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Citizenship education in Singapore: controlling or empowering teacher understanding and practice?

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Teachers understand and apply citizenship education differentially in traditional western democracies. But what of Asian countries where democracy is more recent and treated differently and where countries have traditions of highly controlled education systems? Do teachers have and demonstrate independence of thought in civic matters? This article reports on a study of social studies teachers' understandings of citizenship education, and how these understandings influence their teaching. We found that teacher understandings and practice of citizenship education were located in three distinct groupings, characterised as nationalistic, socially concerned and person oriented. This reflected a citizenship education landscape in Singapore that, despite tight controls, was not as rigid, prescriptive or homogenous as literature on the Asian region suggests.

Introduction

Interest in developing citizenship education programmes, including in Asia, has become widespread in recent years (Cogan *et al.*, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2006; Print *et al.*, 2007). This interest has been stimulated by a growing concern with injustice through globalisation and migration (Giddens, 2000; Osler & Starkey, 2006), decreasing confidence in democratic institutions (Norris, 1999), decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 2001), and growing youth disengagement from democracy (Saha *et al.*, 2005). Citizenship education, however, is contested, because of the diverse discourse communities that exist, and the many needs, goals and beliefs assigned to citizenship (Wilkins, 1999; Kerr, 2003; Pinson, 2007). But there is considerable consensus that it involves preparing young people in the essential areas

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of knowledge, skills and values to be an informed, responsible and participative citizen of their respective communities (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001; Parker, 2003). It is concerned in achieving this through schooling, and the 'development' of citizens, often described as 'good' citizens, consequently involves the critically important role of the teacher.

There is also widespread agreement that the development of good citizenship is a central purpose of social studies education (Barr *et al.*, 1977, Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Martorella *et al.*, 2005). In many countries, such as the United States and Australia, social studies education is the primary source of formal citizenship education for students (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 1999, 2001). In Singapore, social studies is a vehicle for National Education, with the focus on the nation, common culture and shared values.

The Singapore context

Singapore became an independent nation when it separated from Malaysia in 1965. Faced with severe, multiple challenges its existence was threatened from the very beginning. A tiny island at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore is without natural resources and was initially an undeveloped economy with high unemployment. Demographically it has a multi-ethnic population with a Chinese majority in a region surrounded by Muslim countries. Major political issues such as the Japanese Occupation, communism and the racial riots in the early years of independence emphasised to its political leaders that for Singapore to survive, nation-building in developing a shared national identity, and modernising the economy were urgent priorities (Chua & Kuo, 1991).

The People Action Party (PAP) government, which has been consistently returned to power since 1965, consolidated Singapore's independence through the politics of survival, emphasising economic pragmatism and rationality, built on the principles of multiracialism, meritocracy and multilingualism (Chan, 1971). The PAP government very early turned to schools as allies in the nation-building cause. The education system in Singapore was centralised under strong direction of the state, with the twin foci of economic development and citizenship formation to provide for skilled human resources and social cohesion (Green, 1997). The overriding priority for the PAP is economic growth, where the ability to sustain it legitimises the centralised state apparatus.

In governing Singapore, the PAP's philosophy is that citizens favour the right to a better life over political ideology, the basis of which is a strong economy. Citizens should leave politics to the PAP while they undertake economically productive activities (Mauzy & Milne, 2002). Consequently, citizenship in Singapore is perceived as passive; the citizen's responsibility is to elect a party into power and cooperate with it to govern in the interests of the country so long as it gives them a good life. This has provided a stable environment for economic growth, but the consequence is an increasingly disengaged citizenry, self-centred and materialistic, with a general mindset to defer to the government.

Thus citizenship education is focused on cultivating national loyalty, patriotism, a sense of belonging, and the commitment to actively participate in the goals of national development (Green, 1997). This required, as Chua (1995) noted, that the population must be transformed into a tightly organised and highly disciplined citizenry all pulling in the same direction with a sense of public spiritedness and self-sacrifice in the national interest (Chua, 1995). The PAP government thus developed a tight system of political control that allowed few opportunities for dissent to maintain the social order necessary for economic development (Tamney, 1996). Curriculum development is centralised under the Ministry of Education (MOE) where political leaders wield direct influence over citizenship education related curricula such as social studies. Within the education system, coordinated and sustained effort is made to transmit relevant knowledge, and stimulate the desirable values of hardwork, thrift and group cohesion needed to sustain the economy (Mauzy & Milne, 2002).

