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# **THE TIES THAT BIND: GLOBAL FORCES SHAPING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION POLICY IN SINGAPORE**

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines the confluence of political, social, and cultural forces at the global and national level that have shaped the development of citizenship education policies in Singapore. Scholars have noted that the social context and political norms of a given community, as well as the different historical trajectories of nations affect curricular decisions, content, and values (Morris & Cogan, 2001; Oommen, 2004). Being a young, newly independent state with a multi-ethnic populace consisting largely of first- and second-generation immigrants from China, India, and other parts of Southeast Asia, Singapore had to navigate unique challenges, particularly in terms of developing, in its citizens, affiliation to a state that did not exist prior to 1965.

Education has traditionally been associated with the socialization and assimilation of students into the norms of national citizenship. Citizenship education is, in particular, defined and enacted in ways unique to the historical and political context of each country, resulting in distinct differences in the attitudes of young people toward citizenship (Kennedy, Hahn, & Lee, 2007; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). Yet, as Heater (2004) points out, the effects of globalization, however defined, has had “repercussions for citizenship” (p. 354), including a decline in the state’s ability to protect its citizens’ interests, citizens’ increasing mobility, and multiple loyalties and affiliations. Dale (1999) too, argues that globalization not only implies a new set of rules, but has also “affected both the content and form of at least some of the policy making procedures and outcomes of all states” (p. 2). Unsurprisingly, therefore, as Ball (2008) points out, “Globalization is ubiquitous in current policy texts” (p. 29). In essence, the complexities of larger social, political and economic imperatives, in addition to local pressures, have shaped how the state has formulated and enacted citizenship education policies and reform.

Educational reform and policy also play a central role in mediating and managing value conflicts between state and society (Cuban, 2008). In their book, *Tinkering toward utopia*, Tyack and Cuban (1995) defined educational reforms as “planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems” (p. 4). Modern postcolonial Singapore faced many challenges to its existence from its inception, including the lack of land and other natural resources, communist agitation and labor unrest, ethnic tensions, an undeveloped economy with high unemployment rate, and hostility from its immediate neighbors. These early threats to the nation’s survival resulted in a profound sense of vulnerability and insecurity that permeates political discourse and the national historical narrative. The Singapore government’s pragmatic outlook and its focus on the goal of national survival have resulted in numerous significant shifts in citizenship education policies. Greatly influenced by the forces of globalization, these policy reforms have helped redefine the relationships between the Singapore citizen, the nation-state, and the world.

In order to explore how citizenship education policies in Singapore since the 1980s have been shaped in response to national imperatives and globalization discourses, I analyzed a range of data sources in the public domain, including press releases from the Ministry of

Education, speeches from key government leaders, official curricula, and a seminal report produced by the Committee on National Education (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007a) which made explicit, for the first time, much of the underlying motivations for the citizenship education program in Singapore. I examined the rhetorical and linguistic shifts used in the production of policy texts and how this privileges particular state-defined national goals. In particular, I focused on how the Singapore state uses the concept of globalization and its impacts to rationalize citizenship education policy reform.

“Policies,” as Ball (2008) argues, “are very specific and practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies are part of the creation of their conditions of acceptance and enactment. They construct the inevitable and the necessary” (p. 5). It has to be noted, however, that the translation, enactment, and interpretation of policies vary greatly in different schools and settings, even in a small, highly centralized city-state such as Singapore. Gaps between school reform policies and classroom practice, furthermore, frequently occur (Cuban, 2008). Policies can be mediated and/or resisted by teachers and schools. In some instances, these policies, because of their contradictory or complex nature, may be incompatible with existing, entrenched institutional structures and practice. One of the major difficulties encountered while doing this research was the scarcity of official documents that were available to the general public. The policy decision making process in Singapore, as Quah (1984) argues, has been characterized as being surrounded by a “shroud of secrecy” (1984, p. 113). This is exacerbated by the centralized nature of the education policy decision-making process which in effect, was confined only to a select group of Ministry of Education officials who were, in turn, guided by the decisions made by senior government ministers.

