Community in Education:
Lessons Learned from Around the World

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Introduction

Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.
- Chinese proverb

In the spring of 2011, during my sophomore year at Wellesley College, I took my first class in the Education Department, with Megin Charner-Laird, a visiting professor from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This class, EDUC 215: Understanding and Improving Schools, marked the start of my academic commitment to exploring the realm of education. It was in this class that I found my calling, my purpose, and my true passion of exploring the intersections between education and social justice.

I knew, from that moment, that if I were to write a thesis, it would be on education. On what exactly, I didn’t know. But I knew that I wanted to write about schools, about pedagogy, about teachers, about students, and about learning. I wanted my thesis to be a culmination of my own learning, a capstone of my Wellesley College experience that would serve to deepen my understanding of education as a whole. I wanted my thesis to be not only an intellectual inquiry into academia, but also an opportunity for me to make sense of my Wellesley experience, a space for me to question, challenge, and reflect on my own learning and journey over the past four years.

So when the time came to propose a thesis topic during the spring semester of my junior year, I went back to where the spark was first ignited: my EDUC 215 class. I pored over my old papers, readings, and notes, and found a short class memo I had written on the importance of experiential learning, in the classroom. And all of a sudden, it was as if all the dots along the way had seamlessly been connected. I had just returned to Wellesley from spending my fall semester studying abroad on the International Honors Program.
(IHP), which took a comparative, experiential learning approach to studying the world, followed by a Peace and Justice Wintersession program in India, which was also rooted in the tenets of experiential and community-based learning. It was as if some serendipitous force had suddenly aligned these seemingly arbitrary dots to inspire the topic of my thesis: how experiential and community-based learning could encourage critical thinking and build stronger communities.

My thesis research began as any other extensive research paper would: by reading the existing academic literature that was available on my topic. However, the more I read, the more I found myself questioning and reflecting on my own educational experience. I had spent my formative years in Singapore’s public education system, completing primary and secondary school there, before deciding to take a leap of faith and apply to a New England preparatory boarding school – for reasons I will explain later. I then spent my sophomore and junior year in prep school in Connecticut, before spending my senior year in France, on a study abroad program supported by my high school back in the US. After my year abroad in France, I graduated from high school, and moved on to Wellesley College. At Wellesley, I found the space to explore the intersections of power and social justice in becoming a double major in Political Science and Peace and Justice Studies, concentrating in Gender, Education, and Development. It was also at Wellesley during my semester abroad that I discovered the concept of experiential and community-based learning, which inspired the writing of this thesis. All in all, I had spent the first ten years of my formal schooling experience in Singapore, and the following seven years in the United States. Although I still call Singapore home, I fly back and forth from one side of the world to the other at least twice a year, and have spent more time in the US in the
past seven years than I have back home in Singapore. With a divided exposure to two very different systems of education, it was inevitable that I would be influenced by both my worlds.

I then realized that I couldn’t write my thesis without first reflecting on my own experience with education. In my time at Wellesley, I have learned that no piece of academic work is completely objective, because we cannot possibly keep our identities separate from our research. I had to confront my assumptions, my biases, my memories, and my criticisms of my own experience in order to write a thesis that was deserving of honors. And perhaps, in doing so, I would be able to draw on lessons that each parts of my world could learn from one another. So I started to dig deep, deep into the recesses of my educational experience that began in Singapore, and I wrote this.

**Methodology: The Process Unfolding**

The work of my thesis project straddles the intersection of two of my foremost passions: Peace and Justice Studies and Education. It draws on the historic past, and posits the potential future. It has been a long, tumultuous journey, but every step has been an indispensable part of the process. Along the way, this thesis had to try out multiple forms, before I found one that worked. In this section, I will attempt to explain my methodological journey as I embarked on this endeavor, in the hope that it will shed some light on the choices I made and the trajectory I chose to take.

As described in the previous section, I started off the research process by reading a lot of secondary material. I read a variety of books and scholarly articles, mostly on the importance of learning from the community. I read case studies and historical narratives,
philosophical contemplations and accounts of practical applications. The existing academic literature served as a foundation on which I built the ideas of my thesis, and with which I engaged in my teaching practice. Although I might not have explicitly incorporated the material into the writing of certain chapters, it must be understood that the underlying ideas and themes strongly influenced the final material of my thesis. Therefore, although the conventional American Psychological Association (APA) style of citation does not usually call for a bibliography, I have intentionally put together my Reference List in the style of a bibliography to demonstrate the variety of sources that I have used and to give them the credit that they deserve. Because I wanted this thesis to be a capstone to my Wellesley experience, I also went back and read my notes and articles from certain classes I had taken over the past four years. Some of the courses I drew inspiration from were World Politics (POL3 221), Gender and Conflict (PEAC 259), Urban Education (EDUC 335), Political Organizing (POL1 331S), Understanding and Improving Schools (EDUC 215), Contemplation and Action (REL 257), The Politics of Community Development (POL2 310S). Returning to my notes and course material also affirmed my commitment to writing this thesis as a deeper inquiry into the stock of questions that I had meticulously collected during my time as Wellesley.

While reading the existing academic literature and poring over my notes, I soon realized that I couldn’t write my thesis without first reflecting on my own experience with education. This terrified me; I didn’t know where to begin. I had learned to write solid analytical research papers at Wellesley, but I had never written anything so personal, so intimate. But I knew that if I wanted to produce a comprehensive analytical inquiry, I would have to first lay the groundwork by acknowledging where I was coming
from. So I started by writing about Singapore as a memoir: what I saw, heard, and experienced during my time in the Singapore education system.

However, I then realized that my voice wasn’t enough. If I wanted to tell the larger narrative of the education system in Singapore, I would need to include the voices of other individuals. So I conducted a series of interviews with a variety of individuals – students, teachers, entrepreneurs, school district superintendents, just to name a few – who would provide some insight on their experiences with the Singapore system. I listened to what they thought the fundamental ideas behind the present Singapore system were, and what they thought needed to change. I gave interviews and personal narratives as much weight as I did scholarly articles and journals. I didn’t necessarily take what they said as the absolute truth, but understood it as their truth, and their story. This feminist approach to using personal narratives in scholarly work was also an empowering experience for me. In listening to other people’s stories, I became empowered to share my own.

As I began stringing together the personal narratives, including my own, I found a series of emerging themes, which shaped the formation of the rest of my thesis. Issues of pedagogy and access as distinct standards, along with different ideas of social cohesion and equality, came up again and again.

In Chapter 1, I write from my personal perspective about growing up in the education system in Singapore. I share my personal memoir and journey to the United States, sharing my successes and challenges, my praises and my frustrations. Chapter 2 then builds off the experiences in Chapter 1 by taking a step back and looking at the education system in Singapore in context. In Chapter 2, I describe the Singapore system
through a series of personal accounts, studies, and interviews. Chapter 3 then switches gears by moving onto the next leg of my educational journey in the United States, briefly chronicling my experience at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut before going into an in-depth discussion of my experience teaching and learning at the Neighborhood School in Jamaica Plain, MA. In this chapter, I propose that educating children effectively should go further and deeper than the statistics of test scores, towards creating a holistic environment where every student, teacher, parent, and community has a stake in the schooling experience and becomes actively involved and committed to education and learning as a whole. However, these experiences are deeply embedded in pedagogy – which can either have a stifling or liberating effect on a student’s educational experience. Therefore, I argue that learning from the community through experiential pedagogy is invaluable in creating an education system that is able to address. The thesis then culminates in Chapter 4, where I create a dialogue between my personal experiences, the narratives of others, and academic research. In trying to fit my own account and my thinking together, I found myself considering how we could open up possibilities for Singapore and its education system. However, this proposal is just a vision, and is by no means a prediction. This convergence of thoughts is inspired by theory, and influenced by observed practices. It almost seemed at this point that my methodology had been a culmination of my entire life, and that each event had its purpose in helping me understand where I stand on issues of education today.

In writing this thesis, I hope to challenge the boundaries of what we traditionally define as “academic.” Using a combination of personal interviews, secondary research, field observations, and my own experiences with education, I employ a diverse range of
sources with the intention of stringing together a collective narrative to address my guiding research question: *What do we learn by contrasting two sets of ideas about social cohesion, equity and education, and what can they learn from one another?*
Chapter 1:  
My Singapore Story

1996 – Primary 1

The dawn is breaking, but I’m already wide-eyed and awake when my father comes into the room to get me up for school. I gleefully jump out of bed, and my mother helps me get ready for my first day. “You have to look your best,” she says. “First impressions are very important!” She helps me put on my school uniform that we had ironed and laid out the night before, and carefully pins on my school badge. “There we go,” she smiles. “Now you look like a true blue SCGS girl.” I love my uniform – a simple, sleeveless, sky blue pinafore with a zip down the back, complete with a belt made of the same material. I like how different it is from any other school uniform in Singapore – it makes me feel like I was part of something special, something bigger than myself. I take a long look at myself in the mirror, and smile at my reflection. I am officially a Kim Gek, and an SCGS Girl.1 But I would only find out later what this really meant.

As I run down the stairs for breakfast, I notice that my parents are beaming. Their eldest daughter is starting her first day of primary school! I grin back at them, and sit at the foot of the stairs as mother helps me put on the brand new SCGS socks and canvas school shoes we had bought at Thomson Plaza last week. Everything smells so new. My

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1 Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (SCGS), is one of the top public schools in Singapore. SCGS is known to produce kim geks – young and educated ladies who would embody the best values and traditions of their heritage. As an all-girls school serving students from Primary 1 to Secondary 4 (ages 6-16), SCGS prides itself on nurturing and developing bright and intellectual young women with integrity and character.
uniform, school shoes, water bottle, backpack, and everything that was in it, was brand new. I had spent the past few months getting ready for today. Was I ready?

Every morning begins with an all-school assembly, as is the case with all the public government schools in Singapore. The school hall is not air-conditioned, and the oscillating fans on the wall barely help with the humid Singapore heat. I can tell who has been playing in the courtyard before assembly by the sweat stains on their backs. The starchy cotton material of our blue uniform is very unforgiving in this weather, despite its seemingly weather-appropriate design. A Chinese teacher scolds the sweaty girls in front of me, and tells them that running around before assembly is not “ladylike” or becoming of a *kim gek*.

The bell rings, and the flag raising ceremony begins. A school prefect gives the order in Bahasa Melayu for the school to stand at attention, and we sing the National Anthem together as the Singapore flag is raised by a brownie.

*Mari kita rakyat Singapura
Sama-sama menuju bahagia.
...Marilah kita bersatu
dengan semangat yang baru;
Semua kita berseru,
Majulah Singapura,
Majulah Singapura!*

I don’t know what we are really singing about – no one really learns Bahasa Melayu in school anymore, unless you are Malay. It was different when my parents were in school though. Everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, was given the option to learn Bahasa Melayu – so my parents both spoke and read Malay. However, times have since changed, and the government only wants us to learn our “Mother Tongue,” which meant I have no choice but to learn only English and Mandarin Chinese as my primary languages. There
are also very few Malays who go to my school – or Indians, for that matter. SCGS is predominantly Chinese, which I guess is reflective of the schools name: Singapore Chinese Girls’ School. Bahasa Melayu seems a completely foreign language to us, even though it is our National Language. But I know the tune and the lyrics to the National Anthem, so I sing along anyways. Once the National Anthem is over, the SCGS school song begins, and the school flag is raised next to the Singapore flag.

_Glad that I live am I,_
_That the sky is blue._
_Glad for the country lanes,_
_And the fall of dew._
_After the sun the rain,_
_After the rain the sun,_
_This is the way of life,_
_Till the work be done._
_All that we need to do,_
_Be we low or high,_
_Is to see that we grow,_
_Nearer the sky._

Then, the head prefect instructs us to place our right fists over our heart as we take the National Pledge together:

_We the citizens of Singapore,_
_Pledge ourselves as one united people,_
_Regardless of race, language, or religion,_
_To build a democratic society,_
_Based on justice and equality,_
_So as to achieve happiness, prosperity,_
_And progress for our nation._

I decide that I really like the flag-raising ceremony, and make a mental note to myself to tell my brother and sister all about it when I get home.

After assembly, I am told that my class is Primary 1 Generosity, and my form teacher’s name is Mrs. Tan. I soon learn that the names of the five Primary 1 classes – Sincerity, Courage, Generosity, Service, and Prudence – are reflective of the school’s
mission. I’m not too sure what these words mean just yet, but I do know that I will probably get really good at learning how to spell ‘generosity’ this year.

My classroom is on the first floor of the Primary School block. It has forty small grey desks with matching plastic chairs and one big whiteboard at the front of the room. The walls are painted white and the tiles are a cool bluish-grey. There are big blue cupboards on both sides of the French windows, which store class supplies, the overhead projector, and the brooms and dustpans. The French windows are my favorite part of the classroom – they keep our non-air conditioned room well ventilated and breezy in the tropical heat, and they look out onto a grassy field. I am so excited when I learn that my desk is next to the French windows! I am told that this will be my desk for the whole school year, and I couldn’t be more thrilled.

The first thing I notice about Mrs. Tan is her sweet smile. She is soft spoken and poised, and she doesn’t scold the girls who are crying as the parents wave goodbye at the door. She is wearing a pretty print dress and her hair dances around her shoulders. I like her calm, nurturing demeanor — it’s very comforting on our first day of school. Our Chinese teacher, on the other hand, is terrifying. Mdm. Poh is all kinds of scary. She has a head of short curly hair and wears her thin-rimmed glasses perched on the edge of her nose. And when she stares at me, I feel as if she’s peering into the depths of my soul. Her voice is shrill and sharp as she barks out instructions to the class — I am too scared to speak.

There are forty girls in my class. We are all dressed the same way: sky blue pinafores, blue belt, white socks, white school shoes. I am so excited to meet everyone, but most of my fellow classmates look terrified. I make friends with the girl sitting next
to me. At this point in my life, I still don’t know what it means to be nervous or shy. My parents have never really taught me what fear means. I only learn it a year or two later when my cousin explains to me what it means to be nervous.

My mother has spent hours wrapping all my schoolbooks in clear plastic. This year, I am taking English, my Mother Tongue (which is Mandarin Chinese), Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Arts and Craft, Music, and Civics and Moral Education. Each of these subjects has its own textbook and workbook, which we buy as a whole set from the school bookstore. I love the smell of the brand new books, and how they look when my mother wraps them in the clear plastic. I want to keep them clean and looking new, so I’m very careful when I turn the pages – I don’t want to crease or crumple them.

I am excited to use all my new stationery! I often can’t wait to start doing my homework when I get home everyday. I like homework – and I love school. Mrs. Tan is wonderful – she is caring, smart, pretty. She always wears pretty dresses and skirts and never has a hair out of place. She reminds me of Miss Honey from the book *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, which is one of my favorite books that I read with my parents at home. Mrs. Tan writes us letters with bright pens and colorful stickers, letters that are full of encouragement and kind words. I want to be like her when I grow up. I go home and play “teacher” with my brother and sister – and I pretend to be a teacher like Mrs. Tan. I assign my siblings homework and write them encouraging letters as Mrs. Tan does. I decide that I want to be a teacher someday.

My classes are all very fun. But I soon learn that some classes are more important than others. The classes that will be counted for the Primary School Leaving Examination
(PSLE) that we will take at the end of Primary 6 are English, Mother Tongue (which for me is Mandarin Chinese), Mathematics, and Science. These are the classes that we spend the most time on. These are also the classes that I have private tutors for. In English we learn vocabulary and how to write and spell. I like spelling quizzes because I am good at them. My mother helps me prepare for each and every quiz that I have. Mother Tongue is not as easy because we only speak English at home, and we learn about ancient Chinese myths and legends - much of which doesn’t particularly interest me. Math and Science are fun and I am good at them, especially with the help of Aunty Irene, my private tutor. We each have a little blue notebook that we keep in our desks for “Mental Sums” that happen every day during Math. I always get all my Mental Sums right. The other subjects – Social Studies, Arts and Craft, Music, and Civics and Moral Education – are not as important, but I like them anyway. In Social Studies we learn about Singapore’s history, in Arts and Craft we paint and draw, and in music we sing and learn to play the recorder and sing songs. Mrs. Tan is also our music teacher, so I really like that class. Moral Education, on the other hand, is taught in our Mother Tongue. This means that it is taught by Mdm. Poh, our Chinese teacher, who is mean and terrifying. She teaches us what it means to be a hao gong ming, a good citizen, which is also the title of our Moral Education textbook. We learn not to litter on the ground, to give up our seat to old people, and not to abuse animals. The tests we have for Moral Education are not difficult – we all know the right answers.
1998 – Primary 3

I soon learn that not all teachers are like Mrs. Tan. In fact, she is the exception rather than the norm. Most of my teachers are scary. They shout and don’t smile very much. But I am learning, and I’m getting smarter. And that’s what school is for, right?

I am starting to like some subjects more than others. I think a lot of it has to do with my private tutors outside of school. Aunty Irene teaches me English, Math, and Science. Wang Laoshi teaches me Chinese. For some reason or another I am becoming more partial to English, Math and Science – Aunty Irene makes learning enjoyable. She is patient, kind, and really good at explaining concepts in a fun and engaging way. She also tells me she has special powers, and I believe her. My siblings, cousins, and family friends all have tuition classes with Aunty Irene too. She’s the best. Wang Laoshi, on the other hand, becomes our arch nemesis. When my siblings, cousins, and family friends get together, we can’t help but complain about how mean she is. Unfortunately, our dislike for Wang Laoshi grows into a dislike for the Chinese language as well. We devise all sorts of pranks to play on her, although we are never able to execute any of these plans before getting caught by our parents.

