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The (bio)politics of engagement: shifts in Singapore’s policy and public discourse on civics education

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This article provides a historical overview of civic educational policy and political discourse in Singapore from 1959 to 2011, focusing on changes in the role attributed to students in the education process. A review of educational programmes and analysis of political speeches reveals that an earlier transmissionist approach that focused on value inculcation and factual knowledge has been supplemented recently by policy and discourse emphasizing student engagement. The authors link their analysis to larger political changes that have been taking place in Singapore. They argue that the push for more participatory forms of civics education parallels an ongoing shift in the ruling party’s political ideology from economic pragmatism to a communitarian ideology that emphasizes citizens’ responsibility. From the point of view of political rationality, promoting active student engagement in civics education can be seen as governmental efforts to build a strong civil society through early socialization into civic responsibility and voluntarism. Viewed as a technology of power, engagement is also seen as a new biopolitical intervention aimed at regulating political participation.

Keywords: civics education; political discourse; political ideology; educational policy change; biopolitics; Singapore

Introduction

Much has been written about Singapore’s efforts to build a nation, with the bulk of academic work commenting on the role of the state in engineering the social, political and economic conditions that have propelled the ex-colony to a first-world city state within a few decades (e.g., Hill & Lian, 1995; Ortmann, 2009). A focal point of analysis as well as critique has been the pragmatism adopted by the People’s Action Party (PAP) as a central political, cultural and economic ideology since it formed the country’s first independent government in 1965. As a newly independent nation, Singapore was faced with high unemployment and an urgent need to industrialize, while having to create a cohesive national community out of an ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse population. The PAP government saw economic development as the key catalyst for nation-building, with all other aspects of life subjected to this goal through a logic of instrumental rationality (Chua, 1985). Indeed, numerous studies have documented how pragmatism has pervaded all levels of policy, organization and public discourse in Singapore (e.g., Ooi, 2010; Schein, 1996; Wee, 2008).

However, pragmatism needs to be understood within the broader political system that the PAP has put in place and has tried to carefully maintain over the decades. Chua (1995) has argued that economic pragmatism proved efficient and sufficient during the
first three decades after independence based upon an ‘ideological consensus’ that gave the PAP legitimacy so long as it delivered material goods to its constituency. As part of the pact, individuals forfeited their democratic rights in favour of a national interest, as defined by the PAP. However, according to Chua (1995), once the aggressive pursuit of economic growth bore fruits and an increasingly affluent, consuming and English-speaking populace developed a desire for more individualism, the PAP realised it could no longer rely merely on pragmatism and a survival/crisis-rhetoric to maintain its legitimacy. As a result, a new framework of communitarian ideology was introduced and enshrined in the PAP’s 1990 Shared Values White Paper that placed ‘collective interest’ above all other interests (Chua, 1995). A persistent problem associated with such a political ideology is who gets to decide what the interest of the collective is. As Chua notes, unless the government gives greater weight to public consultation with the electorate, communitarian democracy will emerge as a more nuanced ideological packaging of an authoritarian political system.

It is possible then to see some of the changes that have been taking place in Singapore in the past 15 years as emanating from the government’s recognition that a top-down style of governance needs to be supplanted by efforts to engage citizens on the ground (Koh & Ooi, 2000). This consultative shift was initiated as early as in the 1980s but came into force in the 1990s through the emergence of several civil society organizations, such as the Association of Muslim Professionals and the women’s group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), that have been able to exert considerable influence in shaping government policies pertaining to their group interest (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2000; Singam, 2000). In the late 1990s, citizens were invited to deliberate about the nation’s future, culminating in the publication of Singapore 21, a vision statement delineating key challenges and solutions for the country in the twenty-first century. This document overtly promotes ‘active citizenship’ that encompasses the provision of feedback by citizens, as well as participation in the political process (Lee, 2002). The Feedback Unit of the government, established in the 1980s, was revamped in 2006 as Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenship at Home (REACH), with the goal to promote active citizenry through citizen participation and involvement (REACH, n.d.). Most recently, no doubt in response to the unprecedented drop in public support for the PAP in the 2011 general elections, the government embarked upon a National Conversation (later renamed Our Singapore Conversation), aimed at providing ‘an opportunity for Singaporeans to come together and ask: What matters most? Where do we want to go as a country, as a people?’ (Ministry of Education [MOE], 26 August 2012).

