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A Glocal History of Post-independence Singapore's First Sex Education Curriculum, 1966-1973

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Abstract

Most studies of sex education center on local Anglo-Euro-American contexts, tracing the origin of sex education to a coordinated response to the spread of venereal diseases. These neglect the circumstances in which sex education developed in the developing world between the 1950s and 1980s: a growing collective anxiety about rising birth rates that culminated in the adoption of population control measures. This paper examines the “glocal” history of population-centered sex education in the developing world in the 1960s and 1970s, through the case study of Singapore. Examining the emergence of the first sex education curriculum in post-independence Singapore between 1966 and 1973, I argue that population-centered sex education that emerged in Singapore was intimately connected with global population politics. Analysis of how the policy was formulated shows that the Singapore state reacted to both domestic and global concerns. In connecting local developments to global contexts, this paper gestures toward the possibilities of studying the global history of population-centered sex education.

Keywords: sex education; family planning; population control; population education; Singapore education

Introduction

In 1968, Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*. The book came with a dire warning. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” Ehrlich wrote, predicting that without population control, “mankind will breed itself into oblivion.”¹ Ehrlich’s publication of *The Population Bomb* came on the heels of a collective expression of anxiety over overpopulation and its consequences, one that began in the early 1950s.² In the United States, this anxiety led to the birth of the American

¹Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), xi.

²In 1954, for example, the Hugh Moore Fund published a pamphlet titled *The Population Bomb*, with a call to pay attention to population growth in the post-World War II era.

environmental movement.³ Elsewhere, particularly in the developing world, this anxiety led to the embracement of family planning—the deliberate reduction of the birth rate through the limiting of births, primarily by artificial means, but also by natural means.⁴ “Rapid population growth,” demographers concurred, was “the primary barrier to economic development.”⁵ Hence, there were proclamations from government officials, like the one from the Indian minister for planning in 1952, that overpopulation was the “most crucial problem” facing his country, and was what hindered its economic development.⁶

The concern in the developing world was exacerbated by the prominence of demographic theories, such as the demographic transition theory, which tied economic development to a decreasing population size.⁷ Family planning was thus deemed necessary. This, according to Jonathan Zimmerman, “spawned a new but narrow form of sex education, centered on the concept of ‘population.’”⁸ This was a global phenomenon, with family planning organizations in countries as varied as Ghana, Uruguay, and Malaysia advocating for sex education to complement family planning programs.⁹

Despite the global nature of such population-centered sex education, little has been written on the subject. To date, only one monograph on the global history of sex education has been published, with most studies instead treating sex education within the boundaries of the nation-states in Anglo-Euro-American contexts.¹⁰ There, sex

³See Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

⁴While *developing world* can be too general a term for describing the experiences of the countries I cite below (such as India, Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s, Ghana, Uruguay, and Malaysia), I find that it does broadly capture how these nations conceived themselves, particularly in how they conceived of the relationship between population control and economic development.

⁵Emily Klancher Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 93–94.

⁶Cited in Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 167.

⁷Davis Kingsley, “The World Demographic Transition,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 237, no. 1 (Jan. 1945), 1–11.

⁸Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 81. However, Zimmerman does not say much else beyond this.

⁹Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle*, 104; “Plan to Teach Family Planning in Upper Schools,” *Straits Times*, March 29, 1968, 7.

¹⁰The only global history is Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle*. However, Zimmerman’s work is primarily based on the archives of Global North organizations like the Population Council and the International Planned Parenthood Federation. With Zimmerman as the exception, other histories have focused on a national context. For the United States, see Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Valerie J. Huber and Michael W. Firmin, “A History of Sex Education in the United States since 1900,” *International Journal of Educational Reform* 23, no. 1 (Jan. 2014), 25–51; Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government’s Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). For the United Kingdom, see Lesley A. Hall, “Birds, Bees and General Embarrassment: Sex Education in Britain, from Social Purity to Section 28,” in *Public or Private Education? Lessons From History*, ed. Richard Aldrich (London: Routledge, 2004), 93–112; James Hampshire, “The Politics of School Sex Education Policy in England and Wales from the 1940s to the 1960s,” *Social History of Medicine* 18, no. 1 (April 2005), 87–105. For Europe, see Lutz D. H. Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, eds., *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe* (London: Routledge, 2009).

education emerged from a public health concern concerning the spread of venereal diseases after World War I and World War II, with the curriculum focusing on preventing the transmission of venereal diseases by emphasizing personal and social hygiene.¹¹ Population-centered sex education in the developing world emerged as a response not to a public health crisis, but to high birth rates.¹² Consequently, such population-centered sex education prioritized a family planning agenda instead.

While scholars have studied the history of family planning and population control, most have focused on the social policies associated with family planning, particularly among adults.¹³ Less attention has been paid to how family planning was taught to youths. This lacuna is significant because even while the adult population was targeted through family planning campaigns, these campaigns began to show their limitations in the late 1960s when the younger generation of post-WWII baby boomers reached sexual maturity. For family planning campaigns to succeed in the long term, these states recognized that it was important to educate youths on sex—through what has come to be called “beyond family planning” measures—to ensure that knowledge on family planning was passed down to youths. By focusing on the interaction of youths with family planning, and the subsequent development of population-centered sex education, we see how family planning and sex education in the developing world was mutually constitutive.

To study population-centered sex education in the developing world, I examine the case study of post-independence Singapore’s first sex education curriculum in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴ This is a case study that has received little attention by scholars, with most scholarship focusing on the formulation of sex education policies post-2000.¹⁵ One reason for this could be that sex education in the 1960s and 1970s was often not called “sex education,” but was instead euphemistically referred to as “family

¹¹Lord, *Condom Nation*, 27; Hampshire, “The Politics of School Sex Education Policy in England and Wales from the 1940s to the 1960s,” 87.

¹²For literature on the high birth rates of these Global South countries, see Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, chap. 4.

¹³Connelly’s insights in *Fatal Misconception* are still relevant today. See also Robert Jütte, *Contraception: A History*, trans. Vicky Russell (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Carole R. McCann, *Figuring the Population Bomb: Gender and Demography in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); Warren C. Robinson and John A. Ross, eds., *The Global Family Planning Revolution: Three Decades of Population Policies and Programs* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2007).

¹⁴Although Singapore is by most metrics today a developed country, at its independence in the 1965, it was very much part of the developing world, with a burgeoning unemployment rate of 14 percent and rising in 1965. The policies undertaken by the People’s Action Party government of the day in prioritizing economic development through attracting foreign multinational corporations and enforcing labor discipline through regulating union activities demonstrates the importance the government placed on economic growth. Constance Mary Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore: 1819–2015* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 475–76.

¹⁵The following are the extant literature on sex education in Singapore: Warren Mark Liew, “Sex (Education) in the City: Singapore’s Sexuality Education Curriculum,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35, no. 5 (Sept. 2014), 705–14; M. Krishna Erramilli et al., “Health Literacy, Sex Education and Contraception: The Singapore Experience,” *Studies in Communication Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2005), 147–58; and James Koh and Dominic Chua, “Sexuality Education and ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation,’” in *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation: Contemporary Issues and Challenges*, ed. Jason Tan and Ng Pak Tee (Singapore: Pearson, 2008), 172–90. All presume that sex education in Singapore began in 2000, and neglect

life education,” “population education,” and so on. Hence, even when sex education was used as a tool for population control, scholars did not study it separately from family planning. Although the lessons themselves may not have been called “sex education,” they were understood as such by the students and teachers themselves, and ought to be considered as such. In re-introducing sex education in 2000, through the Growing Years program, the Ministry of Education (MOE) was making explicit what had been implicitly taught over the years.

