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“Riding the citizenship wagon”: Citizenship conceptions of social studies teachers in Singapore

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers were either character-driven, social-participatory, or critically-reflexive.
- Teachers in each category observed different types of boundaries.
- Character-driven teachers used a diversity of teaching approaches.
- There were few social-participatory teachers compared to the other two categories.
- Critically-reflexive teachers cared about social justice and were self-critical.

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ABSTRACT

Interest in citizenship has never been higher. However, citizenship is a contested concept. In this qualitative case study, we examined how social studies teachers in Singapore conceptualized citizenship. We found that teachers' understandings generally could be categorized as three conceptions of citizenship - character-driven, social-participatory, and critically-reflexive. Most teachers valued participation at a personal level and a minority valued civic engagement and/or were concerned about injustices and structural analysis. This challenged the perception that issues of ideology and curriculum content are Western concerns. Rather, social justice cuts across all societies, and is also fundamental to Asia and Singapore.

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1. Introduction

Interest in citizenship has never been higher. Politicians of all stripes stress its importance; from those supporting global causes like tackling world poverty, to those concerned with local issues like combating neighborhood crimes. Governments across the world have promoted citizenship in schools, and introduced citizenship tests for immigrants seeking to become naturalized citizens. The recent Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises have also called into question citizenship issues in how various countries responded to these refugees. How has citizenship been conceptualized in response to issues in these troubling contexts? Has citizenship become broader and more inclusive, or has it maintained a parochial and exclusive bent (McLaughlin, 1992)?

Since Singapore attained independence in 1965, there has been a single-minded pursuit of citizenship education, and it has taken many forms over the years for the purpose of nation-building (Chew, 1998; Chia, 2015). The latest initiative is the revamp of the upper secondary social studies curriculum, to “place greater emphasis on promoting active citizenship and critical thinking” (Goy, 2016). This curriculum was implemented in all schools in 2016. Notably, social studies is a major, if not the main source of citizenship education in Singapore (Sim & Print, 2005). Teachers in this study used the mid-term review social studies syllabus implemented in 2013, the curriculum prior to the latest one. The insights gained into social studies teachers' understandings of citizenship of the older syllabus can be useful in preparing teachers to teach the new curriculum.

Abbreviations: SAP schools, Special Assistance Plan schools; MoE, Ministry of Education; PAP, People's Action Party.

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Any curriculum, however well designed, must be implemented to impact students (Fullan, 1999). Teachers implement the curriculum in the classroom, acting as the bridge between the intended and enacted curriculum (Lee & Fouts, 2005). They are not passive recipients of the curriculum, but act according to their beliefs, and their students' needs and responses (Lee, 2012). Several studies (Castro, 2013; Faden, 2012; Sim & Print, 2009) indicated that teachers' conceptualizations of citizenship education influenced their reported and/or their actual practices. As curricular-instructional gatekeepers, they determine the kinds of skills and dispositions privileged in the classroom (Thornton, 1991, 2005). As implementers of the social studies curriculum, teachers are also the key players in citizenship education. Yet the review of social studies research in the latest *Handbook of Research in Teaching* (Barton & Avery, 2016) noted that the role of teachers in citizenship education has received little attention.

But citizenship is not simple and straightforward. It is contested and complex, and can mean different things to different people (Faulks, 2000; Kerr, 2003). Invariably, citizens, even in the same state, will understand citizenship differently (Kymlicka, 1995). As teachers' conceptions of citizenship hold implications, this study examines the following questions: How do teachers conceptualize citizenship? How might one distinguish one conceptualization from another? We situated the study in the broader discourse on citizenship, and used citizenship conceptions from the literature to address the questions.

2. Related literature

2.1. Definition of citizenship

T. H. Marshall (1950) defined citizenship as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed" (pp. 28–29). Citizenship gives membership status and identity to individuals within a political unit, and refers to the rights and obligations that flow from that membership; confers values and rights of participation, and implies a body of common political knowledge (Cogan & Derricott, 2000).