I have private tuition classes with Aunty Irene and Wang Laoshi several times during the week, along with ballet lessons and piano lessons; on the weekends I have other enrichment classes that my mother has signed me up for. Every Saturday, I go for my Edward de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats class at the Metropolitan Young Men’s Christian Association (MYMCA), which is down the street from my school. I like going for Six Thinking Hats; I like the activities we do there. In these classes, we are told to
“take charge of our own learning,” and are encouraged to ask questions. I’m not very comfortable at first - this isn’t how regular school is - but it’s fun and I am starting to like being able to think for myself. I learn the functions of the different colored hats: facts, optimism, judgment, feelings, creativity, and control. It’s confusing, but it’s fun to learn how to “switch my hats” around to do the activities we’re given. It’s challenging, though. At school, I have a clear idea of what I’m supposed to be learning. I know exactly what I need to learn to do well on my tests and exams, most of which requires a lot of memorization and regurgitation. It’s hard work, but it’s definitely more straightforward. My Six Thinking Hats classes, on the other hand, sometimes get me all flustered and confused. *Why isn’t there a correct answer?* I struggle in trying to understand why there isn’t a single right answer. The uncertainty is unsettling, but I find the challenge strangely comforting at the same time. However, what I find even more unsettling is that every class is so theoretical. Even though I am learning to think for myself, I find it difficult to relate what we’re learning to anything outside the classroom, or to the rest of my life. This leaves me feeling disconnected and uneasy. Nevertheless, I am starting to appreciate the challenge of questioning my own ideas, and am really starting to enjoy working together with the other kids in the class. It’s nice to step away from the competitiveness that exists in school. Here, we are not ranked by how well we do on tests. In fact, we don’t even get grades on our tests. I am no longer trying to outshine my classmates to be ranked as number one. Instead, I am driven by a thirst to quench my own desire to learn, to think, to probe. At Six Thinking Hats, we are told that this is called “parallel thinking.” I’m not quite sure what this term actually means, but I think I’m starting to like it.
Later in the year, I sit for the Gifted Education Program Exam with all my classmates, and don’t really expect much. This exam isn’t mandatory – students take it by choice. I am told that this exam will identify the smartest students in the whole country, and that I should try my best but not expect too much. I hope that my Six Thinking Hats classes will come in useful.

When the results are released I am told that I have been accepted into the Gifted Education Program. My parents are ecstatic. “You are the crème de la crème, my dear! The top 1% of all the students your age!” I don’t really know what this means, but I know this means that someone, somewhere thinks I’m smart. And my teachers have begun to take notice of me. I am given the option to transfer to special schools that have programs for “gifted” students. I decide that I like my school, and where I am, and decide to stay. At the all-school morning assembly, I am personally congratulated by my school principal, who is delighted with my decision not to leave SCGS for greener pastures. My parents support my decision, although they don’t quite know why I didn’t want to go to the top school in Singapore.

This is my first encounter with Singapore’s national standardized testing – and I know that it won’t be my last.

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2 The Gifted Education Program (GEP) is designed to identify the top 1% of students from each academic year with the highest verbal, mathematical, and spatial ability (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2013).
1999 – Primary 4

Our final examinations at the end of Primary 4 mark the first official streaming exercise. At the end of the school year, when we collect our blue report books with our final grades and rankings in the school hall, we receive a slip of paper telling us which stream we have been put into. There are three options: EM1, EM2, and EM3. Out of the five classes in Primary 5, two are designated as EM1 classes, and the rest are mostly EM2 classes. My school only has a handful of EM3 students, so these few students are dispersed among the EM2 classes. I end up in an EM1 class in Primary 5, which not only means that I get to be with the “smartest” students, but being in EM1 also requires me to take an additional class - Higher Mother Tongue. I am already not very good at my basic Mother Tongue that is Chinese, and don’t particularly enjoy it. But it’s prestigious and I’m proud, so I do it anyways.

2001 – Primary 6

At the end of Primary 6 I sit for my Primary School Leaving Examinations, or the PSLE, as they are more commonly referred to. This is the first major exam, I am told, the exam that will determine which secondary school I go to, and whether I stay on in SCGS. I am not too worried. I know that I’ll probably do well. Thanks to my private tutors, I’m getting closer to mastering the art of taking tests and exams.

The phenomenon of “teaching to the test” becomes my reality. At the beginning of every school year, I go with my mother to collect a huge packet of tests and exams from a dingy bookshop in Chinatown. This bookshop, along with several others, is part of

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Streaming is akin to the process of tracking in the United States, where students are filtered into different academics “tracks” based on their academic performance.
an oligopoly of test distribution. Over the course of the year, they collect an extensive range of tests and exams from the best schools in Singapore, make mass copies of them, and repackage them into consolidated packets, organized by subject matter, for sale. My tutors were very much in the know – so they knew where to find these bookshops that sold these packets. There were stacks of tests for English, Math, Science, and Mother Tongue – all the subjects that I would be tested on for the PSLE. And every week during my tuition class, I would work on a new test with my tutor. I never really questioned it – I just thought that it was a part of the whole process.

I did well on my PSLE, but not well enough to make it into the Special Stream. My school administration was rather disappointed. I was supposed to be one of the “gifted” students, one of the potential top scorers that would bring glory and honor to my school. I was supposed to be getting at least 275 on the PSLE, not the measly 245 that I had scored. They had expected more from me, and even I had expected more from myself. I thought my smarts and my “giftedness” would get me through the PSLE without much effort. Being “gifted” is making me complacent.

2002 – Secondary 1

Primary school was a breeze, and I’m not too worried about secondary school either. Being in the Express Stream means I don’t have to take Higher Chinese anymore. In fact, I’m not allowed to take Higher Chinese anymore, because I didn’t qualify for it. I feel rather ashamed because I’m supposed to be a “good student,” but I play it off as not wanting to take Higher Chinese anyway. Although I feel less special than my friends who
were put into the Special Stream classes, I know that being in the Express Stream is still better than being in Normal Stream, and I take comfort in knowing that.

When the time comes for me to choose our extracurricular activity for secondary school – we are only allowed one – I am stuck. I had been playing tennis competitively for two years already, and I know it was something I want to pursue in secondary school. I also love singing in the choir in primary school, and know I want to pursue this love for music too. But I was told that I could only pick one. “If you devote so much time to your extracurricular activities, you will have no time for your studies,” I am told by several teachers. Nevertheless, I choose not to heed this advice, and decide that I am going to audition for the school choir, and try out for the tennis team as well. Ignoring the warnings from my teachers, I went to the tennis team tryouts that Saturday, and then rushed to choir auditions right after, barely making it in time and getting there just when they were wrapping up. I didn’t think I was going to get into the school choir – they were really good – or the tennis team, but I just wanted to give it a shot. My father always said, “You never know till you try.” So when I found out that I had gotten into both the choir and the tennis team, I was pleasantly surprised. However, I am told that I am only allowed one activity to do for the time I am in secondary school. How was I supposed to choose? I didn’t even know which one I liked more because I hadn’t even had the chance to try them out. At my twelve years of age, I knew that couldn’t make this decision, so I politely tell them that I am going to do it all – much to the school’s disapproval.

Secondary school is harder than primary school, and much less fun. At the beginning of the school year, teachers are already stressing the importance of preparing for the Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examinations, more
commonly known as the ‘O’ Levels, that we will take in four years at the end of Secondary 4. We have homework, but most of it doesn’t count towards our final grades. My classes aren’t extremely exciting, but I still like going to school. SCGS is supposed to be one of the best schools in Singapore, but for some reason I’m not feeling particularly challenged – at least not in the way I was when I did Six Thinking Hats.

My weekdays follow a set routine: school, tennis practice or choir practice after school, followed by private tuition, school homework, dinner, tuition homework, then sleep. Once a week I would go for piano lessons and music theory lessons. I just went with the flow, and didn’t really question why I had to go for tuition so many times a week or so much extra homework on top of what I was being given in school. I just accepted it as a fact of life, something every fellow student in Singapore was going through. Nothing was particularly invigorating or thought-provoking.

One of my fondest memories during Secondary 1 is a field trip we take to Malacca, Malaysia. Over the course of three days, we learn about the city’s history and Peranakan past. The Peranakan culture, or Straits Chinese culture, is an important part of SCGS’s identity as a school, so it is expected that all students, as SCGS girls, would acquire a basic grasp of what it mean to be Peranakan, and therefore, a *kim gek*. I love talking to our guide who takes us around Malacca, and taking in these new surroundings.

Although I do well in my classes throughout secondary school, I find that what inspires me most is the activities I participate in outside the classroom. I become very involved both the tennis team and the school choir – probably in some part to prove to the administration that I could do it all. I compete in national and international tennis tournaments, and sing in the national combined schools choir. While my friends are busy
studying and rushing from tuition center to tuition center, I spent my afternoons improving my volleys on the tennis court and practicing for the school musical. It didn’t stop there. I wanted to be involved outside school as well. So I started looking for opportunities to get involved in the community. I decided that if the Singapore school system didn’t think I was special enough to be worthy of being selected for the Special Stream, that I was going to prove to them that I was going to be awesome at life.

So I begin by volunteering at the MYMCA, where I had gone for my Six Thinking Hats classes, just down the street from my school. I worked with children in afterschool programs and summer camps, partly for fun and partly because my parents have always emphasized the importance of “giving back to society.” Since we were little, my mother has always told us that we needed to “give back,” and to help those who might not as “fortunate” as ourselves. Every Chinese New Year, she makes us take a third of the money we collect from the red packets we had received as gifts, and we are allowed to donate that sum of money to a charity of our choice. My siblings and I don’t quite understand why we had to give away all this money we have painstakingly collected while visiting friends and relatives during the New Year. But we’re good children, so we listen to our parents and put aside a fraction of our money each year. My parents have always set an example for us by always “giving back”; however, what they gave was mostly in monetary form. As a twelve year old, I don’t have much money saved up, so I decide that giving my time is probably the next best option. I spend my school vacations volunteering at the MYMCA, and also at Aunty Irene’s kindergarten downtown. Although Aunty Irene is no longer my tuition teacher – she only teaches up to Primary 6 – I still get to see her by volunteering at her school. I also begin to realize that I
really enjoy teaching and working with kids, and decide that this is a great way to spend my school holidays.

At the MYMCA, I begin to meet other young people from different backgrounds. And for the first time, I become aware my privilege. The kids from the “neighborhood schools” don’t speak like my friends at school. They tend to speak in Singlish, which is a colloquial mix of English, Chinese dialects, Malay, and Tamil – the vernacular. We don’t speak Singlish in my home, and am discouraged from speaking it in school as well. We speak standard English, and speak Singlish more in jest. Most of these kids that I meet also live in government housing, and take public transportation. I had probably taken the public bus once or twice in my life. I felt ashamed, and when my mother or driver came to pick me up at the end of the day I would ask them to wait for me far from the main entrance so they other kids wouldn’t be able to see me climbing into the car. However, I also decide that its probably time for me to start being independent, and I start by taking the bus to town at the end of the day. It’s only a few stops away, but it’s a start.

Before I started volunteering at the MYMCA, I was oblivious to the idea of class. I had thought that the kids in my school were a representative sample of the rest of Singapore’s population. After all, it was a public school. I had glazed over the fact that SCGS was predominantly Chinese, even though Singapore was made up of a multitude of races. It’s easy to live in a bubble in Singapore. There are no homeless people on the streets, and poverty is kept well hidden and under wraps. The closest thing to poverty I see on a daily basis is the old uncles and aunties who sell packets of tissue at the hawker centers or at the train stations. Most of my friends at school don’t live in government housing.

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4 The term “Neighborhood School” refers to the regular public schools in Singapore that are not part of the more prestigious group of public schools.
housing – although I soon learn in my Social Studies class that almost 90% of our nation’s population does. I don’t really understand the differences just yet, but I begin to become aware of them.

2004 – Secondary 3

Once again, streaming takes place at the end of Secondary 2. This time, we are streamed into the respective subjects that we will take for the ‘O’ Levels at the end of Secondary 4. The classes are ranked in terms of the number of science classes the students in that class are able to take: the two top classes take triple science, followed by the four double science classes, and the last class that only takes a single science. My school only offers Pure Sciences – Chemistry, Physics, and Biology. “Combined Sciences are for the neighborhood schools,” I’m told. Because I’m in the Express Stream, I get to take two sciences - only students in the Special Stream get to take three. So I take Pure Biology and Chemistry, even though I’m more inclined to the humanities. But science comes first, then humanities. That’s just the way it is. I really wanted to take Pure Literature, but am streamed into the class that takes Pure Geography and Combined Literature instead. So at the end of this tedious and frustrating stream process, I am assigned to take Pure Biology, Pure Chemistry, Pure Geography, Combined Literature, Social Studies, Advanced Math, Elementary Math, English, and Mother Tongue. A total of eight subjects (because Combined Literature and Social Studies make up one full subject), and nine classes. I didn’t really have much of a choice, after all.

After school, I go for tuition classes. I never question it. It was what everyone else was doing. It wasn’t enough to just go to school and do your work diligently. Even the
brightest students went for tuition. You didn’t go just for tuition because you needed extra help on your work, you went so that you wouldn’t need to go to your teacher in school for extra help. There were individual tuitions and group tuitions. Individual tutors are expensive. I have a biology tutor who charges S$150 an hour because he wrote the O-Level Pure Biology textbook that every school in Singapore was using. My group tuitions are slightly more affordable. They are also more fun, and allow me to hang out with boys – a huge plus, since many students like myself attend single sex schools.

School is much less exciting than I thought it would be. I still love learning, but I’m not feeling particularly challenged. I thought that the older I got, the more excited I would be about school, but it’s all rather mundane. I’ve learned how to do well on tests: memorize, memorize, memorize. I don’t necessarily retain what I memorized for the test once it’s over, but it’s okay because what matters is what I remember for that test itself. Classes are always the same. “This question will come out on the ‘O’ Levels so you all better know it well,” we are told over and over again. School is no longer fun - what keeps me going are my friends and my extracurriculars.

I have become much quieter too. In class, we must sit quietly as the teacher talks, usually for the entire class period. We are not supposed to ask questions. Once, in a chemistry lab, my teacher asks, “Any questions?” Such a question was out of the ordinary, so I take the opportunity and meekly raise my hand to clarify one of the lab procedures. My inquiry was met with a terse, “Were you not paying attention??” After that, I never asked a question in class again.

We also start using the dreaded Ten-Year Series in Secondary 3, commonly known as the TYS, which contain every Cambridge GCE ‘O’ Level Exam that had been
administered in Singapore from the last ten years. The TYS are a more legitimate form of the stacks of black-market tests I had to do back in primary school; they are printed and published by the Ministry of Education, and are openly used in every school as a required text. We also use it in our private tuition classes. There is a TYS for every ‘O’ Level subject, and by the end of Secondary 4, we are expected to know how to do every examination question that has ever been given for each subject that we were responsible for, if we wanted to do well on our ‘O’ Levels. I soon learn that in order to do well on my ‘O’ Levels, I have to know each TYS I had by heart. I had a good memory, but I felt bad for my friends who didn’t.

2006 – Junior College 1

I do surprisingly well for my ‘O’ Levels, although it doesn’t really matter because I have already been accepted to the Junior College (JC) of my choice: Victoria Junior College (VJC). I am accepted by early admission through the tennis team, and am delighted. VJC is one of the top three Junior Colleges in the nation, and getting into a good Junior College is a necessary step to getting a place in the top universities. I also audition for the VJC choir, in the hope that I can continue both my passions in JC. However, I am sternly told that I can only pick one, again. Some things don’t change. And this time it’s different because I’m counting on that one activity to get me into VJC. I am frustrated, but reluctantly make a decision and stick with tennis.

Once again, using the ‘O’ Levels as a streaming exercise, we decide at the beginning of the year what classes we would like to take for the next two years of JC for our ‘A’ Levels, the next and final nationwide streaming exercise for formal education in
Singapore. Once again, whether you are streamed into the Arts Faculty or Science Faculty is completely determined by your score on the ‘O’ Levels. I do well enough to be eligible for the Science Faculty, and even though I’m still more inclined towards the Arts and Humanities, I sign up for the Sciences. My subject combination is Chemistry, Literature, Math, and Economics. I like how it’s a mixed bag of subjects, but am told by several people that I should define myself more clearly as either Science or Arts, or I won’t be able to get a job in the future.

Classes are slightly different from secondary school. We have large lectures with a few hundred other students, followed by smaller tutorials of about 25 students. However, the work is the same: more memorization, more regurgitation. On most days we sit in the school canteen and copy each other’s homework. No one really checks our homework anyways. We just have to complete the assignments. There are only two exams in the whole school year – the mid-year examinations and the promotional examinations – so I’m not too concerned about memorizing anything for now. I just go to lectures, tutorials, finish the assignments that don’t count for anything anyway. I thought JC was going to be more exciting. I thought that my classes and teachers would inspire me, but they don’t. It just seems like a continuation of the mundane classes that I had in secondary school. I’m disappointed, but I try not to dwell on it.

The rest of VJC is a lot of fun. It’s a lot more racially and socioeconomically diverse than my primary or secondary school, and I’m meeting people from different backgrounds and different schools. I’m going to school with boys for the first time, which is a welcome change but takes some getting used to. VJC is also on the east coast of Singapore, far from where SCGS was, so I’m surrounded by a very different community
from what I had back at SCGS. It’s a refreshing change from being in central Singapore, which is a lot more congested. We’re right by the beach, and I can feel the sea breeze against my cheeks as I practice my serves on the tennis court. I love playing tennis for VJC, and I love my teammates. We train hard, and win the National A Division Tennis Championships that year. I do miss singing in the choir, though, and I still don’t quite understand why I couldn’t pursue both my passions. But I accept my fate and don’t complain.

