Singaporean Citizenship, National Education and Social Studies: Control, Constraints, Contradictions and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the relationship between social studies, citizenship education, multiculturalism, and national education in Singapore. In many countries, including the United States and Australia, the social studies curriculum has been given the task of preparing young people to be citizens (Gonzales, Riedel, Avery and Sullivan, 2001; Nichol, 1995; Print, 2000). Social Studies in Singapore is seen as an instrument of nation-building, as a vehicle for inculcating the six National Education (NE) messages concerning a sense of belonging and patriotism, racial and religious harmony, a meritocracy without corruption, economic opportunity, efficiency and prosperity, and developing a secure, confident, forward-looking, cohesive citizenry [1]. While NE continues to be the core, there are initiatives designed to ‘open-up’ the subject, to make it less focussed on purely Singaporean Studies, more creative, analytical and questioning. It is to “…instil a sense of national identity as well as global awareness” (Ministry of Education 2005a). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in 2004, called for empowering youth, “to give them a say in their lives, to make them feel they can make a difference”. However, tensions and contradictory messages are surfacing between forms of governance, NE policy, and educational reform and practice. Some of those charged with this responsibility question how education can be opened if society is still relatively constrained. Singapore lacks many democratic processes and is threatened by fraught relations with neighbouring countries. We argue in the paper that, within limits, more empathy, appreciation and respect for other cultures and religions, must be developed. Also, if students are expected to accept ideas uncritically, they will not be prepared, affectively and effectively, to meet Singapore’s future cultural and national challenges.

Introduction

“As born Singaporeans my family and I have learnt to accept the idea of living hand in hand and side by side with others of the different races. Those before me had practised this before the Japanese Occupation in Singapore. In fact the races have been inter-depending on each other in terms of providing goods and services and keeping peace on the
island. Maintaining peace and stability in the country is not the work of a single race” (Malay Singaporean Teacher, 2003).

Any discussion about the education of children from disparate cultural and religious backgrounds is basically about assimilation, integration, or pluralism. The essential question, deceptively simple in form, but in content vast and potentially explosive in its implications and ramifications, is, ‘What kind of society is Singapore going to be?’ Is Singapore to continue with People’s Action Party (PAP) domination, allowing only muted opposition? Conversely, is it to move towards a more democratic and inclusive society and polity, with an active, participatory citizenry, reflecting the Prime Minister’s objective that young people ‘feel they can make a difference’? Either future will both reflect and shape Singaporean education, particularly social and citizenship education. This paper draws upon a literature review and research with teacher trainees and practising teachers undergoing professional development, to examine ethnic and cultural perspectives affecting educational policies and outcomes.

The Research

The research was mostly ethnographic, based on participant observation in university and schools, documentary and literature review, and academic, teacher and student contributions, including on-line discussions, using Blackboard. It was a purposeful sample, chosen from ‘information rich’ student teachers and in-service teachers and social studies co-ordinators. The participants had chosen to study and work in the fields we wished to research - national and citizenship education, social studies and ethnic, multicultural Singapore- and proved keen and able respondents to the questions and tasks devised. We surveyed, interviewed and assessed the responses of over three hundred undergraduate and approximately fifty postgraduate students. The latter were experienced teachers and social studies co-ordinators. They responded to a variety of purposeful tasks- for example, on-line discussions of their childhood experiences of ethnic and ‘race’ relations, what it is to be Singaporean, and their critical analyses of academic tracts concerning national and citizenship education. More detailed explanation of the research is found later in the paper, for example students’ and teachers’ responses to lectures, seminars, articles, assignments and questionnaires, concerning ethnicity, citizenship and national education.

The Ideology of ‘Shared Values’, ‘Race’ and Multiculturalism

A perceived absence of shared values has long concerned Singapore’s rulers (see the Shared Values White Paper, 1991). From independence in 1965 Singapore adopted an ideology of pragmatism, of economic development, with a focus on infrastructure, education, training and employment. By the late 1970s most of the nation’s economic needs had been met. In the context of rapid industrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s, there was growing concern among the political leaders that, with the widespread use of new forms of science and technology, increasing use of English and an English-dominated education system, younger Singaporeans were becoming too westernised. It was perceived that western values, which emphasized the individual over the community, would ‘de-culture’ Singapore, individualising the society (Hill & Lian, 1995). This led to promotion of ‘Asian values’, as an
antidote to the perceived evils of ‘Westernisation’. A Moral Education programme, based on ‘Asian values’, and promotion of bilingualism, teaching the respective ‘mother tongues’ as well as English, was designed to blend ‘the best of east and west’ (Hill and Lian, 1995:196-198).

