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**Paper Title**  Differentiating Citizens in a Democracy: Examining Citizenship Education in Singapore

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Differentiating Citizenship in a Democracy:
Examining Citizenship Education in Singapore

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Abstract

Across and within democratic societies, youths’ experiences of education for citizenship vary widely. A growing body of research suggests that students’ experiences of democratic citizenship education will differ according to how academic programs, community culture, socio-economic status, and gender intersect with prevailing conceptions of equality, mutual respect, and reciprocity. This qualitative study explores how democratic citizenship education is enacted in two secondary schools with very dissimilar academic programs and policies. A key finding in the study is fissures in perceptions of civic engagement and democratic rights between students from the two schools, thus suggesting that academic programmes and policies can differentiate the manner in which students are groomed to fulfill their roles as citizens.

Keywords: Citizenship education, democratic education, human rights, Singapore
Differentiating Citizenship in a Democracy:
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Introduction
Democratic theory posits schools as pivotal sites where young citizens acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to sustain the principle of government by the people (Dewey, 1916; Gutmann, 2004). Across democratic societies, and especially under conditions of globalization, however, youths’ experiences of education for citizenship vary widely (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Shulz, 2001). Although an intensified global exchange of ideas has spurred democracy and human rights, these movements have been matched by increasing cultural diversification and widening socio-economic disparities (Dahl, 1998; Held, 1996; Osler & Starkey, 2005). Today, a growing body of research suggests that students’ experiences of democratic citizenship education will differ according to how academic programs, community culture, socio-economic status, and gender intersect with prevailing conceptions of equality, mutual respect, and reciprocity (Avery, 2007; Hahn, 1998; Rubin, 2007; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). This complex interplay holds important implications on the manner in which students position their roles in democratic governance: whether they envision themselves primarily as obedient citizens, community leaders, or activists in pursuit of social justice (Banks, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Yet, current literature lacks nuanced analyses that shed light on the differing ways students understand democracy and citizenship within specific national contexts (Banks, et al, 2005; Hahn, 2010). This paucity in research presents critical gaps in knowledge about the preparation of young citizens from diverse backgrounds to be effective contributors in the democratic enterprise and in an interconnected global society.
In this study, we address those gaps in literature by examining the case of Singapore, a constitutional democracy and one of the world’s most globalized economies. We employ qualitative data to describe how democratic citizenship education plays out in two secondary schools with different academic programs. Our purpose is to illuminate students’ perceptions of democratic governance and their understanding of their roles as citizens; building a basis to implicate democratic citizenship education policy and suggesting directions in research and practice.

**Democratic Citizenship Education, Social Justice, and Human Rights**

Democratic citizenship education refers broadly to “publicly supported education that is defensible according to a democratic ideal” (Gutmann, 2004, p.71). This definition becomes problematic given that traditions of democratic governance span a spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and values that delineate citizens’ rights and avenues of participation (Held, 1996). Differing conceptions of both democracy and citizenship, in turn, implicate the manner in which policies install the role of education, how democracy is codified and animated within schools, and how students make meaning of their roles as citizens (Banks, 2008; Parker, 2003). For example, liberal democratic perspectives hold the protection of individual liberties as an important function of government (Barber, 2003). Educators in the liberal democratic tradition emphasize knowledge and skills that strengthen awareness of and advocacy for individual rights. The civic republican model of government, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that democracy thrives through civic involvement. Participation is not a right, but a duty borne by each citizen (Oldfield, 1998). Within this perspective, an important mandate
of schools is to inculcate in young citizens the responsibility to participate in the affairs of the
department of the political community or the nation-state (Aristotle, 1962).