Midway through my first semester at VJC, I find out that I have been accepted to a number of boarding schools in the United States that I had applied for on a whim after my ‘O’ Levels the year before. My brother and sister had been struggling in the Singapore system, so my parents had been considering a variety of other options for them to pursue their education. My parents had both gone to college in the England, which has a similar education system to Singapore’s. Therefore, they felt that the United States might provide a different approach to education, and a more holistic definition of what learning and success should be – a kind of learning where my brother and sister, who had not been as suited for the Singapore system, could thrive in. So after my ‘O’ Levels were over, my family and I visited several schools in New England. Even though I already had a place in VJC, I figured that it wouldn’t hurt to apply to a few schools that I was interested in. My top choice, the Hotchkiss School, was particularly competitive, so I didn’t even think I would stand a chance. So when I found out that I had been accepted to Hotchkiss, I didn’t know what to do. I loved VJC – I loved my team, my classmates, and the school culture. However, I knew that I had been looking for something more in my
education. I wasn’t feeling challenged, or inspired by my classes; so I took a leap of faith and decided to go to Hotchkiss.

The school administration was not happy, particularly since I had been accepted early to play for the VJC tennis team. My classmates and teachers thought I was trying to “escape” from the Singapore system, and that I was afraid of the hard work, even though what I was trying to do was to look for more of a challenge. I knew my education was supposed to be more than being able to “mug,” or memorize, effectively for my exams. But something deep inside me knew that I needed something more – so I packed my bags, and flew halfway around the world with a heart full of hope that I would find what I was looking for.
Chapter 2: 
Examining Education in Singapore

Part 1: Singapore in Context

The Singaporean Identity

When you ask a Singaporean, “What are you?” his or her reply would probably be, “I’m Singaporean.” Not Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Eurasian, but Singaporean. As the feminist scholar Christine Sylvester argues, we, as individuals, have to keep our repertoire of identities hyphenated. By hyphenating our identities, we are able to make connections with the identities of others (Sylvester, 2009). Similarly, Ibn Khaldun also believed in a toleration of differences and the importance of social solidarity, or asabiyah (Gierer, 2001). The theory of motivation is compatible with the notion that we are all carriers of DNA that is designed to reproduce itself, a DNA that hardwires us for reciprocity, positing that we have a capacity for empathy that leads to something greater and bigger than ourselves (Gierer, 2001). Singapore has a unique national identity; it is a true amalgamation of a multitude of different cultures, including strong influences from both the East and the West. The government strives to create a sense of belonging among its people that stresses tolerance and empathy, working through the differences in race, language, or religion. It also endeavors to build a national identity that is inclusive, one that reinforces the “glue” between Singaporeans rather than primarily exclusive racial or cultural identities.

After Singapore gained its independence from the British in 1965, it found itself in complete chaos. As a British colony, it had become accustomed to depending on its colonial masters, and never thought that someday it would have to fend for itself. During
the period of post-colonial depression, Singapore’s economy suffered, unemployment rates rapidly rose, race riots ensued, and housing across the country was in complete disrepair (Grice & Drakakis-Smith, 1985, p.347). Singaporean society was segregated, backward, provincial, and regressive. When Lee Kuan Yew assumed the role of the nation’s first Prime Minister in 1965, he realized that the basic attributes of nationhood were missing. “We were groups of diverse and different peoples,” he writes in his memoirs. “We had no common past. We had no common language, culture, or religion. We did not have ‘the social glue’ to hold together as a nation” (Lee, 2000, p. 11-12).

Therefore, during his term as Prime Minister, he strove to build a nation that constantly creates and reinforces social solidarity – the “glue” that Singapore was clearly lacking. One of the ways he sought to address this lack of social solidarity was through education.

**Building a Nation through Education**

Nation-building in Singapore has been a self-conscious and intentional act. Over the past few decades, the government has organized an internal society through its policies on aspects such as education, defense, and housing. The fundamental goal of nation-building for Singapore is to create a united nation, impervious to internal dissection and external manipulation. John M. Hobson explains how society is socially constructed through recognition, and that a “glue” of identity essentially holds communities together (Hobson, 2004, p.317). This glue creates the core identity of an empire, which is reinforced through unity, and subsequently redefines its identity with each step of its developmental process.
Education has been one of the key factors in establishing Singapore’s national identity. Every morning before classes start, flag-raising ceremonies take place all across the country where all students sing the National Anthem in unison, followed by a pledge-taking ceremony. The National Anthem is in Malay, the national language, and the National Pledge is in English, the working language. The messages are explicit: the National Anthem stresses progress as a united nation, and the Pledge emphasizes building a democratic society based on justice and equality and reinforces again the idea of living as “one united people, regardless of race, language or religion” (Ministry of Education 2001, p.46). These simple but effective daily practices that are implemented in the daily lives of schoolchildren socialize them into identifying themselves as Singaporeans through active participation, and give them a common identity they can all relate to.

The educational curriculum also gears itself towards creating a national identity. The government, as dictated by Lee Kuan Yew’s vision, realized that the only way for Singapore to survive was to create the conditions that would instill a sense of empathy among its people to ensure that everyone would get along regardless of race, language, or religion. Prime Minister Lee realized that when we attempt to connect with someone different from ourselves, we create channels of communication that broaden our capacity to understand others. In possessing strong bonds of social solidarity, communities would then be able to build on a common identity and common goals and create spaces for intellectual growth and creativity. With the goals of tolerance and empathy as essential building blocks, the curriculum for Moral Education and National Education was born (Lee, 2000).
Moral Education and National Education classes in primary school aim to “develop national cohesion, cultivate the instinct for survival as a nation and instill in our students, confidence in our nation's future...[they] also emphasize the cultivation of a sense of belonging and emotional rootedness to Singapore” (Ministry of Education, 2009). Similarly, Social Studies is taught in secondary school as a GCE ‘O’ Level subject, with the majority of topics covering Singapore’s history. The government continues to use Singapore’s history as a tool to enforce its national identity; once citizens become aware of their country’s roots, they grow an attachment to a common past that reinforces a collective view. Particularly after Singapore gained its independence from the British, there was a need for a nationalist history to show its evolution from a disorganized colony to a civilized state and how it acquired truth, morality, law, and freedom in the process. Events such as Racial Harmony Day and National Day also promote a sense of cohesiveness. In the late 1970s, the government adopted a bilingual education policy, which requires that all students study their subject matter curriculum in English and achieve proficiency in their mother tongue (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.47). Having a common language also fosters a common identity, and it makes for effective communication across different cultures and races.

Another problem Singapore faced upon its independence was the issue of housing. If interactions in society are based on settlement, then creating constructive settlements would encourage the creation of favorable interactions. Lee Kuan Yew skillfully used urban development and public housing programs to create a favorable climate for investment by building a stable and docile population (Grice & Drakakis-Smith, 1981, p.348). Encouraging homeownership also creates a sense of responsibility
as well as a sense of belonging, thereby producing socially committed and conservative homeowners, and citizens alike. In each unique housing district are public housing blocks, community services, and neighborhood schools that cater specifically to that district. Therefore, the services and neighborhood schools available would be able to serve the district directly, ensuring a clear channel of resources being invested into the immediate community.

Singapore has grown so rapidly within such a short time period because of its ability to create a cohesive national identity – the “glue” that has brought and held its society together. Its national policy on racial and religious tolerance has enabled it to establish itself as a uniquely cosmopolitan city filled with loyal citizens. But this “glue” is now in danger of losing its hold.

Degeneration of Social Solidarity

Nations have fallen due to a lack of social solidarity, and the same could happen to Singapore (Chua, 2007, p.xxi). If the government hopes to maintain its sense of social solidarity in a world that is changing so rapidly, it needs to be able to create and maintain a dialogue with the needs of its people. However, in order for Singapore to constantly reinvent and reinforce its identity to ensure that it stays relevant in this increasingly globalized world, its education policy must change to reflect the needs to today’s political, economic, and social climate.

Amy Chua (2007) argues that the downfall of great empires happens when empathy ceases to exist. According to Chua, multicultural intolerance eventually sows the seeds of decline, and diversity becomes a liability, triggering conflict, hatred, and
violence. Intolerance, xenophobia, and calls for racial, religious, or ethnic “purity” repeatedly coincide with the decline of empires, such as in the case of Rome’s High Empire or the Great Mongol Empire (Chua, 2007, p.xxi). During my first Political Science course at Wellesley, I learned that an empire can fall apart in three generations. Although the first generation might emphasize the importance of empathy and tolerance, the second generation could become self-absorbed and self-righteous. Consequently, the third generation could lose its social conscience altogether (Murphy, 2009).

Therefore, it is crucial that Singapore continues to maintain its policy on tolerance, and remain resilient to the shortcomings of the empires that have come before it. Singapore’s identity must continue to be tolerant and empathetic, and be reinforced with the “glue” that has held its society together over the years. Singapore cannot follow China’s policy of strategic tolerance, only advocating inward tolerance to the “Chinese identity” that renders its culture closed off to the rest of the world (Chua, 2007, p.289). To succeed, a nation needs to be ethically and culturally open. However, Singapore’s biggest challenge is probably addressing the challenges it faces without compromising its stance on tolerance.

In particular, there is the question of the government’s role in the dissemination of information, particularly in education. The media often portrays the Singapore government as being overly controlling and not the democratic parliamentary republic it makes itself out to be. As Chua (2007) argues, a controlling government often leads to the downfall of an empire, because it cannot tolerate the increasing disparate differences that will emerge over time. Dissonance in society is easy to create but hard to expel. The
government has to allow spaces for growth, particularly in education, instead of stifling creativity and intellectual rigor with its strict policies.

In this age of globalization and mobility, the issue of more and more Singaporeans studying, living, and working abroad also arises. As Singapore’s economy becomes increasingly reliant on work done abroad, it is questionable as to whether the “glue” will weaken as well. Distance is a factor in cohesiveness, and it will pose a challenge to the government to maintain the ties these overseas Singaporeans have with Singapore.

Singapore has gained tremendously from its diversity; by opening up the issues of identity to a multitude of different people, it has opened itself up to a diversity of identities. However, what happens if this diversity eventually undermines the cohesiveness of its society? The malleability of this idea makes it easy for one to change identities, and perhaps lose the “glue” in the process.

**Maintaining National and Social Cohesion**

Chua attributes the rise of great empires to the existence of reciprocity and trade and the fostering of pluralistic communities that emphasize empathy and tolerance (Chua, 2007, p.xxii). Therefore, if Singapore wants to continue growing as a nation, it is imperative that the Singapore government continue to be tolerant, not only in relations across the varying races and religions, but in its relationship with its people as well.

Noël and Thérien (2008) posit that the world is constructed primarily through debates. They explain how the Left and the Right actually influence each other through defining "contending visions," often generating a new consensus (p.106). This approach
should be applied to education as well. An increased openness to creating a dialogue between teachers and students will create a more equal sense of power, and thus foster social cohesion. Teaching tolerance is no longer enough – creating the conditions to deepen an understanding of other’s experiences is crucial for transformation and change. Creating these conversations would inadvertently encourage the government and the people to find a way to communicate with each other through their individual repertoire of identities, and eventually find a common ground.

In order to maintain this “glue,” the government must evolve with the times, and the education system plays a crucial role in achieving this goal. To keep those Singaporeans working and studying abroad close to home, the government must provide incentives that will encourage these citizens to maintain their ties to Singapore. The government has established numerous Overseas Singaporeans clubs across the globe, and organizes an annual “Singapore Day” for Singaporeans to congregate and share the delicious local cuisine be it in New York, London, or Sydney. In addition, the government offers overseas scholarships to Singaporeans, to ensure that they are contractually obligated to return home after finishing their studies to help the country prosper (Overseas Singaporean Unit, 2011).

Tolerance and social solidarity are necessary in order to achieve dominance and create a prosperous society (Chua, 2007). Singapore needs to move beyond tolerance to create the conditions for social solidarity to flourish in its schools, and beyond the classroom. Constructive disagreement is key in the development of a country; it is about struggling and working together to create change (Sylvester, 2009). Singapore has to remain open to change and be less rigid when it comes to the ruling of the country and
developing its education policies. However, it also needs to continue to maintain the high standards and rigor that support the education system. The key challenge is striking a balance these two components, and moving from tolerance towards dialogue, in order for the nation to thrive.

Part II: The (Unwritten) Rules for Success – The Unofficial Dialogue

In the past year, I conducted about fifty interviews and conversations with a variety of individuals, all of whom have been affected by Singapore’s education system in one way or another. Most of them were Singaporean, although I interviewed two American teachers who had been teaching in Singapore. I interviewed a wide range of individuals: a principal, several teachers, parents, students, former students, and district superintendents. I used a variety of interview formats: I did one-on-one interviews, as well as group interviews. Depending on the situation, I approached the interview with either a more formal, or informal, tone and demeanor. When I interviewed the district superintendent, for instance, I took a more formal interview approach. I wanted to hear her perspective, and not to cloud it with my opinions. In contrast, when I interviewed a group of students, I approached the interview more as a conversation in order to facilitate more open discussion and dialogue. I interviewed secondary school students, tertiary level students, and university level students. The teachers and principal I interviewed were also teaching at the secondary school and tertiary level. Therefore, one of my limitations is in the fact that I am missing the current primary school piece of the conversation. However, many of the interviewees, particularly former students who are
currently in the workforce, did reflect on their primary school experience, which I drew from in writing this narrative.

The following section is a compilation of thoughts, opinions, and reflections on Singapore’s education system and its future. I have intentionally not included any names to preserve anonymity, particularly for individuals who are still working for the government and the Ministry of Education, such as the teachers, principal, and district superintendent. By tying these narratives together, I hope to create a web of understanding from the voices that might not be represented in the official discourse, thereby giving them a platform to be heard.

**Discipline and Rigor**

When I asked individuals to list what they thought the advantages of the education system in Singapore were, the most common answer was that it teaches students discipline and rigor. It taught students that if they work hard, they would succeed. In creating a framework for students to develop the capacity to tackle the nationwide examinations, it established a strong foundation with which students would be able to approach all subjects with confidence. It also helped to nurture obedient students who were not rebellious or unruly. It gave students a drive to excel academically, something that one respondent felt was missing when she transferred to a private school. She felt that even though she struggled academically in Singapore’s public school system, the lack of rigor in private school made her complacent – she no longer had a competitive environment to push her to succeed. In her current job working in an administrative position in a small public relations company, this respondent felt that her education had
failed to give her the tools to work in the “real world,” and that most of what she knows now she had to learn on the job (personal communication, January 22, 2013).

From the moment we start primary school, at the age of seven, school becomes our number one priority. All our other interests, extracurricular activities, come in second. In order to decrease the amount of potential distractions, everything was regimented, from the way we dressed to the relationships we were allowed to have. Each school had its own school uniform, and with the uniform came strict rules. Skirts should be no longer than 4 fingers above the knee, and socks should be no lower than 4 cm above the ankle. Everything was regimented, from the color of our undergarments to the type of earrings we wore. School prefects were the gatekeepers of these strict rules, carrying rulers in their pockets to measure the length of skirts, heights of socks, or diameters of earrings. If we were found to have broken one of these rules, we would receive a booking slip from a prefect. Three booking slips would result in one detention. In co-ed schools, romantic relationships of any kind were prohibited, and booking slips could also be given if this rule was violated (personal communication, January 25, 2013). As always, school and academics were to remain one’s top priority – nothing else was to get in the way.

Many interviewees also acknowledged the shortcomings of overemphasizing discipline and rigor in the education system. Prioritizing discipline over other skills creates an environment where students are taught that memorization and regurgitation will help them succeed. Students are not encouraged to question, or think out of the box. Several respondents commented on the lack of creative thinking, particularly at the primary school level. One respondent, a current university student, said that he learned
early that if he followed the set way in which he was taught, he would do well in class; if he deviated from the norm, he was punished. In doing so, he felt that he developed a foundation for which there was no room for variation (personal communication, February 22, 2013).

Even when schools did try to teach creative thinking, it was not a priority for teachers. One respondent expressed frustration in not even understanding the premise of including these alternative approaches to thinking in a classroom. “My creative answers always failed,” she said. “And I had no idea why.” However, in her current profession working in an advertising agency, creativity and exploration are valued traits, and thus she has since been able to reclaim that loss of confidence in her abilities. Unlike her teachers in school who were not invested in the various explorations of creativity, her current employers do, and thus she feels that she is able to be a better employee because of it (personal communication, January 20, 2013).

Another respondent added that she had heard that schools were trying to give more open-ended questions in secondary school. However, she believed that we needed to start earlier. “In primary school, it was always ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ There was never a ‘because I think.’ It was always: this is the answer” (personal communication, January 22, 2013). She went on to express her frustration with having a dualistic, black-and-white approach to answering questions, as opposed to developing the reasoning and critical thinking skills early on that she would need to develop later in her education, particularly at the university level. This particular respondent, who is currently working in a social media advertising agency, had attended mostly elite public schools from the start, and due to societal pressure, had majored in mostly the sciences. Although she was passionate
about the humanities from the beginning of her education, her passion had to take a back seat until she declared her major in university in Communications – only then was she allowed to pursue what she was truly interested in. As someone who struggled with the same issue, I empathize with her. There was no place in primary or secondary school, or in Junior College (JC) for that matter, for us to study an area of inquiry that went against the grain. However, we mostly accepted the system for what it was – no one really questioned it.

The (Myth) of Meritocracy

The notion of meritocracy was also an advantage of the Singapore system that several individuals felt strongly about. “[The education system] is very structured. It’s meritocratic, and people learn to be competitive at a young age and people know that with a good education, that there’ll be jobs planned for them,” said a young entrepreneur I spoke with (personal communication, January 22, 2013). Many Singaporeans support Singapore’s meritocratic approach of governance, because it communicates the message that hard work will be rewarded with benefits. Because almost all Singaporean students go through the public schooling system, the nation-wide examinations are a straightforward measure of how hard a student has worked, thus giving each student equal opportunities to succeed. Consequently, whether a student gets into the best schools or a less good school is solely dependent on how well they do in these streaming exercises. Using only academic results an indicator of achievement allows schools to disregard all other factors such as socioeconomic status that would put certain students at an advantage, or disadvantage.
Only a few individuals also acknowledged that despite its successes, the Singapore’s education system is also very unfair, and that it disproportionately benefits the privileged – which does not sound too far off from many other countries around the world. “The rich kids attend more ritzy schools, and the lower income families study in neighborhood schools – a very small minority will rise and become completely outstanding,” said the same entrepreneur, who had been a student of these more prestigious schools (personal communication, January 22, 2013). Although almost every child attends public school in Singapore, there is a hierarchy within the public schooling system that created by the nature of testing and streaming that privileges the already privileged. The divide between what is known as the “elite schools” and the “neighborhood schools” creates a false measure of ability, reinforcing the growing socioeconomic inequality in Singapore.

