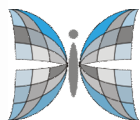


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# Issues of Citizenship, National Identity and Political Socialization in Singapore: Implications to the Singapore Education System

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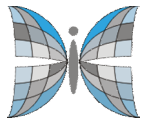
*This inquiry attempts to address the question: How has the Singapore city-state used its education system in integrating three important cornerstones of nation-building? Using selected data from the National Orientations of Singaporeans Survey complemented by policy documents, this article explores three specific questions: (1) How is citizenship education pursued? (2) How is national identity forged? And (3) How is political socialization engendered? The inquiry concludes with challenges that the Singapore education system faces as it tries to address its nation-building project.*

**Keywords:** *Singapore, Education System, Nation-Building, Citizenship, Identity, Political Socialization*

## Introduction

This inquiry intends to address one general question: How has the Singapore city-state used its education system in integrating three important cornerstones of nation-building? Specifically, this inquiry attempts to answer three interrelated queries (1) How is citizenship education pursued? (2) How is national identity forged? And (3) How is political socialization engendered? This inquiry will use findings from the 2010 Citizens and the Nation: National

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Orientations of Singaporeans Survey (NOS4) completed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The NOS4 Survey was designed to “track citizens’ sense of loyalty and pride over time” (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 4). Data gathering for the survey was undertaken from February to May 2009, with a “stratified random sample designed to reflect national distribution on ethnicity and housing type.” A total of 2,016 door-to-door interviews were completed on the respondents with a deliberate decision to undertake “over-sampling of minorities” (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 5). The survey results were complemented by analysis of key policy documents from the Singapore’s Ministry of Education.

### **Singapore Context**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2012, Singapore commemorated its 47<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a young city-state. Far from its unsettled beginnings typified by impoverished slums divided along ethnic lines and sporadic racial riots, the Singapore today has undergone a dramatic transformation. Gone are the destitute enclaves, instead the nation boasts high home ownership rates of 90% (Kau, Tan, & Wirtz, 1998). More importantly, Singapore today enjoys the enviable distinction of having eliminated absolute poverty (Khondker, 2002). As a young nation-state it pursued a relentless and aggressive drive towards development necessitating the emergence and maintenance of a strong government. Guided by an elite corps of technocrats and leaders (Hill & Lian, 1995); (Vasil, 1984), Singapore has been able to amass significant amounts of capital both economic and human, to merit for the nation consistently top rankings as one of the world’s most competitive nations (Garelli, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2009) and has even been described as the world’s most globalized country (A.T. Kearney. & Carnegie Endowment for International Peace., 2007) . Despite this achievement though, one of the constant challenges that the multiracial nation faces is its contentious record of civic and political participation characterized “by the prevalence of elite dominance, bureaucratic omnipotence and political indifference in the society” (Ho, 2000, p. 15). Moreover, political activities and its consequent freedoms are treated as “dysfunctional” and “unproductive” which therefore do “not deserve to be encouraged” (Vasil, 1984, p. 88). Consequently, the state of civic and political participation in Singapore is a far cry from Putnam’s idea of relations of “mutual trust and not of control and subjection” (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994, p. 88).

The history and vulnerabilities of Singapore are the chief causes for its current situation of an administrative state (Chan, 1997) or what

other commentators describe as a developmental state (Huff, 1999; Leftwich, 1995). Its genesis as a nation was “traumatic” as it experienced separation from Malaysia (Wilmott, 1989, p. 587). Early in its turbulent past, the fledgling nation realized that social cohesion among its diverse races was critical in order to accomplish nation-building (Khong, Chew, & Goh, 2004; Quah, 2000). As a result, a strong elite-driven technocratic leadership steered the nation to economic progress and in the process managed to achieve a unique form of social cohesion (evidenced by the absence of racial and ethnic riots that once besieged it) that has effectively “depoliticized” the citizenry (Ho, 2000, p. 448).

