

Evolution of the Primary School Social Studies Curriculum in Singapore: From ‘Moulding’ Citizens to Developing Critical Thinkers

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Abstract

Most educators in democratic societies are of the view that citizenship education is crucial for the continued existence of a society. There is, however, a lack of agreement about what the goals and purposes of citizenship education should be. Most researchers agree that Social Studies is utilised for three primary purposes, viz., socialisation into the norms of society; acquisition of disciplinary concepts and processes; and the promotion of critical or reflective thinking (Ross, 2006). In Singapore, Social Studies is an important vehicle for citizenship education in Singapore. This paper examines the development of Social Studies as a subject for citizenship education in primary schools and shows that the purpose of Social Studies has for many years, focused on socialising the young into the norms of Singapore society. The primary goal has been the development of moral, law abiding and patriotic citizens. This goal has remained constant although towards the 21st century, there is recognition of a need to include the development of critical thinking in the Social Studies. This, however, is still a fledgling goal and more deliberate effort is required to achieve this.

To inculcate in our young the desired values and instincts for nation-building, we need to start at an early age. Social Studies has an important role to play in this respect. It helps to foster national pride in our pupils and to develop in them a deep sense of belonging to the community and nation. This has become even more important in the face of rapid globalization.

Aline Wong (2000)

Introduction

Most educators in democratic societies agree that developing the young to become effective citizens is of utmost importance and schools are well placed to do that (Parker, 2005; Stanley, 2010). In Singapore, Social Studies plays a primary role in citizenship education in school. However, citizenship education is a contentious enterprise as there is no consensus on what “citizenship” means nor about the goals and purposes of citizenship education (Ross, 2006; McCowan, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As pointed out by Sim (2008), the plural nature of communities in modern states, compounded by globalization and its attendant issues, has resulted in a lack of shared conceptions of citizenship even

among members of the same society. McCowan (2009, p.5) posits that the “aims of citizenship education – the development of a ‘good’ or ‘effective’ or ‘empowered’ citizen – depend on fundamental understandings of the nature of the polity, the balance of liberty and equality and so forth.” The multiplicity and diverse natures of nation states in the world suggest that it is not possible to agree on one definitive form of citizenship education.

Over the years, scholars and educators have proposed various purposes and orientations to citizenship education through Social Studies. As discussed in the article “What is Social Studies?” in this issue, Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) grouped the various approaches to citizenship education (and Social Studies) into three categories: citizenship or cultural transmission, social science, and reflective inquiry. Many other scholars have also contributed to the discussion on the goals and purposes of Social Studies and citizenship education and proposed other traditions or orientations towards Social Studies. Morisett (1977), for example, described five orientations of Social Studies:

- Transmission of culture and history
- Social science processes and subject matter
- Reflective or critical thinking and inquiry
- The study of social and political controversies with the aim of promoting social activism
- Personal development

Clark and Case (1997) proposed that orientations towards Social Studies should be seen in terms of two intersecting continua: social transmission and social transformation at the two ends of one continuum and child-centredness and subject centredness at the two ends of a

second continuum.¹

While there are many different conceptions of the orientations towards Social Studies, most researchers agree that Social Studies is utilised for three primary purposes, viz., socialisation into the norms of society; acquisition of disciplinary concepts and processes; and the promotion of critical or reflective thinking (Ross, 2006). Stanley and Nelson (1994) (cited in Ross, 2006) suggest that the debate over the purposes of Social Studies centres on the relative emphases accorded to citizenship/cultural transmission as opposed to critical or reflective thinking. The emphasis on cultural transmission is aimed at socialising children to the accepted norms and practices of a society. The focus then is on the teaching of knowledge, behaviour, skills, values and dispositions that are accepted by that society. On the other hand, an emphasis on critical or reflective thinking seeks to promote social reform or transformation and the concomitant focus is on knowledge, behavior, skills, values and dispositions that question and critique accepted norms and standards accepted by that society.

