knowledge-based

economies, it is necessary to examine features of globalisation which affect the study of Literature (Miller, 1998, 2002).

The education system in Singapore has responded to impacts of globalisation and economic challenges. Education policies are based on national economic planning and manpower needs (Goh & Gopinathan, 2006), and from time to time the education system has been restructured to sustain Singapore's competitiveness in the global market (Goh & Gopinathan, 2006, p. 51). Recent changes have been geared "towards innovation" with the "innovative use of ICT in teaching and learning" in order to prepare the students for a "fast-evolving and challenging future" (Lui, 2007, para 2, 24).

Meritocracy is a key political concept affecting almost every aspect of life in Singapore. The education system encourages individual achievement and the pursuit of excellence. Students choose subjects and courses of study in which they believe they can excel, corresponding to perceived political and economic goals of the country. This adversely affects the study of Literature which is "widely perceived as a difficult subject suitable for an elite few" (Poon, 2007, p. 51) and considered by many to be an indulgence.

Political and economic discourses of the Singapore government highlight the importance of Mathematics and Science (Lee, H.S., National Day Rally speech, 2010; New Year Message, 2010). As part of the educational initiative of Thinking Schools Learning Nation (Goh, C.T., 1997), the focus on Innovation and Enterprise has promoted achievements in the areas of Mathematics, Science and Technology. In such circumstances, there is an uncertainty about the value of Literature in the curriculum. It has been marginalised, and by association so too have its teachers and students.

Cultural and Social Factors

For a multi-racial country with four dominant racial groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian), as well as expatriates working and living in Singapore, promoting a shared cultural identity is challenging. Ties to Singapore's colonial past linger, as evidenced in the predominance of British texts in the Literature curriculum (Holden, 2000; Choo, 2004; Poon, 2007, 2009). Although revisions to the 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses introduced post-colonial literature, British texts ultimately reflect British culture which "transplant(s) uneasily to the Singapore context" (Holden, 2000, p. 40). Statements on language and language policies consistently refer to English as the language of commerce and mother tongue languages as languages of heritage and identity (Silver, 2004, p. 61). Study of Literature in English is highly challenging for students from non-English cultural backgrounds.

Equally important is the issue of national identity. Velayutham (2007) outlined the problems and paradoxes faced by the establishment of Singapore as both a city-state and a nation. Singapore's emergence as a "Newly Industrialised Economy and its engagement with the 'global' and the West was seen as a threat to its social cohesion" (ibid., p. 203). Ambivalence towards the study of Literature, which had been associated with the West, could be attributed to this uneasiness about the 'negative' influences of the West. As Singapore has developed as a nation, Singapore literature has become a potent unifying agent . The changing arts scene in Singapore is reflected in changes in social attitudes towards literature. However, the Literature curriculum has not been in sync with the rapid developments in the local arts scene. The vision of Singapore as a global arts city by the 21st century entails promotion of culture and the arts. The study of Literature complements this objective and has potential to contribute to its realization.

Education Policy Factors

Students in Singapore sit the Cambridge University General Certificate of Education (GCE) at either Ordinary ('O') or Advanced ('A') levels. The 'O' and 'A' levels literature syllabuses for secondary schools were reviewed in 2008 to feature the work of local writers as well as providing more varied selections of texts. The inclusion of local playwright Haresh Sharma's controversial play "Off Centre" as an 'O' level examination text in 2008, among other texts like Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie was heralded as a bold move on the part of the MOE.

Concerns over the falling numbers of students studying Literature in secondary schools have been raised by teachers, educators, researchers, writers and members of the public who felt the drastic drop of 42.4% over a 7 year period (1990 to 1997) warranted desperate measures to curb the dangerous trend before the demise of the subject altogether (The Straits Times, 1997). This overall trend is not evident in some of the independent and government-aided schools where there seems to have been a traditional attachment to the study of Literature. This raises the question of whether the subject Literature is for study only by a select few, those considered 'good enough' to pursue it at a higher level, and not for the masses.

The number of literary arts societies and organisations in Singapore has increased and many local writers have participated in prestigious international literary events. The National Arts Council has promoted literary arts through numerous initiatives and projects to nurture local writers. The Renaissance City Report (MICA, 1999) outlined two aims for Singapore, the first of which was to establish Singapore "as a global arts city… a key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century and a cultural centre in the globalised world". The second was "to inculcate an appreciation of our heritage and strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through the creation and sharing of Singapore stories, be it in film, theatre, dance, music, literature or the visual arts" (ibid., 1999, p. 4).

