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**"WE LOVE SINGAPORE" -
K-2 CHILDREN'S LEARNING OF NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN A MULTI-RACIAL SOCIETY**

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**"We Love Singapore!" ---- K-2 Children's Learning of
National Identity in a Multi-Racial Society**

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Introduction

In May 1991, a quasi-experimental research was launched to investigate Singapore K-2 children's learning of national identity and the effect of parental involvement in the learning process. This study was sponsored by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (The Netherlands)* and conducted by the National Institute of Education (Singapore), with the collaboration of two People's Action Party education centres and two People's Association kindergartens.

A specially designed 43-item questionnaire was used to interview a sample of 329 K-2 children randomly selected from the participating education centres and kindergartens. This questionnaire (instrument) was pilot-tested with 54 children of same age at a primary school and a private kindergarten.

The 4-week intervention (five 20-min lessons per week plus take home exercises) was implemented after the Pre-test has taken place in early July 91. The same sample of children was interviewed again in mid August 91, after the celebration of National Day on 9 Aug 91. The post-test scores shows there is an increase of the awareness as well as fondness of Singapore as their nation among the children in study. The research design and findings of data analyses are presented and discussed in this paper.

* BvLF : The Bernard van Leer Foundation seeks to promote the development of human resources within communities experiencing social, economic or cultural disadvantages by focusing on the needs of young children.

Singapore: A Youthful and Striving Nation

The 26-year-old Republic of Singapore, which consists of a main island of 573.9 square kilometers (42 km in length and 23 km in breadth) and 57 islets, is situated one degree north of the equator at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Today, she has the world's busiest port, the third biggest refining center, a first-class international airport, and a very popular, highly ranked airline. She is also the clearinghouse for the region's wealth, comprising tin, rubber, coconut, oil, rice, timber, jute, spices, coffee, and so on. Her massive banking and communication systems make her one of the world's key financial centers.

The population density of Singapore was 5,232 persons per square kilometer in 1990. Out of 3,002,800 people, 77.7% (2,089,400) were Chinese, 14.1% (380,600) were Malays, 7.1% (191,000) were Indians, and 1.1% (29,200) were other ethnic groups (Eurasians, Europeans, etc). The resident population grew older as a result of declining fertility and increased longevity. The proportion below 15 years of age declined from 28% in 1980 to 23% in 1990. There was a corresponding increase in the proportion of persons aged 15-59 years (65% to 68%) and elderly persons (8% to 9%). Singapore is very much a multi-ethnic and youthful nation although the problems of an aging population are already on the way.

There are four official languages, i.e., Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil, and English. Malay is the national language,

while English is the language of administration. This multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural society became an independent nation in 1965 when it was separated from the rest of Malaysia, which was formed in 1963. Her people and the government struggled together for years for nation building. Her strategic location, trading heritage, and the favorable world economy helped the onset, but the journey was by no means a smooth sail. There were many difficulties, such as the withdrawal of the British Armed Forces (1971), the oil crisis in the mid-1970s, and the last recession in 1985 (negative growth in gross national product [GNP]).

But Singaporeans from all walks of life demonstrated the meaning of the word 'sacrifice.' To restore the country's competitiveness, wages were cut by 12% by reducing the employer's contribution to the Central Provident Fund, from 25% to 10% of base pay. In addition, wage increases were severely restrained in 1986. (Koh, 1987)

Such measures took effect, and the GNP growth is back to the positive now. Lessons from those difficult times in the past have shown the way to cope with changes in a young nation that depends so much on the global economy and international relations. Singapore's success today is not a miracle, but a living example of people's joint effort and strong will to survive through all weathers.

Not many people know that there is a Singapore in Michigan, in the United States. While the Singapore in Asia was founded by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (the British Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen) in 1819, Michigan Singapore was laid out by land speculators, as a land port to rival Chicago and Milwaukee, in the late 1830s. "Oshea Wilder and his sons, from New York, bought a large tract of land near the mouth of the Kalamazoo River from the Barnes family (patentees) and in 1883 laid out the village, which they named after a famous foreign seaport to attract settlers" (Romig, 1986). The "famous foreign seaport" was most likely referring to the Singapore in Asia.

Asia Singapore was "an instant success because people flooded in from various countries in the region. Within just three years (early 1820s), the island had developed from a fishing village to a prosperous trade port of 10,000 inhabitants of all races" (Ministry of Communication and Information, 1986, p. 2). Michigan Singapore was a busy lumbering town until the 1870s.

