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# The ecologies of civic competence: students' perceptions from one Singapore school

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A growing body of research suggests that traditional assessments of democratic participation overlook students' present realities, and fail to capture the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to resolve public issues in the 21st century. Addressing these concerns, we employed an interpretive perspective in examining students' perceptions of civic competence in one Singaporean school. Analyses of qualitative data reveal students' perceived lack of civic competence to effect systemic change within their school environment and in the larger political arena. This perceived lack of civic competence can be attributed largely to rigid and hierarchical classroom, school and political structures, and the pragmatic focus of Singapore society. We discuss findings in light of civic education research, policy and practice.

**Keywords:** civic education, democracy, secondary students, Singapore

## Introduction

The participation of citizens in public life is crucial to the health of a democratic society (Dewey, 1916; Parker, 2003). Although democracy as a form of government has spread in recent years, its ascendance has been matched by a decline in youth political interest, and increased emphasis on preparing youth for participation in the global economy, characterized by standards-driven reform and an attendant focus on educational testing (Nussbaum, 2010). Collectively, these developments have spurred cross-national debates about how best to prepare young citizens for effective engagement in the 21st century (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silberstein, 2002).

Central to the civic engagement debate are challenges to established constructs and research perspectives that presumed predictive links between young people's early attitudes

and future political behaviour (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Galloway, 2007; Haste, 2004).

Critiquing these constructs as instrumental and “means-end” in orientation, scholars contend that such perspectives forward a deficit model of youth and a view of citizenship as an “*outcome* of an educational and developmental trajectory” (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009, p. 6, [original emphasis]). They further argue that citizenship education research overlooks how youth – through their daily experiences inside and outside of school – are able to build a personal understanding of civic engagement (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Rubin, 2007).

The present study contributes to the ongoing debates on civic engagement by investigating Singaporean students’ perceptions of civic competence. Civic competence draws on constructivist and relational theories of learning in referring to individuals’ understanding of how government functions. It highlights youths’ quotidian acquisition of behaviours as they “participate in government, and...meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within the framework of democratic principles” (Youniss, et al., 2002, p. 124). Haste (2004) further characterizes civically competent individuals as possessing agency. They are “self-sufficient, able to focus attention and plan, has a future orientation...and has a sense of responsibility and commitment, including that *one can oneself* have an effect” (p. 426 [original emphasis]). These characteristics are fostered by families and communities, ecologies that provide competent role models, create practical opportunities for involvement, and experiences that balance socialization into established understandings of citizenship with prospects to counter prevalent conceptions (Engle & Ochoa, 1998; Haste, 2004).

Using qualitative data from interviews and observations and employing a perspective of civic engagement as encompassing both school and the wider ecologies of society (Dewey, 1916), we created a case study based on the experiences and perceptions of students in one Singapore school. We aimed to inform research efforts that are expanding traditional notions

of youths' understanding of civic engagement, implicating educational policies and practices, and extending knowledge for citizenship education in the 21st century. Below, we explicate the theoretical constructs that inform our view of civic competence. We then cite studies to emphasize the cultivation of civic competence in various nested ecologies.

## **Review of the literature**

### ***Theoretical perspectives***

In forwarding a study of civic competence, we echo conceptions of civic engagement as an endeavour that expands beyond conventional actions, such as voting or standing for political office (Rubin, 2007; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Rather, civic engagement may manifest in actions to recognize issues, propose and critique solutions, and respond to social problems (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). These perspectives mirror John Dewey's (1916) view of democracy that is not limited to purely political acts, but encompasses "associated living", the open exchange of ideas among individuals aimed at addressing problems in society. Furthermore, we adhere to perspectives of citizenship learning as constructivist, relational and ecological (Osler & Starkey, 2003; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Younnis et al., 2002). As scholars have observed, whether an individual constructs an understanding of civic engagement as personally responsible, participatory or geared towards the achievement of social justice is influenced heavily by the meanings they make while interacting within political, cultural and social milieu (Haste, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)

For proponents of emerging perspectives of citizenship and engagement, individuals have the capacity to construct meanings of their civic rights and responsibilities before adulthood and in ways that may not necessarily reflect specified outcomes (Haste, 2004; Rubin, 2007). Scholars such as Osler and Starkey (2003), in arguing for alternative views of civic engagement, noted that traditional perspectives posit youth as "not yet citizens" who would attain full citizenship status only upon learning certain behaviors and knowledge, and

“traversing into adulthood” with its attendant experiences and responsibilities (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 4). Although academics and youths themselves recognize the need to widen young people’s knowledge of citizenship through schooling (White, Bruce, & Richie, 2000), scholars increasingly argue that the focus on instrumentalist, formal citizenship education has masked how young people are already engaged in activities that are rich sources of citizenship learning.

