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# Book review: Singapore's approach to developing teachers—Hindsight, insight, and foresight authored by Woon Chia Liu

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## KEYWORDS

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In the 1960s, Singaporeans were poorly educated. Singaporean education was the envy of none. Today, Singaporeans enjoy what some believe to be the best educational system in the world—the envy of all. How did this miracle happen?

The author of *Singapore's approach to developing teachers* (2022), Woon Chia Liu (Dean of Teacher Education at the National Institute of Education [NIE], co-chair of NIE's Teacher Education Model for the 21st Century, and former high school teacher) is perhaps the best placed educator in Singapore to explain how the “Little Red Dot” on the world map developed its flourishing educational system. According to Liu, the foundation to the nation's educational success was its focus on the quality of its teachers. Of course, many nations focus on their teachers, but Singapore did so deliberately, strategically, and with a full commitment to provide its teachers with the resources they needed to thrive. This is a book about how a nation supported its teachers—but also the costs of doing so.

On the bookshelves of many educators are titles telling the story of how a nation elevated its educational system to world-class status, such as *Teach like Finland* (Walker, 2017), *Learning from Shanghai* (Tan, 2013), and even the earlier-published *Learning from Singapore* (Ng, 2017). What makes *Singapore's approach to developing teachers* different is that the story is told by a professor who was in daily contact with everyone involved in the effort to elevate Singaporean education to world-class status, including the Ministers of Education, NIE policy makers, University Deans, chairs of special committees, principals, head teachers, beginning teachers, preservice teachers, students, and parents. As they say in the musical *Hamilton*, she was “in the room where it happened.”

*How did Singapore achieve educational success?* Singapore's rise was a decades-long tale. According to Liu, it started with governmental policy and the priorities of the Ministry of Education (MOE). To realize its priorities, the MOE created the institutions and organizations needed to realize its national goals, such as the NIE and the Academy of Singaporean Teachers (AST). These organizations prioritized good teaching, and its standards were high (Liu, 2022, p. 34). To help teachers' reach these high standards, the MOE made a special effort to provide systematic teacher support, such as professional collaboration and diverse career trajectories (Teacher Growth Model; Liu, 2022, p. 72–73). Promotions were based on merit and professional growth. Beginning teacher development was prioritized. Schools treated beginning teachers very well *via* a mentoring system and a reduced workload. Eventually, the tripartite partnership (MOE, NIE, schools) came together to produce a teacher-centric support system. The “coherence” within the tripartite system is Singapore's “secret sauce” (e.g., “common vision” section in Chapter 3; Tripartite Partnership, Chapter 5; “shared goals and purpose, mutual respect; commitment to work together”).

This policy—teacher education—schools collaboration (i.e., MOE, NIE, schools) is what makes the Singaporean system unique. For example, in the USA, policy makers produce policies and identify best practices with elected representatives. However, discrepancies in perspectives from school practitioners are likely to prevent local implementation of state-level discipline policy (e.g., Arkansas Act 1059; Anderson and McKenzie, 2022). In other countries (e.g., China), national policies are made and communicated unilaterally rather than collaboratively. Teachers have little voice to provide their input and priorities into the shaping of national policies. In Singapore, all three agents have equal status and responsibility. They mutually communicate and make new programs to attain shared goals. And each party executes their own responsibility.

*How does Singapore prepare its teachers to provide 21<sup>st</sup> century education?* The tripartite partnership dedicates itself to providing Singaporean students with a 21st century education. This national goal begins with formulating shared values and a sense of mission that the three-core organizations (MOE, NIE, schools) achieve together (V<sup>3</sup>SK framework, p. 97). Singapore created new teacher training programs to support well-established existing professional platforms, such as school-based collaborative programs, professional learning communities, and inter-school level communities. These programs take instruction beyond traditional knowledge-based learning to emphasize 21st century skills such as critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity. The result of such values, planning, and teacher education is the education of students who can create problems, think critically, work collaborative, and develop novel solutions, rather than simply generate a designated answer to a pre-set question.

*What are the costs?* Although Singapore has a well-developed teacher educational system, we need to take a step back and ask what costs have been incurred. Teachers' high level of stress and burnout are critical issues. Singaporean teachers collectively report a high intention to leave the profession within 5 years (35%; OECD average 25%). Singapore supports its teachers and cares about their professional wellbeing (e.g., reduced administrative workload), but the Singaporean effort overlooks one robust predictor of teacher stress—namely, performance assessment of teachers. Singapore teacher education utilizes a competence-based performance assessment system that revolves around teacher accountability for high student achievement scores, and it put in place a teacher reward system to drive that assessment. The result is an atmosphere of high-stakes testing. The Singaporean effort also overlooks the important role played by teachers' instructional goals. The types of instructional goals that promote students' 21st century outcomes and teachers' autonomy and wellbeing are "intrinsic instructional goals" (e.g., teachers have students strive for personal growth and relationship growth; Jang, 2019), but the types of instructional goals that are commonplace in the Singaporean classroom are "extrinsic instructional goals" (e.g.,

teachers have students strive for high test scores and getting ahead of others). Another concern is the personal and social development of Singaporean students. As the PISA 2018 data attest, Singaporean students show high academic achievement, but there is room for improvement in terms of their personal and social development. For instance, bullying in Singapore is higher than the OECD average (ranked 28 out of 75 countries). This is educationally important. The mere presence of bullying and victimization influences students' mental and physical health (e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness and sadness) and academic performance (Marsh et al., 2022). According to Liu, Singaporean educators recognized these concerns, and they are currently upgrading their teacher education programs accordingly.

*Can educational stake holders in other countries learn from and successfully apply the Singaporean system to their nation?* All countries vary in culture and context. It might be difficult for other nations to replicate the Singaporean educational success story. However, all nations can benefit from Singapore's hindsight, insight, and foresight as catalysts to improve their own education system. The book is valuable reading to the full range of international educational stakeholders, including policy makers, teacher educators, school leaders, and researchers.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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