

Social Studies in Singapore: Contradiction and Control

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Abstract

Debate over the definitions and purposes of social studies has a long and contentious history (Nelson, 2001; Evans, 2004). None-the-less, despite the often rancorous debates, in many countries, including the United States and Australia, the task of preparing young people to be citizens has specifically been focused in on social studies classrooms (Gonzales, Riedel, Avery & Sullivan, 2001; Print, 2000). In Singapore “social studies” has been designated as the curriculum field in which is to address “concerns for the environment and preservation of our heritage” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999) and to “instill a sense of national identity as well as global awareness” (MOE Social Studies GCE ‘O’ Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005). It is described as a crucial area to promote the goals of nation-building and developing effective citizens (Lee, 1997; Sim & Adler, 2004).

The prime minister has called for empowering youth: “to give them a say in their lives, and to make them feel they can make a difference” (Lee, 2004) Consistent with this call, it would appear that social studies should hold a central place in the curriculum. And yet, it remains a low status subject, with little time allowed for the development of conceptual understanding and important skills. This study is an analysis of the current primary and secondary social studies curriculum in Singapore. Through a review of texts, the MOE syllabus, responses from teachers regarding their implementation of the curriculum, and interviews with faculty responsible for preparing teachers to implement the curriculum, the author will examine the contradictions and tensions embedded in the current curriculum materials and expectations. It is hoped that an “outsider’s” review of curriculum can facilitate the development of a planned curriculum which will enable teachers to more effectively implement a program which is consistent with enabling Singaporean youth to take their place as active, engaged citizens.

Debate over the definitions and purposes of social studies has a long and contentious history (Nelson, 2001; Evans, 2004). None-the-less, in many countries, the task of preparing young people to be citizens has specifically been delegated to social studies classrooms (Gonzales, Riedel, Avery & Sullivan, 2001; Print, 2000). This is certainly true in Singapore, where “social studies” has been designated as the curriculum area that is to address “concerns for the environment and preservation of our heritage” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999) and to “instill a sense of national identity as well as global awareness” (MOE Social Studies GCE ‘O’ Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005).

Since the new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took over in August 2004, it has been encouraging a more active citizenship. A key focus of the new leadership is to engage youth in playing a more active role in building Singapore. In this apparent but gradual step towards greater openness in the political process, Prime Minister Lee has called for empowering youth: “to give them a say in their lives, and to make them feel they can make a difference” (Lee, 2004). Consistent with this call, it would appear that social studies in Singapore is about creating effective citizens for today’s nation and world. Yet, many Singapore teachers are unclear about the value and purpose of social studies and the curriculum itself appears to send contradictory messages. This study explores the meanings and contradictions embedded in the Singapore social studies

curriculum and challenges educators and policy makers to face those contradictions straight on. The authors reviewed current social studies syllabi and texts, and scripted discussions on citizenship and the social studies curriculum. The participants in these discussions were teachers taking pre- or post-graduate and in-service courses in social studies curriculum at the National Institute for Education.

The Role of Social Studies in Singapore's Schools

Upon achieving independence in 1965, Singapore was faced with a number of challenges. Key to the survival of the nation was the challenge of nation-building, developing a shared national identity among the disparate groups who made up Singapore's immigrant society. Another key to Singapore's success as a nation was the need to build an infrastructure and modernize the economy. The People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling party since Singapore had achieved self-rule in 1959, very early turned to schools as allies in this cause. "Politically, the task was to construct a unified national system of education from the ethnically divided and politically contested provision inherited from the English. Economically, it was to provide a stock of basic education, skills and attitudes required for industrialization" (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). The education system was centralised and brought under government control, putting into government hands an important ideological apparatus (Kho, 2004).

Schooling, teaching and curriculum are always about the construction of knowledge and truth (Apple, 1993). Schooling can be an "ideological arena" in which conflicting demands and beliefs work themselves out. Or it can be an ideological apparatus, which emphasizes the promotion of one acceptable way of thinking. "Official knowledge," as Apple calls it, grows from what is included and excluded from textbooks, syllabi and curriculum guides.