A historicization of sex education in this period affords us a nuanced understanding of the Singapore state as more than just a top-down developmental state.¹⁶ It is also useful in demonstrating the possibilities of a global history of population-centered sex education, turning our attention away from a study of national contexts and toward a study of the transnational and global contexts that facilitated the emergence of a specific form of sex education. Even while global developments led to the emergence of population-centered sex education in Singapore, this phenomenon was mediated by local factors. In the case of Singapore, policy makers referred to sex education using euphemisms. My research into the motives for this practice reveals a consultative Singapore state that sought to strike a balance between its developmental objective of reducing the birth rate and its need to be sensitive to and respectful of the range of sexual mores among its religiously diverse communities.

This paper examines the local and global (or glocal) contexts behind the formulation of post-independence Singapore’s first sex education curriculum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Using recently declassified policy files from the MOE and other sources, I argue that in its earliest implementation, sex education in post-independence Singapore was intimately connected to population politics. Sex education in Singapore originated with Christian churches, when missionary schools committed to teach the subject in order to demonstrate it as a viable alternative to the proposed legalization of abortion in 1967. Although the government initially declined to formalize the teaching of the subject in 1967—citing practical considerations such as a lack of space in an overcrowded curriculum and concerns over the social acceptability of sex education—a sudden and unexpected increase in the birth rate between 1969 and 1972 cemented its decision to roll out sex education as a means of complementing family planning programs, by tackling the increasing birth rate “upstream,” so to speak.

to address the early connection between sex education and family planning. The exception is an undergraduate thesis by Xun Qiang Toh. However, Toh’s study assumed that sex education was rooted in a moral basis when it was, in fact, rooted in a pragmatic population-planning basis. Xun Qiang Toh, “Love, Sex and Marriage: The Circulation of Sexual Knowledge in Singapore, 1965 to 1985” (BA thesis, School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, 2019). In contrast, almost all studies on family planning in Singapore focus on the social policies implemented, as opposed to the education policies that were shaped by family planning. Saw Swee-Hock’s work stands as the leading research on the history of family planning in Singapore. Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Singapore*, 3rd ed. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

¹⁶See Manuel Castells, “The Developmental City-State in An Open World Economy: The Singapore Experience” (BRIE Working Paper #31, Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy, University of California, Berkeley, Feb. 1988), https://brie.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/wp_31.pdf; Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); W. G. Huff, “The Developmental State, Government, and Singapore’s Economic Development since 1960,” *World Development* 23, no. 8 (Aug. 1995), 1421–38; Giok Ling Ooi, “The Role of the Developmental State and Interethnic Relations in Singapore,” *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 2 (June 2005), 109–20.

Post-independence Singapore's Turn to Family Planning

On August 9, 1965, Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia. The decision to merge with Malaysia in September 1963 had been undertaken on the presumption that Singapore would not be able to survive without an economic hinterland nor natural resources.¹⁷ With separation, the development strategy of import substitution industrialization through the common market with Malaysia was no longer an option, and the entrepôt trading strategy that the country had depended on historically was also not viable owing to increased protectionism.¹⁸ Adding to the unprecedented crisis was a 14 percent unemployment rate that would increase as more children entered the workforce as adults.¹⁹ This cataclysmic event was likely what triggered the People's Action Party government to take over the family planning program that was previously undertaken by voluntary organizations like the Family Planning Association of Singapore.²⁰

Hence, on September 27, 1965, the Ministry of Health (MOH) presented the “White Paper on Family Planning” to the Singapore Parliament. The ministry’s position was clear: the “annual crude birth rate of *over* 30 per thousand is too high.” The birth rate had to be brought down, not for humanitarian grounds alone, but also for the purpose of economic development, with the ministry observing that with family planning, the 26,500 families receiving social welfare at a cost to the state of \$12 million each year would have fewer children, and thus require less assistance. The money saved could go toward “improv[ing] the general welfare” of Singaporeans through channeling “millions more of public funds into [the] productive economic development of Singapore and thus to increase ... job opportunities and prosperity, all round.”²¹ Along with making these observations, the white paper recommended that the government provide “family planning on a mass basis,” presenting family planning and economic development as complementary. The white paper reflected the global consensus among demographers at the time—that “fertility rates had to come down,” and in the case of Singapore, through family planning.²² With Parliament adopting the white paper, the MOH introduced the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB)

¹⁷Tan Tai Yong, *Creating “Greater Malaysia”: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 37–38.

¹⁸Tan Tai Yong, *The Idea of Singapore: Smallness Unconstrained* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2020), 93–94; and Kevin Blackburn, *Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2017), 90.

¹⁹Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2000), 23; Blackburn, *Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore*, 90; Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore: 1819–2015*, 475.

²⁰Notably, family planning was part of the PAP’s election manifesto in 1959, but the support for it came primarily through the provision of grants to voluntary associations that promoted family planning. Mui Teng Yap, “Singapore: Population Policies and Programs,” in *The Global Family Planning Revolution: Three Decades of Population Policies and Programs*, ed. Warren C. Robinson and John A. Ross (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2007), 204.

²¹Government of Singapore, “White Paper on Family Planning” (Government Printer, Sept. 27, 1965), Papers Presented to Parliament, National Archives of Singapore (hereafter NAS), 1, 14, emphasis in original.

²²Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb*, 113.

Bill on December 31, 1965, and established the SFPPB the next year in January 1966.²³

The SFPPB was charged with implementing the National Family Planning Programme (NFPP), which aimed to lower the country's annual birth totals from sixty thousand to thirty thousand children by 1970.²⁴ To do so, the SFPPB pursued a three-pronged approach: increasing the accessibility of medical procedures by reducing the cost of contraception, using social policies to discourage child birth, and mass public education campaigns.²⁵ As Health Minister Yong Nyuk Lin remarked at the inauguration of the SFPPB in January 1966, "Family planning is ... a matter of national importance and indeed, one of urgency... . Our best chances for survival in an independent Singapore is a stress on quality and not quantity."²⁶ Population control was needed for survival.

Initially, the NFPP showed promise. Between 1966 and 1967, Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) fell from 4.42 to 3.95.²⁷ The SFPPB also exceeded its target of 25,000 new acceptors of family planning, recruiting 30,410 new acceptors in 1966 alone.²⁸

However, just as the shock of separation from Malaysia began to subside, Singapore was hit by another shock: the announcement of the British withdrawal from Singapore. The impact was dire, with 20 percent of GDP, thirty thousand direct jobs in British bases, and forty thousand jobs in supporting industries lost almost overnight.²⁹ In his National Day Message in 1967, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew noted that the withdrawal would create "immediate problems" with unemployment—already at 14 percent, and it was likely to increase.³⁰

Two days later, the government announced plans to legalize abortion. Proposing the legislation, Yong Nyuk Lin framed abortion as the "ultimate weapon" and a "second line of defence" to curb the birth rate.³¹ Although the NFPP was "proceeding most satisfactorily," it is clear that the twin shocks of separation and withdrawal, and the anxiety over Singapore's survival, weighed heavily on the minds of the political leadership. The birth rate, falling as it were, was not falling fast enough. More had to be done, and the case of Japan—which reduced its TFR to replacement rate within one generation, albeit

²³Singapore Parliamentary Debate; Vol. 24, Sitting No. 15; Col. 878-9; Dec. 31, 1965, Parliamentary Debates, NAS, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=014_19651231_S0003_T0009.