### **Globalization and Citizenship Education**

Globalization, argues Dale (1999), is “not a homogenous process, nor are its effects homogenous” (p. 3). Globalization, while being an inherently ambiguous, fluid and amorphous concept, has undeniably resulted in massive increases in the movement of capital, people, products, and ideas. Scholars such as Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1994), Ong (1999), Sassen (2001) and others write about the increasing deterritorialization of nations, the rise of global cities, and the growing influence of transnational elites. These global developments have also encouraged a reimagining of traditional notions of nations, communities, and identities. Appiah (2006), for example, advocates the development of a cosmopolitan ethic that is not restricted by national boundaries or customs. Citing Diogenes, Seneca, Plutarch and others, Nussbaum (2002), too, makes the case for giving our primary allegiance to “the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings” (p. 7).

The impact of global forces varies greatly across different contexts and does not affect individuals, societies, and states in uniform ways. States and individuals assimilate, mediate, or resist these influences differently. Some states, as Ball (2008) asserts, are “more able and more likely to deflect or mediate global policy trends while others ... are required to accept and respond to external reform imperatives” (p. 29). To some extent, the parameters associated with citizenship and its attendant allegiances to the nation-state has necessarily been redefined and reshaped as nation-states attempt to manage transnational flows of people, ideas, goods, and technologies.

Within the nation-state, educators, individuals, and interest groups with disparate agendas engage in a constant struggle to define the education landscape, particularly during periods of social change and disequilibrium (Cuban, 2008). Citizenship education, in particular, plays an important role in mediating the shifting relationships between the citizen,

the nation-state, and the world. Citizenship is a complex and multi-faceted concept that has been accorded many different meanings and definitions.. The shared practices, beliefs and worldviews that govern the ideals of good citizenship are, to a large extent, determined by national governments and those with access to power (Zemach-Bersin, 2007). The ability of the nation-state to sustain its citizens' commitment to national priorities has become increasingly threatened because nation-states are, to varying degrees, "compromised by globalization in their capacity to maintain exclusivity of identity attachments" (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 271). Despite the efforts of states to bind their population through the development of cultural and political symbols of national identification (Anderson, 2003), other forms of identity positions such as the transnational subjectivities and the ties of the diaspora have become much more salient (Ong, 1999).

Economic globalization, furthermore, has resulted in a prevalence of market principles and business interests in educational institutions (Welch, 1998). The economics of globalization, according to Ball (2008), play a crucial role in the making of education policy. The main rationale for education reform, shared across multiple national settings, is primarily economic in nature and center on making themselves more globally competitive (Dale, 1999; Levin, 1998). "Many policymakers," argue Tyack and Cuban (2001), "have narrowed the currency of educational success to one main measure – test scores – and reduced schooling to a means of economic competitiveness, both personal and national" (p. 26). This "cult of efficiency in education" (Welch, 1998) with its emphasis on instrumental economic goals such as quality improvement and responsiveness to market forces, has resulted in the commodification of knowledge and a displacement of social concerns such as equity, individual welfare, and social mobility.

### **Politics and Education in Singapore**

Singapore, a small island in Southeast Asia, achieved independence in 1965 following its separation from Malaysia. Numerous challenges, as the official historical narrative of Singapore points out, threatened the survival of the fledging nation (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007c). The young nation-state faced problems such as high unemployment, a lack of natural resources, ethnic tensions, and social unrest that resulted in a profound sense of vulnerability. The Singapore government secured the country's independence through the politics of survival, premised largely on the principles of economic pragmatism, multiracialism, and meritocracy.

The Singapore state vigorously promotes values such as love and respect for family and elders, belief in order and stability, consultation, obligations and societal harmony (Freeman, 1996; Mahbubani, 1998). Political leaders such as Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, regularly espouse a vision of a society that subordinates the rights of individuals to the community in order to ensure economic growth (Zakaria, 1994). The state also developed a tightly organized system of political control and has worked hard to enforce "social discipline" (Hill & Lian, 1995; J. S. T. Quah, 2000). Emphasizing national interest, the White Paper on Shared Values, adopted by the Singapore Parliament in 1991, promoted the values of the collective such as "Consensus, not conflict," and "Nation before community and society above self" (Lai, 2004, p. 6).