The specialised School of the Arts (SOTA) was established in 2008 by the MICA with the aim of providing "a vibrant environment for learning that is uniquely anchored in the arts" to "nurture Singapore's artistic and creative leaders for the future" (Lee, B.Y., 2005) through its integrated, multi-disciplinary academic and arts curriculum. With such a vibrant arts scene, it is timely to revise teaching of Literature in schools to encourage the younger generation to create "works that fuel the imagination of our fellow citizens and promote an active, thinking society" (Shanmugaratnam, 2005, para 8).

Literature Review

The close relationship between English and Literature which is explored by Ball, Kenny and Gardiner (1990) and adapted by O'Neill (1995) formed the basis for the conceptual framework in the study on which this paper draws (Figure 1). O'Neill's adaptation of Ball et al's model is useful in contextualising the study of English and Literature in Singapore. The aims of the Literature syllabus can be placed within each of the different models of the teaching of English and the MOE education policies can be aligned with the various orientations of the quadrant diagram (Figure 2). This provided a structure for the framing of the research questions to examine the aims and objectives of the Literature curriculum from the perspectives of students and teachers.

Chambers and Gregory's (2006) discussion of the current state of Literature identified factors, such as the "retail model of higher education", that could threaten its future in the school curriculum and beyond. Miller (1998) focussed on the issue of globalisation and its effects on literary studies. He concluded that massive economic, political and technological changes brought about by rapid globalisation, such as the rise of new forms of non-print media altering the transmission of literary language and narrative techniques, would change the nature and essence of literature.

AUTHORITY
'THE STATE'
'NOT SELF'
DIRECTIVE AND
PRESCRIPTIVE

FUNCTIONAL ENGLISH
ENGLISH AS SKILLS
'Communications', 'Life-skills'

CULTURAL HERITAGE
ENGLISH AS THE GREAT
LITERARY TRADITION
'Standards and sensibilities'

SELF

NOT SELF

INDIVIDUAL

COLLECTIVITY

GROWTH MODEL
PROGRESSIVE ENGLISH
'Individuality'

CULTURAL CRITICISM
ENGLISH AS CRITICAL
LITERACY
'Assertive, class conscious,
political in content'

NEGOTIATION AND
PARTICIPATION
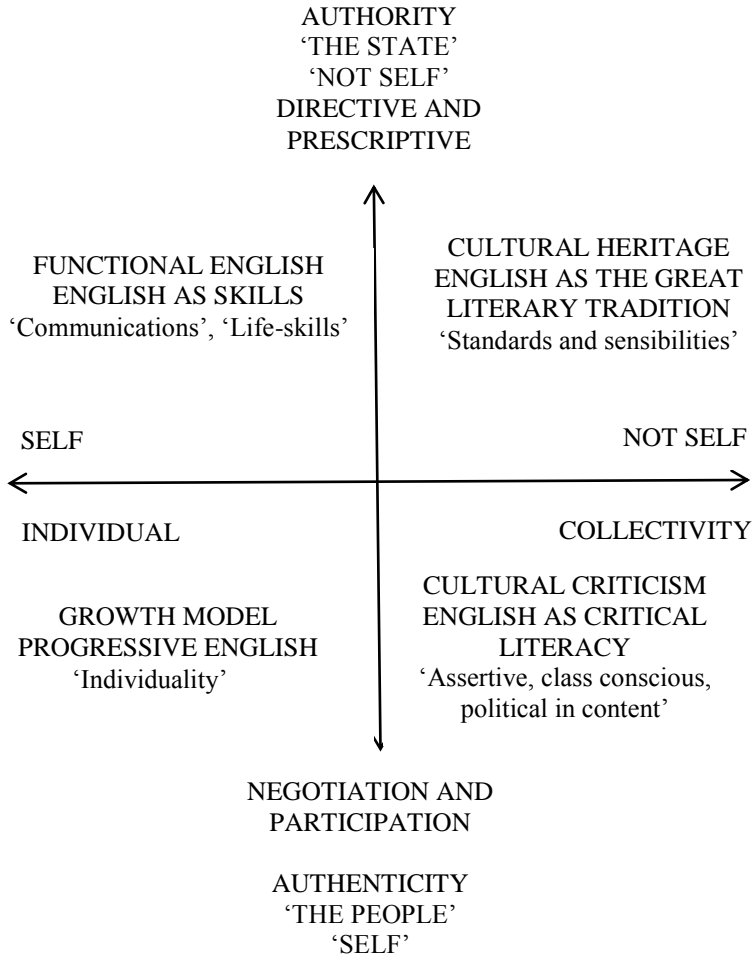
AUTHENTICITY
'THE PEOPLE'
'SELF'