²⁴"Spore Plans to Halve Birth Rate," *Straits Times*, Jan. 13, 1966, 7.

²⁵Government of Singapore, "White Paper on Family Planning," 11; Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, 3rd ed., 158-59, and "Week-Long Show on Family Planning," *Straits Times*, Dec. 28, 1966, 4; "Now Mobile Shows on Family Planning," *Straits Times*, May 17, 1967, 4.

²⁶Cited in Saw Swee-Hock, *Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 24.

²⁷The TFR measures the average number of children born to one woman in her lifetime, assuming she conforms to the age-specific fertility rate and lives from birth to the end of her reproductive life. The TFR measurements are derived from Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, 156.

²⁸Saw Swee-Hock, "Population Growth and Control," in *A History of Singapore*, ed. Ernest C. T. Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 231.

²⁹Lee, *From Third World to First*, 69.

³⁰Lee Kuan Yew, "How Singapore Is Meeting Its Problems," *Straits Times*, Aug. 9, 1967, 10.

³¹"Abortion to Be Legalised," *Straits Times*, Aug. 11, 1967, 1; "Legal Abortion Ultimate Weapon: Yong," *Straits Times*, Sept. 6, 1967, 10.

through liberal abortion legislation—must have been on the minds of the leadership.³² Although professed to not be a replacement to family planning, the framing of abortion as a “second line of defence” suggests that abortion was understood as a fail-safe to family planning. It was in this context that the Christian churches in Singapore began to mobilize to offer sex education classes in their missionary schools as an alternative to abortion.

Sex Education as an Alternative to Abortion

Even before the government took over the family planning program, Christian churches in Singapore had expressed concern over the impending population explosion. From as early as November 1963, Reverend T. Thangaraj, the secretary of the Methodist Church of Singapore (MCS) Central Conference, had argued, in a speech at the Asia Consultation conference convened by the Board of Missions at Port Dickson in Malaysia, that “providing an organised programme for popular participation to achieve responsible parenthood and family life is an unavoidable responsibility of the Christian Church.”³³ That Rev. Thangaraj’s speech was reprinted in the November 1966 issue of the *Methodist Message*, the periodical of the MCS, indicates that the matter was still of concern even as the NFPP was being implemented.³⁴

The concern that Rev. Thangaraj raised was not merely a local concern of the MCS—Methodists across the globe shared his concerns. Methodists around the world organized multiple conferences on Christian family life during this time. In 1966, representatives of the MCS attended three such conferences: a Christian Family Life Seminar organized in Singapore by the Education Commission of the Malayan Christian Council, based also in Singapore, which was attended by seventy representatives from Singapore and Malaysia in April; the First World Methodist Study Conference on Family Life, organized in Birmingham, England, and attended by delegates from thirty-eight countries in August; and the six-day-long World Federation of Methodist Women Assembly, organized in Wimbledon, London, and attended by 250 women representing fifty-five countries in August.³⁵ At each of these conferences, concern about the “population explosion” was palpable, and organizers often highlighted the issue for discussion among delegates. Delegates from Singapore networked and interacted with their counterparts, listening to lectures on topics such as “Tackling the Population Explosion in Asia.”³⁶ The use of “explosion” as a framing device shows that leaders within the church regarded the situation as urgent.

³²Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, 90.

³³In 1963, Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaysia. T. Thangaraj, “New Forms of Service,” *Methodist Message* (Singapore), Nov. 1966, 4–7.

³⁴The *Methodist Message* is the official organ of the Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore. It is published monthly, and on occasion bi-monthly. I accessed the *Methodist Message* at the Methodist Archives and History Library (<https://archives.methodist.org.sg>) at the Methodist Church of Singapore, located at the site of the Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road), with the assistance of librarian Ms. Serah Soon. The Methodist Archives and History Library holds a record of all issues of the *Methodist Message* published in Singapore.

³⁵“MCC to Sponsor Family Life Seminar,” *Methodist Message*, April 1966, 21; M. T. Fang, “Fear the P-Bomb,” *Methodist Message*, Dec. 1966, 24; Ermelinda G. Quiambo, “Population Dilemma,” *Methodist Message*, June 1967, 4–5; Teng Ping Ming, “World Women Methodists,” *Methodist Message*, Nov. 1966, 24.

³⁶“MCC to Sponsor Family Life Seminar,” *Methodist Message*, April 1966, 21.

Perhaps the most telling warning came from the executive secretary of the “Men and Women Cooperation Department” of the World Council of Churches, Mrs. Ermelinda Quiambao. In a paper Quiambao presented at the August 1966 Birmingham conference, she warned that “the bomb that mankind today faces will eventually blow up the entire civilised world, including man himself, is not the A nor the H but the P bomb.” While acknowledging that “the situation throughout the world is grave,” Quiambao emphasized that the consequences of rapid population growth were “most grave in the underdeveloped regions” such as Asia. “As long as present population trends in the undeveloped countries continue,” she warned, “the situation will grow worse” because “the exploding population is standing in the way of economic development in these regions.” Concluding her presentation, Quiambao cited the eugenicist Julian Huxley, arguing that “the only cure is birth control, aimed in the first instance at bringing the world’s present unmanageable rate of increase to manageable proportions as fast as possible, and eventually at achieving a balance between population and resources.”³⁷ Quiambao’s speech reflected a global outlook on population, reflecting the importance with which the issue was treated.

Such global networks were not restricted to Methodist churches. Catholics, too, convened conferences in Bangkok and Italy to discuss the role of the church in relation to rapid population growth.³⁸ The *Malaysian Catholic News*, the periodical of the Catholic Church in Singapore and Malaysia, carried articles about family planning from abroad, reprinting statements from church leaders in the Philippines, Hong Kong, England, Malaysia, and Japan on birth control and abortion.³⁹ Within the church, Catholic experts in the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control discussed the theological acceptability of artificial means of birth control, reporting to Pope Paul VI, who later went on to publish his decision in the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.⁴⁰

The government’s decision to legalize abortion thus took place at the height of population anxieties within the global Christian community. In discussing Christian approaches to family planning, church leaders discussed whether natural or artificial means of birth control could be used.⁴¹ They never considered abortion as an option. The Singapore government’s decision to legalize abortion thus shocked the

³⁷ M. T. Fang, “Fear the P-Bomb,” *Methodist Message*, Dec. 1966, 24; Ermelinda G. Quiambo, “Population Dilemma,” *Methodist Message*, June 1967, 5.

³⁸ “The World Depends on Its Youth,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, Jan. 2, 1966, 9; “The Pope on Marriage,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, March 3, 1966, 9.

³⁹ The *Malaysian Catholic News* is the official organ of the Catholic Church in Malaysia and Singapore. It is published on a bi-weekly basis, with some exceptions. I accessed it through the Publication SG collection, maintained by the National Library Board, Singapore, with the assistance of Ms. Zoe Yeo. Examples of articles about birth control include “Catholic Birth Control Clinic,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, Feb. 13, 1966, 5; “Population Probe in Hong Kong,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, Feb. 13, 1966, 3; “Abortion Opposed By Doctors,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, March 3, 1966, 5; “Opposition to Family Planning in Senate,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, April 10, 1966, 2; “Abortion Not Just Catholic Issue,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, Sept. 11, 1966, 3; “Japanese Daily Condemns Abortion,” *Malaysian Catholic News*, Oct. 9, 1966, 3.

