Social studies and citizenship education: Exploring teachers’ understanding and practice

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Abstract

This paper draws upon on-going doctoral research that explores teacher understandings and practice of social studies and citizenship education. The research is located in Singapore secondary schools where social studies is taught as a compulsory and examinable subject since 2001, and in which citizenship is directly addressed. Specifically, the study explores how teachers mediate citizenship education into the social studies curriculum and give it purpose in the context of schools in an environment known to be more authoritarian than democratic.

Thornton characterized teachers as the curricular-instructional gatekeepers, as they are the primary determiners of what gets taught and how it is taught in the classrooms. A large part of how teachers tend the gates hinges on how they understand the subject matter. Teachers may conceptualise and characterize social studies and citizenship education from different frames of reference influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, life experiences, subject specializations, professional landscape and apprenticeship in observations and so forth. Consequently, the enacted curriculum looks more varied than the official intended curriculum, even in a tightly controlled education system such as Singapore. This paper reports on the findings related to two social studies teachers, in quite different contexts, from the first phase of the study.

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The Context of Citizenship in Singapore

In Singapore, as in many countries, formal schooling is the primary instrument for citizenship education. As in many countries, the task of preparing young people to be citizens has specifically been focused in on social studies classrooms. In recent years, the challenge of developing good citizens has been made more complex by global developments intertwined with internal developments in Singapore. Worldwide trends – the globalization of the world economy, the rapid development of communications technology to break down barriers of time and space, democratization in Eastern Europe, Tiananmen, a rise in ethnic and national conflicts, an increased global migration, and terrorism have no doubt problematised the notion of citizenship.

Intertwined with worldwide trends is a changing local landscape characterized by greater social class differences and the emergence of new lifestyles reflecting greater affluence and individualising tendencies. A changing demographic pattern of well-educated and widely travelled younger generation of Singaporeans also want more say in the decision-making processes in the collective arena (Chua, 1995; Lee, 2004). Consequently, citizenship has become increasingly topical and urgent in Singapore.

In Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP) government has been described as paternalistic and authoritarian. While formal features of democratic electoral politics remain in place, the PAP government is skeptical regarding the rationality of the ordinary citizen and unapologetically anti-liberal (Chua, 1995). The citizen’s main role is to elect a party into power, and to co-operate with it to govern in the interests of the country as a whole (Han, 1997). Moreover, the government adopts an “economic instrumental rationality” which has successfully transformed Singapore economically, including the material life of the people since. In a political environment more authoritarian than democratic, it has however, resulted in a sense of political ennui among Singaporeans. Caught in the crossroads, the PAP government has responded by stepping up its efforts at engaging Singaporeans and encouraging a more active citizenship since 1997. The new government headed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong since August 2004 has sent a clear signal that it wants greater participation from the younger Singaporeans in shaping Singapore's future (Lee, 2004).

National Education and the Development of Social Studies

The introduction of social studies in Singapore secondary schools at the upper secondary level must be seen in the context of National Education (NE). NE was launched in 1997, and is the latest nation-building initiative in which citizenship is addressed. NE is aimed at developing and shaping positive knowledge, values and attitudes of its younger citizenry towards the community and the nation. The purpose of NE is to develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future.

The catalyst for NE was younger Singaporeans’ perceived lack of knowledge of and interest in Singapore’s recent history and nation-building issues. Social studies was introduced at the upper secondary school level in 2001. It is high-status, the fact that it is a compulsory subject and examinable at the national examinations.
The Research Study

This paper draws upon on-going doctoral research that explores teachers’ understandings and practice of social studies and citizenship education. Specifically, the study explores how teachers mediate citizenship education into the social studies curriculum and give it purpose in the context of schools in an environment known to be more authoritarian than democratic.