Recent models of democratic citizenship education address increasing cultural diversification
and economic disparities through frameworks of social justice. Gutmann (2004) observed that
“more or less civic equality distinguishes more or less democratic societies” (p. 71).
According to Gutmann (2004), schools in democracies should “both express and develop the
capacities of all children to become equal citizens” (p. 71). For Westheimer and Kahne
(2004), democratic citizenship education must not only educate youth to be personally
responsible citizens who are honest, patriotic, and law-abiding; but to be participatory and
social-justice oriented citizens. Participatory citizens possess knowledge about government,
government agencies, and strategies for initiating and accomplishing collective tasks within
established political systems and community structures. Advocates of social justice-oriented
citizenship propose a transformative stance of civic preparation. They argue that schools must
inculcate in youth the skills to question, debate, and change established systems that
reproduce patterns of injustice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Similarly, discourses of human rights increasingly inform democratic citizenship education
(Banks, et al., 2005; Osler & Starkey, 2005). As Osler (2008) has argued, both democracy and
human rights are premised on recognition of our shared humanity. Some scholars caution that
presenting human rights as a theoretical basis for citizenship may overlook the
interrelationship of identity and participation in the context of a political community (Kiwan,
2005). Yet, advocates of human rights remind us that such rights are not premised on legal
frameworks, but on the recognition of fundamental freedoms to which all are entitled (Sen,
2010). Sen (2010) clarifies human rights as “ethical pronouncements as to what should be
done” to realize inalienable freedoms and the obligations that protect those freedoms (p. 357, original emphasis). The ethical basis of human rights implies democratic citizenship education that fosters in youth the skills to scrutinize, dispute, and critique existing policies and practices (Nussbaum, 2010). Students must learn to participate in democratic deliberations – be it in schools, their communities, through unconventional media such as online platforms, or through transnational networks – to determine how prevailing laws and beliefs parallel or contradict human rights (Osler & Starkey, 2010). In this vein, schools can play pivotal roles in preparing young citizens to view human rights not as pronouncements devoid of legal foundations, but as motivators of specific action towards the achievement of a more just and ethical society.

The study

The Singapore context: An outline

Singapore is a tiny city-state with a diverse population and an almost total lack of natural resources. Wedged between two larger Malay-Muslim states, Singapore alone in Southeast Asia has a large Chinese majority. Critics questioned the nation’s ability to survive when it was expelled from Malaysia and became independent in 1965. The newly formed state was, in addition, poverty-stricken and rife with racial tensions and social unrest. The People’s Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since 1965, consolidated the country’s independence through the politics of survival and economic pragmatism. The government pursued a strategy of infrastructure modernization to attract foreign investments and as a result, the government was able to gain legitimacy through sustained economic development (Castells, 1996). Within three decades, Singapore was transformed into a thriving first world economy, with its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world.
Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia, together with its tiny size has given its leaders an acute sense of national vulnerability. Policies were designed “to organize the population into a tautly-controlled, efficient and achievement-oriented society” (Bedlington, 1978, p. 211). Although founded on democratic ideals, in governing Singapore, the state assumes that citizens favour the right to a better life over political ideology (Chua, 1995). Consequently, the ruling party developed a system of political control that allowed few opportunities for dissent. An official narrative of the government states that economic discipline and social conformity is necessary to maintain the social order, promote economic development, and ensure the survival of the nation-state. This narrative has had profound implications for the education in Singapore, particularly in terms of school structure, curriculum, and testing. Education plays a central role in nation-building and citizen formation in Singapore largely due to comprehensive and required citizenship education programmes such as National Education (NE).

**School profiles**

Two contrasting cases, identified by their pseudonyms, Raintree Secondary and Eugenia Secondary, were purposefully chosen for this study. At age 12, all primary students are sorted into highly differentiated secondary schools and academic tracks based on the results of the national Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE).

Raintree Secondary is an elite ethnically diverse all-girls secondary school that primarily admits students who are ranked in the top 10% of their cohort. It is one of only seven schools in Singapore that offers the Integrated Programme (IP). This highly selective programme
allows students to bypass the national Singapore-Cambridge GCE ‘O’ level examination that is otherwise required for the majority of secondary students, and take their GCE ‘A’ Level examinations at the end of the six year programme. The students, freed from the constraints of one of the national examinations, will therefore have to opportunity to “spend a lot more time on developing leadership and commitment to the community” (Tharman, 2002).

Raintree Secondary’s curriculum places considerable emphasis on preparing students for their responsibilities as future leaders. Uniquely, the school incorporates the themes of active citizenship and advocacy in the curriculum, with the explicit aim of developing skills in leadership, decision-making, negotiation, and communication. For instance, in addition to the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) that is mandatory for all students in Singapore schools, Raintree students participate in service-learning and community problem solving.