Globalisation has led to massive changes in the social, economic and political circumstances in many countries, Singapore notwithstanding. The global economy demands a creative and adaptive workforce that is proactive, can take on complex duties, and problem solve. But the culture in Singapore largely encourages acceptance of authoritarianism and paternalism, with the nature of the polity under the PAP characterised by a centralised power structure and a close elitist policy-making apparatus (Mauzy & Milne, 2002). At the same time, the local landscape has evolved dramatically, with greater social class differences and the emergence of new lifestyles, reflecting greater affluence and individualising tendencies. Younger Singaporeans, growing up amidst relative affluence when Singapore advanced from a fledging nation to a cosmopolitan city, are well-educated, widely travelled and technologically savvy. They have diverse needs and aspirations, with many wanting more control in personal spheres and more say in the collective decision-making. The government is concerned that younger, skilled Singaporeans are emigrating overseas, leading to a brain drain. This has serious implications on the future survival of Singapore as a nation.

With the destabilising effects of globalisation, the PAP government realises it cannot guarantee sustained prosperity, producing increasing concern about the engagement and participation of young people in Singapore's future. The issue is how to develop and deepen national consciousness among an increasingly materialistic, mobile and globally-oriented Singaporean youth. Efforts are made by the government to engage Singaporeans in the discussion of national issues. However, developing citizenship, of the variety favoured by the government, is a complex task for the government and educators to resolve. How are the socio-cultural forces of globalisation to be managed, when the survival of the nation is reliant on engagement with the global economy? The tension is clearly evident between societal change and the PAP conservatism.

National Education and social studies in Singapore

For this reason, National Education, the latest nation-building initiative, was launched in 1997, aimed at shaping positive knowledge, values and attitudes of the younger citizenry towards the nation, in order to develop national cohesion and confidence in the

future (MOE, 2008). Specifically, National Education centres on the 'Singapore Story'—a straightforward tale adopted by the political leaders that charts how an independent Singapore overcame the odds to become a peaceful and prosperous country, highly regarded by the international community. It is a means to rally the people in a nation known as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). Implicit is the central role of the PAP leading Singapore from a Third World to a First World nation.

National Education is the form that citizenship education takes in Singapore. Citizenship in the context of National Education is nationalistic and communitarian, closer to the civic republican tradition, emphasising responsibilities and duties, and the submission of individual interests to the common good and public sphere. This contrasts with the liberal individualist tradition of citizenship that emphasises status, and individual rights associated with it, where these rights are safeguarded by constitutional limits on government power (Oldfield, 1998; Kymlicka, 2002). Citizenship is seen in service to the nation, common culture and shared values, reflecting the government's pursuit of citizenship education to meet national needs (Hill & Lian, 1995). The issue is how to reconcile the need for citizens' allegiance to the regime with the equally important democratic rights of participation.

National Education is not taught as a subject in school, but infused into the curriculum through subjects such as social studies. Social studies is a major vehicle for National Education, introduced to all schools at upper secondary level in 2001, when students are 15–16 years old. It is an integrated subject that is compulsory and examinable, focused on enhancing awareness of national issues, pertaining to the historical, economic and social development of Singapore, as well as regional and international issues that impact Singapore (MOE, 2006). The assumption is that by staying informed of Singapore's achievements, students will have confidence in her future, and consequently be more participative.

Thus, the social studies curriculum is a construction, inescapably political and ideological, reflecting a particular worldview and a dominant ideology that serves a specific interest group. The government, through the powerful and centralised MOE, possesses the ideal conceptions of society and citizenship and these are to be transmitted to students in terms of salient knowledge and values, to help them become loyal believers in the particular set of truths necessary to guarantee the survival of the society. And while all governments, to varying degrees, control citizenship education as a means to educate future citizens, few stated democracies exert such levels of control as found in Singapore. Further, in exerting this control, the government believes that the education system will obediently follow its direction. This expectation is not necessarily achieved, reflecting tensions between government policy and school practice, between National Education and the practice of citizenship education in schools.

A curriculum perspective

In Singapore's centralised education system, curriculum development begins at the highest level of government. Citizenship education through the vehicle of social studies is a carefully planned subject with clearly delineated aims and objectives to culturally

reproduce the elites' view of Singapore society. But as curriculum writers have long suggested (Stenhouse, 1975; McCutcheon, 1988; Cornbleth, 1990) there are large gaps between what is intended to happen and what actually happens in the class. This study addresses the gap and focuses on the teacher, located in the social studies classroom, who acts as the curricular-instructional gatekeeper (Thornton, 2005).

Thornton (2005) has characterised teachers as curricular-instructional gatekeepers, reflecting their well-known role as controllers of what is taught and how it is taught in classrooms. This is pertinent in social studies because citizenship education is contested, where teacher gatekeeping implies there are many educational possibilities within the curriculum. A large part of how teachers tend the gates hinges on how they understand the subject (Cornbleth, 1990; Kelly, 2004). Consequently, curriculum is not merely a product developed by distal experts as a script for teachers, but a classroom enactment where the same curriculum can be arranged and taught in countless ways, enabling teachers to interpret even a prescribed curriculum. The official discourse on citizenship education in Singapore, while clearly articulated, has still to be implemented by teachers. What is not known is how teachers understand citizenship and give purpose to citizenship education through social studies, in the context of the tightly controlled Singaporean education system.

