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Taming “Issue Investigation”: Singapore Secondary Social Studies Teachers’ Accounts of Challenges Encountered and Strategies for Coping

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Abstract

The upper-secondary Social Studies (SS) syllabus (Express/Normal-Academic) released in Singapore in 2016 introduced an inquiry-based component called “Issue Investigation” (II). Given the relatively recent nature of this introduction, so far there has been little research on II. Drawing on a small qualitative study, this article reports on some of the typical challenges experienced by Singapore SS teachers in implementing and enacting II, as well as the coping strategies they developed. According to these teachers’ accounts, II was from the outset hindered by an exam-driven pragmatic attitude prevalent in Singapore schools; whereas specific enactment challenges included the II’s (perceived) overwhelming scope and depth, time constraints, and deficits of certain skills or preparedness among students and teachers. Faced with these challenges, teachers developed broadly two types of coping strategies—simplification and “piggybacking”—to tame II by making it manageable, both for the students and for themselves.

Introduction

The upper-secondary Social Studies (SS) syllabus (Express/Normal-Academic) released in Singapore in 2016 introduced a component called “Issue Investigation” (II).

Speaking to the target learners, the SS textbook defines and explains II as follows:

An Issue Investigation encourages you to identify a societal issue to develop a response to. A societal issue is one that is of concern to society and people have points of view about. An Issue Investigation allows you to analyse factors and perspectives that shape the development of societal issues.

Through the course of the investigation, your group will also understand the impact the selected societal issue has on society and develop possible responses and recommendations to address the issue. (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 367)

In terms of carrying out II, the textbook prescribes a four-stage cycle: (1) sparking curiosity; (2) gathering data; (3) exercising reasoning; (4) reflective thinking. It thus seems that II is positioned as an inquiry-driven learning activity that helps students gain analytical insights into pertinent societal issues, which in turn serve the broader objective of Social Studies to develop learners into “informed, concerned and participative citizens” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. iii).

The importance curriculum developers have attached to this new Issue Investigation component is apparent. In the

official textbook, an extensive chapter—“*Chapter 12: Skills for Issue Investigation*”—is dedicated to II. Indeed, spanning some 94 pages (pp. 364-457), this chapter is much longer than any of the eleven preceding chapters dealing with substantive topics. Due to the recent nature of II’s appearance in the SS syllabus, however, so far there has been little research-based understanding of this new aspect of SS education.

Existing research on Social Studies education in Singapore, instead, has largely taken a critical curriculum perspective to examine the ways in which SS has been mobilized to serve the National Education (NE) agenda of the state and, relatedly, the state’s hegemonic conception of citizenship education which allocates differentiated citizenship roles and capacities to different categories of students (see Ho, 2012; Sim, 2011; Sim & Print, 2005). Less has been written about Social Studies from the perspectives of pedagogy and teaching/learning experiences.

This paper makes a modest contribution towards addressing the above research gaps through a small-scale empirical study into Singapore secondary SS teachers’ experiences associated with Issue Investigation. Specifically, this paper shall focus on the challenges teachers encountered in implementing and enacting II and, relatedly, how they developed certain strategies to make II manageable.

Before describing briefly the qualitative study underpinning this paper, however, it is important to note that II, although now an integral part of the SS syllabus, is *not* directly reflected in the standardized national assessment. The compulsory national examination for SS in Singapore

consists of a self-contained 1-hour-45-minute paper, comprising a Structured-Response Question (SRQ) and a Source-Based Case Study (SBCS), to answer which the examinees in theory need not rely on any material beyond what is already provided in the paper. II’s positioning, thus, is more akin to that of a “project work”, and its assessment is supposed to be “school-based,” with little apparent bearing on the national exam. In a performance-driven education system predicated on high-stakes examinations such as Singapore’s (Cheah, 1998; Deng & Gopinathan, 2016), this setup raises questions about motivation and pragmatism. The *Guide to Teaching and Learning Upper Secondary Social Studies* prepared by the Ministry of Education (MOE) for SS teachers rationalizes that “Issue Investigation *also* contributes towards developing students’ competencies for *national assessment*” (Ministry of Education, 2016b, pp. 262, emphasis added); however, for teachers on the ground, the place of II in SS teaching remains a question far from settled. As the study’s findings shall reveal, this is an issue featuring prominently in Singapore SS teachers’ experiences as they grappled with this particular mode of inquiry-based learning.