The 1991 Shared Values White Paper argued that a “common, unique culture” is needed to bind Singapore’s citizens together (see pp. 2-3). It expressed a need to identify common, key values, in the expectation that, in time, all racial communities would develop “more distinctively Singaporean characteristics”. The White Paper also stressed the secular nature of the state and its religious neutrality (see pp. 6-10). There is a strong, controlling political agenda in the document, designed to shape change in approved directions (see Clammer, 1993:34-51). It is intended to steel the populace to cope with internal and external threats, such as the Asian economic meltdown, terrorism, Severe Acute Respiratory Acute Syndrome (SARS), and so on.

The sociologist, Chua Beng Huat, sees Shared Values as promoting a ‘communitarian’ ideology, combining survival and pragmatism (Chua 1995:210). He describes an ideological consensus, where the ruling group’s ideas are usually accepted and reproduced by Singaporeans as part of their “natural reality of everyday life” (1995:128). There is a strong emphasis on harmony and consensus. Western values of individualism are seen as threats that could destabilize society. Is this overdrawn, too dichotomous? After all, there is a Western tradition of the commonwealth, the public good, which is not inconsistent with communitarian values and outcomes.

Our own reading, experience and research indicate that most Singaporeans do support the PAP approach and are prepared to make sacrifices for the common good. However many expressed, in private, their disquiet about what would happen to social cohesion if the economy took a very severe downturn. Also, many expressed concern about the level of indoctrination and top-down processes, stating that promoting civic education and active citizenship would be far better, in the long run, for national identity and cohesion. Citizenship education in Singapore, in practice, “…is…values inculcation and an acceptance of the status quo” (Adler and Sim 2005:2). It is clear that the concepts of citizenship and citizenship education are highly contested. Is the goal the ‘good citizen’, one with a commitment to the state, or the ‘active citizen’, who has highly developed critical faculties and who participates in civic action? Or, as we argue, following Engle and Ochoa (1988), it requires elements of both. The PAP government clearly favours the former. “In Singapore, the notion of citizens actively engaged in conflict with the establishment is likely to be unacceptable” (Han, 2000:69).

**Education in Singapore**

In general, by world standards, for Singaporean education, teacher accountability is high, very comprehensive and professional. Student achievement, particularly in mathematics and science, often leads the world. There is a high level of cohesion and forward planning, for teacher education, schools and schooling. A particular example of this, in late 2003, was ‘Blue Sky’, an educational planning and consultation meeting. Almost all of Singapore’s teacher educators, the senior officers of the Ministry of Education (MOE), and every principal and deputy-principal in the nation, met under the one roof. This is possible in a nation-state-island of 4.3 million [2]. Some of the deliberations and recommendations from this consultation are referred to later in the paper.
The following examines potential questions for research in the Singaporean social studies curriculum. It provides the reader with an introduction to some of the issues, tensions and concerns we have observed, or were conveyed to us by colleagues, teachers and students. They are tentative, and some are examined more fully later in the paper.

**Social Studies Education**

Debate over the place and purpose of social studies has a long and contentious history (Nelson, 2001; Evans, 2004). Some of the issues facing social studies teachers in Singapore are: What should be social studies’ place and role in relation to National Education (1997), Moral Education, Citizenship Education, Multicultural Education, Community Service and Independent Projects? The curriculum and syllabi have allocation for all of these and, in practice, they often contradict the seeming cohesive planning. As noted above, national education is almost code for nation-building and racial cohesion [3], in a time of considerable tension, and with memories of past riots, bombings [4], and religious intolerance. The Islamist terrorist spectre is omnipresent. These and other threats and challenges, real or perceived, include few natural resources, economic competition, especially from China and Malaysia, a low Chinese birth-rate, emigration to Malaysia, to Australia, particularly to Perth, and another SARS-type epidemic.