Citizenship education and social studies

Citizenship education may take many forms, though worldwide the dominant mode is based upon the concepts, processes and values of education for democratic citizenship (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 1999, 2001; Parker, 2003; Osler & Starkey, 2006). Accordingly, citizenship education aims to develop young people's capability for thoughtful and responsible participation as democratic citizens in political, economic, social and cultural life (Crick, 2000). Useful pedagogies for developing such citizens have been recognised as focusing upon engaging students in active learning experiences, stimulating an understanding of values and encouraging reflective, critical thinking (Print & Smith, 2001).

There are several approaches to conceptualising and teaching social studies, including citizenship transmission, social science, reflective inquiry, informed social criticism and personal development (Barr *et al.*, 1977; Stanley & Nelson, 1994; Martorella *et al.*, 2005). These can be linked to the different interpretations of citizenship education. McLaughlin (1992) has categorised citizenship education as located between maximal and minimal interpretations reflecting more or less complex approaches to educating about citizenship. Mapped onto a citizenship education continuum, citizenship transmission is minimal in interpretation (Kerr, 2003) as it focuses on socialising students into the mainstream knowledge and values to ensure the continuity of society.

A minimal interpretation, Cornbleth (1982) asserts, is illusory and/or technical. The illusory form emphasises discipline and ritual, knowledge is static and students are to accept predetermined answers. On the other hand, the technical form emphasises efficiency, discipline and management procedures, offering carefully pre-planned

series of activities intended to yield measurable competencies. Knowledge is standardised, with political content limited to discrete skills and bits of information to be mastered. Students can be moderately active insofar as they strive to attain the objectives set for them. The social science approach focuses on learning the key concepts and methods from the social science disciplines to function more effectively as citizens. Whether it is maximal or minimal in interpretation depends on the perspective taken by the constituent discipline.

In contrast, reflective inquiry, informed social criticism and personal development approaches are maximal in interpretation. Reflective inquiry employs a process of thinking and learning where students identify problems, collect, evaluate and analyse data to make reasoned decisions. Students inquire deeply into enduring social issues to develop key habits of the mind and heart for active civic participation (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). A critical pedagogy approach is informed social criticism that seeks social transformation grounded in values of justice and equality. This approach challenges the injustices of the status quo, supporting students as they come to understand their world and have agency as citizens (Giroux, 1980). Finally, personal development promotes positive self-concept and personal efficacy based on the idea that effective citizenship involves understanding one's freedom to make choices and responsibilities.

A maximal interpretation of citizenship education is constructive (Cornbleth, 1982), where students critically examine a broad range of political content and possibilities, and participate effectively in public affairs. Comprehension is emphasised with content meaningfully integrated into students' experiences. Knowledge is tentative, different perspectives sought, and multiple ways of learning and knowing recognised.

The study

This study utilised a case-study approach to provide depth and insight into teachers' understandings and practice involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 2002). Eight teachers, seen in Table 1, were purposively selected using the criterion sampling strategy, as instrumental cases. Teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds were selected as this variable was expected to make a difference to how citizenship is understood and taught, especially given the fact that social studies teachers have graduated in a range of disciplines including history, geography, political science and sociology. Race is an important element in Singaporean identity. Singapore has four official races, namely Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasian. Teachers of different races were selected to reflect Singapore's multiracial population. Age and gender were two other criteria, given that there were concerns about younger Singaporeans. Furthermore, Singaporean men and women may think differently about citizenship, as men must undergo a two-year mandatory military service.

The eight teachers were invited to participate in the study from four secondary schools where the principals allowed access. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms for participants and schools.

Table 1. Profile of the teachers

School	Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Disciplinary Background	Teaching Experience
Central	Vind	Female	Minority	Political Science and Literature	Nine
Central	Peter	Male	Minority	History	Four
Wharton	Carolyn	Female	Chinese	Geography and Economics	Twenty
Wharton	Leong	Male	Chinese	Political Science and Sociology	Five
Bayshore	Frida	Female	Minority	Political Science and Sociology	Eight
Bayshore	David	Male	Chinese	Asian Studies and History	Six
Kovan	Ying	Female	Chinese	Political Science and Economics	Three
Kovan	Marcus	Male	Chinese	Maths, Economics and Sociology	Nine

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and documents. A total of 43 interviews, with an average of 90 minutes each, were conducted, and 84 lessons of 45 minutes each were observed. Analysis was data-driven and inductive, where the constant comparative method was used by unitising and categorising the data. New categories emerged, changed and were refined as the data were scrutinised many times over. Trustworthiness came from prolonged engagement in the field. Methodological triangulation of data from the multiple sources, together with member checking and the use of reflexive journal writing, maintained the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The individual case studies were co-ordinated with an interest in characterisations across cases. The study identified teacher understandings and practice of social studies and citizenship education in three distinct groups characterised by nationalistic, socially concerned and person oriented teacher stances respectively.