Research also indicates that civic competence takes root within contexts where youth experience both socialization and counter-socialization. Engle and Ochoa (1998) and Haste (2004) argue that the preparation of citizens must entail going beyond socialization, the transmission of knowledge and behaviours necessary to make democracy work through an uncritical manner. Rather, civic education can sensibly balance socialization and counter-socialization. In this vein, the cultivation of youths’ understanding of their capacity to democratically forward their interests calls for civic education that critically examines historical and cultural narratives that have defined citizenship and question entrenched political or social practices (Haste, 2004). By balancing socialization and counter-socialization, youth develop reflective decision-making, learn to understand the root causes of social and political problems, weigh alternatives, and explore the effects of possible courses of action (Engle & Ochoa, 1998).

*Ecologies of civic competence: Socialization and counter-socialization in context*

Constructivist, relational and ecological frameworks are increasingly used to examine civic education in democracies (See Biesta et al., 2009; Torney-Purta et al., 2001, the International Association of Educational Achievement’s Civic Education Study [IEA CivEd]). In its theoretical framework of civic education in 28 democracies, the IEA CivEd positioned students in the center of nested ecologies, actively forging an understanding of their civic roles through interactions with agents that are embedded in cultural and

institutional settings, such as the family, peer group, community and school. Circumscribing and informing these interactions are the “macro-systems”, including narratives in national and local communities, government and civil institutions, and processes and values in politics and education (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

At the state level, the implementation of civic curricula is usually tied to states’ constructions of citizenship, positioning schools as mechanisms for promoting passive or active participation in governance (Hahn, 2003). The formal and informal curricula implemented by states and schools create a powerful societal microcosm where students learn of their capacities to forward goals within democratic principles. Studies from Denmark and Hong Kong illustrate contrasting cases in point. In Denmark, Hahn (1998) observed classrooms and interviewed students in a *folkskole*, which is mandated by law “to model democracy in order to prepare citizens for decision-making” (p. 9). Hahn (1998) observed that these mandates were reflected in elected student representatives who held equal voice with teachers and parents in the *folkeskole* board, and open classroom climates emanating from discussions about compelling topics, including controversial European Union initiatives that implicated local social policies. Conversely, in Hong Kong interviewed school practitioners observed that students were not interested in discussing issues related to political participation, despite the fact that students were involved in electing student representatives (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). They further surmised that the didactic delivery of civic education classes – as opposed to compelling lessons that motivated students – led students to become disengaged during lessons (Lee, 1999). Lee (1999) noted that curricular emphasis on economically-driven subjects such as science, contributed to an overall low regard for civic education in Hong Kong. Recent research, however, indicates that civic education is increasingly given importance in the Hong Kong curriculum (see Leung, 2006; Leung & Yuen, 2009).

Increasingly, scholars argue that in order to foster civic competence, schools must provide young citizens with opportunities to practice democracy by involving them consistently in decision-making about the problems and controversies of school life (CIRCLE, 2003). Notably, what teachers teach and their relationships with students are key determinants of students' perceived abilities to make a difference in school and society. Teachers can create a civil climate by “convey(ing) messages about social inclusion...and about tolerance and respect for differences of opinions” which are core principles of democracy (Flanagan et al., 2007, p. 423). Studies also indicate that students who learned about the tenets of democracy, and whose teachers encouraged them to critique democratic principles in light of daily experiences, showed a deepened understanding of their civic or political rights and increased awareness of avenues for action (Middaugh & Kahne, 2008).

Beyond the state and the school, family conversations such as discussion of events in media can help make prominent the political realm and thus, orient youth politically (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). These orientations, however, can be reinforced or negated by discourses and interactions outside the home. For example, communities can expose youth to issues that are deemed important or unimportant in the public sphere. From interactions within communities, youth learn the ways that fellow citizens respond to these issues (Rubin, 2007).

### **The study**

The present study is part of a series of investigations of citizenship education in Singapore. In previous publications, we examined students from different academic tracks (see Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim & Yap, 2011; Ho, Sim, & Alviar-Martin, 2011; Sim, 2012), and found that students' perceptions of citizenship drew from differentiated expectations of citizenship espoused by the state. Yet, the studies' foci limited our depiction of how students – through their experiences inside and beyond school – made meaning of their roles as citizens. These findings and limitations led us to probe more fully into how state-promoted narratives

intersected with other ecological factors in shaping students' meaning-making of civic engagement.

