
Title	Core 3 research programme: Getting into the heart of social studies pedagogies in Singapore primary 5 and secondary 3 classrooms
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Core 3 Research Programme: Getting into the Heart of Social Studies Pedagogies in Singapore Primary 5 and Secondary 3 Classrooms

By **Dennis Kwek**

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In broad terms, the role of Social Studies as a curriculum subject is to prepare students for active participation in society (Sim, 2011). In Singapore, Social Studies “seeks to ignite students’ curiosity to inquire into real-world issues that concern their lives. Through inquiry and authentic learning experiences, Social Studies helps students to attain relevant knowledge and understanding about these issues, develop critical and reflective thinking skills, and appreciate multiple perspectives” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 2). Unlike other core subjects like English, Mathematics or Science, Social Studies has a unique place in the school curriculum in its emphasis on the relationships between self and others, nation and world, and the importance of students becoming “informed, concerned and participative citizens” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 2).

Having a rich disciplinary tradition since the United States’ 1916 Report of the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association’s Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (cited in Baildon & Damico, 2011, p. 2), Social Studies education emphasises “inquiry-based social practices for understanding and addressing problems, especially complex multi-faceted problems”, and can “help students develop the knowledge and the interpretive, reflective, and deliberative practices necessary to make sense of new historical realities” (Baildon & Damico, 2011, p. 1, 11). The importance of Social Studies in schools cannot be understated

despite its often perceived “lower status” relative to the above-mentioned core subjects. In an increasingly globalised and information-saturated world, Social Studies can equip students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that can help them to carefully and productively navigate complex identities and knowledges.

In Singapore, the Core Research Programme, of which we are now at the third iteration (Core 3) has been centrally focused on the questions of “How do teachers teach, and why do they teach the way they do”. The clear methodological focus and design philosophy of Core 3 is on “everyday classroom pedagogy, on the intellectual and discourse work of teachers and students in the classrooms” (Luke, Freebody, Shun, & Gopinathan, 2005, p. 9). We first collected classroom observational data on Social Studies pedagogy in 2004, at the cusp of *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* and *Teach Less, Learn More* reform initiatives. We collected data on Social Studies pedagogy again in 2016–2017.

We sampled a number of mainstream schools and teachers in average Primary 5 (P5) and Secondary 3 (S3) classrooms—seven each, and collected 121 lessons in P5 and S3. We segmented the lessons into 5 minute phases and coded these for key pedagogical practices that

we believe should be happening in classrooms, drawing from both the local curriculum intentions and international understandings of what Social Studies teaching and learning should be about. We also conducted interviews with teachers and focus groups with students.

In terms of Knowledge Focus, or what the knowledge emphasis is during the lessons, we saw that on average, P5 and S3 teachers tend to focus on Factual Knowledge (62.5%) and Conceptual Knowledge (61.4%), and less on Procedural Knowledge (35.9%), Metacognitive Knowledge (6.3%) or Moral and Civic Knowledge (11.9%). When we compare this to our Core 1’s 2004 data on Social Studies, the difference is striking: Factual Knowledge in 2004 was 93.7%, Conceptual Knowledge was 16.5% and Procedural Knowledge was 13.6%, indicating decreases in emphasis on factual knowledge and increases in conceptual and procedural forms of knowledge.

We often see teachers in 2016/17 using examples and analogies and weaving together different ideas and concepts to help students better understand the subject matter. S3 teachers are more likely to exercise procedural knowledge, largely due to the source-based case studies

▶ that students are eventually assessed on. While teachers tend to ask closed-ended questions about half of the time in our observed lessons, they also ask open-ended questions about one quarter of the time, with encouraging extended responses from students. These positive results can be attributed to the curriculum reforms which has increased the emphasis on inquiry-based teaching and learning.

We examined how teachers enact the processes of Social Studies Inquiry—Sparking Curiosity, Gathering Data, Exercising Reasoning, and Reflective Thinking—as well as the continuum from teacher-directed to student-driven inquiries. Our data shows that Social Studies lessons are typically strong in stimulating student interest and curiosity with teachers and students often sharing agency in ideation, idea exchanges, and accessing prior knowledge.

As part of inquiry, students are often presented with the data by teachers, encouraged to make careful observations, and generate additional data from sources. When the inquiry cycle emphasises exercising reasoning, however, we observe predominantly data analysis or analyzing arguments (17.4% of all phases in P5, 22.7% in S3) and synthesising/summarising ideas (19.7% in P5, 13.7% in S3), but less observed are perspective taking (2.5% in P5, 4.5% in S3), or justifications of knowledge claims (5.8% in P5, 8.6% in S3), with teachers guiding students in the inquiry process about a third of the time.

The Reflective Thinking aspect of the inquiry cycle has the weakest emphasis in the observed lessons: Students are seldom asked to reflect on their own learning (7.3% in P5, 3.0% in S3), reflect on the inquiry findings (3.8% in P5, 1.1% in S3) or reflect on their own beliefs or assumptions (2.5% in P5, 0.8% in S3). Given the importance of reflection and metacognitive knowledge in student learning, and teachers often reporting “running out of time” to do this phase of the cycle in their rush to complete the curriculum, the infrequent opportunities for students to conduct their own

reflections can be worrying and is an important area for improvement in Social Studies pedagogy.

Our 2016/17 baseline study on Social Studies P5/S3 pedagogy includes teacher interviews where we asked them about their perceptions on Social Studies teaching and learning, and some of the challenges they faced. Overall, teachers do value and believe in the importance of Social Studies but saw the need to “tread a very fine line” when it came to sensitive issues or contexts, to quote a teacher. One teacher points out that the “meaning and beauty of Social Studies lies in the existing tensions” in society and the world students live in, and teachers often enjoy drawing in authentic examples and events to help students make meaning of the subject and open up discussions.

However, teachers struggle with balancing between opening up space for active and sustained classroom discussions and the need for curriculum coverage, with some teachers worried that students may not be ready for discussions if they lack the language skills or do not read widely. To help students, teachers would assign readings or pre-discussion tasks before engaging students in classroom discussions. Our student focus group discussions reveal that while students enjoy Social Studies lessons, they would appreciate having more time to discuss and share their personal views, and some students, especially in S3, do perceive them as a form of propaganda.

From our study, a number of recommendations can be made. First, to help teachers to address the tensions relating to time for discussions and curriculum coverage. Second, to help students to appreciate Social Studies through authentic and personal engagement so that the subject would appear less as a means of indoctrination. Third, to promote pedagogical strategies that facilitate collaborative learning, engaging in multiple perspectives and reflective thinking. Finally, we believe there is a need to promote better questioning techniques from both teachers and students, such that productive dialogic exchanges can

occur around complex ideas, and students can make strong connections between the personal, and the societal and cultural knowledges and identities.

Ultimately, as Alviar-Martin and Baildon (2017, p. 89) point out, the challenge for Social Studies “lies in how schools can become spaces where students are empowered to make full meaning of present life... and actively connect civic values as they envision novel forms of citizenship, engagement, and society”.

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