Figure 1. English and forms of literacy

(Adapted from O'Neill, M.H. (1995) *Variant Readings: A Cross-Cultural Study of Reading Comprehension and Literacy Texts* based on Ball, S., Kenny A., and Gardiner, D. (1990). Literacy, politics and the teaching of English'. In I. F. Goodson and P. Medway (Eds.), *Bringing English to Order* (pp. 75-76). London: Palmer Press).

Mapping the 1999 and 2007 Singapore Literature in English Syllabuses to orientations to English	Mapping 2007 Singapore Literature in English Syllabus to orientations to English
…to develop students' ability to:	(Lower secondary)…to develop students' ability to:
1. enjoy the reading of literature and appreciate its contribution to aesthetic and imaginative growth; *(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)*	1. discover the joys of reading Literature and become aware of new ways of perceiving the world around them; *(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)*
2. explore areas of human concern, thus leading to a greater understanding of themselves and others; *(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)*	2. explore the elements of the different genres via the study of literary texts and to understand how these function in enabling literary works to achieve their desired ends. *(Functional English)*
3. read, understand and respond to various types of literary texts to appreciate ways in which writers achieve their effects, and to develop information retrieval strategies for the purposes of literary study; *(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage / Functional English)*	3. articulate perceptive and logical thinking when discussing and writing about Literature *(Functional English)*
4. construct and convey meaning clearly and coherently in written and spoken language. *(English as skills: Functional English)*	4. select and interpret relevant material judiciously and to express ideas in coherent and clear English; *(Functional English)*
(Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD), 1999)	5. understand the importance of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood; and *(Cultural Criticism)*
	6. engage personally with texts, showing a strong intellectual and emotional awareness of themes, characters, settings and contexts. *(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)*

Figure 2 Orientations to English of Singapore Literature in English and English Syllabuses

The functionality and relevance of Literature in the curriculum was discussed by McGregor (1992), recognising the role of literature in shaping values. Similarly, Chambers and Gregory (2006) investigated how students can feel connected with works of literature. Specifically, Singh (1999) and Yeo (1999) explored the Literature curriculum in Singapore, while Holden (1999) proposed a post-colonial curricular reform, including changes to the manner and rationale of study and the types of literary texts selected for study. Key findings of both literature reviews were taken into account in the formulation of research questions on the importance and relevance of Literature in the curriculum. Recently published research (Choo, 2004; Poon, 2007, 2009) into Literature studies in Singapore found ambivalence towards Literature education. The introduction of Social Studies as a compulsory humanities subject has encouraged schools to select History or Geography electives instead of Literature.

Despite a great deal of interest in English language policies and curriculum, no empirical study has sought perspectives of secondary school teachers and students on the teaching and learning of Literature in English. The research on which this paper draws generated data for future study, review and refinement of teaching and learning practices and curriculum.

Research Methodology

This study is located within the paradigm of interpretivism and uses a grounded theory approach. The collective case study method was used as the research involved multiple cases. Each school presented a unique context and data were gathered from a variety of sources such as focus group interviews, written protocols and documents. The study population which comprised teachers and students from five secondary schools (three autonomous, one government-aided and one mainstream), identified at random, provided the range and diversity needed for a comprehensive study. The only prerequisite was that they offered Literature as a subject at the upper secondary levels. Data were

analysed inductively (O'Donoghue, 2007), individually and then collectively, and the cross-case analysis culminated in the generation of propositions which supported the development of theory.

The study undertook to answer two Central Research Questions :

- What meanings and values do teachers and students ascribe to studying Literature in English in the contemporary Singaporean environment?
- What impact do educational policies and curriculum changes have on the choice of Literature in English as a desirable curriculum subject?

A number of guiding questions were developed to help answer the two Central Research Questions.