Enjoying a robust economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and all the accoutrements of a First World nation, Singapore’s state of active citizenry still leaves much to be desired. One area where this is clearly manifested is in the education system typified by a “completely utilitarian view” of a significant component of civic agency - moral education – in Singapore schools (Gopinathan, 1980, p. 178) and where “passivity” (Lian, 1975, p. 105) and “alienation” (G. Ooi, L., E. S., & Koh, 1999, p. 128) dominate political participation attitudes. Perhaps more disturbing is that despite achieving what is commonly perceived as social cohesion in its multiracial population, ironically, “ethnic essentialism” (E. Tan, 2004, p. 66) has actually accentuated differences among its races (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). These perceived ethnic differences within a cosmopolitan Singapore are a foreboding of critical questions that strike at the very core of the nation’s roots: issues of citizenship, national identity and political socialization.

### **Heart ware in the midst of a Globalized Knowledge-Based Economy**

It is within this paradoxical context where the impetus for change, not surprisingly emanating from the elite-dominated government, emerged in the late 1990s. This modification was ushered in by the creation of Singapore 21 designed to nurture the “heartware” of the country (Quah, 2000, p. 96). In September 1996, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong speaking on a Teachers’ Day rally highlighted that the main purpose of a systematized National Education program was to “engender a sense of nationhood” among Singapore’s young people (Goh, 1996). More than a decade later, the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (PM Lee) speaking on another Teachers’ Day rally underscored that in a time of rapid globalization, Singapore must strive to strengthen its “heartware, our emotional ties which bind Singaporeans to Singapore and to one another” (H.L. Lee, 2007, p. 8).

The policy discourse on “heartware” has become more prevalent especially within the context of increased globalization and the push towards Knowledge-Based Economies (KBEs). Burbules and Torres have acknowledged similar imperatives when they discuss globalization and the consequent paradigm shift in “educational aims that have more to do with flexibility and adaptability” and greater harmony among peoples and among nations (Burbules & Torres, 2000, p. 22). Gopinathan and Sharpe recognize the implications of the irrepressible waves of globalization and raised concerns about societies racing to become KBEs to be cognizant of challenges they face ahead such as radical changes requiring more “inclusive work place and a fuller notion of citizenship” (Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004, p. 121). The Education Minister Mr. Heng Swee Kiat has reignited the policy discourse on “heartware” when he declared that the next stage in the journey of Singapore education would be geared towards student-centered and values-based education (Heng, 2012). Mr. Heng spoke about the great importance that the education system must place in the development of character especially in a transforming Singapore demographic landscape. It is within this rapidly changing context where the message of fostering citizenship and nationhood, a sense of national identity and the manner in which to promote political socialization becomes as urgent as ever. Consequently, a careful analysis of these interrelated concepts is warranted.

### **Citizenship in Singapore**

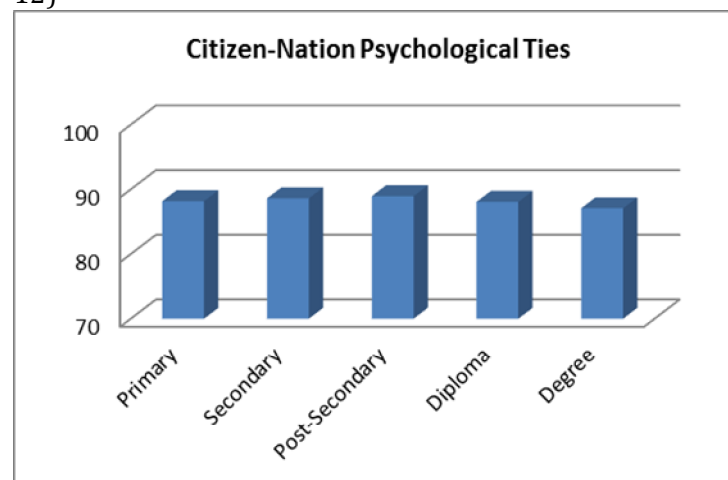
Education and training and its relation to human capital formation have led individuals and societies to invest heavily in its acquisition with the hope of reaping expected higher returns (Minces, 1958). The linkages between education and training on the one hand and notions of income equality and inequality have been investigated quite extensively internationally (Becker, 1962) and in Singapore (Liu and Wong, 1981). Another area that has similarly been studied quite thoroughly would be the linkages between education and citizenship and civic participation (White, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Putnam, 1994; Bourdieu, 1991).

