

REVIEW ARTICLE

Moral and citizenship education as statecraft in Singapore: a curriculum critique

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This is a brief review of the Civics and Moral Education programme currently in use in Singapore schools. The paper offers an appraisal of the rationale provided in policy statements and of selected official and students' workbook descriptions of curricular content, activities and pedagogic theories. It shows that the Civics and Moral Education programme is more a matter of training students to absorb pragmatic values deemed to be important for Singapore to achieve social cohesion and economic success, rather than moral education as the development of intrinsic commitment to and habituation in the practice of values, defended on autonomous moral considerations and not mere national expediency. Whilst educationists would be inclined to take issue with the programme's ultimate stand on values, they might warm to the pedagogy it prescribes in terms of the need for character-building by practice and experience, and also the importance of reasoning in the resolving of disputes and dilemmas.

A critical review of Moral Education in Singapore, published in this journal (Tan, 1994), indicated that since the late 1980s a common syllabus had been in the process of being developed. This syllabus was to build upon worthwhile elements of previously used civics and moral education syllabuses, as well as upper secondary religious instruction programmes taught to reinforce primary and lower secondary civics and values education. In that review, it was noted that moral and religious teaching was being used to serve Singapore's national pragmatic needs; so, the common syllabus was also to be slanted towards meeting a perceived urgency, in the 1980s, to forge 'social cohesion'. The government had initiated a renewed forging of 'shared values' and five were identified: nation before community and society before self; community support and respect for the individual; the family as the basic unit of

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society; consensus in place of conflict; and racial and religious harmony (Singapore, 1991). The common syllabus was to reflect these values.

This paper is a brief review of this common Civics and Moral Education (CME) curriculum that has been developed and is currently in use in Singapore at primary, secondary and pre-university schooling.¹ It is important to distinguish, at the outset, moral and citizenship *education* from values and citizenship *training* as an instrument of statecraft. Moral education must involve the search for, understanding of and sincere living by moral truths. These make claims upon us in terms of our obligation towards intrinsic moral understanding and behaviour, irrespective of whether or not the latter are also useful in the interest of specific state policies and goals. Now, moral obligations arise in all aspects of one's life, and therefore also in the aspect related to citizenship. Moral education therefore should include citizenship education. All citizens ought to have moral education and live by moral values as a worthwhile way of life, irrespective of questions of utility. But, the use of values teaching as statecraft has no respect for moral truths *per se*. Its measure of all things is not truth, justice and mercy but what works in the interest of 'nation-building'. The possibility of a conflict between moral living and pragmatic state interest would never arise by this measure, as it appraises values only in terms of how they are perceived to subserve state interests. By this measure, there could never be a call to sacrifice national interests for morality's sake.

'National education'

That CME is inclined to be statecraft is evident in its statements of aims and much of its teaching content, and its culmination, at the pre-university schooling, in a national leadership course. The latter has been constructed to dovetail with the focus of a newly instituted 'national education' programme (Lee, 1997). This programme is not an additional formal teaching course, but an integration of all curricular and co-curricular content related to 'national education' with a view to highlighting it in the interest of a more focused and effective citizenship training. The broad aims of 'national education' are for primary pupils to 'love Singapore', secondary pupils to 'know Singapore' and pre-university pupils to 'lead Singapore'. CME culminates, at pre-university schooling, in a 30-hour 'civics syllabus' module (Singapore Ministry of Education (SMOE), 2000a; notice that the 'moral' component of CME is left out in naming the module) entitled Challenge of Leadership (notice that 'civics' is here reduced to mere leadership training). This is evidently in order for CME at this schooling level to merge with national education's aim for pre-university students to learn to 'lead Singapore'. All this tells of CME's underlying politically pragmatic agenda. Indeed, an expressed objective of CME is to integrate 'national education' messages and components into its content.