Focus groups of five students, randomly selected by teachers, participated in semi-structured interviews of about 40 minutes. All groups were asked the same set of questions although the sequence in which these questions occurred was not necessarily the same. Opportunities were given for clarification and elaboration. At the end of the interviews, students were asked to complete a written protocol of seven Likert items with a four-point scale, focussed on two areas: text selection and value of literature. The responses were compiled in a focus group summary sheet from which main themes were identified and cross-referenced with the student interview data. The written protocol offered a means of verifying interview data and establishing the degree of consensus with which key views were held by the 89 students involved in the study. Two Literature teachers from each of the schools were invited to participate by completing an open-ended survey. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with the Heads of Departments (HODs).

Findings and Discussion

Global Economic Forces

Singapore's open economy responds to globalisation by aligning its foreign and domestic policies to maximise growth and in order to produce "the best workforce in the world" (Lee, K.Y., 2009). Education and training are vital means for developing Singapore's most significant resource – its people. Education policies of the MOE are formulated to meet changing demands necessitated by global economic forces.

The impact of the Global Financial crisis (GFC) had to be taken into consideration when interpreting the research findings, as normal anxieties about syllabus change seemed to have been exacerbated by the uncertain economic climate. The perception that Literature was a subject in which it is difficult to achieve high grades has long been embedded within the Singapore education system (The Straits Times, 30 May,16 August 1997); more students choose to study History and Geography rather than Literature as it was easier to score distinctions in these two subjects. Despite changes to the School Ranking System and the introduction of the Humanities subject with its flexible combinations of subjects for study, choosing to study Literature was still viewed as limiting the overall academic standing of individual students. This has implications in a meritocratic society like Singapore, especially post GFC. The need to excel academically is crucial and the prevalent belief that Literature graduates would not be employable in the uncertain economic climate, where the demand is in the financial, technological and scientific sectors, does not encourage students to pursue Literature studies at secondary school. Literature education is not seen as relevant in the current Singapore environment.

Societal Influences: political, social and cultural

Interviews with teachers and students revealed conflicting perspectives on the value of Literature as a subject in secondary school. Many participants noted that the subject encourages development of higher order thinking and creativity. The findings also showed that that the vision and mission of the school and its performance in the School Achievement Table (School Accountability Framework Review, 2006) have an impact on the importance students placed on the subject. Students in the high performing schools were more receptive to Literature studies and this was reflected in their positive feedback.

Literature was valued for its perceived high functional element; the majority of students commented on its role in their improvement in English Language. There was consensus among students, teachers and HODs that study of Literature in English contributed considerably to increasing students' proficiency in English Language. This placed Literature in the English as Skills quadrant (O'Neill, 1995), highlighting the authoritative and highly prescriptive control exerted by the top-down approach of the government and the MOE in educational issues. Study of Literature focussed mainly on mastery of skills related to textual analysis and analysis of literary devices and techniques as reflected in the aims of the Literature syllabus (CPDD, 2007). In this respect the aims of the syllabus had been achieved.

There was a general consensus among the participants that the study of Literature can make an important contribution to the holistic education of students. The Literature syllabuses highlighted political, aesthetic and linguistic objectives. Although participants noted that study of Literature could promote the values of National Education, this was not made part of the Literature teaching syllabus in schools. The subject Social Studies appears to have taken over from Literature as the vehicle for the transmission of moral and social values through the teaching of National Education5 messages.

Despite the importance placed on Literature in secondary schools, the subject occupied a very low status compared with other Humanities subjects. Many students did not consider the subject relevant to the contemporary Singaporean environment. The political and economic 'directions' that the country is taking reinforce perceptions of the irrelevance of the subject. Practices such as the national ranking exercise, teacher shortages, employment of unqualified relief English/Literature teachers and the reluctance of schools to offer the subject at 'O' level, devalued the credibility of Literature as a field of study. Literature also was perceived to be a difficult subject because of its subjective nature and lack of tangible facts which could be memorised. All these factors have huge implications for teaching and learning.

The discourse of government policies which highlighted Singapore as a centre of excellence in Mathematics and Science, and the promotion of a knowledge-based economy, encouraged students to avoid Literature for subjects that they felt would get them jobs in the future. National Day and New Year ministerial speeches constantly promote Singapore's educational achievements in Science and Mathematics (2010); MOE's efforts to increase Singapore's global competitiveness through the establishment of specialised schools and Future Schools underscore the importance placed on Mathematics, Sciences and Technology (MOE, 2007; MOE, 2008; MOE, 2011). Lack of emphasis on Literature and over-emphasis on Mathematics and Science reaffirmed the popular view that Literature is not important or relevant.