Eugenia Secondary, in contrast, is a fairly representative government co-educational school located in the western part of Singapore. Less than 15 years old, Eugenia Secondary is ethnically diverse and mostly admits students who are ranked in the bottom half of their cohort. Unlike Raintree Secondary that has the autonomy to design its own curriculum, Eugenia Secondary implements the national curriculum developed by the Singapore Ministry of Education. For students in the academic track, a major part of curricular time is devoted to preparing students for the ‘O’ Level national examinations. Frequently, the assessments promote opinions that are closely aligned to the state-prescribed National Education (NE) programme (Baildon & Sim, 2009), a comprehensive citizenship education programme and nation-building initiative that aims to foster a very place-specific national pride in students. Notably, Eugenia Secondary has been lauded for its exemplary NE program and facilities that promote NE sharing and teaching. For example, the school has unique displays of photo-stories depicting Singapore’s past and has a NE internet games gallery. The school curriculum
also explicitly focuses on educating young citizens to “know and love Singapore,” be active contributors to the community, and be “gracious and caring.”

**Methods and data sources**

Because of the nature of the research purpose, we adhered to a qualitative instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1995). A total of 58 15-year old secondary three students participated in this study: 22 students from Raintree Secondary and 36 students from Eugenia Secondary. Of the 36 students from Eugenia Secondary, 14 students were from the four-year Express programme, nine were from the five year Normal Academic programme, and 13 from the four year vocational Normal Technical track. All 22 Raintree Secondary students were from the elite six year Integrated Programme.

Data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews lasting 45-60 minutes. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. School policy and curricular documents were also analyzed. Analysis was data-driven and inductive, shaped largely by the notion of grounded theory and its attendant constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The raw data, including researcher notes and interview transcripts were coded with the use of the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 8. Codes were then generated and subsequently refined. Methodological triangulation of the data from the multiple sources together with member checking maintained the credibility of the findings (Stake, 1995).
Findings

Our goal in this paper was to explore how students from two Singapore schools, Raintree Secondary and Eugenia Secondary, understood the concepts of democratic governance and their roles as civic actors, given the different school contexts, formal and informal curricula, and school values. A key finding in our study is fissures in perceptions of civic engagement between students from the two schools. Specifically, our study noted distinctions in terms of: (1) the depth of understanding of the key elements of a democracy, including the constraints and limitations of democracy, and the power relationship between the citizen and the government; and (2) the nature of rights and participation within a democracy and the global community.

1. Understanding of democracy and governance

Many students from both schools shared similar understandings of the role of a democratic government, particularly in terms of the provision of basic needs for the people. This statement made by Sally, a student from Raintree Secondary, was typical: “I think they (the government) are supposed to make sure everything in the country is going right like law and order, ... economics (and) education.” Several students from Raintree Secondary were able to provide additional critical insight and suggested that the Singapore government’s legitimacy lay primarily in the provision of social and economic goods to Singapore citizens. Xian and Jean, two articulate Chinese girls from Raintree Secondary, had this to say about the how Singapore citizens perceived the role of the government:

I think for Singapore it’s more of the economy ... I think it’s the only thing that’s making us not unhappy … it’s all about earning money. For Singapore, it’s the thing that’s stopping us from really complaining.
Singaporeans are like that. We keep being told that it’s for our own good ... the truth is, as long as you give us our material goods, we are quite happy. We will shut up.

Students from both schools also agreed that the government should focus on maintaining internal stability and peace. Nurin, a female student from Eugenia Secondary stated that the Singapore government had the responsibility to “maintain stability and … make sure that everyone feels safe.”

With regard to the relationship between the democratic government and the citizens of the country, numerous students from both schools shared similar understandings of the dominant leadership role of the government. Raintree Secondary student, Christy, adopted a position that was similar to that of the students from Eugenia Secondary, stating that the role of the government was to “control us citizens and ensure security and peacefulness and happiness.” Similarly, Lyn, an insightful student from Raintree, used the metaphor of a parent and a child to describe the relationship between the government and the citizens:

Taking care of the people would encompass a lot of sectors, like making sure the economy doesn’t crash…And when they implement things like the CPF (Central Provident Fund), it’s also like taking on a parental role, like how parents would encourage their children to save, and actually make it a habit.

Interestingly, a greater proportion of students from Eugenia Secondary highlighted the hierarchical relationship between the government and the people. Shah, a Malay boy, explained that citizens could write letters to the government to try to change policies but it may not be effective because “if they have too much stuff to do then I don’t think they have time to read our letters... But I think they will allocate some times for us also.” His schoolmate, Mirah, was worried that she would be jailed for dissent if she voiced her concern
about government policies. Similarly, Yong Ming, a Chinese boy, focused on the power difference between the individual citizen and the government, exclaiming: “I don’t know (whether) the government will listen or not (sic) … They so big … we very small.”