Teachers as Curricular-Instructional Gatekeepers

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the tradition of curriculum (e.g. Cornbleth, 1990; Elbaz, 1981; Kelly, 1989; Klein, 1992; Marsh & Willis, 2003; McCutcheon, 1982, 1988; Print, 1993; Shulman, 1986). The key concept is that teachers are significant key players of the curriculum. They are the persons who enact the curriculum, they are the “curricular-instructional gatekeepers” (Thornton, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b & 2001c; Parker, 1987; Parker & McDaniel, 1992). The implication is that as “gatekeepers”, teachers then determine consciously or otherwise, their students’ access to knowledge and bound their opportunities to learn (Fickel, 2000; Kennedy, 1990; Marsh, 1997; Parker, 1987; Thornton, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b & 2001c). Hence, teachers are the direct context that links the intended with the enacted and finally, the experienced curricula.

The Concept of Citizenship and Citizenship Education

Citizenship can be described as membership in a political community and entity (Barbalet, 1999). A citizen also has the right to influence the decision-making process by which that citizen is governed. Since citizens are necessarily citizens of a particular political entity, there may be legitimate variations in citizenship depending on the values and traditions of the society. Basic to understanding citizenship is that it has to be grounded in democracy. Citizenship falls along two divides – the liberal individualist tradition which views citizenship as essentially a private conception, and the civic republican conception which is community-based (Hill & Lian, 1995; Oldfield, 1998).

Citizenship is contested along a continuum that ranges from minimal to maximal interpretations (Kerr, 1999, 2003; McLaughlin, 1992). The location of citizenship on the continuum is related to underlying political beliefs and contrasting interpretations of democracy. Minimal interpretations define citizenship narrowly. Citizenship is a formal status, and it is seen in formal, legal and juridical terms. It primarily focuses on the question of who qualifies to be a citizen (Kerr, 1999, 2003; McLaughlin, 1992; Hill & Lian, 1995). This leads to narrow, formal approaches to citizenship education which is largely content-led and knowledge-based, with an emphasis on transmission of information. It lands itself to didactic teaching and learning approaches.

In contrast, maximal interpretations define citizenship more broadly. Citizenship is not merely about formal rights, but being a member of a community with a shared democratic culture, participating and contributing to the integration of the society (Barbalet, 1988; Kerr, 1999, 2003; McLaughlin, 1992; Hill & Lian, 1995). Citizenship education aims not just to inform but to use the information to help students understand and enhance their capacity to participate. It lands itself to a broad mix of teaching and learning approaches (Kerr, 1999, 2003; McLaughlin, 1992; Navel, Print & Veldhuis, 2002).
Social Studies

Barr, Barth and Shermis’ (1977) approaches to social studies centred around three traditions which include social studies taught as citizenship transmission, social studies taught as social science, and social studies taught as reflective inquiry or thinking. Martorella (1996) extended the Barr, Barth and Shermis’ (1977) classification by adding two more categories, social studies taught as informed criticism and social students taught as personal development.

Engle and Ochoa (1988) argued that two dimensions are central to the education of citizens in any democracy. They are socialization and countersocialization. Socialization is a process by which the society inducts young children into its customs, values and behaviors as a way of continuing existing traditions and practices. Children are thus taught to fit into the existing social order. The traditions and values transmitted are often grounded in the past experience of the society. But socialization must be balanced by countersocialization, which emphasizes independent thinking and responsible social criticism. The latter is a process of expanding the individual’s ability to be a rational, thoughtful, and independent citizen by promoting active and vigorous reasoning. This includes reappraising what has been learned through socialization. It does not reject what has been learned early in life, but calls for a thoughtful assessment of traditional values in a changing context.

Given that teacher influence over what is taught is profound, it is therefore imperative to explore how teachers understand citizenship education and social studies, and how these understandings influence their citizenship educator roles.

Methodology

Using the qualitative case study method in a naturalistic setting, this study explores eight teachers understanding of the subject matter of social studies and citizenship education, and how this influences their classroom practice. Multiple data are collected from January through September 2004 from interviews, observations and the study of documents for methodological triangulation.

