

**SPECIAL ISSUE: How can social studies relate to youth civic engagement?**

# **How Can Social Studies Relate to Youth Civic Engagement?**

## **Preparation for Informed Civic Participation Through an Inquiry Approach: The Singapore Social Studies Curriculum**

**Min Fui Chee**

Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group, National Institute of Education,  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

### **Abstract**

The term civic engagement is used in many different ways and a wide range of definitions can be found for the concept. Civic engagement can mean personal or collective action and it can include both political and non-political participation. It can be defined simply as a sense of connection to the community and it can also be understood as active participation in a variety of social and political activities initiated by citizens or the government. Effective civic engagement rests on citizens' ability to understand issues from multiple perspectives and possession of civic competencies to act for the common good. This paper presents a case of Social Studies in Singapore. It discusses the affordances and challenges of an inquiry approach that focuses on the development of critical thinking skills to prepare students to be informed, concerned and participative citizens. It suggests that Social Studies, as a classroom subject, can provide opportunities for civic engagement through the discussion of issues.

**Keywords:** civic engagement, social studies, inquiry, critical thinking

### **Introduction**

There is general agreement that civic engagement is needed to develop strong communities and maintain healthy democracies. Hence, civic disengagement, particularly amongst youth, is largely considered a cause for concern (Putnam, 1995; Putnam 2000; Mann & Patrick, 2000; Youniss et al., 2002; Balsano, 2005; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006; Coley & Sum, 2012). This means that the development of civically engaged citizens is one of the most important goals of citizenship education.

Students can develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills for civic engagement through their experiences and relationships in multiple settings – family, peer and social groups, as well as school (Alviar-Martin, Ho, Sim, & Yap, 2012). Knowledge and attitudes may also be shaped through social media and online civic communities. That being said, school is “the first sustained experience of the public arena” (Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim, & Yap, 2011, p. 206) for most students. The fostering of civic engagement can be done through different ways in the school context (Kahne et al., 2006; Reichert & Print, 2018). Programmes like service learning, action civics,

community volunteering and involvement, political simulations, participation in school elections and co-curricular activities provide opportunities for active participation (Lin, 2013; Quinn & Bauml, 2018; Sim & Chow, 2018). Classroom subjects like Civics and Social Studies and those that focus on character education also play a key role in preparing students for civic engagement (Sim & Chow, 2018; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019).

## **Civic Engagement**

The term civic engagement is used in many different ways and a wide range of definitions can be found for the concept. In describing civic engagement, definitions may emphasize type of activity, purpose or organization. Civic engagement can mean community service or political activity, it can include aims to solve problems or to effect social change and it can encompass both personal and collective action (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Hyton, 2018). It can take place within acceptable structures or it can challenge existing norms. Adler and Goggin (2005) proposed that civic engagement consists of community and political activities and one can situate these activities on a continuum from the informal/private individual realm to the formal/public collective arena.

Besides action, scholars have also broadened the scope of civic engagement to encompass other dimensions including attitudes, future intentions, and skills (See Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015). Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner and Lerner (2010) conceptualized civic engagement as an integrated construct comprising civic participation, a sense of civic duty, civic skills and neighborhood social connection. This conceptualization places importance on connection and commitment to the community, besides action. The idea of connection can also be found in the work of McCoy and Scully (2002) who stated that civic engagement “implies meaningful connections among citizens, issues, institutions and the political system...it implies voice and agency...” (p. 118).

Definitions may differ due to the “perspectives and interests of the definer” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 238) as scholars from different fields emphasize elements of interest in their disciplines, their particular research or are guided by their theoretical perspectives. Stefaniak, Bilewicz and Lewicka (2017) in a study relating the learning of local history to place attachment, civic engagement and social trust defined civic engagement as “actions undertaken by people in order to solve community problems and improve the well-being of the local residents and the community in general” (p. 219). Mitra and Serriere (2015) in advocating civic engagement opportunities for elementary students defined civic engagement as “a particular form of agency—a way in which young people take individual or collective action that works toward improving identified issues of concern in a classroom, school, or community” (p. 3). Taking a critical perspective, they argued that civic engagement includes attention to power relationships and social injustice.

