

**The primary social education curricula in Hong Kong and Singapore:**

**A comparative study**

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**Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank the reviewers for their inspiring and constructive feedback. Special gratitude should be expressed to Professor Robert Arnove (Indiana University) for his kind help and support in reviewing the first draft and Dr. Jasmine Sim (National Institute of

Education, Singapore) for her valuable inputs. Responsibilities for any omission or error are mine.

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#### Abstract

In the face of the challenges of globalization, nation-states would try to reinvigorate their traditional or national values and local identities as a kind of counter-balance to globalizing influences. Hence, social and citizenship education across nations in Asia takes different forms with certain distinctive varieties in terms of policies, practices and values in alignment with national priorities. Based on this premise, this paper aims to compare and contrast the primary social education curricula in Hong Kong and Singapore in order to trace the differences and similarities in the responses of these two Asian city-states to external and internal forces since the turn of the century. This paper will particularly shed light on the tensions and contradictions in policies and practices in social and citizenship education as a result of the interaction of global and local perspectives.

**Keywords:** curriculum; cultures; citizenship; national education; social education

## **Introduction**

Globalization transnationalizes as well as relativizes the world (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992; Waters, 2001; Neubauer, 2007). On the one hand, educational policy-makers seek to learn from their neighbours or competitors the ways and measures through which schools can be turned into sites for transmitting the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to enhance their students' competitive abilities in the global arena. On the other hand, chary of the corrosive impact of globalization, they try to reinvigorate traditional culture / values and local identity as a counter-balance to exotic values and norms (Green, 1997; Reed, 2004). Such a paradoxical tendency certainly adds new meaning and dimension to comparative education.

The comparability of Hong Kong and Singapore can well be justified by numerous academic works pointing out their identical features in terms of British colonial history, predominant ethnic Chinese population, multi-cultural/multi-lingual context, and dynamic economic development. Both Hong Kong and Singapore were former British colonies for about one and a half centuries. Hong Kong reintegrated with the People's Republic of China in 1997 as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems'. Singapore gained its independence in 1965 after four years of self-government from 1959 to 1963 and two years of merger with Malaysia between 1963 and 1965 (Cheung and Sidhu, 2003; Lee and Gopinathan, 2005).

Singapore is relatively more multi-ethnic in population, and it has to offer primary education in one of the four main languages (Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English). Students are required to learn English and their own 'mother tongue' based on ethnicity. Hong Kong has almost 98% of Chinese population with lesser concern for multi-ethnic issue, and it adopts a bi-literate (Chinese and English) and tri-lingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) policy in education. As a result of historical legacy and national interest, English has been one of the key languages in both societies (Cheung and Sidhu, 2003; Gopinathan, 1997; Tan, 2007).

In education, both Singapore and Hong Kong governments still exercise control over schools and curricula, though a certain degree of decentralization in school management is allowed. Both governments have been putting emphasis on developing students' skills for economic development in the globalizing knowledge economy, while reinforcing the need of national education for social cohesion and harmony (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2006).

As Asia's 'Little Dragons' (together with Taiwan and South Korea), Hong Kong and Singapore have been competing for the role as a financial, economic, information and educational hub in the Asia-Pacific region (Lee and Gopinathan, 2005). Similar interests might breed competition as well as cooperation. There has been flow of migrants and products (e.g. film, music and communication technology) between the two cities. The Hong Kong

SAR government would also look to Singapore as a source of reference for policy options in such areas as health, public housing and education (Cheung and Sidhu, 2003). It is anticipated that Hong Kong's convergence towards a soft authoritarian Singaporean model will be intensified as a result of China's preference for economic liberty without political liberty (Davis, 1998). All the differences and similarities mentioned above could, to a large extent, warrant the comparability of the two Asian cities under study.