Singapore's meritocratic system which recognises and rewards individuals solely on the basis of achievement, merit and hard work encourages vigorous competition at work and in schools. As a nation, Singapore needs to "have a competitive edge" (Lee, K.Y., 2009) over neighbouring countries and as people are the principal resource, every individual is encouraged to excel. Because opportunities are tied to the goals of a knowledge-based economy, students do not follow through on the study of literature because of its low marketability. Students in this study did not

consider the career prospects of Literature graduates to be as good as those graduating in Mathematics and Science. According to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of NUS, Literature graduates are "well equipped for a number of jobs – typical career areas of recent graduates include journalism, television, public relations in banks and other corporations, teaching and publishing" (NUS website, 2010). Most of participants in the study on which this paper draws were of the view that these careers did not offer attractive status or financial remuneration.

Responses from participants related to Central Research Question 1 informed the development of the first proposition - although teachers and students recognise the functional importance of Literature and acknowledge its moral and social importance, they do not consider it an economically viable course of study.

Policy Makers, Teachers and Students

Changes to syllabus and examination formats are key catalysts for change within the Singapore education system, but a lack of communication between policy-makers and practitioners in schools was highlighted by the poor dissemination of information regarding pathways of study for Literature beyond secondary levels. Teachers and HODs were aware of the syllabus change to include local literature, but only one HOD could explain the reasons, as she had served on a relevant review committee. The majority of the participants had no knowledge of the H1, H2 and H3 pathways of study for Literature. Teachers and HODs, therefore, were unable to advise students of opportunities for further study, indirectly reinforcing the lack of desirability of Literature as a subject in secondary school.

As a contribution to overcome what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called "the most serious recession in half a century" (Lee, H.L., 2009), the introduction of local literature could be regarded as a national move to promote harmony and strengthen local ties within the multi-racial communities. However, despite the merits of Literature (Lui, 2006), purposes of studying it overlap those of

History, Geography and Social Studies. Literature as a subject is in direct competition with those other Humanities subjects. Introduction of Social Studies as a compulsory elective component of the Combined Humanities subject at upper secondary level, through which National Education messages are conveyed, nullified the role of Literature in inculcation of moral and social values.

Few changes were made to Literature syllabuses other than the introduction of local texts and their inclusion in the 'O' Level examination. Choo (2004) attributed the ambivalent status of the subject Literature, in part, to the conflict of ideologies inherent in the subject with those of competing social groups, and to the largely unchanged colonial heritage of texts and assessments. . Although Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, then Head of Literature and Drama at the Singapore National Institute of Education, in 1997 called for schools to "introduce local writers to students" (The Straits Times, 1997), local texts were introduced in the 'O' Level syllabus only in 2008. Kirpal Singh's criticism that Singaporeans lacked "confidence in their own literature" (ibid.) was illustrated in the responses of some of the participants in this study. Poon (2009) contended that the current Literature syllabus statements and goals do not take into consideration current global social, political, ethical and cultural issues. Poon's suggestion that cosmopolitanism be made an intellectual and ethical goal in order to ignite interest and significance in the subject entails the inclusion of more multi-cultural and international texts. This view was supported only by some students who responded positively to local literature in the research on which this paper draws. The mixed reactions of students to the inclusion of more local texts reflect their resistance to change. Reforms such as introducing local texts in the Literature curriculum and introducing Social Studies as a school subject are likely to be effected only by a top-down approach, that is, intervention by the Singapore government.

Based on the views of the participants on Central Research Question 2, a second proposition was developed – teachers and students respond primarily to changes initiated at the policy level

by policy makers, who in turn develop policies based on societal influences and global economic forces.

The traditional British canon had become less significant with the introduction of literary texts from other parts of the world. Its influence was still apparent among the teachers and HODs interviewed who preferred the more "traditional texts" and the "classics", but the majority of students had no knowledge of the canon or canonical writers. Although the majority of the participants were quite supportive of the move to include local literature in the curriculum, the use of the colloquial English, Singlish, in local texts was regarded as not setting the right example for students. Government policy encouraging the use of Standard English is in conflict with the use of Singlish by characters in many local texts, and teachers and students in informal social interaction. The low value attached to Singlish may have affected teachers' and students' judgements of local literature, as those texts were considered inferior to foreign texts. Most students did not think the inclusion of local literature would encourage more students to take up the subject.