Education enhances participation more or less directly by developing skills that are relevant to politics – the ability to speak and write, the knowledge of how to cope in an organizational setting. Education also affects participation by imparting information about government and politics, and by encouraging attitudes such as a sense of civic responsibility or political efficacy that predispose an individual to political

involvement. In addition, education affects activity indirectly: those who have high levels of education are more likely to command jobs that are lucrative and to have opportunities to exercise leadership and to develop politically relevant skills at work, in church and in voluntary associations. (Verba *et al*, 1995: 305)

The results from the 2010 NOS4 survey with particular emphasis on Citizen-Nation Psychological Ties (CNP)<sup>1</sup> controlling for levels of education presents interesting findings: Figure 1 reveals that the construct of Citizen-Nation Psychological Ties remains relatively stable and actually decreases with higher educational qualifications. The Singapore NOS4 Survey findings reveal that the experience of increased levels of education does not lead to increased levels of Citizen-Nation Psychological Ties. These findings seem to point out a unique brand of citizenship that has emerged in the Singapore context.

**Figure 1:** Citizen-Nation Psychological Ties (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 12)



### Uniquely Singapore: Civic Republican Citizenship

A cursory perusal of policies and government directives implemented by the ruling elite of Singapore, the People's Action Party or PAP reveals a deliberate slant towards a "civic republican tradition of citizenship" (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 10). Classic civic

<sup>1</sup> The CNP comprises a 12-item National Identity (NID) Index developed by Dr. Tan Ern Ser of the IPS. Scores for the scale are from 1 to 5 for each, 1 indicating weak ties to country, 5 indicating strong, positive ties to country (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 8)



republicanism views its citizens (all capable of undertaking virtuous action) as taking an active role in society and entrusting the virtuous governance of the state to an elite class (Kennedy, 2007; Spaulding, 2002). This would be opposed to the somewhat contrasting viewpoint of neo-liberal citizenship where the active citizens work in the pursuit of their interests free from government restraints (Kennedy, 2007).

However, a more careful scrutiny of how the ruling elite, the PAP – which has been in power for most of the modern history of Singapore -- has crafted governance and managed citizenship reveals a unique form of civic republicanism. The PAP style of governance of the nation has been sterling and has produced tangible results both in the economy and general well-being of Singapore. Much of the success of PAP can be attributed to its corps of competent and dedicated leaders driven by the overriding governing philosophy of “pragmatism” (Hill & Lian, 1995; Khondker, 2002; Koh, 2005; H. Mutalib, 2002; Wee, 1995). The uniqueness of citizenship in Singapore lies in the fact that the citizenry (who in classic civic republicanism is assumed to be all capable of undertaking virtuous action) is dealt with by the elite class (who is entrusted to undertake virtuous governance) primarily through the provision of economic rewards– ‘self-interested’ motivation as opposed to virtuous action--for the good of society. A clear example of this would be the landmark housing policy of the PAP government which recognizes that “self-interest and nationalism need not be in opposition: a nation that provides economic reasons for patriotism will have more patriotic citizens than one in which citizenship requires everyone to accept hardships” (Wilmott, 1989, p. 590).

Without a doubt, the PAP government takes deliberate steps to foster greater and deeper sentiments of citizenship among the populace. Nationwide “institutionalized means of citizenship exercises” can be seen manifested in feverish activities located in “grassroots and para-political institutions like community centers, clubs and residents’ committees” (H. Mutalib, 2004, p. 62). Increased membership among the populace to these different institutions is deigned as approaches to deepen citizenship. Scholars have similarly pointed out that implicitly, citizenship in Singapore can be viewed as “membership of a multiracial community and the responsibilities that go with it” (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 33). Singapore has also been described as a city-state that adheres to communitarianism. Such an arrangement falls neatly within the PAP government’s avowed goal of social integration.



Communitarianism, of course, defends human rights too, but it concedes to the state, even requires of it, the commitment to intervene in processes of identity formation and maintenance, if necessary. And such intervention is supposed to be necessary if the 'survival' (or even the flourishing) of national, ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities is threatened. (Habermas, 1995, p. 850)

