Education in a Democratic and Meritocratic Society: Moving Beyond Thriving to Flourishing

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Abstract: Following multiple disruptions and crises, global education stakeholders grapple with the issue of how to prepare learners for a future wrought with uncertainty and unpredictability. During the COVID-19 pandemic that caused global school closures, disruptions to learning occurred in differing scopes and magnitudes across different countries. International organisations reported that some students have incurred a 1-to-3-year learning loss, which might have ramifications on their holistic development and, further down the line, their socioeconomic prospects. An equitable solution must be sought for the world to move beyond recovering to flourishing. This article attempts to elucidate the underlying principles of Singapore's education system through Dewey's concept of democracy and education, defined from an apolitical stance. For Singapore, democracy is also balanced with pragmatic meritocracy, which is upheld as a means to provide equal opportunities for all, regardless of socioeconomic background. This paper describes Singapore's democratic and

meritocratic society, setting the backdrop for an education system that seeks to develop its citizens into resilient, values-anchored, and lifelong learners ready to confront the challenges of the future.
Keywords: democracy; education; meritocratic democracy; resilient education; values-anchored education; lifelong education

Educación en una sociedad democrática y meritocrática: Avanzando más allá de la prosperidad hacia el florecimiento

Resumen: Después de múltiples interrupciones y crisis, los actores globales en educación se enfrentan al problema de cómo preparar a los estudiantes para un futuro lleno de incertidumbre e imprevisibilidad. Durante la pandemia de COVID-19 que provocó el cierre global de las escuelas, se produjeron interrupciones en el aprendizaje de distintos alcances y magnitudes en diferentes países. Organizaciones internacionales informaron que algunos estudiantes han sufrido una pérdida de aprendizaje equivalente a 1 - 3 años de escolaridad y que esto podría impactar su desarrollo integral y, en el futuro, sus perspectivas socioeconómicas. Se debe buscar una solución equitativa para que el mundo avance más allá de la recuperación y prospere. Este artículo intenta dilucidar los principios subyacentes del sistema educativo de Singapur a través del concepto de democracia y educación de Dewey, definido desde una postura apolítica. Para Singapur, la democracia también se equilibra con la meritocracia pragmática, que se mantiene como un medio para brindar igualdad de oportunidades a todos, independientemente del origen socioeconómico. Este artículo ofrece una descripción de la sociedad democrática y meritocrática de Singapur que sirve de contexto para su sistema educativo, el cual busca desarrollar ciudadanos resilientes, arraigados en valores y aprendices de por vida, listos para enfrentar los desafíos del futuro.
Palabras clave: democracia; educación; democracia meritocrática; educación resiliente; educación arraigada en valores; educación continua

Educação em uma sociedade democrática e meritocrática: Avançando além do prosperar para o florescer

Resumo: Após múltiplas interrupções e crises, os interessados na educação global debatem a questão de como preparar os aprendizes para um futuro marcado pela incerteza e imprevisibilidade. Durante a pandemia do Covid-19, que causou o fechamento de escolas em todo o mundo, ocorreram interrupções na aprendizagem em diferentes âmbitos e magnitudes em diversos países. Organizações internacionais relataram que alguns estudantes sofreram uma perda de aprendizado de 1 a 3 anos, e que isso pode ter implicações em seu desenvolvimento integral e, mais adiante, em suas perspectivas socioeconômicas. Uma solução equitativa deve ser buscada para que o mundo avance não apenas para a recuperação, mas para o florescimento. Este artigo tenta elucidar os princípios subjacentes do sistema educacional de Singapura por meio do conceito de democracia e educação de Dewey, definido a partir de uma postura apolítica. Para Singapura, a democracia também é equilibrada com uma meritocracia pragmática, que é mantida como um meio de proporcionar oportunidades iguais para todos, independentemente do contexto socioeconômico. Este artigo oferece uma descrição da sociedade democrática e meritocrática de Singapura, que serve de pano de fundo para seu sistema educacional, buscando desenvolver seus cidadãos em pessoas resilientes, ancoradas em valores e comprometidos com a educação ao longo da vida, prontos para enfrentar os desafios do futuro.
Palavras-chave: democracia; educação; democracia meritocrática; educação resiliente; educação ancorada em valores; educação ao longo da vida

Education in a Democratic and Meritocratic Society: Moving Beyond Thriving to Flourishing

The world is no stranger to crises and disruptions. Nevertheless, it is the unprecedented magnitude of the crises and disruptions we are currently experiencing that has made a profound impact on the way we live, work, and learn. The fast-paced, rapidly changing technological advancements brought by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR; Schwab, 2016), combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, have made it impossible to clearly predict the challenges ahead. This uncertainty is further complicated by the Russia–Ukraine War and the energy crisis, among other disruptions. Where once the future was described as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), it is now more accurate to describe it as BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible; *Think Insights*, 2023). 4IR has caused societies to rethink the competencies, skills, and knowledge their citizens need and to reassess the importance and strength of moral character that individuals and nations must possess to survive and thrive well (Schwab, 2016). The pandemic exposed previously obscured fault lines in our societal structures; for example, our political, economic, and social systems were thought to be robust, but inequalities were revealed when the pandemic hit (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). In tandem, a pressing question we must answer is what education is needed to equip our young to face these challenges.