In Singapore, the Social Studies curriculum has evolved over the years, but its goal has remained constant, that is, “to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live” (MOE, 1981, p.1). This paper will show that the purpose of Social Studies in the primary school was cultural transmission for many years. The goal was to develop the dutiful, obedient and patriotic citizen. Participation in the public sphere is very much limited to contributing to the common good and maintaining social harmony. These can be seen in the aims of the primary school social studies syllabuses from 1981 to 1994. Towards the

21st century, there was some recognition of the need to develop critical and reflective thinking in the citizens. The published general aims of the syllabus highlighted critical thinking as important skills to develop but these were not evident within the content and suggested skills at each grade level.

Genesis of Citizenship Education in Early Post-colonial Singapore

Singapore obtained internal self-government from the British colonial authorities in 1959 and full independence in 1965 when it separated from Malaysia. Right from the start, the odds were against Singapore's survival as an independent nation. Firstly, there was no 'nation' to speak of, as Singapore had a largely immigrant population that was multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious and whose loyalties lay with their countries of origin. Secondly, there were serious doubts about Singapore's economic survival, given the high unemployment rate and lack of natural resources. The emphases then were on developing the economy to meet the people's needs as well as forging a common identity among the disparate groups of people living in the country. Citizenship education to develop a sense of shared identity became an important aspect of nation-building.

The role of schools in citizenship education was recognised by the People's Action Party (PAP) government since 1959. In its party manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959–1964*, the important role of teachers in "moulding" the nation was highlighted:

Singapore does not have a stable integrated society, nor has it inherited any traditions. So we hear 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.... Our teachers must therefore realise the important role they play in the building of a united democratic Malayan nation They have a whole generation of children to mould into a national pattern (PAP, 1959, pp. 4-5).

The phrase "mould into a national pattern" captures the essence of the PAP vision of nation building. It implies a model of a citizen that is preconceived by the ruling elite and as argued by Apple (1990), propagated by schools functioning as ideological state agencies for the social reproduction of desirable national characteristics.

The goal then was to ensure Singapore's survival, which the government set about to achieve by putting in place policies to ensure economic progress and a socially stable society. Formal education was a key factor for achieving that social stability. The education system then was not centrally controlled and a potpourri of curricula was being offered by the various vernacular schools. A serious concern over this lack of curricular uniformity was expressed by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew:

If in the four different languages of instruction, we teach our children four different standards of right and wrong, four different ideal patterns of behaviour, then we will produce four different groups of people and there will be no integrated coherent society... (Lee, 1959, p. 3).

Control over the education system by streamlining the curriculum and textbooks in the different vernacular and English

language schools became an imperative and the government of the day immediately set about achieving this. In 1960, a Textbooks and Syllabus Committee was formed to design syllabuses with common content in the four language media, viz., Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English (Ministry of Education, 1966). The aim was to develop a common curriculum that was suited to the local environment to inculcate a sense of national identity in the young.

Consequently, citizenship education between 1959 to 1972 focused on building a sense of belonging with emphasis on character and moral development. Good citizens were self-respecting individuals imbued with values of honesty, kindness, patriotism and loyalty to the country (Ong 1979). A common curriculum for the different vernacular schools was designed and implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Citizenship education in schools took the form of Ethics (1959-1966) and Civics (1967 – 1972). By 1973, Civics was replaced by Education for Living (EFL), an interdisciplinary program that integrated Civics, History and Geography. The purpose of EFL was twofold – for social and moral education. One main objective was to educate pupils about the importance of nation-building and enable them to understand “their duties as loyal, patriotic, responsible and law-abiding citizens” (Ong, 1979, p. 3). The purpose of citizenship education continued to be that of moulding the citizen into a national pattern as the stress was on socialising citizens to be loyal, patriotic and aware of their obligations and responsibilities. There was little emphasis on understanding democratic processes, the rights of a citizen as found in the constitution of Singapore or even the skills and competencies required of an effective citizen in democratic Singapore. Instead, character formation and inculcation of

moral and social values were deemed essential. As Sim (2005) pointed out, the goal of citizenship education then was to develop morally upright citizens and “learning about and understanding democratic principles and processes were all but ignored in favour of dutiful obedience to the state...” (Sim, 2005, p.62).