### **Emigration and New Citizens: Challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Singapore**

Two emerging threats that bear upon the issue of citizenship have gained prominence in 21<sup>st</sup> century Singapore. The first one is emigration and the second would be the implications of the infusion of new citizens. The emigration of professional Singaporeans has constantly been a bane to the government. From 2007 to 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean reported in a Singapore parliamentary meeting that an average of about 1,200 Singaporeans renounce their citizenship yearly (Teo, 2012). Goh Chok Tong, when he was still Prime Minister, spoke about this subject at length as he simultaneously encouraged and admonished Singaporeans through the rhetoric of stayers and leavers in Singapore (Goh, 2002). It has been pointed out that the phenomenon of emigration is a form of "escaping the classification system" that epitomizes Singapore society (Tremewan, 1994, p. 123). Scholars have alluded to a lack of "sense of belonging to their home country" (H. Mutalib, 2004, p. 70) and the need to foster a "soul" within the civic society of Singapore (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 228) as plausible reasons for the continued emigration. With the push of the Singapore government to increase its population (National Population Talent Division., 2013) the challenge of managing the implications of an influx of new citizens becomes paramount:

An important impact that an influx of new migrants would have would be the potential threat of undermining "the 'pre-political' basis of citizenship, the sociological processes which account for collective identity and, finally the institutions of the rule of law. For the latter are requested to acknowledge the multiethnic nature not only of the individual rights of immigrated citizens, but also of the ethnic identities of minorities who experience a remarkable cultural gap with the host countries." (Zolo, 2004, p. 411)

What would be most interesting though is how these two critical developments would eventually impact on citizenship in Singapore. A remarkable feature of the Singapore polity has been described as a





“return-to-sender process” where there exists a constant re-negotiation of the definition of citizen vis-à-vis the state (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 13). The underlying ethic of this re-negotiation between citizen and the state is undoubtedly founded on economic imperatives (Khondker, 2002; Koh, 2007; Tham, 1980). The predominance of the economic agenda could even be identified as the *raison d’être* of the continued legitimacy of the PAP government from the perspective of the Singapore citizenry. Such dominance of the economic agenda has also invariably permeated the notions of Singapore identity (C. S. Ooi, 1998).

### **Active Citizenship: Singapore style**

Singapore recognizes the importance of citizenship education especially since it has the potential to encourage political participation in a broader sense (Shukra, Back, Keith, Khan, & Solomos, 2004, p. 192). PM Lee himself in the 2001 National Day Rally commented on the need for Singapore to embrace active citizenship. He exhorted Singaporeans “to put aside our personal interests and forge common goals” (Hsien Loong. Lee, 2011, p. 8). A careful interrogation of the policy discourse on Singapore’s active citizenship reveals that its essence is more attuned to an “instrumentalist rationale” where various civic groups are encouraged to work with “private and public sectors of various institutions to assist in the improvement and implementation of public policy” in order to pursue the common good of the Singapore nation (Rodan, 2004, p. 84). This view of active citizenship is quite different from the perspective which “requires the ability to engage in action for social change, the establishment of active solidarity” (Ross, 2007, p. 299) and in so doing allow for debate, and discussion of controversial issues employing skills of engagement and the openness to consider various perspectives. Haste has categorically stated that citizenship is a shared enterprise. Furthermore, he states that this is best accomplished through “praxis, whether in the school or in the community” where young people are able to gain “skills and efficacy” to become active citizens (Haste, 2004, p. 435). This inquiry contends that a great challenge then for Singapore to nurture active citizens and to strengthen its efforts towards nurturing citizenship would be the willingness of the city-state’s traditional and entrenched elites to share the Singapore story. The education system could be a powerful vehicle that may be tapped in allowing for a genuine sharing of the Singapore story.

### **Creating National Identity: The Singapore Story**





If you want to be a cultivated man who has a sense of the past, some feel for your own civilization, making your contribution to the transformation which is taking place in Singapore in values and patterns of behavior in the new context, then you must make the effort not just in language and literature of your own ethnic group. When you appreciate your literature that of the English language and one other, you are nearly the complete man in Singapore. (K. Y. Lee, 1984, p. 177)

Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), the acknowledged architect of modern-day Singapore explicitly enumerates the formula for shaping a key aspect of the Singaporean identity. Connection to the past, immersion into the transformations in Singapore and an appreciation of English plus another language (presumably the 'mother tongue') would be components of the idealized Singapore identity. It is not surprising to note that the PAP government, represented by LKY takes an active role in the definition of Singaporean identity.