One issue that has remained unexplored is the extent to which education has been affected by this shift, both in terms of government discourse on education’s role in building a civic-minded populace, as well as in actual policies aimed at achieving such a goal. There is ample literature that critically assesses civics education in Singapore, generally noting the inadequacy of current curricula for attaining a multiculturally aware and globally conscious citizenry (Baildon & Sim, 2010; Rossi & Ryan, 2006). New pedagogic initiatives that purport to foster students’ critical thinking have been received by academics with scepticism, arguing that they merely aim at enhancing the productive capacity of the country’s workforce in order to compete globally (Koh, 2004; Gopinathan, 2007). Instead of being harbingers of loosening state control, these reform initiatives merely represent new ‘tactics of governmentality’ (Koh, 2010, p. 25). National Education (NE), Singapore’s civic-education programme introduced in 1997, has also
been described as a renewed attempt to nurture ‘good citizens’ who are loyal to the country and its government (Tan & Strathdee, 2010), providing a further example for the tendency in Singapore to conflate civil society and its emphasis on one’s rights as a citizen, with civic society and its emphasis on citizens’ responsibilities (Chua, 2000; Lee, 2002).

So while there have been studies that address recent educational reform in Singapore within the context of globalization, few have explored the historical trajectory of citizenship education as a key element in the PAP’s political-economic project of nation building. This paper attempts to do just that by providing a historical overview of civic educational policy and attendant political discourse in Singapore from 1959 to 2011. We will highlight four arguments. First, that citizenship education in Singapore has always focused, and continues to focus, on educating ‘good’ citizens with a strong sense of civic responsibility. Second, that an earlier, transmissionist notion that stressed the inculcation of values in students has been supplemented by discourse and educational initiatives that stress engagement as the basis for civics education. Third, in discussing the findings, we draw parallels between this shift and Chua’s (1995) claim about a new ideological consensus that seems to be the driving force behind the PAP’s willingness to engage citizens. Fourth, drawing on Foucault (1975–1976/2003), we discuss engagement in civic education as one of a host of new technologies of power necessitated by changes in the PAP’s political rationality. We argue that the emphasis on engagement represents a biopolitical intervention that aims to regulate the boundaries of civic and political participation.

A note on data: The analysis of political discourse in this paper relies on a corpus of 249 political speeches retrieved from a publicly available online speech archive. This particular compilation was created using the keywords citizenship, national day and national identity, with the number of speeches from each decade ranging from 36 to 74 (excepting the 2010s, with only 11 speeches). These texts were first read to answer a general question regarding how various participants in the education process, especially students, were represented. Subsequently, texts where politicians explicitly characterized citizenship education were selected and closely analysed for word choice (around five texts per decade). Finally, the computer software WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2008) was used to generate from the larger corpus the frequency of particular key terms that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

Moulding the nation through transmission: early discourse and policy on citizenship education

As a new nation, Singapore could only achieve and sustain needed economic growth through a stable political establishment and an obedient citizenry that felt loyalty and belonging to Singapore (Wilson, 1978). The role of formal education in ‘moulding the nation’ was recognized and emphasized by the PAP as early as in its 1959 party manifesto:

Singapore does not have a stable integrated society, nor has it inherited any traditions. So we hear many discordant voices … Much of this confusion is strongly reflected in our schools today … Our teachers must therefore realise the important role they play in the building of a united democratic Malayan nation … They have a whole generation of children to mould into a national pattern. (PAP, 1959, emphasis added)
The verb *mould*, frequent in early rhetoric, captures the very essence of how the PAP envisioned the process of nation building through education. On the one hand, it implies the formation of (student) character according to a unitary model, determined by the ruling elite. On the other hand, the shape of this ‘national pattern’ was not to develop organically over time but purposefully assembled through Singapore’s public education. To that end, the PAP set about establishing control over the education system by streamlining the curriculum and textbooks in the different vernacular and English language schools. In 1960, a Textbook Advisory Council was set up and under it, a Textbooks and Syllabus Committee was established to design syllabi with common content in the four languages, namely Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English (MOE, 1966). The aim was to develop a common curriculum regardless of the language of instruction, amid fears that otherwise social cohesion may be jeopardized. Ethnic affiliation and the values associated with it were to be subsumed under the larger pattern of a Singaporean national character.

Citizenship education during the period of self-governance (1959–1963) and merger with Malaya (1963–1965) was focused on ‘standards of right and wrong’, conflating civic values with moral values. This is evident in the above quote as well as in the Ethics syllabus that the MOE implemented from 1959 to 1966. The syllabus was designed to lay the foundation for character development with the aim of developing children into ‘self-respecting individuals and good citizens’ (Ong, 1979, p. 2). Stories to illustrate ‘right conduct’ and values such as ‘politeness, honesty, perseverance and kindness’ were used (p. 2).