⁴⁰ See Alana Harris, ed., *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945-1975* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴¹ Notably, the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* forbid Catholics from using artificial means of birth control. Paul VI, *Humane Vitae* [Encyclical Letter on the Regulation of Birth], https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

Christian community in Singapore that was engaged in these global discourses on family planning, and galvanized the churches into action.

The opening salvo came from the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore (CCMS), a transnational ecumenical organization, which supported the Singapore Medical Association's call for the government to carefully reconsider its decision. Rather than legalizing abortion, the CCMS "urged the Government to press forward, with even greater urgency, its educational and practical programme in family planning," noting that "these policies would do far more ... than the proposed short-term policy of legalised abortion."⁴² Shortly after, the editor of the *Malaysian Catholic News* called for sex education, arguing that "what is needed is an intensive and enlightening education in family planning and perhaps comprehensive sex education courses in the schools." "Such measures," the editor wrote, "would seem to be more effective in preventing the social calamities which this negatively conceived [Abortion] bill is attempting to tackle."⁴³ The *Malaysian Catholic News's* advocacy for sex education likely took heed of the position of the Vatican Council in Rome, which, in a "Declaration on Christian Education," noted that children and young people should "be given as they advance in years, a positive and prudent sexual education."⁴⁴ To persuade the government to not legalize abortion, the Churches needed to demonstrate that the benefits of the Abortion Bill were achievable through an alternative. Sex education was that alternative.

Anglican schools were the first to offer sex education classes in post-independence Singapore. Announcing that St. Andrew's School would be introducing the subject in 1968, the principal, Mr. Francis Thomas, was quoted as saying that "students ought to get some properly planned teaching in sexual matters, both physiologically and socially," because sex "has its problems and these are becoming increasingly troublesome in urban Singapore."⁴⁵ In St. Andrew's School, students in the secondary and pre-university sections received sex education as part of the Health and Moral Education program. The lessons, deliberately general in approach owing to concerns of causing "classroom complications," focused less on teaching about contraception. They instead focused on topics such as "how life begins"; "growth of an embryo"; "physical changes that arise at puberty"; "boy-girl friendships"; "the ethics of petting, pre-marital sex and 'trial marriages'"; "the questions of ideals and self-control"; and "the goals of maturity in marriage."⁴⁶ While contraceptive use was not taught, the lessons did inform students about how conception occurs, presumably so that they would be aware of what sexual intercourse entailed. In the same vein, the lessons discouraged sexual intercourse, with a clear recommendation to only have sex after marriage. The objective was to reduce sexual intercourse that would result in unprepared parents, and therefore, the probability of abortion.

⁴²"Bishop's Letter," *Diocesan Digest*, no. 55 (Oct. 1967), 1–4. The *Diocesan Digest* is the periodical of the Anglican Diocese of Singapore.

⁴³"Catholic Call for Sex Class in Schools," *Straits Times*, Aug. 28, 1967, 5; "The Unwanted Child," *Malaysian Catholic News*, Aug. 26, 1967, 9.

⁴⁴"About Sex Education," *Malaysian Catholic News*, July 2, 1967, 4.

⁴⁵"Education in Sex for School," *Straits Times*, Sept. 9, 1967, 8.

⁴⁶Maureen Peters, "At the Schools: Human Happiness," *Straits Times*, Sept. 17, 1970, 16.

The program at St. Andrew's School was taken up by the Anglican Welfare Council, which intended to introduce the subject to all students in Anglican schools, recognizing both the "urgent need for sex education in schools," and that "the classroom could present an atmosphere conducive to such instruction."⁴⁷ The council enlisted a Methodist, Dr. Nalla Tan, a sex education advocate, to train Anglican teachers to teach sex education.⁴⁸ In an editorial piece published in the *Methodist Message* two years later, Dr. Tan reflected on her position on sex education. "Family life education" (FLE), as Dr. Tan referred to the subject, would teach students that "families must be planned not only for the good of the parents, but so that children born are given the opportunity to develop to their full potential and live full happy lives."⁴⁹ This is remarkably similar to the health minister's framing of the Abortion Bill as ensuring that children born are "wanted children" who "will be properly cared for and have opportunities for education and the full development of their faculties."⁵⁰ Dr. Tan's framing suggests that FLE was seen as an alternative means to achieve the intended effects of the Abortion Bill. Hence, Dr. Tan writes, "All methods of contraception ... must be made known to the young. It is desirable that young people know what is available, and understand the basis for the use of various methods.... That family planning is part of the present-day way-of-life... All this information about the problems that may be associated with the practice of family planning must be part and parcel of family life education."⁵¹

While Dr. Tan decried the use of contraception by the youths "who are experimenting with sex," her call for the teaching of contraceptive use so as to inculcate a knowledge of family planning demonstrates that FLE was not only meant to complement the NFPP in reducing the birth rate; it was also meant to ensure a low incidence rate of accidental pregnancies and abortions.⁵² Dr. Tan's advocacy for "all methods of contraception" demonstrated her understanding of the urgency of the matter. This was also reflective of Quiambao's belief that "the only cure [to the population explosion] is birth control."⁵³

Alongside the Anglican and Methodist sex education program was the Catholics' "I Live" program, created by Mrs. Margaret Bell and Sister Josephine Langley. Mrs. Bell was a school counselor who had written to the *Straits Times* stating her opposition to abortion.⁵⁴ She had also given well-received talks to teachers on sex education, with the teachers leaving the talks "convinced of the need for a well-directed sex education."⁵⁵ Sister Langley, on the other hand, was a religious mother who was responsible for

⁴⁷"Sex Teaching: 60 at Course," *Straits Times*, Sept. 25, 1967, 8.

⁴⁸"Course Soon on Sex Classes," *Straits Times*, Sept. 13, 1967, 9; "Sex Talk for Anglican Teachers," *Straits Times*, Sept. 15, 1967, 7.

⁴⁹Nalla Tan, "Some Thoughts on Family Planning," *Methodist Message*, Feb. 1969, 4.

⁵⁰Singapore Parliamentary Debate, Vol. 28, Sitting No. 11, Col. 873, April 8, 1969, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=039_19690408_S0003_T0003.

⁵¹Tan, "Some Thoughts on Family Planning," 5.

⁵²Tan, "Some Thoughts on Family Planning," 5.

⁵³Quiambao, "Population Dilemma."

⁵⁴"Abortion—and the Burden on the Female ...," *Straits Times*, March 2, 1969, 10.

⁵⁵"Teachers and Sex Education," *Malaysian Catholic News*, June 29, 1969, 4.

the religious education program in all Catholic secondary schools in Singapore and Malaysia.⁵⁶

“I Live” was developed for Secondary One students, a level equivalent to grade 7 in a US middle school. It was piloted in missionary schools in the late 1960s, around the time of the parliamentary debate on the Abortion Bill.⁵⁷ Like Dr Tan’s FLE Programme, “I Live” was developed for use by any school, although it was mostly used only in Catholic schools.⁵⁸ The program materials comprised a book for students, a guide for parents or teachers, and two audio recordings featuring a conversation between parents and their children.

