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**T**he Development of Social Studies in  
Singapore Secondary Schools

Jasmine B. Y. Sim

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**INTRODUCTION**

Social studies is introduced as a new compulsory and examinable subject in all Singapore secondary schools at the upper secondary level in 2001. It will be examined for the first time at both the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Normal' and 'Ordinary' Levels (GCE 'N' and 'O' Levels) in 2002. Social studies was conceived in the context of National Education. The purpose is to enhance students' understanding of the key issues central to Singapore's survival and success. This article examines the development of social studies in Singapore secondary schools at the upper secondary level. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students in 20 schools in Singapore on the initial teaching and learning of social studies; the findings and its pedagogical implications will be discussed.

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**NATIONAL EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL STUDIES**

Education in Singapore is the primary vehicle for nation building. Since attaining self-government in 1959, there has been a single-minded pursuit of citizenship education. This has taken many forms over the years for the purpose of nation building (Gopinathan, 1988; Tan, 1997). National Education is the latest development in citizenship education and addresses more recent issues facing Singapore. It is also more holistic in approach, targeting both the cognitive and affective domains.

The aim of National Education is two-fold: (1) to develop a deep sense of shared destiny and national identity; and (2) to develop a national psyche beyond survival. This aim is systematically translated into six key messages for implementation in schools. The six messages are: (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. This was followed by the swift and systematic implementation of the various National Education programmes in all schools, one of which was the introduction of social studies at the upper secondary level in the year 2001. The emphasis of social studies is to provide students with an

understanding of the principles of governance, strategies for overcoming economic constraints, and the role of key institutions.

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## KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL STUDIES

### **Syllabus**

The upper secondary social studies syllabus includes elements of history, economics, political science and human geography. The aims of social studies are to enable pupils to:

- (1) understand the issues that affect the socio-economic development, the governance and the future of Singapore;
- (2) learn from experiences of other countries to build and sustain a politically viable, socially cohesive and economically vibrant Singapore;
- (3) develop citizens who have empathy towards others and who will participate responsibly and sensibly in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society;
- (4) have a deep sense of shared destiny and national identity. (MOE, 2001)

The syllabus is organized around the six National Educational themes and focuses on three basic areas of knowledge, skills and values. While the types of knowledge and skills are clearly stated, the values for social studies are not explicitly stated in the syllabus or instructional package. It requires a skilful teacher to infer the values from the aims and content of the subject. Although the approach is to infuse the values into the content, it is nevertheless felt that these values should be stated in the syllabus to provide a schema for the teacher. Similarly, the Teacher's Resource File should provide some pedagogical tips in handling the values. It would help in more effective planning of lessons and avoid misunderstanding of issues, motives, and even ignorance. The syllabus also comprises a comparative component in the form of regional and international case studies and examples with the focus on how issues may affect the development of Singapore.

The introductory statement of the syllabus states that social studies seeks to

prepare (students) to adopt a participative role in shaping Singapore's destiny in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (MOE, 2001)

Preparation entails enhancing students' awareness of both national and international issues,

so that they will be more informed about Singapore's achievements and limitations and have confidence in her future (MOE, 2001)

The assumption is that by developing the knowledge base, one approaches effectiveness as a citizen. While the acquisition of knowledge can enhance awareness, awareness itself does not necessarily lead to effectiveness or a more participative role in shaping Singapore's destiny. Instead, the implementation of social studies must be accompanied by appropriate educational practices to prepare students for a more participative role.

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## ASSESSMENT

The Combined Humanities paper, of which social studies constitutes 50%, is a compulsory and examinable subject at the GCE 'N' and 'O' Levels. The elective of geography, history or literature, constitutes the other 50%. The assessment objectives of social studies are: (1) Knowledge, (2) Constructing Explanations, (3) Interpreting and Evaluating Sources/Given Information. The objectives are biased towards higher-order thinking skills. Both the test items comprising source-based case study and the structured essay questions, and the method of marking, the Levels of Response Marking Scheme (LORMS), are new and will be used for the first time at the national examinations. The implementation of social studies took place on a rather tight schedule; training was "just-in-time" for teaching with a priority focus on assessment.

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## FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN 20 SCHOOLS

A small-scale survey in the form of interviews and classroom observations was carried out in April and May 2001. The objectives were:

- (1) to document the problems experienced by teachers in implementing social studies
- (2) to collect data on the teaching approaches used in the classroom

- (3) to make recommendations for teaching and learning in the classroom and teacher preparation programme based on the findings.

