Title: K2 children’s learning of national identity in Singapore
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K2 Children’s Learning of National Identity in Singapore

Elena Lui Hah Wah

Abstract

In May 1991, a quasi-experimental research study was launched to investigate Singapore K2 children’s learning of national identity and the effect of parental involvement in the learning process. A specially designed and pilot-tested 43-item questionnaire was used to interview a sample of 329 K2 children randomly selected from the participating education centres and kindergartens. A 4-week intervention (five 20-min lessons plus one home-based exercise each week) was implemented after the pre-test had taken place in early July 91. The same sample of children was interviewed again in mid-August, after the celebration of National Day on 9 Aug 91. The post-test scores showed there was an increase of the awareness as well as fondness of Singapore as their nation among the children in the study. The research design and findings of data analyses are presented and discussed in this paper.

Descriptors: Socialization, kindergarten education

One People, One Nation, One Singapore

Singapore children are the most vital resource for the nation’s future development. It is very crucial that these future citizens realize that they are Singaporeans and feel that they love Singapore. The sense of belonging and feeling of togetherness (“oneness”) will not develop naturally in a heterogenous society like Singapore. Children from multi-ethnic and multi-religious backgrounds need guidance in developing an awareness of the similarities and differences among themselves. They need encouragement to learn to live, play and work with peers and adults of different races. In other words, they need to be nurtured to become loyal citizens and eventually internalise the value of “one people, one nation, one Singapore”. In this nurturing process, parents and teachers can play significant roles in providing guidance and teaching.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate Singapore K2 children’s learning of national identity and the effect of parents’ involvement in fostering children’s love for Singapore. The term “national identity” was defined as follows:

1. an awareness of self and others as a member of the nation called Singapore, eg: “I am a Chinese, you are a Malay and she is an Indian, but we are all Singaporeans”. “We are friends and we respect one another”.
2. a desire to know more about Singapore, eg: “What does Singapore look like on a map?”, “Where do I stay?”, “Where is my kindergarten located?”
3. an appreciation of national identity, eg: learning to know the flag of Singapore, what is it like, and what do the symbols mean.
(4) a feeling of fondness and a sense of belonging to the nation, eg: active participation in the celebration of Singapore’s National Day. This study intended to show that pre-school children can be taught to know and to love Singapore, and that parents can help their children to foster a sense of belonging to the nation through:
- working with teachers, and,
- on relevant home-based activities with their children.

Today’s Children: Tomorrow’s Citizens

The significance of the focus and timing of this study are as follows:
(1) The research experience of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the NIE-BvLF project indicated that “pro-social behaviour can be taught and that it should be taught at an early age.” (Koh, p138).
(2) There is a growing concern about Singaporeans’ sense of belonging to the nation and their identity as Singaporeans. A 3-year campaign which was launched in June 1991 reflected the concern of the government of Singapore in this matter. This research is therefore a very timely study.
(3) The month of July and August were considered the best time for the study to take place as Singapore’s National Day falls on the 9th of August. The inclusion of Singapore related activities at home or in kindergartens during this period would not be seen as disruptive.
(4) Small scale research studies were preferred over large scale research as more control can be ensured through working with individual pre-school centres. The four demonstration centres which have been actively involved in the NIE-BvLF study offered good opportunities for this research.
(5) Several research studies, including those conducted by Horowitz (1940), Piaget & Weil (1951), Jahoda (1964), Cooper (1965), Bandura (1969), Schwartz (1975), Allen, Freeman & Osborne (1985) etc, showed that at various ages children can develop the concepts of national symbols, national identity, geographic location, authority figures, peace and war, democratic ways of decision making and conflict resolution, etc. In Singapore, this was the first ever study of young children’s (K2) learning of national identity. This study’s findings are especially important for Singapore parents and early childhood educators because they play significant roles in providing good models and guidance for multi-cultural understanding, harmonious relationships and positive citizenship.
(6) It has been found that where parents and teachers work together towards common goals, the probability of success will be greater than if each party works alone. Hence a link between home and pre-school will be necessary if we expect what children learn in kindergartens to be further enhanced at home.

As parents and teachers may not be aware of the importance of such a link, or if they do, they may not know how to maintain the link, the study concentrated on providing information to parents and teachers, and suggestions on how they can help each other.

Four Themes for Four Weeks

The treatment (intervention) period of this study was four weeks, from the second week of July to the first week of August 1991.

The Director of the NIE-BvLF Project, Dr Ko Peng Sim, and the researcher designed the four themes and outlines of activities for these four weeks in April 1991 and held several meetings with the four demonstration centres’ supervisors and staff during May-June 1991. Each theme took about 100 minutes of curriculum time, five sessions of 20 minutes each. The aims and objectives of these themes are stated as follows:
Parents of the children in these centres were involved in helping children with the take-home assignments. The guidelines for these assignments were written by the centre staff (one centre was responsible for one theme), after consultation with the researcher and team members.¹

Teachers who were in charge of the sample classes were requested to complete a weekly report on (1) these children’s participation in class, (2) quality of assignment and (3) adult(s) who had helped them in doing the assignment.