The inequality in our education systems was also brought to the fore. An alarming 1.725 billion learners, or 98.6% of the global population of learners, from pre-primary to tertiary levels in 200 countries, were reported to have been affected (United Nations, 2020), largely due to school closures during the respective lockdown periods. Another report cited six negative repercussions of school closures, of which two posited that 24 million children were likely to drop out of schooling completely, and 96% of children surveyed reported an increase in negative feelings toward schooling (ACAPS, 2020). Equally worrying was how COVID-19 hit different sectors of society harder than others, and unsurprisingly, those from disadvantaged backgrounds were the worst off (World Bank, 2020). For them, schools are not just establishments for learning but, more importantly, safe refuges for consistent care from teachers, where their nutritional needs are met, they feel safe physically, and their mental well-being is looked after (World Bank, 2020). It quickly became evident that our systems showed education inequality, such as unequitable access to technology and a lack of provisions for mental well-being. While learning loss was amplified in developing countries, it is in developed countries that we see the wider inequality gap across the spectrum of society.

As education has long been seen as a vital driver of growth and development both for an individual and a country (World Bank, 2020), most policymakers and educators now acknowledge that education must be reimagined to empower our citizens to meet the demands of the VUCA–BANI future. Most education systems around the globe have embraced a Western model of education that has kept to the structure of the 1700s, where a teacher is seen to be a disseminator of knowledge. This model gives little freedom or power to learners to be active learning agents. Policymakers, schools, teachers, learners, and parents have cried out for a reduced weightage given to high-stakes assessments, particularly because they are not a good evaluation of holistic and agentic learning of students. Others have rightly questioned the traditional mindset of education front-loading and the perception that a university degree is all a person needs to build a lifelong career. Policymakers now predict that their citizens will have multiple careers in their lifetime and require continual learning and re-learning rather than be determined by one's academic performance in their first 20 years of life.

An equitable solution must be sought for the world to move beyond just recovering from the pandemic to flourishing. To achieve this goal, we need to anticipate and plan steps that will

ensure our present and future generations are equipped with resilient and adaptive support structures, which includes transforming education that spans the cultural, physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral domains (Datnow et al., 2022). This form of education needs to provide learners with greater equity and freedom to choose multiple career pathways that will enable them to continually grow and develop holistically, allowing them to not just survive but thrive in a VUCA–BANI world. One avenue is to learn from successful components of high-performing education initiatives in different countries. This article provides a case study of Singapore, one of many successful education systems.

First, I will review the literature surrounding democracy and education before presenting Singapore's education system, situated within its democratic and meritocratic society. Singapore has been consistently highly ranked on international benchmarks; however, it recognises that it must move beyond its achievements to provide an even better education in an increasingly equal manner to all citizens, redefining "success." The article will then attempt to elucidate how Singapore takes a democratic approach to education while balancing it with meritocratic principles, ultimately aiming to produce citizens who are resilient, values-anchored, and lifelong learners. Some of the systemic reforms were in response to global disruptions, such as 4IR, while others are recent enhancements, but all have always been governed by the principle of providing each learner with equal opportunity to maximise their potential.

A View on Democracy and Education

This special issue investigates the relationship between democracy and education. It is undeniable that the seminal work by John Dewey is particularly associated with this concept in his publication, *Democracy and Education* (1916/2015). Dewey (2015) noted how education is a necessity of life as a social function, providing direction and growth of human beings, and how democracy interacts with education at both a surface and a deeper level. On the surface, he posits that a government resting on popular suffrage can only be successful if those who elect that very government and who obey the government are educated. At a deeper level, he saw democracy as rising beyond the form of politics to the mode of associated living, which has two traits: (1) numerous multi-varied but shared common interests as a factor of social control, and (2) individuals possessing a democracy habit (Dewey, 2015; Hansen & James, 2016). Rather than perceiving this interaction as a bluntly political one, Dewey (2015) argued that democratic ideals influenced the implementation of education and defined democracy as

> a belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. . . . Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process.

Studies have been conducted on whether democracy governing politics has any influence on education. Dahlum and Knutsen (2017) compared democracy to autocracy in several countries. They looked at whether democracy can improve education and thereby enhance the skills and knowledge of citizens, which would ultimately have positive development outcomes, such as economic growth. While democracy may be seen as superior to autocracy with regard to providing equitable access to education, they could not conclusively find results of significance that would buttress this claim, nor could they find systematic evidence that democratic countries offered better education than autocratic countries. While democratic education systems tended to produce learners who performed better at reading skills, the same gains were not noted for science and mathematical

skills, thereby not supporting that holistic education is provided for all learners in a politically democratic system.