The present Primary Social Studies course (2000) is content driven and almost all Singaporean Studies rather than social studies. It is currently under review. Can and should social studies be the vehicle to shape and coordinate all of the above approaches in this field? Is there an absence in the curriculum of the opportunities to develop the skills of critical thought considered crucial to active citizenship?

An issue examined later in the paper is that Chinese/Mandarin, seen as having considerable commercial value, is studied almost exclusively by Chinese Singaporeans. Some Malay Islamic and Tamil Indian parents argue that this is restricting their children’s future.

Pedagogy for social studies and National Education is another concern. In the opinion of the authors it is too often didactic and narrow, perhaps responding to the arguably rather strident NE slogans. It needs to be more responsive, wide-ranging, relevant, cooperative, creative and inquiry-based. All questioned (curriculum specialists, teachers and teacher educators) agreed regarding the need for a more creative pedagogy- but seemed unsure as to how to achieve such outcomes. Many of the teachers of social studies in schools have no formal qualifications in this field. This will change, as the new undergraduate programme requires all teacher trainees to be prepared for social studies pedagogy and curriculum.

**The History of National, Multicultural, Citizenship, and Social Studies Education**

While NE, as expressed above, was promulgated in 1997, education has always been seen as a key plank in the building of a nation. Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party (PAP), formed in 1959, which has ruled Singapore for nearly 50 years, has always seen education as playing a key role in civic and citizenship education (CCE), and in the forging of a nation from disparate cultures, with differing religions, traditions and customs.

Singapore does not have a stable integrated society... So we hear so many discordant voices. And the divergences of beliefs and customs are probably greater...
in our plural society than among any other population of equal size. Much of this confusion is strongly reflected in our schools today...teachers...have a whole generation of children to mould into a national pattern (People’s Action Party 1959: 4-5).

Consequently, social studies and related disciplines, such as history and geography, have been designed to play a key role in forging a Singaporean identity and allegiance, through citizenship education in schools. Objectives embedded in the syllabi for primary and secondary social studies reflect this aim. ‘Important to the Singaporean conception of citizenship education is the development of pride in and loyalty to Singapore’ (Adler and Sim 2005:3).

Quite overt expression of NE in the social studies curriculum can be seen in the recent, examined, upper secondary curriculum, 2005 [5]. It is a clear response to the PAP political leadership’s concerns about young Singaporeans’ supposed lack of appreciation for the sacrifices and achievements of the older generation, their lack of knowledge of the nation’s history and of current issues, especially the geo-political position Singapore is in. Add to that, the Asian economic downturn, the threats from terrorism and SARS, and you have a leadership determined to instil national cohesion, determination and confidence [6]. This is expressed in terms of fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect, knowing the Singapore story, how it succeeded against the odds to become a nation (expelled by Malaysia, virtually no resources other than its geographical position, its people and their trading, entrepreneurial tradition, and British colonial institutions and infrastructure), understanding the unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, and instilling the core NE values, and will to prevail, that will ensure continued success and well-being (MOE, 2004, in Wong 2005).

The upper secondary syllabus is based on the six national education messages. Concerns expressed about these are similar to those expressed about ‘the American way’, or ‘the Australian way’. How can one be critical and creative if the material is based largely on didactic sloganeering? One teacher trainee, of Chinese descent, keen, articulate, very positive about her future in teaching, and highly committed to her studies, reflected with an ironic smile, “I can never be sure about Singapore, are we communist or are we fascist?”

Conversely, are any of the six NE messages not admirable, particularly in the light of regional and global threats from terrorism and rapid economic and technological change? So, it is the practice, the experience of the citizens, and those charged with delivery of the policy, that is most revealing. And the policy has been modified in recent years, including the ‘Blue Sky’ planning, with more emphasis on inclusive education, critical thinking and active citizenship. This reflects an easing of restrictions in what is a highly regulated society. Students are encouraged independently to access and evaluate information, to develop them into “…citizens who have empathy towards others and who will participate responsibly and sensibly in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society” (MOE, 2000). The term assimilate is not to be found in more recent documents, reflecting considerable change from the sentiments expressed in 1959.