Evolution of Social Studies in the Primary School: 1980s - 1990s

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Singapore economy was taking off, as seen in the Gross Domestic Product per capita which had grown from S\$2,798 in 1970 to S\$10,394 in 1980 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1992). The economy grew by 10% a year from 1978 to 1982 and the overall economic growth was reflected in the rising standard of living. With increasing affluence, the PAP leaders in the late 1970s began to express concern over what they saw as the influence of the ‘decadent West’ resulting in excessive individualism and an erosion of moral values and cultural identity. Goh Keng Swee, the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, pointed out that “[t]here are very good reasons why just going along with the West will really get us into serious trouble... [and that] without morality and a sense of public duty that does not put self always first, Singapore could decline” (Lim, 1982). This view of Western and Eastern values as dichotomous and oppositional resulted in several changes and initiatives in education. There was an increased emphasis on bilingualism in the education system in which Eastern cultural values were to be introduced and inculcated in the students through the mother-tongue languages. Concomitantly, changes were made to citizenship education in the form of two new school subjects at primary level - Moral Education (taught in the mother-tongue)

which replaced Civics, and Social Studies which replaced EFL. Another outcome was the introduction of Religious Knowledge subjects in 1984 to reinforce the teaching of moral values at the upper secondary level.ⁱⁱ This experiment in religious education was short-lived as criticisms about the appropriateness of religious education being taught in secular schools as well as the heightened religious fervor of the period led to the termination of these subjects by the end of the decade (Kho, Ooi and Chee, 2010; Tan, 2000).

A Social Studies syllabus was designed, published in 1981 and implemented in 1984 in the upper primary school curriculum. The goal of the subject 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, 1981). An examination of the syllabus reveals a strong emphasis on developing law-abiding, loyal and morally upright individuals by means of inculcating “certain values in the pupils through developing knowledge, skills and attitudes as they explore History and Geography” (MOE, 1981, p.3). The syllabus content comprised an integration of History and Geography with some basic Economics and Sociology. Topics included the history and geography of Singapore as well as issues related to Singapore’s lack of resources and the unique multicultural composition of its population (Fang, 2002). The organisation of the content was based on an expanding environment approach and themes of national vulnerability and threats to its survival featured strongly in the curriculum. The intent was to transmit a sense of shared crisis so as to develop that sense of common identity, draw its populace together to unite and work for the nation’s survival.

The 1981 syllabus content shows a cultural transmissionist approach to citizenship education. Singapore was a relatively young nation and there was a very real and pressing need to develop a sense of national identity among its people. Furthermore, the government saw the need for an obedient and disciplined populace who would support its growing industrial economy. It seemed then that the emphasis was thus not on developing critical thinkers but on creating a population of followers.

In 1994, the primary Social Studies syllabus was revised because Singapore’s rapid technological advancement and urbanisation as well as people’s increasing interest and concern for the environment necessitated changes in the curriculum “to focus on the environment, the people, their heritage and needs and progress” (MOE, 1994, p.5). The aim of the revised syllabus remained as enabling pupils to understand their social world and develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective participation in society. The scope and organisation of the content was very similar to the 1981 syllabus but there was greater elucidation of and accentuation on desired values/attitudes outcomes. As compared to the 1981 syllabus which only enumerated two attitudes objectives in the syllabus, the 1994 syllabus highlighted six desired attitudes in its objectives. These included recognising the importance of co-operation and being aware of and understanding the need for interdependence among people and countries - objectives which were set out in the 1981 syllabus. Other attitudes objectives highlighted the importance of forging a common Singaporean identity, understanding and respecting the customs and traditions of the communities, being aware that everyone had a responsibility towards ensuring a clean and safe environment and understanding and

adjusting to change (MOE, 1994).