With these in view, comparative studies on the education systems, policies and reforms of Hong Kong and Singapore have proliferated since the 1990s (e.g. Lee, 1991; Morris, 1996; Tan, 1997; Lee, 2002; Cheung & Sidhu, 2003; Lee & Gopinathan, 2003, 2005; Mok & Tan, 2004). However, there is no specific article comparing and contrasting the primary social education curricula of the two city-states, with a view to analyzing how the curricular contents have responded to and interacted with the changing contexts. This paper seeks to fill in the void of this particular area. It aims to: 1) analyse how curricular changes mirror, and are affected by, contextual changes in a comparative lens; 2) reveal the curricular intentions and tensions in social education as a vehicle for citizenship development; and 3) explore the possible ways for improvement in the social education curricula of the two cities under study.

### **Conceptual and theoretical resources**

Comparative education can serve as a means to draw experiences from other countries to

broaden perspectives on educational change and development (Kelly & Altbach, 1989; Noah & Eckstein, 1998; Arnove, 2007). It also provides a conceptual tool for interpreting or analyzing educational principles, rationales and practices, in addition to tracing differences and similarities (Crossley, 2000; Bray, 2007; Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Lo, 2007). It is grounded on such rationales that this comparative study is made.

For research in comparative education, Bray & Thomas (1995) have held that it could be taken at many geographic/ locational levels: world regions / continents, countries, states / provinces, districts, schools, classrooms and individuals. The focus of the study is laid on the third and fourth levels (i.e. states / provinces and districts) as Singapore is a city-state, whereas Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. As regard to the educational dimension, the focus of analysis is placed on the planned curriculum as embodied in the syllabuses (curriculum guides) as well as relevant official documents, papers and textbooks (Print, 1993; Kubow & Fossum, 2007). It is expected that conceptual bedrocks and resources can be laid for future research on the enacted or implemented curriculum as evidenced by pedagogical practices in school/ classroom context, either on comparative or single case-study basis.

Primary social education is selected for comparative study because it is: 1) a major vehicle for citizenship education; and 2) a core component of basic education (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005; Adler &

Sim, 2008). Currently, the social education curricula in use are: General Studies for Primary Schools Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-Primary 6) in Hong Kong and Social Studies Syllabus (Primary) in Singapore. These documents are the foci of documentary analysis, though other relevant materials and publications are also brought into critical scrutiny.

The analysis of curricular components can be framed by such elements as objectives (knowledge, skills, values / attitudes), teaching and learning activities (pedagogies), and assessments (Hartoonian & Laughlin, 1986, 1989; Brophy & Alleman, 1993; Print, 1993; Posner, 1995). Besides, as a vehicle for citizenship education, it is also pertinent to examine social education in the light of such rationales as social adaptation (McNeil, 2006), socialization and counter-socialization (Engle & Ochoa, 1988), as well as child development (the child rather than the subject provides the rationale for the school curriculum), social efficiency (prepare workers who can contribute to the efficient and smooth running of society), and social reconstruction (prepare future citizens as agents of social change and social justice) (Brady & Kennedy, 2003).

## **Aims**

In Singapore, the primary social studies syllabus was revised in 2003 with the intent of updating the content and ensuring its relevance to the needs of pupils and nation. It integrates historical, geographical, economic and sociological knowledge at the primary level. The



major initiatives of the Ministry of Education in strengthening national education, thinking skills, information technology and economic literacy are also incorporated into the syllabus in order to realize the vision of ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005).

While Singapore has separated Social Studies, Science, and Health Education syllabuses in the primary curriculum, Hong Kong’s General Studies integrates the key learning areas of Personal, Social and Humanities Education, Science Education, and Technology Education (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). In terms of curriculum organization, Singapore’s social education is relatively more parallel-disciplined, whereas Hong Kong’s is relatively more cross-disciplinary. Compared with the primary Social Studies in Singapore, Hong Kong’s General Studies is more like a hotchpotch of moral / civic education, sex education, environmental education, technology education and health education (Lo, 2002). It is conceivable that the separate curricula of Social Studies, Science, and Health Education in Singapore enable students to construct stronger knowledge bases in different disciplines, whereas the General Studies curriculum in Hong Kong makes more room for cross-disciplinary integration with a science-technology-society triad.