The PAP elite does not "believe that the formation of a common identity can be left to chance" thus it has undertaken and continues to manage "active social engineering and political socialization" towards a "common Singaporean identity" (H. Mutalib, 2004, p. 58). Indeed, the city-state is the primary agent in constructing a national identity (Hill & Lian, 1995; Koh, 2005). The state has enshrined in policy and in practice the important elements of Singaporean identity that can be subsumed into "multiculturalism, multilingualism, multiracialism and multi-religiosity" (Siddique, 2002, p. 563). These so-called "4Ms" are then encapsulated into the Singapore social formula "(Ss=C + M + I + O) or Singaporean society is the sum of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others". Corollary to this social formula is the notion of "hyphenated identities" (national-ethnic) signifying multiculturalism's consistency with the notion of a created national identity (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 5). One of the implications that has arisen in relation to the multilingual component of national identity which puts a stress on familiarity with the English language is the emergence of a "supra-ethnic national identity" which is well within the design of Singaporean nation-building (Chang, 2002, p. 141). Consistent with its characteristic trait of not leaving anything to chance, the PAP government's pursuit to forge a preferred national identity also "involves two of the most prevalent agents of socialization: schools and media" (Koh, 2005, p. 76). Nonetheless it should be pointed out that the shaping of identity and the accompanying management of



ethnic diversity that follows a top-down approach is fraught with tension:

The shaping of a national identity and the management of ethnic diversity through the education system were contested. Equality meant not just the provision of resource inputs but the extension of the Ministry of Education's control over curriculum, educational structures, examinations, teacher qualifications and fitness to teach, and conditions of service. That control was bitterly resisted, but the Ministry eventually prevailed. The legacy of a heavily politicized educational policy environment remains to this day. Education remains politically sensitive, and the ethnic dimension in education has led to continuing government oversight in education (Gopinathan, 2001, p. 7).

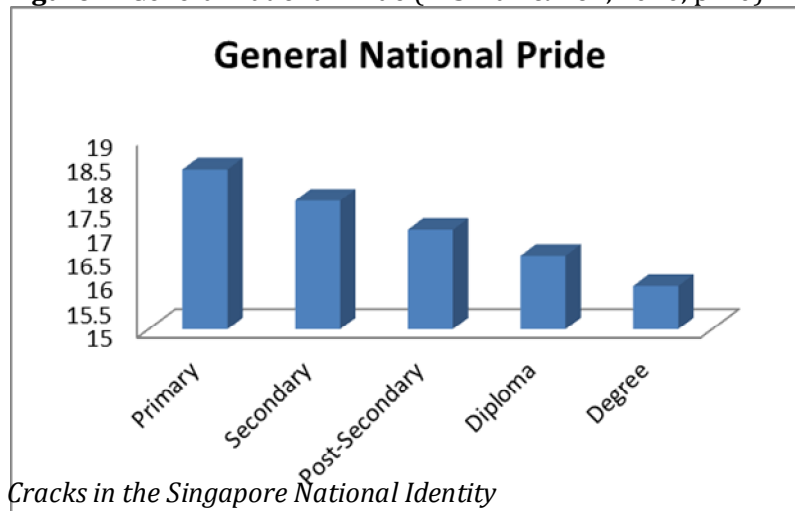
#### **Acquiring identities: Some considerations**

It must be remembered that the Singaporean context and experience of forging a national identity is vastly different from that of other Southeast Asian countries. Singapore is an anomaly in Southeast Asia: "the state preceded the development of nationalism rather than emerging as its political consequence and the state itself became the first major symbol of national identity" (Wilmott, 1989, p. 581). This historical fact could explain some of the nagging issues that bedevil Singapore's continued pursuit not only of national identity but of citizenship as well. Recalling the ideas of Taylor as he liberally adopted from Bakhtin, particularly the "fundamentally *dialogical* character" (Taylor, 1992, p. 32) of the nature of human beings in the process of defining identity provides analytical illumination. The important aspect of Taylor's definition is the importance given to human agency, specifically the opportunity to acquire "rich human languages of expression" (Taylor, 1992, p. 32). Given that the PAP nation-state manages identity formation through an approach best described as an illiberal democracy (Hussin. Mutalib, 2000) achieving genuine identity through the richness of human expression could undoubtedly be difficult. At best, the types of identities forged within a "soft-authoritarian regime" could approximate "hybrid agencies" that depends greatly on "contingency of social interests and political claims" (Bhabha, 1996, p. 58). Consequently, the targeted identity described by LKY as almost the complete man in Singapore would become elusive. The product of the PAP government's national identity creation and management may not reflect the trait acquired by the typical Singaporean man on the street. Notwithstanding, the PAP government's impressive record in economic development for the nation, it seems apparent

that in terms of social engineering and its quest for a common national identity: it is still pretty much in the “gestation stage” (H. Mutalib, 2004, p. 73).

