

“I Not Stupid”: Exploration and examination in Singapore

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Before coming to Singapore, my mom kept reminding me of the well-acclaimed Singaporean movie “I Not Stupid”. She always teased me by saying “You stupid!”¹ in Singlish. From her point of view, I would be scolded by my professors if I didn’t behave well and be studious. “You stupid!” has been lingering in my mind since then.

I know Singapore is a competitive economy with a bunch of competent people. I had no prior knowledge about the education system here though prior to my arrival. From the shallow depiction of the movie, Singapore practices streaming and teachers solely judge students based on their academic results. Majoring in English and Education in Hong Kong, I took courses from National Institute of Education (NIE), the motherland of all qualified teachers in this little red dot. Seemingly, I would love to dig into Singapore’s education system and see if “You Stupid” is still the case.

I went shopping with Shuyi, my Singaporean neighbour, when I first arrived. She was an open-minded and curious person, so she asked me to tell her more about Hong Kong. One thing in our conversation that particularly sparked my attention was education. According to Shuyi’s sharing, streaming is still practiced in secondary schools despite strong dissent. Also, students experience a high level of stress as they are very competitive and hard-working even at the university level. Curriculum-wise, academic standard is over-emphasised. My instinct stopped me from asking if teachers saying “You Stupid!” was an actual custom as it might be offensive. Yet, it seemed to me that Shuyi’s remarks echoed with what “I No Stupid” tried to illustrate: school is just a place to study, while teachers are dogmatic and discouraging. At that

¹ Literally “You are stupid!”

moment, I felt certain that Singapore, being ranked neck and neck with Hong Kong in PISA² and many aspects of education, had similar educational values and issues.

As the start of the semester approached, I started to go to class in NIE. At first, I enrolled in a course related to constructivist learning. I was greatly impressed with what the lecturer was trying to instill in us: a mind to think and a will to encourage students to pursue knowledge in an open, diverse and student-centric environment. He was not just bluffing. He demonstrated the use of various technological tools to achieve his aforementioned vision that I had never tried to use in class before. He even showed us how these tools, combined with appropriate teaching methodologies and comprehensive planning, were applied to teaching and learning in authentic Singaporean classrooms. I started to hypothesise if Singaporean classroom climate has shifted to a tech-focused curriculum with less spoon-feeding. Yet, I could not get over what Shuyi and the film suggested still.

After two weeks, the class was sadly cancelled due to administrative issues. I was then placed in another class on designing learning environment with Internet of Things. With the course title, I could already sense that this module would be a hardcore one to a humanities spirit like me. Fortunately, the professor has been very supportive and I had fun learning about robotics, micro:bit³ and Arduino⁴. I was told in this class that Singapore is being transformed into a technology hub with the notion of Smart City, so every Singaporean has to be tech-savvy. Also, all Singaporean children receive STEM⁵ education and they are even entitled to a free micro:bit for picking up coding skills.

