VOICES FROM THE GROUND: THE LANGUAGE BURDEN OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN SINGAPORE

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The socio-historical development of the teaching of English is but the official version of what gets taught and how teaching is done in English classrooms. To truly understand the nuances of what it means to teach English and to be a teacher of English in the Singapore context, it is important to draw on the narratives of teachers themselves. This paper draws from a larger dataset of phenomenological interviews with retired teachers and current teachers in practice to examine the lived experiences of two experienced teachers in Singapore, one who taught in government schools and another in elite schools for most of their careers. A series of three interviews was conducted over the course of a year with individual participants to gather their narratives and to understand in more depth what being an English teacher meant to them. The stories of these teachers are juxtaposed against the official story of the development of the English curriculum that is evident in the Ministry of Education’s official curriculum document, research and media reports over three decades, from the early 1980s to 2010. These teachers are lived examples of changes and developments in the Singapore educational system, and give voice to a nuanced understanding of how teachers of English language and literature have had to adjust with changes in the world and within Singapore educational context. In addition to the burden faced by most teachers such as the burden of curriculum change and the intensity of caring, the study reveals that English teachers in Singapore shoulder much of the “language burden” of English, which is perceived as the global language and intercultural capital necessary for economic advantage and social mobility in Singapore. By focusing on the voices of individual teachers, the emotionality of teachers’ work is foregrounded as an important aspect of teachers’ lives. Additionally, focusing on the lived experiences of specific subject teachers highlights the specific areas of stress and challenges that teachers in these subject areas face and reveal the realities of policy implementation and change.