

# Leading Classroom Discussions About Population Policy in Singapore

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In January 2013 the Singapore government released a Population White Paper titled [A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore](#), which proposed a plan to steadily increase the population from roughly 5.3 million in 2012 to 6.9 million by 2030. The primary rationale for the plan was to deal with the declining birth rate and rapidly aging population in Singapore. The white paper generated significant response from Singapore citizens, including protests, such as the event organized on Saturday, 16 February 2013, at Hong Lim Park, where an estimated [5,000 people](#) gathered to express disapproval of the plan.

Population policy is a complex topic because it involves or is tied to a range of issues, including those related to overcrowding, foreign and migrant labor policies, increased competition for resources (e.g., university positions for students), and, more generally, about whether there is sufficient infrastructure to accommodate the population increase (e.g., have affordable health care). The topic of population policy is also emotionally-charged and elicits a range of different perspectives about what can or should be done about Singapore's population. All of this makes the topic of population policy ideal for classroom discussions with students.

In this article, we consider how

teachers might lead an inquiry-based activity ([Damico, 2013](#)) about population policy in Singapore – given the purpose of an inquiry approach is to “use the mind well... to read, write, and think critically about something” (Parker, 2012, p. 1). There is a host of potential inquiry questions about the topic of population control in Singapore, yet here we will focus on an “authentic and contemporary” policy question ([Hess, 2009, p. 41](#)) to consider the issue-based question, *How should Singaporeans respond to the White Paper about population policy?*

We outline this inquiry activity in three parts, each with opportunities for students to discuss their ideas and for the teacher to play an essential part in shaping these discussions. We also offer approximate time estimates for each part, which can be modified (extended or shortened) due to time constraints in classrooms.

## **Part 1: Building Relevant Background Knowledge with a Concept Map (15-20 minutes)**

Assessing what students already know and believe about population policy is a key first step. Students will likely come to this activity with prior knowledge. For example, they see or experience overcrowded transportation, observe foreign laborers on construction projects,

and know foreign students living in Singapore with their families. One way to help students tap into their background knowledge is to ask them to complete a concept map of the issue. While students can do this individually, with partners, or in small groups, we have found it is best for students to first complete this initial part of the inquiry independently. The process is to:

1. Distribute blank pieces of paper to students. Large butcher or construction works well to provide ample space for students to represent their ideas.
2. Ask students to draw a circle in the middle of the paper and write “Singapore population policy” within it.
3. Prompt students to draw circles extending from the center that outline key features or aspects of this issue. Here is where they have an opportunity to identify what they already know about the topic.
4. Ask students to draw a square around each of these extended circles and identify *how* they came to learn about each key feature or aspect of population control they identified in their circles. Possible responses here would be *personal experience* (e.g., witnessed crowding on MRT), *family/friend network* (e.g., conversations at home), *media outlets* (newspapers, blogs, social networking sites, etc.).
5. Then prompt students to organize their thinking and prepare to participate in a conversation with a partner in class. They can complete the statement: “My view on population policy in Singapore

is My reasons for this are...” Here students have an opportunity to begin building evidentiary support for claims they will make with a partner and then in a subsequent whole class discussion.

6. Organize students in pairs or small groups to compare and contrast their “Singapore population concept maps.” Students take turns sharing their completed statements: “My view on population policy in Singapore is.... My reasons are...”

This process above meets several goals. Students have an opportunity to vocalize their prior or existing knowledge about the issue; they begin to express this knowledge in the form of claims supported by evidence; and they begin to appreciate the different knowledge and experiences that others bring to this issue. (In our experience, even in relatively homogenous classrooms there can be significant diversity of views when the issue is controversial.)