The relationship between democracy and education is not fixed (Quay, 2016), and indeed, the form of government should not dictate how an education system achieves its goals since political leanings do not guarantee success. In fact, a politically charged democratic governance of education could, ironically, infringe on the civil liberties of learners. This idea supports Dewey's concept of how democracy and education should be seen as a mode of associated living and, by extension, learning. In a nutshell, Dewey saw education as a means of facilitating and enhancing the growth of individual children (Hopkins, 2018). Just as democracy is ever-growing and constantly changing community life, education must also grow and be seen as dynamic (Quay, 2016). It is obvious that Dewey saw democracy and education as an "inherently collective affair" (Hopkins, 2018, p. 434) that is outside of the realm of politics. It is true that Dewey's concept of democracy and education has been problematised by global trends, such as globalisation and the mixing of "shared" interests among states with differing value systems (Gordon & English, 2016), and education has been considered a part of ecological democracy (Peters & Jandrić, 2017). However, this does not negate the relationship between democracy and education—that should not be based on politics—as a viable approach.

This paper adopts Dewey's apolitical stance towards democracy and offers a case study of how Singapore takes a similar perspective of democracy as a mode of associated living, where its citizens have a shared interest or *likemindedness* to achieve progress for their nation by developing habits to achieve this. Encapsulated in the nation's pledge are these words: "to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation" (National Heritage Board, 2023). What is noteworthy is that Singapore's brand of democracy is one of meritocratic democracy. Macedo (2013) sought to reconcile these systems of governance by asking a practical question, "How can we improve the meritocratic quality of our governing institutions consistent with democratic principles?" (p. 236). This effort, however, stems from an investigation of the American Constitution. You (2019) also notes a mixed model of meritocratic democracy with two levels: one that is the carrier of political meritocracy and the other that is about electoral democracy defined from the perspective of politics. These, however, come from a political perspective. This does not apply to Singapore, which apolitically approaches education with meritocratic and democratic principles. Scholars who have written about Singapore's education system have tended to focus on meritocracy in the country, but a linkage to democracy has not been explicitly made. This paper elucidates how meritocratic democracy may be a lens to understand the education system in Singapore.

An Education System Built on Meritocratic Democracy

Dewey's concept of democracy and education, in which the definition of democracy is from an apolitical stance, may be applied to Singapore's education system. In 1965, Singapore gained independence and was declared to be a democratic sovereign state. Since independence, the ruling party has concentrated on growing the nation's only natural resource, human capital, by investing heavily in education in order to ensure the survival of the young and vulnerable independent nation. It has, thus, sought to provide equal opportunities to every citizen through education, albeit to varying degrees in each of its education phases.

The post-independence period has been aptly named the Survival-driven education phase (1965–1978). As the country progressed, it moved into the Efficiency-driven education phase (1979–1997), and subsequently the Ability-driven (1997–2011) and Values-driven, Student-centric

education phase (2011–2018) to the Learn for Life (LfL) education phase (2019–present). Each education phase was intricately linked to the economic demands of the country, and education has always been seen as the central driver to building the economy and the nation. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2010), "The economic goals of education have given education policy a very pragmatic bent and a strong focus on scientific and technical fields" (p. 161). Each phase (see Low, 2023b, for more details) has sought to promote aspects of meritocracy and democracy by providing equal opportunities and rewards to those who work hard and attain noticeable academic qualifications. For example, in the Survival-driven education phase, those who attained a foundation education and became English proficient could be hired to occupations that led to social mobility. Subsequently, in the Values-driven, Student-centric education phase, being able to collaborate or think critically became sought-after competencies by the growing number of international companies. This development was, of course, not without drawbacks, resulting most noticeably in an overemphasis on academic achievement for a desired occupation and less on holistic education and development.

Overall, however, Singapore's shared common vision of providing a good education for all is important to ensure the nation's survival and continued progress regardless of race, language, or religion of the multicultural society. For example, during the Efficiency-driven phase, when school attrition rates were high, there was a need to create different pathways to meet the academic abilities of all learners, and this was encapsulated in the recommendations published in the Goh Report of 1979. It turned out to be a successful venture as more remained in school.