One example is the existing process of awarding scholarships to the top students, which I discussed briefly in the previous section of this chapter. One respondent, a current student, expressed her disdain for the government scholars who are selected in final installment national examinations that happen at the end of Junior College. “Many of the students who receive scholarships can already afford it,” she said. “They come from the best families – that’s how they get into the top schools in the first place. The fact that the government is funding their entire university education is just making the rich richer” (personal communication, January 23, 2013). There is some truth to her argument: although most students attend public school, the wealthier families have the option of hiring private tutors or signing their children up for supplemental lessons – which become a core aspect of preparing for the national examinations – thereby putting
these already privileged students at a greater advantage. The students from lower income families have to spend their afternoons and evenings working at their family’s stall in the food center would have less time to spend on their homework, much less attend as many tuition classes as their fellow counterparts, if they were able to afford them at all. In a place like Singapore where afterschool tuition classes are the norm despite its very efficient public school system, students from less privileged families are put at a severe disadvantage when it comes to preparing for the examinations that determine school placements, and consequently, university scholarships. According to a teacher I interviewed, the current pedagogy in Moral Education classes also fails to talk about these inequities, or address the notion of socioeconomic inequality (personal communication, January 15, 2013).

Another example that some respondents commented on was the loophole that exists for wealthier families to pull their children out from the Singapore system. Although all Singaporean children were required to attend public school, many wealthy families whose children were struggling with the demands of the local system were able to have the financial and cultural capital to move their children to a private school, an international school, or overseas. As one respondent said, “Those kids with rich parents can afford to send their children overseas…it’s really not fair” (personal communication, January 20, 2013). Because learning disabilities are still not entirely recognized in the local school system, public schools don’t have the infrastructure or the ability to support students with additional needs, and thus these students have the option of transferring to a private or international school where these students’ needs can be taken care of. Therefore, wealthier parents who are aware of the option might send their child to be
tested for learning disabilities such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Dyslexia, and to use that as a basis to transfer them to an international school where classes are less rigorous and demanding. However, private and international schools are also very costly compared to public school, and thus barriers to entry are high and only accessible to those who have the financial capital.

Several respondents also commented on how Singapore’s education system can be very unforgiving for those who might not start out with many resources. As one student from a neighborhood school put it, “If I’m taught that I’m stupid, why would I try my best to be as good as they are?” (personal communication, July 15, 2012). This was a common sentiment among a group of teenage juvenile delinquents whom I interviewed in a girls’ home. The emphasis on testing tells them that if they are unable to excel in the nationwide examinations, they are inadequate. Rather than valuing all levels of learning, the system pigeonholes individuals into certain categories. After Primary 4, students are streamed into EM1, EM2, and EM3. At Secondary 1, they are once again regrouped into Special, Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical). At each level, you need to “earn” your merits in order to proceed onto the next level. What remains unsaid is that once you are streamed in to EM3, the chances of you making it into the Special Stream are close to none. As a recent university graduate put it, “Streaming is meritocracy breaking down” (personal communication, December 30, 2012).

Although Singapore’s public education system appears to be fair and equal, the factor of afterschool tuition being the norm upends that assumption. “If it is within your means as a parent, you will hire a tuition teacher to ensure the success of your child…the number of tuition centers in Singapore is shocking, but the supply exists because there is
a demand for them,” said a parent (personal communication, January 20, 2013). The industry of private tuition is extremely lucrative, and several teachers I interviewed admitted to using it to supplement their income. But the clause “if it is within your means” exposes the harsh reality of the socioeconomic inequality that exists in Singapore. Private tuition serves as a filtering process, separating the haves from the have-nots. Tuition classes gave those with the resources an extra edge in school, exacerbating the stark differences between different socioeconomic classes in Singaporean society. For instance, the child of a wealthy family would receive the best private tutors (it was sometimes a fight to get into certain tuition centers, or to hire a certain private tutor), which would further enhance his or her already stellar grades, which would then allow the child to enter the best schools. This child would probably only have to worry about his or her schoolwork, and the occasional extracurricular activity – but that was just for leisure. They would not have to perform household chores, as most middle-class families in Singapore would have a domestic worker.

In contrast, a child who came from a family that was struggling to make ends meet, would probably not have the luxury of private tuition. They would probably also be expected to help their parents out in the home, since they would not have a domestic worker to do the chores around the house. They might even be asked to help out at their parents’ food stall or in the market. As a result, they would have even less time or assistance in doing their homework. Ideally, a child wouldn’t need to enlist the help of a private tutor, but as long as private tuition is only available to the privileged, the opportunities that are available to children will just become more exclusionary.
A Pressure to Excel

Another common sentiment I heard across the board from all the individuals I interviewed was the constant pressure in Singapore to excel academically. This pressure, which began at the very beginning of Primary 1 and continues all through university, is measured by checkpoints along the way in the form of streaming exercises through high-stakes testing. “Looking back, I don’t think it was very fair,” said one respondent, who is a current university student. “Streaming defined a person’s capabilities and how smart they were. I was just not as prepared as some of my classmates back then. If I was, I would’ve been able to have the same kind of success” (personal communication, March 2, 2013).

The guidelines are clear. At the end of Primary 4, at the age of ten, we took a series of standardized national tests for the core subjects: English Language, Mother Tongue, Science and Math. Students are then separated into EM1, not EM2 or EM3. Being in EM1 will enable one to take a Higher Level of one’s Mother Tongue, which would then put certain students at a greater advantage in their education. At the end of Primary 6, at the age of twelve, students sat for our first big nationwide exam: the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which would then divide us into the Special Stream, the Express Stream, or the Normal Stream. If you were in the Special or Express Stream, you would take the Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level (O-Level) Examinations at the end of Secondary 4. If you were in the Normal Stream, you would have to do an extra year, and take the Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) Normal Level (N-Level) Examinations at the end of Secondary 5. At the end of Secondary 2, we were streamed again. This time, streaming
would determine what subjects you would be allowed to take for the Cambridge GCE O- or N-Level Exams, which were taken at the end of Secondary 4 or 5, depending on what stream one was placed into. Then, the O-Level and N-Level examinations would determine what kind of post-secondary education one would receive. In decreasing order of prestige, this took the form of Junior Colleges, Polytechnics, or the Institutes of Technical Education. Thankfully, the Ministry of Education realized that it was ridiculous to put so much pressure on a student at the age of ten to do well on a high-stakes nationwide exam, and has since done away with Primary 4 streaming. But the PSLE at the end of Primary 6 is still a reality. Many respondents agreed that putting pressure on a twelve year old child to do well on such a big exam that would decide which secondary school they went to, thereby unlocking the access to all the top-tier schools, was unhealthy. However, they couldn’t devise an alternative option that would measure a student’s achievement and ability – testing was such an integral part of Singapore’s education system, it was unimaginable to do away with it (personal communication, 2013).

Additionally, there is also the pressure to be effectively bilingual by the time one graduates from secondary school. The structure of Singapore’s education system ensured that all students would graduate knowing at least two languages: English and one’s “Mother Tongue.” One’s “Mother Tongue” would depend on his or her ethnicity. For instance, students of Chinese heritage would learn Mandarin Chinese, students of Malay heritage would learn Bahasa Melayu, student of French heritage would learn French and so on and so forth. We weren’t given a choice of which language we wanted to take, unless we were of mixed race. Additionally, Singlish, a term derived from the words
Singapore and English, despite being the Singaporean vernacular, was discouraged in schools. Singlish was a mix of the four most prominent languages in Singapore: English, several Chinese dialects, Bahasa Melayu, and Tamil. However, as it did not qualify as the “Standard English” that was to be used on the Cambridge GCE O-Level Examinations, it was excluded from the syllabus completely. A group of teenagers from neighborhood schools whom I interviewed expressed their unhappiness in being asked to revert to Standard English all the time, even outside of class. They felt more comfortable conversing in Singlish. In English, they felt excluded and inadequate, and forced to speak in a way to their friends that was uncomfortable for them (personal communication, July 15, 2012). However, the pressure to excel on the national examinations took precedence over what was comfortable, and thus they had no choice but to speak Standard English all the time in school.

**Teaching Values in Education**

The diversity and multicultural nature of Singapore was also expressed by several interviewees as one of strengths that Singapore can and should draw from. As one of the school principals I interviewed noted:

> The diversity and multicultural nature of Singapore’s population is one of its strengths. That alone, if we use it as leverage, the learning can be very rich. The kinds of competencies that we build will be able to provide students the leap into the global context, developing the kind of empathy, the ability to work across cultures, provided that everything is done and we get those outcomes that we desire (personal communication, January 21, 2013).

Her comment “provided that that everything is done and we get those outcomes that we desire,” is indicative that character building still comes secondary to academic achievement. Therefore, although the heart is willing, the demands of the current system
does not allow for social cohesion and character building to be a priority. She also emphasized her strong belief in the importance of what she referred to as a “values-based education.” However, even if all schools do promote a values-based education, the question lies in the kind of values they are teaching, and whom these values are serving.

This is a question I asked in all the interviews: *What type of values do you think our education system teaches? And what kind of values do you think it should teach?* Here is an excerpt from a group interview I did with two individuals who work together at an advertising agency:

A: I think our education system teaches calculated success.

S: Even when you do take a risk, it’s calculated.

A: Yah, to the point where if I want my child to go to MGS, I’ll volunteer all my time at MGS. I’ll shift my house to live near MGS!\(^5\)

S: I’d buy computers! I think it starts so early. In my primary school, streaming started from Primary 1, and you were arranged by your ability from the onset.

A: Education serves the government of Singapore, and I don’t know if that’s what it really should be. If education were to serve the government’s agenda, then Singaporeans wouldn’t have a voice.

S: But you can’t have an education that doesn’t serve the government’s agenda because these people are going to be the pillars of the next generation.

A: Not necessarily. The only reason why Singapore’s education system solely serves the government’s agenda is because we have no other forms of resources.

They went on to discuss how the values that are being taught in schools are not necessarily the values that they would want their children to have, but are values that are reflective of the government’s interests. However, they felt that these values were also

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\(^5\) MGS refers to Methodist Girls’ School, one of the top girls’ schools in Singapore.
relevant to the current economic climate in the country, and thus didn’t feel too strongly about working to change it (personal communication, January 21, 2013).

As is the case in Confucian teachings, Singaporean society is centered on a familial model, where the notion of filial piety continues to be one of the main tenets of a strong society. However, although Confucian values may at their core be full of “goodness,” the appropriation of the teachings may further perpetuate the institutionalized production of educational inequality. One respondent, a recent university graduate, commented on how she believed that Singapore schools function as a site for nation building, strong nation-state policy and close supervision and control (personal communication, January 21, 2013). With a requirement for all Singaporean students to attend public school, the government is able to enforce a uniform national curriculum that applies to every Singaporean youth. High rates of tertiary participation ensure high rates of literacy – a core Confucian value. The “one chance” national examination at the end of schooling determines entry into different levels of tertiary education, helping to sift out the scholars who will be earmarked to become potential bureaucrats in the future. These scholars are then given scholarships for their university education, with a government bond that they will have to serve out once they finish their term of study – ensuring that they will return to work for the Singapore government for at least five years. Several respondents expressed their discontent with this process, saying that it is inherently problematic. They believed that although it follows the Confucianist model of valuing literacy and cultivating scholars who will become future leaders of the country, it also promotes social inequality and elitism (personal communication, January, 2013). It privileges already privileged individuals, creating a veil of meritocracy and a façade of
equal opportunity. The scholars who come from more privileged backgrounds would be better equipped to take the national examinations, especially since they would have attended the best schools and received the most help and guidance from private tutors—which is the case in Singapore.

Another respondent, who recently graduated from a local university, said that the Singaporean education system taught students how to be *kiasu*—a Singlish term that is loosely translated as “scared to lose.” She said that it taught students to be competitive, that they would have to outrank each other in order to prove their worth. “There needs to be constant signaling from all levels to say that [life] is more than just grades,” she said (personal communication, January 22, 2013).

Another respondent, who is a current university student, also expressed that despite the diverse make up of Singapore’s population, our approach to racial harmony veers more towards tolerance than understanding. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, religious tolerance and racial harmony have been key components of educational policy in Singapore. However, he expressed his concern in that the racial harmony that is taught in schools barely grazes the surface of address racial issues, suppressing open dialogue rather than creating a space for it (personal communication, March 3, 2013).

**Moving towards a more Holistic Education**

A former district superintendent with the Ministry of Education whom I spoke with expressed the need to “recalibrate the education system to promote the development of ‘soft skills’ such as creativity and innovation for the 21st century that would give students a competitive edge.” However, she noted that at the same time, Singapore must
not lose the current rigor of the system in the process. “It’s not one or the other,” she said. “Ideally it would have the academic rigor, the confidence, and the soft skills for students to improve themselves.” However, whether this is attainable in reality is another question.

She also spoke to the changes that have been already taking place in the national curriculum. She talked about the changes that have happened at the primary school level, where schools have been encouraged by the Ministry of Education to give Primary 1 and 2 students more space to play, and to learn while playing. They have begun to encourage learning through group collaboration, and to use real world experiences in their learning, such as doing math in the supermarket, or growing plants in the school garden. As she explained:

Having that early start of educating them in that very informal environment allows them to at least have the fundamentals right, the ability to relate and communicate, the sense of confidence, that sense of fun. The only thing is trying to sustain that through the upper levels where the exams again take on greater precedence (personal communication, January 21, 2013).

This approach to learning has not yet extended itself to encompassing explicit character building and critical thinking processes. Nevertheless, it is a substantial start. Getting the fundamentals right, she went on to explain, requires very skillful teachers who are able to balance academic rigor while engaging in community-based learning.

A young entrepreneur I interviewed expressed her concern for the lack of different thought processes in the classroom, which would limit social innovation and creativity. As a result, she said, many young Singaporeans become cookie-cutters versions of each other, with little or no variation in ambition:
Our education system is very good at training people to be doctors, lawyers, and engineers because that’s what Lee Kuan Yew wants. If you notice, his entire cabinet is made up of doctors, lawyers and engineers. At most, accountants. You don’t see a poet, or a theater practitioner (personal communication, January 22, 2013).

She believed that the rigid fundamental structure on which our education system has been built upon needed to shift. She also commented that teachers might have to be of a different breed, a breed that is willing to accept the notion of difference as a strength, rather than an obstacle. “Education as a whole should have a spirit of excellence that isn’t skewed towards a type of technical field. Like if my child is excellent at music, Singapore should give an opportunity for that to thrive” (personal communication, January 22, 2013).

**Disconnect between Policy and Reality**

According to one of the school principals I spoke with, The Ministry of Education is aware that academics cannot be taught in isolation from student development, and that students should not feel obliged to separate what they are learning in the classroom from their social-emotional development. The recent shift from Moral Education to Citizenship and Character Education demonstrates that understanding that whether one is in the classroom or outside of it, teamwork, honesty, integrity, responsibility and empathy should continue to be important (personal communication, January 20, 2013). Although the Ministry of Education is trying to find that mindful balance between academics and fun, the regimented structure and high expectations that it has built for itself are limiting its evolution towards more a more holistic form of education that it desires.
A school superintendent I spoke with explained that it is very hard to break the cycle of the constant pressure to excel. A particular challenge, she explained, was communicating the value of these alternative learning approaches to stakeholders (i.e. parents and families). Although schools are trying to be more mindful about creating a more balanced curriculum, they often receive pressure from parents to focus more on academics. According to her:

Whenever there are efforts to try and give space to more authentic learning, more experiential learning, parents come onto the scene to say, “Oh, there’s not enough homework, there’s not enough rigor...teachers are not doing enough (personal communication, January 20, 2013).

Although the education system is currently attempting to move away from the rigidity of focusing purely on academics, it is ironically bound by the limitations of a system that it has created – a system in which parents and students are implicated but also are also actively feeding the loop, and thereby fueling the fire.

Similarly, although many of the individuals I spoke with expressed a desire for a system that moved away from rote learning with an overemphasis on pure academics, they also recognized that Singapore’s current economic climate does not allow for that shift to happen. “The Ministry [of Education] wants to go that way,” said the principal I interviewed. “But people are afraid of letting go…what happens if grades fall?” (personal communication, January 20, 2013).

For many, education is a means to a better life. One respondent, who didn’t fair so well in the Singapore system, said that in Singapore you studied to survive. In her opinion, the practical demands of doing well in primary school so as to secure a place in a good secondary school followed by a good JC and then university outweighed the importance of social and emotional development. She saw the demand to get a good job
as a more pressing concern, and was prepared to forego the latter in order to achieve her primary purpose (personal communication, January 21, 2013). Therefore, even though the Ministry of Education might attempt to prioritize character development as part of the Moral Education or National Education curriculum, the practical demands of Singapore’s current economic situation might cause individuals to overlook the importance of building a student’s character.

The system is no easier on parents. “Our system here is so results-orientated that it’s so hard for parents to be supportive of their child’s growth without focusing too much on results,” a father said. However, he also recognized that there could be issues with every form of evaluation. The main goal, he said, should be to find out which approach would result in the least amount of inequality.