The strong, authoritarian Singapore government dominates policy discourse and production. Policy formulation in Singapore is largely controlled by the cabinet (J. S. T. Quah, 1984). The ministers define the problem and, together with the civil servants, identify the causes and propose the appropriate solutions. Relative to many other states, the Singapore government has an excellent track record in policy implementation due to the well-funded

and effective civil service, the low level of corruption, and the “social discipline” of the population (S. R. Quah, 1983). The dominance and competence of the ruling political leadership, as well as the weak opposition had resulted in little or no resistance on the part of the public to the implementation of government policies. Correspondingly, non-governmental interest groups and the public play a relatively insignificant role in policy making (J. S. T. Quah, 1984).

The fledging post-colonial Singapore government turned to schools as allies in the nation-building cause. The state centralized the education system and controlled this important ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2006). All state schools, regulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE), closely reflect the state’s priorities and ideals (Tan & Chew, 2004). The MOE determines the curriculum for all subjects for all state schools and all textbooks used in Singapore schools have to be pre-approved by the state (Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004). In Singapore, education policies are characterized by pragmatism and fluidity. The over-riding strategic goal of the survival of the nation-state dominates the political, economic, and social landscape of Singapore. The dual focus on pragmatism and national survival has resulted in the development of an education system that is particularly open to change and influences from other national education systems. Unencumbered by overly nationalist, parochial, or ideological baggage, the Singapore education system has, in the past fifty years or so, been greatly shaped and mediated by global forces and influences.

Formal education and in particular, the subjects of history and Social Studies, have traditionally been used for nation-building and the creation of a national identity in Singapore (Sim & Print, 2005). Citizenship education in Singapore has always been associated with the conventional notion of developing loyal and patriotic citizens (Han, 2000). These programs have taken many forms in response to the changing political and economic needs of Singapore (Han, 2000; Hill & Lian, 1995). A common theme among all the phases in Singapore’s education system, particularly in relation to history and citizenship education, is the explicit instruction provided to students on the desired social and moral behavior of national subjects. The state introduced programs such as *Civics and Moral Education*, as well as *Being and Becoming Good Citizens* in Singapore schools in the 1980s. In 1997, the Singapore government introduced a new citizenship education program called National Education, that was focused on transmitting core national values and building a common national identity (H. L. Lee, 1997b). The National Education citizenship education program was substantially revised a decade later due to changing global political, economic, and social contexts. As then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong pointed out:

The world has changed dramatically in the 1990s. And the pace of change will quicken. Take the Internet, for example. Its web pages, emails, chatrooms and netphones have removed the barriers of geography and distance. It will revolutionise the way we work, live and play. Even the way wars are fought have changed. A country can be brought to heel with air power alone. In economics, the borderless world has led to mega-mergers and cross-border strategic alliances between companies. (Goh, 1999)

In sum, citizenship and citizenship education policy in Singapore has been marked by change and constancy, governed largely by economic and strategic considerations and the need to ensure the survival of the nation. Citizenship is conceptualized largely in instrumental and pragmatic terms. This strategic conception of citizenship is, on one hand, underpinned by a consistent emphasis on key shared national ideals such as meritocracy, national loyalty, consensus, and pragmatism. On the other hand, the Singapore state is also compelled to be

flexible, accommodating, and open in redefining notions of citizenship in the face of changing contexts and the pressures of globalization.

### **Strategic Citizenship – Shifts in Citizenship Education Policies**

This paper focuses on three significant shifts in the citizenship education policies of Singapore: (1) the introduction of Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics in 1982; (2) the introduction of National Education in 1997; and (3) the revision of National Education in 2007. I situate these shifts in policy in broader national and global contexts, focusing on national-global discourses that have redefined the relationship between the citizen, the nation-state and the world, and the global developments that have shaped the state's policies toward citizenship education.