Singapore’s Social Studies curriculum aims to: i) ‘equip pupils with the knowledge, skills as well as attitudes and values to make informed decisions’; and ii) ‘enable pupils to

communicate and work as a team in a multi-cultural and interdependent world' (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, p. 1). This is in line with the government's concern for the development of the skills required for making Singapore's future as a knowledge economy in a fast-changing world (Lee & Gopinathan, 2005; Sim & Print, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2006).

Hong Kong's primary General Studies curriculum is more broad-based in structure. It aims to enable students to: i) maintain a healthy personal development and become confident, rational and responsible citizens; ii) recognize their roles and responsibilities as members of the family and society and show concern for their well-being; iii) develop a sense of national identity and be committed to contributing to the nation and the world; iv) develop curiosity and interest in the natural and technological world as well as understand the impact of science and technology on society; and v) develop a care and concern for the environment (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, p. 11-12).

In both city-states, the curriculum aims connote a drive towards fostering students' concerns for local, national and global contexts, in addition to developing the skills required to face the challenges ahead and fit them into the changing world. Social efficiency or social adaptation prevails over child development and social reconstruction as the primary concern, because the child is not a major focus of the curriculum intents or contents and there is little emphasis on preparing students as agents for social change and justice (Brady & Kennedy,

2003).

## **Objectives**

### **(1) Knowledge**

In terms of knowledge, the social education curricula of Hong Kong and Singapore are both focused on the promotion of the understandings, skills, and values / attitudes associated with the major issues of the world or the dimensions of life that individuals must encounter. That is probably why both of them adopt a theme-based or strand-based approach in organizing the scopes of study.

In line with the integration of geography, history, economics and sociology, the curricular framework of Singapore's Social Studies contains four major themes – 'People, Places and Environments', 'Time, Change and Continuity', 'Scarcity, Choices and Resources', and 'Identity, Culture and Community' (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, p. 3). In a loose sense, these themes are discipline-based and they provide the most systematic and rigorous way of organizing studies of the social world (Case, 1999).

As the Hong Kong General Studies curriculum integrates the key learning areas of Personal, Social and Humanities Education, Science Education, and Technology Education, the learning strands cover a wider spectrum – 'Health and Living', 'People and Environment', 'Science and Technology in Everyday Life', 'Community and Citizenship', 'National Identity

and Chinese Culture’, and ‘Global Understanding and the Information Era’ (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, p.13). These strands are more instrumental for interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary inquiry into issues related to science, technology and society. Basically, like the Social Studies curriculum of Singapore, Hong Kong’s General Studies is far from being completely integrated or transdisciplinary in its real sense (Jacobs, 1989; Beane, 1997).

Given the limitation of curriculum space and time, it may not be possible for all the strands in General Studies to be covered at every grade-level in the Hong Kong’s primary schools. Hence, the curriculum guide indicates that schools may put more emphasis on personal and social education at Primary 1-2. From Primary 3 upwards, themes and curriculum units with different emphases on the three key learning areas could be developed (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). This tends to baffle the design and implementation of a spiral curriculum in which contents are ‘sequenced to ensure that pupils are first introduced to those key ideas and then turn to study them at various stages in more complex contexts’ (Morris, 1995, p. 76). In contrast, Singapore’s Social Studies, which has incorporated all four themes at every grade-level, tends to facilitate the sequential flow for learning in a more developmental and age-grade appropriate way.

In fact, the primary social education curricula in both Hong Kong and Singapore are sequenced according to the multiple dimensions of the expanding communities, which are divided into spheres of experience stretching from concrete to abstract concepts and from near

to remote things or life (Joyce, Little & Wronski, 1991). Yet different educational foci have moulded the divergent patterns of the two curricula in the expanding communities. Hong Kong's General Studies stretches from the self, the family, the local community, the nation to the world, but Singapore's Social Studies curriculum follows the sequences of 'Our School', 'Our Neighbourhood', 'Our Needs', 'Our Beginnings', 'Our Heritage', 'Singapore under Foreign Rule', 'Building the Nation', 'Our Progress' and 'Our Links with Southeast Asia and the World' (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, p. 6). The Singaporean curriculum is replete with a collectivistic and nation-centred overtone as nation-building and social cohesion, rather than individuality and individualism, are the primary concerns (Lee, 1997; Lo, 2002; Lui, 2007; Nichol & Sim, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2008).