At one time Singapore possessed a sawmill, a public hall, a school, a church, a store, a boarding house, and about thirty other buildings. A number of boats were built there and an extensive lumber trade was carried on from the harbor of Singapore. The Singapore bank, one of the series of wildcat banks then operating in Western Michigan, was established in 1837. (Beeson, 1951)

But when the timber supply was exhausted, the mills closed and the people left. Gradually, it was buried by Lake Michigan's shifting sands.

The contrast of the development of these two Singapores reveals an obvious key element for success in our society. It was people's interaction with and adaptation to the environment that really made the difference. When people settled down and strove together toward the same destiny, the place would flourish. When people uprooted from the place, nature would eventually take over. While Asia Singapore is progressing by leaps and bounds toward a high-tech and high-quality information society, Michigan Singapore is buried under layers and layers of sand in the long-forgotten world. It is really crucial for a young nation to have a people of strong commitments, great expectations, and ambitions. Survivors are the surfers who surmount every wave and reach the shore safely and gracefully to realize their aspirations.

3. "One People, One Nation, One Singapore"

Singapore children are the most vital resource for the nation's future development. It is very crucial that these future citizens think that they are Singaporeans and feel that they love Singapore. The sense of belonging and feeling of togetherness ("oneness") will not develop naturally in a heterogenous society like Singapore. Children from multi-ethnic and multi-religious backgrounds need guidance in developing an awareness of the similarities and differences among themselves. They need encouragement to learn to live, play and work with peers and adults of different races. In other words, they need to be nurtured to become loyal citizens and eventually internalise the value of "one people, one nation, one Singapore". In this nurturing process, their parents and teachers could play significant roles in guiding and teaching them.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate Singapore K-2 children's learning of national identity and the effect of parents' involvement in fostering children's love for the Nation. The term "national identity" was defined as follows:

1. an awareness of self and others as a member of the Nation called Singapore, e.g. I am a Chinese, you are a Malay and she is an Indian, but we are all Singaporeans. We are friends and we respect one another;
2. a desire to know more about Singapore, e.g. what does Singapore look like in a map, where do I stay, where does the kindergarten located;
3. an appreciation of national identity, e.g. learning to know the flag of Singapore, what is it like, and what do the symbols mean; and
4. a feeling of fondness and a sense of belonging to the nation, e.g. active participation in the celebration of Singapore's National Day.

This study intended to show that pre-school children could be taught to know and to love Singapore, and that parents could help

their children to foster a sense of belonging to the Nation through: (1) working with teachers and (2) relevant home-based and outdoor activities with their children.

4. Today's children: Tomorrow's citizens

The significances of the focus and timing of the study were:

- (1) The research experience of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the NIE-BvLF project showed that children could learn and need to be taught in order to acquire certain behaviour.
- (2) There is a growing concern about Singapore people's sense of belonging to the Nation and their identity as Singaporeans. The 3-year campaign which was launched in June 1991 reflected the concern of Singapore government in this matter. This research was therefore a very timely study.
- (3) The month of July and August are considered the best time for the study to take place as Singapore's National Day falls on the 9th of August. The inclusion of Singapore related activities at home or in kindergartens during this period would not be seen as disruptive.
- (4) Small scale research studies are preferred over large scale research as more control can be ensured through working with individual pre-school centres. The four demonstration centres which have been actively involved in the NIE-BvLF study offered good opportunities for this research.
- (5) There were several research studies, including those conducted by Horowitz (1940), Piaget & Weil (1951), Jahoda (1964), Cooper (1965), Bandura (1969), Schwartz (1975), Allen, Freeman & Osborne (1985) etc, showed that at various ages children could develop the concepts of national symbols, national identity, geographic location, authority figures, peace and war, democratic ways of decision making and conflict resolution, etc. In Singapore, this was the first ever study on young children's (K-2) learning of national identity. This study's findings are especially important for Singapore parents and early childhood educators because they play significant roles in providing good models and guidance for multi-cultural understanding, harmonious relationship and positive citizenship.

- (6) It has been found that where parents and teachers work together towards common goals, probability of success will be greater than each party working alone. Hence a link between home and pre-school will be necessary if we expect what children learn in kindergartens to be further enhanced at home.

As parents and teachers may not be aware of the importance of such link, and if they do, some may not know what to do or how to maintain the link, the study concentrated on providing information to parents and teachers, and suggestions on how they can help one another.