In reality there was little change to the content of the 1994 syllabus as it continued to focus on the history and geography of Singapore and to highlight the limitations and constraints of Singapore’s size and lack of resources. Table 1 illustrates a topic taken from the Primary 5 syllabus focusing on “Our Needs”. The selected issues of Singapore’s water, fuel, food and housing underscore the vulnerability of the nation and the

emphasis on values of preparedness, adaptability, conservation of scarce resources and even living in harmony reflects the state’s ideological conception of citizenship education in Singapore in that period. From this, it can be gleaned that the envisioned ideal citizen was a law-abiding, responsible citizen whose participation was limited to being respectful, maintaining harmony, conserving the environment and accepting and adjusting to change.

Table 1: Primary 5 Syllabus Topic - Our Needs

TOPIC	CONTENT	CONCEPT/ GENERALIZATION	VALUES
Our needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of water • Location of the reservoirs in Singapore 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarce and essential resources need to be conserved • Concept of location and catchment area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation of resources • Interdependence • Preparedness • Adaptability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of oil to our industrial and domestic needs • Location of major oil-producing countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarce and essential resources need to be conserved • Concept of location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation of resources • Interdependence • Preparedness • Efficiency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional and high-tech farms • Locally produced and imported food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarce and essential resources need to be conserved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation of resources • Interdependence • Preparedness • Efficiency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting our housing needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepts of shelter, land scarcity and spatial distribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in harmony • Concern for community • Participation in community life

Source: MOE (1994). *Social Studies Syllabus Primary*. Singapore.

Developments: Preparing Citizens for the 21st Century

National Education and Secondary Social Studies

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a new approach towards nation-building seemed to be taken. On 17 May 1997, the new citizenship education initiative known as National Education (NE) was launched. The approach of NE was that the objectives of citizenship education were to be infused into the formal and informal curriculum where appropriate. The goals were to “develop national cohesion, cultivate instincts for survival and instill confidence in our students regarding Singapore’s future” (MOE, 2007, p.i). These were to be achieved through:

- fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans;
- knowing the Singapore story -- how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation;
- understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries; and
- instilling the core values of our way of life, and the will to prevail, that ensures our continued success and well-being (MOE, 1997).

The backdrop to this new initiative was the realisation that Singapore youths had little knowledge of the events leading to Singapore’s independence. Two surveys in 1996 had shown this lack of knowledge and interest in issues that relate to Singapore’s vulnerabilities and government leaders were alarmed by this as such disinterest was deemed a challenge to the nation’s continued survival in the face of globalisation and rapid change (Sim, 2005). NE can be seen as a

nationwide attempt at citizenship education. The aims of NE were encapsulated and publicised in six NE messages (MOE, 2007, p.7):

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

Distinct themes were developed for the three academic levels of schools: Love Singapore (Primary level), Know Singapore (Secondary level) and Lead Singapore (Pre-university level). These themes formed the basis around which programs were developed for the different academic levels.

Within the formal curriculum at upper secondary level, Social Studies was implemented as one half of a new subject known as Combined Humanities. By making the subject compulsory and included in the high-stakes General Certificate of Education ‘O’ level examinations, the MOE signaled the importance placed on it. It is clear that the

implementation of Social Studies is a serious attempt to address the lack of knowledge of and interest in the history of Singapore and the critical issues of its vulnerability.

The approach at the primary level differed from that at the secondary level. The goal was to engage them emotionally, rather than intellectually through inculcating in them “correct values and attitudes,” and developing a sense of pride in Singapore as well as a common bond among pupils of diverse races and abilities (MOE, 1997). NE was infused into the school curriculum and this resulted in a new Primary Social Studies syllabus published in 1999 and implemented in 2000.