The diversity in definitions is also a result of different understandings of what good or effective citizenship means and the competing aims of citizenship education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; McCowan, 2009). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conceptualized three types of citizens – the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen and the justice-oriented citizen. Each category is associated with a particular form of civic engagement which differs in terms of initiative, mode of participation and the issues of interest. The personally responsible citizen volunteers in the community, largely as an individual, in times of need. The participatory citizen takes greater initiative in civic affairs and engages in collective action. The justice-oriented citizen would go further to “critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective

strategies for change that challenge injustice” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 243). The justice-oriented citizen takes action for structural change.

Civic engagement is valued as it contributes to the empowerment of citizens. Empowered and active citizens rely less on the government. Civically engaged citizens are more connected to society and as a result, greater social trust and solidarity can develop (Putnam, 1995). McCowan (2009) argued that “participation can be seen as a valuable experience of human development in itself” (p. 16). Hence, civic engagement does not just result in collective benefits, it can also contribute to the growth of the individual citizen.

In summary, the varied definitions suggest that at a minimal level, civic engagement can be understood as a sense of connection to, and an interest in the community. In a broader sense, it includes attitudes, intentions, competencies and active participation in a variety of non-political and political activities initiated by individual citizens or groups in order to improve or change society. One can be civically engaged at several levels from the immediate to the wider community. Civic engagement is sometimes used interchangeably with civic participation. Adler and Goggin’s (2005) conceptualization of a continuum and Zaff et al.’s (2010) integrated construct support a distinction between civic engagement and civic participation. Civic engagement appears to be the broader concept that encompasses civic participation.

How can Social Studies relate to civic engagement? This paper presents a case of Social Studies in Singapore to explore how Social Studies can relate to civic engagement. The Singapore Social Studies curriculum envisions a form of civic engagement that is more aligned to Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) concept of the participatory citizen. The aim of the curriculum is to prepare students to be informed, concerned and participative citizens by using the inquiry approach with a focus on critical thinking (Ministry of Education, 2016b). It “seeks to inculcate in students a deeper understanding of the values that define the Singapore society” (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 2) and to develop citizens who will take action to improve society based on existing values. Singapore’s history and the multiracial and multi-religious nature of its society have contributed to an emphasis on the development of a common identity and on maintaining social stability and harmony.

As part of the inquiry approach, students are encouraged to examine issues from multiple perspectives. This paper suggests that with a focus on issues discussion, Social Studies can be an avenue for a limited form of civic engagement in the classroom, besides developing civic competencies for active citizenship in the future.

### **The Development of Social Studies in Singapore**

The purpose of Social Studies is generally agreed to be citizenship education. However, the nature of the subject can differ depending on the orientation towards particular visions of citizenship and competing ideas about the choice of content and pedagogy most appropriate for citizenship education (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans, 2004; Clark & Case, 2008). It can also vary because of the specific role that the subject plays in the overall school curriculum.

In Singapore, Social Studies differs in its nature and content for the primary and secondary levels and secondary students in different tracks experience different curricula<sup>1</sup>. Social Studies at the secondary level for students in the Express and Normal Academic streams is a relatively new school subject. Social Studies at the primary level has a longer history.

Social Studies was introduced in the primary school for students from primary four (10 years old) up to

primary six (12 years old) from the early 1980s with the aim of preparing students to participate effectively in society (Fang, 2002). The subject mainly introduces children to the history and geography of Singapore as well as the customs and practices of the different ethnic groups in the country. The importance of harmonious living in an ethnically diverse society and an appreciation of the constraints facing the island-nation are key themes as children learn about how the country's various needs are met. They are also introduced to the Southeast Asia region. The subject plays an important role in preparing students for the study of the Humanities in secondary school. It is not an examinable subject at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). An extension of this content made up lower secondary Social Studies for students in the Normal Technical stream. For these students, Social Studies was a two-year programme<sup>2</sup>.