This definition does not cover the complexities of citizenship. Citizenship is now almost exclusively used for belonging to a nation-state, but globalization has increasingly undermined the attachment to nation-state (Turner, 1994). Citizenship is culture-specific, evolving over time, and through communities. Historically, citizenship is often thought to be a Western phenomenon, arising in the early city-states of ancient Greece, with citizens living and participating in the polis (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). According to Lee (2012), citizenship in the Western tradition is fundamentally political, characterized by the state-individual relationship, and concerned with rights and responsibilities. Whereas, citizenship in the Asian tradition is fundamentally relational, concerned with self-cultivation, and harmonious relationships between the self, others, state, and nature. Thus, the good person is a priori to good citizenship, in the same way that citizenship education in Asia foregrounds morality over politics.

However, the distinction between Western and Asian citizenship is now less clear. Globalization has made the world flatter, with transnational flows of people, ideas, media, and technology blurring the lines between what is Western and Asian (Friedman, 2005). Globalists argued that globalization has also facilitated the spread of democracy and a common consumer culture (Fukuyama, 1992; Ohmae, 1990). Currently, there is a majority of 125 electoral democracies out of 195 countries in the world (Puddington & Roylance, 2016), all sharing to some extent common principles of democracy.

Despite the different starting points in Western and Asian citizenship discourses, Lee (2012) argued that all citizenship education have similar intent of political socialization. Attempts at integrating international and local practices have resulted in a hybridized approach to citizenship education in Asia (Kennedy, Lee, & Grossman, 2010; Lee, 2012). To understand citizenship in dichotomous Western and Asian terms is therefore unhelpful. Instead, a ground-up approach to understanding what people think about citizenship would be more insightful in revealing shifts and tensions in citizenship and citizenship education in these "new times."

2.2. Mapping citizenship

Liberal and civic republican traditions. In modern times, citizenship is cast along two contrasting perspectives (Heater, 1999; Kymlicka, 2002). The liberal tradition focuses on the rights that the state guarantees for the individual. To participate is a right, citizens can choose when and whether to be active. It is no derogation from their status if they choose not to be. The attitude towards the collective life is instrumental (Oldfield, 1998). By contrast, the civic republican tradition emphasizes duties of the citizens towards the state, particularly of active participation in decision-making.

The republican tradition regards political participation as key to citizenship (Miller, 2000). Citizens are expected to participate in self-government and demonstrate concern for the common good. Self-government is not conceived in narrow political terms; it "refer[s] to any public tasks and activities that a community wishes to engage in" (Oldfield, 1998, p. 87). Individuals are motivated to participate by a shared, strong element in their personal identity, identifying with the national culture at large. Morality is seen as giving one's service to, and fulfilling one's duties in the political community.

Both these traditions have considerable influence on citizenship education. In the civic republican discourse, education texts and curricula tend to emphasize knowledge related to democratic ideals, and cultural and intellectual heritage (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Community service is used to develop a sense of commitment to community and nation. Liberal texts, on the other hand, tend to promote individual and group rights, with opportunities to participate in school governance and decision-making. Typically, those of civic republican leanings encourage young people to work for the common good, while those of liberal orientation promote intellectual rigor. Abowitz and Harnish (2006) also noted that while scholarly discourse on citizenship is lively and calls for multiple modes of democratic engagement, the taught citizenship curriculum is much narrower.

Minimal and maximal interpretations of citizenship. McLaughlin (1992) distinguished citizenship according to minimal and maximal interpretations, a continuum relating to the elements of identity, virtues, political involvement, and social prerequisites. A minimal interpretation defines citizenship narrowly "in formal, legal, juridical terms" (p. 236), and promotes particular exclusive elitist interests. It leads to narrow, formal approaches to citizenship education that is largely content-led. Instruction is didactic, with little student interaction and initiative. As citizenship education is strongly textbook-based, outcomes are often measured through written exams.

A maximal interpretation defines citizenship broadly, and includes all groups and interests in society. It leads to a broad mixture of formal and informal approaches to citizenship education, with the primary purpose of helping students understand and enhance their capacity to participate as citizens. Instruction focuses on process and content, using a range of didactic and interactive approaches, inside and outside of the classrooms. Students are given

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