In the present investigation, students' perspectives illuminate civic competence in one Singaporean secondary school. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is most appropriate to the phenomenological nature of the study that emphasizes youths' understandings and experiences (Merriam, 1998). Employing the instrumental case study method, we gained insight into students' perceptions to inform the external interest, civic competence (Stake, 2005). This investigation focused on one typical co-educational government secondary school in Singapore. Assuming an interpretive stance that highlights experience as locally negotiated yet situated amid larger meanings (Creswell, 2003), we construed how students' perceptions of civic competence were informed by formal instruction and interactions within nested socio-political ecologies. Two questions guided our analysis: 1) What are students' perceptions of government and their ability to participate in governance at the societal and school level? 2) How do daily civic experiences and formal instruction inform student perceptions of civic competence?

### ***The Singapore context***

Singapore is an island city-state of 699 square kilometers with an almost total lack of natural resources. Among nations in Southeast Asia, Singapore alone has a large Chinese majority but adheres to an explicit policy of multiculturalism and equality across a population that includes Malays, Indians and people of "other" ethnicities (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). Singapore became independent in 1965 and the newly formed state was poverty-stricken and rife with racial tensions and social unrest. For the People's Action Party (PAP) government, which has governed Singapore since 1965, nation-building, developing a shared national identity, and modernizing the economy were urgent priorities. It pursued a strategy of infrastructure modernization to attract foreign investments and as a result, the government was able to gain

legitimacy through sustained economic growth. Singapore today is recognized as a thriving first world economy, with its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world (Chua, 1995).

Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia and its limited size has given its leaders an acute sense of national vulnerability. Policies were designed "to organize the population into a tautly-controlled, efficient and achievement-oriented society" (Bedlington, 1978, p. 211). Although founded on democratic ideals, politics is dominated by a small elite group consisting mostly of members of the ruling party, judiciary, military, civil service, leaders of large government-linked business organizations and academic institutions (K. L. Ho 2000). The ruling party also developed a system of political control that allowed few opportunities for dissent. The governing elite help define and shape political and economic discourse by maintaining control the mainstream media and defining acceptable boundaries of public discourse or "out-of-bounds markers" (Tan, 2010). An official narrative of the government states that economic discipline and social conformity is necessary to maintain social order, promote economic development and ensure the survival of the nation-state.

This narrative has had profound implications for education in Singapore, particularly in terms of school structure, curriculum and testing. The education system in Singapore was centralized under the strong direction of the state, and is remarkably responsive to the directives of its political leaders. Such a system is deemed essential to promote economic development and to achieve the social and political goals of national cohesion. The school subject, Social Studies, for instance, have regularly been used for building national identity and creating a sense of historical consciousness. These subjects are guided by a citizenship education framework, National Education (NE), which aims to develop and shape the civic knowledge, values and attitudes of young citizens. The goal of this programme is to ensure that young citizens are committed to national ideals and to the state-defined national shared

values such as pragmatism, social cohesion, and meritocracy (L. C. Ho, 2010). Consequently, the national Social Studies curriculum is dominated by state-determined values such as racial harmony, meritocracy, and, in particular, the theme of economic development and national survival (Sim & L.C. Ho, 2010).

### ***Case selection***

We selected a school to typify secondary education in Singapore. The school's ethnic representation, academic make-up of its students and co-curricular activities comprised the primary selection criteria. The ethnic proportion of students at Banyan Secondary (a pseudonym) of 68% Chinese, 24% Malay and 6% Indian, approximates the ethnic breakdown of the overall national population. Similar to the majority of secondary schools in Singapore, Banyan Secondary School is a co-educational government school, with a total population of 1,460 students and staff of 90 teachers. The school is nestled in a small private housing estate, located within the larger neighbourhood of public housing, in the eastern part of the island. Banyan Secondary was established 30 years ago to cater to the fast growing needs of the expanding surrounding community.

Banyan offers three secondary tracks, including the Express course for the more academically able students who will complete their secondary education in 4 years; the Normal Academic (NA) course for less academically able students who will take an extra year to complete the secondary programme; and the Normal Technical (NT) course for the least academically able students. At the Secondary 3 level, Banyan Secondary has three Express classes with a total of 135 students; three NA classes with 120 students, and one NT class of 40 students. As with other neighbourhood co-educational schools, Banyan Secondary offers a range of co-curricular activities, including sports, uniformed groups, performing arts, clubs and societies. The school emphasizes values and personal development. This is

explicitly reflected in its mission statement, which highlights responsibility, self-reliance, contributing to society and meeting challenges with courage and confidence.