The research is located in four secondary schools, all but one are full government schools. The four schools are chosen for their neighbourhood school status, relative stability in staffing and curriculum, geographical location and willingness to participate in the study. Eight teachers were purposively selected and invited to participate in the study. The teacher is the unit of analysis. This article reports on the findings related to two social studies teachers, ‘Carolyn Chan’ and ‘David Soh’. A total of 17 lessons were observed and 12 interviews conducted for both teachers. The data from each case study has been analysed by identifying emergent themes and topics in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Case Study Interpretation: ‘Carolyn Chan’

Carolyn Chan is a 44-year-old Chinese female, married with two daughters. She teaches social studies and geography, and is also the Head of the Humanities Department at a government-aided, secondary school. She did her undergraduate studies at the local university, with honours in geography and a major in economics. Subsequently, she was trained to teach geography at the then Institute of Education. As a student, Carolyn also studied in the same school that she teaches now. She saw
teaching in her alma mater as a form of giving back to the school from which she had received much as a student.

Carolyn has been teaching at this school for 18 years and is regarded as a senior member of staff. Teaching is Carolyn’s first and only job so far. For Carolyn, teaching is not just any profession, but a special calling to nurture young people. In congruence with her vision of what it means to be a teacher, she is guided, in teaching, by her philosophy that everybody can learn, only how much effort one puts into the learning.

Understanding of Citizenship, Citizenship Education and Social Studies

Citizenship and Citizenship Education

Carolyn’s understanding of citizenship is reflective of the ‘good citizenship’ model. Carolyn characterized citizenship as being engaged in practice and activity. She focused on contributions and responsibilities to the community. In other words, it is a conception of an active and participative citizenship. This theme is reverberated throughout the interviews and in practice. She believed that active citizenship must be structured for. The subject matter for citizenship education should be real issues relevant to living in society. The purpose is to keep students informed and engaged in the issues of the day.

Carolyn takes an expanding environment view of citizenship and citizenship education, starting from home to nation. Citizenship is also understood as tied to a physical location, the place where she was born and grew up in. Significantly, it is also about an emotional tie with the nation. At the end of the day, citizens must feel a sense of belonging to the nation, and a sense of conviction for the nation.

Carolyn’s conception of the good citizen is also about being an informed and thinking citizen, one who takes an interest in public affairs, and is able to think critically about issues, reason and thereafter make informed decisions. In her definition of citizenship as ‘giving back to the community’, she described it in terms of ‘contributions’, and ‘how to be a useful person’, than mere duties and obligations. These descriptions suggest a thoughtful and autonomous citizen who is free to decide on his/her course of action.

Citizenship education is not confined to any particular subject. While some subjects such as social studies and humanities may land better to dealing with citizenship related issues, citizenship education should be schoolwide, and can occur and integrated in any subject. Finally, Carolyn shared that in her views of things, she is influenced by her religion, Christianity. This includes the way that she understands citizenship.

Social Studies

Carolyn sees social studies as mainly current affairs, the subject matter is real, relevant and ongoing. Social studies are the issues of the day that affect us as members living in this society. The subject matter of social studies is therefore functional, useful and applicable in helping us go about our lives. However, Carolyn believes that to study the current issues, it must begin with the historical
background that will help students understand the issues in their contexts. The subject matter of social studies however, is oriented towards the current and future rather than the past.

Carolyn also thinks about social studies in terms of its nature and purpose that is, decision-making. In this context, she understands social studies is driven by skills and processes. The focus is on understanding issues, developing higher order thinking, and a questioning attitude. Thus, questions in social studies should be open-ended and not have fixed answers.

While she agrees on the benefits of studying social studies, nevertheless she feels that the subject matter may be too difficult for students because of their immaturity and transitional period from the lower to the upper secondary examination syllabuses. Furthermore, because the subject matter emphasizes breadth and given the constraint of time, she often has to simply skim through issues, leaving her feeling dissatisfied with her teaching.

While she understood that social studies was introduced in the context of NE, she was not able to articulate explicitly the connection between social studies and citizenship education. If she did make any connection, it was more tacit. She also appeared not to understand that NE is the form in which citizenship education takes in Singapore.