Thus education played a crucial role in focused efforts to build and mold a nation, not only economically, but also culturally and psychologically (Chua & Kuo, 1991). Citizenship education was developed as a way to cultivate national loyalty, patriotism and a sense of belonging. Characteristic of citizenship education in Asian countries, moral education has been emphasised in Singapore (Cogan, Morris & Print, 2002). Moral education and citizenship education are closely integrated, moral values and 'right conduct' are regarded as essential to being a good citizen. Despite some variations of emphasis in the different citizenship education programmes in Singapore since 1959, the central element of moral education has always been clearly present. Indeed, the ideal citizen is often described in moral terms (Han, 1997; Sim & Print, 2005). However, a recent review by Tan & Chew (2004) has critiqued the element of moral education. According to the authors (Tan & Chew, 2004), moral education involves "the search for, understanding of and sincere living by moral truths", irrespective of state policies and goals. Specifically, what is practised in Singapore is "values and citizenship training as an instrument of statecraft." That is, we argue that citizenship education in Singapore is, in fact, values inculcation and an acceptance of the status quo. Yet the rationale for citizenship education suggests something somewhat different.

Social studies is taught in both primary and secondary schools in Singapore. Social studies was introduced in the primary schools in 1981. The purpose was to "enable pupils to understand their social world and to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live" (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999). It was also intended that "social studies should enable children to know something about their historical roots and their physical and social environment."

Social studies at the upper secondary level was developed in the context of National Education (NE) and became the key subject for citizenship education in Singapore (Sim & Adler, 2004). NE was launched in 1997 with the purpose of developing national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future (MOE, 2003). This initiative was built around an identified set of shared values which are reflected in the social studies curriculum:

- Nation before community and society before self
- Family is the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

The intended outcomes of NE are:

- 'Love Singapore' at the primary level;

- 'Know Singapore' at the secondary level; and
- 'Lead Singapore' at the pre-university level.

Social studies at both primary and upper secondary levels was conceived of as a direct response to address the problem of young Singaporeans' lack of knowledge and interest in Singapore's recent history and the central issues key to her survival (Sim & Adler, 2004). At the primary level, social studies was revised to support nation-building more explicitly. Previously taught only to the upper primary level, social studies was extended to the lower primary level. At the upper secondary level, social studies was introduced as a compulsory, examinable subject at the national examinations. It is noteworthy that NE was viewed as high-stake. The speed at which NE programmes were planned and implemented in all schools underlies the urgency of the task. Social studies took only five years, from conceptualization to the final implementation in all schools (Sim & Adler, 2004; Sim & Print, 2005). By implication, social studies as a vehicle for NE is supposedly high-stake and high status. However, the intended curriculum does not align with the enacted curriculum, embedded between the two curricula lies a host of contradictions.

Educating the Singapore Citizen

Many nations cite citizenship education as an important function of education. In recent years, there has been a worldwide increase in interest in civic education in many nations, including those in the Asian-Pacific region (Print, 2000). However, the concepts of citizenship and citizen education are contested ones. Is the goal of citizenship education the "good citizen," i.e. one with a commitment to the state? Or is it the development of the active citizen, one who participates in civic action? Or, as Engle and Ochoa (1988) argue, perhaps it is both. Citizenship education can be the basis for both socialization and "counter-socialization," where socialization involves the cultivation of love of one's nation, of loyalty, of responsibility and obedience to laws and norms, while counter-socialization emphasizes independent thinking and responsible social criticism. Active citizenship, in essence, is characteristic of counter-socialization, for it involves thinking for one's self, making informed decisions, and questioning the status quo.

There is much in the NE initiative that places the focus on socialization. "[C]hildren are encouraged towards a sense of loyalty to, and pride and confidence in, the country. They are also taught the values which are regarded as fundamental to Singapore's success and survival, such as the notion of equal opportunity and meritocracy" (Han, 2000). The idea of active citizenship was also introduced with NE; but it is the academic elite who are to be taught to think independently and draw their own conclusions, suggested by the key outcomes of NE for pre-university students, deemed to be the more academically able.

The Singapore 21 was a government effort in 1997 to engage a wide cross section of Singaporeans in discussion of issues concerning making Singapore the 'Best Home'. The report expressed both notions of citizenship: loyalty and patriotism ("the Singapore heartbeat") and active citizens ("making a difference to Singapore"). But political leaders have urged caution in regard to the latter. Guidelines or markers are established in order that citizens might understand what is acceptable to challenge and what is not. "In Singapore, the notion of citizens actively engaged on conflict with the establishment is likely to be unacceptable" (Han, 2000, p. 69). Similarly, there was absence of the skills of critical thought and of procedural values generally considered crucial to active citizenship in the school curriculum (Han, 1997).