The Study

Enabled by a small Start-Up Grant (SUG 07/18 YPD) provided by the MOE through NIE, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted. Data was collected between April and October 2019 through seven semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions (FGDs), involving a total of 17 SS teachers (7 in one-to-one interviews; 10 in FGDs) from seven mainstream secondary schools in Singapore (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

Table 1. Interview (one-to-one) participants

Teacher (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Subject combination	Years of teaching experience
James (T1)	M	30	SS/Mathematics	4
Daliah (T2)	F	26	SS/History	3
Beatrice (T3)	F	28	SS/English	3
Keith (T4)	M	29	SS/History	2
Cherie (T5)	F	29	SS/English	3
Kali (T6)	F	55	SS/History	30
Laura (T7)	F	Undeclared	History/SS	10

Table 2. Focus group discussion participants

Teacher (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Subject combination	Years of teaching experience
Chris	F	Undeclared	English/SS	19
Sam	F	Undeclared	Geography/SS	Undeclared
Padma	F	Undeclared	Geography/SS	>20
Gloria	F	30s	Geography/SS	11.5
Silvia	F	30s	SS/English	8
Monroe	M	30	SS/Mathematics	4.5
Esmerelda	F	27	History/SS	0.75
Clarice	F	29	English/SS	2
Ivy	F	38	Geography/SS	15
Lisa	F	34	SS/English	9

Participants were recruited using a mixture of purposive and snow-ball sampling methods. The author selectively reached out to his professional contacts in the Singapore SS teaching community to invite potential participants who embodied diversities in terms of teaching experiences, academic backgrounds, and school types. The seven schools involved in the study were mostly medium-range schools: two or three might be considered lower-end “neighbourhood schools”, but none were exceptionally high-ability or “elite” schools. Participants were also asked to forward the research invitation to their eligible contacts, which led to several more volunteers. The

resultant pool could be regarded as more or less typical of the profiles of SS teachers in Singapore schools, representing varying lengths of teaching experience, subject combinations, and a range of positions and seniority levels, including rank-and-file teachers, Senior Teachers, Subject Heads and Heads of department. Nevertheless, given the limited sample size and the sampling methods used, some caution is in order when generalizing this study’s findings.

An interview/FGD session typically lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. Some of the interviews/FGDs were conducted or

facilitated by a trained research assistant. All sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded and transcribed, and coded thematically using the NVivo 12 software for analysis. Transcripts were anonymised to conceal participants' identities; all participant names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

Challenges to II Implementation and Enactment

The study found that research participants' experiences in relation to II implementation and enactment were by and large similar, with their narratives converging on a more or less common set of challenges. One major challenge that hindered II implementation from the outset had to do with the perceived tenuous link between II and the high-stakes national exam, and a resultant exam-driven pragmatism.

Tenuous link to exam, and exam-driven pragmatism

Despite affirming from the outset the intrinsic value of doing II, Kali, a senior teacher with some thirty years of experience, spoke with brutal candour when she was asked during an interview if she and her school colleagues saw II as important in their scheme of work:

We don't see [II] as important, because it's not exam-based. Never do also never mind! And if you must do it, "Don't use so much time ah! Because we need to study for exam!... Because no matter how much you change, the exam is pen and paper, we will teach to pen and paper, we will teach to the exam because in the end that is what they want to see: the results. So, they can change it whichever way they want, if the exam doesn't change, we will teach to the exam.

The exact same sentiment was echoed by Laura, a teacher with ten years of experience and the Head of the humanities department at a school. Reflecting on her past three years of helming II implementation in her school, Laura characterized SS teachers' perspective as follows:

I think the problem that many of my teachers often share with me is that "Actually after I do all this, I'm not teaching them [students] any skills that are useful for the exam, so why are we doing it? Like, as in, it's [II] just a project". [...] So...over the years it's been harder and harder for me to actually keep [advocating for II], and in fact, sometimes I think the teachers feel like it's just a pain that they have to get through.