As noted above, it is practice and outcomes that matter, and the following passages outline and analyse some of these. They draw from interviews, discussions and documents provided by Singaporean educators, often social studies co-ordinators, mostly Chinese, but also some with Indian or Malay Islamic heritage. Some of the co-ordinators and teachers responded to an article they were asked to critique, Cherian George’s (2000) ‘Neglected Nationhood: Singapore Without Singaporeans?’ It was chosen because it raises many of the issues we are interested
in, and ensured a wide range of reflections and responses, concerning race, identity, multiculturalism, assimilation, integration, pluralism, governance and nationhood.

We also make some observations, criticisms, and recommendations, about governance, National Education, multiculturalism, social studies, and citizenship education for Singapore.

Outcomes and Recommendations

Essentially, the data analysis indicates that some Singaporeans argue for higher levels of social integration, often bordering on assimilation, while others, particularly from minority groups, stress the value of pluralism and looser forms of multiculturalism. The latter also express concern about the future employment and economic prospects for their communities. The frequently heard ‘minority’ perspective, is summed up well by a Malay teacher, as follows:

*Every race in the country has a culture that is unique... If we are to adopt the model of ‘Singaporean Singapore’ melting pot, then the uniqueness will disappear. I disagree with the movement of wanting to create a culture common to all Singaporeans. With globalisation, Singapore receives people from many parts of the world who have their own unique cultures and I do not think they would want to be included in the ‘Singaporean Singapore’ melting pot, which means losing their own culturally distinct characteristics...*

Before independence, most Singaporeans lived in kampongs or villages, which they recall had a strong spirit of community self-help. Many of the older teachers and other older Singaporeans said that kampong residents of different ‘races’ lived, worked and played together. Reading about early Singapore indicates that they were not always as mixed as fondly recalled. ‘Chinatown’, ‘Little India’ and the ‘Geylang Serai/Kampong Glam’ Malay Muslim district did not suddenly appear. A Malay Muslim teacher’s personal account contradicts the notion of earlier mixing of races and religious groups. She also, tellingly, from experience, supports integrated schooling:

*As a Muslim teacher in multi-cultural Singapore, I grew up in a predominantly Malay environment. I had no chance of developing relationships outside of my race. It was only when I was in secondary school that I was able to form multi-ethnic relationships. It was not out of reluctance from my part. I believe that I was hampered by my inability to speak English properly. Now, I see my first daughter mixing well with people of all races. Her close friend is a Chinese girl. My second daughter, on the other hand, went to a religious preschool run by a mosque. She has no problems in speaking English, but she has more Malay friends compared with my first daughter who went to a childcare centre that caters for children of all races and religion.*

*There is more than one factor that contributes to a person not mixing with other races, as shown by my own example and my daughters. The reasons might be language, lesser opportunity or other factors. The*
government emphasizes more on the minority race to mix with the majority but nothing is done when the opposite happens, as seen from the disparity in numbers in some sections of the military and private housing estates.

Today, kampongs have vanished and the majority of residents are housed in high-rise public housing, with others in private dwellings, also high-rise, but with superior architecture, landscaping and facilities. The dramatic change in housing has resulted in changing race relations in the country. As each household became more insular, and mixed less with their neighbours, knowledge and understanding of other cultures was reduced, as different races had less opportunity to mix and mingle. Schools and work places have become the common ground for the different races to socialise. School is increasingly becoming the first place of contact with a child of another race.

Minorities are dispersed among the HDB, a deliberate strategy to promote integration, to prevent the possibility of racial disintegration in the country, and, for the more sceptical observer, to ensure their political voice is muted:

Cherian George raised many important and related issues. If you ask a Chinese about the subject of racism, he or she will probably reply that there is no racism in Singapore. But being part of a minority group in a Chinese-dominated country, I felt that the author had truly given voice to many of our muted concerns. For example, the public housing scheme and ethnic residential quotas. In the past, minorities such as the Malays lived as a community, settling in kampongs. However, the public housing scheme...splintered the Malay community in housing estates throughout Singapore. The ethnic quotas were introduced in 1989, on the pretext of preventing the emergence of ethnic enclaves that might harm racial harmony. These measures were undertaken to ensure no ethnic group, especially the minority groups, can gather enough electoral support to push for their agenda. (Social Studies Co-ordinator, 2003).

Thus, the inherent tension and contradiction is clear. A person charged with developing NE objectives, and genuinely wishing to develop better cultural relations, sees ‘top-down’ policy ‘splintering’ minority groups. Of course, this is one perspective and many argue that so long as the government ‘delivers the goods’, that is achieves impressive economic development and employment, effective educational and health provision, and promotes racial cooperation and integration, the vast majority of citizens will support the PAP.