Contradictions of Curriculum

Nation Before Community, Society Before Self

An important component of NE is the value of communitarianism, with its emphasis on harmony and consensus. Underlying discussions of harmony and consensus is an implied view of values that is essentially dichotomous in nature, that is, Asian vs Western values. Western values, with their emphasis upon the individual over the community, are perceived as threats that could deculturise Singapore and destabilize societal common good (Hill & Lian, 1995). Although Singapore draws upon its cultural heritage in articulating this value, it should not be placed in juxtaposition to the individualism of the West where there is also a tradition of concern for the "public good." Indeed, democratic citizenship, particularly that which is grounded in the civic republican tradition

emphasizes the responsibilities of citizens to sustain the political community (Oldfield, 1998). Democratic societies, Asian and Western, struggle to find that balance between individual needs and wants and the good of the whole.

Important to the Singapore conception of citizenship education is the development of pride in and loyalty to Singapore. The primary social studies syllabus states that: "The social studies syllabus has an important place in the primary school curriculum. It lends itself to inculcating in the pupils from an early age a sense of belonging to the community and country; and cultivating the right instincts for reinforcing social cohesion" (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999). One of the major goals cited in the syllabus is to "develop a sense of awareness and concern for Singapore and its people." Syllabi and texts show a continuing and ongoing emphasis on the importance of living in harmony in the diverse community which is Singapore. The pupils will "respect the customs and traditions of the various communities in Singapore".

The secondary syllabus, similarly points to the development of national identity and cohesion, as well as racial harmony. One of the broad aims stated in this document, for example, is that of enabling learners "to have a deep sense of shared destiny and national identity." The pupils will "develop into citizens who have empathy towards others and who will participate responsibly and sensibly in a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society" (MOE Social Studies GCE 'O' Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005).

But despite the emphasis on harmony and consensus, the social studies curriculum, and the nature of Singapore's social and economic system send messages that can contradict the messages of the curriculum. Consider the contradictions surrounding the message of "Singapore before self." Yet, the government is paternalistic in practice which has successfully bred a 'father knows best' attitude and a mentality to defer to the government among citizens. Furthermore, the government adopts an "*economic instrumental rationality*", encapsulated ideologically in the PAP's concept of "*pragmatism*" in all its policies (Chua, 1995). This has successfully transformed Singapore economically, including the material life of the people since. However, the consequence of successful pragmatism coupled with paternalism is that Singapore citizens have generally become passive, materialistic and politically apathetic (Tan, 2001). More insidious is a lack of a sense of national consciousness among the younger citizens born in a context of affluence.

Economic growth has no doubt brought prosperity to Singapore; the Singapore of 2005 is a very different place than it was in 1965. From health care, to education, to housing, Singaporeans are living far better, in terms of material comforts, than they did a generation ago. It may be, that the provision of material comforts, and the continued desire for material well-being, have prompted an acceptance of the status-quo, as long as such comfort is delivered (George, 2000), as well as a focus on personal well-being. Capitalism is premised on the ideas of individualism and self-interest. In the free, individualistic market place, the best ideas and products will survive. Such self-interest is, argues those who support capitalism, good for all society. Yet not only is this conclusion debatable, but even if accepted, it does not foster the value of "nation before self" especially in the Singapore context.

Discussions with teachers (In-service discussion, Sim, 4Sept04) show their ambivalence about putting community first, which might mean self-denial, vs. emphasizing self-interest. "Self-denial can conflict with self-interest," argued one secondary teacher. "That becomes a frustration. Your country wants this much and you cannot meet the expectation." One view of "active citizenship" found in the social studies literature is about the importance of decision-making (Engle, 1963). Under this definition a major purpose of social studies is to help learners consider and make choices. But the secondary teachers, in discussing the role of decision-making in social studies questioned whether they ever really had choices. "Consider streaming," said one of the secondary participants. "Right from the start they predetermine potential.... If you don't want to be in a track there is no way you cannot be." Noteworthy that education is a topic in the secondary syllabus, and streaming is an issue hotly discussed in the social studies classrooms. In some cases, particularly with the Normal Academic classes, the issue is discussed with students who perceived themselves as the "casualties" of streaming. How would this contradiction play out in the social studies classroom would make for interesting future study.