Singapore's principle of meritocracy is often presented as a "unifying and common discourse for educational curriculum and outcomes" (Tan & Deneen, 2015), which ties in well with Dewey's concept of democracy as shared interest and a common language. Meritocracy is said to have the goal of identifying and reducing disparity between subgroups of society and has been justified as a practice that rewards hardworking and deserving individuals with economic success and social mobility as it provides citizens with non-discriminatory opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic starting point (Nur, 2015; Tan & Deneen, 2015). In applying meritocracy to education, the merit-based streaming of learners to respective streams of the multiple-pathway schooling system creates a culture where effort is valued (Gopi, 2012, as cited in Tan & Deneen, 2015). Critics of Singapore have noted, however, that meritocracy largely rewards only the academically inclined individuals (Nur, 2015), which implies that it may promote contested and conflicting ideas and priorities, favouring the best individuals for the most influential jobs and thereby take an elitist approach that promotes and perpetuates elitism (Tan & Deneen, 2015). Many Singaporean parents and learners still also see the merit-based academic streaming as limiting gateway to entry into education institutions (2015). The ill-effects of meritocracy are ironically associated with a widening income gap and societal divisions between the elitists and the non-elitists (Nur, 2015). It accordingly begs the question of how meritocracy evaluates and rewards individuals since assessments are traditionally seen as the mechanism that reflects, defines and assigns merit (Tan & Deneen, 2015).

From the Survival-driven to the Ability-driven education phases, it is clear that academic performance determined educational progress and advancement. They were the bedrock of Singapore's self-government under British colonial rule and its independence era, with founding fathers, such as the late Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee, being astute intelligentsia and thinkers who were able to conceptualise Singapore's success and bring it to fruition through grit and character. "Dream, design and deliver" was the mantra associated with the ruling party's style of upholding meritocratic democracy (OECD, 2010, p. 161). According to Lee (1979), the goal of education is "to bring out [a child's] greatest potential, so that he will grow up into a good man and a useful citizen" (p. 1). The Values-driven, Student-centric, and LfL education phases signal the

country's recent attempts to begin evaluating individuals based on both academic and non-academic aspects—such as values, character, and dispositions of lifelong learning—so that one may be holistically a useful citizen. The LfL education phase further advocates the mindset change by encouraging learners to view their learning journeys as lifelong.

How the country recruits teachers may serve as an example. While recruiting from the top 30% of each year's cohort, this process is no longer solely based on achievement resumes. In a joint recruitment panel comprising representatives of Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE), the National Institute of Education (NIE), and schools, teacher candidates are now also assessed based on their aptitude and attitudes towards teaching (Low, 2023a). When the country recruits from the "best and the brightest," it no longer refers solely to academic achievements but to those with the best attributes, such as the right aptitude and attitude for teaching.

Yet while the Singapore government acknowledges that meritocracy has its advantages, it also has issues or pitfalls. Country officials, such as President Halimah Yacob, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, and Education Minister Chan Chun Sing, have voiced the government's commitment to broaden meritocracy to combat social stratification; they acknowledge that the current form of meritocracy is narrow, particularly the social mindset on schooling and grades, and they see the need to avoid its pitfalls while providing more inclusive meritocracy with opportunities throughout life (Chew, 2023; Goh, 2023; Tay & Lau, 2023; Teng, 2023). The government concedes that while "we will build on our strong foundations . . . we must also have the courage to change where change is needed" so that citizens "don't have to succumb to a paper chase to secure a good salary and a viable career path" (Chew, 2023). Education must diversify into different pathways that recognises different strengths, interests, and learning needs (Tay & Lau, 2023) and "do justice to the range of people's gifts" (Teng, 2023). This must be done throughout every citizen's life, regardless of starting point (Goh, 2023). Essentially, the government, and so must society, "must also re-examine how it rewards different skills and talents, and recognise the full range of pathways to success" (Teng, 2023). This paper will suggest three broad goals of education and describe how they can be achieved.

Education for Resilience

When the pandemic hit, many moved to remote learning. While the transition to remote learning was available in both developed and some developing countries, approximately 463 million learners did not have access to technologies supporting home-based learning during national lockdowns (World Bank, 2020). The pandemic also exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, with negative short- and long-term ramifications due to the lack of access to schools, especially for children from low-income homes and marginalised communities, such as those with special needs (Veintie et al., 2022). It has been estimated that due to the closure of schools, learners worldwide likely lag in their development anywhere from 4–12 months (McKinsey & Company, 2022), which impacts overall development and limits chances for upward social mobility. Teachers were also in danger of physical, emotional, and mental burnout and poor well-being (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

As nations move to the post-pandemic era, it is exceedingly clear that education systems must engender resilience, or the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity (Masten et al., 1990). At the systemic level, education systems must be resilient to allow learning to continue uninterrupted, to help the joy of learning persist, and to support the needs of every learner, regardless of their demographic or socioeconomic background. At a social level, resilience may be described as the capacity of teachers to utilise personal and contextual resources to cope with challenges, a process in which teachers use effective personal and professional strategies in response to crises and

disruptions and experience professional growth and well-being despite adversity (Naidu, 2021). Resilience may also be defined as a characteristic that all individuals can develop and enhance through direct action (Mansfield et al., 2016). For example, learners who embark on part-time courses while working full-time have developed resilience as they balance studies with family and work commitments.

