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National Education and the Humanities

Goh Chor Boon

THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL EDUCATION

The idea of National Education (NE) or Citizenship Education (as popularly known in the West) is not a recent development. It dates back to ancient times and continues to have an all-important place in the growth and development of practically all modern nations today. Some of us would have read about how a few thousands Athenians and Spartans repelled the onslaught of the great Persian kings in ancient Greece. It was the love and commitment of the Greeks to their motherland that allowed Greece — and hence, Western civilisation — to enjoy its golden era during the 5th century BC. This sense of identity and patriotism, however, did not develop overnight. It was systematically imbued into the hearts and minds of the young Greeks through sports and education.

If this example is too far off in time and proximity, let us look into a nation closer to us, Japan. The Japanese today are still very nationalistic. Beginning with the Meiji era in the last quarter of the 19th century, Japan recognized the need to open its door and learn from the industrialised West. At the same time, however, they not only maintained but also strengthened the deep sense of reverence for their cultural heritage and the keen awareness of their constraints and vulnerabilities as a small country without natural resources. What is more significant is that this attribute of the Japanese people is being developed regardless of who is governing the country. In other words, educating young Japanese about their roles as citizens of the country is an on-going process.

Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that the Singapore government, in the 1970s, was so impressed by the economic and technological success of the Japanese that they attempted to emulate the developmental pathways the former had taken. In the words of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, “the human factors – the Japanese society – that has made the Japanese economy what it now is... . It is a closely-knit society in which differences in income and status are made tolerable by an embracing and equalising patriotism and national pride” (speech at Shangri-la Hotel, 11 September 1971).

Singapore has a relatively short modern history; and precisely because of this do we urgently need to educate our young what Singapore stands for, how we come to be what we are, and what we must all do to safeguard our way of life. This is the key purpose of National Education in Singapore, which has nothing to do with the way we vote and whom we vote for, but has everything to do with the survival of our nation today, tomorrow and in the future. In the words of Mr Goh Chok Tong, National Education “must engender a shared sense of nationhood, an understanding of how our past is relevant to our present and future. It must appeal to both heart and mind” (speech at the Teachers’ Day Rally, 8 September 1996). In this respect, the Ministry of Education has come up with an important document entitled “The Desired Outcomes of Education”. The basic premise is that “a national education system has two functions: to develop the individual and to educate the citizen”. It encapsulates the outcomes, which we as teachers have always subscribed to in our professional calling.

KEY ISSUES IN NATIONAL EDUCATION

One key issue in the successful implementation of NE is to develop in pupils an understanding of our national history. The history syllabus on Singapore has the objective of developing an appreciation of our historical roots and good social and moral values, such as loyalty, perseverance, and religious and ethnic tolerance. Although all our pupils will know something about Singapore’s history, many unfortunately do not think deep enough on *why* certain events happened and what the repercussions were. As teachers, we have the responsibility to remind our pupils of the importance of understanding the Singapore Story — not just of past events, but also our present challenges. Our post-war history has been fraught with dangers, such as the Japanese conquest and occupation of Singapore, the Maria Hertogh Riots in 1950, the Hock Lee Bus Riots in May 1955, the communal tension and riots in July 1964, the Indonesian “Confrontation”, the separation from Malaysia in 1965, and the British military pull-out in the early 1970s. Except for the war, these events formed the ‘Turbulent Decades of the 1950s and 1960s’ in Singapore’s modern history. In the teacher’s narration of the events of this era, it is imperative that he/she consistently emphasizes the key lesson to be remembered, which is, the need for Singaporeans to preserve racial and religious harmony within a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

National Education, however, is not just about knowing our past. We should also encourage our young to know and understand developments that continue into the present. Vivid lessons in NE are not to be found in history books but in what we observe happening around us. From time to time, issues will surface which contain significant lessons for the future - for example, the caning of Michael Fay, the Flor Contemplacion incident, the uneasiness with our northern neighbour over some political cartoons and remarks made by our politicians, the causeway jam, and more recently, the Lee Kuan Yew memoir and the air-space issue. And as a region, countries in Southeast Asia have been battered by serious economic problems. Although the economic turmoil seems to have abated a little, the region is still very fragile. In the international arena, we have also seen how war and civil strife decimated Yugoslavia and, in 1990, complacent and unprepared, the Kuwaitis became easy bait for the Iraqis. These conflicts among races and nations evoke fear, tension, uncertainties and frustration. We must make special effort to get our young to understand the causes of international conflicts and the importance of maintaining good bilateral relations with other countries. The issue of unemployment, for example, motivated the Nazis to launch the Holocaust during the Second World War.

Another important message of NE is that our young must recognize Singapore's unique constraints and vulnerabilities. The country is a small speck of land mass, located at strategic crossroads between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It has limited human and natural resources, a highly urbanized environment, and a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. We have to import water from our neighbours; we have to recruit foreign scientists and technologists and not forget that we have to depend on foreign semi-skilled, unskilled workers and maids to construct our infrastructure and look after our homes. Another point to note is that our economic survival is also inextricably linked to the external environment and we have little influence on external events. Despite our the government's constant assurance to foreign investors that our economic and financial fundamentals are sound, Singapore was also caught in the throes of turmoil in Southeast Asia. Therefore, it is essential that every pupil appreciates our economic and political vulnerabilities and not take prosperity and stability for granted.