Although “I Live” was positioned as a form of sex education, a close reading of the text shows that the focus was not on sex per se. Instead of “imparting lists of facts for a young adolescent,” the program “present[ed] an understanding of life as it really is, to the child at an age when the child is psychologically most ready to welcome this understanding and accept its meaning, before being exposed to insidious counter-values.”⁵⁹ In a “sex-saturated world,” “I Live” sought to prepare youths “for the changes that are about to take place within them physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and socially.”⁶⁰ It did so by teaching students about puberty changes and the physical and emotional aspects of sexual intercourse within marriage, as well as how conception occurs through sexual intercourse.⁶¹ Much like the St. Andrew’s School program, “I Live” discussed sex only in the context of marriage, presumably to prevent conception among unprepared parents.

The sex education offered by the three main Christian denominations sought to minimize the possibility of abortion by arming students with as much knowledge about sex as possible. Dr. Tan’s FLE was the most direct in its advocacy, arguing that youths needed to know about contraception so that they could use it to prevent becoming pregnant when they were not ready for children. The St. Andrew’s School and the “I Live” programs were less direct, choosing to only discuss sex in the context of marriage. Outside of marriage, students were told to abstain from sex, and even masturbation, with “I Live” denouncing masturbation as “shallow, self-centred, selfish and infantile.”⁶² Such a move also built on a global circulation of discourses within international church networks on what methods of preventing conception were permissible. Methodist programs adopted Quiambao’s proclamation of using birth control, while Catholic programs followed *Humanae Vitae*’s prohibition of artificial birth control. Collectively, these programs sought to prevent conception, and thereby the possibility of abortion. In these ways, the sex education presented by the churches served to demonstrate that the goal of the Abortion Bill—that of ensuring that every child was wanted—was achievable through an alternative policy.

⁵⁶Correspondence between Specialist Inspector for History and Geography and Permanent Secretary Education and Chief Inspector of Schools (Jan. 21, 1970, EDUN 3011-67, p. 225, NAS).

⁵⁷“Sex: Helping Young Minds Figure Out the Facts,” *Straits Times*, April 9, 1971, 21; Trish Sheppard, “Learning about Sex ...,” *New Nation*, April 19, 1972, 11.

⁵⁸Sheppard, “Learning about Sex ...”

⁵⁹Margaret Bell and Josephine Langley, *I Live!* (Singapore: Focus on Life Publications, 1970), 110.

⁶⁰Bell and Langley, *I Live!*, 103, 104.

⁶¹Bell and Langley, *I Live!*, chaps. 1, 5, 6, and 7.

⁶²Bell and Langley, *I Live!*, 109.

Rationalizing the Government's Position on Sex Education

Given that missionary schools were teaching their own sex education programs, with little oversight by the MOE, a parliamentary question was filed in November 1967 asking the ministry to clarify its position on sex education.⁶³ In response, the Minister of State for Education set the MOE's position as such: while the MOE had "no objection" to missionary schools introducing sex education, "provided such instruction is intended to prepare adolescents for a healthy sex life with due regard for its moral and ethical aspects," there were "no plans for introducing sex education as part of the regular curriculum in secondary schools." Rather than have a policy on sex education, the MOE chose to give schools leeway to decide if and how sex education would be conducted, noting that some schools had invited MOH medical officers and lecturers from the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health to speak on the subject previously.⁶⁴

Internal correspondence within the MOE explains why it took such a position: the ministry was aware of concerns about the approach to sex education among Singapore's religiously diverse community and was sensitive to potential pushback. One chain of correspondence discussed whether to approve the implementation of the "I Live" program in government schools. Writing to the education minister, Bell and Langley argued that their program was a response to the "urgent need for a realistic approach to the problems of boys and girls as they reach puberty," and that their book discussed sex "fully and completely, but with a view to educating the young to see the role of sex in life in its whole perspective of the continuation of the pattern of life." They sought the MOE's approval to expand "I Live" into government schools the next year, their letter marking the start of an exchange of letters within the MOE.⁶⁵

Rev. T. R. Doraisamy, the MOE's acting deputy director for the primary schools, in a letter to the permanent secretary for education, wrote that "the authors should be told that this Ministry cannot recommend their use [of "I Live"] in Singapore schools, as they are not entirely suitable for use in classes which have pupils of a heterogeneous nature," and that while he agreed with the theological position of Bell and Langley, "we as a secular state should leave that to the religious bodies, which themselves have varieties of opinion on the role of sex."⁶⁶ The specialist inspector for history and geography, writing to the chief inspector of schools, refused to commit to approving the program, noting that "we do not have any well-defined policy on sex education in schools," and that "the position seems to be that ... formal sex education is left to the discretion of principals."⁶⁷ Responding to Rev. Doraisamy, the acting chief inspector of schools wrote

⁶³Singapore Parliamentary Debate, Vol. 26, Sitting No. 6, Col. 368, Nov. 14, 1967, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=008_19671114_S0004_T0017.

⁶⁴Singapore Parliamentary Debate, Vol. 26, Sitting No. 6, Col. 368–9, Nov. 14, 1967, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=008_19671114_S0004_T0017.

⁶⁵Josephine Langley and Margaret Bell to Ong Pang Boon (Minister for Education), Nov. 22, 1969, EDUN 3011–67, p. 228, NAS.

⁶⁶T. R. Doraisamy (Acting Deputy Director of Primary Schools) to Permanent Secretary (Education), Nov. 23, 1969, EDUN 3011–67, p. 226, NAS.

⁶⁷Specialist Inspector (History and Geography) to Chief Inspector of Schools, Dec. 19, 1969, EDUN 3011–67, p. 227, NAS.

that “I Live” was “not good enough due to the lack of emphasis on the secondary section for [sexual] intercourse.”⁶⁸ The deputy director for accounting was even more candid in his recommendation to the education minister, writing that the ministry should “watch the experiment with the mission schools and assess public reaction before taking a decision on whether the subject should be introduced in government schools,” because “in the local context, sex education has to be approached with caution.”⁶⁹ These concerns indicate that the MOE was aware that because sex education was a sensitive issue that might not be widely accepted, it had to be approached with caution, lest the ministry receive public backlash.

The MOE’s cautious approach toward sex education was also captured in at least two other instances. In one instance, when Dr. Nalla Tan requested to do a health education survey on teachers that included questions on whether they were comfortable with the subject of sex education, the MOE suggested that she remove the questions on family planning from her questionnaire, asking, “Does family planning come under health education?” and raising concerns that these questions “will embarrass Catholics, Muslims.”⁷⁰ In another instance, when a member of the public raised concerns about the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) using the “I Live” books, the chief inspector of schools wrote to the CHIJ principal demanding an explanation, although also acknowledging that the ministry was “not raising any objections to Sex Education being included in [the] school’s instructional programme.” Instead, the MOE’s concern was about the public’s questioning of the policy.⁷¹

It is also likely that the case of Malaysia influenced the MOE, with MOE correspondence showing that its officers in Singapore had an eye on developments regarding sex education across the causeway in Malaysia.⁷² The Malaysian Education Ministry initially introduced sex education on March 29, 1968, to immediate opposition from parents. Such opposition continued unabated, even when the ministry tried to frame sex education “as a science subject.”⁷³ Eventually, the opposition proved too much, and the ministry removed sex education from the curriculum on September 27, 1970.⁷⁴

At the same time, the MOE also had another concern: an overcrowded curriculum. The shock of the British withdrawal strengthened existing investments in the development of human capital, leading the MOE to pursue a survival-driven curriculum that focused on vocational and technical training so as to attract multinational corporations to invest in Singapore. Correspondingly, policies were realigned, with the MOE emphasizing technical and language education. All boys and 50 percent of girls in secondary schools now needed to study technical subjects such as woodwork.⁷⁵ Secondary and

⁶⁸ Acting Chief Inspector of Schools to T. R. Doraisamy (Acting Deputy Director of Primary Schools), Dec. 22, 1969, EDUN 3011–67, p. 227, NAS.