'National education' arose under circumstances of political exigency. There had been diplomatic friction between Singapore and Malaysia, which Singapore politicians viewed as hangovers of historical events of the 1960s that had led to the expulsion of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia. Speaking with some school

students, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was appalled at their ignorance of even the mere fact that Singapore was once part of Malaysia, let alone the events that led to her expulsion from the Federation.² A committee headed by a top civil servant was appointed with the brief to institute a compulsory national education programme for schools and other education institutions, to focus on the teaching of recent political history. This historical knowledge was thought to be important for young Singaporeans' ability to appreciate the dangers of inter-communal friction, arising from racial and religious sensitivities that had much of their roots in recent political history, still lurking within and without Singapore. So conceived, 'national education' is part of an ongoing politicized campaign of 'total defence', involving physical and ideological training. It was assumed that 'national education' would indisputably show Singaporeans who were at fault, and where the dangers lay, and thereby motivate and equip them to protect the nation. The possibility of complications arising from critical reflection on controversial historical issues was never considered to be a problem. It was assumed that history could be left to tell plain facts.

'Shared values'

Also indicative of its slant towards being a means of statecraft is CME's expressed aim of basing its content on Singapore's 'shared values'. With regard to 'shared values', the issue of whether the values which were considered to be shared were also morally right and true never arose. But it could not be the case that *all* shared values were included; so the selection, if not based upon intrinsic moral grounds and truth, must have been chosen by criteria of utility and expediency in accordance with Singapore's oft-expressed political pragmatism. Now, an ongoing concern that had become urgent, owing in part to the rise of religious fundamentalism among Muslims and Christians, was the forging of the 'social cohesion' that the state had deemed pragmatically important for warding off inter-communal friction. This pragmatic stance at settling questions of validity and worth is in line with CME's aim to foster 'the desired outcomes of education'. The latter phrase is contained in the Singapore Ministry of Education's statements of general objectives and policies (SMOE, 2004). Even at this level, the pertinent issue that what are considered 'desired' outcomes should be proven to be also desirable, or that pragmatically desired things should be proven to be educationally right and wise, was never raised.

Faith in pragmatism has long been ritualized for daily worship by Singapore students. Ever since Singapore became a nation, students have had to make a daily national pledge at assembly, after singing the national anthem before the national flag. Students have had to pledge to be 'one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, *so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation*' (SMOE, Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD), 2000, p. 67; emphasis added). The pledge does not allow for the fact that democratic values might sometimes have to be maintained at the expense of happiness and expediency. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew, founder Prime Minister, had often said, in response to appeals for more freedom and tolerance, that

he stood only for ‘democracy that works’. The pragmatic ultimate objective of the pledge is stressed by the music writer who rendered it into a national song, sung annually at the National Day parade and show, where school pupils participate prominently. The phrase printed in italics is sung as the tune ends in a climactic high-pitch crescendo, in a song that begins comparatively low-keyed.

Primary syllabus

It was to be expected that with such objectives, the specific policies and content of CME would have a decided leaning towards meeting national practical needs. So, under the heading ‘rationale’, the primary CME syllabus (SMOE, 2000b, p. 4) states that ‘the alignment of CME content with national and societal needs is vital ...’ because of ‘the fragility of our country ... with its vulnerabilities and constraints’. This required the cultivation of ‘good habits ... that enable students to work efficiently with others and cope well in times of change and uncertainties’. It also required cultivating ‘one’s loyalty and commitment to the nation’ because of ‘the impact of globalization’ which ‘poses a constant challenge’ to national loyalty. And so, also, under ‘knowledge objectives’ required by CME’s ‘rationale’, understanding of ‘teamwork’ and ‘concerns of the community and ... the ways they could contribute to the community’ and ‘being aware of the ideals of the nation’ loom large and are stated as policy goals (p. 5). At the culmination of a list of skills pupils should be trained in are those that ‘contribute to total defence (of the nation)’. Students are also required to cultivate attitudes which ‘show a sense of belonging and love for Singapore as their homeland’ (p. 6). In all this, that ‘ideals of the nation’ would need moral appraisal in moral and citizenship education, and that students would need in the end to accept such ideals as autonomously understood and morally defensible principles, do not receive due consideration. Like the ‘desired outcomes of education’, it seems that the yardstick of moral worth was only what the nation desires as ideal.

Translating these aims into teaching objectives, five themes are identified, beginning with ‘self’ and, again, culminating with ‘nation’, with ‘family’, ‘school’ and ‘society’ intervening, in that order. By way of explanation, the syllabus states that ‘within the parameters of relationships extending from Self to the Nation, pupils are equipped with knowledge, skills and attitudes that reflect the values and principles deemed important and good, and upheld by society, which include Our Shared Values, Singapore Family Values and the Desired Outcomes of Education’ (SMOE, 2000b, p. 6). That pupils should be morally educated towards being able to autonomously appraise Singapore’s ‘desired’ values and educational outcomes, with the risk that not all such ‘desired’ values might be found to be desirable, has never been a consideration.