Teachers as nationalistic educators

Half of the social studies teachers, Peter, Vind, Leong and Carolyn could be characterised as nationalistic educators, though with variation. For them, as Leong summarised, ‘Citizenship is tied to the nation, if the nation is there, we are citizens ... the nation gives us our identity.’ The nation was their primary reference, with the dominant theme of nationalism running through their understandings and practice of social studies and citizenship education. Nationalism meant support for the nation, which the men, Peter and Leong, described in terms of ‘defending the nation, safeguarding our sovereignty’, influenced by their compulsory military experience. Peter, for example, said,

What I’ve gone through in the army left a powerful impact. It’s a feeling of pride ... it’s hard to describe unless you are part of it. You see the flag, weapons, power ... what your country has.

By contrast, the women saw support as ‘contributing back to the community’, where Vind spoke of ‘doing well in your work to contribute to the economy, and help Singapore move ahead.’ The teachers had a sense of national consciousness in terms

of knowing of and affection for the nation, a sense of unity of the nation, sharing collective memories, and acceptance of core societal values. These were manifested in their attitudes in which they cared about their identity as members of the nation. They sought to sustain the nation through emphasising and achieving the national interests, which were ‘not to be questioned, necessary to pull the nation together.’ Peter explained, ‘Social studies is nationalistic and purposeful, the focus is the nation’. Lessons taught were ‘to engender the nation ... preparing students to know about the nation, understand Singapore’s past and challenges,’ with clear implications for citizens because ‘it’s our responsibility’.

But the four teachers were not homogenously nationalistic. The nationalistic stance may be conceived of in terms of a continuum, with one end a conservative stance and the other a progressive one. Peter and Vind were typically conservative, a stance top-down in nature, with teachers urging the interests of the nation. Peter explained,

It’s putting together a package to direct students to feel nationalistic, a prescribed tablet to take to react in a certain way. It must be taught, to shape how they are to understand and respond to what happens in Singapore.

Students were envisaged as passive and accepting, storing up information for later use. In contrast, Leong and Carolyn were progressive with their emphasis on reasoning to reinforce conviction and progress for the nation. Leong explained,

You reason to confirm our values and way of life. The nation will be robust when these are tested and stand true.

Students were envisaged to be more participative, building capacity for bottom-up support for the nation-building process.

If students do not think about issues, they become complacent and won’t know how to respond in crises, threatening our survival as a nation.

Social studies as citizenship transmission

The nationalistic teachers conceptualised social studies as a vehicle for citizenship transmission instrumental for the survival of the nation. Social studies transmits to students a precise image of ideal citizenship, ‘socialising them into the set of correct knowledge and values’ to commit them to national loyalties. ‘If citizens do not possess the right information and hold the correct values’, Leong explained, ‘they can destroy Singapore’. The importance of transmission was unanimous, because students ‘have not undergone difficult times, thus have no experiences to pull them together as one people’.

The conservative teachers were doctrinaire. To them, ‘social studies is synonymous with National Education’ so they sought to transmit the entire set of truths embodied in it without question. Peter and Vind opined,

MOE has articulated the National Education basis for social studies, the teacher must align and not have different views.

Often, lessons taught showed a stark contrast of an enlightened and efficient Singapore government vis-à-vis a lesser one. Invariably the accompanying tone was imbued with moral conviction of the rightness of the actions of the Singapore government. 'I purposefully and explicitly teach it like that', Peter said, because 'I strongly feel getting students to understand the National Education messages is critical, I will make that come out clearly'. In contrast, the progressive teachers did not force-feed; rather the national ideals were emphasised through opportunities to rationalise their importance, guided by the teachers, where

students think through the issues and understand the reasons for the decisions. With understanding comes greater willingness to accept with conviction.

The subject matter of social studies was utilitarian, drawn not from the logic of the disciplines, but deliberately 'packaged in bite sizes' to constitute a set of national information 'to target a precise outcome.' It was 'a tablet that you take ... a capsule', formulaic to condition students to a particular understanding of Singapore. The teachers concurred on the criticality of the Singapore Story, the government's version of the nation's past and present, which none found problematic. Instead, Leong said, 'the Singapore Story comprised important facts to guide our actions ... and accepted as truths.' Carolyn's response was typical, declaring that problematising the Singapore Story 'did not cross my mind',

What ... problematic? You mean there are problems in our history? History is fixed, I don't question much, can't change it. Shouldn't be problematic, it's informative.

