PERSPECTIVES

Timely change and timeless constants: COVID-19 and educational change in Singapore

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great disruption in schooling around the world. This has triggered me to reflect on educational change in Singapore and some related issues the pandemic has raised. Using "Timely Change, Timeless Constants" as an organizing framework, this paper examines the educational changes that are happening in Singapore and amidst such changes, the timeless constants that should be affirmed. In particular, the move towards a blended learning approach needs to help students develop the capacity for independent learning, not just replicate classroom teaching in the virtual medium. Also, despite needing to adapt very quickly to the pandemic, Singapore should continue to build its education system in a balanced and steady manner, reaffirming the important roles that school leaders, teachers and schools play in the society. Some of these points are applicable to other parts of the world.

Keywords COVID-19 · Singapore · Blended learning · Paradox · Digital divide

1 Introduction

I am writing this paper during a difficult time in the world. No country can declare with certainty that it is safe from the COVID-19 pandemic. Schooling around the world has been badly affected. Schools in Singapore have reopened fully but many schools in other countries remained closed. COVID-19 has triggered me to reflect on educational change in Singapore. The pandemic has actually raised many issues, and this paper will not be able to identify or address them all. But, I hope my reflection on some of these issues, although mainly about Singapore, will be beneficial to readers from Singapore and many other parts of the world.

Let me first provide readers with a brief timeline here. In late January 2020, imported cases of COVID-19 began to appear in Singapore (before it was actually named COVID-19). By February, local transmissions were reported. The Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level was raised from Yellow to Orange on February 7th, just a tier below the top category of Red. A "Circuit Breaker" was implemented from April 7th to May 4th. Except for essential services, workplaces were closed and schools moved to full home-

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based learning. The Circuit Breaker was subsequently extended to June 1st. The one-month mid-year school holidays, originally scheduled in the month of June each year, was brought forward to the month of May. Schools reopened on June 2nd, with a combination of strict safety measures, including physical distancing and wearing of masks.

So, what has the pandemic changed? Many business leaders, especially those hard hit by the COVID-19 lockdowns, are at the moment at a loss to whether their business, and indeed their whole industry, could survive the economic shock. Airlines are making massive losses. Jumbo jets are idling at airports. People are facing retrenchment. Many have already been retrenched. Consumer behaviours and attitudes have changed drastically. Business at physical retail shops has dived because customers turned to online shopping. Many companies have to make significant efforts to reposition themselves and respond to changes confronting industries and sectors as a whole. Everyone is emphasizing "agility," the ability to reconfigure structures, processes, strategies, human resources and technology quickly towards value-creating opportunities.

The pandemic has also disrupted supply chains globally. Worldwide, even before they were actually disrupted, at the first hint of such a possibility, people were already snatching up supplies, notably toilet paper. That exposed our psychological vulnerability and the extent to which people living in modern cities have taken the security of supply chains for granted! Social norms have been redefined. People do not shake hands when they meet. Children no longer play the way they used to. The considerate thing to do is to keep a physical distance. Globally, governments scrambled with fiscal relief packages to keep businesses and people financially solvent. In Singapore, a suite of budgets aimed at bringing financial relief to individuals and companies were implemented in quick succession as the pandemic deepened. What we were used to have changed, and things will not go back to the way they were. Even the future is not going to be what it used to be (Sneader and Singhal 2020).

COVID-19 is a crisis. The impact on human lives, livelihood and lifestyle is tremendous. But as the Chinese equivalent of the word "crisis" goes, in a crisis, there are dangers and there are also opportunities. We have been reacting to the dangers. But we could also capitalize on opportunities if we ask and reflect on the appropriate questions. Should schools simply reopen and try to go back to what they have always been doing? Or should we seize the opportunity to change education with intent and purpose, and with some caution and a dose of optimism? Will the grammar of schooling prove too strong for even a pandemic to disrupt? Nowadays, because of COVID-19, there is a popular mantra of "reimagining education" (read Hargreaves 2020, for his comments regarding this). Yet, "there is only a little chance schools will change as a consequence of this pandemic without bold and brave shifts in mindset in how that change happens." (Sahlberg, online first). So, what should Singapore's position on educational change be?