#### **1. Asian values: The introduction of Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics**

The Religious Knowledge program, incorporating subjects such as Confucian Ethics, Buddhist Studies, Bible Knowledge, and Islamic studies, was introduced in 1982 to promote Asian cultural values and Confucian ethics in response to the crisis of deculturalization and the influence of negative Western values (Hill, 2000). The rapid industrialization of the preceding years raised concerns that the adoption of science and technology, and the increasing use of English were causing young Singaporeans to become too westernized. Alarmed by the “corrupting ideas” of western individual liberalism, the Singapore government, together with the leaders of other Asian states such as Malaysia and Hong Kong, embraced the Asian values discourse. In what Hill (2000) labels “reverse Orientalism”, the Asian values discourse served both as an ingredient for successful economic development and as “a ‘cultural ballast’ against the ‘corruption’ of western, liberal individualism” (Chua, 2003, p. 67). In a “self-orientalizing move” (Ong, 1999, p. 80), Singapore leaders appropriated the originally Western construct of Asian values and used it to claim superiority over the “Other,” now defined as the decadent West (Hill, 2000).

The Singapore government promoted a narrative of Asian modernity that attributed the rapid economic progress of East Asian states such as Japan to Asian values that gave priority to the community and the associated values of hard work, thrift, sacrifice, and loyalty (Mahbubani, 1998). Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore argued vehemently against the notion of Western individualism:

The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy. (cited in Zakaria, 1994, p. 111)

Western values, according to the state, deculturized and individualized society, and thus posed a threat to social cohesion and national survival (Hill & Lian, 1995). Schools, therefore, should promulgate Confucian values such as collectivism and stability to young citizens. Lee Kuan Yew outlined the main rationale for introducing Confucian values into the school curriculum:

In the middle 1980s we noticed a change in young people. They appeared less Confucian and placed more emphasis on individual rights and the freedom to “do their own thing”. Rapid development and growth had increased incomes

and increased exposure to Western media, and Western tourists ... So we decided to reinforce family influence with formal lessons in schools to teach Confucian ethics and the different religions. The objective is to restrict the Westernisation of Singapore society. (K. Y. Lee, 1994)

Scholars such as Wee (2004) have argued that the valorization of these cultural values also allowed Singapore leaders to not only maintain the power of the ruling elite through the suppression of dissent but also link the Singapore state to other Asian economic powerhouses like Japan. The promotion of these Asian cultural identities allowed the state to make links to a perceived Asian capitalist modernity and create trade and economic opportunities with a newly resurgent China. The use of the Asian values discourse, according to Ong (1999), also helped to both “regulate society while culturally authenticating policies that produce the social conditions desired by global business” (p. 202). This program was abandoned less than a decade later partly because of the perceived rise in religious fervor and the potential for heightened racial and religious divisions in Singapore (Hill & Lian, 1995), as well as the Asian economic crisis that posed a challenge to much of the legitimization for the “Asian way.”

## **2. Loyalty to the nation: The introduction of National Education**

The political discourse on citizenship and national affiliation became particularly prominent in the late 1990s. Alarmed by the increasing number of Singapore citizens emigrating, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned, “Singapore risks becoming like one of those well-run, comfortable international hotels which successful business executives check in and out” (1999). Since 1997, the Singapore state has attempted to incorporate the key elements of citizenship into a unique, comprehensive citizenship education program called National Education (NE) which currently dominates education discourse in Singapore. This new citizenship education program was launched in large part due to growing apprehension about developing national identity and affiliation in increasingly transnational contexts. Underlying the Singapore state’s educational reform strategy was the explicit recognition, by the political leadership that globalization and the changing economy posed a challenge to the loyalties and attachments of young Singaporeans (Goh, 1996; H. L. Lee, 1997b). Disparate global flows have, for example, increasingly resulted in young people being pulled into multiple allegiances that challenge the hold of the nation state. Former Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, for example, expressed his concern that many young Singapore citizens, disparagingly called “quitters” in his speech, will leave and “take flight when our country runs into a little storm,” (Goh, 2002).