Singapore's attempts to develop education for resilience within a meritocratic democracy are exemplified below. As mentioned above, Singapore education stakeholders have a common goal to help each learner reach their full potential, believing that all learners can and want to learn (MOE, 2023b). This goal stems from a democratic perspective that all should be seen as equal and given equal opportunities and appropriate rewards. Some efforts to achieve this were evident during Singapore's national lockdown and school closure, known as the "circuit breaker" period from April–May 2020, which led to many lessons learned:

1. Society needs to be cognisant of the importance of teacher well-being. During school closures, the roles of Singapore teachers extended from educator to safety officer, healthcare worker, and IT support (Tan, 2019), and juggling multiple roles impacted their sense of well-being greatly (Qing, 2021). Teachers have long been identified as the most important factor in determining student learning outcomes (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012), and they are also pivotal in ensuring that an education system is resilient. As such, MOE is investing heavily in teacher well-being and looking to improve and strengthen its teacher education (TE) and professional development (PD) pathways for teacher job satisfaction (see the section "Lifelong Education: Long Runways, Multiple Pathways").

2. The physical classroom is no longer the only learning space. School closures forced us to move learners out of the classroom and into the online space, which many accessed from home. It was due to this that many learners did not lag far behind or at all in their learning development, although it did reveal the inequality of access to technological resources. Being able to learn in online platforms proves that learners can learn outside the classroom. The only barrier is equal access to technology.

3. Inequalities need to be identified, acknowledged, and addressed. Even in a developed country like Singapore, a small proportion of students did not have access to basic technologies (i.e., a personal device, internet connection) that enabled them to learn remotely. Schools had to remain open with a skeletal workforce for them, and private, non-governmental organisations and philanthropists stepped forward to provide such amenities. Singapore has since advanced its timeline from 2028 to 2024 to place a personal learning device into the hands of every secondary school student in preparation for hybrid learning. This goal also requires a major pedagogical shift, and TE and PD programmes are being modified accordingly.

4. Assessments need to be re-evaluated. During the lockdown, some non-final year examinations were removed from a number of foundations to tertiary levels to ensure health safety. The graduation criteria were adjusted in 34% of countries at the primary level and 47% at the upper secondary level, with some countries implementing new assessment policies to adapt to the situation (UNESCO, 2021). Singapore did likewise. This suggests that the stresses of standardised testing may be relaxed without any detrimental effect on the development of learners while greatly reducing the stress levels of educators, students, and parents. In a system of meritocracy, where the academically able have more access to educational pathways, it is important to consider

how the goals of assessment criteria should be adjusted such that holistic assessment of student performance, including non-academic achievements, becomes a reality.

5. Learners must also be encouraged to become self-directed and motivated. While learners need to be properly supported by teachers and face-to-face social interaction is important for their socioemotional development, continual learning, particularly amidst challenges, allows students equal and constant access to meritocratic opportunities in the future.

Educators need to move beyond surviving crises to flourishing after emerging. To achieve this, we need a goal alignment at the systemic level for the purposes of education. This alignment requires a shared vision that building a nation starts from educating and nurturing the young, who will be the future pillars of the country. A shared vision or likemindedness does not entail identical-mindedness, in which everyone thinks exactly in the same way and has the same thoughts: "Rather, it has to do with fundamental understandings that allow people to communicate, interact and dwell together in the first place. Likemindedness in this sense has a close family resemblance" (Hansen & James, 2016, p. 104). While certainly a tall order for a multicultural and multiracial nation such as Singapore's, a unifying discourse of nation-building and inclusivity can emerge through communication that is respectful, harmonious, collaborative, and focused (Hansen & James, 2016) and that will help education stakeholders be anchored to a shared vision and purpose is a values-anchored education.

Values-Anchored Education

Values are the principles, standards, and beliefs that guide individuals in their daily activities (Muthigani, 2019) to make and prioritise good decisions when considering how to improve their lives (Filippou et al., 2021; OECD, 2019). They are enduring beliefs that order one's behaviour, attitude, social norms, judgements, and actions for the well-being of individuals, societies, and the environment (OECD, 2019). Values also serve as a motivation for lifelong learning; a frame for personal well-being, good personhood, and citizenry; as an endorsement and support of societal and human values that promote societal well-being (OECD, 2019); and a compass that directs one with a sense of moral direction and agency (Scoffham, 2020). Values are as fundamental to an individual as they are central to a culture, thereby implying that there are two levels: the individual and the societal or contextual (Filippou et al., 2021). This intersection of the two levels of values is what education should concern itself about.