The results from the 2010 NOS4 survey with particular emphasis on General National Pride (GNPRIDE)<sup>2</sup> controlling for levels of education provides credence to the argument that the creation of national identity in Singapore is still very much in a gestation stage: Figure 2 reveals that the construct of General National Pride decreases with higher educational qualifications. These findings seem to indicate cracks in the creation of a Singapore identity.

**Figure 2:** General National Pride (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 20)



True enough, the PAP government itself has raised concerns on the current state of Singaporean National Identity. Aside from the “leavers and stayers” rhetoric of former PM Goh Chok Tong during his 2002 National Day Rally speech four critical issues related to Singaporean national identity have been identified as warranting serious attention:

The first is the rise of ethnic and religious parochialism; the second relates to the “Westernized” lifestyle of the younger generation; the third is the sense of political alienation of the minority population, in particular, the Malays; and the fourth, the high

<sup>2</sup> The GNPRIDE comprises a 5-item General National Pride (GNPRIDE) Index developed by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. GNPRIDE scores are 1 to 5 for ascending pride level. (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 15)



emigration figures of talented young professionals. (H. Mutalib, 2004, p. 64)

The four critical points enumerated above point to a seeming lack of unity in the ever elusive conceptualization of a Singaporean identity. Growing parochialism, increased Westernization, alienation and emigration point to a lack of rootedness to what is truly Singaporean. There are several possible reasons for such a situation.

Three of these are described as:

- (1) contradictions as a result of pragmatism,
- (2) a lack of authentic history and thus identification with the nation and an
- (3) infantile civil society.

One of the potential sources of the cracks in the formation of a national identity may actually spring from the phenomenal economic success Singapore continues to enjoy that has been engineered by the dominant PAP. Chua argues that “capitalist economic success at both the individual and national level may be weak grounds” towards creating “building bonds” for the basis of establishing a national Singapore identity (Chua, 1996, p. 55). This inquiry asserts that another great challenge that Singapore faces in building a national identity would be the willingness of the dominant PAP to deliberate move away from purely capitalist economic basis of national identity and instead move towards more holistic sources. The Singapore education system known for its successes in highly-competitive international league tables could be used as a powerful starting point to move national identity beyond economics towards more social and civic ideals.

### **Political Socialization**

Political socialization is essential in developing civic engagement which forms that basis of a citizenry that values and aspires to build and develop national identity. Education systems that aspire to capitalize on the impacts of political socialization must create for itself functional models of civic and political participation that allow the acquisition of values and habits toward civic engagement for the youth. These socialization processes are geared towards advancing “civic orientation” which fosters “psychological attachment to the polity and the community” among young people (Crystal & DeBell, 2002, p. 114). The experience of Singapore in relation to its avowed goals of political socialization has produced paradoxes.

In its quest to achieve economic progress, the PAP government oftentimes embraced policies that appear contradictory. These contradictions in the name of pragmatism can be found in the PAP