Rhetorically, both Hong Kong and Singapore have devised their social education curricula with a rationale based on child development (child-centred approach), though the former puts more emphasis on children's personal growth and development at Primary 1-2 (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). Nevertheless, this concern for personal development, together with the ideals of enabling pupils to take ownership of their learning and making the curriculum relevant to their needs, do not necessarily imply any advocacy for individuality or individualism. Instead, both curricula are a means to an end of making pupils more adaptable to contextual needs / changes. Socialization of individuals is, indeed, the prime focus at each dimension of the

expanding communities as the social education curricula in both city-states stipulate what students need to achieve in order to fit into or contribute to various communities (McNeil, 2006).

## **(2) Skills**

In general, both Singapore's Social Studies and Hong Kong's General Studies focus on such major skills as process learning (study), communication, participation (collaboration), creative and critical thinking (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). However, all these skills are meant to better equip students for coping with contextual changes and meeting future needs. By and large, they are grounded on a rationale of social efficiency – preparing workers who can contribute to the efficient running of society (Brady & Kennedy, 2003).

Nonetheless, as evidenced by the examples in the curriculum guides and textbooks the development of a particular skill is confined to discrete learning tasks that may not be able to demonstrate how various skills could be connected and integrated (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Chai-Yip & Cheng, 2004; Lam, Leung & Chung, 2004; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, 2007). The training of isolated skills could strengthen students' academic rigor by bits and pieces, but not necessarily conduce to the transformation of learning skills into life skills (Brophy & Alleman, 1993). Skills in thinking are pre-requisites for learning, but they cannot be equated with learning experiences that are

closely bound up with and applicable to real-life situations (Stahl, 2005).

In both city-states, social participation is suggested for students to contribute to society; but the emphasis is on the learning components and academic-oriented skills that may not be connected to social reconstruction. In communication and participation, students are expected to respect others' views and enhance group relationship. Creative and critical thinking is mostly applied to problem solving that necessitates perspective-taking and conflict resolution. Yet it is often conducted as an academic and de-politicized exercise that may not be related to social improvement or reconstruction. Informed and reasoned decision-making is encouraged; but critical thinking that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and problematizes the status quo is very much understated (Lee & Sweeting, 2001; Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Lo, 2002; Osborne, 2004; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005; Sim & Print, 2005). Independent learning is given much more emphasis than independent thinking. Social adaptation and efficiency tend to prevail over social reconstruction as a bedrock for curriculum design.

### **(3) Values / Attitudes**

Though situated within the same geographical location of Asia, Hong Kong and Singapore have similar and different values as embodied in their respective social education curriculum.

First of all, the values and attitudes related to positive self-image and personal efficacy

are included in the Hong Kong General Studies curriculum, but individuality is not an important element in the case of Singapore where social cohesion is a primary concern (Ai, 1997; Lo, 2002). Hong Kong's General Studies attempts to strike a balance between rights and responsibilities, whereas Singapore's Social Studies places much more emphasis on individuals' responsibilities in various institutions and contexts. Yet in both places, individuals' participation in and contribution to the promotion of collective well-being is a distinctive feature in defining 'active citizenship' (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999; Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). There is a strong message that individual good can only be achieved through social good (Osborne, 1997).

Secondly, the national education in Singapore is charged with the emotionally loaded desired outcomes of education – students should know love and be proud of Singapore (Ministry of Education, 2009). Through highlighting the common past experiences and historical rootedness, it aims to promote unity in a nation with diverse ethnic and cultural groups. The national identity is supra-ethnic as its value system transcends classes, religions and social groups. In this sense, Singapore's national education is tinged with an assimilationist overtone that aims to help students fit into the existing social and political order (Parker, 2001). Quite different from Singapore, Hong Kong has never been a locus of loyalty or unity (Mathews, Ma & Lui, 2008). After reintegration with China in 1997, there has



been an increasing concern for promoting a sense of belonging to the People's Republic of China. Rebuilding the national identity is a vital concern for smoothing the operation of the two systems under one country. Chinese culture and history have been increased in the General Studies curriculum to promote the sense of Chineseness since the late 1990s (Leung & Print, 2002; Lo, 2004). This is intended to conceal the difference and relieve the tension between the national and the local in the process of identity re-building.