The majority of students from Raintree Secondary, in contrast, appeared to have a deeper understanding of the relationship between the role of a democratic government and its citizens. While acknowledging that the government had to lead the country, many students took pains to emphasize that the power of the government emanated from the people. For example, Xian stated that the government should “lead the country, give it a direction and … basically also listen to the citizens because they are the voice of the citizens.” Unlike the students from Eugenia Secondary, Raintree students based much of their argument on their understanding of democratic theory. As Marian explained: “Democracy is when the people are given the ruling power … so that we don’t just follow one leader blindly but we are given equal power to like control, rule the country.” Others including Nahar and Rui, spoke about the social contract between the government and the people. Lyn also emphasized that the government had to protect the people’s interests:

I guess it’s part of the social contract … Like the policies, and implementing things… to ensure… the citizens’ welfare. The role of the government is not... about how much power you have, … the people are the ones that are directly affected and if the government wants to stay in power, they have to protect the interests of the people, because the people are the ones that vote(d) for them.

2. Civic rights and participation within a democracy and beyond

We noted both commonalities and divergences in terms of Eugenia and Raintree students’ conceptions of civic rights and participation. In both schools, students showed a growing
awareness of a global civic interdependence. Intriguingly, Raintree students displayed a stance of citizenship that was more informed and critical compared to their Eugenia counterparts.

With regard to citizens’ rights and duties, both Raintree and Eugenia students referred to one or more of the following rights: to vote, to a basic standard of living, housing, healthcare, protection and education, the right to speak up, to equality, and against discrimination. Raintree students’ responses, however, reflected a more sophisticated understanding of the interdependence of freedoms and responsibilities. This was mirrored in a question posed by Rui: “Are the people making good use of their rights or are they using their rights to do something that will affect other people in a bad sense? There are pros and cons …” A few students across schools mentioned these rights in relation to human rights. Azrinah, a Eugenia student, positioned human rights as a guidepost in citizens’ dealings with others: “We have to respect and uphold the laws and follow the laws…and each of us has human rights, so we cannot abuse and humiliate others.” A Raintree student, Hazel, characterized human rights as corollaries to Singapore’s socio-economic policies: “We are not a welfare state, but citizens still have the basic human right to a decent standard of living. There are policies to help the poor…..The right to basic education, the Compulsory Education Act ensures that children have at least primary education.”

A commonality between students from Eugenia and Raintree was an emerging consciousness of an interconnected human community, especially in terms of issues relating to the environment. Nadia, a Eugenia student, pointed to Singaporeans helping other people “even in other countries ... when they (are) struck by disaster.” His schoolmate, Eugene, emphasized the need to recycle because of global warming: “When people waste too much resources
the human race will be gone.” At Raintree, numerous students mentioned participating in the school’s Overseas Learning Program, including volunteering in an orphanage in Cambodia and tutoring students in Vietnam. Students such as Doreen and Aziana reiterated their responsibilities within a common human society:

- Everybody should be treated equal instead of ‘Oh, you are from a poorer country, so I don’t really have to respect you or anything’…
- Like, the environmental things, we have responsibilities to these shared resources, and even...the Internet, these things that we share as…like, one human race.

In general, students from Raintree were more conscious of societal problems and were much more critical of the government compared to their counterparts from Eugenia. While many Eugenia students failed to identify any social or political problems in Singapore, numerous students from Raintree Secondary spoke passionately and at length about social justice issues, particularly, the need to question existing structures that impeded freedom of speech and reinforced the widening income gap. Jean explained in great detail the problem of the Internal Security Act (ISA), a law that allowed the Singapore government to detain any person without trial for an extended period of time:

- I think that while the ISA will be seen as a device to discourage terrorism, it’s doing much more harm in terms of freedom of speech… the problem is you don’t get a trial … because they are not given a chance to prove their innocence. So I think that maybe we should have a cap on the number of days you can detain them ... before giving them a trial. ... And you must publish the evidence … or else it’s very shady … that’s why people have this perpetual fear.
Notably, despite their critical stance, the majority of the Raintree students expressed similar levels of approval of the Singapore government’s performance to the students from Eugenia Secondary. All the students recognized that the Singapore government had succeeded in ensuring political and economic stability, particularly in providing for the basic welfare of the people in terms of housing and education. Lyn, from Raintree, was careful to note that Singapore was still evolving as a country:

I think the government has still done a very good job. Even though we have the poor in our country ... but you’ll still never see someone who has fallen so far beneath the cracks…Overall, I guess we’re still progressing, really fast, as a country. And I think it’s really due to good governance.