My Moment of Critical Consciousness

It took me a really long time to admit to myself that as amazing as Singapore’s education system was, it was also capable of perpetuating inequality. All through my high school experience in the United States, I was full of praise for Singapore’s education system, and so were my teachers. When I started tenth grade, I took a series of placement tests, and was placed into numerous Advanced Placement (AP) classes immediately, particularly in the areas of Math and Science. As a tenth grader, I was placed into AP Calculus BC, the most advanced AP Exam for math that was available, and AP Chemistry. There was only one other student from my grade in my AP Calculus BC and AP Chemistry classes – the rest were all juniors and seniors. It wasn’t because I was particularly good at science and math. I wasn’t. In Singapore, I was an average science
and math student. But because Singapore had given me such a solid foundation in these quantitative skills, I was able to excel in this respect. I had learned how to take tests very well, so the Scholastic Assessment Tests (SATs) I needed to take to get into college were a nonissue.

My privilege had blinded me. It was only when I came to Wellesley that I began to question my own educational experience and what it held for me. It was at the end of the summer before my junior year that I was finally able to admit to myself that Singapore’s education system was flawed. I had gained so much from the system, so much so that I was terrified to admit that I had been a product of a system I had believed so strongly in. I felt ashamed to admit that the myth of meritocracy is alive and well in Singapore. When I first moved to the US for school, I would proudly tell people that, “Singapore has one of the best education systems in the world. Our public schools are incredible – you only go to private school when you can’t make it in public school.” To think that what I had been preaching was almost illegitimate was terrifying. Had my entire education been a lie?
Chapter 3: The Neighborhood School

“If a student memorizes something, they will forget it. If they discover something, they will never forget it.”
– Deborah Bond-Upson

School After Singapore

After ten years of formal schooling in Singapore, the Hotchkiss School was a breath of fresh air. Hotchkiss, an independent boarding school in idyllic Connecticut, has small classes, a beautiful campus, and a dedicated faculty. My classmates are brilliant, driven, and ambitious. But most of all, they are involved – both in and out of the classroom. They aren’t just exceptional students; they are also accomplished athletes, artists, and student leaders.

Instead of being asked to pick between tennis and choir as I had to in Singapore, I am invited to try out a variety of extracurricular and to experiment with my interests. For the first time, I am able to pursue both tennis and singing without any pushback from the school administration. In fact, I have their support. I am even encouraged to step out of my comfort zone and to try new activities, instead of only sticking to what I know I am already good at. So I join the cross-country team in the fall and swim in the winter, before coming back to play tennis in the spring. I sing in the Hotchkiss choir, the gospel choir, and Calliope, the all girls a cappella group on campus. I also join the Admissions office as a tour guide, and volunteer with Touchstone, a juvenile delinquent facility for teenage girls. And I become the captain of the Math Team – although I’m sure that the only reason why I’m able to do so is because of my rigorous training in math from my education in Singapore.
More importantly, for the first time in a traditional school setting, I am asked to articulate my own thoughts. I am explicitly invited to question, and to question often. It isn’t something I’m used to. I am used to memorizing and regurgitating the “correct” answers and spending most of my lessons sitting at my desk, diligently taking notes and listening to my teacher speak without muttering a word. I am not accustomed to expressing my own thoughts, or having classes that are based heavily on discussion. Apart from my short stint with my Six Thinking Hats lessons in Primary 3 in Singapore, I am not used to “thinking outside the box.” But my teachers are patient and my classmates are encouraging, and I slowly begin to open up and welcome this new approach to learning with open arms. I begin to challenge my own preconceived notions, and become more comfortable with challenging the perceptions of those around me as well. Hotchkiss nurtures my ability to think critically and learn actively; it constantly fuels my intellectual curiosity and leaves me wanting more.

Wellesley College is very similar to Hotchkiss. I love the small class sizes, inspiring classmates, and exceptional professors. Like Hotchkiss, Wellesley has a beautiful campus and boundless opportunities for learning and getting involved. I enjoy and thrive in the challenging learning environment; it helps me to push the boundaries of my thinking and spurs me to reach for more. And, like Hotchkiss, most students are involved in a variety of activities outside the classroom, making for a vibrant and thriving campus culture. However, most of my formal learning continues to take place in the classroom, until my junior year at Wellesley when I spend the semester abroad, and discover experiential and community-based learning.
I spend my fall semester junior year studying cities with the International Honors Program (IHP) in Brazil, South Africa, and Vietnam. Although we have still regular classes, the majority of our learning is done outside the classroom. Using the classes we have as a foundation, we spend the majority of our days on field visits to neighborhoods, meeting with local organizations, local officials, and individuals on the ground. For the first time, I am able to make concrete and specific connections between what I am learning in class and what I am experiencing in the world, and I finally have a vocabulary to describe the kind of learning I had been looking for all this time. In reconciling theory with application, I gain a deeper and more critical understanding of the work I’m doing, and its implications in a larger societal context.

When I return from spending the year abroad, I decide that I want to explore this pedagogical approach to learning further. And with the help of Soo Hong, a professor in the Education department, I find a school where I can pursue my interest in community-based learning by becoming involved on the ground and in the classroom. In this chapter, I will be examining the Neighborhood School as an institution, drawing primarily from my experience and the observations I’ve made while teaching there. In doing so, I hope to shed light on an alternative model of learning that I believe carries a lot of value for education in our world today.

The Neighborhood School

The Neighborhood School in Jamaica Plain, MA, is not a typical elementary school. Sitting on the edge of the Jamaica Plain and Roxbury in a primarily residential area, it is housed in two ordinary looking buildings on Peter Parley Road across the street
from each other. The school could easily be mistaken for any other house along the street. On my first day, I walked by the school and missed it altogether.

The decision to house the school in a home was intentional. When Joyce Mallory and Tricia Morrow founded the Neighborhood School in 1986, they wanted to create a school that would be integrated into the neighborhood, and directly connected to its community. They wanted to create a “hands-on, learn-as-you-are-ready, creative, and cooperative environment,” where feelings and thoughts were valued as much as reading and writing, and diverse learning needs were respected and integrated into a holistic learning process (Morrow, personal communication, October 3, 2012).

Joyce and Tricia also wanted to create a small school to cater to the individualized learning needs of its students. Their mission “to provide developmentally appropriate education to children representative of the diversity of Boston neighborhoods within an atmosphere of respect and consistent caring” is indicative of a larger idea of the value of caring in education (Neighborhood School, 2013). As Shawn Ginwright (2010) writes in “The Importance of Fostering Caring Relationships for Social Justice,” nurturing a caring relationship in education can be a key ingredient in a child’s developmental and intellectual growth. With only fifty-seven students in total, Joyce and Tricia, along with eight other teachers, make it a point to know all the families they work with and to understand each student on a personal level. By working on a smaller scale than the average public school, teachers are able to better understand a child’s individual learning needs and follow his or her progress more closely. Developing more a personal relationship with students also allows for a healthy teacher-student rapport to develop, which creates a more positive classroom atmosphere.
Dedicated to inquiry-based learning, the Neighborhood School emphasizes learning by doing, taking a student-centered, active-learning approach that focuses on questioning, critical thinking, and problem solving. It emphasizes a commitment to promoting engaged and active learning, where every child, teacher, and parent is expected to participate in the educational process, and thus becomes committed to education and learning as a whole. Although students and teachers form the core of the classroom, parents are encouraged to get involved too. Whether its signing up to volunteer at the Learning Fair, a time where students showcase the different projects they had been working on that year, or attending the weekly all-school assembly, parents assume an indispensable role in preserving the healthy ecology of the school as a whole (Hong, 2011).

The Neighborhood School is very intentional about building relationships: student-teacher relationships, student-student relationships, parent-teacher relationships, and school-community relationships. Each morning, when the students arrive at school, they gather in the main classroom on the ground floor and spending those few moments before the school day officially begins talking, playing, and just being together. Having all the students, ages four to twelve, together in the same room, spending those few moments together every morning, helps create a space in which relationships can be created and nurtured across age groups and classrooms.

Another way the Neighborhood School intentionally foster relationships between the older and younger students is the idea of having reading buddies. For example, each Level One student is paired up with a Level Three student as his or her reading buddy. This arrangement not only allows Level 1 students to learn how to read, and Level 3
students to become better readers by teaching others to read, but it allows a relationship
to develop between the older and younger kids, a relationship that might not necessarily
exist otherwise.

The most impactful way that the Neighborhood School has encouraged the
building of relationships both in and out of the classroom is by constantly reminding
students to "be a friend." Because each classroom, or Level, typically serves a group of
children whose ages span across two to three years, teachers constantly encourage "older
friends" to look out for their "younger friends," and younger friends not to be shy about
asking for help from older friends. Even in Level One, the teachers constantly remind the
second year friends, who are five to six years old, that they need to set a good example
for their 1st year friends, who are four to five years old. In doing so, the younger friends
have someone to look up to and emulate, and that older friends have an opportunity to
display leadership qualities when they are reminded that they need to set an example for
their younger friends.

Building relationships such as these are possible because the Neighborhood
School is so small. Teachers really get to know each student, and thus have a better
understanding of what they need both in the classroom and as an individual. Similarly,
students get to really know each other, and the students are able to get to know the
community they go to school in as well. This is not the case for larger, public elementary
schools. Public schools do not have the luxury of having these intimate relationships
through small class sizes – the resources available are not able to support it. Teachers in
public schools have to make a much larger and intentional effort if they want to get to
know their students in the same way that teachers at the Neighborhood School are able to just by virtue of their class size.

Being a friend also means being engaged with the larger community and building relationships within the neighborhood. As part of the curriculum, Tricia, the director of the school, has weekly RAP around sessions with each class, where they have discussions about the importance of building a community, and discuss ways in which students can better engage with the neighborhood around them. The RAP Around program, an integral part of its curriculum and learning ethos, was one of the key factors that cemented my commitment to the Neighborhood School. “RAP Around,” as Tricia described to me, “is a time to talk about important things.” These “important things” included socio-emotional wellbeing, and community engagement. Students embark on expeditions, engaging in long-term investigations of important questions and subjects that mirror real world challenges. Being located at the edge of the Roxbury and Jamaica Plain town line also give the kids many opportunities to step outside the classroom and learn directly from the world around them. Even Level One students take trips to Jamaica Pond or the Arboretum to learn about science through doing. At the Neighborhood School, learning is about educating the whole child. It aims to create students with a sense of civic duty, who are able to apply what they learn in the classroom to the outside world. Tricia and Joyce both believe in the power of an intimate and personalized education that is built within the framework of the surrounding neighborhood and community. And because the Neighborhood School was created to be intentionally small, this is possible here.
The Field Experience

I started doing my fieldwork at the Neighborhood School in Jamaica Plain as part of the Urban Education course I was taking during the fall semester of my senior year at Wellesley. Although I was not sure what to expect, I was very curious to learn more about education policy and the ways in which it can either perpetuate social inequalities or become a catalyst for social transformation. I started out teaching in the Level One classroom, observing and assisting the lead teacher, Kaye. But when Tricia invited me to observe Level Four’s RAP Around time, I serendipitously found a space where I could learn about community-based learning in an actual classroom setting.

One of most valuable elements of my fieldwork was having Tricia as a site mentor. Tricia not only co-founded the Neighborhood School, she also leads RAP Around Time for all the classes and is the director of the school as well. Tricia is an invaluable site mentor – she supports my learning while encouraging me to constantly try out new ideas and initiatives in the classroom. She enables me to be both an observer as well as a participant, knowing when to give me the space to step back and reflect on what was going on in the classroom but also knowing when to draw me in and allow me to be a part of the discussion. I learn so much just by observing Tricia, as well as the other educators of the Neighborhood School, carry out lessons both in and out of the classroom. And being able to talk about it with Tricia or whichever teacher I was working with after class also served to deepen my understanding of why they believe so strongly in the pedagogy that they practice.

The emphasis the Neighborhood School places on the importance of community culminates in the manifestation of RAP Around Time. Tricia describes RAP Around as a
time to talk about important things, such as the value of having a healthy community, and the ways students can better engage with the world around them. Working on the Egleston community project enabled not only students but also myself to see the school in the context of the larger community. It also served as a reminder that schools are not isolated entities of learning, and that they are connected to the communities that exist around them. Furthermore, these communities can serve an extension of the learning that happens in schools to help students situate their learning in authentic experiences that are happening around them.

Having the opportunity to apply what I was learning in class back at Wellesley into a real classroom setting was valuable to my learning. I was able to make connections between discussions we had in class, the larger academic literature, and what I was experiencing the classroom. These experiences mutually reinforced each other, further cementing my belief in the value of community-based learning and the application of critical pedagogy outside the classroom.

Over the course of the semester, I found myself continually reflecting on my role on the classroom, in my fieldwork, and in the larger school community. When I first started my field placement at Neighborhood School, I was more of a classroom assistant. I worked alongside the lead teacher to carry out classroom activities, dealt with student conflicts, and helped out wherever I could. Although I loved working with the young kids, I found myself constantly wondering if I was actually making an impact in the classroom. I also felt like I was in more of a teaching role, even though I was not explicitly conducting lessons. However, as I participated more in RAP Around Time, I felt my role beginning to change. During RAP Around, I feel like I am learning alongside
the kids. Even when I am guiding discussions or facilitating question time, I notice how my thoughts are being shaped by what the kids are saying and that it feels like we were on the same journey together. I have begun to feel like less of a teacher, and more of a learner - and I have embraced this change with open arms.

It might just be because I have become more comfortable at the school over time, or because my relationships with my students have grown stronger, but I am beginning to feel less of a stranger and more a part of the community. Over the course of the semester, I have realized that the Neighborhood School really holds true to its commitment of being a community. Across the four levels and varied age groups, all the children know each other. And over the course of the semester, despite being placed in a specific classroom, I've gotten to know almost all of them as well. At the beginning, it would surprise me when a student from a class I didn't teach would shout, "Good morning, Jie!" or run up and give me a hug when I walked into school in the morning. We would never do that in my school in Singapore. But now, I have come to realize that it's just a beautiful and integral part of the Neighborhood School and what it stands for. The fact that every teacher knows every student by name, and that there is a place for conversations to happen between twelve year olds and five year olds, keeps it strong. As Tricia puts it, “A school that learns together, and plays together, grows together.”

Doing action research challenged my preconceived notions about what the purpose of research really is. Having the primary purpose of research be informing practice might seem like second nature now, but at the beginning of the semester, my idea of research was just the production of knowledge for the sake of creating and
reproducing knowledge. Action research has allowed me to see the bridge between theory and application, and the means to cross that bridge time and time again.

**The Egleston Square Project**

On my first Friday with Level Four, Tricia invited me to join them on a field trip to the Boston Neighborhood Network as part of their weekly RAP Around time. This trip was sparked by a previous visit to Egleston Square, where the students spent the morning walking around the neighborhood and talking to business owners and residents. From their conversations that morning, they found that many business owners in Egleston Square were worrying about two things: a lack of safety and a lack of customers. They also realized that these two issues were inherently linked; a lack of safety results in fewer customers, and a lack of customers and human traffic results in having fewer eyes on the street and thus, streets that are less safe. The students became interested in starting an initiative that would help revitalize Egleston Square by promoting it as a vibrant space with potential - not a neighborhood that people stayed away from because of its high crime rates. The purpose of this visit to the Boston Neighborhood Network, also known as the Boston News Network, was to learn more about its role as a potential resource in their project. Could they possibly create a Public Service Announcement to promote Egleston Square? What role could the Boston Neighborhood Network have in their project?

This project that the students are embarking on is an Action-Research Project in itself, so this was an interesting process in itself. The students are asking the questions, and coming up with a plan. *How can we revitalize Egleston Square? How can we help to*
promote the small businesses in the area and make it a safer neighborhood? They thought about creating a PSA with the Boston Neighborhood Network, making posters to put up all over JP, interviewing their families and friends about their thoughts on Egleston Square and finding ways to encourage JP residents, as well as their own families, to visit Egleston Square more. Many of the students lived in the area – either in JP or in Roslindale – but from a survey they conducted, barely any families had been to Egleston Square. Most knew where Egleston was, but they just drove through it. The students also began to work with Egleston Main Streets, a community organization in the area, on this project.

Level Four’s community project manifested itself in the form of creating a brochure that aimed to bring together everything that the class had been working on since the start of the year. It included the three elements that the students had wanted to create in their community project: an informational pamphlet, an Egleston passport, and a poster. This brochure was the result of many class discussions, small group breakout sessions, word processing and editing, as well as several field trips. It was also the result of lots of time, love, and effort.

I loved seeing the kids get excited about working with the small businesses in Egleston Square, brainstorming ways to acquire data and then analyzing that data, and having it all culminate in a product that could help their community. The process of going from ideas to action was really inspiring to watch, and served as a reminder that we should not underestimate the power of children to step up and get involved in their communities to create change.
The Egleston Square Passport, as it was soon named, was distributed to all the other students at Neighborhood School. It was also included in Tricia’s weekly emails to the NS Community:

**The Egleston Square Passport**

Did you find a surprise in your school mailbox from Level 4? The class created a tri-fold brochure to help NS families take a walking tour of the Egleston business district. Leave your car on Peter Parley Road, follow their map down Washington Street, and visit their three top picks! If your child collects signatures on the brochure from two of the three businesses, s/he is eligible to enter L4’s Egleston prize raffle. Brochures are due back to school by next Wednesday, December 12. We extend our special thanks to Jiezhen Wu, our intern from Wellesley College, for assisting Level Four with this project. Jie completes her work with us this week and is looking forward to going home to Singapore for winter break. Jie found some treasures in Egleston Square for our raffle prizes.

We had initially planned to do the raffle on December 7th but decided to extend it to December 12th so that Level 4 could give present their brochure to Level 1 and 2 during the all-school assembly that Friday. This gave the Level 4 students the opportunity to further improve on expressing and articulating their thoughts and ideas around their community project, while practicing their presentation and public speaking skills at the same time. They also had a discussion on how they could make this presentation more accessible for Level 1 and Level 2 students, and decided not to use the PowerPoint slides that they had used in their presentation to Level 3 the week before.