We find a curriculum which stresses the importance of harmony and consensus embedded within an education system that emphasizes competition, individual merit and self-interest. The hidden curriculum that emerges from a system designed around testing, ranking and individual competition sends profound messages which

may contradict the intended curriculum of the social studies syllabi. These seemingly contradictory messages must be resolved by each learner. What do they reject? What do they accept? How do they reconcile contradictions?

This is not a problem unique to the social studies curriculum, it resonates with the findings by Chew (1988) in her ethnographic study of a secondary school in 1988, in which the contradictory messages reverberated throughout the school. In the case of the social studies curriculum, the significance lies with the fact that such contradictory messages are likely to be more acute, given the compactness of the subject matter, with deliberate and explicit intensions of developing harmony and consensus. Shouldn't this basic contradiction in the curriculum be ironed out at the policy level? Leaving it in the hands of individual learner to resolve the contradictory messages risks misinterpretation and non-achievement of the purposes of social studies, and NE.

Racial and Religious Harmony

In keeping with the message of harmony and consensus, is the theme of racial harmony that permeates both the primary and secondary social studies textbooks. The primary texts feature four children whose appearance threads throughout the texts. Each child represents one of the four major racial groups in Singapore: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian. Children learn about the heritage of each group, about the cultures and traditions each represents. The readers learn about the different holidays, ceremonies and foods of each group. The message is clear that we should value the traditions of all groups. Children are pictured playing and learning together; that is, racially mixed groups are represented throughout the texts. Children are taught how all the peoples of Singapore worked together to create the nation.

But there is little in the texts or the curriculum that helps learners move beyond a superficial approach to understanding diverse cultures. What are the beliefs and values that underlie various traditions and behaviors? What about those within a group who don't follow particular customs; do Singapore children, for example, recognize that one might be both Indian and Muslim? When asked whether this coverage of diversity might be too superficial, one of the primary post-graduates responded by suggesting that we should not probe too deeply into our differences. "You never know what you might find," he explained (Personal log, Adler, 3Aug04). These pre-service teachers explained that on the one hand such coverage maintains harmony. On the other hand, they, especially minority students, talk about a lack of real understanding of cultural differences. Are the image and words of racial harmony actually a way to avoid discussing deeper, and more controversial, issues? Perhaps the state, in promoting racial harmony, displaces a serious examination of issues such as social stratification (Chua & Kwok, 2001).

Racial and religious harmony is also a key theme in the secondary social studies curriculum, specifically organized around the theme of 'Harmony and Discord', and originally featuring three case studies of Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland and Switzerland. Switzerland was recently taken out of the syllabus with the apparent reason of reducing the content. While representations of the theme are not direct in terms of having racially mixed groups, the message is similar, that without racial and religious harmony, it would spell disaster as in the cases of Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland. This is presented more indirectly, yet starkly, in terms of the consequences of racial and religious discriminations and conflicts. Visual pictures of anguish faces, gruesome photographs of dead victims of the Bloody Sunday incident, and the ravages of civil wars poignantly illustrate the point, and drone the message through.

Similarly, the issue of racial and religious conflicts are superficially dealt with in the syllabus and textbook. The causes and consequences of racial and religious conflicts in both case studies are stripped of their complexities, and simplistically packaged into an accessible list to be studied for the exams. It is speculated that its simplicity is purposeful. At a subliminal level, perhaps the simplicity is meant to drive home the point of contrast between countries in conflict and those in peace and harmony, the latter unmistakably represented by Singapore. As a point of illustration, an in-service secondary school teacher shared how after learning about Sri Lanka, his students in school thought that Sri Lanka was a severely war torn country, totally unsafe to visit, and they were surprised that he actually went on a tour to Sri Lanka (In-service discussion, Sim, 4Sept04). Its use could therefore be interpreted as a scare tactic to huddle citizens into acceptance of the societal values of racial and religious harmony.