Teachers were consumers of the meanings given in the subject matter, a medium for socialisation grounded in past experiences of the society. Knowledge was assumed to be constant, timeless and predetermined.

The conservative teachers adopted a highly controlled approach in teaching citizenship education that was teacher-centred and didactic. Typically, lessons began with the teacher presenting an issue, reduced to a list of points. Simple arguments, accentuating the rightness and wrongness of each was constructed, the correct ones justified the government's decisions. Afterwards, students were 'drilled and grilled' for the correct responses using whole class elicitation. Assertion of control over what and how to think was effected by emphasising citizenship education through social studies as examinable. The teacher was the source of epistemic authority, often reminding students to 'listen to me, you won't go wrong, follow the method I teach you, and you will pass'. In contrast, the progressive teachers adopted a persuasive approach. Groupwork was used to engage students in rationalising governmental decisions. Students discussed issues in greater depth, where teachers guided students to explain how what they said worked for the good of the nation. While teachers listened to the different perspectives raised, the conclusions were pre-determined, where they always persuaded students to see why certain decisions were more correct for Singapore. And so students accepted why Singapore could not do certain things, and focused on how to make it better by working within the given circumstances. Citizenship education was practised as persuading students

towards an acceptance of the status quo. Likewise, the teacher was the source of epistemic authority.

Teachers as socially concerned educators

A pair of teachers, Marcus and Frida, could be characterised as socially concerned educators with participation as a dominant theme. Teachers sought to ‘actively involve people in their community within which lives are passed ... participating in local causes and concerns.’ ‘The more one participates’, Frida noted, ‘the stronger the sense of attachment and belonging.’ Society was their primary reference, ‘it’s people living together as a community’, with ‘mutual concerns and shared institutions ... a network of interdependent relationships ... and respect for differences.’ A tight connection between citizenship and the community is implied where members were bound by the sense of community, defining their identity with reference to and participating in it. The individual is therefore not the centerpiece, but important insofar that he/she is part of the community. Teachers’ ideas of the common good and social awareness did not indicate a nationalistic commitment, but were expressions of responsibilities towards others because that was how people should behave one towards the other.

Both teachers believed that society can be reformed by developing the potential for good and reason within every student. This must be ‘exercised with respect to the welfare of others and in meeting community needs’, which implies developing a society characterised by trustworthiness, care, initiative and reciprocity among its members. Social awareness was basic to nurturing social responsibility, where citizens must stay informed of issues. ‘Awareness hopefully begets concern’, Frida explained, ‘realising that their community is affected, so are they.’ They must recognise that they have the responsibility and right to redress the issues to improve society. Marcus underlined the importance of ‘informed participation ... not ignorance and blind emotions.’ Teachers agreed that ‘this can happen only if they have the know-how to participate.’ Consequently, teachers focused on providing educative experiences and structures to develop participatory skills and dispositions for active citizenship. They also took seriously the responsibility to model active citizenship with examples of their own efforts, with Marcus actively participating in the national feedback, and Frida championing action research in her school.

Social studies as social education

The socially concerned teachers conceptualised social studies as social education, with the term ‘lifeskill’ frequently used together with preparing students to be actively participating in the life of the community where one lives. A basic lifeskill was working cooperatively with others in solving problems. ‘We can be at each other’s throats’, Marcus explained, ‘because we insist on our way, we don’t know how to handle different views.’

The aim of social education was to help students understand issues and enhance their capacity to participate. Social issues were defined as ‘human issues that inform

our condition ... problems we confront living together', which are 'complex, controversial, raising more questions than resolving'. 'Issues have no clear answers', Marcus said, 'people can respond differently because issues have to do with values.' Knowledge was thus assumed to be tentative and incomplete. From this perspective, both teachers problematised the construction of the Singapore Story. 'While the national agenda was important, multiple perspectives to the issue was', Marcus noted, 'as important in better appreciating the circumstances.' Frida added, 'Diversity of perspectives help counter propaganda.'

The socially concerned teachers, more than the others, adopted the social science approach in teaching. Marcus emphasised economics, often explaining decisions in terms of limited resources and opportunity costs. Frida focused on civic competencies of speaking up and fairness:

Political science and sociological concepts have helped me look more critically at society. I learnt about policy-making and feedback. This knowledge is empowering, I am more informed and know how to be involved.