### ***Data sources and analysis***

The primary unit of analysis was a group of 23 Secondary 3 students – 12 boys and 11 girls – with ages ranging from 14 to 15 years. We chose this particular grade level because the Secondary 3 Social Studies curriculum covered topics relating to governance and democracy that were central to our investigation. We selected participants to mirror the school’s ethnic representation and to accommodate perspectives across academic streams. Table 1 summarizes the students’ background.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with the 23 students. Each interview lasted between 35 to 60 minutes and comprised four sets of questions. These questions were designed to probe deeper into the categories identified in the IEA study, including school participation, government, classroom and democracy. Initial questions focused on students’ perceptions of discussions during Social Studies classes. Students expounded on topics that were taught and pedagogical strategies teachers employed. Next, students shared how confident they felt to participate in school decision-making. We probed students’ perceptions of the school’s government structure and avenues for acting on concerns. The third set of questions entailed students’ participation in co-curricular and community activities. Lastly, students shared their understanding of democracy, citizenship, and government. We assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect anonymity.

A total of nine, hour-long observations of social studies lessons were conducted to determine classroom climate. The observations focused largely on the nature of teacher-

student and student-student interactions. Students were further observed during school events such as Racial Harmony Day and morning assemblies to ascertain student participation in school decision-making. We analysed Social Studies textbooks, school-based documents, and documents from Singapore's Ministry of Education to sketch the intended civic education curriculum. Finally, to expound on student data, we interviewed two social studies teachers and the school's Discipline Mistress who advised the student government (prefectorial board). Interviews with school personnel lasted between 60 to 90 minutes.

The raw data were classified and coded with the use of the qualitative software, NVIVO 8. Categories emerged and were refined as data were examined for patterns and linkages, and subsequently for different possible interpretations. Analysis was data-driven and inductive, shaped largely by the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To address the first research question, we examined student responses to the interview items. The first level of analysis yielded over 80 categories, which were reduced to 11 categories, including lecture-based instruction, limited influence in school decision-making, and factual understanding of democracy. Subsequent analyses addressed our second research question. We scrutinized school personnel's perceptions of democracy, school governance and classroom instruction, and data from observations and documents for commonalities with the 11 student categories. Finally, we conducted a cross-analysis to compare, link and merge the 11 categories thematically. The four themes that resulted from the final analysis formed the basis of our findings. Triangulation of the data from multiple sources and member checking maintained the study's credibility (Merriam, 1998).

## **Findings**

Examining the relative influence of school, family, public institutions and peer groups on the students' perceptions of civic competence, we found that the students' abilities, self-belief and desire to act through the framework of democratic principles were greatly constrained by

formal instruction and experiences within nested social and political milieu. An overall finding was students' perceived lack of civic competence to effect systemic and structural change both within their immediate school environment and in the larger political arena. This perceived lack of competence and general passivity can be attributed largely to rigid and hierarchical classroom, school, political and social structures; fear and respect for authority figures; and the pragmatic focus on accepted priorities of Singapore society.

### ***Rigid and hierarchical structures***

At Banyan Secondary, participants characterized their school as a safe and caring place.

Leela, an Indian girl from the NT class, said that her teacher often asked: “‘How can we make the class better?’ Then, maybe we can make suggestions.” Her comments were echoed by many participants, who said that they felt comfortable approaching teachers if they had concerns about lessons covered in class. Some students identified ways that they could participate in school decision-making, such as dropping letters in a suggestion box. Bart, a Chinese boy from the NA class, said that students' feedback helped amend a rule so that students were allowed to use mobile phones in the cafeteria during breaks. Yixuan, a Chinese girl from the Express class, recalled how schoolmates who lived in a distant neighborhood were often penalized for arriving late in the mornings. The students approached their student prefects, who helped arrange for attendance to be taken 10 minutes later. These examples notwithstanding, a majority of participants shared the impression that they played a minor role in school decision-making. None of the students, including Bart, knew of a classmate or friend who had actually used the school suggestion box.

Out of 23 participants, 16 said that school governance depended upon the Principal, Vice Principal (VP), or Discipline Mistress (DM). William, a Chinese boy from the Express class, emphasized the school's hierarchical nature: “I don't think we will have the chance to make school rules... because...the Principal, VP, DM ...those higher ranking people...decide

the rules.” Even the student leaders were considered primarily as extensions of the school’s authority and as rule enforcers. Harry, a Malay boy from the Express class, explained that prefects “help teachers in disciplining the students”. Likewise, Norris, a perceptive Chinese boy from the NA class, portrayed prefects as “the soldiers of the school”.