Clearly, on the theme of racial and religious harmony, it is not teaching for an understanding of diversity, rather, it is to socialize students into the set of core societal values. The subject matter is not presented in a way that

encourages students to question and discuss the issues of diversity openly. In this case, knowledge and values are not regarded as problematic. Controversial issues in the social studies curriculum which are essential for developing critical thinking and clarifying values, have been sanitized.

Issue of Participation

While the social studies curriculum seeks greater and more effective participation by citizens, it is not clear how this is to be done. Both the primary and secondary social studies syllabi have mentioned the idea of participation as their broad aims. Specifically, the primary social studies aims to “help them (students) to participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999) while secondary social studies “will prepare them (students) to adopt a participative role in shaping Singapore's destiny in the 21st century” (MOE Social Studies GCE ‘O’ Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005). As suggested by the syllabi, the social studies curriculum and the larger NE outcomes are designed to develop students who would ‘Love Singapore’ and ‘Know Singapore’, and as a result, be moved to be more participative in society. The assumption regarding participation is that by developing a base of knowledge, skills and values, one will become a more effective and participative citizen (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Patrick, 1999). While the acquisition of knowledge can enhance awareness, awareness itself does not necessarily lead to effectiveness nor a more participative role in shaping Singapore’s destiny.

To prepare students to be more participative, it is imperative that the implementation of social studies be accompanied by appropriate educational practices and pedagogy that encourage participative skills and values (Print & Smith, 2000; Sim & Print, 2005). The literature in the field has long argued the importance of participative, active learning about citizenship by young people (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hahn, 1996; Newmann, 1989; Osborne, 1991; Parker, 1991; Patrick, 1999, 2002; Patrick & Hoge, 1991; Stanley, 1991). The premise driving this argument is that an active approach to learning by students will be reflected later in an active approach to participative citizenship as adults (Print & Smith, 2000). Social studies in the Singapore context is largely taught as citizenship transmission (Sim & Print, 2005). Furthermore, social studies as an examination subject adds a further constraint to a more active and experiential approach to teaching. This is especially true given the general passivity and acquisitive tendencies of Singaporeans, a consequence largely of being subjected to an authoritarian and paternalistic government (Tan, 2001). Instead of citizenship participation, Singaporeans have been socialized to defer to the government.

Importance of Social Studies to Nation Building

As noted above, social studies has been identified as the primary vehicle by which schools socialize young people into a love of Singapore and through which knowledge about Singapore history, development and current issues will be promoted. The primary social studies syllabus indicates that social studies must place an emphasis on critical and creative thinking: “Pupils will not only learn how to acquire information, analyze problems and find solutions, but also to become aware of their own thinking.” It also states that it has incorporated thinking skills in order “to equip our pupils with the knowledge and skills to be better thinkers, life-long learners and to create their own opportunities in the information age amidst a globalising economy” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999). The secondary syllabus states that it “provides a framework within which pupils can develop thinking skills and learn to use information technology to independently access and evaluate information” (MOE Social Studies GCE ‘O’ Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005). But despite these very important goals expressed by the formal curriculum of the syllabi, the enacted curriculum may actually send different messages.

The time devoted to social studies at primary level is very limited: 30 minutes a week P1 – P3 and sixty minutes P4 – P6. This compares to an average of about six hours of maths per week P1 – P6. Even then, this tiny fraction of social studies airtime is often poached by other subject teachers. This leaves very little time for anything more than superficial coverage of the important concepts and skills embedded in the primary curriculum. Can teachers really expect to teach children to analyze problems, find solutions and be aware of their own thinking in 30 – 60 minutes a week? Most teachers we spoke with worried that they hadn’t the time to even cover basic information.

Another confounding factor is that social studies is not examinable at the primary level. In theory, this leaves teachers free to approach social studies teaching in more creative ways. However, in addition to the limited time availability, there is a tendency not to teach what’s not assessed. That is, the PSLE exam is critically

important, to the students and to each school. By not including social studies on this exam, there is an implicit message that social studies really isn't very important. Indeed, teachers explain that as they increase their focus on preparation for the exam, they are likely to "borrow" time from social studies to work on maths and English. As one primary pre-service teacher suggested, "Social studies is treated like a Cinderella subject." Once again, classroom practice appears to create a "hidden curriculum" that contradicts the intended curriculum found in the social studies syllabus.