Thirdly, appreciating cultural diversity and accepting cultural difference are the key elements in both curricula. While both city-states are aware of the increasing diversity of culture under the impact of globalization, they do have different agenda for boosting these values. Since Hong Kong aims to position itself as Asia's or China's world city, it needs to make its culture more accommodating. As its population is becoming more multi-cultural (with more returnees and immigrants), Hong Kong has to make room for accommodating a flexible citizenship – a kind of market-based and pragmatic strategy of identification in order to benefit from different nation-state regimes (Ong, 1999; Mathews, Ma & Lui, 2008). In Singapore, the prime focus is not diversity, as that could lead to cultural fragmentation and ethnic division. Not only does Singapore aim to make its students aware of the global culture in order to fit into the world arena, it also anticipates that cross-cultural experiences may enable students to reflect on the difference between cultures and countries so that they can come to a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of Singapore (Singapore 21 Committee,

1999; Tan, 2007).

### **Suggested instructional strategies**

The analysis of curriculum implementation in this paper is based on the suggested principles, methods, exemplars listed on the relevant curriculum guides and textbooks, which are primarily the sources of reference for teachers to design and develop their instructional strategies. Certainly, these resources are only used to reveal the curricular intents and contents and analysed in the light of the relevant research literature, either locally or internationally. Nevertheless, further case-study research in school/classroom context will be needed if pedagogical practices are to be studied in contrast with the intents of the official documents.

Rhetorically, the curriculum guides and textbooks of both city-states follow the contemporary trends of social education in adopting a student-centered, activity- and skill-based approach to instruction. They advocate the use of a wide variety of teaching and learning strategies (e.g. role-play, discussion, debate, story-telling, oral history and inquiry learning) that aim to arouse students' interest in learning, develop their learning capabilities, enable them to acquire generic skill for independent and life-long learning, and nurture positive values and attitudes (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Chai-Yip & Cheng, 2004; Lam, Leung & Chung, 2004; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005, 2007).

To support the implementation of these suggested strategies, the governments have

provided resource packages and exemplars in printed or on-line form. In some cases, governments and textbook publishers could also provide supplementary teaching resources including photographs, newspaper clippings, CD-ROM and web-based materials (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). To most of the teachers who lack experience, skill and time in curriculum adaptation, these resources and exemplars could become toolkits for instructional devices. Some of them have also indicated that texts and government curriculum materials could be the fundamentals for their collaborative lesson preparations as a result of the limitation of time (Morris, 1995). Quite often, these texts and guides might be regarded as safe resources in teaching sensitive and controversial issues (Lo, 2006).

Besides, teachers may rush to cover the major contents in order to ensure consistency across different classes within the same grade-level in terms of instructional progress. The problem becomes worse when teachers have to balance between content coverage and learners' diversity with limited curriculum time – Hong Kong's General Studies has been allotted 15% of the total lesson hours (i.e. around 4-5 periods per week); Singapore's Social Studies has 1 period per week for P. 1-P. 3, 2 periods per week for P. 4, and 3 periods per week for P. 5-P. 6 (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). All these tend to encourage textbook-centered and didactic instruction that runs counter to the advocacy of student-centered approach (Nichol & Sim,

2007; Po, Merryfield & Lo, 2007).

The social education curricula and textbooks in both city-states place stress on issues-based and field-based inquiry. Nonetheless, inquiry learning is often presented in a framework that is made up of inquiry stages or steps (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Sim & Chee, 2005). If teachers lack the professional competence and knowledge to integrate these methods with concept construction, social learning, and values clarification, the teaching of such procedural knowledge may become de-contextualized, close-framed and lockstep.