Carolyn Chan: Citizenship for Useful Contribution

For Carolyn citizenship education is not something purposeful in her social studies lessons. It is a naturally occurring process. If she teaches citizenship, she does so unknowingly because it happens that the purpose and nature of citizenship education also coincide with both her philosophy and beliefs about education, as well as her understanding of what social studies is about.

In the day-to-day teaching, citizenship education was built into her choice of approach, instructional strategies and activities. Her pedagogical preferences were structured discussions and small group work. She often provided opportunities for students to take responsibility of their own learning. However, this was not in a free-flow context, instead she was also diligent in monitoring and facilitating her students’ learning. It was noteworthy that she was conscious of using classroom time well.

Her choice of instructional strategies and learning tasks focused on two aspects, they are, firstly, developing and increasing students’ capacity to think critically and to reason; and secondly, providing opportunities for students to work interdependently. Integral to her teaching are values including openness, trust, mutual respect, fair play, responsibility, freedom and the right to express one’s views and be listened to, critical thinking and reasoning. She tried to maintain such a climate in her social studies classes.

Issues about citizenship are raised only where the topic lands itself to the discussion, she would not otherwise ‘deliberately talk about it’. Citizenship is thus an implicit part of her teaching practice. It is citizenship education by coincidence than purposeful. Citizenship education is not the focus of social studies, learning the skills to handle the questions and tackle the issues for the exams is. She prefers to teach through sources and documents as they land well to teaching students skills, processes and exposing them to different perspectives to issues. Interestingly, even when exams frame her
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teaching, she gives a lot more space and time for citizenship education through social studies in practice than she claimed in the interviews.

Case Study Interpretation: ‘David Soh’

David Soh is a 34-year old single Chinese male. He teaches social studies and history at a fully government school. David studied at an American university, majoring in history and Asian studies. Teaching was not his first choice, and he came into it in a ‘roundabout’ way. He worked in the food catering industry for three years, but eventually found the profit-driven environment meaningless. He finally decided to teach, having seen the outside world. He enrolled for the teacher training course, and was posted to Eastern Secondary School upon completion of the course. Four years have passed and he still continues to enjoy teaching.

David is acutely aware of his Peranakan ethnicity, especially because he spoke fluent Malay and not Chinese. He was conscious of the fact that he failed his Chinese language as a student, and considered himself a ‘victim’ of the mother tongue policy. This experience has affected his worldview. As a consequence, he feels a sense of detachment from Singapore. On the other hand, his experience and resilience have helped to give him a more macro view of life, beyond the grades and exams. He is guided by the philosophy, ‘never mind if you fail, just do it’, in his approach to teaching.

Understanding of Citizenship, Citizenship Education and Social Studies

Citizenship and Citizenship Education

Citizenship is understood in terms of the history and development of Singapore. A key aspect of citizenship education is learning about the country’s past in order to appreciate the present. The subject matter is therefore historical and chronological in nature. Specifically, the focus of citizenship education is to teach about the achievements of the Singapore government. Hence, it feels somewhat like propaganda because it is skewed to the government’s perspective. In congruence with NE, the form which citizenship education takes in Singapore, David understands citizenship education to be both nationalistic and communitarian in orientation. He explained that he had been socialized to think from the perspective of the country through education and National Service.

It is noteworthy that David’s understanding of citizenship veers away from the political dimension. Instead, he understands citizenship and citizenship education from a cultural dimension. A recurring theme in his understanding of citizenship is that of racial harmony. He sees teaching the value of racial harmony especially important in a globalised and diverse world especially in the present context of terrorism.

In David’s conception of citizenship, the government dominates and the image is of a paternalistic government who thinks it knows best. Consequently, David saw citizenship in Singapore as restrictive. In the same vein, citizenship is characterized as duties. National service is apparently a major influence in the way he views citizenship. In line with his view of citizenship as a duty, David’s conception of citizenship education is therefore to develop a passive form of good citizenship for Singapore. Citizenship education seems to be about developing the individual in the personal
dimension. The good citizen is also one who abides by the laws and is socialized into the values of the country.