5. Four Themes for Four Weeks

The treatment (intervention) period of this study was four weeks, from the second week July to the first week of August 1991. The Director of the NIE-BVLF Project, Dr Ko Peng Sim, and the researcher designed the four themes and outlines of activities for these four weeks in April '91 and held several meetings with the four demonstration centres' supervisors and staff during May-June '91. Each theme took about 100 minutes of curriculum time, five sessions of 20 minutes each. The aims and objectives of these themes are stated below:

Unit	:	One
Theme	:	Myself & My friends
Aim	:	Awareness of self & others in the Community
Topic	:	I am ... You are ... We're Singaporeans
Objective	:	To identify oneself by name, sex, ethnic group To know peers by names, sexes, ethnic groups To share common identity: Singaporeans

Unit : Two

Theme : My Home & My Country

Aim : Knowledge of Singapore as an Island & a Garden City

Topic : This is Singapore Island
Here is My Home
We live in a Garden City

Objective : To point out the location of Singapore Island on a regional map

To show the location of one's home on a Singapore map

To care for this Garden City

Unit : Three

Theme : My Nation and Me

Aim : Appreciation of National Symbols

Topic : Our National Flag is ...
Our National Flag says ...
We're proud of our National Flag!

Objective : To learn the composition of the Singapore National Flag

To know the meanings of the Singapore National Flag

To love and respect the Singapore National Flag

Unit : Four

Theme : We Love Singapore

Aim : Development of Love for the Nation

Topic : Our People's Celebrations:
* Hari Raya
* Deepavali
* Christmas
* Chinese New Year
Our Nation's Birthday

Objective : To know more about how various ethnic groups' celebrate their festivals

To talk about how to celebrate National Day and show one's love for the Nation

Parents of the children in these centres were involved in doing the take-home assignments. The guidelines for these assignments were written by the centre staff (one centre was responsible for one theme), after consultation with the researcher and team members.

Teachers who were in-charge of the sample classes were requested to complete a weekly report on (1) these children's participation in class, (2) quality of assignment and (3) adult(s) who had helped them in doing the assignment.

6. Two Tests and Two Methods

The research design of this study was quasi-experimental using both quantitative and qualitative methods. To measure the effect of the treatment (4-week learning activities), interviews with individual subjects (pupils) were conducted during the week before the treatment and one week after the treatment. The interview schedule, developed by Dr Ko Peng Sim and the researcher, was used as an instrument to test the treatment effect.

This instrument was validated by a pilot test conducted in May 91, with 54 pupils of the same age in a primary school and a private kindergarten. The total scale and four sub-scales were found valid reliable in the pilot test, the pre-test as well as the post-test. The total scale's KR 20s of this test was 0.75. The range of subscales' KR 20s were 0.44 to 0.63. All the inter-scale correlations and the item - total correlations were significant at 0.05 level. There was no other suitable instrument to use for testing the concurrent validity. This is quite a common limitation of this kind of "pioneer" studies.

In addition to the quantitative method as mentioned above, the qualitative method was also used. This is done by teachers' observation of pupils' class participation and assessment of the qualities of the take-home art & craft assignments. Specially designed weekly record sheets were completed by these teachers and analysed by the full-time research assistant, Miss Jennifer Loke.

7. Three Major Findings

Data collected by interviews and observations subsequently coded by the part-time research assistants and then loaded on to the computer (IBM-SAS program) for data analyses. There are many interesting findings, and more are still yet to come, at this point of time. To present here, there are three main findings:

- (1) 91% of the subjects had shown improvement on the total scale of the test. 3% has no change, while 6% has lower scores. This small percent of decrease might be caused by young children's playfulness and moodiness. The increments of scores are showed at the table below:

INCREMENT OF SCORES (91% of total sample)

INCREMENT	PERCENTAGE
1 to 10	23.74%
11 to 20	45.48%
21 to 30	25.76%
31 to 40	4.35%
41 to 50	0.67%
	100.00%

- (2) Majority of the subjects had obtained some assistance at home to complete their assignments. There are significant correlations between the quality of work and assistance from mother, father and/or others in the fourth assignment, a birthday card for Singapore. The other three assignments were also completed with help at home, but the correlations of quality and assistance were not significant at 0.05 level. Maybe the reason was that these three assignments did not require as much adults' assistance as the "birthday card" assignment.
- (3) All teachers participated in this study found the programme was very meaningful. They were happy to see their pupils learning more about: (1) things done by other races, (2) places in Singapore, (3) national flag and its meanings, and (4) national day celebration. Moreover, they had developed better rapport with parents.

And some of them encouraged the parents to explore more in their neighbourhood and be confident in tapping community resources, such as going into a hotel and walk up to the front desk to collect tourist information pamphlets. It is a fact of life that many people seldom go to places meant for tourists or visitors.

8. Summary

The overall evaluation of this study indicated that it is a worthwhile project. The findings show that young children (K-2 pupils) need to learn and can learn more about their national identity and the multi-ethnic features of Singapore. Above all, they can be guided to develop sense of belonging to and love for the Nation.

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