Opposing Cultural Models and Tensions

Cherian George (2000) discusses the opposing models of a ‘Singaporean Singapore’ melting pot (he favours more integration), and a ‘return to roots’ emphasis on disparate Asian cultures. He argues that the melting pot approach was seen as being “in danger of entrenching the pre-independence dominance of English-speaking, Western-oriented Singaporeans” [7]. This has led to the formation of ethnic-based, self-help groups, which are viewed “…as part of a trend towards greater ethnic polarization, and the end of the Singaporean Singapore ideal”. George identifies three problems with the way the principles of racial integration are put into practice.
The first is the failure to communicate properly the position of Chinese language and culture in Singapore. He argues that the policies have appeared to other racial groups as an attempt to make the country, as a whole, more Chinese. The second is the alarmist terms in which ethnic diversity is discussed (usually connected to fear of Malay birth rates and Islamist terrorism). The third is an over-reliance on laws and policing to sustain inter-ethnic peace.

George argues that the development of citizens’ appreciation of cultural diversity and the establishment of common ground is imperative. He adds that Singaporeans were assured that public schools, HDB estates, and compulsory National Service for all young men, would provide opportunities for mixing and thus promote multi-racialism [8]. However, an increasing proportion of households live in private estates with few ‘minority’ residents, some schools have only Chinese students, and not all sections of the military have a representative racial balance. For example, many interviewees said that nearly all officers and fighter pilots are Chinese. The teachers, mostly Chinese, generally argued that George was too harsh in his criticisms, although some teachers and trainees, mostly from minorities, made comments similar to the following, that, “George’s article surfaces a lot of pent-up feelings that many minorities in Singapore feel…” A Chinese teacher was passionate when she asserted that, “In fact, people of all races express a deep longing for a nation that is more integrated”. The social studies trainees, teachers and coordinators, provided a great deal of evidence that they and their colleagues do provide their pupils with ‘opportunities for mixing’.

Racial And Social Integration In Schools

Discussing the issue of race in Singapore is particularly sensitive and emotional. For years, the PAP government has made the discussion of racial and religious issues a taboo. However, the September 11th destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York City…has thrown open again the whole question of inter-racial relations (Chinese Teacher, 2003).

School policies include the deployment of pupils to classes [9], so as to encourage inter-racial mixing, and to promote school programmes that infuse knowledge and understanding of different cultures. In social studies, the teachers argued, themes of racial harmony are infused throughout the syllabus. Although reading and discussing about other cultures does raise awareness, the literature review and research indicate it is the experience of coming into contact with customs and practices that determines how much and what each child acquires. Thus, social studies planning should identify strategies and activities that make imperative experiential, authentic cultural experience and learning.

Since the publication of Cherian George’s article in 2000 there has been a greater appreciation of the cultures and religious practices of the various racial groups in Singapore, borne of fears of disharmony, even terrorism. The government and MOE, through NE and citizenship education policy and funding, encourages activities at the grassroots level, such as visiting places of worship of different religions, to learn about their religious practices, as well as participation in the festivals of other races. These are positive moves towards the understanding and appreciation of other cultures.
Language Policies

Less positive has been the perceived failure to communicate properly the position of Chinese language and culture in Singapore. Various policies by the government have appeared to be an attempt to make the country more Chinese. For instance, the high profile ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign failed to specify the target audience, creating an unfortunate impression among non-Chinese. Also, the government does not permit Malay and Tamil pupils to choose Chinese as their second language, even though some minority parents believe strongly that studying Chinese would be in their children’s long-term economic interests. Among the Tamil and Malay minorities there is very real suspicion and resentment about this issue, as the following account, by a Malay teacher, attests:

“The ‘Speak Mandarin’ Campaign came under a lot of scrutiny in recent months. A Straits Times reader feels that the campaign is a waste of taxpayers’ money, given the economic scenario right now. I feel the same way as the reader for more reasons than I can explain here. Why must Mandarin be promoted so much by the government? If it is so important that it will overtake English, then why not let the other minority groups take Mandarin as a second language. The promotion of Chinese culture and values in the late 1980s left many minorities, including me, confused.