The increasing government apprehension about young Singaporeans’ lack of knowledge and interest in their country’s recent history and the central issues key to national survival resulted in a concerted effort on the part of the government to push for a comprehensive citizenship education program that gave priority to state-defined shared values such as pragmatism, social cohesion, consensus, and meritocracy. The National Education program thus focused primarily on developing national cohesion, fostering a sense of identity and pride in being Singapore citizens, instilling core values, and understanding the unique geopolitical and economic challenges that Singapore faced (H. L. Lee, 1997b). The aims of the program were distilled into six core messages: (1) Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong; (2) We must preserve racial and religious harmony; (3) We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility; (4) We must ourselves defend Singapore; (5) No one owes Singapore a living; (6) We have confidence in our future (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007a). Citing similar citizenship education programs from other countries, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, asserted that every American child was deliberately

inculcated and indoctrinated with American political and social values and ideals. This, according to Lee, was crucial to ensure that “the next generation grows up with these ideas deeply ingrained” (H. L. Lee, 1997a).

Notably, the timing of the launch of National Education coincided with an intense worldwide interest in citizenship education in response to globalization. This, compounded with the absence of any real crisis to Singapore’s survival, suggests that NE was an attempt by the governing elite to maintain power in the face of challenges posed by the forces of globalization and changing global realities (Sim & Ho, 2010). As Hawazi Daipi, the Parliamentary Secretary of Education, pointed out, “A strong national identity, healthy values, and racial and religious harmony are needed to withstand the divisive impact of globalization and the attractions of imitating the West” (2002). At this stage of the debate, speeches from key government leaders appeared to suggest that citizenship and loyalty to the nation was a zero sum proposition, equating cosmopolitanism with the loss of “rootedness” to Singapore:

Whether we like it or not, more Singaporeans will take wing, given the pace of globalisation and their own personal mobility. As Singaporeans become even more cosmopolitan, the issue of concern to us is whether they will become less rooted to Singapore. We now have to even compete for the hearts of Singaporeans against attractions elsewhere. (Goh, 1999)

Similarly, in his speech, Ng Eng Hen, the Minister for Education, highlighted the social consequences of using the English language as the primary medium of instruction for public schools in Singapore arguing that the use of a colonial language, English, has affected Singapore’s national psyche and core values. “With rising affluence and education, inevitably,” noted the minister, “we will see an increasing number of Singaporeans who work, travel and live in other parts of the world. This easy adaptability to the larger world does obviously impact on their sense of rootedness here” (Ng, 2008). Consequently, educators should, according to Aline Wong, then Senior Minister of State for Education, inculcate in students “the core national values and social instincts so that they will remain committed to the country while being members of the global community” (Wong, 2000). Citizenship education in Singapore, therefore, should help reinforce this “sense of rootedness” in Singaporeans.

### **3. (Re)defining good citizenship: The revision of National Education**

By the turn of the century, shifts in domestic and international cultural, economic and political norms required a change in the Singapore government’s policy toward citizenship education. The Singapore government acknowledged the need for the nation to anchor its citizens in face of increasingly influential transnational flows of people, products and knowledge. The rise of “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999), defined as “the cultural logics of capitalist accommodation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 6), the Singapore state took care to redefine and, in some ways, deterritorialize the Singapore identity by organizing the current Social Studies curriculum around two core ideas – “Being Rooted” and “Living Global” - with the aim of promoting national identity, multicultural understanding, and global perspectives.