A key development impacting the subject of Social Studies came in 1997 with the introduction of National Education. National Education is a citizenship education initiative which was introduced due to concerns that the young in Singapore did not have a good understanding of the country's journey to independence and the challenges of nation building (Sim & Adler, 2004). It aims to develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future of the country (Ministry of Education, 1997). It also aims to nurture a strong national identity and a sense of belonging to the country in the face of rapid globalization. Values deemed to have been responsible for Singapore's achievements are emphasized— racial harmony, equality, meritocracy and self-reliance. These values and the aims of National Education are reflected in six messages. They are:

- Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong
- We must preserve racial and religious harmony
- We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility
- No one owes Singapore a living
- We must ourselves defend Singapore
- We have confidence in our future

(Committee on National Education, 2007, p. 7)

National Education was infused in all subjects as well as in the informal curriculum. A community involvement programme and learning journeys to key heritage and government institutions were part of the initiative (Committee on National Education, 2007). At the primary level, Social Studies began to be taught from primary one up to primary six. A major change came at the upper secondary level where Social Studies was introduced as a compulsory and examinable subject in 2001. The content of the subject then consisted of case studies built around themes and issues (e.g. conflict and co-operation, harmony and discord, growth of nations) that were considered important to the country and source analysis was a key element in the subject. Higher order thinking skills were emphasized as assessment objectives included ability to interpret and evaluate sources (Sim, 2001).

This new subject has been considered significant from the perspective of the development of citizenship education in Singapore. Sim and Adler (2004) pointed out that with the creation of Social Studies, there is a break from past practice which closely integrated moral education with citizenship education. This separation creates opportunities to explore conceptions of citizenship that are not specifically focused on the good citizen as a morally upright person. As thinking skills are a major feature of the subject, Sim and Adler stated that “this suggests the recognition that to develop more thinking citizens, social studies must be taught apart from an explicitly moralizing context, and in a context in which divergent thinking and views are tolerated” (p. 165).

To date, the Social Studies syllabus has undergone several revisions. The emphasis on source analysis and higher order thinking remains and a comprehensive inquiry approach has been conceptualized and described in some detail. At present, the syllabus for the primary, secondary normal technical as well as normal academic and express streams share similar aims in developing the informed, concerned and participative citizen through an inquiry approach. At the secondary level, the curriculum is centered around questions and issues pertaining to citizenship and governance, living in a diverse society, and globalization for students in the express and normal academic streams (Ministry of Education, 2016b). For students in the normal technical stream, the issues include those pertaining to living in a multicultural society, resolving conflict and building peace, protecting the environment and caring for society (Ministry of Education, 2016a). There is strong emphasis on considering the multiple perspectives inherent in complex issues before reaching conclusions that are well-reasoned. There is also provision for students to conduct investigations into issues of their choice besides the pre-selected issues in the curriculum<sup>3</sup>. At the primary level, while the content is not designed around issues, inquiry questions guide teaching and learning and students are encouraged to take action to improve society (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The following section lays out the aims of the curriculum as they are expressed in the Secondary Express/Normal Academic syllabus document of 2016.

*Aims related to an informed citizen*

Students will:

- understand their identity as Singaporeans with a global outlook;
- understand different perspectives;
- view the world with an understanding of the Singapore perspective;
- apply reflective thought in making quality decisions;
- analyse, negotiate and manage complex situations; and
- evaluate information, consider different viewpoints and exercise discernment in reaching well-reasoned conclusions and making responsible decisions.

*Aims related to a concerned citizen*

Students will:

- have a sense of belonging to their community and nation;
- appreciate the importance of engaging in issues of societal concern;
- be committed to building social cohesion by appreciating diversity in society; and
- have an awareness of the ethical considerations and consequences of decision-making.

*Aims related to a participative citizen*

Students will:

- be motivated to identify issues of concern and take action;
- be resilient in addressing concerns of the community or society in spite of challenges faced; and
- be empowered to take personal and collective responsibility for effecting change for the good of society, and serve to make a positive difference to others.

(Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 3)

The articulation of these aims is a significant development as they represent a stronger emphasis on

active participation compared to the past. The aims also signal the importance of citizen initiative and action to effect change and a recognition of the need for thinking citizens in an increasingly complex world.

### **Developing the Informed, Concerned and Participative Citizen: The Inquiry Approach**

The syllabus recommends that Social Studies be taught through an inquiry approach. The four main elements of this approach are questions, evidence, reflection and knowledge construction. Inquiry is first and foremost, driven by questions generated by teachers and developed from student interest and curiosity. According to the syllabus, these questions will be answered through a critical examination of evidence which will lead to the development of a working hypothesis. The syllabus recommends attention to the “double movement of reflection” (Dewey, 1991, p. 79) where students move “back and forth” between the evidence and the hypothesis, reexamining existing evidence and searching for new evidence in light of the hypothesis and then further refining the hypothesis until a defensible and robust conclusion is reached. In this way, students construct their own understandings rather than passively receive information (Ministry of Education, 2016b).