There were two explanations offered for the promotion of Mandarin. The first was economic, as a result of China’s burgeoning economy. The second was emotional, combining a pride in Chinese heritage and China’s recent development, and a fear of young people’s obvious westernisation.

Language is associated to culture. However, many Chinese Singaporeans especially the younger generation are not speaking the language... Many have adopted the language and lifestyles of the west. The Speak Mandarin Campaign and other activities associated with it are meant solely for the Chinese to remind and to bring them back to their cultural heritage. Other races should not be too sensitive on this issue. (Malay Teacher, 2003).

Social Engineering or Enlightened Leadership?

Another perceived problem with the management of diversity in Singapore, as mentioned above, is an over-reliance on top-down policing to sustain inter-ethnic peace, rather than on developing citizens’ sensitivity, knowledge and skills when dealing with cultural diversity. The government practises forms of ‘social engineering’, such as imposing ethnic quotas in HDB public housing estates. A teacher commented, intriguingly, that this “…strong regulatory emphasis…allows Singaporeans to enjoy the fruits of inter-ethnic peace without having to work particularly hard for it. Hence, most Singaporeans are free-riders when it comes to ‘race’ relations, as no deep commitment to multi-racialism is required either in thought or action.” An outside observer might add that in HDBs they do live it, which is not always easy if one believes some of the accounts in the Straits Times newspaper [10].
It is also questionable whether a regulatory approach is sustainable, as ethnic quotas in HDB estates, for example, will become less effective as the proportion of Singaporeans living in private housing, increases. The teacher added, “With Singaporeans becoming more cosmopolitan, multi-racialism can only be sustained if it is embedded in the instincts of each individual, rather than imposed by authority”.

Interestingly, since 1959 there has been positive support from the PAP for the education of Malay students. In 1982, the government stressed that the educational difficulties and poor performance of Malay Singaporeans were a national problem. Since then, it has taken additional steps to improve their educational performance.

As a Malay student, I received free schooling, which was offered by the government. Such assistance has eased the financial burden of many Malay pupils from lower income families. It also provides more equal learning opportunities for the minorities (Malay teacher, 2003).

In general, the teachers supported the government’s efforts to foster unity amidst diversity. As noted above, many activities in schools provide opportunities for mixing and promoting NE, citizenship and multi-racialism. Racial Harmony Day and Cultural Week, as stipulated in the Social Studies Action Plan, enable pupils to understand the differences and yet, retain the distinctive characteristics of their diverse cultures.

Some specific occasions appear to have more universality than others, as the following Malay teacher’s account attests:

In school, when we celebrated Total Defence Day on 15 February, on the surface it seemed most pupils enjoyed the activities that were shown, but I doubt whether they really understood the meaning of the activities. When shown clips of the race riot, some were oblivious to the tragedy which unfolded. Perhaps this attitude arises from not experiencing this in the first person or it could be factors such as being comfortable in their present life and not believing that such things will occur now... The ‘fault line’ message [of the government] is therefore unnecessary and serves to further heighten the suspicious and distrust of each race against another.

Schooling, Language, Culture

It is clear from our research that certain schools, accepting only Chinese pupils, need to put in more effort to achieve ‘respect for diversity’. Detailed planning must be carried out to expose pupils to the different food, cultures and practices of people from other racial groups. It would be feasible to collaborate and form partnerships with other schools so that student exchange programmes can be carried out. In the teachers’ and coordinators’ opinions, most pupils are exposed, to some extent at least, to the cultures and traditions of their peers from other racial groups. As a Tamil teacher commented, “The minorities feel that the promotion of Chinese culture and language is a biased government’s step, totally against the promotion of multiculturalism”. We argue strongly that the above applies to any segregated educational setting, including Christian, Muslim and Hindu.
‘Race’ Relations and Active Citizenship

Many trainees and teachers adopt a very Singaporean pragmatism [11] when it comes to ‘race’ relations and active citizenship. Minorities do not want to be left behind, hence the resentment at the promotion of Chinese language and the elite, mainly Chinese, Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools [12], however they value a system that works and which produces economic and material advancement. A Malay Islamic student commented,

When the government refers to race relations as ‘ethnic fault lines’, I agree with Cherian George’s view that why should the government be alarmed? Is there any need? I think the government has really trained us well in the school of pragmatism. Most Singaporeans are just happy and contented to have a well-paying job and being able to enjoy the fruits of their labour. They are not into taking up causes or standing with pickets in front of the Parliament House.