***Primary Social Studies Syllabus:
Preparing for the 21st Century***

The new Primary Social Studies syllabus published in 1999 and implemented in 2000 may be seen as a new milestone in Singapore’s citizenship education journey. For the first time, the importance of the subject was clearly spelled out in the syllabus document:

“The subject has an important place in the primary school curriculum. It lends itself to inculcating in the pupils from a very early age a sense of belonging to the community and country; and cultivating the right instincts for reinforcing social cohesion” (MOE, 1999, p.4).

In recognition of its importance, Social Studies was implemented in the formal curriculum from Primary One to Primary Six (whereas in the past this was only taught from Primary Four to Six). As mentioned earlier, NE was infused into the new syllabus, purportedly because of the “realisation that our pupils need to

understand the constraints and opportunities facing Singapore and develop a sense of belonging to the community and nation” (MOE, 1999, p.3). This emphasis was not new as earlier syllabuses had always focused on developing a sense of belonging and highlighted the constraints faced by the nation. In any case, the aims, scope and content of the new syllabus did not differ much from those of the 1994 syllabus.

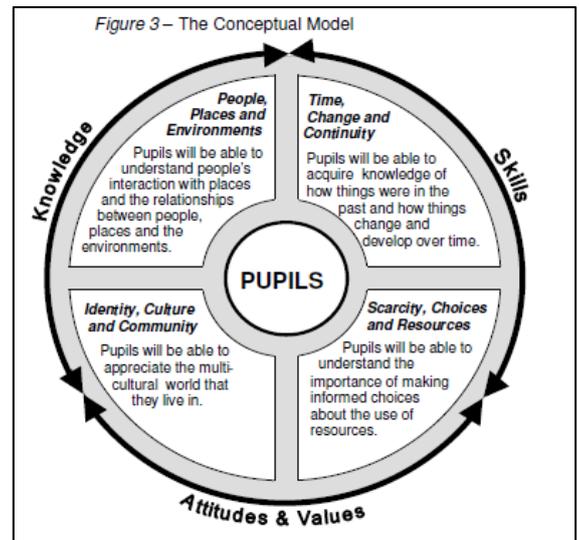
An interesting development in the new syllabus was the inclusion of new skills objectives, i.e., information technology and thinking skills – problem solving and decision making skills and ability to make sound judgements. This was a step forward in citizenship education and should be seen in the context of the period. NE was launched in the same year (1997) as the ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (TSLN) initiative – a move designed to prepare the young for a knowledge-based economy by developing in them more critical and creative thinking skills. It is no wonder then that thinking skills was highlighted within the 1999 Social Studies syllabus. However, Baildon and Sim (2010) argue that these two initiatives presented a dialectical tension. On the one hand, TSLN seeks to prepare the young for a knowledge-based economy in a globalised world through developing their critical and creative thinking but on the other hand, NE tends towards parochialism in emphasising convergent thinking and development of a local nationalism.

An examination of the learning outcomes of the 1999 syllabus seems to validate Baildon & Sim’s (2010) point. Many of the stated learning outcomes centred on the affective domain, for example, “appreciate the importance of every individual to society (Primary 3); “empathise with the people and their sufferings during the war” (Primary 4);

“appreciate the contributions made by Singapore leaders in the 1950s” (Primary 5); “appreciate the progress that has taken place in Singapore” (Primary 6). There was perhaps only one learning outcome that might be seen as encouraging critical thinking – “suggest ways in which Singapore can make further progress” (Primary 6). Problem solving and decision making opportunities were not significantly highlighted in the learning outcomes at the different grade levels in spite of their being identified as important overall skills objectives of the syllabus. In the battle between convergent and critical thinking, the former seemed to be more imperative and developing a sense of national identity triumphed over the desire for critical and creative thinkers. Be that as it may, that there was recognition of the need to develop critical thinking in the young should still be seen as a positive move.