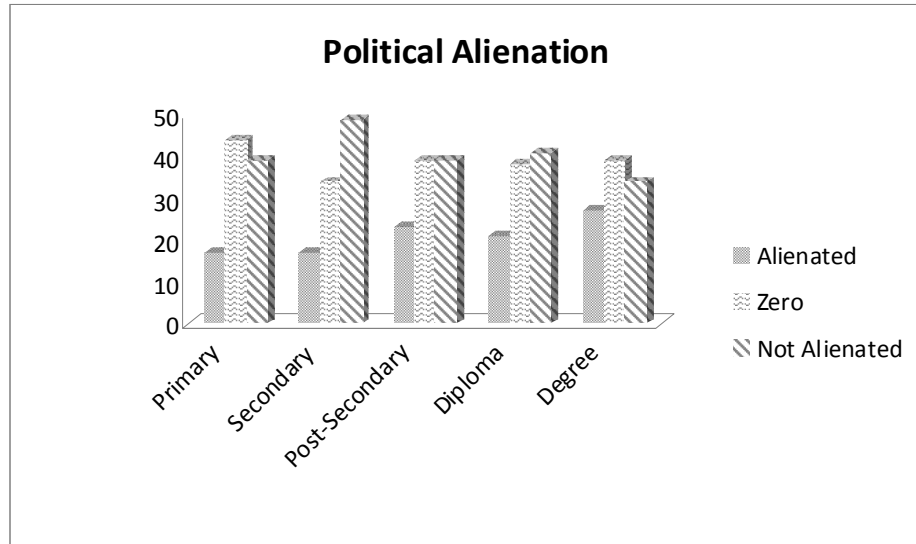
government's attitudes and actions towards open political dialogue (Ho, 2000, p. 446). On one hand, espousing open dialogue and on the other cracking down harshly on what it perceives as slanderous vilification. The education system itself – one of the conduits of socialization in terms of national identity – is also prone to contradictions. The intense competition that “constitutes the hard reality” comprising “daily relevancies of teachers, pupils and parents” is a contentious source of contradiction (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002, p. 158). Still in the realm of education, the landmark National Education (NE) program, primarily designed to inculcate citizenship and identity-formation towards nation-building also suffers from contradictory characteristics: “this is the dilemma of its identity creation: one that attempts to reconcile the global and the local. A similar contradictory logic is also inherent in the NE curriculum” (Koh, 2005, p. 86). In the name of globalization, it encourages students to embrace transnational notions and beliefs. At the same time, it reminds them of the need to stay rooted to their local context. In the writing of history books, the PAP government has always promoted an anti-colonial stance. However in the creation of Singapore history which acknowledges the contribution of Stamford Raffles it would seem that “the need for national symbols that represent Singapore as a whole requires some compromises with the PAP’s original anti-colonial stance” (Wilmott, 1989, p. 589). Perhaps a more insidious form of contradiction could be found in the very successful Singaporean social formula of Ss = C + M + I + O or a “homogenizing” of the four races which tends to “sharpen differences rather than dissipate them” (Siddique, 2002, p. 574).

The results from the 2010 NOS4 survey with particular emphasis on Political Alienation<sup>3</sup> controlling for levels of education seem to confirm the contradictions that are inherent in the political socialization efforts, as represented in institutionalized education controlled by the city-state: Figure 3, the construct of Political Alienation reveals that despite achieving higher educational qualifications, the sense of political alienation increases while the perception of not-being-alienated decreases.

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<sup>3</sup> One can say that there is political alienation if one’s **desire** to influence national discussion on public policy outstrips the perception that it is **possible** to do so. Score ranges from 1 where the desire outweighs opportunity (alienated), to 0 where desire is met with perception of ability to do so (zero), and -1 ability to do so outstrips desire to do so (not alienated) (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 27)

**Figure 3:** Political Alienation (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 33)



### Absence of authentic and critical history

LKY stated that “we are of immigrant stock, having left a richer cultural, and psychologically more secure past, we have only the future to make something of, and that we have determined to do” (K. Y. Lee, 1984, p. 194). This clarion call to create a history hinged on ‘the future works well in rallying an impoverished population towards survival, sustainability and progress. However, an unintentional drawback could be the absence of a sense of authentic and critical history, essential in fostering a national identity.

One should not forget that the local dilemmas of Singaporean identity, while now more directly addressed by artists and the man-in-the-street alike, still require ongoing attention. Singapore needs a stronger and *critical* historical discourse so that Singaporeans can have a deeper understanding of history, as the past is the foundation of individual and collective identity. (Wee, 2002, p. 228)

Another point of view that could be considered is the notion of a history that is controlled by the ruling elite. In reference to an incipient civil society movement in Singapore, the need for a critical history becomes vital: “as long as history remains the PAPs exclusive prerogative, Singaporean civil society’s own historical linkages will be denied in their own right” (Chng, 2002, p. 28). Singapore commentators have repeatedly harped on the very real limitations of

creating a flourishing of civil society in Singapore (Singam & Tan, 2002; Zolo, 2004) Attitudes of the government, perceptions of lack of transparency and fear have handicapped and “built barriers to civil society activism” (Singam & Tan, 2002). Scholars have reiterated the vital importance of civil society in fostering mature political cultures particularly in plural societies (Eishtan, 2001; Wolfe, 2001). With the discourse on history and the reins of national development (economic, historical and even cultural) firmly in the hands of the PAP government, it can be said that the current “loose and inclusive definition of civil society is only indicative of its condition of being a ‘work-in-progress’ in Singapore” (Chng, 2002, p. 23).