The use of local texts to engage students "on an intimate and personal level" might be viewed as an attempt to forge a national identity within the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Singaporean community. However, given the tension between Singlish and Standard English, this notion of identity may be contentious. The huge success of local plays and television sitcoms which make use of Singlish, indicates a divide between the performing arts scene and the literary scene. The vibrant cultural arts program and the vision of Singapore as a global arts city appear not to connect strongly with schools where local literature still has not won wide acceptance.

These findings led to the development of the third proposition – local literature has not yet made any significant impact on students in secondary schools in terms of promoting and encouraging the study of Literature.

Evidence from the interviews indicates that the culture of schools plays a huge part in determining the direction of curriculum programs. School leaders and the vision and mission statements of schools drive the learning programs. One HOD lifted the profile of Literature in his school and generated interest in it as a course of study. Another was able to encourage all students from Secondary 1 to 4 to study Literature as a pure subject or an elective. Similarly, a tremendous increase in the number of students studying Literature since 2001 in another school was the result of extensive promotion by the HOD of the subject to parents and students.

A fourth proposition was developed on the basis of these observations - school leaders have the autonomy and the ability to initiate change through the implementation of programs and courses of study at the school level.

Implications

The implications from the research on which this paper draws are wide-ranging and have significance for policies, practices and further research. Literature needs to be seen as more than a subject reserved only for a select few: those who are intrinsically motivated, sufficiently competent in the English language, and who intend to pursue careers in teaching or the arts. There has been a gradual change in policies of the MOE regarding the teaching of Literature with more autonomy given to schools on choices of texts. It is in the hands of the practitioners to implement change at the micro-level in schools.

Reluctance to free the curriculum from its colonial influences confirms Choo's view of Literature's "ambivalent position" (Choo, 2004, p. 77). Initiatives to revise the 'O' and 'N' level syllabuses to include local literature and increase the range of texts have not improved the status of Literature in the secondary education curriculum. Literature may be more successful as a non-examinable subject to be studied purely for appreciation rather than an examinable one. It needs to be seen as a viable subject for

study, possibly by incorporating it into either English Studies or Social Studies or expanded as Cultural Studies.

To increase its relevance in the contemporary Singaporean environment, links between the subject Literature and the local Performing Arts and Literary scene need to be made and constantly reinforced. Literature as a subject needs to be freed from the colonial 'baggage' and enabled to develop an independent identity. Incorporation of local literature in the school curriculum is one means of promoting and strengthening Singapore's national identity.

Finally, although Singapore has responded positively to global economic forces by up-skilling its workforce and expanding foreign policies to attract overseas investments, among other initiatives, necessary changes to the Literature curriculum to bring the subject into the 21st century through a more varied curriculum and a more encompassing mode of assessment have not been made. In Singapore's environment of constant change, where the need "to continually reconstruct itself and keep its relevance to the world" (Lee, K.Y., 2009) is vital, the aims and objectives of the Literature curriculum have remained stagnant. Literature is viewed as an indulgence and warrants only minor adjustments to its curriculum. The calls for a change in mindset from marginalised students of Literature and marginalised Literature teachers cannot be ignored and need to be actioned by stakeholders at all levels.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to generate theory on how teachers and students in Singapore secondary schools deal with Literature in English studies, by looking at the meanings and values teachers and students ascribe to studying Literature in the contemporary Singaporean environment and evaluating the impact of educational policies and curriculum changes on the choice of Literature as a desirable curriculum subject. Based on the four key propositions, this theory proposes that teachers and students possess complacence and ambivalence towards the teaching and learning

of Literature. They do not see the economic viability of pursuing Literature studies beyond the secondary levels. There is a tendency for the subject to be seen as an 'elite' subject, suitable only for students from the better performing schools. The subject Literature is seen as a disparate entity, unrelated to the vibrancy of the local Arts and literary environment. The future of the subject is dependent upon the reformulation of policies at both institutional and governmental levels.

The research on which this paper draws recognises that it takes a long time for a literary culture to evolve, especially in post-colonial countries which retain features of the educational practices and standards of their colonial past. Having attained economic stability and internal cohesion, the time is conducive for the development of a multi-racial literary culture in Singapore. Singapore is fast becoming a regional financial and technological hub, with a vibrant Arts scene particularly in performing arts. Within this dynamic environment, the potential for the development of an exciting, current and meaningful literature program could only enhance one of the world's best performing school systems.