Both teachers extended social studies, integrating it meaningfully into the lived experiences of the school community. On the topic of 'Aging Population', Marcus organised projects around the neighbourhood senior citizens' corners. Frida referred students to what they had learnt in social studies as examples of how they could tackle issues in the school, such as petitioning the principal. There is not a single source of epistemic authority. Students were encouraged to interact with others within the class community to co-construct knowledge and understanding of issues. Teachers believed that participative-active approaches can potentially engage students in meaningful learning activities that would develop the disposition for active citizenship.

Social studies teachers as person oriented educators

The remaining teachers, David and Ying, could be characterised as person-oriented educators. Personal development is a dominant theme, the focus is 'the whole person, and lifelong.' It is concerned with developing positive self-concept and personal efficacy, and opportunities for individual growth and self-fulfillment (Martorella *et al.*, 2005). This was a response to a state perceived to be paternalistic and authoritarian, 'It means I'm right, listen to me, I know what is happening, follow.' 'We are like kids needing discipline through the harsh laws and rules', intended to socialise citizens into acquiescence. 'It's for our good, the state says, for economic stability.' A sense of passivity and disempowerment was felt, David thought.

I have been brought up to understand that if I stick out my tongue, I will get knocked.

Ying added,

It's not because we aren't interested, it's the system ... some spoke up, but many restrictions ...

Consequently, teachers felt that society would be better served with people who were confident, self-governing, but responsible and of good character.

Thus the individual was the primary referent for the teachers. In this regard, the idea of the good person rather than the dutiful citizen was emphasised, where good citizenship was a payoff from being a good person with good character. Accordingly, the good person is well adjusted, anchored in strong and positive values, self-disciplined and responsible. By contrast, the good citizen does what is best for his nation and community.

Social studies as general education

The person-oriented teachers conceptualised social studies as general education, which is encompassing.

It covers a wide area ... about everyday life affecting people. It's everywhere, when you stop at the traffic light, we link it to law, that's social studies.

Breadth was inherent to the person-oriented stance because general education was viewed from a constructivist perspective. The subject matter comprised 'issues encountered in daily living', accessible and familiar to all, thus encouraging the drawing of personal relevance. Knowledge is subjective, diverse across teachers, and becomes meaningful in the living of it by the individual. Consequently, multiple truths and realities can exist.

In view of this, teachers argued for the need to consider the Singapore Story from more than one perspective. They were keen to enlarge the scope to many Singapore stories to include the ordinary voices. The official history always attributed Singapore's success to the wisdom of the government. But without the will of the people to carry policies through, it was not possible. If ordinary people were shown to be involved in social change, then citizens would feel they were valued individuals within society.

'Reading the textbook is not the only way to learn, people can learn in different but equally powerful ways.' More than the other groups, diverse ways of learning were evident including role plays, story-telling, mindmaps, songs and raps, art, exhibition and fieldtrips. 'There is no need to nitpick and insist on a single way of learning,' David explained. Overall, teachers were careful not to dominate and impose on students' learning, but 'created opportunities for meaning-making,' Ying said, 'If you don't develop your own understanding of issues, you can be easily controlled.'

Lessons were noticeably more inclusive of students' voices, giving them greater freedom to decide with teachers how they wanted to learn. By doing so, teachers helped students 'develop a positive "can do" attitude', 'exercising agency ... over the circumstances' in working towards being more self-governing. In a lesson observed, students discussed with David if they could research international diplomacy, as this was a topic many in the class were interested. So David divided students into groups and each chose an aspect to work on. In the next lesson, the groups came together and taught their parts to the class. David reflected,

They joined the different aspects together and constructed their own understanding of it from their research. Their slides, explanations and reflections were good. It was satisfying to see them taking initiative for their own learning, making good use of the freedom given.

Experiential learning was a common feature in their teaching. David took students on two overseas and four local fieldtrips in a year. On the Korean fieldtrip, he reported:

Students saw divided Korea, guards carrying guns, patrolling the border, one country but separated. They saw the consequences of ideological differences, and made sense of it as they interacted with the people, saw how they live and reflected on the experience. This understanding is meaningful, not what the textbook tells you.

Clearly, there is not a single source of epistemic authority but individuals are producers of knowledge and meanings for themselves, where teachers constantly assured students of the validity of their meaning-making.

Discussion

Interpretation of citizenship education

While teachers may be expected to interpret the school curriculum, and not remain mere passive transmitters, the degree to which interpretation occurs reflects the tightness of control exerted by education systems and political forces. Despite a tightly controlled education system in Singapore where teachers are employees of the state, teachers in this study conceptualised and practised citizenship education quite differently, characterised by three distinct stances, namely the nationalistic, socially concerned and person-oriented. Locating the three stances on the citizenship education continuum (McLaughlin, 1992; Kerr, 2003) serves to highlight the comparisons, with characteristics of the nationalistic stance suggesting a citizenship education towards a minimalist interpretation, while those of the socially concerned and person-oriented stances suggesting a citizenship education towards a maximalist interpretation. The study found that the difference in the interpretations of citizenship education is strongly related to how teachers understood and treated knowledge within social studies. This then corresponded to a view of citizenship which was either narrow or broad, that influenced the adoption of particular pedagogical approaches.