In my book *Learning from Singapore: The Power of Paradoxes*, I wrote that "Singapore is always looking for timely change. It is also hanging on dearly to some timeless constants. Singapore is a land where change and continuity coexist and are equally valued" (Ng 2017, p. 39). Timely change is needed to keep up with the times and stay ahead of the curve. Timeless constants are necessary to stay rooted to our identities as we navigate the turbulent waters of change. Let me use "Timely Change, Timeless Constants" as an organizing framework for this paper.

2 Timely change

One of the most obvious change is that we are now much more used to online learning. During the Circuit Breaker period, when home-based learning (HBL) was implemented in the whole country, the means for teachers to carry on teaching and learning was online learning. Home-based learning and online learning were virtually synonyms at that time, although to be pedantic, they are not exactly the same concept. HBL does not necessarily involve online learning. One can read a physical book at home. Online learning does not take place only at home. One can learn online on a bus.

Around the world, many education systems have turned to online learning at some point in time. The disdain for online learning has diminished sharply among educators, because for many, there were no choices but to adapt. Teachers saw the need. There wasn't even time to argue or debate. So, many have learned how to operate the tools, some more competently than others. These competencies could well stick, paving the way for pedagogical advancement. Teachers now have a better sense of what technological tools can do and what they cannot provide. This is a great opportunity to evaluate what has worked, what has not and what can work better using an online approach. Online learning has "worked" during the pandemic because there was no other option. That does not mean it presents an optimal or a sustainable solution for all learners.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the challenge is to make sure that we are using online tools to bring about better learning for our students, not as a second-rate replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning processes. For example, if a demonstration could be done in class, why would we shift it online in a contrived manner just to fulfil the notion of "online learning"? So, online learning should not be merely a replication of the traditional classroom. Online learning systems should not be a store of worksheets that would have been dished out during a "normal" lesson. Teachers have to discover how these tools can bring about better learning outcomes. Therefore, the use of technology is really about the skillful teacher, someone who knows how to use online tools appropriately to enable a superior pedagogy. What can technology enable, beyond the current classroom setting, which leads to more and better learning? What pedagogical processes are embedded during online learning? What lessons are better conducted in a classroom, rather than online, and vice versa? These are key questions for a teacher to answer.

So, blended learning, generally understood to be a mix of face-to-face teaching and online learning, appears to be a balanced strategy to achieve the best of both worlds. But to move towards blended learning, the pandemic has brought into stark relief the challenge of digital divide. During Circuit Breaker, the home-based learning experience was highly uneven among students depending on family situations. Disadvantaged families did not have computers or enough devices to be shared among the children. Others could not find enough space in their small flat to create a conducive learning environment. Some did not even have Internet access. Well-off families might have concerns regarding the quality of online instruction and children's excessive screen time. Less well-off ones grappled with basic needs (Ng and Lim 2020).

In response to the digital divide, the MOE announced that all secondary school students would receive a personal laptop or tablet for learning by 2021. The plan was already in place before the pandemic, but the target date was brought forward by seven years (Yuen 2020). This is a very positive step, considering the enormous economic challenges that the country is currently facing. But this is a necessary step, and only one step out of many. The pandemic has awoken the country to the digital divide more generally in the country, and more measures

will eventually have to be taken to address this. There is a strong case for nation-wide digital access, given that home-based computing is becoming a post-pandemic norm (Ng and Lim 2020).