References

Ball, S., Kenny, A., & Gardiner, D. (1990). Literacy, Politics and the Teaching of English. In Goodson, I., & Medway, P. (Eds.), *Bringing English to Order* (pp. 47-86). London: The Falmer Press.

Chambers, E., & Gregory, M. (2006). *Teaching and Learning English Literature*. London: Sage Ltd.

Choo, S. (2004). Investigating Ideology in the Literature curriculum in Singapore. Unpublished master's thesis. Department of English Language and Literature: National University of Singapore.

Choo, S. (2011). On literature's use(ful/less)ness: reconceptualising the literature curriculum in the age of globalisation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 47-67). London: Routledge.

Curriculum Planning and Development Division. (2007). *Literature in English, Teaching Syllabus.* Ministry of Education: Singapore.

Goh, C.T. (1997). Prime Minister, Speech At The Opening of the 7th International Conference on Thinking, 2 June 1997, 9.00 am at Suntec City Convention Centre Ballroom. Retrieved October 12, 2006, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/1997/020697.htm

Holden, P. (1999). The Great Literature Debate: Why Teach Literature in Singapore? In Chua, S. H. & Chin, W. P. (Eds.), *Localising Pedagogy: Teaching Literature in Singapore* (pp. 79-89). Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

Holden, P. (2000). On the Nation's Margins: The Social Place of Literature in Singapore. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Volume: 15 Issue: 1 Page: 30.

Holden, P. (2009). Introduction: Literature in English in Singapore before 1965. In Poon, A., Holden, P., & Lim, S. (Eds.), *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, pp. 5 - 14. Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore.

Lee, B. Y. (2005). Minister for Information, Communications and The Arts, Speech At the Opening of the School of The Arts, 2 January 2008, 8:00am at 90 Goodman Road. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=79&ctl=Details&mid=540&ItemID=181

Lee, H. L. (2009). National Day Rally speech 16 August 2009. Retrieved November 12, 2010, from http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesninterviews/primeminister/2009/August/national_day_rallyspeech2009part4shapingsingaporetogether.html

Lee, H. L. (2010). National Day Rally speech 29 August 2010. Retrieved January 11, 2011, from http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesninterviews/primeminister/2010/August/national_day

_rallyspeechenglishbyprimeministerleehsienloongon29a.h
tml

Lee, H. L. (2010). New Year Message 2011. Retrieved January
    11, 2011, from
    http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/spee
    chesninterviews/primeminister/2010/December/prime_mi
    nister_snewyearmessage2011.html

Lee, K. Y. (2009). The Fundamentals of Singapore's Foreign
    Policy: Then and Now, Speech at the Rajaratnam Lecture
    9 April 2009. Retrieved September 15, 2010, from
    http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/ag
    encies/pmo/speech/   S-20090409-1.html

Lui, T. Y. (2006). Speech at the MOE Literature Symposium 21
    July 2006. Retrieved April 6, 2007,
    http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2006/sp20060721
    .htm

Lui, T. Y. (2007). *Gearing Up for the Future: Innovation in
    Singapore's Education System*. Speech at IBAP Teachers
    Conference 31 March 2007. Retrieved July 12, 2009, from
    http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2007/sp20070331
    a.htm

McGregor, R. (1992). Imagining realities: values and literature. In
    Thomson, J. (Ed.), *Reconstructing literature teaching:
    new essays on the teaching of literature* (pp. 137-148).
    Norwood SA: Australian Association for the Teaching of
    English.

Miller, H. (1998). Effects of Globalisation on Literary Study.
    Paper presented at conference on Literary History and
    Comparative Literary Studies, May 7 1998. Retrieved
    January 26, 2011, from
    http://litteraturhistorie.au.dk/fileadmin/www.litteraturhisto
    rie.au.dk/forskning/forskningspublikationer/arbejdspapirer
    /arbejdspapir16.pdf

Miller, H. (2002). *On Literature*. London: Routledge.