⁶⁹ Deputy Director/Accounting to Ong Pang Boon, Jan. 5, 1970, EDUN 3011–67, p. 224, NAS.

⁷⁰ Mr. Choo to D. D., Aug. 9, 1966, EDUN 742–55, pp. 153 and 171, NAS. This was a written annotation.

⁷¹ Au Keng Chu to Principal, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, March 17, 1971, EDUN 3011–67 p. 210, NAS.

⁷² Tan Keng Kang to Chief Inspector of Schools, SIS/C, SIS/G, Assistant Director (Curriculum), June 28, 1973, EDUN 1168–60, pp. 120–21, NAS.

⁷³ Dahari Ali, “Not for Love Affairs but for Safety,” *Straits Times*, Feb. 23, 1969, 9.

⁷⁴ “Roasted: Pupils Wasting Time on Pop Music,” *Straits Times*, Sept. 27, 1970, 3.

⁷⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 489.

postsecondary curricula were developed with “a bias towards science and technology in order to fit [the students] into a rapidly expanding industrial society.”⁷⁶ As Yeow-Tong Chia observes, education in this period was tailor-fitted for industrialization, a phenomenon Kevin Blackburn associates with the “education-economy” nexus—the close and symbiotic alignment of education and economic policies, with the former being subordinated to the latter.⁷⁷ Given the limited time and resources, a trade-off had to be made. Hence, subjects like health education, which PM Lee Kuan Yew considered to be important because “this knowledge is more essential than twiddly-bits about art or geography,” were not added into the curriculum as stand-alone subjects.⁷⁸ Instead, the MOE recommended integrating health into other subjects. The MOE’s bottom line was this: it “cannot set aside a special period in the school time-table and curriculum to teach ‘health’ as a special subject.”⁷⁹ To do so, the permanent secretary for education wrote, would come “at the expense of some other subject because the number of teaching hours on the timetable is restricted by the necessity to run two sessions a day.”⁸⁰

This was unacceptable to the health minister, who criticized the MOE’s attempt to integrate health education “into crowded civics and science classes” as “inadequate and not making the impact needed.”⁸¹ The MOE, in response, compromised by introducing the subject as a non-examinable one in primary schools. However, both MOE and MOH officers criticized the compromise. One MOE officer questioned whether “our already crammed primary curricular [can] accommodate this additional subject?”⁸² Meanwhile, the senior health officer in charge of the School Health Service, Dr. Connie Lim, complained that with only thirty minutes every fortnight, “it would be impossible ... for teachers to implement and carry out the Health Education syllabus that has been drawn up.”⁸³

The MOE’s dilemma was captured by the permanent secretary for education. Writing to his MOH counterpart, the official emphasized that while the MOE accepted the value of health education, its concern was “whether we have to find the time for it at the expense of other subjects in the curriculum which may be more important.”⁸⁴ Hence, subjects like math and English that had clear consensus and clear benefits to economic development were prioritized. Concurrently, sensitive subjects that had no

⁷⁶Lim Chong-Yah, *Economic Development in Singapore* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1980), 16.

⁷⁷Yeow-Tong Chia, *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State: “World-Soul” Lost and Regained?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 43; Blackburn, *Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore*, 90, 113.

⁷⁸Lee Kuan Yew to Ong Pang Boon, Feb. 26, 1968, EDUN 626–55, p. 323, NAS.

⁷⁹“Notes of a Meeting Held to Discuss Course for Teachers of the Ministry of Education,” May 24, 1968, EDUN 626–55, p. 293, NAS.

⁸⁰Permanent Secretary (Education) to Permanent Secretary (Health), July 9, 1969, EDUN 626–55, p. 228, NAS.

⁸¹Chua Sian Chin, “Re-organisation of the School Health Service,” Aug. 13, 1969, EDUN 626–55, p. 221, NAS.

⁸²This comment appears in an annotation of an extract of a Cabinet Paper, a paper submitted by a minister for discussion by Cabinet ministers. See Cabinet Paper Extract, Nov. 21, 1969, EDUN 626–55, p. 167, NAS.

⁸³Connie Lim to Director of Education, March 31, 1971, EDUN 626–55, p. 98, NAS.

⁸⁴Permanent Secretary (Education) to Permanent Secretary (Special Duties) (Health), Dec. 26, 1969, EDUN 626–55, p. 165, NAS.

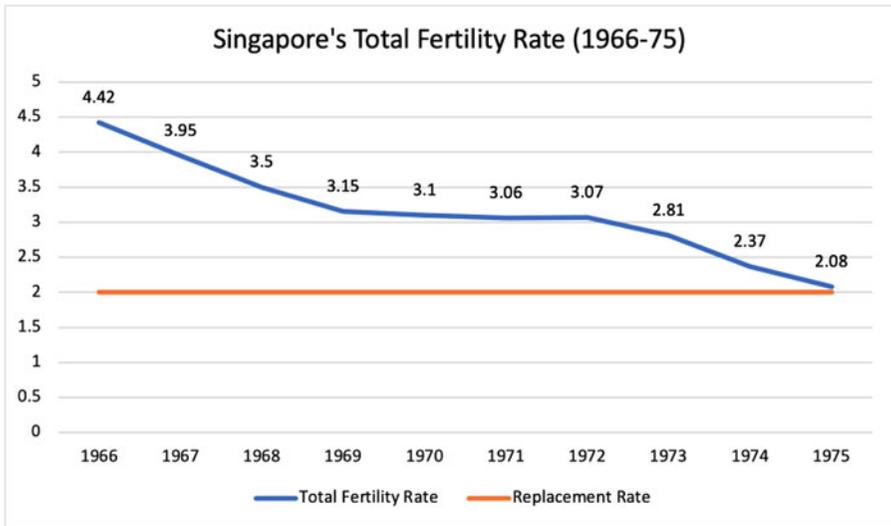


Figure 1. Singapore's total fertility rate between 1966 to 1975.

Source: The calculations here are the author's, based on Table 8.2: "Birth, Crude Birth Rate and Total Fertility Rate, 1947-1975," in Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, 156.

clear social consensus, such as sex education, were deprioritized. Schools, the MOE felt, were best placed to decide if and how they wished to offer sex education. Yet, just three years later, even while these concerns still remained, the government added sex education to the curriculum.

Explaining the Government's Endorsement of Sex Education

The government's attitude on sex education changed shortly after 1969, when the TFR reduction caused by the NFPP began to decline. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the TFR, initially at 4.42 in 1966, experienced double-digit declines to 3.95, 3.5, and 3.15 in 1967, 1968, and 1969, respectively. However, the decline appeared to plateau in 1970, with a minuscule decline of 1.6 percent. This continued for the next two years: a 1.3 percent decline in 1971 and a 0.3 percent increase in 1972—a sign of increased natural birth.