Education is not only "acquiring knowledge and skills to pass examinations and prepar[ing] children for life, but it is also concerned with the flourishing of humanity" (Hawkes, 2013, as cited in Muthigani, 2019, p. 2). Seen in this light, education has the important end goal of developing values-anchored learners who can contribute to the flourishing of humanity. Skills, knowledge, and competencies may improve one's livelihood, but it is only with values guiding these cognitive competencies that humanity can flourish. If the shared vision of education stakeholders is focused on flourishing humanity, if teaching is a moral activity that should cause teachers to consider the moral impact they have on learners (Muthigani, 2019), and if teachers play a vital role in the development of learners to become responsible citizens, then it is of utmost importance that educators themselves are role models of sound values that help direct their decision-maker processes.

Compelling evidence suggests that teachers who take a values-based education (VbE) approach positively impact their learners' learning and lives. Lovat and Toomey (2009) argued that quality teaching works in tandem with VbE in a double-helix relationship, implying that quality

teaching and VbE are intertwined and form the DNA of a high-quality teacher. Only when personal and professional values guide teachers can quality teaching and quality learning—and therefore, learners' holistic development and overall well-being—occur (cf. Low, in press). Rather than simply treated as a curriculum subject, values must be the underpinning philosophy of education.

Education must, in addition, prepare pre-service teachers to become high-quality teachers who are equipped with not just pedagogical practises but also with values that will help meet the increasing demands of the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Teacher educators must strive to instil values in pre-service teachers by role-modelling the values needed (Muthigani, 2019) and infusing values into their programme participatory and reflective pedagogical modes (UNESCO, 2011). Teacher educators and teachers have to carefully balance their personal values with professional ones and should be encouraged to reflect on whether both values are in alignment (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). It is a complicated process where teachers must learn to harmonise conflicting personal–professional values and be continually conscious of not only what they are teaching but also who (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012).

Enablers are needed to support a values-anchored education. One enabler could be communities of professional practice that connect pre-service teachers, teacher educators, practising teachers, and the wider school communities (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). Through this network of learning from one another's experiences and wisdom, stakeholders can open communication channels and discuss the development and reflection of values in depth.

A related enabler is having a common framework and language for values, which are particularly important with globalisation expanding, causing interactions to become increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural. Even within the same nation, different understandings of a particular value exist as much as varying terms for the same value. In the education literature, a host of terms describe values education, such as "moral education, character education, personal and social education, citizenship education, civic education and religious education" (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012, p. 67). Studies provide evidence that teachers and teacher educators have values (e.g., Willemse et al, 2008), but they vary significantly. In other studies (e.g., Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012), teachers commented that having a framework or model to follow and a common ethical language to frame discussions would enhance values-based teaching. It could also help stakeholders to be more comfortable speaking about difficult moral tensions and dilemmas (Sanderse & Cooke, 2021). A common ethical language can serve as a platform for awareness of values and affirmation of the agreed values.

Another possible enabler is the inculcation of values into habits, "which a person forms through experience [that] provides a mode of response to new stimuli and events" (Hansen & James, 2016, p. 94). Dewey argued that the school and classroom are formative environments, not dormant surroundings, where learners respond to the conditions they are in (Hansen & James, 2016). As such, a well-formed dynamic school environment can foster democratic habits, which include learning to voice one's opinion in class so that learners take a participatory and agentic approach to school life, learning to cooperate and collaborate with others, and learning to communicate responsibly about their experiences (Hansen & James, 2016). How a person forms their habits is greatly influenced by their value system. An individual is guided by their values, which helps them make judgments that turn into actions (OECD, 2019; Scoffham, 2020), and these actions eventually develop into habits responding to the same external stimuli.

In the case of Singapore, this paper cites two examples: the national Framework for 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes (21stCC; MOE, 2023a) and the Values,[3] Skills, and Knowledge (V^{3}SK) Model, which is the underpinning philosophy of teacher education enacted by the nation's sole pre-service education institute, NIE. It is worth noting that in both the 21stCC

Framework and V³SK Model, values are schematically placed at the central core to signify their importance in guiding both the education philosophy and the curriculum design.

Launched in 2010, the 21stCC guides educators in how to help students thrive in a fast-changing world by emphasising what core values and competencies are important to cultivate. The framework is represented by (1) Core Values as the innermost circle, which include respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care, and harmony; (2) Social-Emotional Competencies as the outer concentric circle, which include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship management; (3) 21st-Century Competencies as the third concentric circle, which include civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills; critical and inventive thinking; and communication, collaboration and information skills; and (4) Student Outcomes as the outermost circle, which include confident persons, self-directed learners, active contributors, and concerned citizens. The framework starts with the Core Values that permeate into the competencies students develop to the desired education habits defined by the student outcomes. The Core Values are the democratic approaches and habits of how one should treat another as an equal, of which then the social-emotional and 21st-century competencies provide the know-how to manifest such democratic ideals. Cultivating them well provides meritocratic encouragement through revitalised assessment criteria.