Likewise, Kianpin from Eugenia Secondary pointed out that the Singapore government has done a good job because “we feel that being in Singapore is better than staying in other countries because we are safe and we feel protected by the government.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Numerous studies have documented how American students from different socio-economic backgrounds, racial groups, and schools experience differentiated access to civic learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008b; Levinson, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Similar to the findings of scholars such as Hahn (2003), Avery (2007), and Levinson (2007) who suggest that a civic achievement and engagement gap existed in the United States, we observed notable differences in how students from Raintree and Eugenia Secondary understood democracy and the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the democratically elected government. At Raintree, students exhibited tendencies towards participatory and social justice-oriented citizenship. Whereas, at Eugenia, students adhered to
a personally-responsible form of citizenship that rarely challenged societal status quo (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In the following sections, we discuss bifurcations between cases in light of the schools’ academic and civic education programs, both in the formal and non-formal spheres. We focus on curricular programs’ repercussions on students’ efficacy and level of engagement in social and civic issues. We discuss these repercussions to implicate democratic civic education policy, and conclude our study by noting a common, emerging consciousness of human rights, and suggesting directions for future research.

Generally, Eugenia Secondary students were less willing to be socially and politically active. Numerous students felt that they were too young to make a meaningful contribution to society. They felt that contributing to Singapore started only with employment. Kirsten, for example, stated: “I’m actually thinking, why should I do it? I'm too young, I don’t have a right yet to do such things or maybe it’s my parents’ responsibility, not mine.” Just as Eugenia’s citizenship curriculum exhorted students to be “gracious” and “law-abiding,” many participants from the school understood their civic roles in personally-responsible terms: to be active in community projects, or to assist the poor and elderly, but to refrain from challenging structures that have maintained Singapore’s order and stability. In contrast, students from Raintree Secondary demonstrated a beginning sense of social justice. Jean emphasized that she would speak out against issues that she felt were morally wrong:

I just read Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau…I think a real citizen is someone…that remains true to their rights, and would engage in civil disobedience if necessary … because what the government decides shouldn’t be the end. As a community we have to decide what is right for us as well. When we vote in the government, they represent what we want. So we have the right to disobey what they
say because you, you cannot go against our morals. If not, what is the point of being a citizen?

Schools and the citizenship education curricula convey explicit and implicit societal expectations, constraints, and rules (Cornbleth, 2002). These help mediate and perpetuate societal messages by allocating different social and economic roles, conditioning students’ opportunities and outlook, and controlling access to knowledge and skills (Apple, 2004; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As part of their formal social studies curriculum, students from Raintree Secondary were encouraged to investigate social and political issues. Examples of projects cited by students included an examination of the rights of ex-offenders, single mothers, and the impact of the Internal Security Act. Exposure to these issues that were not part of the official national curriculum had a clear influence on students’ perceptions and understanding of human rights, democracy, and citizenship. Intriguingly, based on students’ responses, it also appeared that the teachers in Raintree Secondary were more willing to share their political opinions with students and discuss social and political issues; whereas, in Eugenia, students reported experiencing didactic social studies instruction that was focused on preparing them for the national examinations.

Within schools, it is crucial for students to have equitable access to civic learning opportunities because this has been shown to impact civic commitments and participation, particularly among less privileged students (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008a; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). These civic learning opportunities are not confined to the formal curriculum. Scholars have observed that the civic knowledge and confidence that students gain from participating in school and learning about elections and voting are strong predictors of voting (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003). One notable difference between Raintree and Eugenia is the level of
democratic influence students have in the school. Raintree Secondary implemented numerous avenues for students to voice their opinion and influence school policy, treating them as ‘full citizens’. Rui, for example, shared how the Student Congress helped shape school rules:

Actually I find that my school cares quite a lot about the opinions of the students… as in we are given leadership roles, to change something, to affect our school, … For example, … Congress is a platform for students to speak out and present their views.