On the other hand, social studies at the secondary level is examined. Ironically, secondary social studies teachers who participated in our in-service class felt that examinations constrain teachers in what and how they teach. They described the pressure they felt to teach for success on the examination. These teachers explained that they were reluctant to discuss controversial issues, or to examine primary source material, without giving their students a template, a way of thinking, that would guide them in answering challenging questions on the exam. The focus, then, is not on decision-making or exploring controversy, but on how to construct a correct answer.

Civic Engagement

Parker (2001) describes the desired outcome of education for democracy as what he terms "Enlightened Political Engagement." This concept, explains, Parker, has two dimensions, democratic enlightenment and political engagement. Democratic enlightenment refers to the importance of developing the knowledge and skills which would enable "wise participation" or informed decision-making and problem solving. Political engagement refers to the actions of participating in public decision-making and problem solving. In the American national context, for example, such participation refers not only to voting, but to campaigning, letter-writing and even civil disobedience. Enlightened action, Parker goes on to explain, refers to the democratic commitments and values which shape this action.

This conception of civic participation is not in opposition to Singaporean values and goals. In his National Day observance speech (2004), Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam spoke of the importance of encouraging "our students to question as they learn, and to speak their minds." "The Guide" (A Guide to the Primary Social Studies Syllabus in the Year 2000) states that the focus is not on learning of concrete facts but on getting pupils to learn important concepts in history, draw generalizations from them and make thoughtful judgments on the past" (Fang, 2002). In short, one of the goals of schooling in general, and social studies in particular is that of preparing young people to become thoughtful, enlightened, decision-makers. If students are not taught to make "thoughtful judgments," if they are not asked to "question what they learn," we can reasonably assume that such thoughtfulness and decision-making will not find its way into the political arena. The rationale for thinking is informed by a human capital ideology and a competitive nationalism that sees education as a social investment in preparing "human resources" able to participate in an intensively global, competitive economy. It does not accommodate the critique of political economy and society (Koh, 2002).

However, the secondary social studies teachers who participated in our class doubted that they were really expected to prepare young people for "enlightened political engagement." They described a government that "seems so distanced from the people." Furthermore, how can teachers prepare young people for active, thoughtful engagement when they themselves have little experience of engagement in decision-making at any level. The teachers explained that they can express an opinion, for example, about a school policy, but they don't believe that anyone with decision-making authority will pay attention to their ideas. They explained that they don't even have control of curriculum; they have no choice but to adhere to the syllabus and the clear government messages embedded within (In-service discussion, Sim, 4Sept04). Their impotence as citizens is evident. We are not sure how prevalent such sentiments are among teachers, but how then can teachers be expected to make the leap from a sense of incapacity and resignation to developing "enlightened political engagement"? How realistic are the aims of both the primary and secondary social studies curriculum, to develop students who will "adopt a participative role in shaping Singapore's destiny" (MOE Social Studies GCE 'O' Level Syllabus 2190/1, 2005), and "participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live" (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999)?

These teachers expressed skepticism about the consultation process the government is now promoting. Prime Minister Lee, since taking over the government, has painted a vision of an inclusive Singapore, and has been engaging citizens, particularly the post-independence generation of Singaporeans, on issues and encouraging greater participation from this group of citizens. However, the teachers are cautious about the intentions of the government

and doubt if their views are seriously sought. This could be the effects of socialization into passivity. Listen to the words of one of the secondary teachers in our class (In-service discussion, Sim, 4Sept04): “In the case of Singapore, the people making policy seem so distanced from the people on the ground.... On the ground, people want certain things to be done.... But on the top, they may or may not be open ... may not see what’s going on.” The teacher went on to refer to how school policies are made: “We are not asked. We have no say at all.... Suddenly the Prime Minister asks for my view.... All I want is another fifteen minutes for recess, but the school is not interested. So what credibility is there in my involvement?”