Teachers are perceived to be enforcers of discipline and simultaneously subjected to discipline. Sheldon, a Chinese boy from the Express class, described his teacher as an authoritarian but benevolent ruler, “... my teacher, he would say that he is the king, so he set all the rules...he is a teacher who uphold fairness, so nothing to fear about”. Thus, according to Sheldon, there was no need for students to participate in making class rules. Sheldon also observed that teachers themselves had no agency with regard to the implementation of school rules: “Teachers nowadays are more technical in expressing themselves over disciplinary actions. It’s like they only follow the law...they don’t do things that they feel is right.”

Students’ responses evidenced that state governance is perceived as the responsibility of the government, and citizens are tasked to support the government. All the participants conceptualized their civic roles in ways that did not challenge the status quo. A majority defined a good citizen as someone who “loved” or was “loyal to” Singapore, whereas about half of the students mentioned that good citizenship entailed “respecting others” and focusing on their studies. Rose, a Chinese NA student, portrayed the government’s role in the following manner: “To take care of everyone in Singapore. They will try to make better decisions for us.” Leela described a paternal state that took care of its citizens’ needs. She argued that a good government “helps the needy”. In these scenarios, active civic participation appeared to be unnecessary because it was the government’s responsibility to care for its citizens.

This paternalistic notion of governance closely parallels the state’s position. The idea that highly capable government ministers are in a better position to make decisions for the

less well-informed populace has frequently been advanced by the state, and for the most part, accepted by the citizenry. Ms. Sharma, the Discipline Mistress, stressed:

A good citizen will...be flexible with the changes in the country, and understand why the country has to make that change. Initially people may not like it, but in the end, it's going to be for the betterment of society.

Echoing Ms. Sharma's sentiment, several students appeared to feel that acquiescing to the rules imposed by the school authorities was necessary because these rules contributed to their well-being. Yixuan stated that she would not raise objections to any problems within the school because "they are doing this for our own good". Samir, from the NA class argued, quite forcefully, that students should not voice their objections to school rules, "Can't, you can't say that what. Because, it's important...it's good for you."

### ***Fear and respect for authority figures***

We observed that participants' perceptions of governance stemmed from a predominant subservience to figures of authority, including school personnel, parents and the government. Students frequently expressed fear and respect for school authorities that deterred them from questioning school conventions that they did not agree with entirely, such as the frequency of tests or the wearing of uniforms. William said that he would consider talking to his teacher regarding rules that he thought were unfair, but he was adamant that he "wouldn't dare" approach the Principal or Discipline Mistress. He surmised that involving his parents would be a more feasible avenue for airing grievances: "I can do nothing ... Maybe our parents will write a letter. We cannot. Students, we don't have the right. Because we are students, they are teachers. We must respect their decisions."

Libby, from the NT class, shared how her family's approval or disapproval greatly shaped her actions, such as her willingness to contribute to charity. When asked whether she would be willing to help in the community, Libby stated: "My parents say don't care, but for me, a bit care (sic)." Subsequently, Libby asserted that she was unwilling to go against her parents' wishes, "because if my mother say cannot, then (I) can't help." These statements

indicated parents' mediating influence on students' civic participation; the lack of parental support restrained Libby's actions even though it was apparent that that she would have been willing to do so otherwise.

The state government appeared intimidating to the students. When asked whether he was willing to fight a law that was unjust, Harry described his unwillingness to do so because "it's still the law ... you cannot fight it." Likewise, Libby feared speaking out because of the possible repercussions, "maybe will put you in prison ... later I say wrong things ... then surely die." Another factor that prevented her from voicing her opinion was the perception that she had a lower status than the government minister from the ruling political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), "(I) don't dare to talk to him ... because he is PAP, I nothing."

Norris described one possible reason why Singapore citizens were afraid to participate actively in the public arena. Citing the example of his uncle who was jailed for protesting on behalf of a member of the opposition party, Norris stated that the government had great power over the media and citizens "...everything they control, media they control... it's like they control the thoughts of the citizen." Thus, this helped the state discipline its citizens and constrain their political or civic activities. In a similar vein, Malik, an articulate Malay boy from the NA class, described how one of his father's friends reacted to the implementation of the electronic road pricing (ERP) toll system:

Malik: He (is) very unhappy about ERP... He say he doesn't like it, I don't know what he is going to do.

Interviewer: Oh, he just grumbles only?

Malik: Ya, just grumbles.

Interviewer: Is he taking any action?