Secondary syllabus

This pragmatic national orientation is emphasized even more in the secondary school CME syllabus. In a section on aims (SMOE, 2000c, p. 2), it states the following. It

aims to 'incorporate more concepts and contents that are relevant to meet the changing needs and future challenges of the nation.' 'National Education messages have been infused', specifically 'values and attitudes of responsible citizenship' and 'issues that concern the nation'. The rationale is 'the need to enhance our pupils' sense of emotional bonding and commitment to the community and the nation in the midst of increasing globalization and a borderless world.' They 'need to know and appreciate the uniqueness of Singapore, the struggles and vulnerabilities and the achievements of our nation ... There is also the need to further heighten our pupils' confidence in our nation's future and security. Our pupils have to be provided with opportunities that help them develop instincts for survival and confidence in the future.' 'The overarching goal of CME is to nurture a person of integrity who acts responsibly with the welfare and interests of others and the nation in mind. This is to mould the people who will determine the future of the nation.'

The themes of teaching follow the same order as those of the primary syllabus, starting with 'self' and proceeding through 'family' and 'community', and culminating with 'our nation, our heritage' and the 'challenges ahead'. The last theme is obviously meant to usher pupils into the pre-university level 'civics' module, which, as we have noted, is really a national leadership course. Although labelled Civics, the aims of this module render it only one specific aspect of 'civics', relevant only to those citizens identified for national leadership (SMOE, 2000a). This is frankly admitted in the syllabus' title Challenge of Leadership. The aims are 'to equip our students with the requisite knowledge and skills as future leaders to make sound decisions for the nation', and to 'develop in our students the willingness to take on the responsibility to contribute to shaping the future of our nation.' (p. 2).

The slant towards 'statecraft' becomes very decided in the secondary school CME 'knowledge objectives' statement (SMOE, 2000c, p. 3). The values to be taught are here explicitly stated as only those 'essential to the well-being of our nation'. Pupils are to 'know the people and the events of our nation's past, and their links with the present, the factors that contribute to nation-building, our nation's constraints and vulnerabilities, and how to overcome these constraints, our system of government, the impact and issues of a fast changing world on our nation's survival and success.' In the pupils' books, where these objectives are translated into curricular content and activities, the national pragmatic interest has evidently motivated the inclusion or exclusion of historical persons and events, concepts and values to be featured. For instance, in the Pupils' Book for Secondary Four (for 16-year-old pupils; SMOE CPDD, 2000–2002), where 'our system of government' is featured, there is no attempt to teach a critical awareness of democratic values with which to help pupils appraise the actual system of governance being practised in Singapore. Only a description of the features of the system in practice is given, detailing the functions of each.

This is especially telling when some of those features are peculiar to democracy in Singapore, such as the provision for government approved, non-elected 'nominated members of parliament' and for the election of 'grouped members of parliament' representing grouped constituencies. The rationale and functions of these provisions

are contentious issues, with detractors claiming, despite the official explanations, that they are really strategies meant to offset the swing of votes in recent elections towards whatever political opposition had existed. The perception has been that voters had lately tended to vote opposition candidates at elections only in order to have alternative viewpoints at parliamentary proceedings, and therefore providing for nominated members in parliament would render it unnecessary to elect opposition candidates in order to fulfil that function. And there has been the suspicion that requiring some electoral constituencies to elect a whole team of at least three election candidates, each of a different race to represent one of the three dominant racial groups in Singapore, has the effect of making it difficult for the opposition political parties, which are poorly staffed and lack resources, to compete. Another observation has been that a significant number of previously single constituencies that had supported opposition candidates strongly at previous elections have been subsequently merged with other constituencies under this grouping scheme in order to neutralize the support. Whatever the merit or demerit of such views, the 'depoliticized' teaching of governance in the secondary school should surely not present such debatable and debated features as parts of the normal and accepted process of democracy.