The 1999 syllabus was reviewed and a revised syllabus was published in 2005 for implementation in 2006. The revised syllabus continued to focus on providing historical, geographical, economic and sociological knowledge with the intent of equipping children with the knowledge, skills and attitudes deemed necessary for future participation in society (MOE, 2005). What is noteworthy is the emphasis on informed decision making as one of the aims of the syllabus. Although the syllabus content was still very much similar to that in the 1999 syllabus, there was an attempt at a clearer conceptual and thematic organisation with explicit elucidation of learning outcomes within each theme. The subject matter was organised around four themes: People, Place and Environment; Time, Change and Continuity; Identity, Culture and Community and Scarcity, Choices and Resources. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Themes of 2005 Syllabus



Source: MOE (2005). *Social Studies Syllabus Primary*. Singapore

Like the 1999 syllabus, the revised syllabus also highlighted the knowledge, skills and attitudes learning outcomes at each grade level. Interestingly, a list of thinking skills was included at each grade level. This is a significant improvement and signals a deliberate attempt to integrate thinking skills into the curriculum. Some examples of the listed thinking skills include “comparing to discuss similarities and differences”, “brainstorm creative solutions to problems,” “consider advantages and disadvantages of a solution to a problem,” “draw conclusions based on historical data,” “take different perspectives, generate new ways of viewing a situation and develop arguments” and “explore ideas beyond what is given and consider their relevance.” Unfortunately, the syllabus did not provide specific detail or examples of the topics or issues when such thinking skills could be used. The skills were couched in rather general terms (as above), so teachers had to decide for themselves the issues within the grade level content that could provide opportunities for integrating such thinking skills. This in itself was not really a bad

thing if teachers were skilled in teaching thinking skills or using issues in the curriculum to develop thinking. However, because many Social Studies teachers were not trained in teaching the subject and most teachers frequently used direct instruction, whether there was really an attempt at developing thinking skills through Social Studies is open to question.

In terms of attitudes and values objectives, the syllabus continued to emphasise a sense of belonging and rootedness to the nation, social harmony and appreciation for ethnic diversity in Singapore and appreciation of the need for creative solutions to Singapore's resource constraints. A significant departure from previous syllabuses was the addition of a topic about Singapore's links with the rest of the world. In the 1994 syllabus, the scope of Singapore's links with the rest of the world was limited to a study of Southeast Asian countries. The 1999 syllabus continued to focus on Southeast Asia but included an overview of Singapore's links with the world, without spelling out clearly what these links were. The 2005 syllabus was more specific in outlining the scope of Singapore's involvement in international organisations such as United Nations, World Trade Organization and World Health Organization. This is noteworthy because it seemed to recognise the need to develop a more global outlook in our young people by providing them with some information about such international organisations. The attitudinal objectives included appreciating the similarities and differences of peoples in the region and the world, and developing "a sense of responsibility to local and global environment and communities" (MOE, 2005, p.19). That augured well for citizenship education as it symbolised a move away from a narrow parochial national identity to a more global one.

New Directions in Citizenship Education: The Informed, Concerned and Participative Citizen

NE was reviewed in 2007 by a committee specially appointed by the Minister of Education, Tharman Shanmugaratnam. Among the findings of the review was that while NE was acknowledged as necessary and the core programs were sound, these programs were unevenly implemented in schools (MOE, 2007). In schools where NE was not well implemented, students had indicated that they were unexcited and some even "expressed cynicism at what they felt was 'propaganda'" (MOE, 2007, p. iv). This is unsurprising as the first secondary Social Studies syllabus was designed around the six NE messages. Presented like slogans or jingles, these messages certainly evoked ideas of indoctrination and hype.

Consequent to the 2007 review, a revised framework for the next phase of NE was recommended. The "Head, Heart, Hands" framework was proposed as a more integrated approach to developing the outcomes of "Love, Know and Lead" Singapore. The three elements are seen as intertwined and working in tandem together. The "Heart, Head, Hands" framework encapsulate the outcomes of loving, appreciating and belonging (Heart), knowing, thinking and understanding (Head) and contributing, creating and leading (Hands).