As Singapore moves forward, the MOE expects to make blended learning the new educational landscape. Ong Ye Kung, when he was Minister for Education, suggested after the Circuit Breaker that regular home-based learning (HBL) would complement classroom lessons as part of this blended learning approach. During such HBL periods, students were expected to take charge of their own learning and engage in some topics outside the curriculum (Davie 2020). This, I think, goes to the heart of the matter. Blending learning will not mean anything very much if the students are learning the same thing in roughly the same way, except that sometimes they sit unsupervised in front of a computer at home to learn it, rather than in a classroom! But, if blended learning is to help students develop higher capacity for independent learning and learning something beyond what is normally "covered" in the school curriculum, then that is really the future of learning in Singapore. But to achieve this goal, teachers actually require higher levels of lesson deign and facilitative skills. If HBL is not well designed and facilitated, for at least some students, HBL will merely mean free time or confused time at home! So, teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to facilitate students' learning at home. Otherwise, HBL may become "abused" and teachers will have to help their students catch up with their learning later, but now with lesser time in the classroom! Therefore, while technology is good news, Hargreaves (2020) offered a balanced view regarding its usage:

> Balanced learning with judicious use of technology is an essential part of the physical schools we will always need… Enough, but not too much, digital technology and a lot more face-to-face support for vulnerable students after the pandemic—that's what our reimagined new normal now needs to include.

Other than technology and pedagogy, the pandemic also hastens us to examine the "why" and "what" of learning. There are many forces, both local and global, that require us to change our focus from the traditional academic content and qualifications to lifelong learning and deep skills. This is not a new direction, but the pandemic accentuates its importance and urgency and raises important questions for the education system.

During the pandemic, the issue of whether Singapore has been over-relying on foreign workers surfaced again, triggered by the observation that foreign workers who lived in dormitories accounted for some 9 out of 10 cases in the country (Chang 2020). But Singapore has been relying on foreign workers for many years because local manpower costs were high and many locals were not willing to do low-wage laborious work. The government has indicated that Singapore would have to rely less on foreign workers by automating manual operations and having local workers take on higher value-added activities in its post-pandemic economy (Chang 2020). At the same time, Singapore needs more local entrepreneurs. But having observed how a pandemic could wipe out a business within a short time, people are more worried about striking out on their own. Is it not better to have a safe job, especially a government-related job, where security is much more assured? Will COVID-19 set us back psychologically, that we end up with people wanting safe jobs even in the longer term? In many countries, the issue of supply chain security has become pertinent. In Singapore, this issue is even more pertinent, because we do not have any natural resources to rely on. The general wisdom of risk reduction by diversifying the sources of supply does apply. But, the pandemic has challenged even this now. In Singapore, when there is a global shortage of a certain resource, or when transport lines are affected, we are caught. Even with careful scenario planning and hedging risks, Singapore has to try to be more self-sufficient in certain

critical areas and less reliant on imports. With the scarcity of land, we are planting vegetables on roof-tops. We are trying to make our own medicines and masks. All these indicate a change in the current nature and structure of the labour force. But, what are the implications for the education system, which is the main supply of the local labour force? What does this mean for career guidance and subject choices in school?

In this light, the pandemic has given SkillsFuture a critical push. SkillsFuture is a national movement to encourage and support lifelong learning, so that Singaporeans, both in school and in the working world, will be able to acquire deep skills that are relevant to industries and the future economy (SkillsFuture Singapore, nd). Even the current Education Minister, Lawrence Wong, acknowledged that there was a big gap between his textbook understanding and the way things actually worked in the real world, and he still had to continue plugging the knowledge gap to this day (Teng 2020a, b). As Singapore faces the challenge of supporting an agieng population, people will even have to change their mindset about retirement, from "retirement" to "re-tyre-ment"—that is, put on a new tyre and go again! But the work of developing a new labour force starts from young. It starts in the education system. How far have we moved away from a focus of learning for grades to one of learning for life?

