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Author(s)	Jasmine B-Y Sim and Susan A. Adler
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The Role of Secondary Social Studies in Educating Singapore's Citizens

Jasmine B-Y Sim and Susan A. Adler

Abstract

This article examines the nature and purpose of the social studies curriculum in the light of the demands of citizenship education in Singapore. The development of social studies at the secondary school level is located within the history of citizenship education in Singapore. While the core focus of the subject continues to be that of nation-building, the introduction of social studies is also a significant milestone in the development of citizenship education in several ways. A major initiative is the emphasis on developing more thinking citizens. As a result, social studies is best taught apart from an explicitly moralising context, and in a context in which divergent thinking and views are tolerated. It also suggests ways in which social studies can provide young people with the skills and knowledge to function as citizens in the 21st century.

Introduction

The students were working in small groups; each group had a section of PM Lee's National Day Rally speech to read and analyse. Each group was to identify the main recommendations and policies from their section of the speech. Once they had determined what the policy recommendations were, each group would decide whether or not they agreed with these recommendations and why. They would express their opinions in the form of a letter to their minister, to the Straits Times or to the PM.

In another classroom, students were investigating current issues facing Singapore. Each student had to define the issue he or she was working on, develop at least three possible solutions to the problem presented by the issue and determine the possible effects of each solution. Finally, each student was to make a policy recommendation based on a clear understanding of the alternatives.

Meanwhile, across town, a group of students were engaged in role playing a ministerial discussion following Singapore's separation from Malaysia. In this simulation, in which each student had been assigned a particular role to play, the "ministers" were to reach a consensus about the most pressing problem facing Singapore, explore possible solutions to the problem and decide which solution to pursue. Following the role play, the class discussed what made reaching consensus easy or difficult.

In each of these classrooms, social studies is being implemented with the goal of preparing youth to be thinking and involved citizens. In Singapore, as in many countries, formal schooling is the primary instrument for citizenship education.

Furthermore, in many countries, including the United States and Australia, the task of preparing young people to be citizens has specifically been focused in on social studies classrooms (Print, 2000; Gonzales *et al.*, 2001). This article examines the nature and purpose of the social studies curriculum in the light of the demands of citizenship education in Singapore and suggests ways in which social studies can provide young people with the skills and knowledge to function as citizens in the 21st century. It is our hope that by locating the development of social studies in Singapore within the history of citizenship education teachers will be able to make better informed decisions regarding the implementation of social studies curriculum.

Citizenship Education in Singapore: A Brief History

A characteristic of the developmental state is that education serves the process of state formation or nation-building (Green, 1997). That is, schools become the vehicle through which youth are inculcated with the values and goals of the nation. This has certainly been the case for Singapore. Since independence, nation-building policies have focused on two goals: developing consensus among the diverse ethnic groups and moving Singapore towards economic development and modernisation (Chua & Kuo, 1991). The overriding priority has been the promotion of economic growth, perceived to be inextricably linked to national survival. However, the state intervenes not only to promote economic development but also to improve social conditions and to construct a national identity. Thus a nationalised school system was put in place in the early 1970s through the policies of integrated schools, bilingualism and meritocracy (Gopinathan, 1974). Since then, the education system has been highly centralised and responsive to perceived social and national needs.

Strong political leadership, together with centralisation of authority with regard to formal education and curriculum development, are elements of a focused effort to build and mould a nation, and to ensure that the curricula objectives and content are congruent with national goals. Thus education in Singapore functions not only to move the nation towards economic development, but also to instil the cultural-symbolic and civic-instrumental dimensions of nation-building (Hill & Lian, 1995). That is, education takes on the task of promoting the beliefs, values and ideals of the developing nation, as well as preparing people to contribute economically.