Malik: He is not taking any action, he just say... he just leave it.

The extract demonstrates how the adults in Malik's circle are merely content to vocalize their unhappiness with the government's policies privately and appeared unwilling to publicly and actively challenge state policies.

***Pragmatic focus on conventional social goals***

The lives of Singapore citizens are governed by the notion of pragmatism. Citizens are constantly reminded by the government of the accepted norms and goals of society, most notably, economic productivity and the maintenance of social harmony. This theme is central to the secondary Social Studies narrative. The second chapter of the Secondary 3 textbook expresses the national value of economic productivity through the governing principle of meritocracy:

Meritocracy is a key part of the principle 'Reward for work and Work for reward'. Meritocracy means a system that rewards hard work and talent. When people are rewarded based on their abilities and hard work, they are encouraged to do well (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37).

Classroom pedagogy in Banyan Secondary reinforced our observation that the entire school system was geared toward preparing students for the national examinations, a key pillar in the state's meritocratic ethos. As noted wryly by the students, their role is to concentrate on passing the high-stakes national examinations. We observed that many of the lessons across academic streams were highly-regulated and teacher-dominated, with the teacher frequently devising study methods to aid the students in their examination preparation. Mr. Teo, the Express and NA teacher, preferred to conduct lectures with the aid of PowerPoint slides. During lessons, he constantly emphasized the importance of shaping their essays to maximize grades: "It is important to link explanations to inferences to secure your points. Do not waste time and explain what is more than necessary!" Similarly, Ms. Priya, who taught the NT class, argued that despite examinations' stated focus on critical thinking, examiners usually looked for formulaic answers. Thus, she taught "essay skills" by

having the students master facts from the textbook and providing them with outlines to follow when writing responses.

The lack of focus on critical thinking extended to community-involvement activities. Several students aired concerns about Singapore's aging population and the environment. They said that they felt "good" about visiting the elderly in their neighborhood. Samir, his NA classmate, Shanti, and Wanda from the NT class, mentioned that they helped pick trash from a nearby public beach so that they could contribute to Singapore's order and cleanliness. Some participants observed that they were privileged to participate in the school's overseas service trips that were financed through government funds. However, participants viewed these activities mostly as opportunities to appreciate how they were capable of helping those who were less fortunate than themselves. After hearing of her schoolmates' experiences upon their return from tutoring students in Vietnam, Yixuan said that she felt "blessed" to be a Singaporean. In all, participants' views suggested that service activities strengthened their sense of responsibility to help others, and perhaps their national affinity, but did not encourage them to question established systems that led to social problems in Singapore or elsewhere.

Several participants were more direct in assessing students' purposes for joining community-service activities as pragmatic. Mansour, from the NT stream, surmised that students participated in such activities "to get (community-involvement) points". Norris expanded his analysis of Singapore citizens' political apathy by noting that many Singaporeans were struggling to survive economically. Consequently, they did not have the time to be politically active and engaged: "If you are working like normal Singaporeans, why should we protest? We don't have so much time in our hands... We are struggling ourselves so we don't have time to like bother this kind of stuff."

### ***Resistance and opposition***

Despite the constraints faced by the participants, several students were unafraid of being openly critical of school and political structures, reflecting a depth of understanding and maturity that was unusual. Sheldon, for example, provided an interesting analysis of the impact of a school system that rigidly enforced rules:

In school...just because it is a rule, people usually think it is right. So what people usually do is follow rules and slowly everyone (is) influenced by practice... If, for example, our DM (Discipline Mistress), is just following rules, thinking that what are stated in the rules are right...in future we may not know what we do is right or wrong, just because there's no rules for us to follow and there isn't rules for every situation.

Unsurprisingly, Sheldon was one of the few students who showed an active interest in current affairs. As he pointed out, he chose to keep up to date about issues such as the flu pandemic and the financial crisis “just for myself...to understand the situation better” and not because he was compelled to by the teacher or the curriculum.

In a similar manner, Tang, a Chinese boy from the NT class, showed a willingness to challenge the political status quo and an ability to critically assess the political structures in Singapore. When asked whether he was willing to voice his objection to government policies, he had this to say,

Interviewer: If you are unhappy about the government, who do you think you can speak to? Will you speak up or not?

Tang: Even if right, I will have to get a bunch of people to accompany me.

Interviewer: Go to who?

Tang: Different ministries, like if I am unhappy with education, I will go to MOE (Ministry of Education).

Interviewer: Will you voice out or will you be scared?

Tang: Scared la, but still have to go, otherwise will never change.