Social Studies

The theme of relevancy recurs in David’s understanding of the subject matter of social studies. Social studies issues are about everyday living and the subject matter comprises lived experiences. In the same way, social studies is a study that bears personal relevancy, for it is not a study about others, but us, as members of the society living and experiencing the issues and policies. Thus, the subject matter is functional, useful and applicable in a practical sense. In addition, the subject matter is current and dynamic. The best source of information for social studies is the newspapers. While David understands the subject matter of social studies to be current real life issues, he also sees social studies as similar to history. What he means is that the subject matter of social studies and history are similar in terms of the events studied, as well as the themes and developments, but the approach to the subject matter is different.

Because of the constant need to draw lessons for Singapore, David feels that social studies is somewhat propaganda in nature. Furthermore, so much of the subject matter focused on Singapore and for the purpose of NE. He feels that the subject matter is presented in an uncritical and biased manner, and this contradicts the objectives of social studies which is to develop more thinking in students. Moreover, because of propaganda and exams purposes, the subject matter is presented in a simplistic manner. Complexities are ironed out, issues are made more straightforward, and this takes the exploratory nature off the subject. At the end of the day, students go away with a superficial understanding of issues, sometimes even a misunderstood understanding.

David sees social studies as a vehicle for citizenship education. He relates social studies explicitly to NE. As citizenship education, its purpose is socialization. For David, he emphasizes multiracialism and social integration as discussed in an earlier section. Asked if he saw citizenship education through social studies as a way of developing a more participative citizenship, he was skeptical partly because of his own view of citizenship, and also because of the constraint of time. But he understands that through social studies, students become more informed of the issues of the day, and this may spark interest in students to take a more proactive stance towards issues in society.

Because the substance of social studies are current issues in society, it lands well to teaching students to question and take a more critical stance towards these issues that affect them. It is noteworthy that to David, developing the thinking individual through social studies is not considered from a societal perspective, rather it is for the purpose of personal development.

David Soh: Citizenship for Personal Development

Citizenship education through social studies is helping students to connect what they have learnt with issues out there in society. David seeks to bridge the gap between what is studied and the real world in his teaching in every possible way. Experiencing, seeing, making sense, are keywords in David’s teaching of citizenship education through social studies. Consequently, fieldtrip is his pedagogical preference.
It is noteworthy that David’s purpose of developing informed citizens is for personal development and less for participation in the community. He related learning the skill of evaluation to personal needs such as purchasing a handphone, car, watch or insurance. The importance of being aware of the issues of the day was explained in terms of how students may use the knowledge for their own personal or family needs in future, such as making decisions about educational needs of their children, or when they travel overseas they would be more knowledgeable of the cultures, history and people. He is skeptical about active citizenship, advocating a more passive conception of good citizenship, one who minds his/her own business and does not cause trouble for society, obeys the rules, do well in his/her job, for example, if one is a student, study hard.

In the day-to-day teaching, David tries to make his social studies lessons experiential and connected to the outside world through a variety of means. A key aspect of David’s teaching is his attention to multiple intelligence. He emphasizes the visual aspect such as using pictures and mindmaps. This is influenced by his personal preference for learning. David incorporates newspapers, uses the internet and video clips, gets students to mindmap, do collage work, brings in artifacts and photographs for students to feel and see, and also uses dramatic techniques such as skits in his lessons.

It is observed that David likes to give students groupwork activities. David’s groupwork was relatively unstructured, and usually conducted in a freeflow context that gave students the opportunity to make sense of concepts and issues themselves. The message he sent out was that personal meaning-making is as valid and significant as that put forth by the textbooks. Similarly, exam scores are not David’s focus. Instead, he is cultivating a personal interest for the subject.

David agrees that citizenship should be taught through social studies. For the lessons observed, David approached citizenship education from a historical perspective, usually explaining the events chronologically. His emphasis was knowledge. Citizenship-related issues were usually embedded in the events and not outrightly dealt with. Although he talked about the importance for students to interact with other races and speak the common English language especially for social studies lessons, it was however observed that he was not strict in implementing these.