Since Singapore attained self-government in 1959, there has been a sustained pursuit of citizenship education. This pursuit has taken many forms over the years to meet perceived social and national needs (Gopinathan, 1974, 1980, 1988, 1991; Chew, 1988, 1998; Eng, 1989; Hill & Lian, 1995; Han, 1997, 2000; Tan, 1997; Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004). Between 1959 and 1966, citizenship education was taught as Ethics. Following Singapore's separation with Malaysia, Ethics was replaced by Civics in 1967 at the lower secondary school level. Civics dealt with topics such as the constitution, legislation and international relations, and included values such as patriotism, loyalty and civic consciousness. In 1973, Education

for Living (EFL), a short-lived interdisciplinary programme that integrated civics, history and geography, was adopted at the primary school level. Civics and EFL reflected the concern of the authorities to develop in children a sense of national identity in the initial years of Singapore's independence.

Rapid industrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s raised new concerns among the political leaders. It was feared that with the adoption of science and technology, the increasing use of English, and an English-stream education, younger Singaporeans were becoming too westernised. There was concern that western values, which emphasised the individual over the community, would deculturise Singapore and individualise the society (Hill & Lian, 1995). This period saw citizenship education defined in dichotomous terms — Asian versus Western values. Consequently, following the reports of Goh (1979) and Ong (1979), citizenship education consisted primarily of moral elements. The aim was to inculcate Asian moral concepts and values (Ong, 1979; Han, 1997). However, in both the Goh and Ong Reports, there was an absence of the skills of critical thought and of procedural values generally considered crucial to citizenship education in a democracy (Han, 1997).

Moral education and citizenship education were closely integrated; moral values and "right conduct" were regarded as essential to being a good citizen. Whatever the variations in the emphasis of the different citizenship education programmes, the element of moral education has always been present. Indeed, the ideal citizen is often described in moral terms (Han, 1997). This approach is not unique to Singapore. The recent Asia-Pacific Civics Values study found that a number of participating Asian countries including Japan, Taiwan and Thailand emphasised the element of moral education in their civics and citizenship programme (Cogan, Morris & Print, 2002). This was similarly evident in the Citizenship Education Policy Study project (Cogan & Derricott, 1998).

To counteract the growing influence of Western values among the young and strengthen moral education, two new citizenship education programmes, *Being and Becoming* and *Good Citizens* replaced Civics and EFL, respectively. Both programmes had values and moral education as focus. Another outcome was the introduction of Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics in 1982 to reinforce the teaching of moral values. By the end of the decade, however, Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics were abandoned as it was perceived to have heightened religious fervour. Both *Being and Becoming* and *Good Citizens* were replaced with Civics and Moral Education (CME) in 1992. The content of CME was expanded to include the five Shared Values that have been accepted at a nation-wide level and a variety of teaching approaches.

National Education and the Development of Social Studies

The introduction of social studies in Singapore secondary schools at the upper secondary level must be seen in the context of National Education (NE). NE was launched in 1997, and is the latest nation-building initiative in which citizenship is

addressed. NE is aimed at developing and shaping positive knowledge, values and attitudes of its younger citizenry towards the community and the nation. The purpose of NE is to develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future by:

1. Fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect in being a Singaporean;
2. Relating the Singapore story: how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation;
3. Understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries;
4. Instilling the core values of our way of life and the will to prevail, all of which to ensure our continued success and well-being (MOE, 2003a, b).

The catalyst for NE was younger Singaporeans' perceived lack of knowledge of and interest in Singapore's recent history and nation-building issues. According to then DPM Lee Hsien Loong, this was a critical concern which put the nation at risk. It meant that young people might take peace and prosperity for granted. Adequate historical knowledge was essential, it was argued, so that young people would be committed to such ideals as meritocracy and multiracialism. The issue at stake became how to develop a sense of national consciousness, along with an awareness of the constraints facing Singapore, as well as a sense of belonging and feeling for Singapore among a new generation of Singaporeans who are highly mobile and engaged in a global youth culture.