Within a short span of time, Singapore had diversified from its traditional entrepot economy to a knowledge-based, technology-driven economy. We became one of Asia's newly-industrializing economies and, in terms of per capita income, we are now one of the richest nations

in the world. Surveys conducted by established international organisations have once again rated Singapore as the world's second most competitive nation and our workforce as the world's most efficient. Changi Airport and Port of Singapore Authority have successfully maintained their premier status in the region and the world. But our current economic prosperity may not last forever if our younger generation becomes complacent and indifferent to change. Countries in the world, especially those in Asia, are gearing their economies to face the new challenges of the twenty-first century. We are on a course for a 'head-to-head' competition with other newly industrializing economies, albeit a friendly one. Hence, it is important for us, as teachers, to let our children understand two fundamental beliefs, that is, no one owes Singapore a living and Singapore's economic destiny lies entirely on our own commitment to survive and prosper. We want them to see the opportunities the future offers but, at the same time, remind them that success and confidence come from hard work and the willingness to strive for a better tomorrow.

Finally, our pupils must also understand that Singapore is their homeland. No one else is responsible for our security and well-being but ourselves. The presence of the United States' forces in this region does not mean that there will be eternal peace. Singapore is a small country. We cannot depend on others to defend our own land. The lesson of the British defeat and the subsequent years under the Imperial Japanese rule is a powerful reminder of the need for the nation to achieve military self-reliance and readiness through citizenship commitments in national defence. We need to convince our young that Singapore is their homeland, their future and that we will fight any invading force to the very last because Singapore is the place we can proudly call home.

SOME PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

To be successful and effective, National Education in schools must go beyond the textbooks, the classroom, and the formal curriculum. In short, the teacher is the key person who 'makes or breaks' the implementation of NE in schools. He/she must be someone who consistently attempts to make the Humanities *come alive* – so that pupils can *enjoy* learning and thus, within this positive environment, are more ready to internalize the messages of NE. Hence, one pre-requisite of success is that the teacher must deepen and broaden his or her knowledge of local and world events, both in historical and

contemporary perspectives. Having developed the knowledge base, the teacher is ready to infuse NE messages within the Humanities disciplines in a more informal, multidisciplinary approach.

Field trips are now not 'just going somewhere and enjoying the sight' experience, but linked to the objectives and contents of the syllabi. For example, a trip to Tanjong Pinang, the major town in Bintan, Indonesia, provides a useful learning experience for history and geography pupils. The humanities teacher could relate the historical features of the place and tie them in with the physical and human resource development of the town over time. The pupils can compare the factors influencing the development of Singapore and Tanjong Pinang in terms of location, area, population changes, infrastructure, resources and environment. Oral interviews with the locals could provide an additional challenge for the pupils. A Tanjong Pinang fieldtrip reinforces the idea that it is essential to keep our heritage and way of life, and that the survival and prosperity of a nation or community depends solely on the hard work of its inhabitants. Another popular fieldtrip location is Bangkok and the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Pupils could be guided to undertake a city study of Bangkok, rated as one of the most densely populated cities in the world. At Kanchanaburi, the group should take a trip up to the Hellfire Pass, about 80km north of the town. The Pass is part of the Hintok-Konyu section of the railway, a distance of about 5km and along which more than 700 prisoners-of-war (POWs) perished. Besides learning about the trials and tribulations of the POWs from information found in the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, the teacher could get the pupils to trek along the shorter 1-km loop trail. Retelling the stories of the POWs at Hellfire Pass, the teacher could evoke a deep sense of historical empathy as the pupils tread on the very path that was carved out to serve the ambitions of Imperial Japan. It is suggested that, prior to the trip to Thailand, students could visit the Kranji War Memorial to stimulate their interest. Visits to such 'war-sites' could reinforce the message that war is cruel and that, unless Singaporeans are totally committed to defend our homeland in the face of external threats, history could just repeat itself.

Contemporary issues, local and international, as presented in the newspaper, are also useful teaching tools to stimulate discussions. Indeed, they are particularly relevant to students who, through the skilful usage by the teacher, could see the importance of understanding the NE messages. In his/her a discussion of the Pacific War, for example, the history teacher could highlight the strong racist overtone of the conflict between the Anglo-Americans and the Japanese who,

subsequently, discriminated against other 'inferior' Asian races. He/she can then refer pupils to what happened in Kosovo or the ethnic conflicts in Indonesia. Racism is still a powerful factor in engendering hatred and war among peoples living within a country and between nations. Besides the use of newspapers, films and documentary footages, songs, poems, creative drama and dance, postage stamps, and anecdotes are also some exciting resources to generate topical discussion. It is suggested here that the Humanities Department could utilize these resources to mount year-round activities, such as exhibitions, song-writing competition, inter-class debates, project-work, and concerts, to infuse the NE messages. For example, the department could organize a creative drama and dance night (or even a mini arts festival) based on students' efforts in terms of script writing, song compositions and dance choreography on NE themes. Besides providing the opportunity for teachers within the various subject areas to guide pupils and contribute ideas, the objective of these informal and creative learning situations is to enable pupils to exercise their talents and, in the process, appreciate a little more about the importance of National Education.

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that the National Education programme is not an ad hoc measure, not history for its own sake, and certainly not linked to any hidden agenda of the ruling political party. It is a forward-looking exercise adopted by the government to help Singaporeans to understand the nation's past and the present situation in preparation for the challenges ahead. Singaporeans must also be proud of the fact that they are Singaporeans.

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