² Programme for International Student Assessment

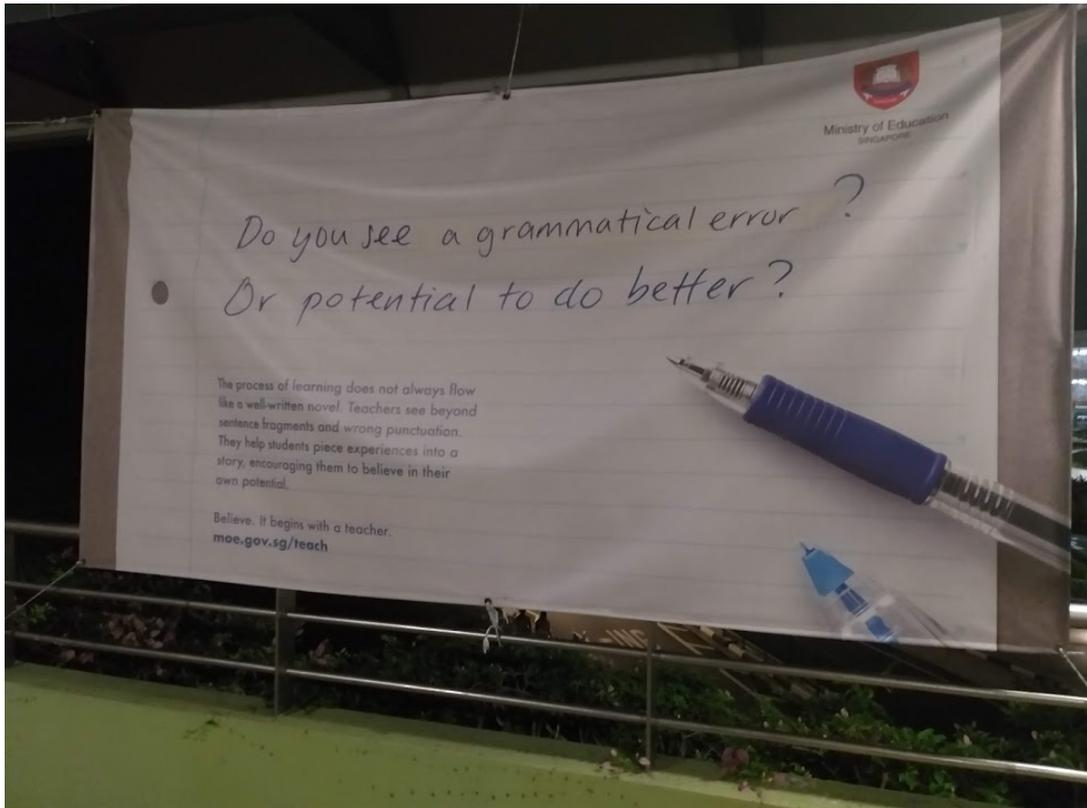
³ A pocket-sized computer that can be coded. It can also be linked to different sensors and parts to form Internet of Things and solve daily problems

⁴ A small computer for coding

⁵ Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

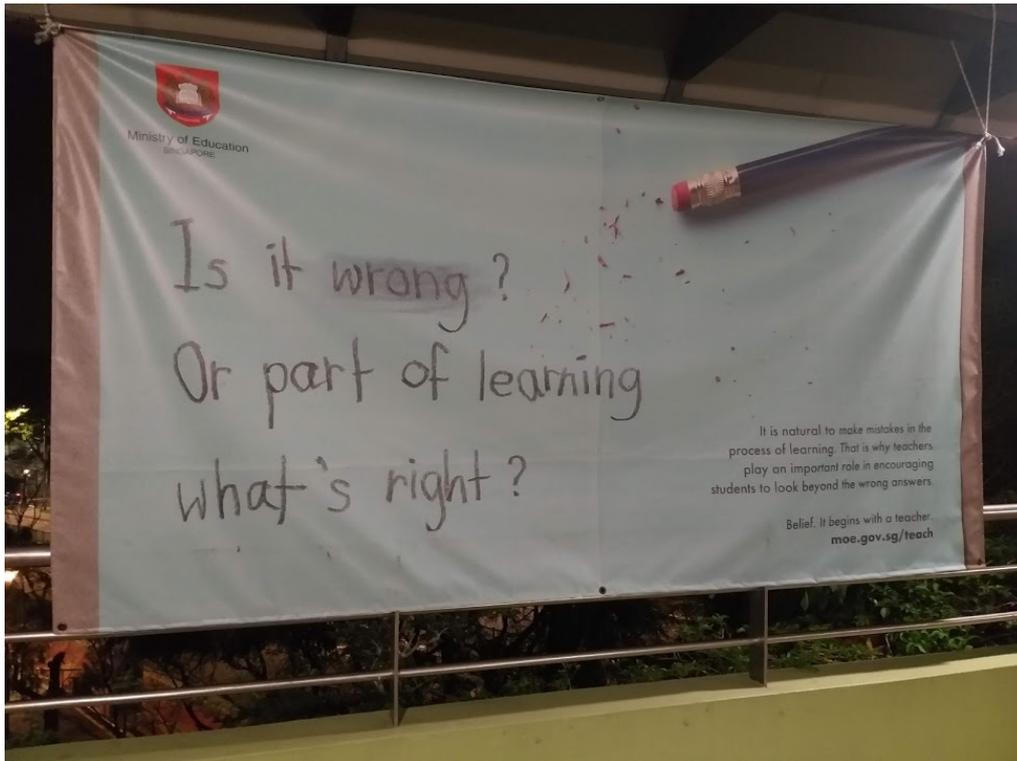
Going back to the line, “You Stupid!” which cannot be erased from my mind, I did not observe this practice of scolding students through personal attacks and physical punishment in Singapore in this day and age.