This increase in births was primarily caused by the postwar babies reaching sexual maturity. An article in the *Straits Times* in 1971 reported that the rise in births was "creating doubts in Government circles that Singapore's birth rate can go down any further."⁸⁵ Adding to this anxiety was the result of a survey conducted by the SFPPB in 1972, which showed that 56 percent of family planning acceptors wanted a family size of four or more, with older couples desiring, on average, a family size of 3.6, and younger couples desiring a family size of 2.78.⁸⁶ This was a grave concern for the SFPPB's chairman, Dr. Wan Fook Kee, who noted that "the number of kids a

⁸⁵"Halt in Birth Rate Fall: FP Head Explains," *Straits Times*, Feb. 27, 1971, 4; "Doubts as Falling Birth Rate Trend Halts," *Straits Times*, Sept. 6, 1971, 6.

⁸⁶"Hard Core of Women Still Resisting Birth Control," *Straits Times*, July 21, 1972, 7.

couple eventually has is always greater than the desired family size.” “If the average Singaporean couple bears four children,” he remarked, “the population will double in a generation.”⁸⁷

The trend of increased births was a global one. Matthew Connelly observes that by 1968, there was a perception that the baby boomer generation would “give birth to a still larger, hungrier, and angrier generation.”⁸⁸ As family planning programs worldwide struggled with the sexual maturity of the baby boomers, political leaders pondered over “resort[ing] to either outright compulsion or broader social changes”—what has come to be called “beyond family planning” methods.⁸⁹ For the Singapore government, “beyond family planning” meant looking beyond the traditional family planning audience of young adults, and zooming in on new audiences like schoolchildren.

The move toward sex education should thus be understood as a means of going “beyond family planning.” PM Lee Kuan Yew recommended to the health and education ministers that “family planning, together with personal hygiene and basic sex education should be part of the school education.” For PM Lee, it was important students be told that if they “have large families, their children are unlikely to have much of a chance in life, regardless of heavily subsidised education, health and housing,” and that they be “indoctrinated not to have more than 3 children at the most.”⁹⁰ Health Minister Chua Sian Chin agreed, arguing that doing so “would as a long term measure go a long way in reducing the desired family size of our future parents,” and that “it should not be difficult to drum into our primary school children the simple message that too many children in a family will result in poverty.” Noting that “there is no need to go into the technicalities of family planning at that stage,” Chua felt that such lessons “can be done during [the] civics or personal hygiene lessons.” However, he opted to leave the decision on implementing such curriculum to the MOE, noting that “sex education has been a controversial issue among educational circles,” and thus was “a matter for our educational experts ... to give us their professional advice.”⁹¹ Chua’s cautious approach makes clear that the government was still concerned that sex education remained a sensitive topic. However, it was clear that the question was not whether there should be a sex education curriculum, but rather what form that curriculum should take.

This was the very question that MOE officers sought to address in the first meeting to discuss the implementation of the sex education curriculum on July 8, 1972. At this meeting, PM Lee’s proposal was unanimously accepted, and it was also agreed that “in introducing controversial and sensitive topics like family planning and sex education,” the discussion must “be carefully deliberated on and planned in such a way that no serious objection from the public would arise.”⁹² While pushback was still a concern,

⁸⁷Tan Wang Joo, “A Long Road to Control Birth Load,” *Straits Times*, Oct. 15, 1972, 12.

⁸⁸Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 237.

⁸⁹Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 239.

⁹⁰Lee Kuan Yew to Lim Kim San (Minister for Education) and Chua Sian Chin (Minister for Health), June 24, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, p. 227, NAS.

⁹¹Chua Sian Chin to Lee Kuan Yew, July 10, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, p. 226, NAS.

⁹²Notes of the Preliminary Meeting on “Family Planning Education,” July 8, 1972, EDUN 1168–80, p. 223, NAS.

the increasing birth rate was deemed a bigger problem. Thus, the deliberation focused on how to manage the opposition toward sex education. One decision the officials made at this meeting was that while students “should be informed as to where they could get the necessary information on family planning,” they “should not be given specific instruction on contraceptive techniques and devices.”⁹³

Another strategy to manage opposition is evident in the public speeches the education ministers planned to give in order to prime the public for policy changes. Writing to PM Lee, Education Minister Lim Kim San wrote that he would be “pointing out the desirability of having small family” in his National Day Message to schoolchildren. He echoed his colleagues’ conclusion that the topic must be covered in a way that avoided objections from parents, but ultimately agreed with Mr. Lee that “the future citizens who would be indifferent to family planning appeals are likely to come from the primary school drop-outs and it is this group that must be influenced before they leave schools.”⁹⁴ Lim’s message therefore emphasized the importance of small families, noting that “we shall never grow enough food to feed all the people” if the population continued to increase.⁹⁵ Similarly, in an address to delegates at joint meeting between the International Union of Geographers and UNESCO in 1972, the newly appointed education minister, Dr. Lee Chiaw Meng, highlighted that given the “importance of population control in improving the quality of life and the standard of living ... it may not be at all out of place to include certain aspects of population control or family planning in the school curriculum.”⁹⁶

At the heart of the strategies to manage opposition to sex education was a desexualization of sex education, disassociating the subject from sex and instead associating it with population control and family planning. Singapore was not alone in using this approach. This global strategy, as Zimmerman has found, was employed by family planning organizations in Africa and Asia between the 1960s and 1980s.⁹⁷ At its first meeting to review the proposed sex education curriculum, the chair of the Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development (ACCD), Dr. Ruth Wong, remarked that while “family planning should not be confined to the provision of sex education,” the priority was to “reiterate the message to successive generations of young people to develop proper and responsible attitudes to family planning.” The objective of sex education was thus to inculcate a culture of family planning. After some discussion, the ACCD decided that it would integrate family planning and population education topics into “the teaching of Civics, Health Education, Social Studies, History, Geography and Science.”⁹⁸ At the next meeting, the ACCD further agreed that sex education, now referred to as “family planning and population education,” would be primarily taught through Health Education in primary schools, Science and Health Education in lower

⁹³Notes of the Preliminary Meeting on “Family Planning Education,” 224.

⁹⁴Lim Kim San to Lee Kuan Yew, July 27, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, p. 220, NAS.

⁹⁵“Message to Schools on the Occasion of National Day 1972,” Aug. 8, 1972, from Minister of Education, EDUN 1168–60, pp. 28–29, NAS.

⁹⁶“Update the Teaching of Geography, Urges Dr Lee,” *Straits Times*, Sept. 19, 1972, 2.

⁹⁷Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle*, 104.

⁹⁸Minutes of the 30th Monthly Meeting of the ACCD, Aug. 16, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, pp. 209–10, NAS.

secondary schools, and Health Education and Civics in upper secondary schools.⁹⁹ Thus, rather than center on the individual's sex and sexuality, Singapore's de-sexualized approach to sex education centered on population and the problems of overpopulation.