**Looking Deeper**

The Neighborhood School is effective because it not only focuses on students and test scores, but reaches out to embrace all aspects of education. With a team of dedicated teachers, invested parents, and committed students, education is not limited to students’ learning, but it becomes a learning process for all stakeholders. With its small size, it is also able to take a more intimate approach to learning that can jump through the conventional bureaucratic hoops that exist in the enormous public school system.

First, in strengthening leadership across the school, the Neighborhood School equips its students with not only academic skills, but an essential life skill as well. It sets
high expectations for its students, creating a climate of excellence and achievement. By creating a culture of leadership, it empowers its students to look at the world differently and constantly question it in order to affect change. In doing so, it ultimately gives its students the tools to challenge the culture of power as described by Delpit (1988) that exists in society by making them aware of these inequities, thereby enhancing each student’s cultural capital to understand these systems of power.

Second, emphasizing the importance of culture and character is yet another indication of why the Neighborhood School holds so much value as a school. The Neighborhood School expects its students to be courteous, respectful, and demonstrate a commitment to learning both in and out of the classroom. In instilling values and promoting character development through academic work and service, it builds a “school-wide culture of trust, respectability, and joy in achievement” for students, teachers, and parents alike (Morrow, personal communication, October 19, 2012). Having open channels of communication create a sense of trust and respect for all stakeholders, and events such as the Learning Fair celebrates student achievement and showcases the hard work that teachers and parents have put in to make these accomplishments possible. This holistic approach towards learning not only helps students excel in school, but also prepares its students for life beyond the classroom.

Third, active pedagogy goes further and deeper than the statistics of test scores, creating an environment where every student, teacher, and parent has a stake in the educational experience and becomes committed to learning as a whole. Instructional practice is student-centered and progressive, and actively involves students in the learning process through high-level tasks and dynamic roles in the classroom.
Additionally, this approach to pedagogy also engages parents, keeping them active in their involvement. In making learning an ongoing process for all participants, the Neighborhood School is able to create a culture that holds every involved individual accountable.

Fourth, learning expeditions during RAP Around Time effectively nurture a love of learning within and beyond the four walls of a classroom. The Neighborhood School is similar to the MET School in Rhode Island, which believes that “experiences in the real world motivate profound learning” (The MET, 2011). At the MET School, fieldwork is a significant component of the curriculum that engages students with interdisciplinary work in a way that connects what they learn in class to real-world issues. The work might be very academically rigorous, but it cultivates a joy in discovering and learning that is grounded in authentic experiences. Both the Neighborhood School and the MET encourage students to engage with the world around them, and thus students gain a different sense of purpose in what they are learning about in school.

Fifth, character development at the Neighborhood School does not exist without academic rigor. At the Neighborhood School, teachers infuse dynamic instructional practices into the curriculum to build skills and critical thinking. Students are constantly engaged in learning in a variety of ways, and teachers are constantly looking for new ways and innovative ways to enable students to be most effective in the classroom. As of last year, they have introduced a “Singapore Math” curriculum, a new collaboration between Singaporean and American educators to produce a comprehensive and rigorous math curriculum that takes the best of the Singaporean approach to Math and attempts to
integrate it into a US context. Students are still held to high standards – but standards are measured more so by how well students learn, as opposed to how well they do on tests.

**Considering the Limitations**

However, despite its numerous accomplishments, the Neighborhood School also faces several limitations. The Neighborhood School is made up of a diverse group of students, most of who live in the surrounding area or in one of the neighborhood adjacent to Jamaica Plain. However, despite its desire for diversity, admission to the Neighborhood School is very selective. As described on its website, “While our school is valued for its intimate size, openings are extremely limited.” (Neighborhood School, 2013). In order to ensure racial and ethnic diversity, several spots in each class are intentionally reserved for students of color. Neighborhood School exists as a very intentional community, with students representing the “diversity of Boston’s neighborhoods” (Morrow, personal communication, October 3, 2012). As a result, the racial makeup in each class is very intentional and measured, in order to create this diversity through the selection process that is admissions.

Achieving socioeconomic diversity is slightly more challenging. Although financial assistance is available, limited resources only allow for a third of students to receive aid. With the full cost of tuition adding up to $12,600 a year, not many working class families are able to afford to send their children to Neighborhood School without receiving any financial assistance. Although the school offers some financial assistance (around thirty percent of students receive some kind of assistance), it doesn’t have the resources to offer it to every student who needs it. Thus, most students pay the full cost of
tuition (Neighborhood School, 2013). The cost of this tuition serves as a barrier to entry to an approach to education that some children might need, but cannot afford. Although the Neighborhood School might not be as costly as Hotchkiss, which costs $47,950 a year, it is still an independent school that exists outside the public school system (The Hotchkiss School, 2013). Despite its culture and mission being different from that of Hotchkiss, the Neighborhood School is still an elite school in some respect. However, because of the limited financial resources, it has to make certain decisions between giving an education to more children and providing the best resources and education for the children it currently serves – which is a difficult balance to achieve.

Families that send their children to the Neighborhood School are also a self-selecting group. They believe in the ethos and the approach that the Neighborhood School takes to education, and share similar values to that of the Neighborhood School. For the Neighborhood School to work the way that it is, it requires the support and faith of families to actively choose this type of learning for their children. It takes courage on the part of the families to trust that an education at the Neighborhood School will equip their children with the skills to build a path to their future. Similarly, it takes courage for families to intentionally move away from a system where success is so heavily measured by testing and statistical scores, particularly since it is much easier to quantify progress that way. Thus, although the Neighborhood School’s mission might have the best intentions at heart, it inadvertently becomes an elite school because of its barriers to entry – even though these barriers are a consequence, and not an intention, of its approach to education.
Small, independent schools such as the Neighborhood School can also be an exclusionary mechanism, and manifest as an element of cultural tracking. The nature of the curriculum and approach to learning at the Neighborhood School also results in a self-selecting group of parents and families who believe in the ethos and mission of the school – a group that believes in the value of alternative education, and is willing to break out of the conventional mold to support this kind of learning. This group of families is typically more progressive than the average American, and thus their children have the privilege of growing up in a household whose values resonate with those at the Neighborhood School. These barriers to access do not help to bridge the larger achievement gap that exists beyond its four walls. It has its benefits as a small, independent elementary school in Jamaica Plain, but this barrier to entry could breed even more inequality in its community. Thus, RAP Around Time is key in directly engaging the larger community and the needs of its local children and their families in an authentic manner (Santiago, Ferrara & Blank, 2008, p. 44). Families that lack cultural capital might be at a disadvantage in finding out about such specialized schools, or having the resources to pay for them. Therefore, it is important for the Neighborhood School to recognize the inequalities in the larger community and to ensure that information and resources about education are available to all families, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Its ‘Admissions’ section on its website also needs to be revised to paint a clearer picture of what families need to do in order to enroll their children at the Neighborhood School. This might not increase access to the Neighborhood School specifically, but it will ensure that all families are at least adequately informed of their options in selecting a school.
Although the Neighborhood School’s model works for a school of its size, whether it is possible to scale up this model to function as a national model is dependent on a variety of factors. Initially, I thought that the limitations would lie in a lack of resources in a larger, public education system to support a model like the Neighborhood School’s. With a limited number of teachers and a high student-teacher ratio, creating the intimate setting that exists at the Neighborhood School would be a challenge. I soon realized that even if the entire model could not be scaled up, that certain aspects of it could still be applied at a larger scale, with the ethos of the Neighborhood School being the most viable one. Although the Neighborhood School currently functions as a successful alternative to the US public school system, I recognize that it cannot replace the larger system completely. However, the Neighborhood’s School’s commitment to helping students achieve their fullest potential on their own terms, and defining success as how well students learn, as opposed to how well they score on tests, could potentially serve as a reminder to schools about the essence of education. Therefore, it would not be a question of resources, but a question of a readiness to embrace a system with different ideals and expectations that might not be in line with the measures of success that might not be in line with public education in the United States today. It would thereby require a paradigm shift that prioritizes the personal development of students as a means to achieving success in life, however that success might be defined. If the Neighborhood School’s approach to learning can be implemented in a larger state or national school system, it would also be able to address the barriers to entry that the Neighborhood School faces because of its small size. Although this remains a vision embedded in my highest hopes for education, I believe that a shift in this direction greatly benefit larger
systems of education. The big question that continues to remain is the steps we would need to take to get there.

A Final Note

At the end of the fall semester, I made a “give back” in the form of a short letter that I created to share with parents and the Neighborhood School community. This letter aimed to articulate the importance of RAP Around Time and what I had learned during my time at Neighborhood School, to share my experience working with the kids and Tricia and my thoughts on the value in community-based learning and how it helps students become better thinkers and learners.

Dearest Neighborhood School,

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this learning community, the past few months have truly been a privilege, and a delight. I noticed a poster in Level 4’s classroom the other day that said, “30 years from now, it won’t matter what shoes you wore, how your hair looked, or the jeans you bought. What will matter what is what you learned and how you used it.” What will matter is what you learned and how you used it. My time at NS has had me thinking more about the goals of education and schooling. What do we want kids to learn? Do we want them to get a 2400 on the SATs? Or would we rather that they become curious, engaged, intelligent individuals who will, as clichéd as this may sound, use what they learn to make the world a better place? What is learning at the Neighborhood School really about?

At the Neighborhood School, learning is about thinking. It’s about thinking about the world around us, and engaging with it in ways that are transformative and educational. Kids learn to think about structures of inequality, about the importance of community, and the value in engaging others in a dialogue that promotes inclusive growth. Through Level 4’s community project, they were able to think about how they could collect information, analyze this information, and then share it so that others could think about these issues as well.

Learning at NS is also about being able to express your views and opinions and being able to work as a team. During discussions, and especially during RAP around time, the kids hold themselves accountable for maintaining a positive group dynamic by making sure that everyone has a turn to talk. The kids also spend a significant amount of time working in groups – a valuable skill that seems to be overlooked, even at Wellesley College, where I go to school. By learning
how to collaborate and cooperate in group situations, and how to speak up and participate in discussions, these kids are getting a head-start to being successful in life. Why isn't this a greater priority in all schools?

Learning at NS is also about caring. Learning to care about their community, their neighbors, and the people around them will eventually lead to these kids learning to care about the larger world that they live in. With Level 4, a walking tour of Egleston Square turned into a series of questions, which then turned into several discussions, which then culminated in the most pivotal step of all: action.

Learning at NS to also about teaching, and learning through teaching. In Level 4’s community project, they learned how to share/teach their larger community about all the good things that were going on in Egleston Square. They gathered data and information, and found ways to share that information with their families and friends. Teaching and learning are not two separate entities - they are intricately intertwined and interconnected, and are mutually dependent. By doing their community project, Level 4 learned that with learning comes the responsibility of teaching; information is meant to be shared.

Most of all, learning at NS is about understanding. It's about being able to see different perspectives, to respect these perspectives if they're different from our own, and to build a new world of understanding for ourselves that is self-constructed and malleable. After all, we don't live a stagnant world. In a world that is ever-changing and ever-evolving, our learning should be just as fluid and open to change too.

Thank you for a wonderful semester of learning and sharing, I can’t wait to continue this journey of learning with you.

Love,

Jie
Chapter 4: 
The Conversation: Education for Social Cohesion and Equality

As I pieced the various parts of my educational experience together, I realized that each step of my journey had its own unique value that has brought me to where I am today. My first ten years of formal schooling in Singapore gave me a strong foundation for my learning, and instilled the discipline and rigor that gave me an advantage when I moved onto high school and college in the United States. It made me a good student, in the most traditional sense of the word, but it also pushed me to yearn for something more in my education. The following seven years that I spent in US schools fed off that desire for something more, and drew out my critical consciousness, deepening my latent desire to learn and to engage with perspectives different from my own.

Although I am grateful for what I gained in each experience, I also recognize that each segment of my learning trajectory has also had its shortcomings and its limitations. Despite having benefitted greatly from my education in Singapore, I have slowly begun to recognize why I chose to leave the Singapore system, and how that choice stems from a place of privilege. Even in my mostly positive experience in the United States, I have moreover, begun to engage with limitations and barriers to access in the types of schooling that I have had the privilege of experiencing here at Wellesley, at Hotchkiss, and at the Neighborhood School.

As I thought about the relation between these two educational contexts that have influenced me the most, I started to posit the probability of how they could fit together, and whether they could fit together. In doing so, I began to see them as relational and
connected, which allowed me to develop a new lens with which I was able to better understand and make sense of these two systems of education. In this section, I put my various experiences into conversation, in the hope that these institutions might be able to learn a thing or two from each other in how to build a stronger learning community. I thus return to my guiding research question: *What do we learn by contrasting two sets of ideas about social cohesion, equity, and education, and what can they learn from one another?*

**Two Different Contexts**

Educators such as Tony Wagner believe that the twenty-first century demands more of individuals; education can no longer be merely about memorizing formulas – it must include the mastery of more “non-academic” skills such as literacy and critical thinking (Wagner in Conlon, 2008). Although the Singaporean government recognizes the need for these skills, the current education policy of teaching to the test limits the actualization of this goal. An education system that is driven by testing inhibits the ability of students to develop a love of learning that is driven by a thirst for knowledge and a strong intellectual curiosity. In contrast, education that is supported by critical thinking and authentic pedagogy cultivates a genuine love of learning, allowing students to take ownership of their learning in all areas of their lives. As expressed in several interviews, Singapore’s current education policy, although effective in promoting academic rigor and literacy, falls short of enabling Singaporean students to remain relevant in today’s global context. Therefore, I believe that if Singapore wants its education system to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, it must make a commitment to moving away from its
current model of education, towards a model that will enable students to gain this set of skills through their schooling.

The emphasis on science and mathematics was crucial in post-independent Singapore in establishing a hub for the sciences (Ng, 2004). However, the current global climate calls for different kind of learning. In an age where entrepreneurship and innovation are key, testing no longer provides an adequate indication of an individual’s success. The current system breeds risk-averse behavior, encouraging students to perfect exam questions rather than expand their knowledge by pushing intellectual boundaries. An emphasis on testing recognizes a narrow interpretation of learning – one that is unforgiving to those who may not be as skilled in taking tests – which could be detrimental to promoting inclusive growth and Singapore’s potential success as a nation.

Singapore needs an education system that will not only serve the needs of our workforce today, but the workforce of the future. Although Singapore gave me a strong foundation to achieve academic success later on in life, it didn’t encourage me to think out of the box, and it was only through leaving the system that I was about to learn to think for myself. Therefore, although certain components of its education system are still valuable, such as promoting values of rigor, discipline and hard work, Singapore’s education system still has plenty of room to grow. In encouraging more authentic and diversified forms of learning in addition to the strong quantitative skills it currently instills in students, Singapore will be able to develop resilient, adaptable, and creative individuals who will enable us to stay current as a nation. It does not have to pick between its current system and an alternative system. Rather, it needs to adapt and stay relevant and valuable as a nation in the current dynamic international environment by
ensuring that its education system that cultivates critical thinking and active engagement for all students, regardless of what background they might come from.

Although the United States has developed one of the world’s most comprehensive schooling systems, it too continues to face numerous challenges. The American high school graduation rate today is 19th in the world, compared to its number one status forty years ago. Every day, 7,000 high school students drop out of school, with one student dropping out every 26 seconds. Among minority students, only 56 percent of Hispanic students, 54 percent of African American students, and 51 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students in the US graduate with a regular diploma, compared to 77 percent of White students and 81 percent of Asian Americans (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). These statistics are proof of significant inequalities, inequalities that are likely to increase unless we make significant improvements in the education system. The education system must therefore promote equity through education, in a way that addresses the more deeply rooted issues that cultivate these inequalities. The Neighborhood School was created in response to these inequities; it was founded to serve the diversity of Boston’s Neighborhoods, and became a place where lower income families could receive an independent school education. However, even though it tries to maintain that mission, the intimate size of the school keeps most students from benefitting from a Neighborhood School education.

In the early 1900s, John Dewey (1902) suggested that education theory had trapped teachers in a false binary in the realm of pedagogy. Dewey believed that teachers were asked to choose between a classical curriculum and a curriculum focused on
lived experiences of their students. More often than not, teachers select the former choice as it is traditional and therefore, more professionally more acceptable.

Dewey’s work argued that rather than thinking of curriculum as an either/or proposition, that it should always be a both/and endeavor…[he] believed that the child should be at the center of the curriculum, such that school curriculum draws from the lived experiences of the child to expand into broader horizons. This approach does not attempt to replace the knowledge that children bring with them to school; it built on it…[making] the relevance of school immediately apparent to the students, given that they would be engaging school knowledge through the lens of their lived social reality (Dewey in Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

At the Neighborhood School, teachers are able to move beyond this false binary. They are not restricted by state standards or state testing, and thus have the luxury to create a school curriculum that draws primarily from the lived experiences of the child. However, whether the Neighborhood School’s approach to learning is able scale itself up to function at a national level in the US is questionable. At the state or federal level, although it is still possible, practical demands make it much harder for teachers to engage school knowledge with the lived realities of their students.

The Neighborhood School strongly believes in the importance of its students being engaged with the larger community and building relationships within the neighborhood. RAP Around functions as an essential part of the curriculum, where students have the opportunity to participate in discussions about the importance of building a community, and discuss the ways in which they can better engage with the neighborhood around them. Through teaching social, emotional and moral understanding in the classroom, and through service-learning during RAP Around Time, students will acquire the tools to excel academically in a way that engages and interests them (Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003). I have observed this commitment to using social-emotional learning and service-learning as tools to promote critical thinking and a love
for learning as a whole. Through readings Neighborhood School students’ reflections and speaking with them about their own learning experiences, I have found that they see the value in this approach to learning too (personal communication, 2013). Schools should not simply be a place to train efficient workers; it should be a means to creating a society with deeper character and to develop thoughtful citizens who can make wise civic choices (Nodding, 2005).