My professors from NIE were very warm-hearted and they were really passionate about teaching both students of different majors and teachers to be. They are aspiring educators who inspire student teachers to pass virtues on to the younger generation. On the humble ground, they offer very concrete advice on classroom management and student mentoring to us. Some of the staff are actually in-service teachers who possess a rich set of teaching experiences. I have sat in on a class about inclusive education before. The module is conducted by teachers who specialise in special needs education for years. Surprisingly, both of them have children with special needs. Their rich experiences allowed them to possess effective teaching strategies to manage multicultural students of different capabilities, so scolding and labelling students is taboo and not an actual practice. Also, the Ministry of Education Singapore (MOE) cultivates positive beliefs in both teachers and students. Mistakes are being seen as opportunities for further improvement instead of something negative. In addition, teachers are advised to encourage students to do better. It appears to me that the depiction of “I No Stupid” is retro and inapplicable to the current teaching landscape.



A

poster of MOE's goal on campus



Another poster of MOE's goal on campus

Based on what Shuyi had told me and “I Not Stupid”, I’d like to point out a few things about the critique against Singaporean education. These claims can never be proved unless I do a detailed empirical research. Yet, the stark contrast between the second-hand information and my first-hand experiences has sharpened my awareness of stereotype, generalisation and bias. I am not here to sing praises of or defend the Singaporean education system. However, it is unfair to judge whether the negative claims and presumptions are valid as I do not know the full picture of the education system here and I am not even part of it. The lack of research basis and my limited expertise in the education field cause me to sit on the fence as well. I do not want to see the world through a pair of tinted glasses which distorts my vision. Instead, I want to be observant enough to see the world from multiple perspectives without jumping to the conclusion since stereotyping is definitely dangerous. With stereotypes, we may ignore new information that do not meet our expectation, triggering confirmation bias which may impede intercultural communication (Jackson, 2014).

Certainly, it is very easy to fall into the trap of judging since we all have our preferences in life which may dangerously lead to biases. Human, being affective animals, can be swayed by our own emotions as well. Born and raised in Hong Kong, I have a very strong sense of belonging to my homeland, resulting in a distinctive regional identity. While Singapore and Hong Kong are often being seen as rivals, I did not want to fall into the trap of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentric people see out-group as inferior and in-group interests being more important than those of an out-group (Sumner, 1911). Dangerously, ethnocentrism hinders one's appreciation of a host country. Also, it may cause communication breakdowns as no one wants to make friends with aloof and arrogant people. In a globalised era, countries have to cooperate to achieve a win-win situation and this concept is widely promoted in Singapore. Therefore, most Singaporeans are friendly to outsiders and proactively engage in cross-cultural events. For instance, Temasek Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Singapore, organises a Leadership Enrichment and Regional Networking programme (TF LEaRN) to unite students from ASEAN countries, including Singaporeans. As part of this holistic programme, I can really feel Singapore's effort in cultivating multiculturalism and people's cultural awareness.



Asian friends coming together in a TF LEaRN event

Writing this reflection has allowed me to ponder over many trivial things that had happened during my sojourn. After all, it is these minor details and small talks which make up my life here as an exchange student. I am a keen believer of experiential learning. When it comes to experiential learning, some people put forward that hands-on learning is enough to make a person flourish intellectually, but my NIE professor disagrees. In his opinion, being minds-on is most important. I do agree more with his opinion since solely having an experience is meaningless if you do not make full sense of it by reflective observing the surrounding, conceptualising your learning and experimenting your new-found insights (Kolb, 1984). Through writing, I can better organise my thoughts and revisit my experiences. Hence, I can better prepare my speech acts and behaviour before encountering cultural differences again. By looking back on what I did and producing an account, I can also celebrate my ups and my downs during this once-in-a-lifetime journey. In the time to come, I will possess a more open

attitude to the unknown. Also, I will be more courageous to reach out and try out things that I have not done before.

Recalling my arrival, many Singaporeans asked why I had chosen to go to Singapore instead of the West despite its geographical proximity to Hong Kong. The many experiences that I have here are bulletproof evidence that even among Southeast Asian countries which have a dominant Chinese population, diverse cultures can be observed and the differences are worth investigating and experiencing. At this point in time, I have already seen a lot of interesting things and cultural differences here. And I strongly believe there is even more to be seen in this small albeit vibrant country.

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