Interviews were conducted by preservice teachers as part of their social studies final assignment. The interviews were carried out during the practicum and at the 20 schools to which the preservice teachers were attached. It was a random selection of schools and teachers and students interviewed came from a range of schools in Singapore. A total of 49 teachers and 200 students were interviewed. The preservice teachers were also told to observe the social studies classes and record their observations. Cross-referencing the data from teacher and student interviews, and classroom observations assisted the verification process. The interviews covered the following areas:

- (1) Perceptions of social studies
- (2) Clarity of rationale for social studies
- (3) Approach to the teaching and learning of social studies
- (4) Difficulties encountered in assessment
- (5) Main concerns

The summary of the findings are presented below.

***Teachers:***

Seventy per cent of the teachers viewed the introduction of social studies positively and were clear about the rationale. They perceived the main focus of social studies was to prepare students adequately for the examinations. As such, they expect students to master the content and be familiar with the test items. Eighty per cent of the teachers used traditional methods of teaching i.e. teacher-centred, lecture-style, with a focus on drill and practice, relying heavily on the textbook. These teachers believed that this was the most efficient method of covering the heavy syllabus. There was no mention of the aims and values associated with the teaching of social studies and National Education. Teachers found it demanding and strenuous to master all three areas of content, assessment and pedagogy in so short a time, while having to prepare students for the GCE 'N' and 'O' Levels examinations as they perceived that there was little lead-time before the first examinations in 2002. Thus, the main problems faced by these teachers were:

- Inadequate preparation to teach the subject

- Unfamiliarity with the requirements of the new assessment format and the method of marking
- Too wide a syllabus for the time frame
- Uncertainty about pedagogical approach as the content is complex and conceptual with a bias towards higher order skills, resulting in difficulty teaching the weaker students

***Students:***

In the case of the students, only 25% of the students viewed the introduction of social studies positively and were clear about the rationale. Students claimed that teachers did not explain the rationale to them. The main concern of the students was that the examination has a more skills-based approach. For many students, social studies (Combined Humanities paper) is the only humanities subject offered at the examinations and this could affect the overall results and admission to the next level of study. Sixty per cent of the students found social studies interesting because the issues were current and teachers used a variety of sources in teaching. However, although the issues may be complex, the textbook provides a rather simplified version of the issues and this has made it difficult to study for their examinations. Seventy per cent of the students found the subject difficult. The main reasons were that the content was conceptual, complex, heavy, and the questions were difficult. For students who were weak in language, there was the additional fear of misunderstanding questions and expressing ideas incoherently. As the lessons were largely conducted using the lecture-method, they perceived that the questions were more to check understanding than to stimulate discussion or a reflection of issues. There was no mention of the aims and values associated with the learning of social studies and National Education. Students generally regarded social studies as yet another subject to be overcome at the national examinations. Some even felt that social studies tends to duplicate history. Thus, the main problems faced by these students were:

- Fear of the examinations because of the demands of a skills-based approach to assessment and a general concern about the inability to comprehend the examination sources and questions.
- A syllabus that was too wide for the time frame given to master it.
- A general perception that it was too demanding to have to grapple with new content, assessment format and a different (skills-based) approach to learning.

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## DISCUSSION

The nature of social studies is citizenship education. In the tradition of Asian countries, citizenship education takes the form of a distinct subject designed for the purpose (Morris & Cogan, 2001). Assessment is formal, high-stake and taken at the national examinations. The focus is on content and knowledge prescribed by MOE. Social studies seems positioned to be an important subject in the curriculum. Attention will be given to it by all players i.e. politicians, teachers and students, but for different reasons. For politicians, social studies is tied closely to the survival of the nation. For both teachers and students, social studies is yet another hurdle to overcome in the national examinations. In a society where Singaporeans adopt an instrumental attitude towards education, it is difficult to neglect a compulsory examinable subject.

But this status could be its weakness too. The importance of social studies in the curriculum is derived from its examinable status; this can undermine the very rationale for its conception. The dominance of examinations in the educational process means that success in the examinations determines whether a student will be able to proceed to the next level of education, the type of higher institutions he/she can apply to, and eventually success in finding good employment. Under such circumstances, it is likely that social studies will be studied to pass the examinations, and less for its non-cognitive objectives. Interview findings point to this direction as both teachers and students were most concerned about the assessment of social studies; none acknowledged the values aspect of the subject. This suggests that teaching of the subject is geared towards preparing students for the examinations; the aims and values of National Education and the intentions highlighted in the social studies syllabus are conveniently forgotten.