But the forces are not just about local issues. There are global forces at play. The pandemic also suggests that we need to focus on new areas of learning, not just on the traditional areas of languages, mathematics and science. The COVID-19 crisis is a sudden change that hits the world. We have the excuse that we did not see it coming. There is hardly any excuse for not seeing the dangers of climate change, which affects us globally. For example, climate change is melting Bhutan's glaciers in the mountains and the country is under threat of a "tsunami in the sky" (Board 2020). Singapore is also under threat of rising sea levels, and it will cost some S$100 billion or more, over a century, to protect the country against the threat (Chang 2019). Other than climate hazards, global political tensions are also increasing. Even before the start of the pandemic, there were already many signs of global unease. There was increased market protectionism and more restrictive immigration. There was increased emotional distancing among different governments and peoples. The pandemic has made this situation worse. But Singapore thrives in a stable environment where international relationships are harmonious and global trade is encouraged. So, again, Singapore, a small country, will have to walk a tight rope among much bigger ones, some of which are at odds with one another. These global forces suggest that we have to do a lot more to educate the next generation about environmental and sustainability issues, as well as global political and citizenry issues. So, the point is, we have a lot of new things that we have to educate our children about, which are going to affect them more than the traditional learning areas. It is heartening that Singapore has begun work in these areas. For example, secondary schools now engage students fortnightly on contemporary and sensitive issues, including race, religion, bullying, and social media. More teachers are trained to be able to engage students and facilitate such discussions in context (Ang 2020a, b). Environmental protection and climate change issues are now embedded in the school curriculum in the different subject areas, such as science, social studies and geography. Some schools even require students to research on climate-related topics (Ang 2019). In the past, these areas of learning might have been deemed as "icing on the cake." In the future, these areas will be part of the cake itself.

So, COVID-19 has raised many questions regarding what we ought to change. But, "in a world where change is the only constant, there are constants that do not and should not change. These timeless constants are Singapore's beacons during change so that the education system will not lose its mission and identity in the waves of change" (Ng 2017, p. 49). Let us now turn to the timeless constants that we should hold dear.

3 Timeless constants

The pandemic has changed a lot of things. But the mission of education in Singapore has not changed. It is always to mould the future of the nation. Teachers are to edify, educate, inspire and care for their students. The way to do it may need to change. But the mission has not. Commenting on the reactions to this pandemic, Scanlan (online first) wrote, "Nobody has time to just sit there. Everybody feels compelled to do something. In this context, 'Don't just do something, sit there!' might sound at best naïve and at worst irresponsible. Yet I submit that this time of crisis and chaos, of uncomfortable uncertainty and of angst, this counsel is, ironically, wise." Taken in the right spirit, there is indeed wisdom in the counsel. There are great things in the education system that we should affirm in the tides of change.

Firstly, we do have a robust education system and we should avoid knee jerk reactions in reforming it. Today, we are hit by the coronavirus. If we simply react by shifting all education online, tomorrow, we can be hit by a computer virus! So, there is a time to change quickly to adapt to changing circumstances. There is also a time to change in a steady, reflective and balanced manner. Covid-19 is a great disruption. But it is not the only challenge to come. Therefore, we should use this opportunity to construct a robust system for the long-term future and not just solve problems for now. The education system in Singapore today is not the result of one big reform. It is the cumulative effect over more than 50 years of "systematic building, upgrading and refurbishing by many ministers, officials, school leaders, teachers and teacher-trainers" (Ng 2017, p. 53). There is change, and there will be more change. There is a new normal, but I think we should not hype about it. When steam engines arrived, there was a new normal. When the first mobile phone (looking like a brick) arrived, there was a new normal. When the smart mobile phone arrived, that was again a new normal. New normals occur quite frequently and with increasing pace. It may soon be abnormal to hype about a new normal. Being prepared for a new normal is the new normal.