What both Kali and Laura pointed out unequivocally is that, despite the intended alignment and complementarity between Issue Investigation as an inquiry-based learning activity and the standardized national assessment, for many SS teachers on the ground, the two remained, to use research participant Beatrice's words, "totally divorced". Given a high-stakes exam environment, teachers unsurprisingly developed a highly pragmatic, if not also cynical, attitude that worked against the implementation of II. Indeed, during the interview Laura went as far as to say that the MOE curriculum planners' push for inquiry-based learning in SS through II had caused "real teacher grievance on the ground"—a sentiment echoed by Kali, who also used the word "grievance".

Practical enactment challenges for teachers and students

Aside from the exam-driven pragmatism that dampened teachers' incentives for implementing II, enacting II

in a “hands-on” sense presented another set of practical challenges, which were also to a large extent shared among the research participants.

One challenge almost universally mentioned was what the teachers considered to be the “daunting” (Kali) scope and depth of the II processes as prescribed in the various official teaching documents. Referring to the extensive textbook chapter dedicated to II, Lisa intoned a mixture of disbelief, impatience and resignation when she exclaimed in an FGD: “So many things you know! Sampling, random sampling, and then they teach them the different kinds of sampling, I think we don’t need to do this. And then, they teach the different types of questions, double-barreled questions, bla bla bla...” In a similar vein, another participant in the same FGD, Ivy, remarked on the supplementary materials provided by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD): “the package given by CPDD can be very massive. Yah. And sometimes I wonder which school is able to execute it like that? I don’t know.” It was not just the amount of content that was found overwhelming; what also resonated among research participants was the view that the social science-like inquiry process was unrealistically demanding cognitively for the vast majority of secondary school students. Illustrating this view, James said that he felt the II as envisioned in the curriculum was too difficult except for a few “humanities scholars going towards JC [Junior College]”.

Closely connected to II’s perceived overwhelming scope and depth was the issue of lack of time—a problem just as commonly and acutely experienced by the teachers. Time constraint did not only stem from the limited number of lesson hours allocated to SS each term week (typically three periods of about half an hour each); it

was exacerbated by the common practice in Singapore schools to try to “cover” curricular content as quickly as possible in order to reserve ample time (for example, a big portion of the year of Sec 4) for revisions and exam skills drilling. Consequently, the extensive investigative cycle expected of II was found to be extremely time-consuming, to the extent that several schools expressed regret about rolling out II in the elaborate fashion that they did initially. A few research participants became convinced that II could only be done realistically as either a vacation take-home assignment or a post-exam activity, but not during term time.

Lastly, according to research participants’ narratives, deficits of certain dispositions and skills among students also hindered II enactment. Some teachers cited students’ passive learning dispositions — “not want to think” and “won’t go and read up on their own” (Cherie) — as a major obstacle. This meant that the amount of autonomy and options inherent in II proved paralyzing for some students. Students’ English language proficiency and IT literacy also played a role, since these skills were often indispensable at various stages of the inquiry process, from formulating questions, through to gathering data and presenting findings. Also touched on by some participants was the issue of teacher preparedness: teachers who were used to a more didactic mode of SS teaching and consequently less in tune with open-ended inquiry learning were reportedly less at ease with enacting II. Nevertheless, this latter obstacle was somewhat mitigated through teamwork with other teachers whose academic backgrounds have equipped them better for guiding investigative learning.

Taming II: Coping Strategies

Grappling with these challenges, teachers in the study recounted a number of

strategies they used to *tame* II—making it manageable for students and themselves. These coping strategies seemed to operate according to broadly two rationales, which may be respectively dubbed *simplification* and “*piggybacking*”.