Eugenia Secondary, in contrast, provided little opportunity for student agency. Students are treated as “citizens-in-the-making,” a view that is underpinned by a lack of participation in school programmes and the top-down approaches to the engineering of citizenship education in various aspects of their school life. Democratic practices in this school were therefore framed within dominant unequal power relations between staff and students. Numerous students cited the mass pupil suggestion scheme that occurred annually. Kirsten explained: “There’s an assembly where we have to fill up forms when we voice our views … suggesting for change.” When asked whether the Eugenia school administration allowed students to have a say in changing school rules, Ridah noted that “So far, the school haven’t like give the chance to students to voice out on changing the rules (sic).” School prefects are perceived to be an extension of the school authority that assists in the enforcement of school rules.

Essentially, power seemed to lie primarily in the hands of teachers and participation appeared to be a gesture of tokenism (Hart, 1992). Shah noted that students had little power in the hierarchical school system, “I think we have our say on what we want but then the rest is up to the teachers to decide what is good for us and what is not good.” Overall, significantly fewer students from Eugenia Secondary expressed confidence in their capacity to make decisions and effect fundamental change in school and in society.
The cases of Raintree and Eugenia schools implicate democratic citizenship education policies in profound ways. As findings in this study show, policies can differentiate the manner in which students are groomed to fulfil their roles as citizens. The education of students from Eugenia Secondary was guided by policies and curricula that emphasized responsibilities and respect for those in power, and a sense of uncritical patriotism, because students are not expected to take up positions of responsibility. Rather, they are prepared within constraining school climates and assessments to be obedient citizens. In contrast, the education of students from Raintree Secondary - a school given autonomy from restrictive educational policies - lays considerable stress on equipping them for responsibilities as future leaders. These students are well aware of their rights and agency, and demonstrate strong civic and political efficacy. This deterministic and stratified view of education, we argue, is highly problematic given the fluid and complex nature of democratic citizenship in a globalized society like Singapore. As Gopinathan (2007) states, “the [g]overnment can no longer pick winners in the economy ... neither can it on the basis of school assessments provide some with opportunities and not others” (p. 68).

Notably, the study illustrates an emerging awareness of human rights and consciousness of a shared human society. At the governmental level, there is an apparent willingness though still very cautious, on the part of the Singapore government to engage in a discussion of human rights issues. In a significant recent development, as part of the United Nation Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, both the Singapore government and various non-governmental civil rights groups such as the Think Centre and Maruah submitted reports on the country's human rights track record (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2011). As a result, civil society groups such as Maruah that explicitly work toward promoting and raising ‘awareness, knowledge and understanding of human rights and human rights and related
issues at the national, regional and international levels, in Singapore, ASEAN and elsewhere’
(Constitution of Maruah, 2007) have gained increasing prominence. These developments
though gradual, offer a platform for students to develop democratic citizenship geared
towards the achievement of social justice.

As Banks and his colleagues (2005) have noted, the disjunctures that result from the
intersection of local beliefs and human rights can be harnessed to open discursive spaces that
are hallmarks of a democratic society. Just as students in Raintree and Eugenia Secondary
recognized socio-economic policies such as the right to education and safety as entitlements
that should be extended to all human beings, this recognition can lay the basis for challenging
the limited political freedoms enjoyed by Singapore’s citizens. Admittedly, the discursive
spaces we speak of are more likely to emerge in schools such as Raintree; however, given the
increasing influence of on-line civic communities globally and in Singapore, we see novel
opportunities for youth across the educational spectrum to engage in dialogue about social
justice issues. Future research in democratic education can extend current literature by
examining not only the ways that citizens within nations are prepared differentially for their
civic roles, but how media and the internet provide the means to counter these differences,
outside and inside of schools.

Several scholars have argued that it is a moral imperative within democratic societies to grant
young citizens equal access to the basic skills and knowledge that will enable them to be
effective participants in the democratic enterprise (Gutmann, 2004; Levinson, 2007). This
includes the ability to question, debate, and challenge existing hierarchies based on income,
ethnicity, or gender. The case of Raintree demonstrates that social justice-oriented citizenship
can take root. The flourishing of social justice, however, depends heavily on how academic
programs conceptualize the role of citizens that requires a critical re-working of power relations between staff and students. This study of two Singaporean schools likewise points to the potential of human rights discourse to harness youths’ recognition of and advocacy for social justice within democratic frameworks. Fundamentally, democratic citizenship is about working with others, within and across communities, in the quest for the good society (Dewey, 1916). Here, human rights can be invoked as guiding principles for what constitutes the good society, as underpinning both human rights and democracy is the notion of common humanity, based on ethical conceptualizations of the individual (Osler & Starkey, 2005).
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