The nationalistic teachers were unanimous that the subject matter of social studies constituted 'the national history', 'the definitive nation's past', regarded as 'indisputable facts' and 'pivotal', associated with developing social cohesion, therefore 'not opened to interpretation and challenges.' Implicit in such an understanding of the subject matter was a view of knowledge that was taken as given, authoritarian, predetermined and unchanging. It was not problematic for the authority to define the body of knowledge to be learnt by all, and passed from teacher to student.

Correspondingly, citizenship was defined narrowly in terms of the nation that sought to promote exclusive national interests. There was little understanding of the individual as a citizen, for national identity was associated with the unity of the nation. The two minority teachers seldom described their citizenship in terms of their race or religion, believing it to be 'individualising tendencies' but emphasised they were Singaporeans. Similarly, teachers were uninformed about individual rights so long as the bread-and-butter needs were met. Consequently, the commonalities were emphasised at the expense of recognising the differences, suggesting that citizenship identity

was problematic. Teaching and learning approaches were largely didactic, focused on transmitting the country's history and salient facts. There was little opportunity for student initiative in constructing meanings. Political content was avoided unless it supported the status quo. Outcomes were narrow, involving the acquisition of 'correct' knowledge and understanding, measured through examinations. Citizenship education leaned towards a minimal interpretation focused on socialisation.

By contrast, social issues were the crux of the subject matter for the socially concerned teachers. Issues were 'open-ended', 'real world problems', 'not static but current', 'value-laden'. Knowledge was treated as emergent, 'over time, new evidence can emerge and alter the nature of knowledge.' Hence, teachers viewed knowledge as complex, tentative and incomplete. Claims to knowledge should therefore raise questions and foster scepticism, where multiple perspectives were sought. Citizenship was framed more broadly as a practice in civic republican tradition (Oldfield, 1998). To be a citizen is to participate in the civic affairs of the community where one lives, extending outwards to the nation. Multiple and overlapping identities were recognised, for citizens invariably belong to several communities. In multiracial Singapore, identity cannot be seen solely in national terms, as Frida highlighted, 'We are each Chinese, Malay, Indian, that's our race and identity, yet we are also Singaporeans'. Here, race, ethnicity, language, religion and local community were recognised as constitutive of identities. Similarly, individual rights were important, where autonomy must be exercised with respect to the welfare of others.

Consequently, citizenship education focused on meaningfully using knowledge to participate in the concerns of the communities, where teachers extended learning beyond the classroom. Teaching and learning approaches actively encouraged inquiry into issues. Structured opportunities in group settings were created for student interaction. The political process was not avoided, but tackled as it occurred, within system confirming ways, 'lest the openness be withdrawn.' Outcomes were broader, besides knowledge acquisition, they include the development of skills and dispositions, which cannot be easily measured by exams. Citizenship education leaned towards a maximal interpretation focused on enhancing participation.

For the person-oriented teachers, the subject matter of social studies was the experience of 'daily happenings in life'. Experience is subjective, so knowledge was treated as personal and individualised. Personal development rather than the common good was emphasised. Often, teachers felt tension choosing between the personal and societal needs. While the inclination was to prioritise the personal, the individual was also part of the society with different expectations to meet. Citizenship was defined flexibly to embrace diversity among individuals. Teaching and learning approaches were student-centred, with multiple pathways and experiential learning stressed. Political processes were not emphasised because teachers avoided the public sphere. Outcomes were broad, including experiences which cannot be measured by exams. Citizenship education leaned towards a maximal interpretation focused on personal efficacy.

Democratic societies rely for their very survival upon the active participation of an informed citizenry (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Crick Advisory Group, 1998). Scholars

(Cogan & Derricott, 2000; Parker, 2003) have argued the inadequacy of a minimal interpretation of citizenship education in meeting this challenge in the globalised world, for it neglects the development of critical thinking, personal values and the civil society. Conversely, a maximal interpretation of citizenship education develops such critical capacities. Findings show that the teacher's epistemological perspective drives citizenship pedagogy. Further research can investigate the sources of knowledge construction to maximize citizenship education.