Two Tests and Two Methods

The research design of this study was quasi-experimental using both quantitative and qualitative methods. To measure the effect of the treatment (4-week learning activities), interviews with individual subjects (pupils) were conducted during the week before the treatment and one week after the treatment. The interview schedule, developed by Dr Ko Peng Sim and the researcher, was used as an instrument to test the treatment effect. The total sample was 329 K2 pupils, 159 girls and 170 boys. It represented the racial distribution of Singapore.

This instrument was validated by a pilot test conducted in May 91, with 54 pupils of the same age in a primary school and a private kindergarten. The total scale and sub-scales were found valid and reliable in the pilot test, the pre-test as well as the post-test. The total scale’s reliabilities (KR 20s) of both pre-test and post-test were coincidentally the same (0.75). The range of subscales’ KR 20s were 0.44 to 0.63. All the inter-scale correlations and the item-total correlations were significant at 0.05 level. There was no other suitable instrument to use for the test of concurrent validity. This is quite a common limitation of this kind of “pioneer” studies.

In addition to the quantitative method as mentioned above, the qualitative method was also used. This is done by teachers’ observation of pupils’ class participation and assessment of

¹ The guidelines for these assignments were available for teachers’ reference, at the NIE-BvLF office.
the qualities of the take-home art & craft assignments. Specially designed weekly record sheets were completed by these teachers and analysed by the full-time research assistant, Miss Jennifer Loke.

Three Major Findings

Data analysis provided some interesting findings. These are grouped into three main areas:
(1) children’s learning;
(2) parents’ involvement; and
(3) teachers’ evaluation:

(1) 91% of the subjects showed improvement on the total scale of the test. 3% had no change, while 6% had lower scores. This small percent of decrease might be caused by young children’s playfulness and moodiness. The increments of scores are showed at Table 1 here:

Table 1: Increment of Scores (91% of total sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCREMENT</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 10</td>
<td>23.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>45.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 30</td>
<td>25.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 40</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 to 50</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increase of mean scores of the total scale and the four subscales are 14.83, 6.50, 3.25, 2.52, 2.55 respectively. The t-values are very high ranging from 14.84 to 28.54, all significant at 0.0001 level, (Table 2).

(2) A majority of the subjects had obtained some assistance at home to complete their assignments. There were significant correlations, at 0.0001 level, between the quality of work and the assistance from mother, father and/or others in the fourth assignment, a birthday card for Singapore. The other three assignments were also completed with help at home, but the correlations of quality and assistance were not significant at 0.05 level. Maybe the reason was that these three assignments did not require as much adults’ assistance as the “birthday card” assignment.

Generally speaking, a great majority of parents were cooperative in the home-based activities. These parents mentioned to the teachers that they have learned more about the meanings of the national flag, about Singapore and her people.

(3) All teachers who had participated in this study were involved in the evaluation of the programme. They found that the programme was very meaningful. They were happy to see their pupils learning more about:
(i) things done by other races
(ii) places in Singapore
(iii) national flag and its meanings
(iv) National Day celebration.

Table 2: Comparison of Mean Scores by Scales (N = 329)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCALE</th>
<th>PRE-TEST</th>
<th>POST-TEST</th>
<th>DIFF OF MEANS</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>27.95</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>42.78</td>
<td>10.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>10.41</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>16.91</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>10.49</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moreover, these teachers had developed better rapport with parents. And some of them encouraged the parents to explore more in their neighbourhood and be confident in tapping community resources, such as going into a hotel and walking up to the front desk to collect tourist information pamphlets. It is a fact that many people seldom go to places meant for tourists or visitors.

Teachers also benefitted from the cultural learning experiences in this project. They were amazed by diversified and complicated ethnic features of Singapore people. As a result, they all became more sensitive and prepared in working with children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Summary

The overall evaluation of this study indicated that it is a worthwhile project. The findings showed that the young subjects (K2 pupils) needed to learn and could learn more about their national identity and the multi-ethnic features of Singapore. Teachers and parents could give them guidance in developing a sense of belonging to and love for the nation. There was also encouraging feedback from fellow researchers, curriculum developers, lecturers and professors who have attended the talks on this study. It was commended as a proactive approach and preventive measure to enhance ethnic harmony in a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Singapore.

The researcher would like to record her gratitude to the team members of this study, the Director and staff of the NIE-BvLF Project for their contributions. She is also very thankful to all the staff of the four demonstration centres, the primary school and private kindergarten for their cooperation in the various aspects of this study.

REFERENCES