David maintains a positive and open attitude with his students in his lessons. Much of what he models and shares with his students are derived from his own personal struggles and experiences. It is noteworthy that alongside a formal, official view of citizenship education which focuses on Singapore history, NE and the exams, approached from a historical perspective, and knowledge-driven, David shares with students his personal experiences as a Singapore citizen living in the society.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data on the two teachers and their approaches to citizenship education through the vehicle of social studies suggest that each sees citizenship differently. While both their conceptions of citizenship are based on the good citizenship model, and seeks to continue the existing order. The difference is that Carolyn advocates an active stance that focuses on useful contribution to society, while David takes a passive stance, focusing on personal development and fulfilment. Both conceptions are also similar in that they are grounded in the civic republican tradition (Hill & Lian, 1995; Oldfield, 1996). In the civic republican tradition, it is an essential part of citizenship to participate in the government of the political community. Such a participation is regarded not simply
as a privilege, but as a duty. Not to engage in the practice is, in important sense, not to be a citizen. As a consequence, the involvement of the individual in the affairs of the nation is considered to be of crucial importance. This is characteristic of both Carolyn’s and David’s understanding of citizenship; Carolyn conceptualised citizenship in terms of contribution to society, while David, in terms of duty to the nation. However, David shows a more liberal individualist tendency than Carolyn.

Similarly, both conceptualise citizenship education quite differently too. For both Carolyn and David, citizenship education involved a tacit process. Carolyn does not see citizenship education as a purpose of social studies. But in the way that she characterizes social studies, and understand its subject matter, they are in congruence with her understanding of citizenship and citizenship education. She focuses her teaching of social studies on skills and issues. As a result, she is more explicit in her teaching of citizenship education through social studies. However, this is not because of any overt intentions, but due largely to the fact that it coincides with her philosophy of teaching and understanding of the subject matter of social studies. On the other hand, David links social studies to citizenship education explicitly. But for David citizenship education through the vehicle of social studies is also a more generalized process, as his teaching focuses largely on content and events, informed by a historical, chronological approach.

In terms of characterizing instruction, White (1992) observed that very few subjects could be classified into either one approach or the other. It is usually the case that instruction is characterized by some combination of the approaches. Similarly, the two teachers’ instruction is characterized by a combination of approaches. Carolyn’s instruction is more like a Reflective Inquiry/Citizenship Transmission in approach, and David’s instruction is a Personal Development/Citizenship Transmission approach.

A full discussion of the teachers’ gatekeeping tendencies goes well beyond the scope of the present article. But what is evident is that even though social studies is a national and examinable subject, both teachers conceptualized and characterized social studies differently due largely to teachers’ gatekeeping. Both teachers’ gatekeeping tendencies are more unintentional and unconscious in nature. They teach from different frames of reference, and therefore give different purposes for citizenship education in their teaching. In this article, we suggest that what appears most influential is the subject matter understanding.

The data suggest that the way citizenship education is taught through social studies is very much influenced by how the teachers understand the subject matter of citizenship and social studies. In this case, both teachers understand citizenship and its relationship to social studies quite differently. Perhaps, this could be a result of their limited understanding of what citizenship is in a democracy. Given that Singapore is a pragmatic and authoritarian state, citizenship-related issues are seldom discussed. If discussed, it would be skewed towards more pragmatic issues, such as economic ‘bread and butter’ matters. Consequently, citizens have a limited view of citizenship. Furthermore, with the changing global and local contexts, varying understanding and conceptions may emerge. Similarly, teachers have a limited understanding of the nature and purpose of social studies, beyond the fact that it is organized around the NE messages. In the context of different personal backgrounds, this will lead to varying approaches to social studies. Given that the way citizenship education is taught in schools will have an important impact on the ability of individuals to fully function in society, and that social studies is introduced to address key citizenship issues in a changing global and local context,
there needs to be a re-thinking about how citizenship and citizenship education should be introduced for social studies teachers at the pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes.

References