Tang was also able to explain, in a fairly coherent manner, why the political landscape in Singapore was dominated by one party, the PAP. He explained the system of gerrymandering

introduced by the ruling party as an effort to keep the PAP in power: “Even if there’re more votes in opposition, the PAP will just suddenly make (itself) win ... Because if the opposition were to win, they will change the rules and everything.” Tang and Sheldon were exceptional among pupils in Banyan Secondary in showing a critical understanding of the democratic political system and issues in Singapore – a key requirement of civic competence (Younnis et al., 2002).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, we sought to describe students’ perceptions of civic competence. Second, we aimed to illustrate the ways that daily civic experiences and formal instruction informed student perceptions of civic competence. Findings from the qualitative analyses revealed that civic competence is both locally constructed and situated amid larger contextual influences. Although the concept of civic competence rejects contentions of passive enculturation to established societal norms about citizenship and governance, most telling among findings is the predominant congruence among the state’s projected civic ideals, students’ perceptions, formal instruction and daily experiences. The governments’ vision of a highly disciplined citizenry with a sense of self-sacrifice in the national interest (Chua, 1995) was reflected in rigid hierarchical structures, fear and respect for authority figures, and a pragmatic focus on conventional social goals. Despite evidence of resistance and opposition, findings illuminated students’ perceived lack of civic competence, particularly, their perceived inability to promote interests within the framework of democratic tenets.

In democratic societies, schools are seen as sites where students acquire an understanding of democratic governance and experience efficacious praxis that enable them to participate effectively in the public sphere (Dewey, 1916). Singaporean schools are similarly mandated to instill “a sense of public spiritedness” among young citizens (Chua,

1995). Yet, rather than promoting democratic empowerment, the structures in Banyan Secondary skewed students' understanding of democracy towards the state's rendering of governance: as pragmatic, paternalistic, and ultimately, dependent upon citizens' capacities to follow regulations and policies. Research supports contentions that elements of the formal curriculum, including learning about democratic government and discussing contentious public issues within participatory classroom climates, contribute to students' perceptions of democratic agency (Hahn, 1998). To a large extent, Banyan students' perceptions of their limited ability to participate in state governance mirrored the teacher-centered instruction that they experienced in Social Studies classes. In these classes, students had few opportunities to air their opinions or examine issues that were compelling in the public sphere. Instead, the discourse that we observed in classrooms was guided by factual textbook content that remained uncontested.

Hess (2008) has written of how issues-centered discussion and the examination of controversial problems are unlikely to flourish within restrictive climates. At Banyan Secondary, we observed that a focus on standardized testing constrained teachers' pedagogical freedom. Ms. Priya noted: "The exams guide 100%...of teaching. Even project work is so that they can answer (the exam)." Both teacher-participants mentioned that they themselves experienced education that was disproportionately dedicated to test preparation. Although they tried to incorporate critical thinking in their lessons, they felt a responsibility to ready their students for the national examinations, much like their own teachers.

The constraining climate we observed extended to the manner in which Banyan students experienced citizenship in the informal curriculum. Although students identified avenues for voicing suggestions or taking part in school governance, many viewed these structures as cosmetic. Numerous participants recognized the predominantly undemocratic character of their school. They noted that the power of decision-making lay ultimately with

teachers and school administrators who, according to Sheldon, were themselves socialized into “following rules...not knowing what’s right or what’s wrong.” His comment was reflected in Ms. Priya’s recollections of her schooling:

Singaporeans are good followers.... Like my primary and secondary school days...we were taught to follow rules and...if we don’t...we are bad students.... Good students perform well in examinations. They don’t get into any trouble.... Here we are expected to follow rules and if students don’t follow, they will be punished.... So the system didn’t really change much.

Intriguingly, participants’ subservience to a controlling, centralized authority was often couched in themes of family, unity and productivity that are ubiquitous in Singapore society (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007; Ho & Alviar-Martin, 2010). Ms. Sharma, the Discipline Mistress whom many students deemed a primary figure of authority, expressed admiration for the former Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, who is portrayed in media as the father of modern Singapore and a shrewd, benevolent leader (Zakaria, 2003). Her perceptions of governance at Banyan Secondary were replete with similar images: “I prefer to be called the Discipline Mother to the students...and the teachers...they all make a family.” She characterized “weak teachers” as those “who cannot control” their classes. “Teachers should be like, ‘I can control, but I need help so that we... can do more work. So then you (students) all assist me, it’s easier’.”