The syllabus suggests that teachers take students through an inquiry process or cycle comprising the following stages (see Ministry of Education, 2016b).

#### *Sparkling curiosity about issues*

-In the initial stage, teachers arouse students’ curiosity about issues, identify or develop questions with students and get them to be aware of their own assumptions and existing views.

#### *Gathering data*

-Students are encouraged to gather information and learn more about the relevant issues through studying multiple sources reflecting diverse perspectives. Where relevant, they may gather data through observations and interviews.

#### *Exercising reasoning*

-Students reason, and think critically about the diverse range of sources. Through these thinking processes, they develop informed conclusions. They learn to make responsible decisions and justify their opinions based on reason.

#### *Reflective thinking*

-Reflection should be present throughout the different stages of the inquiry process. But it is also the culminating or final stage of the inquiry as students are led to reflect on the entire process and their new understandings.

Discussion is a key pedagogy in the inquiry approach, particularly in the exercising reasoning stage. Although, Social Studies may be limited in providing sufficient avenues for social action and needs other supporting programmes to fully develop participative citizenship, well-facilitated discussions of significant public issues provide a platform for civic engagement at the classroom level. Perspective taking, critical thinking and discussion with diverse peers have been identified as civic skills (Van Camp & Baugh, 2016). Studies have found that the discussion of issues with attention to multiple perspectives can develop civic consciousness and attitudes for eventual civic participation (Hahn, 2001; McCoy & Scully, 2002; Toney-Purta, 2002; Lenzi et al., 2014).

## **Issues and Challenges of Inquiry and Critical Thinking for Informed, Concerned and Participative Citizenship**

At the core of the inquiry approach is the development of critical thinking. There are, however, different conceptions of critical thinking and what it means to be “a thinking citizenry” (Baildon & Sim, 2009, p. 408). The curriculum envisions critical thinking predominantly as a process involving particular dispositions, higher order thinking skills and the exercise of reasoning, judgment and reflection (Ennis, 1987; Garcia & Michaelis, 2001; Case & Daniels, 2008). Baildon and Sim (2009, p. 411) argued for critical thinking as “historically and culturally situated” critical social practices where issues of power, ideology and official knowledge are questioned. In their study, they found that teachers felt that there were limitations to this practice of critical thinking in the Social Studies classroom. Feelings of constraint were related to teachers’ perception of ‘out of bounds markers’ in social critique, their understanding of their roles as politically neutral civil servants and the need to maintain social harmony.

Tan (2017) discussed the relationship between cultural norms and understandings of critical thinking suggesting that in a culture that respects teacher authority and values the maintenance of social harmony, expressions and ways of developing critical thinking that are more co-operative than those that are more adversarial and confrontational are preferred. These studies indicate that how teachers conceptualize critical thinking and how they teach critical thinking needs to be further understood in the Singapore Social Studies classroom in the context of the present curriculum aims and in light of the value placed on maintaining social harmony.

The potential of the inquiry approach and critical thinking can be limited by the interpretation of, and translation of curriculum aims into grade level objectives and by how content, questions and issues are framed (Kho, 2017). It can also be limited by how practitioners, when interpreting and enacting the curriculum, perceive the extent of their autonomy and agency.

Studies so far, and interactions with teachers, strongly suggest that the demands of a high-stakes examination rather than the aims of the curriculum exert the dominant influence on the enacted curriculum at the secondary level. Social Studies is examinable at the O-level and this signals importance ensuring that the subject enjoys high status and priority in the school curriculum. However, according to Baildon and Sim (2009), examinations can “distort the skills and processes they are intended to develop” (p. 414). In their study, it was found that teachers felt that there was not enough time to teach for critical thinking. A teacher “noted how teaching critical thinking has been reduced to formulae by teachers to help their students deal with the rigorous assessment modes and guidelines of the subject” (Baildon & Sim, 2009, p. 414). This confirmed findings in an earlier study where teachers reported that “they were reluctant to discuss controversial issues, or to examine primary source material, without giving their students a template, a way of thinking, that would guide them in answering challenging questions on the exam” (Adler & Sim, 2005, p. 6). Hence, examinations present a dilemma. They send a message about the importance of a subject but high stakes examinations can end up promoting individualism and a competitive culture. The development of a concerned and participative citizen requires emphasis on co-operation, and consideration of the common good. Examination driven instructional practices are not likely to promote the development of civic competence (Alviar-Martin et al., 2012).