Simplification strategies

The following long quote from Cherie, who taught at a neighbourhood school with relatively low-ability students, captures the essence of simplification strategies vividly:

It’s *always* a matter of how to *keep it simple*. Because I think the first year we tried to do, we wanted to do something, like, “Wah, I get the students to present and they go and find, interview like don’t know how many people [...]” Then we realized that that was *so tiring, for us and for the kids*. So we stopped that. Then last year, we had a more experienced teacher, so she was one of the Lead Teachers lah. She came in and she was, like, “Guys, *we don’t have time to do this kind of grand things you know?*” We’re like “Yah, we know, but how else do we *shorten* it?” So we get them to, like, interview maybe, just say, in a group of four, interview four people, so each one one person. Go and interview and come back [...] So I think, when it comes to doing it, we try to *minimize the wastage of time*, we try to make it *as simple as it is [possible] for the kids*, we give them worksheets that are, like, “This is what you are supposed to find”, *step-by-step*. Yah. (emphases added)

To achieve the simplification of II from “kind of grand things” to something “as simple as it is [possible] for the kids”, a number of specific strategies were typically used. As illustrated in the above quote, the scope of data collection was often significantly reduced (moving from

ambitious plans initially to each student interviewing just one person). At Keith’s school, only students in the Express stream were required to conduct empirical data gathering in the form of a survey; Normal (Academic) stream students were instead only required to do internet-based information gathering and research. At Kali’s school, in fact, all data gathering for II were based on secondary sources readily available on the internet—as Kali put it, “it’s purely websites”. She further added that even the list of websites was provided to the students.

This move to reduce the scope and nature of II activities applied not only to data gathering, but extended to other stages of the investigation cycle. For example, most of the time, the investigation question was either simply assigned to the students, or offered as a small number of options—worked out also by the teachers—for students to choose from. This served to reduce drastically the uncertainty of formulating the II question, an otherwise complicated and time-consuming process. Some schools also chose not to strictly adhere to the prescribed II cycle, instead modified it to suit their circumstances. For instance, presentation of findings might be drastically simplified, or done away with altogether (as was the case in Cherie’s and Laura’s schools). As Laura put it, “we have truncated the II process to make it easier on the teacher”.

Another very common simplification strategy involved standardizing certain aspects of the II processes, so as to keep manageable the administrative and pedagogical burdens on the teachers. Most schools in the study reported having a highly coordinated approach to conducting II across the student cohort, where SS teachers worked closely as a team, used “a coherent set of resources”, and “assignments [were] all standardized across”

(Keith). In short, doing so ensured an “economy of scale”. Standardization also characterized how teachers “scaffolded” the inquiry process for students, as illustrated in Cherie’s mention of worksheets that provided “step-by-step” guidance. Indeed, it was nearly a universal practice for teachers to develop “templates”—be it as physical print-outs or in digital form (in James’s case, Google Docs)—that basically turned II into a highly structured process with clear step-by-step instructions.

In short, there was a clear agreement among participants in the study that simplification in some form or other was necessary before II projects could be realistically carried out. Vividly capturing the teachers’ battle to tame the formidable Issue investigation, Kali said: “we always thought it was not possible. [...] you can say [we] *cheated*, [...] then we realized we can do a *watered down II*. And then at least now you see we are brave enough to try it” (emphasis added).

“Piggybacking” strategies

Since, as discussed previously, one major disincentive for schools to take II seriously was the perceived irrelevance of this inquiry learning activity to examinable skills, teachers from several schools tried to forge a link between II learning outcomes and exam formats, namely, the Structured-Response Question (SRQ) and Source-Based Case Study (SBCS).

In specific, a few research participants shared that they had their students write an SRQ answer based on their II project findings. Illustrating this strategy, Laura said in the interview: “we [...] actually extend the II to become an SRQ question later on, so that the teachers and students see a link to what they studied.” In fact, at Laura’s school, the II process ends off with

doing an SRQ. She was aware that this “doesn’t stick very clearly to CPDD’s recommended model”, but she remarked that “this method has been a bit more successful for us”.