The national discourse shifted from counterproductive oppositions – “stayers” and “quitters” – to embracing the newly (re)defined Singapore diaspora. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pointed out in his speech,

We respect the choice of those who work overseas. In fact, we encourage Singaporeans to go abroad, spend time abroad, gain experience, understand how the world operates and then come back to Singapore. But of course, while it's good to have people abroad, we also hope that they don't spend all their life there and at some stage, they will decide to come back to Singapore ... we must deal with our diaspora to make them part of the family and treat them as part of the family. (2006)

Acknowledging the impact of changing global realities, the government made the strategic decision to refine the National Education citizenship education program in 2007 to concentrate more on "cultivating a sense of belonging and emotional rootedness to Singapore" (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. vi). This revised NE citizenship education policy focused primarily on the need to remain rooted to the nation-state while embracing a global perspective. The curriculum also highlighted new geo-political challenges such as international terrorism. In his speech, the Education Minister, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, argued that the NE program had to be reformed and restructured in order to cope with these new global realities,

NE has also been given added impetus by the advent of global terrorism, the new face of a globalising world. No country is immune to terrorism. Singapore is not immune. (2006)

The minister spoke at length about how countries such as the U.S., Australia, England, Japan, and China had to modify their existing citizenship education programs to reflect new challenges and global realities. Foreign examples, as Phillips (2006) argues, can be used to "both advocate and to warn against change" (p. 552). For example, the minister noted that the Japanese had to focus on changing their schools to adapt to the increasing number of minorities, while the Chinese had to address the problem of increasing individualism and materialism by focusing more on "developing moral character and social responsibility" (Tharman, 2006). The NE committee's 2007 report also gave great prominence to the Australian and the British governments' promotion of national history, common national values and national identity. The committee cited the 2007 British Ajebo report which advocated the need to focus more on British history so as to build a more cohesive society, to promote "core British values" (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 18), enhance historical understanding of relevant issues, and to "unify Britons with a common identity and heritage" (p. 17). Likewise, the NE report also used the example of the Australian federal government decision to make mandatory the teaching of Australian history in order to impart national values and lessons, and to "develop a clear, strong and compelling national identity" (18). These examples helped legitimize the committee's call for a greater focus on deepening "rootedness," social cohesion, and national identity in Singapore students.

### **Conclusion**

As John Goodlad and Stephen Thornton have noted, different educational goals have had priority at different times and contexts (Goodlad, 1994; Thornton, 2008). The Singapore state's citizenship education policies are unique in that they are formulated, in large part, as a response to larger transnational forces and institutions. Educational reform for citizenship education in Singapore reflect the interplay between the deterritorializing economic-technological forces of globalization and localized expressions of collective identity and culture (Tomlinson, 2003). Unlike citizenship education programs in other countries that are fundamentally national enterprises (Heater, 2004), this responsiveness, fluidity, and openness form the core of the state's citizenship education policy.

Correspondingly, policy makers in Singapore do not shy away from strategically redefining core citizenship ideals and values to address different national agendas and perceived global imperatives.

The Singapore education system exemplifies what Ball (2008) describes as the “increasing colonization of education policy by economic policy imperatives” (p. 39). Education policy serves the interests of the Singapore state and its desire for economic survival. As Raymond Lim, the Minister for Transport, explained:

Singapore does not have the luxury of pursuing a foreign policy of abstract ideals. Like that of other countries, ours is a servant to the national goals of survival and prosperity. The guiding principle is national interest. (Lim, 2006)

In their quest to ensure the survival of the nation-state, the Singapore government’s citizenship education policies are governed by pragmatism and fluidity. This particularly pragmatic viewpoint is encapsulated in a quote, attributed to Deng Xiao Ping, that is frequently used by members of the governing elite, “It does not matter whether a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). Instead of resisting or putting up barriers, the state consciously realigns its policy priorities in order to accommodate and allow a repositioning to occur in relation to the constant flows of capital, people and knowledge. The local agency is not always victimized by global forces but is “capable of pursuing its own interests by manipulating global forces” (Silova, 2004, p. 71). In sum, domestic imperatives and historical constraints, while important, play a less crucial role in defining citizenship and citizenship education policies in a young state like Singapore as compared to states that are locked in, either by design or default, to an unproductive and potentially destructive spiral of parochial, ideological, and nationalistic ideals.

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