The primary curriculum, meanwhile, suffers from the opposite problem. Not being an examinable subject at the PSLE means lower status and priority and can mean that the subject sometimes gives way to

examinable subjects in terms of curriculum time. Although the absence of a high-stakes examination allows space for teachers to experiment and accept non-standard responses from students, there is also the “tendency to not teach what is not assessed” (Adler & Sim, 2005, p. 6).

Time, knowledge and skills are needed for teachers to teach with the inquiry approach and to develop critical thinking for citizenship. Baildon and Sim (2009) commented that the implementation of a curriculum centered on inquiry and critical thinking “required time and space for professional reflection” (pp. 413-414). Discussion is an important pedagogy for inquiry and for reasoning about issues. The difficulties and complexities of facilitating classroom discussions have been highlighted by Social Studies scholars (Parker 2001; Beck, 2005; Hess, 2010) and research have found that most discussions are recitations (Larson, 1997; Wilen, 2004; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Teaching with discussion is challenging and requires both subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Chee, 2017).

Teachers’ conceptions of citizenship also play a role in how they teach for civic participation. Sim, Chua and Krishnasamy, (2017) found three conceptions of citizenship in a study of 14 teachers - character-driven, social participatory and critically reflexive. Only two teachers were found to be social participatory. These teachers participated in civic activities and also incorporated active citizenship in their lessons. For example, students engaged in inquiry fieldwork in the community and took part in fundraising. The majority of the teachers studied had a character driven conception of citizenship. Three teachers had a critically reflexive conception but they did not advocate active civic participation although their lessons encouraged students to question existing power structures and the official construction of knowledge. In reality, teachers themselves may lack experience of civic participation and may not feel equipped to guide students to be active citizens (Adler & Sim, 2005). They are also not likely to be able to find time for civic participation given the heavy work demands of the teaching profession (Sim et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Social Studies can play an important role in civic engagement depending on the nature of its content and pedagogy. This is clear from a 2011 study by Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim and Yap who found significant disparities in the civic knowledge and sense of civic efficacy of students who went through different curriculum for Social Studies in Singapore. A Social Studies curriculum taught through an inquiry approach with discussion of public issues provides young people with opportunities for face-to-face discussion with diverse fellow citizens in an environment that is facilitated by a knowledgeable adult. It provides opportunities for civic engagement at the classroom level. In the case of Singapore, further research is needed to understand teachers’ sense of agency and efficacy and to manage the dilemma posed by examinations to fulfil the civic purpose of Social Studies.

## **Notes**

1. There are several pathways in secondary education in Singapore. The Express stream is a four-year programme ending with the O-level examination. Students in the Normal Academic stream sit for an examination in the fourth year and can qualify for the fifth year of study which also leads to the O-level examination. The Normal Technical stream is a four-year course. Entry to these streams is based on performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The Integrated Programme is offered

- to students whose PSLE results qualify them to skip the O-level examination. They take a six-year course ending with the A-level examination or the International Baccalaureate. (For a detailed description of the secondary school pathways see <https://beta.moe.gov.sg/uploads/secondary-school-education-booklet-english.pdf>). This practice of streaming is scheduled to be phased out by 2024 and subject banding where subjects will be taught at different levels will be introduced. For example, a student may pursue one subject at a more advanced level and another at a more basic level (Davie, 2019).
2. At present, the Normal Technical students do four years of Social Studies and the content has been revised. See page 7.
  3. Besides Social Studies, another subject Character and Citizenship Education is also compulsory (Ministry of Education, 2012). Students also go through a Values In Action programme that aims to develop social responsibility. In this programme, students find out community needs and propose improvements. See Tang, F. X., & Lim, M. Z. (2017, July 24). *Values In Action programme: Instilling a sense of duty, empathy*. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/chung-cheng-high-main-lessons-from-butterflies>

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