There is a gap between the intended curriculum and the actual practice in the classroom. This finding is not unique to Singapore. While an assessment-driven curriculum causes schools to pay serious attention to the subject matter, the discrepancy between the written curriculum and the applied curriculum is also more substantial (Print, 2000). The findings also suggest that the classroom with its own set of players, i.e. teachers and students, can take on an independent life, and interpret and execute the curriculum in ways that diverge from the original intentions. What accounts for this gap and how it can be bridged is an area for future study. Similarly, the effects of classroom dynamics on the implementation of curriculum plans make for interesting research.

Pedagogy leaves much to be desired. Findings show that the approach to teaching is largely teacher-centred, with a tendency to use the "tried and tested" method of lecture. This means that teachers

provide the facts and students store up the information. This conservatism has been attributed to a focus on examination, lack of pedagogical knowledge, and the fact that it is the most efficient way of covering the wide syllabus given the short time frame. The method amounts to passive learning on the part of the students. It is precisely this emphasis on knowledge and passivity within social studies that Shermis and Barth (1982) were critical of, describing it this way,

... students are held to be disciplining themselves and thereby acquiring knowledge and attitudes essential for citizenship at a later time (Shermis & Barth, 1982).

If students are passive during the formative stages of learning about citizenship, the precedence this sets for their future lives as active citizens is questionable.

Similarly, a heavy reliance on the textbook for instruction limits opportunities for students to explore issues in-depth, to question critically, make decisions and solve complex problems. This is because textbooks alone present a limited representation of events and people. While teachers acknowledged the need to move beyond the textbook, many found that they did not have adequate time to prepare for the teaching of the subject.

Studies have shown that appropriate pedagogy and classroom climate are important considerations for the development of active, informed and reflective citizenship, a stated intention of the social studies syllabus (Cogan & Morris, 2001). It requires a different kind of learning environment where teaching must move beyond the imparting of facts, and learning beyond studying for the examinations. Pedagogy must promote active learning where the classroom is seen to be participative and interactive. Higher-order questioning, student-to-student dialogue, as well as teacher-student interaction must be characteristic of secondary social studies teaching. Importantly, students must be treated as active learners, that is, they must be given the opportunities to construct rather than merely consume and reproduce knowledge. An open classroom concept is suggested, which advocates teaching methods that involve students in mental activities that go beyond concrete events, creating opportunities for students to focus on discrepancies and contradictions. Active questioning and discussion of issues, even controversial ones must be encouraged. Only by engaging students in serious explorations of complex and conflicting arguments can we bring about the leap of consciousness that enhances awareness and broadens perspectives.

The findings also hold implications for teacher preparation programmes. This is because the type of content and methods to which preservice teachers are exposed, and are required to use in the classroom in their teacher preparation programmes, will directly affect how they educate for citizenship in secondary classrooms. Hence, teacher preparation must take cognizance of the following:

- (1) Establish a classroom climate in teacher preparation programmes that encourages deliberation and is open to diverse points of view.
- (2) Make citizenship education an integral component of teacher preparation by addressing citizenship education as an essential part of a teacher's educational philosophy and mission.
- (3) Teach subject matter in a manner that encourages preservice teachers to think critically.
- (4) Increase opportunities for preservice teachers to be involved in cooperative learning activities and other democratic forms of pedagogy.
- (5) Require that opportunities for community action and involvement be an important feature of teacher preparation. For example, encourage preservice teachers to be active in school governance.

The introduction of social studies can be viewed as another "technocratic document or plan", political in nature with an emphasis on economic rationality, policies formulated and closely monitored by top-ranked government officers (Tan, 1997). While it ensures implementing an urgent programme efficiently, there are problems associated with this style.

Firstly, there is a lack of sensitivity to the needs at the ground level. Findings show that there is insufficient lead-time before the implementation of the syllabus and the first examinations. Consequently, teachers find that they are not sufficiently prepared for the teaching of social studies. This has added to the stress level for, given little time, teachers need to master all three areas of content, pedagogy and assessment while at the same time, prepare students for the first examinations in 2002. Furthermore, findings also indicate that the syllabus may be too wide for the short time frame and the content may be too difficult for average students.

Secondly, a curriculum change must be systemic in approach, affecting not only the syllabus and subject-matter, but also related aspects such as the examination system and its attendant reward system. In Singapore, the examination is high-stake; it alone determines

if the student can proceed to the next level of study, and the educational route he/she can take. Unless there is a re-look at the examination system as the sole determinant of entry to the next level of study, students will generally adopt a functional approach to knowledge. This is supported by the findings that show the main concern of students to be assessment.

Citizenship education is not an easy task. But the point needs to be made that this is the early phase of the implementation of social studies. Given more time, and a necessary re-look at the curriculum structure, together with a reconceptualized teacher preparation programme on citizenship education, the teaching and learning of social studies should move beyond mere assessment to developing effective citizens.

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