Likewise, NIE's V³SK Model makes clear that values undergird the foundations of the design and curriculum of the teacher education programmes and courses. At the central pillar is a three-pronged set of values comprising Learner-Centredness, Teacher Identity, and Service to the Profession and Community. Taking its roots from the V³SK Model, the VbE Expanding Environment Approach articulates how pre-service teachers can nurture positive values and social and relational skills and build their teacher personhood (see Low, 2023c; Liu, 2022). The VbE approach is schematically realised as concentric circles that span from self to different spheres of societal, national, and global spheres (see Low, 2023c; Liu, 2022).

First, "Myself" forms the innermost core, which is realised in the Meranti Project, where pre-service teachers reflect on their own professional calling and why they chose teaching as their profession. Second, "My Community" is the second circle. In the Group Endeavours in Service Learning course, pre-service teachers put their values education into action by enacting community involvement projects with communities of their choice. Third, "My Nation, Singapore" forms the next circle. In the Singapore Kaleidoscope course, pre-service teachers explore the country's rich culture and heritage to broaden their understanding of local and international issues through the pedagogical modes of appreciative inquiry, experiential learning, and self-directed learning. Fourth, "My World" forms the outermost circle. Through the international practicum stint, the semester overseas exchange programme, and the Service and Leadership Training course, where service learning occurs outside Singapore, pre-service teachers discover the world as their classroom and both catch and teach values (Liu, 2022). The central spine holding the entire framework together is the CCE in the Singapore Context course, which serves as the pre-service teachers' moral compass pointing to the true north and aims to develop values, character, social-emotional well-being, and citizenship dispositions. Through the VbE Expanding Environment Framework, pre-service teachers develop into values-anchored individuals who are vital contributors to building and sustaining a nation's continued progress.

Lifelong Education: Long Runways, Multiple Pathways

In the past, careers and livelihoods were defined by academic qualifications. This thinking is, however, unsustainable as we approach the second and third decades of the 21st century with

multiple crises and disruptions. Many sociologists, scholars, and education stakeholders have called for the opportunity to reimagine education (Low, 2023a), and one aspect is to re-evaluate the "lifespan" of education (Low, 2023c). Learners are traditionally front-loaded with knowledge in the first quarter of their lives, which is expected to tide them through whatever future challenges and disruptions. The education runway was a relatively short one. Many on this front-loaded runway have found it difficult, at best, to pivot out of their clearly and narrowly defined jobs when 4IR caused job disruptions. As the WEF surveys show (Table 1), individuals are likely to have multiple careers in their lifetime rather than just having one, and employers have very quickly changed their minds about what skills and competencies they prefer employees to possess. The change between the years is striking. While some skills have remained and moved up the ranking, many have been subsumed into others or completely replaced. This shift implies that the skills, dispositions, knowledge, and competencies to meet the job market will change every 5 years or even sooner, illustrating that the traditional front-loading form of education is grossly inadequate.

Table 1

Top-10 Skills and Competencies Preferred by Employers over the Years (WEF, 2016, 2018, 2020)

2016 Report on 2015	2018 Report for 2020	2020 Report for 2025
1. Complex problem-solving	1. Complex problem-solving	1. Analytical thinking and innovation
2. Coordinating with others	2. Critical thinking	2. Active learning and learning strategies
3. People management	3. Creativity	3. Complex problem-solving
4. Critical thinking	4. People management	4. Critical thinking and analysis
5. Negotiation	5. Coordinating with others	5. Creativity, originality, and initiative
6. Quality control	6. Emotional intelligence	6. Leadership and social influence
7. Service orientation	7. Judgment and decision-making	7. Technology use, monitoring, and control
8. Judgment and decision-making	8. Service orientation	8. Technology design and programming
9. Active listening	9. Negotiation	9. Resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility
10. Creativity	10. Cognitive flexibility	10. Reasoning, problem-solving, and ideation

Lifelong education, thus, needs to be highly prioritised by education systems responsible for developing such dispositions and habits of mind in every citizen, regardless of their age. The benefits of lifelong education have been understood to be drivers of broad social, political, economic, and environmental transformation (Benavot et al., 2022). Education is seen to be fundamental to supporting a nation's development and growth (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2014), and equal access to high-quality education should be made available to every citizen, thereby providing the conditions to ensure inclusive and equitable education opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Lifelong education can take various forms, such as formal, informal, and non-formal (Riddell et al., 2014). It does not discriminate between culturally distinct traditions in education and can promote the idea of nation-building and social solidarity (Benavot et al., 2022), which may also be

seen as a shared interest among citizens with the likemindedness for national progress and societal well-being. It may be argued that lifelong education is also a democratic habit allowing nations to meet life's current and future challenges; therefore, it is an attribute we want teachers to exhibit as they educate the next generation of learners (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2014). Balancing this with a meritocratic approach ensures that those who work harder will be rewarded commensurably.