Ms. Sharma’s comments encapsulated findings that Banyan School’s informal curriculum mirrored prevailing discourses about government – and actual governance – in the Singapore state. The diminished agency of students in school decision-making paralleled how Singapore citizens are limited in voicing opinions critical of the government’s social and political initiatives (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). Freedom of expression is guaranteed under the constitution; however, the Singapore parliament has passed several instruments that, particularly, undermine the expression of ideas against its message of social cohesion. In 2005, for example, the Singapore government used the Sedition Act to prosecute three young bloggers who made racist comments about members of minority groups (Popatlal, 2005).

Generally, few citizens or media outlets challenge the state's platforms. Previous studies have likewise documented how some teachers in Singapore practise self-censorship for fear of breaching "out-of-bounds markers" during classroom and informal discussions (Baildon & Sim, 2009). It is unsurprising, then, that school structures and personnel replicated centralized mechanisms for decision-making and a climate that silenced voices of dissent.

Beyond the school setting, the study reveals discursive links between society and family in youths' formation of their civic roles. A number of participants mentioned that at home, they were exposed to discussions that led them to question disjunctures between democratic principles and their lived experiences, such as their parents' criticisms of the ERP initiative, the government's control over media, and the lack of access to political leadership. However, parents, whom students identified as strong determinants of civic participation, were deemed powerless in influencing public policies. Like many adults in their immediate community, students were content to voice their grievances in private while accepting governing regulations as "for their own good". Studies indicate the primacy of family in shaping youths' constructions of citizenship and civic participation (Flanagan et al., 1998; Richardson, 2004). The present investigation, however, suggests that in Singapore, familial discourses about citizenship are mediated by societal narratives that are, in turn, dominated by the state's agenda.

In sum, analysis of formal and informal citizenship curricula at Banyan Secondary forwards an example of how schools with little autonomy, and operating within a public sphere that stifles opportunities for dissent, tend to function as socializing agents of the state. Engle and Ochoa (1988) maintain that schools can cultivate a climate of democratic agency by encouraging both socialization and counter-socialization, or perspectives that reflectively critique accepted norms of civic participation. In Banyan Secondary, as is the case with Singaporean society, however, a challenge lies in relocating voices of resistance and

opposition from the periphery to more prominent dialogical positions. Restricted by standardized testing, exposed to curricula and instruction meant to hone memorization, and deprived of platforms to critically examine policies' effects on school and daily life, students were limited in their capacities to forge an empowered understanding of democracy and forward their interests within democratic principles.

The present investigation may seem an extreme case of students' limited abilities to cultivate civic competence within a democracy. Our findings could have differed, for example, had we selected another school, involved other students or school personnel, or observed classes at different times. We contend, nonetheless, that this study of one Singapore school offers a lens from which to view global trends in education that increasingly subsume civic curricula within utilitarian and pragmatic goals. The case of Banyan Secondary resonates especially in countries where standardized testing is employed as a means to measure students' suitability for further education and the workforce (Berliner, 2009). Studies from Hong Kong, Italy, and the US show how testing policies have led to the devaluing of civic education classes as curricula increasingly reflect subjects such as mathematics and the sciences (Alviar-Martin, Randall, Usher, & Engelhard, 2008; Lee, 1999). The present study extends current literature by evidencing that when examinations dictate citizenship curricula and teacher pedagogy, students are unlikely to experience efficacious democratic classroom and school climates. Just as teachers in this study admitted that test preparation bent their instruction towards memorization and mastery of facts, an examination-focused school curriculum can mediate students' civic competence by depriving them of the skills to critically explore and discuss public issues and ultimately, diminish their perceived capacities as co-participants in democratic governance.

Recently, the Singaporean government launched "Twenty-first Century Competencies" a framework that aims to shift schooling towards a more holistic focus. This

includes honing students to become “self-directed learners” who “question, reflect, and persevere” and “concerned citizens” who are “informed about world and local affairs...and participate actively in bettering the lives of others” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2010). This initiative echoes cross-national calls for civic education that develops youths’ critical skills to address societal and global problems (CIRCLE, 2003; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). As the present study illustrates, examination of such programmes could enrich current literature by attending simultaneously to the ways in which youth actively construct meanings of citizenship within school, family and wider spheres of their civic ecology. In particular, future research can explore schools’ capabilities to provide students with the opportunities to counter prevailing narratives about their civic roles and responsibilities. Given the interlinked challenges faced by societies in the 21st century, this case study of civic competence underlines the need for schools to recapture the democratic spirit (Dewey, 1916) amidst increasing calls for utilitarian- and economic-centred education, to cultivate youths’ critical abilities, and further capacities to fulfill their democratic potential.

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