Curiously enough, despite the clear eugenicist beliefs of the first generation of People's Action Party leaders such as PM Lee Kuan Yew, who supported a proposed voluntary sterilization bill in Parliamentary debates, there was no discussion within the MOE over the differential reproduction rates of the different races and classes.¹⁰⁰ Instead, the emphasis was on reducing the birth rate across the board, as opposed to devising biopolitical incentives and disincentives for specific population groups to increase or decrease their reproduction rates. Indeed, it was only after the population had stabilized in the late 1970s that the government implemented policies such as the Graduate Mothers' Scheme, which incentivized university-educated couples to increase their reproduction while simultaneously using financial incentives to encourage non-university-educated women to sterilize themselves after they had had two children.¹⁰¹ Although there were expressed preferences for specific populations to increase their reproduction and for other populations to decrease their reproduction, such as those expressed by PM Lee, there was no mention of it in the archival sources I consulted. The only mention of class can be found in the letter from PM Lee to the health and education ministers, in which he emphasized that sex education had to start in the primary schools and continue in the secondary schools because "nearly 50% [of the students] do not make the secondary schools."¹⁰² Even then, the focus was not on limiting the births of just the school dropouts. Rather, it was to ensure that everyone knew of family planning and how to practice it. In the context of the early 1970s, when the TFR seemed to plateau, the People's Action Party government's focus was not on the *quality* of the population, but instead on its *quantity*, with policies derived to reduce births across the population. It was only after the population figures had stabilized, and the target TFR of 2.0 had been reached, that political leaders began to contemplate strategies for maximizing reproduction from some groups and minimizing reproduction from others.

By de-sexualizing sex education and associating it with the widely accepted policy of family planning, the MOE lessened the topic's sensitivity. Instead of discussing subjective moral or religious questions such as the morality of pre-marital sex, this strategy

⁹⁹Notes of the Meeting on "Family Planning and Population Education," Sept. 27, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, p. 216, NAS.

¹⁰⁰During the debate over the report of the Select Committee on the Abortion Bill and the Voluntary Sterilization Bill, PM Lee famously remarked that while "every person, genius or moron, has a right to reproduce himself," if the trend where "parents with more education have much smaller families than those with less education" continues, "then the quality of the population will go down." Lee supported both bills, arguing that these were "the first tentative steps towards correcting a trend which can leave our society with a large number of the physically, intellectually and culturally anaemic." Singapore Parliamentary Debate, Vol. 29, Sitting No. 6; Col. 320–3; Dec. 29, 1969, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=015_19691229_S0003_T0003.

¹⁰¹See Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 164–69.

¹⁰²Lee Kuan Yew to Lim Kim San (Minister for Education) and Chua Sian Chin (Minister for Health), June 24, 1972, EDUN 1168–60, p. 228, NAS.

emphasized the urgency and seriousness of Singapore's population crisis and focused on how sex education was the solution to this problem. In doing so, the MOE deftly minimized public pushback on the subject.

The First Sex Education Curriculum in Singapore Schools

Sex education was thus added to the school curriculum from 1973 onward under the name "population education." The subject aimed to ensure that students "know the acceptable family size that will stabilize the population in Singapore," and that "action taken or not taken will benefit or [dash] the hopes of a better life for this and subsequent generations."¹⁰³ An editorial published the day after the *New Nation* broke the news commended the government for "keeping with the changing times," noting that there was no better way to promote family planning "than to start lessons on the subject in the schools." While the editorial expressed a concern over the training of teachers on this subject, it stated that that did not disagree with the general stance that introducing the subject was the right move.¹⁰⁴ An editorial in the *Straits Times* observed that "if boys and girls are convinced that family planning is a matter of social responsibility, there will be less chance of a baby boom when today's students turn into the newly-weds of the future."¹⁰⁵ Overall, the public pushback that the ministry anticipated did not materialize.

Yet, the curriculum did not seem to be effective. The abortion rates for females aged fifteen to nineteen increased by over 160 percent between 1971 and 1976. Survey research revealed that over 70 percent of pre-university students claimed insufficient knowledge about contraceptives, and venereal diseases among teenagers increased.¹⁰⁶ One fifteen-year-old school girl even insisted that "men could become pregnant because her grandmother told her so."¹⁰⁷ Moreover, despite the stated plan that the program for secondary schools would begin in 1974, a MOE official commented in March 1975 that the subject "will soon be taught," implying that teaching had not yet begun.¹⁰⁸ Teachers also did not seem to be well trained to teach the subject. One student remarked that "by the time [our teachers] tell us about how babies are made, we already know all there is about sex."¹⁰⁹ Despite the MOE's best efforts, its curriculum did not seem to be making any progress in educating teenagers about sex. Perhaps the de-sexualization of sex education was its fatal flaw.

Nevertheless, at every step in the formulation of the sex education curriculum, the twin objectives of reducing birth rates and reducing teenagers' sexual activity were clearly stated. Originating from both church and state, sex education in Singapore was intimately connected with population politics.

¹⁰³Masie Kwee, "Population Education Will Be Part of Curriculum," *Straits Times*, Feb. 20, 1973, 22.

¹⁰⁴"Teaching Sex in the Classroom," *New Nation*, Oct. 26, 1972, 8.

¹⁰⁵"Learning Early," *Straits Times*, Feb. 10, 1973, 10.

¹⁰⁶Sheila Cheong, "Abortion among Teenagers Up 10-Fold," *Straits Times*, Sept. 10, 1977, 12; Nalla Tan, "Students Are in The Dark," *New Nation*, May 24, 1975, 2; "Of Sex—in Unhappy Ignorance," *New Nation*, Sept. 4, 1976, 8.

¹⁰⁷"Bid to Curb Rise in Pregnancies among Teenagers," *Straits Times*, April 14, 1978, 7.

¹⁰⁸"Stop at Two' Lessons Soon," *New Nation*, March 12, 1975, 4.

¹⁰⁹Lu Lin Reuters, "A Big Change in Attitude of the Young to Sex," *New Nation*, Jan. 20, 1975, 9.

Conclusion: Toward a Global History of Population-Centered Sex Education

The Singapore case study offers three contributions to the scholarly literature. By noting the connection between sex education and family planning, it offers a new chronology for the origin of sex education in Singapore, tracing it to missionary schools in 1967, before becoming a government policy in 1973. By examining ministry correspondence, the study expands our understanding of the developing Singapore state as a consultative government that sought to balance its social and economic imperatives on the one hand with its need to be sensitive to religious and cultural concerns on the other. Finally, studying the formulation of the policy, both within churches and the MOE, illustrates the global concerns and connections that precipitated the emergence of population-centered sex education in Singapore. In doing so, this paper offers a “glocal” history of post-independence Singapore’s first sex education curriculum. It also illustrates one means by which a global history of population-centered sex education might be approached.

More research can be done, however, on the global history of population-centered sex education. Within the archives of the MOE, I found correspondence between the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Population Council, and the MOE discussing strategies for population education.¹¹⁰ While the church periodicals I cited mentioned international family life conferences, I was not able to locate the records of the conference proceedings in Singapore. But the fact that the conferences were held suggests that the use of sex education as a means of mitigating rising population growth was an idea that had a global reach, circulating around the world, with different countries adopting different strategies to mitigate the common problem of a high birth rate. It is possible, I argue, to write a global history of population-centered sex education, examining the emergence, circulation, and development of population-centered sex education between the 1960s and 1980s. Such a global history may be worthy of further attention by scholars.

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¹¹⁰These are records EDUN 1500–70 and EDUN 1168–60, located in the NAS.