Revised Primary Social Studies Curriculum, 2012

The 2007 review of NE resulted in a new primary social studies curriculum published in 2011 for implementation in 2012. The "Heart, Head, Hands" framework is translated in the outcomes of the revised 2012 social studies curriculum

for primary schools as the informed, concerned and participative citizen. Although the new curriculum for 2012 continued to emphasise the vulnerability of Singapore, constraints due to the lack of natural resources, the need for social cohesion and the responsibility of everyone to contribute to the survival of the nation state, the curricular aims do indicate a move towards a more democratic and social reformist model of citizenship education. Some significant curriculum aims are listed below:

As an *informed* citizen, the pupil would:

- understand his/her own identity vis-à-vis his/her identity as a Singaporean and as a global citizen;
- respect different perspectives and yet view the world with an understanding of the Singapore perspective...

As a *concerned* citizen, the pupil would:

- have a sense of belonging to his community and nation;
- find it important to engage in issues of societal concern because he/she understands the potential impact his/her response has on society...

As a *participative* citizen, the pupil would:

- show motivation to identify issues of concern and take action;
- take personal and collective responsibility for effecting social action for the common good... (MOE, 2011, p.2).

The recommended approach in this new curriculum is inquiry and a substantive description of the rationale for,

elements and forms of inquiry is provided in the syllabus document. Among other things, the inquiry approach is seen as crucial for preparation for 21st century living as well as enabling quality decision making in citizens (MOE, 2011). The value of inquiry is in the construction of knowledge and development of understandings by the learners themselves. This, according to the syllabus document, will enable the development of the informed, concerned and participative citizen. These are noble aims and conceptually sound approaches and, if achieved, would go far towards educating our children to become responsible, thinking citizens who would have the knowledge, understanding and capability to contribute positively to society and to effect change where necessary.

Unfortunately, a detailed examination of the syllabus document shows that these aims are inadequately reflected in the selected content nor the knowledge, skills and values/attitudes objectives at the various grade levels. Firstly, it is unfortunate that the topic of Singapore's links with the world was removed from the 2011 syllabus. With that removal, the scope of knowledge of the world returned to the limited region of Southeast Asia. It is rather difficult to develop that desired global outlook without some information about current issues in the world and their impact on Singapore. Although there was a new unit of study about ancient civilisations introduced at Primary Five, the inquiry focus was restricted to the impact of the legacies of these early civilisations. The objectives were limited to gaining an awareness of the rich cultural heritage of the past and appreciate the legacies that still have influence on the world today. Even the suggested performance task only focused on researching and writing about the impact of an invention from the ancient

civilisations. This form of inquiry does not stimulate much critical thinking. To achieve the goal of developing informed citizens who can engage with issues and take social action, it might have been an idea to get pupils to discover the context or issues related to why and how inventions were made. Simply appreciating the ingenuity of the past is not enough. Our children may benefit more by examining how certain inventions or achievements were solutions to problems faced by people of the past. The children may then be encouraged to think about their current context to identify existing challenges or issues and brainstorm some possible solutions to these challenges.

At other grade levels, the inquiry focus and objectives were similarly focused on obtaining information and uncritical appreciation. At Primary Four, the unit entitled 'Valuing our Past' focused on knowledge about migrants' and leaders' contributions to Singapore with the concomitant attitude of appreciating the adaptability and resilience of the people of Singapore. At Primary Six, the inquiry focus was on how Southeast Asia is important to Singapore. In this unit about Singapore and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), there are many issues to explore about regional groupings and the challenges to regional cooperation. Children should be able to understand such issues even if only at a very basic level since these are often reported in the media. Issues such as environmental pollution, contesting territorial claims, trade pacts and competition, etc. are all possible areas of inquiry. Yet these are not identified in the content. On the face of it, the suggested performance task which focused on research on UNESCO gazetted World Heritage Sites to understand why these places are deserving of preservation may not seem to encourage critical thinking

skills. But the follow up activity of identifying and researching on other sites that may be deserving of being accorded World Heritage Site status is useful for developing critical thinking as it requires pupils to understand, apply the criteria and justify their choice. If more of such performance tasks were suggested for the other grade levels, there is greater likelihood of achieving those stated aims of developing informed, concerned and participative citizens.