While lifelong education is often seen in an individual's development journey from youth to adulthood, a systemic perspective may also be taken (Low, 2023c). And while many have advocated the need for high-quality teacher education programmes, teacher education has been largely seen as related but separate from foundational levels of education. If the education system is mapped onto a continuum from youth to retirement, pre-service teacher education may be viewed as the starting point, extending to career-long PD, with the outcome of enhancing student learning. The quality of an education system relies on a high-quality teaching workforce comprising professionals who are learners for life, who have gone through rigorous teacher education programmes, whose personal and professional values are aligned, whose characters have been developed, whose well-being has been supported by the system, and who are highly regarded by society. This is of utmost importance since teachers are the central force of educational change (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995) and agents of systemic improvement (Office of Education Research, n.d.).

In these challenging times where the demands on teachers are evolving and increasing (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2014), there is an urgent need to invest in teachers' career-long PD; systems need to provide adequate resources for promoting and enhancing school improvement efforts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) and allow teachers to design innovative and engaging pedagogies (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). For PD to occur coherently throughout educators' careers, development efforts must link pre-service preparation and beginning teacher induction to teacher accreditation standards and annual performance evaluation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). We need to recognise that no teacher preparation or PD programme can comprehensively equip educators with all the competencies they will need throughout their careers (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2014). For educators to be fully effective, they need to adjust to their students' ever-changing learning needs and continually seek to find ways to upgrade their competencies.

Starting right at the beginning of the formal schooling years, Singapore's MOE hopes to help each young learner reach their fullest potential by providing multiple pathways that suit learners' academic and holistic development needs. This goal is embodied in the Singapore Curriculum Philosophy, where all educators and education stakeholders embrace the shared belief that "every child wants to and can learn" and will flourish "in caring and safe learning environments, when children construct knowledge actively, through the development of thinking skills and dispositions, and when assessment is used to address children's learning gaps" (MOE, 2023b).

Moving beyond the formal years of education, the government is also advocating lifelong education beyond tertiary education. Education Minister Chan Chun Sing (2022) rallied institutes of higher learning to be institutes of continual lifelong learning where university graduates remain members for the next 40 years and consistently return for continuing education courses that can help them in their career development. Through the SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) initiative, adult learners may take subsidised PD courses and programmes conducted by industry partners (SSG, 2021). SSG markets these offerings through roadshows, financial subsidies, and the provision of SkillsFuture credits (i.e., SGD1,000 per citizen) to pay for SSG-recognised PD courses and programmes, including for teachers. The SkillsFuture for Educators (SFEd) initiative considers six areas of practice to be the most needed areas for teacher PD, articulated through focused-group discussions (Academy of Singapore Teachers [AST], n.d.).

In tandem with the lifelong education pathways, multiple academic pathways are provided at both the foundation and tertiary levels. Government secondary schools are now transiting to full subject-based banding (SBB), which is already implemented at the primary level. SBB takes the place of the decades-old and controversial academic streaming where secondary school students are segmented into express, normal, and special streams. SBB recognises that learners display differing levels of abilities across the different subjects that they study, and the archaic model of academic streaming disregards learners' performance in individual subjects. SBB is also part of the government's LfL initiative and MOE's attempt to nurture the joy of learning in students by catering to their different strengths, aptitudes, and interests (MOE, 2020). Unlike with the previous streaming approach, students may choose one out of three levels of a subject they wish to take and be situated in a class of mixed-ability learners. SBB also provides learners with agency over their learning pace. This complements the system's already existing multiple pathways at the secondary level of schooling, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma and the specialised mathematics, science, technology, and engineering schools; sports schools; and visual, literary, and performing arts schools. At the university level, new interdisciplinary schools and programmes are also being developed to ensure that students have a choice in the direction they want to take for their eventual career(s).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to articulate the underpinning philosophies and the latest education initiatives through the lens of Dewey's concept of democracy and education. Singapore's education system has been premised on meritocracy, which can have the unintended consequence of over-emphasizing academic achievements over holistic development. This paper presents three goals in a system positioning its citizens for the current VUCA–BANI world and the uncertain future ahead: to build resilience, values-anchoredness, and lifelong learning mindsets and opportunities. While no system is perfect, and Singapore is not without its issues, this paper presents the positive steps for others to consider implementing in a similar context. Rather than taking an overly critical and negative stance, which can be discussed in a separate article on its own, this paper hopes to cheer on the efforts of others seeking to better the world through education initiatives that build resilience, provide a values-anchored education, and motivate a lifelong education mindset for all.

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