The Neighborhood School promotes a strategy of academic achievement that makes room for the social and emotional needs of students, thus promoting a culture of caring that is relative to individual and collective needs. Children need to learn take an active role in building their communities, and understand the everyday problems they face. Academic possibilities connected to social and emotional learning involve curriculums that go beyond facts or taking tests promoting high achievement. Students learn critical thinking skills, how to analyze situations and topics, and how what they learn effects the communities they live in.

The Neighborhood School is also evocative of the vision of education that Thomas Jefferson once had: his hope that public education would mold a leadership of citizens, who would use their knowledge to continuously better American society has the potential of being realized (Noddings, 2005). It is important for us to foster an environment where children can grow into themselves. The skills that will be attained through such a program will be an ability to listen and understand others, to achieve better communication skills and an understanding of people; as Goleman (1995) asserts, “emotional literacy enhances school’s ability to teach” (p.284.)

Educators like Harvard Professor Tony Wagner have pointed out that to fully take
part in today’s society, children must have the following seven skills: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination (Conlon, 2008). These ideas paint a picture of an education system that would encourage students to learn to communicate and think for themselves. Students would directly engage with what they are learning in order to attain these critical skills. Education that empowers can cultivate a collective of students who have the capacity to deal with 21st century challenges and promote systems of collaboration. As explained by Sir Ken Robinson (2010), this would require a drastic paradigm shift in education that places a larger focus on students and their strengths.

Although the approaches taken to learning by the Neighborhood School and the Singapore education system might seem to differ in more ways than one, they share a common goal of providing education as a means for students to gain access to a better life. But the goals of schooling in each system can also perpetuate societal inequities and inhibit social cohesion. The key distinction in this is that each system does so in a different way. Because they come from such different places, theoretically and geographically, each system also has its own idea of what social cohesion and equity mean within the context of its system – which then impacts its approach to education as a whole. Still, I believe that we always stand to gain from engaging in dialogue with perspectives different from our own. In the next few sections, I will attempt to put my own experiences into conversation with each other, to see what we stand to gain if we compare these two different sets of ideas in education.
Social Cohesion Across Contexts

The notion of social cohesion is understood differently in each context. In Singapore, social cohesion is understood as racial harmony and tolerance of difference. It promotes unity, pledging oneself as “one united people...regardless of race, language, or religion,” as students do every morning when they recite the pledge during the flag-raising ceremony. Social cohesion is synonymous with national unity, and with pride in one’s country, which is instilled from the very beginning in primary school through Moral Education and National Education. The emphasis is on the collective, but the idea of the collective is not necessarily synonymous with the notion of an open community. As shared by one of the interviews with a current Singaporean college student, Singaporeans have become averse to talking about issues of race and class, because they are so afraid to ruffle the feathers of what appears to be a united, cohesive nation (personal communication, March 3, 2013).

The Neighborhood School approaches social cohesion in a different way. It moves beyond a mere tolerance of difference, to an understanding and appreciation of difference. This approach allows for more open dialogue about difference – whether that refers to difference in background, ability, or opinion. Questioning does not ruffle the cohesiveness of the community, but strengthens it. RAP Around time, in particular, creates a space for students to talk about important, albeit sometimes difficult, topics. Even in Level One, students begin to talk about stereotypes and the danger of acting on our assumptions and preconceived notions. Of course, simpler language is used in the actual pedagogy – but the ideas behind it are the same. The students are then encouraged
to apply this awareness in their interactions with their other friends around school. Although the Level One students are only five or six years old, creating room for questions on issues of race and class that does not incite judgment or disrespect. These processes are monitored by the teachers at the Neighborhood School, many of whom join the teaching staff because of their affinity with the school’s ethos. The teachers have made an implicit commitment to this style of learning, which makes this approach to learning possible across all levels.

The explicit approach to teaching values and the importance of social cohesion also varies across contexts. In Singapore, values are taught through Civics and Moral Education classes, which begin at Primary 1. These classes have official textbooks that are issued by the Ministry of Education, containing information on how to be a good citizen. Civics and Moral Education classes are usually taught in one’s mother tongue, which for me was Mandarin Chinese. My textbooks were titled *hao gong ming*, which translates as “good citizen,” and there was a specific textbook for each semester. According to the Ministry of Education (2007), the Civics and Moral Education syllabus focuses on six core values: respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience, and harmony. In addressing issues of harmony, students are taught about why it is important to make friends with people of different races: “we are a multiracial society, to understand each other, to build a harmonious living environment, to enhance peace and stability” (Ministry of Education, 2007). However, this curriculum is very textbook heavy, and values are taught, rather than instilled. Furthermore, according to a current teacher, the Ministry expects most of these lessons to be taught verbatim from the textbook, and there is little flexibility in what is being taught in a particular class. There is
also little room for discussion or debate, and a clear “right” or “wrong” answer for each question that might be posed (personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Although the Ministry of Education does have a Community Involvement Program (CIP) and a Service-Learning (SL) component, these initiatives are somewhat disconnected from the learning that happens inside the classroom. Students are expected to complete six hours of CIP each year (Ministry of Education, 2007). For most of the individuals whom I interviewed, the consensus was that the most common activity to fulfill these six hours of community service was to participate in “Flag Day,” where students would go downtown or stand outside train stations with donation bags or tins, asking people to donate their spare change in return for a sticker, or a “flag,” of the charity they were raising money for. Although there was a level of community engagement, many respondents admitted that they did not feel any connection to the charity they were selling “flags” for, and noted that there was never a follow-up or debrief of the activity back at school. Furthermore, several respondents said that they were never pushed to take their CIP seriously, and that the majority of students would opt for Flag Day because it required the least amount of effort (personal communication, 2012). Therefore, although it seems intuitive that CIP and Civics and Moral Education would be closely related, there is no platform in the Civics and Moral Education curriculum for students to make these explicit connections between what they are learning in class and the activities they are participating in outside of school. For the students who did want to take their CIP time more seriously by volunteering their time in Retirement Homes or Children’s Homes, there was no intentional space in class for them to discuss their experiences and to make sense of what they were learning. I myself found
this particularly frustrating. Even when we had Service-Learning programs, our initiatives were isolated from everything else we were learning in school; they seemed to be activities we participated in for a week or two, then completely disconnected from after. There was no follow-through, no returning to, these projects that could have been very valuable learning opportunities. Therefore, although the intentions and theory to promote social cohesion were there, the practical implementation of these lessons remained disconnected and distant from what was being taught in class.

At the Neighborhood School, the values and the importance of social cohesion are shared during RAP Around Time, as well as during other classes. Moreover, although RAP Around functions as a time and place to talk about values and the importance of building a community, these conversations are not expected to stop when RAP Around time is over. In fact, these conversations pervade other lessons and aspects of school. The ethos of Neighborhood School can be found in the pedagogy of all subjects, whether that is literacy, history, or science. Similarly, the organizational structure of the school reflects this commitment to social cohesion, where the dual-level classes are intentionally structured as so to promote community, collaboration, and leadership (Morrow, personal communication, October 3, 2012). As described by Tricia:

At Neighborhood School, children learn to discover and value each other’s differences as people and as learners. Time is spent in learning about social and emotional issues and in developing effective communication. Cultural diversity of children is represented and valued. Within a cooperative learning situation, positive interdependence develops among students. Students see that they can reach their own learning goals while they work to insure that others also reach their goals. Personal accountability and effective problem-solving are also stressed. Students discuss material with each other, help each other understand, and encourage each other to work hard (Neighborhood School, 2013).
However, these are statements are not merely intentions; they are put into practice each day, strengthening and reinforcing the learning community that exists at the school.

Unlike Civics and Moral Education, RAP Around does not have an official textbook. The lack of a textbook allows for more flexibility for the curriculum to respond to issues that are currently happening in the students’ lives, and gives the teacher the ability draw from these lived experiences to create a lesson that is engaging, authentic, and relevant. However, the lack of a textbook can also result in a less organized structure and less explicit goals – which might impede the clarity of the lessons as a whole. Although I appreciate the flexibility of being able to teach whatever topic that might be pressing at that moment, I believe that RAP Around would be even more effective if it had more explicit goals that teachers could refer to like the Civics and Moral Education syllabus does, such as a clear set of themes to cover for the semester. For instance, in the project that the students were working on this semester, it would have been helpful for me to have had some sort of guiding framework, rather than having to create it on my own. Furthermore, although having a responsive curriculum is one of the strengths of the RAP Around approach, creating a more proactive curriculum might allow for issues to be dealt with before they arise. There does not need to be a tradeoff between having an explicit goals and flexibility; one can still be culturally and situationally responsive while having clear and explicit goals – it is just a matter of achieving a balance between the two. For instance, a guiding framework would have helped me be more intentional about my teaching and learning goals, which I would then be able to use to create lesson plans that were relevant and meaningful to my students’ lives.
RAP Around also includes a community engagement component, similar to the Community Involvement Program (CIP) in Singapore schools. However, the way that community engagement is approached is different from how CIP is approached in Singapore schools in a number of ways.

Firstly, students design their own community engagement projects. They have the agency to decide the “who, what, and how” of their projects, and are held accountable for whatever decisions they make. In deciding the “who, what, and how” of their projects, they critically engage with the world around them. They decide the constituency they want to work with on their project, and ask whether this constituency even needs their help to begin with. As Aidan, a Level Four student said as he shared his reflections on The Egleston Square Project:

Our recent project on Egleston Square gave me an insight on what community action is about. Community action is about helping other people. I think that the hard part about it is sometimes people do not want help for reasons you do not understand. You have to go around the neighborhood and ask around to understand what people do or don’t need or what they want for the community. So the class of Level Four went around and asked. We asked storekeepers and other people. We did a survey and in the end we ended up helping the neighborhood in a good way. I think that this experience really helped me do more community action (personal communication, March 30, 2013).

Similarly, the students have the agency to decide what issues they want to focus their project on. At the beginning of the semester, I had them sit down and brainstorm a list of issues that are important to them: issues that are happening in their community, and issues that they would like to change. This helped me realize as a teacher what was relevant and important to them as children, and to envision what my role could be in helping them achieve their objectives. The students were also about to devise the “how” of their project – the steps they would take to achieve their purpose. Whether that was
creating a brochure in the fall semester, or implementing a Neighborhood Walks campaign in the spring semester, they were able to design and collaborate on the project, and to take an active role in shaping it and implementing it. This allowed for the active engagement of all students, which was closely monitored by Tricia and myself.

Secondly, unlike the textbook-heavy approach in Singapore, RAP Around explicitly encourages students use the immediate world around them as an educational medium to promote social cohesion. In Civics and Moral Education, the textbook examples are derived from real world examples, but these real world examples might not necessarily apply to students’ lives. The disconnect between what is being depicted in the textbook and the availability of a space to apply that learning outside the classroom limits the effectiveness of the Civics and Moral Education curriculum. Although values such as respect, responsibility, and harmony are taught, they are confined to the four walls of the classroom. Lessons are limited to the depicted lessons in the textbook, and students are asked not to question what values are important to them, but to adhere to the values that are prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The lack of a textbook and a set curriculum at the Neighborhood School allows students to take charge of their own learning, and to discuss the values that are relevant and important in their lives. As a result, they are able to see the importance of learning from the world around them everyday. This space of reflection gives students a place to ground their observations, and to build off each other’s experiences.

The experiential component of RAP Around is also embedded in the classroom discussions and assignments, making learning from the community and enforcing the importance of social cohesion an intentional, purposeful act. In Singapore, although
students are encouraged to engage with their community through CIP, they are not explicitly encouraged to connect their experiences with what they are learning in the classroom; an opportunity for learning and reflection is lost. Similarly, although students might be inclined to take what they have learned in class and apply it to their lives outside of the classroom, the lack of a space to come back to and reflect on their experiences limits the possibility for greater involvement and critical thinking to take place. Students like myself might then start to believe that learning only happens within the classroom, and consequently lose out on the countless learning opportunities that exist in the world around us. Although one might argue that this intentional approach of community engagement goes against the organic nature of the Neighborhood School’s approach to learning, I believe that it creates a space for students to act with intention, to learn from each other in sharing experiences, and to receive feedback and guidance in the process. Even though the creation of a space is intentional on the school’s part, the process of reflection and sharing is still organic – which again reinforces the ethos of the Neighborhood School’s approach to education, which is responsive to students and their needs.

Thirdly, a student’s understanding of social cohesion and the importance of community engagement among students is measured differently. In Singapore, the tests that are administered in Civics and Moral Education classes have clear right and wrong answers, and students are expected to know how to choose the “correct answer.” However, as one interview respondent, a currently college student, commented, “Real life is not as simple as choosing the correct multiple-choice answer on a test, and not everyone ascribes to the same values…but in Singapore in order to excel you have to fit
in...you have to fit the cookie cutter model” (personal communication, January 23, 2013). The Singapore education system teaches a set of values that it expects students to ascribe to, rather than allowing students to discover what is important to them on their own. The Neighborhood School, on the other hand, is open to students questioning their own preconceived notions as well as societal expectations in order for students to discover their own values and their own presumptions. There are no tests, no quizzes, or formal examinations. Teachers assess students’ understanding by their participation in discussions, and by the reflections they write in their journals. Although the Neighborhood School’s approach is more difficult to control and monitor because of how open and malleable its curriculum is, students have the opportunity to make sense of what they are learning in more authentic and meaningful ways.

Therefore, although the Ministry of Education and the Neighborhood School share similar goals of promoting social cohesion through education, their interpretations, approaches, and practical applications do not align. More specifically, even though the Civics and Moral Education curriculum and the RAP Around program have similar desired outcomes of promoting social cohesion, their ideas of what building a community means and how they implement their respective programs to achieve these goals is very different.

**Equality Across Contexts**

Another goal that the Neighborhood School and the Ministry of Education both believe in is the importance of equality in education. However, the two models of education interpret the idea of equality in different ways.
Equality in Singapore’s education system is more synonymous with the idea of fairness, and is understood as giving all students equal opportunities to excel. In practice, this translates as giving students the same examinations and holding all students to the same high standards and expectations, regardless of background, race, and socioeconomic class. At the Neighborhood School, equality is more representative of equity, or substantive equality, where each student receives an education that takes into consideration his or her cultural background and where he or she is coming from, and takes an approach to learning with those considerations in mind to create the most conducive learning environment for that child.

The way that teachers are trained in each context is also very different. Because all teachers in Singapore are trained at the National Institute of Education (NIE), they receive the exact same form of training, and are thus inclined to teach in very similar ways. Teachers who teach at the elite schools are trained to teach the same way as teachers who teach at neighborhood schools. Differences in the type of student population are not accounted for, and teachers only receive their posting upon the completion of their training program (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Neighborhood School, on the other hand, has a self-selecting group of teachers who have a shared vision with the goals of the Neighborhood School, and who are thus committed to creating a learning environment that recognizes, acknowledges, and celebrates the differences between students. The teachers went through different teacher certification program, and thus all have their own styles of teaching. For example, Kaye, the Level One lead teacher, is currently trying out a form of Montessori style learning in her classroom. Joyce, the 3 lead teacher, on the other hand, takes a more traditional approach to teaching, but as one
of the founding teachers of the Neighborhood School, still holds strong by its ethos and mission of creating a school that will provide “developmentally appropriate education to children representative of the diversity of Boston neighborhoods within an atmosphere of respect and consistent caring” (Neighborhood School, 2013). Therefore, teachers are mindful of the diversity, and have the flexibility to account for the various inequities that might exist in the classroom and the ability to address them in a caring and respectful way.

The two education models also approach differences in learning ability in various ways. The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is the first formal step in the testing trajectory that every Singaporean student has to undergo at the age of twelve, regardless of learning ability or how much tuition one has been able to receive. Although this approach is fair in theory, whether it is just in practice is questionable. As one teacher I interviewed explained, because learning disabilities are not entirely recognized in Singapore schools, teachers are not adequately trained to address them. Some teachers also did not want to appear as if they were playing favorites by giving special attention to certain students (personal communication, January 23, 2013). As a result, in the pursuit of equality, some students with learning disabilities fall through the cracks. The Neighborhood School, on the other hand, recognizes that students have various levels of learning abilities, and that these abilities exist on a spectrum (Morrow, personal communication, October 3, 2012). All students are recognized for their strengths, and given assistance on dealing with their weaknesses – whether they have a weakness in reading, concentration, math, or social skills. Because I am still relatively new to this approach of learning, I sometimes forget that. I once assigned a written reflection to the
students that would be displayed to parents during the annual Learning Fair, under the assumption that each student was capable of writing a paragraph on what he or she learned from doing community projects. However, when I noticed that one boy kept writing and crushing up what he had written, I realized that I had forgotten that not everyone in the class was a strong writer, even if they might all be good thinkers. So Tricia suggested that I talk to him and to help him write out his reflections – so that his voice could still be included. And I’m glad I did, because he had a lot to say. This small example is reflective of the Neighborhood School’s mission of providing a “developmentally appropriate education” to children. Because it believes that children develop at different speeds, and also in different directions, teachers are expected to keep students at the center of learning, as opposed to centering learning on a curriculum which students are expected to adhere to.