Secondly, while avoiding knee jerk reactions, we must continue in the spirit of timely change. "Timely change occurs in anticipation of the future. It is change launched from a position of strength rather than one of desperation" (Ng 2017, p. 42). For example, in Singapore, the Student Learning Space (SLS) has really come in handy during the Circuit Breaker. Implemented in 2018, the SLS is a national online learning portal that allows teachers to curate and share lesson resources and students to access these resources in a self-directed manner. The SLS also provides a common platform for teachers to collaborate across schools and for students to collaborate in their learning projects. Of course, the SLS was not developed as a contingency plan for addressing learning needs during a pandemic. But when COVID-19 struck, the SLS was a "lifesaver" for many schools and teachers. The point is that we should seek improvement continuously rather than to stagnate in an illusion of success. We should change when we are strong. Do not wait until we are desperate to change. Singapore should always remain in this posture.

Thirdly, we must continue to affirm that teachers, school leaders and schools matter to the nation. Parents sometimes complain about teachers' method of educating their child. During the HBL period, their own skills at educating (or just managing) their child or children were fully tested. For many parents, there was no rest for the weary (Chew 2020). Some could not wait for schools to reopen, so that they could hand their children back to the teachers! Hopefully, these parents will come to appreciate teachers more. Before the schools reopened after Circuit Breaker (when people would be returning to work), some parents were understandably concerned about the safety of their children. But Ong Ye Kung, who was Education Minister at that time, explained that the reopening of schools and work places came

hand in hand. The country would provide a safe environment in school so that parents could return to work, confident that their children would be safe in school (Ang 2020a, b). When schools reopened, there was no violent public objection. Part of the reason, I believe, was that the society trusted in the professionalism of school leaders and teachers. Schools were trusted to be safe places with good professionals on the ground to ensure discipline in keeping to the safety measures. Given safety guidelines, teachers had the practical wisdom in navigating ambiguous situations and empathizing with the circumstances students or families found themselves in (Scanlan, online first). In addressing the emerging challenges of the pandemic, schools and their leaders were acting in a distributed, collaborative and networked manner to help one another solve daily problems effectively (Harris, online first). So schools matter. They are places for children to learn and to build relationships in a safe environment, and they enable parents to work while children learn and socialize. School leaders and teachers matter. They are the ones who make schools work. It is therefore heartening that teachers will receive more professional development support, under a new SkillsFuture for Educators road map in line with the national lifelong learning movement, so they can better meet the evolving needs of students. Key learning areas include digital technologies, character and citizenship education and assessment literacy (Teng 2020a, b). We must continue to uphold the professionalism and collective professionalism of the education profession. We should continue to invest in the development of professional capital in our education system. In Singapore, education is investment, not expenditure (Ng 2017). Let us stick to this philosophy.

4 Conclusion

Even as we work through the changes, paradoxes will surface that requires careful management and calibration, so that the inherent tensions will lead to positive developments rather than destruction (Ng 2017). In the post-pandemic world, we need to develop our young people to be agile and flexible. We also need to educate them to be disciplined and obedient to rules and to be able to tell the difference between different situations! People who do not follow safety guidelines during a pandemic endanger themselves and others! We need people to "sacrifice" individual convenience for the collective good (and for one's individual good as well). At the same time, as we emphasize more on student well-being, we must calibrate our approach so that well-being does not imply less resilience in the long term (Ng 2020). Such careful, thoughtful and nuanced approaches, to me, must be a critical part of our educational change.

COVID-19 may stay for quite a while, but it will eventually go away. However, Singapore's education system must continue to be the bedrock for its nation building journey, one that leads to a more prosperous, gracious and resilient society. Crises have been a catalyst for change in the past—independence in 1965, the Asian financial turmoil in the late 1990s, and SARS outbreak in 2003. Singapore has always had the gumption to survive and reinvent itself (Jamrisko 2020). Having benefitted from the sacrifices of the previous generation, this generation shall carry the burden of change, triggered by COVID-19 or otherwise, for the benefit of the next. Education is, after all, the human enterprise of paying it forward (Ng 2017).

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