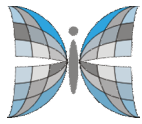
The results from the 2010 NOS4 survey with particular emphasis on Willingness to Sacrifice (WTS)<sup>4</sup> controlling for levels of education lends credence to the notion that political socialization, represented for example by increasing levels of willingness to sacrifice, represented by an active civil society is still very much a work-in-progress: Figure 4, reveals that Willingness to Sacrifice decreases with higher educational qualifications.

**Figure 4:** Willingness to Sacrifice (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 33)



<sup>4</sup> The WTS comprises a 12-item National Identity (NID) Index developed by Dr. Tan Ern Ser of the IPS. Scores for the scale are from 1 to 5 for each, 1 indicating weak ties to country, 5 indicating strong, positive ties to country (E. S. Tan & Koh, 2010, p. 8)





### **Political Socialization and Political Space**

Tan & Gopinathan suggest unequivocally that the path to “true innovation, creativity, experimentation and multiple opportunities in education” would be accomplished if and when the “state allows civil society to flourish and avoids politicizing dissent” (J. Tan & Gopinathan, 2000, p. 10). One type of society and economy that would be dominant in a 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized setting is what is referred to as an Experimentally Oriented Economy (EOE). In EOE’s “full penetration of state space for optimal positioning by all agents is impossible at each point in time, and (because of learning) at each future point in time”, which therefore presents a situation highlighting uncertainty and complexity as a feature of tomorrow’s society (Eliasson, 2001, p. 47). Given such a fluidity, what would be ideal are scenarios where “inconsistent (experimental) decisions” of “decentralized, individuals” are encouraged. A key implication of EOE’s is the somewhat disconcerting tolerance of “constant and unpredictable change” which essentially becomes a feature that is a “necessary consequence of steady long-term growth”. In essence, nations preparing to become KBEs such as Singapore should be willing to “accommodate” the “associated change socially and politically” that would typify growing, experimenting and learning societies (Eliasson, 2001, p. 59). The need to come to grips with EOE and its “uncertain” implications becomes particularly acute in fast-paced and constantly changing sectors of the economy, just like the highly-competitive education sector. This becomes of paramount importance especially since Singapore – not usually known as an education system that is tolerant of the unknowns -- methodically and strategically positions itself to become an “educational hub with not only its own enterprises providing education to foreign students but also foreign institutions” (Lee Soo Ann, 2007, p. 185) opening itself up to uncertainties. This inquiry contends that another big challenge that Singapore faces in its efforts to strengthen political socialization would be the willingness of its city-state, known for not leaving anything to chance, to embrace greater political openness and dissent.

#### **What lies ahead?**

This article explored interrogated how the Singapore city-state has used its education system in integrating three important cornerstones of nation-building, namely the pursuit of citizenship, the forging of national identity and engendering political socialization. Using selected results from the NOS4 survey, this inquiry has identified great challenges that the city-state faces as it integrates education towards nation-building. In order to nurture



active citizens and to solidify the education system's efforts towards nurturing citizenship, traditional and entrenched elites represented by the PAP would need to be willing to release its monopoly control of the Singapore story. Current efforts by the Singapore government towards forging a National Conversation<sup>5</sup> are welcome moves.

The key question would be:

How open would the traditional elites be to fostering an authentic dialogue with all relevant stakeholders?

In its efforts towards building national identity:

Up to what extent would the dominant PAP government be open to modifying its current national development goals, - propagated through the education system - and represented by purely capitalist economic milestones?

In its attempt to strengthen political socialization, as epitomized by its education system:

How far would the Singaporean city-state, known for not leaving anything to chance, be willing to embrace greater political openness and dissent?

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<sup>5</sup>The National Conversation on Education was launched on Sept 2012. The exercise is an attempt to engage with as much as 5,000 educators and other stakeholders around one fundamental question: What kind of children do we want to raise? For more information see, (Heng, 2012).



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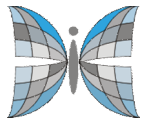
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