Meanwhile, a few other teachers in the study (including James, Kali, and Keith) identified some parallels between II and the “sources” used in the SBCS, which essentially consist of findings or information about a particular societal issue. Accordingly, students in Keith’s school were tasked to construct “sources” based on their II project in a way similar to the sources used for SBCS in the exam papers. In James’s school, the standardized II template given to students essentially guided them to think of the project as an SBCS “source”. This strategy essentially allowed students to practice exam skills for SBCS as they pursue an II project, because, as James put it, “we are making them the examiner, we are making them create a paper”.

In short, through teachers’ such intentional efforts, students were able to “piggyback” on Issue Investigation to *also* develop skills that are useful for exam performance. Doing so provided some reassurance to both the students and the teachers that doing II was “not a waste of time” (Daliah). It should be noted that not all participants in the study adopted this strategy; however, those who did seemed to report more positive experiences in relation to II.

Lastly, another II taming strategy that followed this “piggybacking” logic involved scoping the II project in conjunction with Values in Action (VIA) or Character and Citizenship Education (CCE)—both being compulsory, though non-examinable, components of Singapore school curriculum. This may also be dubbed a “kill two birds with one stone”

move that essentially allowed II and VIA/CCE to be integrated or to overlap in practice, such that the resources and commitments required are reduced substantially. According to Kali, whose school used this strategy, it worked by having II designed from the start in such a way that the deliverables fit also the criteria of VIA and/or CCE learning objectives and outcomes. As a concrete example of this, in one school, the students' II project investigated elderly citizens' vulnerability to scams, and the project culminated in a visit to a nursing home, during which students played board games with senior citizens to raise their awareness. This latter visit also served to fulfil the students' VIA requirements.

It is worth noting that the majority of schools in the study did not explicitly use this second "piggybacking" strategy, but most research participants seemed aware of it. This was apparently due to certain peer professional learning and exchange that had taken place previously between different schools.

Conclusion

To conclude, based on a small qualitative study that primarily elicited teachers' experiences and accounts, this paper has sought to explore how "Issue Investigation" (II)—a recently introduced inquiry-based learning component in the upper-secondary Social Studies syllabus in Singapore—has been implemented and enacted "on the ground", and how some of the main implementation and enactment challenges have been managed so far.

Findings show that one major obstacle to the meaningful implementation of II in Singapore secondary schools was the perceived irrelevance of II to the high-stakes national exam, which gave rise to an attitude of pragmatism that disincentivized

stakeholders from taking II seriously. Indeed, anecdotal evidence further suggests that, due precisely to this pragmatism, there are schools in Singapore where II is implemented very minimally, or even not at all. Meanwhile, the enactment of II too was fraught with practical challenges, chief among which were the perceived overwhelming scope and depth of II, time constraints, and deficits of certain skills or preparedness among students and teachers. Notwithstanding this, most of the SS teachers the researchers spoke to in the course of this study did seem to appreciate the intrinsic value and potential of II as an inquiry-driven learning activity.

Grappling with the numerous challenges and obstacles, Singapore secondary SS teachers developed a number of strategies to "tame" II, making it manageable for both the students and themselves. Virtually all schools/teachers reported using some strategies to *simplify* II, typically through reducing the scope of work required and standardizing the inquiry activities and processes. In addition, at several schools, teachers also adopted a "*piggybacking*" approach, which worked essentially by making undertaking II also serve some other purposes, such as helping students practice exam-relevant skills, or fulfilling learning objectives in relation to Value in Action (VIA) and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). In other words, these latter strategies operated by *dual- or multi-purposing* II, so that II became a stone that kills more than one bird. It was evident from the research participants' accounts that adopting these strategies had indeed made II a more manageable task for the teachers as well as a more productive learning activity for students. Thus, for schools and teachers currently still deterred by the "daunting" appearance of Issue Investigation, the II-taming strategies mentioned in this paper may have certain reference value.

Lastly, given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited scope of data, this paper represents but a small first step towards addressing the various research gaps pertaining to Issue Investigation in Singapore Social Studies. Future research may aim towards providing a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of II, and inquiry-learning in SS more broadly, across Singapore schools. More research into effective enactment strategies in relation to II will also be valuable.

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