Teacher empowerment

The study reinforced Thornton's (2005) concept of the teacher as curricular-instructional gatekeeper within the social studies curriculum. Teachers were not mere transmitters of external knowledge but were as Lee and Fouts (2005) argue key figures in putting the curriculum into classroom practice. What they saw as important got taught despite a highly prescriptive social studies curriculum to ensure fidelity-of-use. This was empowering because teachers took a stand on what knowledge was of most worth in social studies for citizenship education, and in doing so, they exercised agency. Consequently, citizenship education was approached from varied frames of reference.

Across the three stances, it was evident that personal experience acted as an important filter through which teachers made sense of and decided what was important for citizenship education that inclined them towards a particular stance (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Personal here meant the particular past experiences teachers constantly referred to in talking about the current and future situations. The interaction between the past and present became the medium through which teachers made sense of and acted on citizenship education.

For example, the nationalistic teachers felt, 'optimistic with the way of life. There is good governance, fair and meritocratic.' Peter, an ethnic minority, felt privileged to be Singaporean:

Multiracial policies here ensure every race is treated equally. I can comfortably be myself. Things are fair, I feel safe, I don't need to prove myself because I am a minority. People give me the respect. I had experienced racial discrimination elsewhere ...

Likewise, Leong was grateful for the opportunities through scholarships that supported his studies through university. Without it, 'I would not have made it. I come from a low income family.' How Peter and Leong understood the present situation was mediated through their particular experiences of discrimination and opportunities, which shaped how they viewed their present situation of privilege and gratitude. 'We are willing to support the government's vision of progress for the nation' and this informed the nationalistic stance as citizenship educators.

Similarly for the socially concerned and person-oriented teachers: for example, Marcus had a stark encounter with illiteracy and low wages of forklift workers at a logistic job he held earlier, and this left a long-lasting impression.

I am among the profit-makers, we keep workers down to keep costs down. They know no better, they are not literate. If only they have bargaining power for wages ...

The realisation led to a turning point in his life, he left the job and became a teacher, keen on helping students to stay interested in learning, be informed, and develop skills for collective action. There were dilemmatic moments with the socially concerned stance in the context of high-stakes exams.

I don't want students to do badly for the exams, but we also don't need to be always drilling them. We need to think of their long-term development, but they are weak, at risk of dropping out if they fail ...

The plight of the forklift workers encouraged him to focus on the long-term development, 'yet be resourceful in not neglecting the exams.' Likewise, David drew on his own experience of failure in school, 'because I wasn't academic, and in an education system that prized academic success, I dropped out.' Yet he persisted, worked and saved enough money to study overseas. Such a 'can do' attitude, of 'not being held down by the system' influenced the way David inclined towards the person-oriented stance.

Clearly, the teachers were not apolitical, dispassionate, or divorced from the world outside the classroom. Given the context they were surprisingly actively engaged in deciding the subject matter for citizenship education. This was also true of the nationalistic teachers who were most aligned to the government's vision of citizenship. They were not simply dupes, but exercised agency in reasoning why they adopted the particular stance. In adopting different interpretations from the state, the socially concerned and person oriented teachers did not see themselves as resisting. As Marcus said:

It's fine that people question, so long they don't end up destroying the system. If you need to speed up, slow down, or make a U-turn, that's fine, to make it better building on our core values. The purpose is to improve society, and not to overthrow the system.

Likewise, David was positive about:

the steps the government has taken to be more inclusive—there is the sports school, arts school ... times are different from when I was growing up ...

There is a general understanding among all eight teachers that while the government may have been authoritarian, it has not been repressive in many ways. The government has taken care of what it sees as the needs of the people. It has transformed the material conditions of the population, by delivering material returns and raising the standard of living of Singaporeans. 'It has been', as Frida explained, 'fair and forward-looking', and that is 'not common practice in many countries; look around.'

Conclusion

Hahn (1998) argues that the forms citizenship education takes reflect the distinct set of values of the particular culture. Therefore, approaches to citizenship education in Singapore classrooms are sensitive to the discourses that structure the political and material conditions of Singapore. Both the socially concerned and person-oriented varieties of citizenship education are divergent and increase the meanings that students

acquire. They are workable alternatives that are progressive, emphasising thinking and participation, yet sensitive to the conditions in Singapore. They provide, to varying degrees, positive moments and possibilities for personal growth, active citizenship, and work towards incremental changes through reforms and renewal. This is important because overall, they contributed to a less parochial view of citizenship in Singapore.

Finally, the findings from the eight teachers reflected a citizenship education landscape in Singapore that is not rigid, prescriptive and homogenous as might be expected in such a tight politically controlled state. Instead findings from this study revealed a broadening perspective of citizenship superseding national loyalty. Not to recognise the variety of understandings of citizenship risks reducing the meanings that students acquire, ignoring civic realities, and alienating otherwise engaged and passionate citizenship educators.

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