The reference by government to ‘fault lines’, redolent of earthquakes and potential disasters, is a telling indication of top-down concern about race relations in the country. This is borne of the Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew’s memory of traumatic times, of riots, and of Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia. Add to this the present threat from Jemaah Islamiya, the Islamist terrorist group, exposed initially by Singapore’s secret service, and responsible for bomb threats to foreign embassies in Singapore, the Bali and Australian Embassy, Jakarta, bombings and numerous other outrages in the region, and you can see why there is such desire for integration and shared NE values. However, the tension and ambiguity this places on members of minorities in Singapore should not be ignored, as the following account attests:

Singaporeans should appreciate the ethnic diversity that we have. ‘Fault lines’ should be treated positively and not be used as a tool to break the multi-ethnic bonds... We should not allow irresponsible individuals or groups to instigate us negatively using the ‘fault lines’...Younger Singaporeans whose feelings and ideas can be easily manipulated should be given proper guidance so as not to be led astray...Singaporeans would not like to live in a similar situation to the ‘blacks’ and the ‘whites’ in the west (our emphasis) (Malay Social Studies Co-ordinator).

Assimilative attitudes, policies and practices were anathema to the minority cultural groups. They argued strongly for moderate degrees of social and political integration, respect for law, and for high levels of cultural and religious respect and autonomy.

I believe that the different races and their cultures should be left as they are, as long as they do not infringe the rights of their neighbours. Their uniqueness will make Singapore an interesting and ‘colourful’ place to live in. I also believe that all ethnic cultures teach good values and attitudes... As Malay Muslims we do not feel too restricted in our actions, or discriminated... as long as we conform to the laws (Malay teacher, 2003).
Conclusion

Most Singaporeans, having lived in HDB flats, are used to having neighbours of different cultures and religions. They more or less understand their cultures, beliefs, lifestyles, religions, foods, and ceremonial practices. This is not to deny the constant tensions and occasional disparagements. Our undergraduate students often expressed views similar to the following, “People are still intolerant in private. They are prevented by rules and laws”. There are stereotyped views of ‘lazy Malays’, ‘clannish, selfish Chinese’, ‘smelly, ‘tight’ Tamils’, ‘snobbish Eurasians and Europeans’. During good economic times and with tight societal controls these views are kept well in check.

As noted in various quotes, you also hear many positive cultural statements, for example, the hospitality, friendliness and family-orientation of Malays, attributes also ascribed, but to a lesser degree, to Chinese and Indian Singaporeans. There is also considerable knowledge and enjoyment of each other’s National Holiday festivals, rituals and celebrations.

The teachers and trainees said that the majority of pupils in schools do not have problems communicating with those of different ‘races’. They added that during play many choose to play with those of the same ‘race’, mainly because they feel comfortable using their own language [13]. However, during school-planned activities, such as games and quizzes, they said, and we often observed, the mixing of races seems natural and spontaneous. In other activities, such as ‘buddy’ reading, ‘buddy’ mathematics, and co-curricular activities, ethnic mixing is normal.

Schools, MOE and NIE, work closely with the government to ensure that teachers and their pupils develop the ‘correct’ awareness of, and attitudes towards, the different races in Singapore. This is implemented in Social Studies Programmes in all schools. The six NE messages, especially multiculturalism- ‘Though many races, religions, languages and cultures, we pursue one destiny’ - are embedded in the texts and syllabuses. Teachers are expected to deliver these important messages to their pupils. All acknowledge the importance of the government’s NE drive and the need to avoid personal bias and to instil correct, approved attitudes and knowledge in their pupils.

The Malay and Indian teachers and trainees are particularly concerned about those pupils who live in private estates, almost exclusively Chinese, while the Chinese teachers and trainees are more concerned with enhancing cohesion, shared values, and want more integration in school and society.

There is clear dissonance and tension between National Education, governmental directives, a closely controlled society, and pluralistic, multicultural, democratic and creative educational objectives. The Singaporean government, particularly in recent years, appears to be encouraging a ‘thinking’, creative curriculum, with a more inclusive and participatory citizenship. A consideration of the teachers’ concerns and voices is a positive start to such change.