Conclusion

Citizenship education is an enterprise carried out by all nations. The need to develop in citizens a sense of rootedness and a national identity exists in every country. Singapore in the early 1960s was a young nation comprising a largely immigrant and multicultural populace. Many who were here at that time did not regard this place as their homeland. The challenge of developing a sense of belonging and a shared identity was even greater as a result. The government of the day envisioned a citizenship education that would mould the citizens into a "national pattern." That "national pattern" as seen in the various primary school Social Studies curricula appears to be that of an obedient, law-abiding, contributing citizen who is aware of the vulnerabilities and constraints of Singapore and will therefore not cause any problems by questioning, criticising or upsetting the status quo. For many years, this mould was the dominant one. The approach of Social Studies was therefore one of cultural transmission with emphasis on the knowledge, skills, behaviours and values of the dominant groups in Singapore.

The first semblance of change appeared towards the end of the 20th century when the new Social Studies syllabus showed a recognition of the need to prepare its

citizens for the 21st century. Among the skills highlighted in the 1997 TSLN vision as requisite for the new millennium was that of critical and creative thinking. However, the changes in the content and objectives of the 1999 Social Studies syllabus to educate citizens to become critical and creative thinkers were rather more cosmetic than real.

It was only after the 2007 review of National Education that saw a slight shift away from a didactic cultural transmission approach to a more liberal democratic approach, emphasising critical thinking in citizenship education. Among the recommendations by the NE review committee, one that stands out is that of providing opportunities for students to explore and discuss different perspectives before arriving at their own informed conclusions regarding issues concerning Singapore (MOE, 2007). This was definitely a step forward, albeit possibly in response to charges of propaganda and an attempt to align with the TSLN vision. However, a caveat in the recommendation was that a common set of fundamental values should be the foundation upon which such discussions were made. A common set of fundamental values is useful for ensuring social identity but if they became “sacred cows,” these may not be helpful in raising thoughtful and informed criticisms of policies and issues. Having such a caveat may work against genuine and open inquiry and discussion which will be essential for social transformation.

The clear descriptions of the informed, concerned and participative citizen found in the 2011 primary Social Studies curriculum document signals a distinct shift away from the conception of a conforming citizen to that of a thoughtful social reformer. The focus of the learning outcomes at the different grade levels may

still be wanting in really achieving the ideals as set out in the general aims, but it is still a positive beginning. Future curriculum designers will have to be more deliberate in ensuring that the goals of developing reflective and thinking citizens are distinctly reflected in the content, skills and attitudes of the syllabus at every grade level. It may take some time for this to happen as this requires changes in beliefs and mindsets. It will also take time for educators to be comfortable with using an inquiry or discovery approach. They will need to develop skills in facilitating discussions of controversial issues, engaging pupils in more reflective thinking about the accepted norms and practices in Singapore and equipping pupils with skills to take social action. There is still some way to go to achieve the goal of educating citizens for social transformation but this is essential for Singapore’s continued survival and development.

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These were Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Bible Knowledge, Sikh Studies, Buddhist Studies and Confucian Ethics. Although Confucian Ethics is not a religion, it was offered as an alternative to any student who did not wish to study any of the other five Religious Knowledge subject options.

ⁱ For a more detailed discussion of this, see the article “What is Social Studies?” by Susan Adler and Kho Ee Moi) in this journal issue.

ⁱⁱ Students were given the option to take one of six Religious Knowledge subjects.