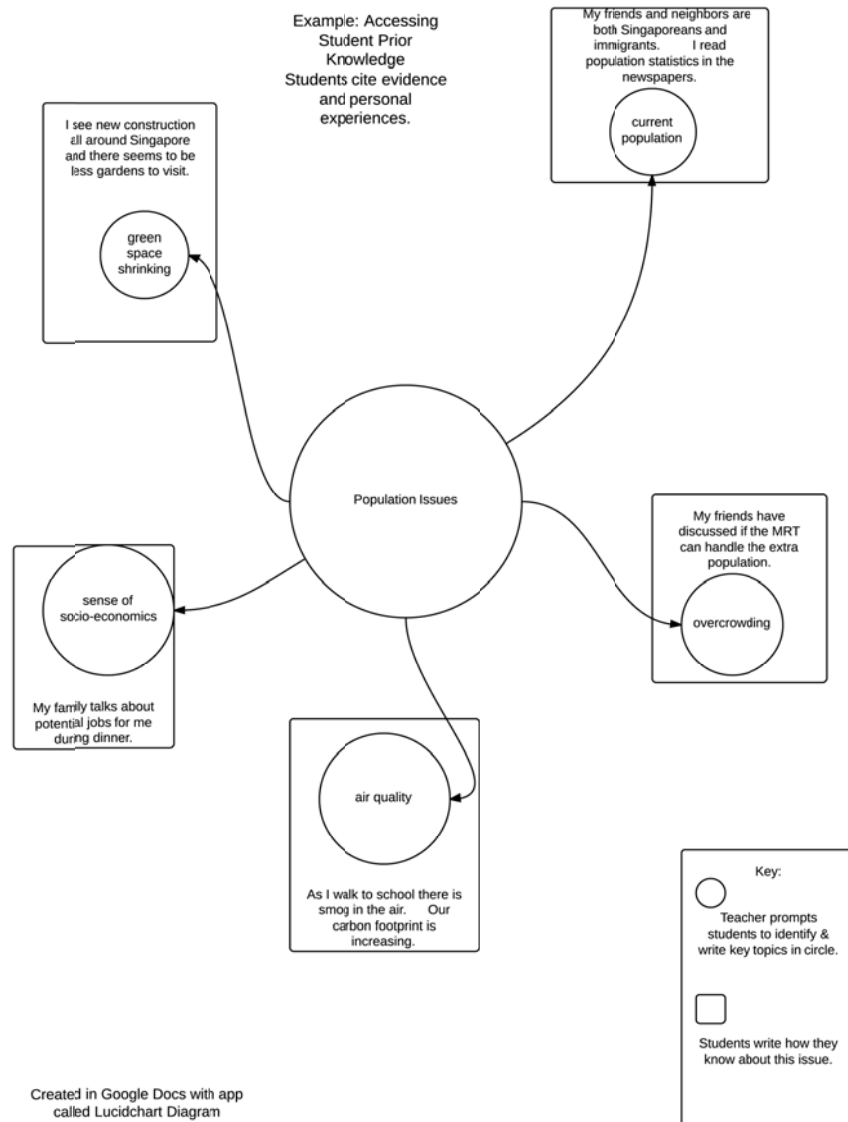
*Extending through a Fishbowl Activity  
(10-15 minutes)*

To extend this initial activity, a teacher can further cultivate discussion with a fishbowl activity. To begin this fishbowl, the teacher asks students to take turns sharing their completed statements: “My view on population policy in Singapore is.... My reasons are...” When the small group’s time is completed, the teacher asks the outer circle of students if they have any questions for discussants in the inner circle. This is a good time for the teacher to model appropriate comments or critical questions, such as: “What type of evidence did you find most convincing?” Then the teacher can ask four or five outer circle students to exchange places with the inner

circle students. The new inner circle students can repeat the process (i.e., discuss their concept maps for approximately five minutes). As the inner circle discusses the topic, the teacher encourages the outer circle to take notes. Again at the end of the discussion time, the teacher can ask for questions from the

outside circle.

Note this fishbowl activity requires about 13 minutes of instructional time (10 minutes for discussion, 5 minutes for each inner group (2 groups total), and 3 minutes for transition times, 1 ½ minutes for set up and exchange of students).