Social Studies was conceived as a major vehicle for NE at secondary school level, with a focus on the nation, common culture and shared values…Introducing it as a compulsory, examinable subject in upper secondary schools reflects the government’s continuous, single-minded pursuit of citizenship education to meet national needs (Sim and Print, 2005).

In conclusion, and being more specifically educational, we recommend that the Social Studies Syllabus is the logical vehicle to coordinate these related fields of national, citizenship and multicultural education, and Social Studies Co-ordinators are best placed for implementation and evaluation.
In Singapore, social studies is the 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...citizenship education and thinking meet...social criticism and participation in decision-making by citizens on public issues are desirable outcomes (Adler and Sim, 2005:8).

The coordination could be achieved through a network of specialists to provide more curricula and pedagogical research and development initiatives in this vital field. However, these must predicate on a more participatory democracy.

It is interesting and instructive when seeking to understand the inherent cultural and societal contradictions and tensions examined in this paper to see that many Singaporeans, young and old, ascribe kiasuism or selfishness, pragmatism and economic positivism, as influencing their attitudes and behaviours. If the society and polity is to become more inclusive, democratic and creative, the express aims of the ‘Blue Sky’ policy, then these attitudes and behaviours must be addressed in national education, multicultural and social studies programmes. The challenge is high-stake, in a globalized world of rapid, unpredictable change. If students are expected to accept ideas uncritically, they will not be capable to meet future challenges- social, cultural and national.

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NOTES

[1] 1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong. We want to keep our heritage and our way of life. 2. We must preserve racial and religious harmony. Though many races, religions, languages and cultures, we pursue one destiny. 3. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility. This means opportunity for all, according to their ability and effort. 4. No one owes Singapore a living. We must find our own way to survive and prosper. 5. We must ourselves defend Singapore. No one else is responsible for our security and well-being. 6. We have confidence in our future. United, determined and well-prepared, we shall build a bright future for ourselves.

[2] In 2007 there are approximately 3.5 million Residents/Citizens, and 800,000 Non-Resident/Citizen Workers, the latter often female domestic staff, labourers and construction workers, but including many professionals. (see http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/maqstats/indicators.html).

[3] ‘Race’ is a significant factor in identification in Singapore. From birth to death official forms require one to tick Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian or Other. On television there are the Indian, Malay, English or Mandarin channels (see Lee, C. et al, 2003: 2).


[6] One can quickly see parallels with aspects of Australian education’s move to ‘Essential Learnings’, and the emphasis over the last two decades, in Australia, the USA and UK, on civic and citizenship education.

[7] This group, often Christian, is strongly represented in business and the professions, including the teaching and teacher education profession. Formerly they were known as “The Queen’s Own Chinese”.

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This is clear evidence of the ‘top down’, directive form of PAP governmental ‘social engineering’ practiced in Singapore. It has resulted in a great deal of economic success, a powerful military, and improved educational and living standards, but also many inherent pressures and contradictions, often personal and ethnic.

As minority students predominate in streamed lower-achieving classes, due to their lack of facility in English, inter-cultural mixing is inevitably reduced.

As with other newspapers, The Straits Times focuses on stories about strife, conflict and illegality.

Singaporeans tell you frequently that they are a utilitarian, pragmatic people.

A Chinese SAP teacher (2003) said that “…segregation within the education system does exist…such an institution reinforces the differences between races. These schools are descended from a [Anglo] Chinese [private] school tradition, are almost entirely Chinese in their student-bodies, and are strongly supported by our government. They teach both Chinese and English at first-language level, in a bid to nurture ‘a Chinese elite’ (in the government’s words). The SAP schools tend to have the brighter pupils (given their more challenging syllabi), and are expected to produce future leaders for the private and public sectors. …some study Malay…[but] the pupils very much lack in their inter-racial outlook…National Service is too late…”

In 2003, a university study of multicultural Singapore revealed how little communication in school playgrounds there was between children of different races. This was attributed to preference for their own mother tongue (Lee, C. et al, 2003). The study received considerable coverage in the media. Many Singaporeans wrote letters of concern to newspapers. The response from MOE and government was negative, critical of the findings. It appeared a case of ‘shooting the messenger’.

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