These teachers raised the question about the meaning of “consultation.” Is this a way to promote real political engagement? Or is “consultation” a more palatable manner in which to explain a decision already taken? In which case, “consultation” is not a process of decision-making but an endorsement of the decision already made. If this is the case, it is a change of style and not substance, from the stick to the carrot in terms of decision-making. Does the social studies curriculum prepare young people for consultation that raises wise questions and considers different policies? What does it imply for citizenship education if consultation can only happen within the context of the government boundaries? It is perceived that certain areas and issues are classified out-of-bounds and non-negotiable. If teachers have no experience of real decision-making, how can we expect the enacted curriculum to provide students with real decision-making experiences. We know, from extensive international studies, that real experience with decision-making results in a greater commitment to democratic values (Torney-Purta, Schwille & Amadeo, 2001).

Curriculum as Slogan

Curriculum reform in many nations is often promoted and popularized through the use of slogans. Who can argue with the idea of “no child left behind” or “thinking schools, learning nation.” Yet too often slogans present an appearance of harmony and consensus where little actually exists (Clabaugh & Rozycki, 1999). Slogans are statements with ambiguous phrases; they serve to over-simplify issues and over-generalize solutions to complex problems. Slogans are not without meaning, and they do provide ideas around which people can rally. But ultimately, such agreement is shallow. People find that the key ideas mean very different things to others. Such vagueness can result in recipe-like prescriptions for creating change (Case, 1994).

The Singapore social studies curriculum has been guided by top-down slogans intended to unify a nation and to maintain harmony in the face of potential conflicts. Teachers are charged with teaching children to “love Singapore” within severely limiting time constraints. At the secondary level, learners must get to “know Singapore,” in order to pass an exam. Young people are to be taught the about the importance of racial harmony, but they are rarely asked to explore beneath the surface. They are taught that a nation run by consensus will avoid the pitfalls of competition among competing interests. They are taught that the nation, community and family are more important than the individual, but they are surrounded by material goods and caught up in the desire for more. The curriculum does not ask young people to explore the complexities which underlie the slogans. The Singapore curriculum developers do not expect that an open study of national and global development will lead young people to conclusions that are in the best interest of the nation as a whole. A curriculum designed to enable young people to “participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999) neglects to provide those young people with the tools for meaningful participation.

Challenge of Balance

Citizenship education involves the preparation of young people to become informed, responsible and participative citizens. In Singapore, social studies is a key vehicle for citizenship education in the context of NE. Its focus is on the nation, the common culture and shared values, which is essentially socialization. Developing thinking skills is also a major objective of social studies. This is significant because social studies is the context where both the components of citizenship education and thinking meet, and therefore a potential for counter-socialization (Sim & Adler, 2004). Engle and Ochoa (1988) identified the democratic ideal as the basis of counter-socialization, where social criticism and participation in decision-making by citizens on public issues are desirable outcomes. It is evident that Singapore does not achieve that ideal. For Singapore, the basis of counter-socialization is linked with economic development and nation-building (Koh, 2002; Tan & Gopinathan, 2000; Sim & Print, 2005). But can thinking be confined? While the extent and nature of thinking are circumscribed by the demands of nation-building, the outcome of developing thinking in an individual may not be easily anticipated (Sim & Adler,

2004; Sim & Print, 2005). The challenge is what's right for Singapore? What should be the balance for socialization and counter-socialization?

Democracy requires "public space," that space where diverse people come together and take responsibility because they are people capable of choosing for themselves (Green, 1996). A public space is a space of dialogue and interaction, of undertaking and renewal. But this public space, so necessary for democracy to thrive, is not a place of anarchy or unmitigated conflicts. John Dewey explained that "a public begins to come into existence when various people begin to pay heed to the consequences of certain private transactions – consequences that affect the lives of people outside the sphere of those transactions" (Green, 1996). Education plays a crucial role in preparing citizens to participate as informed and caring citizens in that public dialogue.

So long as students are asked to accept ideas uncritically, they will be capable of little more. They will be unable to grapple with the problems of the 21st century, not only in technology and science, but in human interrelationships. Furthermore, they will be prone to accepting demagoguery for they have never been taught to think critically. Social studies can and should, we argue, be the place in school where young people are taught to love and know Singapore. But it should also be a safe space for examining and questioning the past and the present. The ends cannot always be foreseen; but those who come to really know Singapore are more likely to feel attachment, to "love Singapore." Finding the right balance for Singapore youth is an important challenge to social studies educators and curriculum developers. This challenge is high-stake in the context of globalization that brings about rapid unpredictable changes; it is a challenge we cannot afford to ignore.

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