NE is thus perceived as high-stake in nature. What is striking is the large scale and pervasive nature of the programme. The speed at which NE was implemented in all schools underlies the perceived urgency of the task. NE exists as a cross-curricula initiative. Substantial revisions were made to the formal and informal curriculum to incorporate the teaching of NE-relevant content. In the formal curriculum, social studies was introduced at the upper secondary school level in 2001. Social studies was developed in only 5 years, from conceptualisation, the writing of instructional materials to the final implementation in all schools.

Key outcomes of NE are "*Love Singapore*" at the primary school level, "*Know Singapore*" at the secondary school level, and "*Lead Singapore*" at the pre-university level. At the secondary level, the emphasis is on knowledge, an awareness of facts, circumstances and opportunities facing Singapore. Social studies is therefore a direct response to address the problem of young Singaporeans' lack of knowledge and interest in Singapore's recent history and the central issues key to her survival. Social studies is high-status; its importance is underlined by the fact that it is a compulsory subject for all secondary school students and examinable at the national examinations — the GCE "O" and "N" Levels. Social studies makes up one half of a full GCE "O" and "N" Level paper called the Combined Humanities; the other half comprises an elective component of history, geography or literature.

Exploring the Social Studies in the Singapore Context

Social studies was conceived in the context of NE and is a major vehicle for NE at the secondary school level. It is the key subject for citizenship education in Singapore. Its focus is on the nation, the common culture and shared values. As with past citizenship education programmes, social studies today is top-down in approach, state initiated and driven. Nation-building continues to be the core focus of this new subject. It is essentially the “nuts and bolts”, seeking to develop in students the essential areas of knowledge, skills and values of an informed, responsible and participative Singapore citizen. It reflects the continuous pursuit of citizenship education to meet perceived national needs. However, the introduction of social studies is a significant milestone in the development of citizenship education in several ways. In the past, the trend was for citizenship education-related subjects such as *“Being and Becoming”* and CME, to emphasise moral education and underlying that, a relatively passive citizenship. In this way, moral education and citizenship were closely integrated. But unlike the trend in the past, social studies is set up to emphasise knowledge in line with NE outcomes. What this means is that it separates the moral education aspect from a citizenship education-related subject. The moral elements have not been neglected, rather they are separately located and continued to be addressed in CME, apart from social studies.

The framework that separates and therefore frees the moral elements from citizenship education issues is an important development, because the separation provides greater space and scope for exploring new grounds, particularly for infusing thinking skills in the curriculum. Developing thinking skills in students is a major objective of social studies. Perhaps this suggests the recognition that to develop more thinking citizens, social studies must be taught apart from an explicitly moralising context, and in a context in which divergent thinking and views are tolerated.

The emphasis on thinking in social studies *per se* is a significant departure from past citizenship education programmes (see e.g. CDIS, 1994). For this, a new assessment format with new test items, including a compulsory source-based case study, and the structured essay with questions asked in parts, is adopted. These items assess students’ ability to interpret and evaluate sources and given information, as well as to construct explanations respectively. These assessment objectives are biased towards higher-order critical thinking skills. Furthermore, a new method of marking, the Level of Response Marking scheme (LORMs), which awards students for demonstrating higher order thinking skills, is adopted.

While any subject can serve as a context for developing thinking in students, the significance lies in that it occurs in social studies. Social studies is the context where both the components of citizenship education and thinking meet. The economic rationalisation for developing thinking is clearly espoused, but is there a political agenda in developing more thinking citizens? Can social studies be regarded as a form of political education?