Ministry of Education. (2005, July 17). *Nan Hua Sec to be
    accorded autonomous school status from 2006* [Press
    release]. Retrieved February 27, 2007, from
    http://www.moe.gov.sg/press/2005/pr20050717_print.htm

Ministry of Education. (2007, May 22). MOE Selects First Five FutureSchools@Singapore [Press release]. Retrieved November 12, 2007, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/2007/pr20070522_print.htm

Ministry of Education. (2008, March 3). New School of Science and Technology to Open in 2010 [Press release]. Retrieved May 4, 2008, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2008/03/new-school-of-science-and-tech.php

Ministry of Education Corporate Brochure. (2010). Education in Singapore. Retrieved October 12, 2010, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/about/files/moe-corporate-brochure.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2011). School Information Services. Retrieved February 19, 2011, from http://app.sis.moe.gov.sg/schinfo/

Ministry of Education. (2011). *Education Statistics Digest 2011*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2011). Gifted Education Programme: Integrated Programme. Retrieved January 30, 2011, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/integrated-programmes/

Ministry of Information and the Arts. (1999). *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*. Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore. Retrieved 20 January, 2010, from http://app.mica.gov.sg/Portals/0/2_FinalRen.pdf

Mok, K. H. & Tan, J. (2004). *Globalization and Marketization in Education: A Comparative Analysis of Hong Kong and Singapore*. UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

National University of Singapore High School. (2011). Principal's Message. Retrieved March 15, 2011, from http://www.highsch.nus.edu.sg/content.php?id=45c48cce2e2d7fbdea1afc51c7c6ad26

O'Donoghue, T. (2007). *Planning your qualitative research project: an introduction to interpretivist research in education*. London; New York: Routledge

O'Neill, M. (1995). *Variant Readings: A Cross-Cultural Study of Reading Comprehension and Literacy Texts*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Murdoch University, Western Australia.

Poon, A. (2007). The Politics of Pragmatism: Some Issues in the Teaching of Literature in Singapore. *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education* 14(1): 51-59. London: Routledge.

Poon, A. (2009). Introduction: 1990- present. In Poon, A., Holden, P., & Lim, S. (Eds.), *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (pp. 359-379). Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore.

Poon, A., Holden, P. and Lim, S. G. (2009). *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*. Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore.

Poon, A. (2010). Constructing the Cosmopolitan Subject: Teaching Secondary School Literature in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 30*, (1), 31-41.

School Accountability Framework Review. (2006). Singapore – Education System and School Accountability. Retrieved October 12, 2007, from http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/accountability/docs/singapore.pdf

Shanmugaratnam, T. (2002). Report of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee. Retrieved June 7, 2007, from http://www3.moe.edu.sg/jcreview/JC_Upp_Sec_Review_Report.pdf

Shanmugaratnam, T. (2005). Speech at National Arts Council's Golden Point Award Night. Retrieved June 7, 2007, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/speeches/2005/sp20050831a_print.htm

Shanmugaratnam, T. (2007). Speech at the International Baccalaureate Community Dinner on 1 December 2007 Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2007/sp20071201a.htm

Sharpe, L., & Gopinathan, S. (2002). After effectiveness: new directions in the Singapore school system? *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(2), 151-166.

Silver, R. E. (2004). The Discourse of Linguistic Capital: Language and Economic Policy Planning in Singapore. *Journal of Language Policy*, 4(1): 47-66.

Singh, K. (1999). Literature in the Singapore Curriculum: Challenges for the Future, in Chua, Seok Hong & Chin, Woon Ping (Eds) *Localising Pedagogy: Teaching Literature in Singapore* (pp. 62-67). Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

Tan, J., & Gopinathan, S. (2000). Education Reform in Singapore: Towards Greater Creativity and Innovation? National Institute for Research Advancement Review Summer 2000. Retrieved March 27, 2008, from http://www.nira.or.jp/past/publ/review/2000summer/index.html

The Straits Times. (1997). 'Myopic' to make students give up literature. 30 May 1997 (p. 53). Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings.

The Straits Times. (1997). Big drop in students studying O-level literature. 16 August 1997 (p. 3). Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings.

Yeo, R. (1999). National Education and the Literature Curriculum in Singapore Schools. In Chua, S. H., & Chin, W. P. (Eds.), *Localising Pedagogy: Teaching Literature in Singapore* (pp. 68-78). Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

Velayutham, S. (2007). *Responding to globalisation: nation, culture and identity in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Vethamani, M.E. (2001). A Bibliography of Malaysian Literature in English. Petaling Jaya: Sasbadi Sdn Bhd.