Learning in the field is also one of the channels for life-wide and authentic learning in both city-states (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). Teachers may be quite familiar with the ways or procedures through which field-based learning activities can be designed, implemented and assessed, as there are exemplars and suggested activities in the curriculum guides and textbooks. Yet teachers who lack the time, knowledge and skill for translating the community resources into objects of inquiry may fall back on didactic teaching, focusing on what to learn instead of how to learn (Sim, Tan & Sim, 2005). Examples can be found in the cases when some teachers relied on the docents of museums for introduction and the worksheets prepared by the museums for students to fill in the blanks (Lo, 2008). The extent to which inquiry learning actually takes place in the field is rather minimal in such cases.

Albeit both Hong Kong and Singapore have a strong intention to promote national education and multi-cultural education in response to the practical need of the changing contexts, their primary social education curricula rely heavily on such cultural and symbolic means as national anthem, flag-raising and national holidays / special days (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005) to promote emotional attachment and cognitive understanding. Yet these could not help much in developing a more critical and rational sense of national consciousness. It is probable that the fostering of critical thinking skill might run counter to the political reality of training loyal, obedient citizenry that unquestioningly accept the norms and values prescribed by the state. For multi-cultural education and global education, both curricula tend to emphasize teaching for the acceptance of cultural diversity (e.g. food, customs, festivals etc.) in order to foster socio-ethnic harmony through mutual respect and toleration (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005). However, Singapore's overriding concern for unity out of diversity may make the teaching of global interdependence more biased towards how the nation can remain cohesive in the face of the challenges of globalization. It may preclude any opportunity for students to look at national issues and concerns from critical and multiple perspectives (Adler & Sim, 2008).

## **Assessment**

In the area of assessment, the primary social education curricula of the two city-states have more similarities than differences. The two curriculum guides are indeed similar in the following policies and principles:

- (1) The subject is a non-examination one for all grade-levels.
- (2) Both formal and non-formal assessments are adopted.
- (3) Emphasis is placed on assessment for improving students' learning.
- (4) All assessment tasks should be placed in a meaningful context.
- (5) Self-assessment and peer-assessment can be adopted to allow students opportunities for reflective learning (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005).

In both city states, the textbooks are designed in line with these principles as stipulated in the curriculum guides. There are learning / assessment tasks on map / graphic / pictorial interpretations, documentary analyses, inquiry projects, interviews, social participation and data-search, which can generally fit the purposes of encouraging process learning, skill development and student-centered approach (Chai-Yip & Cheng, 2004; Lam, Leung & Chung, 2004; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007). Nevertheless, tests and exams are still mainly used in schools to evaluate students' learning outcomes. Worse still, the primary school curricula in both places have been skewed towards the system-wide assessments conducted by the governments to maintain academic standards and benchmark

students' achievements (e.g. Primary School Leaving Examination in Singapore and Territory-wide System Assessment in Hong Kong). These system-wide assessments focus on numeracy and literacy, not social or general studies (Ministry of Education, 2006; Ng, 2008; Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009). Hence, social education has become a low-status and marginal subject, leaving the primary curricula broad-based but unbalanced.

### **Conclusion: complications and implications**

This comparative study further reveals that the social education curricula in Hong Kong and Singapore do have a mix of child development, social efficiency (social adaptation), and social reconstruction approaches, though with different foci and interpretations. Both are child-centered in pedagogical and curricular designs at least rhetorically, but individuality is given more weight in Hong Kong than in Singapore where collectivity is the primary concern for promoting national cohesion and inter-ethnic harmony. Both Hong Kong and Singapore are similar in the aim of equipping students with the skills and dispositions required for the smooth and efficient running of society. The development of critical thinking skill is present in the social education curricula of both city-states, but it is counteracted by the emphasis on individuals' contribution to social good (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2005).

Moreover, the predominance of national education that emphasizes harmony, co-operation and unity in Singapore tends to reduce critical thinking to a kind of discrete, de-politicized and de-contextualized learning skill, which may help to improve the society according to prescribed norms and values, but not to change it according to rationality and justice ( Sim & Print, 2005; Adler & Sim, 2008). Hong Kong's General Studies curriculum has some suggestions for students' learning through social participation and issues-inquiry that aim to critically examine controversial issues and explore ways for improvement or change. Being less constricted by the pressing need of national cohesion as in the case of Singapore, its curriculum materials focus relatively more on local and global than on national issues or concerns (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). This could deprive students of a chance to understand the problems of the nation from a rational and critical perspective; thus, weakening the potential role of social education as a bridge between the two systems under one country.