The infusion of thinking into the social studies curriculum has complicated the otherwise neat categorisation of social studies as citizenship transmission. By the logic of the "Return to Sender" dynamic which presumes an interactive relationship between the political leadership and citizens (Hill & Lian, 1995), while the extent and nature of thinking are circumscribed by the demands of nation-building, the outcome of developing thinking in an individual may not be easily anticipated. In the context of social studies, helping students to acquire and develop skills to think more independently about issues may concomitantly enhance their consciousness as individuals and citizens. Even when the political leadership socialises its citizens into identities appropriate to its political agenda, it is possible that these identities can take on an autonomy which cannot always be anticipated, and may well be unintended, so that the political leadership then has to readdress them. In this sense, citizens can convert this consciousness into a basis for negotiation. From this perspective, social studies is not merely political socialisation but aspects of political education are present through the medium of thinking.

It is also significant that the social studies syllabus notes that the goal of social studies is to prepare pupils to adopt a more participative role in shaping Singapore's destiny. This marks a key difference in the development of citizenship education programmes in Singapore. The emphasis of social studies is knowledge. Furthermore, it is a knowledge that seeks to promote a more active citizenship. However, the nature of participation is broadly and vaguely stated. Does it mean a greater willingness to engage citizens in the political process? This is a possibility given that the political leadership in recent years has been more opened to engaging and consulting citizens in the "Singapore 21" and "Remaking Singapore" initiatives in 1997 and 2002, respectively.

The Role of the Social Studies Teacher

Social studies teachers are faced with the possibilities and the challenges of implementing lessons which teach learners higher-order thinking skills. The temptation is to prepare students for the test and managing document-based questions. But rather than focus on test preparation, focusing on building the skills of document analysis will serve the same end and add further value in promoting higher-order thinking. Most students will not be able to leap from a document to inferences about and analyses of that document. However, with careful training most will be able to move up a series of steps from understanding what the document says, to analysing its accuracy and reliability, to drawing inferences and tentative conclusions about the document's meaning. One source for guidelines for helping students work through these steps is available from the US National Archives (2004) at http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/worksheets.html. Although the documents available at this site are related to US

history, the worksheets guiding students through a variety of types of documents are useful across a variety of contexts.

Another strategy for helping students to develop thinking skills, as well as encourage greater engagement with political issues is that of working with public issues. Public issues are issues which raise questions about policies which affect Singaporeans. Issues which are effective in teaching students how to think and reason and how to make informed decisions are those which spark some controversy and are as yet unresolved. One example might be: *How might Singaporeans be encouraged to become more engaged in their communities and nation?* Another issue might deal with immigration policy. Students have to be taught how to think and reason about such issues or discussion might deteriorate into an exchange of groundless opinion. Students can be taught how to define an issue, determine multiple viewpoints, and assess evidence in determining solutions. In short, students can be taught the skills needed to become engaged citizens who are capable of participating in the debates of their nation. Many websites are available to assist teachers in thinking about teaching around public policy issues. Two such sites are: *Teaching Students to Conduct Controversial Public Issues* available at <http://www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed457106.html> and *Teaching Controversial Issues* available at www.flinders.edu.au/teach/teach/inclusive/controversial.htm.

Social studies in Singapore today not only presents teachers with challenges; but it also opens doors for new opportunities. If a new generation of Singaporeans is to be engaged and involved in the political life of the nation, they need to learn the knowledge *and* the skills of informed citizens. Thoughtful engagement with issues and evidence can be the core of dynamic social studies teaching. How teachers respond to this curriculum challenge really matters. It is, ultimately, the teacher who makes a difference in implementing a curriculum which will truly prepare young people to be effective citizens in tomorrow's Singapore.

Jasmine B-Y Sim is a lecturer with the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group, National Institute of Education. She received her Master's from Harvard University and is pursuing her doctoral studies with the University of Sydney. Her research interests are in citizenship education and curriculum.

Susan Adler is an Associate Professor of Education and Director of Teacher Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She is currently a Visiting Senior Fellow at NIE. She has been a social studies educator for many years, as a teacher and a teacher educator. She is a past president of the National Council for the Social Studies (2000–2001) and served on the NCSS Task Force in the development of curriculum standards for social studies.

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