**Figure 1: Example of a Concept Map a Student Might Complete**

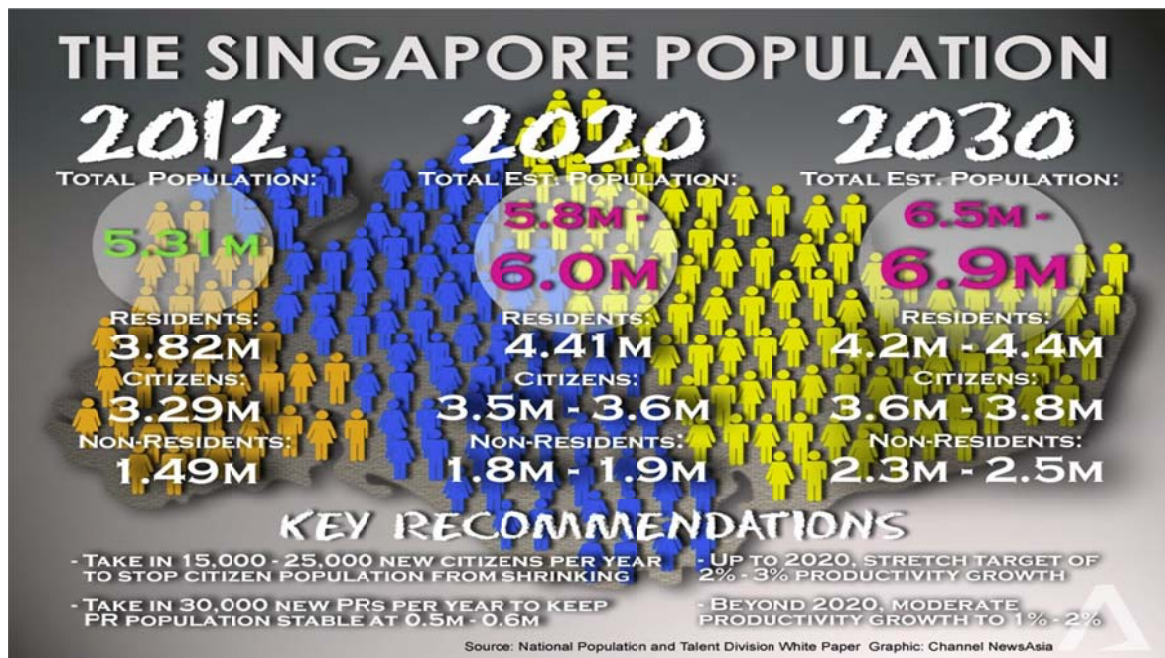
**Part 2: (Optional) Clarify Background Knowledge** (10-15 minutes)

After this preliminary activity, the teacher might decide to provide some clarifying background knowledge (to possibly address misconceptions that surfaced in Part 1). However, if the students seem to have a grasp of the key

components of this population issue, the teacher might want to just move ahead to the sources in the Part 3 activity.

If the teacher wants to ensure students have a grasp of key ideas, the following two sources – an image and a YouTube video – offer useful background knowledge.

*Background knowledge - Source 1: Graphic- “The Singapore Population”*  
[http://blog.dk.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/843921\\_10151246282012934\\_1267819086\\_o.jpg](http://blog.dk.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/843921_10151246282012934_1267819086_o.jpg)



*Background knowledge - Source 2: Youtube video: Population projected at 6.9 million by 2030 with strong Singaporean core*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGZv4VcbV0#t=33>

This video source, published 29 January 2013 and 4 minutes, 42 seconds in length,

summarizes the White Paper. Again the goal here is to establish a shared understanding of the White Paper’s content.

To support discussion with these two sources, the teacher can ask students to write down any details from these two sources they can add to their concept maps

and use to further complete their statements: “My view on population policy in Singapore is..... My reasons for this are...” Again, the goal is for students to continue building evidentiary support for claims they can make to a partner or in a class discussion.

At this point, students are ready to further discuss the population issue centering on the inquiry question: *How should Singaporeans respond to the White Paper about population policy?*

**Part 3: Engage with Sources to Build Evidence-based Interpretations** (20-30 minutes)

A range of sources can be used to promote reading and evaluation skills and students’ ability to strengthen their own evidence-based claims, which, in turn, can enrich class discussion. Here we propose two sources: a photograph and a speech excerpt.

To guide students to work with these two sources, the following “Inference chart” can be used (see Figure 2). For each source, students are prompted to make evidence-based inferences (or interpretations) from each source through a process of careful analysis of key source details and application of relevant background knowledge (this is where students can refer directly to the concept maps they created in Part 1).

**Figure 2: Inference Chart**

Source	Observations	Background Knowledge (Use Concept Maps)	Inferences or Interpretations
<b>1. Image</b>  “Singapore for Singaporeans”	What are key details in the source? - Who is in the image? - Where are they located in image? - What are they doing? - What else is happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I already know that helps me understand this source?</li> <li>• What have I already read from other sources? How have I experienced the issue in my life?</li> </ul>	My inferences or interpretations of this source are.... based on this evidence....
<b>2. Speech excerpt from Faizah Jamal</b>	What are key details in the source? - Who is the author? - What claims are made? - What evidence supports claims?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I already know that helps me understand this source?</li> <li>• What have I already read from other sources? How have I experienced the issue in my life?</li> </ul>	My inferences or interpretations of this source are.... based on this evidence....