To reduce such tensions, Singapore's Social Studies could place more emphasis on the self and personal development of students in order to enable them to position themselves more rationally in various communities. Hong Kong's General Studies, in which only about 19% of the instructional contents focus on China Studies and are mostly confined to ancient history and culture (Chai-Yip & Cheng, 2004; Lam, Leung & Chung, 2004), could include more contemporary issues related to the development of Mainland China. This may enable



students to acquire a deeper understanding of contemporary China and develop a sense of national consciousness, which is indispensable for the smooth operation of the two systems under one country. Indeed, both Hong Kong and Singapore need to strike a better balance within the amalgam of child development, social efficiency (social adaptation) and social reconstruction in order to address some of the inherent tensions or conflicts among them.

Apart from the issues related to the relationship between the personal and the national, there is also a need to better re-position the local and national communities in the global context. The social education curricula of Hong Kong and Singapore are both inclined to promote emotional attachment to the national entity, though the former is characterized by national reintegration and the latter places emphasis on nation-building. However, cognitive understanding of and emotional attachment to the nation may lead to uncritical and spoon-fed approach to patriotism (Fairbrother, 2003; Tse, 2007). The over-emphasis on harmony, loyalty and responsibility could constitute a stumbling block to the development of democracy that may involve conflicting views and diverse interests (Ochoa-Becker, 2007). Without respect for diversity and equity, the nationals may not be able to develop among themselves inter-cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural understanding, which are essential attributes for a global mindset and awareness (Merryfield, 2002, 2004; Avery, 2004). The balance between uniformity and diversity is not an easy task; but it is vital for developing the multi-dimensional and flexible citizenship required for people to face the challenges in the

increasingly globalized world.

As afore-mentioned, the social education curricula in Hong Kong and Singapore do have some instructional devices or materials to enable students to appreciate cultural diversity and accept differences. Yet the understanding of the world and other cultures through such symbols as flags, foods and festivals as well as linkage and interdependence is rather superficial (Skelton et al., 2002). Educators, policy-makers and teachers could consider expanding the content of global education to the dimensions of inter-cultural competency and cross-cultural experiential learning, which would give students the inter-cultural skills and habits of mind for lifelong interaction with people whose norms and values are different from their own, in order to counteract the abuses of cultural biases or stereotyping in ethno-cultural sense (Case, 1999; Merryfield, 2004).

To effectuate the implementation of the various directions of curricular betterment mentioned above, schools and teachers also need to reflect on certain teaching and assessment strategies that run counter to the rationales, and objectives of the curricula. Didactic, text-based and 'teach-to-assess' approaches should be abandoned or minimized (Morris, 1995; Lo, 2002; Adler & Sim, 2005; Nichol & Sim, 2007) in order to facilitate the design and implementation of experiential learning tasks that could help students construct concepts, develop higher-order thinking skills, and foster positive values.

The development of the social education curricula in both Hong Kong and Singapore is

complicated with many different paradoxes. The ideas and practices are often moving between conflicting binaries: patriotism / nationalism versus multi-cultural and global perspective, social adaptation versus social participation in the improvement or reconstruction of society, social conformity versus critical and independent thinking, and unity versus diversity (Nelson, 1991; Sim & Print, 2005; Ochoa-Becker, 2007). The challenges ahead for social educators and teachers are to mediate and balance the various competing and conflicting forces through accommodating heterogeneity, respecting diversity, developing open-mindedness, fostering the sense of empathy, and nurturing flexible / multi-dimensional citizenship (Cogan, 2000; Lo, 2002; Banks, 2004; Gutmann, 2004; Merryfield, 2004; Ochoa-Becker, 2007). In a world that is rapidly changing, learning is socially situated and knowledge is contextualized. Both curriculum and instruction have to be modified continuously to go *pari passu* with temporal and contextual changes. By so doing, social education can play a more vital role, not only as an overarching link between education and society, but also as a bridge over the troubled waters of national and ethno-cultural conflicts.

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