Another example concerns the teaching of 'the people and the events of our nation's past'. Political personages deemed worthy for inclusion as national heroes and paragons of virtue are all People's Action Party (PAP, the ruling party) personnel. Political leaders in office during those tumultuous years of struggling for independent statehood, before the PAP took the reigns of government, do not surface, not even David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister during her period of limited local political participation under the British, and whom Lee Kuan Yew came to regard highly enough in latter years to appoint as ambassador to France. Yet another example of this pro-official bias of CME is its teaching of students to appreciate only political leaders of ability and integrity as an important responsibility of citizenship. Now, in the context of present-day Singapore party politics, it would be taken for granted by pupils that good leaders are by and large those in the PAP, and that Cabinet Ministers had searched exhaustively to identify such people in talent-scarce Singapore. The government's standard response to political opposition has been largely to attack the integrity and competence of aspirants to political opposition.

The syllabus's thematic pattern, recycled several times yearly through primary and secondary schooling, of 'self', 'family', and 'community' preceding 'nation', might seem like disinterested moral and civics education. But it would seem also to subserve national interests when we examine some of the themes in relation to social facts. It might be thought that 'self' is taught in the light of one of the 'shared values' being 'respect of the community for the individual'. Topics like the worth of responsible individualism might then be featured, with due warnings given, say of overly stressing collective interests at the expense of individual development and autonomy. As the syllabus has it, however, 'self' is 'character development'. Now, a person's character is formed in practice as one relates with others within the family, community and nation. Therefore, the theme of 'self', as CME has it, is only the beginning, focusing more on

the development of personal attributes, of teaching the themes of family, community and nation. Now, in a small island state where a strenuously efficient PAP government has found it possible and desirable to exert leadership in all areas of life, it is not surprising if even the themes of family and community cannot be treated free of political leanings. Let us illustrate.

'Singapore family values' have been officially pronounced as counterpoints to undesirable Western individualism and freedom. And so, another of the 'shared values' is 'consensus, not conflict', rather than Western style 'confrontational' democracy. In addition, there is the pragmatic interest of enabling the young to feel Confucian filial piety and therefore to support their old parents in the potentially ageing population of Singapore, a place where 'nobody owes you a living', in the oft quoted words of Lee Kuan Yew (and so, interestingly, one of the 'national education messages' which CME also features is 'nobody owes Singapore a living'). Also, under 'family values', marriage and the obligation to have children, and some sex education, are featured in CME. Even this is politically expedient. The government has been concerned that better educated citizens are not marrying and reproducing themselves and their talents in a country where humans are the only natural resource. There has been the additional worry that the racial composition of the nation – 'the formula that works' – would be upset with the Chinese and Indians not reproducing themselves proportionally to the Malays, whose Islamic values forbid the use of contraceptives.

The theme 'community' is seemingly neutral but politically tinged too. Every political constituency has a 'community centre', which comes under the direct purview of a People's Association, an extension of the Prime Minister's Office. Advisors of the centres are PAP members of parliament. In the one or two constituencies that have elected opposition members of parliament, PAP election aspirants there continue to advise the community centres, and not the communities' elected representatives. There are also community projects, such as PAP-run pre-school centres, and community self-help organizations, established and supervised by the government, to look after the special educational interests of the respective ethnic groups. Housing estates are served by 'residential committees', advised by PAP members of parliament, which organize social functions for residents. So, teaching the theme of responsibility to the community in terms of participation and contribution would of course include advocating volunteering one's services to such PAP social services.

Pedagogy

Given that Singapore's ultimate values are pragmatic, there could be no moral and civics education distinguishable from what we have termed 'statecraft'. It is therefore credible, despite its political and pragmatic slant, that CME represents a sincere attempt at values education. This is evident in the manner the syllabus is planned, by and large in accordance with good pedagogy, when considered apart from the ultimate rationale of its content. Acknowledging that 'virtue is caught and not taught', it emphasizes character formation by specifically rendering what it calls 'self'

development as the focal starting point, and seeks to involve pupils in experiential learning activities of encounters of self with other selves in human relations from familial, through the wider and yet wider relations of school, community and eventually nation. For example, compulsory involvement of students in community social services, like hospitals and homes for the aged, and participation in school co-curricular activities, like social services organized by school clubs and 'uniformed groups' like the Boys' Brigade, are outside classroom learning requirements. The curriculum is spiral, the thematic pattern of self, family, community and nation being recycled several times each year throughout primary and secondary school, progressing in depth and breadth of treatment through the cycles in accordance with pupils' experiential and cognitive levels of development. In addition to knowledge and understanding, the syllabus caters, as we have seen, for the more emotive components of personality and character development through experiential activities that aim to train pupils in commitment, courage and worthwhile habits.