**Source #1 – Photograph “Singapore for Singaporeans”**

<http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/large-turnout-speakers-corner-protest-against-population-white-paper-2>



**Source #2: Excerpt from NMP Faizah Jamal’s full speech on Population White Paper & Land Use 2030**

<http://oliveventures.com.sg/act/2013/02/07/nmp-faizah-jamals-full-speech-on-population-white-paper-land-use-2030/>

*Yet not once during the Debate of the last two days did I hear anyone talk about our connection to another Mother, that of Mother Earth. In the midst of all those numbers we were crunching it is astonishing to me Madam, that no mention was made on how all those numbers impact on something bigger than ourselves, the Environment. We act as if all that*

*economic growth, all the companies and foreign talent that we want to entice, all the goodies that we desire in life, all the construction that will happen, does not in fact come from somewhere and end up somewhere, in the environment. Yet there is no mention in the White Paper about the impact of so many people on our carbon footprint, our food security – which as it stands, we are 90% dependent on outside sources and we all know how vulnerable that makes us – to the higher costs that Singaporeans have to bear in the years ahead as the pressure on energy and water mounts as we race towards a dream GDP.*

*To explain further what I mean by the White Paper speaking to the head and not*

*the heart, I note with concern the emphasis on the familiar slogan ‘City in a Garden’ and the emphasis in the Land Use Plan 2030, on the word ‘parks’. It seems to me that policy-makers have a different shade of green in mind when they refer to ‘greenery’.*

Figure 3 represents an example of a completed Inference chart for these two sources. Students can work independently or with a partner as they work with these two sources. The main goal is for them to continue their practice with making evidence-based claims (or evidence-based inferences) based on key details and relevant background knowledge.

**Figure 3: Completed Inference Chart**

Source	Observations	Background Knowledge (Use Concept Maps)	Inferences or Interpretations
<p><b>1. Image</b></p> <p>“Singapore for Singaporeans”</p>	<p>What are key details in the source?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who is in the image?</li> <li>- Where are they located in image?</li> <li>- What are they doing?</li> <li>- What else is happening?</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b> Singaporean in center of photo Raising right fist, mouth clenched Sign reads: “Singapore for Singaporeans” (all capital letters) People around him with umbrellas Faces in the crowd are smiling &amp; less intense</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I already know that helps me understand this source?</li> <li>• What have I already read from other sources? How have I experienced the issue in my life?</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b> Family and friends are losing their jobs to immigrants. The newspapers are reporting on population statistics in Singapore. Young people are protesting in the street about too many immigrants in Singapore. I should be concerned about my future in Singapore.</p>	<p>My inferences or interpretations of this source are.... based on this evidence....</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> As a young Singaporean I am concerned about my country’s future and outside influences.  Why is this young man so angry about immigration?</p>
<p><b>2. Speech excerpt from Faizah Jamal</b></p>	<p>What are key details in the source?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who is the author?</li> <li>- What claims are made?</li> <li>- What evidence supports claims?</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b> No mention of 90% dependency on outside sources Energy and water concerns Dual meaning of “greenery”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I already know that helps me understand this source?</li> <li>• What have I already read from other sources? How have I experienced the issue in my life?</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b> There is construction all around Singapore and less green space. Our carbon footprint is increasing. Driving is already costly, and now MRT will be overcrowded.</p>	<p>My inferences or interpretations of this source are.... based on this evidence....</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Immigration increases stress our economy and limits job potential. The proposed population increase further stresses our food security. With increased housing needs and infrastructure there will be less ‘City in the Garden’ and higher living costs.</p>

A next step is for a teacher to lead a class discussion where students can use their completed inference charts to respond to questions the teacher (or other students) ask, such as: What interpretations do you have for Source 1? What are the most important details in the source that support your interpretation? What about with Source 2? A teacher can also ask more

specific questions. For example, with Source 2, a few questions could be: What does the word “greenery” mean in this context? Do you think there are limits to economic growth? Can there be economic growth in Singapore that doesn’t jeopardize the environment?

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have highlighted how the use of discussion can enrich the ways students make evidence-based claims or interpretations. In the three-part inquiry activity, Part 1 focused on evidence from personal experience (and use of concept maps to document this evidence) while Parts 2 and 3 primarily emphasized evidence from source details in conjunction with personal experience and background knowledge. We also considered different modes of discussion, including partner or peer discussion, small group discussion (part of the Fishbowl activity), and whole class discussion. Doing this work involves a set of core thinking skills, which are not only covered on exams (e.g., making inferences, evaluating claims, constructing explanations) but are also critical to effective citizenship, such as careful listening, engaging different perspectives, and evaluating the reasonableness of others' ideas. Moreover, along with others (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2012), we contend that it is through a discussion-based dialogical process that we can best address complex questions about Singapore's population.

### References

Damico, J.S. (2013). [How to help all students with evidence-based reading and writing during an inquiry activity](#). HSSE Online: Research and Practice in Humanities and Social Studies Education. 2(1), 36-43.

Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York: Routledge.

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