Equality in Singapore is also synonymous with the idea of meritocracy. As noted in the National Pledge, Singaporeans will pledge themselves as “one united people…regardless of race, language, or religion.” Similarly, regardless of a student’s race, language, or religion, he or she will be treated equally by the Ministry of Education. There is no quota as to how many Chinese, Malays, Indians, or Caucasians are allowed in a school. Things are different at the Neighborhood School, where diversity is so highly prized and valued that it is willing to artificially create a racially diverse classroom that is reflective of “the diversity of Boston’s neighborhoods” (Morrow, personal communication, October 3, 2012). Although one might argue that the artificial creation of diversity in the Neighborhood School goes against its organic approach to education, it does with the intention of accounting for the unequal opportunities that different racial
and ethnic groups start out with. Whether or not this approach is just, is a question of perspective and priorities in education. Singapore, on the other hand, is against any kind of affirmative action, all in the name of fairness and equality – even though it is clear that certain groups in Singapore are clearly more privileged than others (Sowell, 2004). For instance, although Singapore has a very multiracial and multiethnic population, the general consensus among people I interviewed was that most of the wealthiest and most privileged individuals are Caucasian or Chinese (personal communication, 2012). My elementary school and secondary school, Singapore Chinese Girls’ School, is an example of this racial divide. Although one’s primary school is dependent on where one lived, secondary schools are dependent on one’s PSLE results. But receiving a solid primary school education is key on doing well on the PSLE. Therefore, because the top primary schools tend to be in the wealthier neighborhoods, students from wealthier families, who are mostly of Chinese descent, tend to receive a higher quality education than students who go to neighborhood schools. As R. Quinn Moore (2000) writes:

As a result of certain structural inequalities in the educational system and a general social bias toward the Chinese, Chinese students seem to enjoy an educational advantage that contributes to their disproportionate economic success…The Chinese on average are disproportionately more advantaged than Malays or Indians, and these advantages have implications for the racial distribution of opportunity.

Therefore, though Singapore believing in the importance of giving every student equal opportunities, it fails to address the structural inequalities that exist in its society, such as the unequal access to extra help that some students receive before they even begin formal schooling, and the extra help that some students receive outside of the official school hours, such as private tutoring. With more financial resources, wealthier families, who
are mostly Chinese, are able to further supplement their children’s already privileged education, thereby exacerbating the existing inequality embedded in the education policies that do not account for racial and socioeconomic differences.

In contrast, the Neighborhood School believes that giving each student an equal opportunity to succeed is inherently tied to acknowledging that students come from a variety of backgrounds. When teachers are aware that socioeconomic inequities that might affect a student’s ability, they can be more mindful about how they teach their lessons, and how they might interact with each student most effectively to help them succeed. Building relationships with families is also highly valued at the Neighborhood School. By building relationships with families, teachers are able to get to know each child in the context of their family, and thus have a better understanding on how to give that child what he or she needs to succeed.

The Neighborhood School also attempts to address existing societal inequalities through its admissions process. In order to give more historically disenfranchised groups access to a Neighborhood School education, it reserves a number of spaces in each class for students of color. As noted in Chapter 3, however, this selective admissions process also becomes a barrier to entry for other families. Only the students who gain access to this exclusive education will benefit from the values of the Neighborhood School. Therefore, although the barriers to excel within the school are low, the barriers to gaining
entry to the system are high. This unequal level of access thus contradicts the school’s approach emphasis on addressing societal inequalities, and excludes many from gaining an equal opportunity to receive a Neighborhood School education. If implemented in a public school context, the Neighborhood School would not be able to pick or maintain its desired composition of racial diversity. Although this might lower barriers to entry, it might also raise barriers to receiving the same quality of education that the current school possesses due to its intimate size, because the potential for this model succeeding in a public school context rests on the level of investment from all stakeholders: students, teachers, and parents alike.

In terms of access in the Singaporean context, equality is understood as giving all students access to the same national public education system – a level of access that does not exist at the Neighborhood School. In the eyes of the Ministry of Education, the Neighborhood School would probably be seen as outright elitist and exclusionary, even if that might not be the school’s intention. Students also learn from the same standardized national curriculum, until they are streamed into the various streams based on ability. Even within the various streams, all students within that particular stream are learning from an identical curriculum that is prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Giving students the same materials in the same school system allows the Ministry to hold them to the same standards and expectations, which are then reflected in the nationwide,
standardized exams. Barriers to entry in the Singapore system do exist, but in different ways than they do at the Neighborhood School. Because the Ministry of Education does not account for socioeconomic differences, or the underlying racial inequalities inherently tied to those socioeconomic differences, it creates barriers of access for more disenfranchised racial groups to gain access to the elite schools. Although the barriers to gaining access to the education system in Singapore are much lower than the barriers that exist to gain access to the Neighborhood School, the barriers to being able to excel within the system are much higher.

Therefore, equality in Singapore is better understood as fairness, while equality in at the Neighborhood School is better understood as justice. In Singapore, equality in education is seen as giving every child a shoe of the same size, so that they might learn to walk. It gives each student the same path, and holds each student to the same expectations. However, at the Neighborhood School, equality in education is seen as giving each child in the school a shoe that fits. It celebrates the fact that every child is different, and in doing so does its best to address the different needs each child might have.
The Best of Both Worlds: Neighborhood Schools in Singapore

When I shared the Neighborhood School’s approach to learning with some of the Singaporean educators and individuals I interviewed and asked them whether they thought it could work in Singapore, I received a resounding “no.” Many felt that Singapore teachers were already overworked, and that we didn’t have the resources to create that kind of learning environment. “It’s a great idea,” they said. “But it wouldn’t work here.”

I disagree. I believe that in order to be better, we have to learn from each other. In the same way that the Neighborhood School adopted a “Singapore Math” curriculum, Singapore should also open itself up to different approaches to learning. Singapore has a system that offers universal access with a mechanical banking pedagogy, while the Neighborhood Schools has a system with an organic and holistic pedagogy but with extremely limited access. The Singapore system values discipline, rigor, and hard work, while the Neighborhood School system values creativity, community, and authentic learning. The Singapore system is limited by its comprehensive, one-size-fits-all model, while the Neighborhood School is limited by its exclusive, intimate model that is only available to a select few. Each model of education has its own strengths and weaknesses, but what is stopping us from having the best of both worlds? I don’t believe that it’s a lack of resources that would prevent this change from taking place, but rather a set of expectations and priorities that is standing in the way of change. Although the different interpretations of social cohesion and equality in each context create two distinct cultures, I believe that there are always opportunities to learn from one another, especially if one context is doing something positive and beneficial. I am not saying that we need schools
like the Neighborhood School in Singapore, or that an exact replica of the Neighborhood School’s model could be implemented in Singapore schools. I am also not saying that Singapore’s education system is inferior to that of the Neighborhood School’s; quite contrary, there are many positive aspects of the Singaporean education system that I would like to see continue. The Neighborhood School might not be able to become a system like Singapore’s with universal access because of its size limitations, but Singapore’s public education system has the potential to incorporate new elements into its pedagogy. I believe that certain elements and practices of the Neighborhood School could greatly benefit Singapore schools and Singaporean students, and that we should consider all the possibilities to make our education system the best that it can be.

A part of my vision for this convergence of ideas is the possibility for the neighborhood schools in Singapore to take on a greater role in the community, in order to build a stronger learning community. Neighborhood schools in Singapore have long been stigmatized, and are generally less desirable than the elite schools. However, I believe that they are an untapped resource that could strengthen the learning that happens in Singapore’s public schools.

Firstly, the location of neighborhood schools is key. Because of the way Singapore was planned and developed after it became an independent republic in the 1960s, school distribution is divided up by housing estates. Each housing estate was designed by the Housing & Development Board (HDB) to be self-sustainable, and thus has a variety of community resources, such as schools, hospitals, parks, and sports

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6 To clarify, the term “neighborhood schools” in lowercase is categorized as what Singaporean society generally refers to when talking about the non-elite schools in Singapore, while “Neighborhood School” refers to the independent elementary school in Jamaica Plain, MA. It was purely coincidence that the school I was posted to was called The Neighborhood School – it was not planned.
complexes. Housing estates were also created with the intention of promoting social cohesion and community:

Another key priority of HDB is the building of cohesive communities within its towns. Living environments are provided with community spaces for residents to mingle and interact. Public housing policies and schemes are formulated not only to meet changing needs and aspirations, but they also support national objectives such as maintaining racial harmony and stronger family ties, and focus on the needs of elderly and those who may be in financial difficulty (Housing & Development Board, 2012).

However, neighborhood schools currently only serve as an educational facility for individuals living in that community. They are generally not directly involved with the community, or open to inviting the community within their school walls. With more than 8 percent of Singaporeans currently living in HDB’s housing estates, neighborhood schools are clearly an untapped resource for communities to benefit from (Housing & Development Board, 2012). Because of the layout and design of housing estates, and the neighborhood schools that exist within them, neighborhood schools are well located to become a promising site for the kind of community-based learning and more authentic forms of learning that are practiced at the Neighborhood School in Jamaica Plain, MA.

Secondly, neighborhood schools in Singapore could follow the example of the Neighborhood School by making a more explicit attempt to get to know the population they are working with, to provide the best education for their students. Getting to know the community better, and to celebrate and understand its differences as opposed to merely tolerating them, will not only benefit the school’s relationship with the community, but also teach students valuable lessons in collaboration and social cohesion. Teachers should also be trained more comprehensively, to recognize these differences that exist and to learn how to address them, as is done in the Neighborhood School in the
US. In getting to know its immediate population, it can better understand its place in the community and can serve its students better.

Thirdly, the resources in the community that are available to neighborhood schools are priceless and should be harnessed for good. For instance, having lessons reflect issues that the community is facing could enable students to make connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they are experiencing in their daily lives. Learning from the community will enable more authentic learning experiences, particularly in classes like Civics and Moral Education, allowing students to make more concrete inquiries into their different modes of thinking. To reduce the high student-to-teacher ratio that currently exists in Singaporean schools, members of the community could also volunteer to assist in the classroom. By getting involved, parents and community members would also become more invested in the schools because they have a part to play in the success of the students, thereby increasing their stake as stakeholders.

Although Singapore’s curriculum has its strengths, its curriculum and pedagogy have much room for improvement. If learning becomes more student-centered, as it is at the Neighborhood School, as opposed to curriculum-centered, as it currently is in Singapore, students would be able to have learning molded to their strengths, as opposed to having to conform to a set of national standards that might not be beneficial or relevant for every individual. Curriculum could also ground learning in the world surrounding the students, as it is in RAP Around time at the Neighborhood School, as opposed to relying heavily on an arbitrary textbook, for "a moral education is most potent when lessons are taught to children in the course of real events, not just as abstract lessons – the mode of
emotional literacy” (Goleman, 1995, p.285). Approaches to testing in Singapore could also be modified to encompass a more open interpretation of academic success. As Ken Robinson (2010) writes:

School systems everywhere inculcate us with a narrow view of intelligence and capacity and overvalue particular sorts of talent and ability. In doing so, they neglect others that are just as important, and they disregard the relationships between them in sustaining the vitality of our lives and communities. This stratified, one-size-fits-all approach to education marginalizes all of those who do not take naturally to learning this way (p.14).

In adopting the Neighborhood School’s approach to assessing a student’s progress, Singapore would be able to expand its current narrow view of intelligence and capacity to ensure that success is not exclusive to the few who fit the cookie-cutter values that the Singaporean education system currently ascribes to.

The role of teachers in Singapore could also be improved upon. The Neighborhood School believes that being valued and attended to can be personally empowering for students, so teachers take on an active role to ensure that students all feel valued and affirmed in the classroom so that they can be their best selves. If teachers in Singapore took on a more caring role, as opposed to a more authoritative role, students might be more open to speaking up in class and participating. Even if the Ministry of Education changes its curriculum to include more questioning, the success of the curriculum is still determined by how well teachers implement the said curriculum. As one respondent said, “We would need a new breed of teachers – teachers who believe and support other forms of learning that aren’t based on test scores” (personal communication, January 21, 2013). Teachers would therefore have to actively model the importance of social cohesion and critical thinking, in order for a curriculum similar to that of the Neighborhood School’s to succeed.
During the interviews, I asked some individuals whether they could share some suggestions that would improve Singapore’s education system. Many of the suggestions shared were mostly pedagogical, such as introducing more open-ended responses in exams, or making critical thinking lessons, such as Edward de Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats*, more affordable to low-income families (personal communication, 2013). Although these suggestions are important and valid, they don’t go to the root of the issue. They do not address the societal inequalities or lack of critical thinking in Singapore schools. Strengthening the community around the school, as I have observed in teaching at the Neighborhood School, has the ability to strengthen the learning community and the depth of learning that takes place within a school. With stronger communities, we will hopefully build stronger schools.

If aspects of the Neighborhood School model were to be implemented in Singapore, the difficulties would not only be in changing ideas and curriculum, but also in changing practice. One of the biggest challenges I foresee in changing practice is changing the way teachers are trained. Because all teachers undergo the same teacher certification training at the National Institute of Education (NIE), the ways schools are run would not be the only thing that would have to change – the way that teachers are trained would have to be reimagined and implemented as well. It would require experienced teachers to be retrained, so that they will have the skills and the confidence to introduce a more open and organic approach to learning in their classroom, and to become comfortable about not looking for the absolute “right” answer in their students’ work. It might also be valuable for some individuals from Neighborhood School to actually engage in conversation with some representatives from the Ministry of
Education, so that the Ministry would be able to conceive a vision for the future of education in Singapore with some help from the Neighborhood School itself. The Ministry of Education needs to step away from only learning from private, prestigious boarding schools such as the Hotchkiss School, and to expand its scope to learning from smaller but equally valuable sites of learning such as the Neighborhood School.

Achieving this vision would require a number of steps, on a variety of levels. It would require the approval of the Singapore government, followed by a comprehensive re-envisioning of the Ministry of Education’s goals and practices, such as the overemphasis on testing and using tests to measure a students’ success. Then, it would call for a restructuring of the way new teachers are taught and trained at NIE, and the retraining of experienced teachers to ensure that all teachers have an understanding of the new approaches to learning. Achieving this vision would also require the investment of parents and families, for without their support this vision will once again face that disconnect between policy and reality that I discussed in Chapter Two. Ideally, it would also include community partners and organizations to work together with neighborhoods, schools, and parents to enable a web of relationships and networks to be formed. Most importantly, it would require policy makers, educators, parents, families, and students to engage in a national conversation to understand what the actual needs of students are in order to determine what kind of changes it would need to make to the current system. A smaller pilot program would not work if it still had to adhere to the larger national standards of testing and streaming, even if it had the commitment of collaborators and educators. Therefore, unless a pilot program was able to remove itself completely from the system and its regulations, the only approach I see to achieving this vision is to
restructure the whole system to address the educational needs of students today, and work from there.

My vision would require a paradigm shift in Singaporean education. It would also call not only for an overhaul of the current curriculum and pedagogy, but also for a change in ideas, expectations, priorities, and practice. I observed the values that I believe in become a reality in the school setting of at the Neighborhood School in Jamaica Plain, and I have faith that this could potentially become a reality in Singapore someday. However, I also recognize that these are my values, and that they might not necessarily align with the values of the Singaporean government, the Ministry of Education, or Singaporean parents. A change in ethos and pedagogy would need to be culturally relevant; if the society values only rigor and discipline, and measures success by test scores, then Singapore’s education system will not be able to change. All stakeholders – the Ministry of Education, schools, parents, and students – would have to want a change in the education system for this movement to be successful. However, it has to start somewhere. Creating a critical consciousness through authentic learning shouldn’t be a luxury – it should be a right and an essential basis for all education.
Conclusion: Looking Towards the Future

This thesis has served as a capstone, not only to my Wellesley education but also my journey from Singapore to New England and the spaces in between. It has served as a link between my idealized visions and the practical applications of issues that are important to me. My good friend Meredyth Grange recently said to me:

A thesis is never finished. It’s not supposed to be because a thesis is simply another marker in your wonderful journey of scholarship. Be proud of everything you’ve written at this point and be excited for how your ideas will expand as time goes on. This feels like it marks an end, but it really marks a beginning (personal communication, 2013).

This thesis is therefore still a work in progress, a piece of research that I plan to continue working on even after I graduate from Wellesley, an endeavor that is merely a first step into what I hope will be a life-long devotion to and journey in the field of education. By comparing two different contexts of education, I gained a new and different perspective in my own learning. I was able to look at my own educational journey in a different way, and to better understand the two systems of education that brought me to where I am today.

So where am I, at this point? I am standing on the bridge that connects my two worlds, trying to envision how I will be able to grow the beautiful flowers that are growing on one side of the riverbank on the other side, even though each bank has such different soil. Although I to recognize that I don’t know everything, I have done my best in this thesis to write about what I do know, and what I believe in. I want to challenge the limitations that currently exist, and sow the seeds for change in the future.
In my ideal world, I would be able to take the best of both worlds and combine it into my perfect education system. However, the real world contains many more obstacles. So as I graduate from Wellesley this May, I will begin my search into the foray of education and inquiry. As I sit here considering my options post-graduation as I write this thesis, I have become more inclined to believe that I need to return to the Singapore education system if I want to address these issues. Whether I join the Ministry of Education as a teacher or conduct research for the National Institute of Education in Singapore, the writing of this thesis has cemented my belief that I need to work with the system if I want to see anything change.

We often see education as a means of empowerment and a method to provide equal access to a better life. However, the goals of schooling, as noble as they may be, are also capable of perpetuating societal inequities and inhibiting social cohesion. One way we can address this problem is by building a more equitable and cohesive education system that addresses these underlying issue. We need schools that nurture a love of learning within and beyond the four walls of a classroom, equipping students with not only academic skills, but life skills as well. Good schools will embed learning in authentic experiences, while holding students to high standards to achieve the most positive outcomes for all students. Educating children effectively goes further and deeper than the statistics of test scores, creating a holistic environment where every student, teacher, and parent has a stake in the schooling experience and becomes actively involved and committed to education and learning as a whole. However, these experiences are deeply embedded in pedagogy and access, both of which can have either a stifling or a liberating effect on a student’s educational experience. In doing so, they might be able to
address the need to create authentic experiences in the face of inequality by educating students to become caring but critical thinkers who will make a difference in the world.


References


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