Pupils' books provided for primary and secondary schools (SMOE CPDD, 1999–2002, 2000–2002), are styled more as 'work books' rather than in the traditional instructional textbook format. The workbooks provide for such items as activity sheets for pupils to keep a record of their personal observations and thoughts on the various topics covered, summarize the essential points raised in each lesson, plan the actions they would do to practise lessons learnt, and review their progress in this practice. Detailed guidance is given to teachers on the pedagogic theory adopted and even on specific content and learning activities. Varied activities are required, during which pupils are to attempt to make values choices, infer answers, complete details of knowledge and information, and so on, to help them at every stage to 'learn through experience'. This activity-learning orientation is to be continued in living experiences beyond the classroom within and beyond school environments. In all this, the syllabus shows cognizance of the need in values understanding and appraisal, not only for knowledge of principles and rules, but also for other knowledge and information with which to understand the social situation where decisions and priorities have to be made and resolved. So, some regional and local history and geography, cultural and religious studies and some psychology, sociology and physiology of interpersonal relations and empathy in the context, of, for example, family values and sexual relations, are featured in age-related components throughout primary and secondary school.

The curriculum planners have also been cognizant of the need to help pupils develop reasoning and motivation appropriate for values practice. Through discussions and the resolving of values conflict and priorities, pupils are meant to move from initially self-regarding motives for values choice towards more altruistic, other-regarding reasoning, in line with recommendations of cognitive developmental psychologists, such as Piaget and Kohlberg. This is on track, as morality has to do not only with doing right but also doing so with the right motive. However, the planners seem to be unaware of a misfit of aims between the Kantian moral philosophy such psychology presupposes and the relativist pragmatic view of values CME ultimately

adopts. There is an adequate fit at primary and even lower secondary school stages, where CME attempts to move pupils away from thinking and acting from solely self-regarding motives towards greater awareness of communal interests, and respect for the authority and rulings of the community over the self. This would represent progress from Kohlberg's Level One to Two of moral development. However, with CME's presumption of values pragmatism and relativism, there would be no need to aim for progress towards authentic moral motivation and reasoning, where the value preferences of society and nation are examined in the light of autonomous moral principles. The latter principles might require sacrifices, even the sacrifice of pragmatic national interests. The motive is morally intrinsic – doing one's duty solely for duty's sake. CME's ultimate values would, on the contrary, require a sliding back to Kohlberg's Level One of acting on self-regarding motivation, the difference being only that the selfishness here is for the collective national self.

Notes

1. CME is taught at lower primary classes (first three years of school) in two 30-minute periods per week, and upper primary classes (the next three years) in three 30-minute periods. It is taught in the 'mother tongues' of Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Post-primary CME is taught in the common medium of instruction, i.e. English. Students at secondary school (four or five years of schooling, depending on whether they are in a fast or slow stream) do two 35-minute periods per week, and those at pre-university level (two years after secondary school at junior colleges, or three years at centralized institutes) take a 30-hour module.
2. A former British colony, Singapore was granted internal self-government in 1959. In 1963 it became a state in the newly established independent Malaysia, which also comprised the former British territories of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak. Race was an issue from the start, Singapore with her overwhelming ethnic Chinese majority (about 70 per cent of the populace) having been accepted into Malaysia only on condition that Sabah and Sarawak, which had predominantly ethnic Malay populations, also joined. The intention was to preserve in Malaysia the political dominance the indigenous Malays would wield in Malaya if she were to go alone as an independent nation. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, became prominent as an opposition representative in the Malaysian parliament, and soon he led a united front of ethnic minorities of Chinese, Indians and 'others' to campaign for a 'Malaysian Malaysia' rather than a 'Malay Malaysia'. The results were enhanced racial conflict, even rioting between Malays and Chinese, and ultimately the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia, in August 1965, to become an independent island state, where Malays comprise some 20 per cent and Indians 10 per cent (with some 'others', such as Eurasians) in a predominantly Chinese population.

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