After Singapore became an independent republic in 1965, government rhetoric reiterated the importance of education in building a unified nation, framing this process in terms of transmission of values and the shaping of young Singaporeans’ character. The following two quotes are both from 1966, the first from a speech by then Minister for Education, Ong Pang Boon, and the second by Minister of State for Education, Rahim Ishak:

Now that Singapore is a republic, it is more than ever vital for a contented corps of dedicated teachers to identify themselves with the new spirit of independent nationhood and to *inculcate* this sense of belonging to one nation among our multi-racial students. (National Archives of Singapore, 4 June 1966, emphasis added)

The Ministry of Education therefore lays great emphasis on the *moulding and formation* of the character of young people and activities that go toward character building will always have our support. Our curricula is cut out to *produce children and youth* with an all-round balanced character and a sense of value which will turn them into *responsible citizens*, we hope, not easily influenced by racial or religious prejudices. (National Archives of Singapore, 8 May 1966, emphasis added)

If shaping the national character was to be achieved through moulding, teachers’ task was to contribute to this through *inculcation*; persistent instruction that would *produce* youth who felt loyal to Singapore. The actors in this rhetoric are the government (MOE, the curriculum) and the teachers, while youth are passive objects to be shaped and fashioned. The juxtaposition of nation and the multiracial makeup of the student body in the first quote again points to the primacy of national over ethnic affiliation, though the second quote identifies racial and religious tolerance as part of being a responsible citizen.

Much of the 1960s and early 1970s political rhetoric focused on such hopeful plans for grooming the next generation of Singaporeans. As for curriculum policy, citizenship education was taught through subjects such as Ethics (later replaced by Civics) with a
focus on values of patriotism, loyalty and civic consciousness (Ong, 1979). In addition, the daily recital of the national pledge and flag-raising ceremony in every school were introduced as symbolic acts of fostering national belonging (Gopinathan, 1990). At the primary level, Civics was soon replaced in 1973 by Education for Living (EFL), an interdisciplinary programme that combined civics, history and geography. A key objective of EFL was to educate pupils about the importance of nation-building and enable them to understand their duties and responsibilities. However, ‘learning about and understanding democratic principles and processes were all but ignored in favour of dutiful obedience to the state’ (Sim, 2005, p. 62).

Government rhetoric on the need to ‘produce’ students with values and a strong sense of belonging continued throughout the 1970s. In line with earlier proclamations, the education of young Singaporeans to be good citizens is envisioned as a mechanistic process:

But the permanent inculcation of these qualities [consideration for others, willingness to give and take, social discipline] is a long-term process which must depend upon our teachers in schools and the parents at home. (National Archives of Singapore, 28 August 1977, emphasis added)

Well, Confucius says, between government and people, father and son, brothers and sisters, friends: they are important, fundamental relationships; your obligation to society. And if that is programmed early from the age of six in school, you’ve got good citizens. If that’s not programmed, you have a motley crowd. (National Archives of Singapore, 13 August 1978, emphasis added)

The above two quotes echo previous ones by discursively constructing civic educational practices in terms of inculcation and programing. In line with the PAP’s authoritarian style of governance, the educational process through which values and attitudes are to be passed on to students is heavily top-down, with students seen as mere receptacles into which particular character traits can be poured. In addition, starting from the 1970s, there is the adoption of the discursive strategy of moral diagnosis in Singaporean political rhetoric that identifies particular attitudes thought to threaten social stability and the country’s progress, and articulates desirable alternatives to those. These diagnoses often involved an admonition of young Singaporeans for their moral shortcomings, often framed with reference to various ‘threats’ that were endangering youth morality and thus the entire future of the Singapore nation. According to Kuo (1992), this sense of moral crisis came about partly because by the late 1970s, the most essential economic and political questions had been addressed, leaving time for ‘some soul-searching’ (p. 4). However, it was also in the second half of this decade that the new generation of Singaporeans that figured in the hopeful rhetoric of post-independence, came of age. And that coming of age may not have entirely matched expectations.

Among those threats perceived to be most damaging to Singaporean youth of the time were the hippie culture of the 1970s and the materialism that politicians concluded had come to characterize post-war Singaporeans by the 1980s. Both hippie culture as well as materialism was strongly associated with the ‘decadent West’ that had apparently started to affect Singaporean society. As Minister for Home Affairs and Education, Chua Sian Chin, put it:

It is also not possible to insulate our people from the influence of the more pernicious aberrations of Western culture which we see being manifested in drug addiction, long hair and the hippie sub-culture … The only way to prevent our people, particularly our young
people, from succumbing to such harmful influence is to build up in them some form of immunity to it. (National Archives of Singapore, 9 July 1977, emphasis added)

Such calls to ‘build up immunity’ in Singaporean youth against the perceived excesses of Western culture are also linked to political rhetoric of the time that saw the ideological task of nation building in establishing a unique Singaporean national identity as different from others. On the one hand, we see politicians trying to distance Singaporean identity from the migrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with perceived loyalties to their country of origin. On the other hand, Singaporeans needed to remain different from Westerners, mainly through adherence to ‘Asian values’ (Clammer, 1985). In light of these threats, the impetus to assert Singaporeans’ difference through educational policy became acutely strong by the early 1980s, as expressed in a speech by Ho Kah Leong, Parliamentary Secretary (Education):

With youths like lost kites flapping in the sky without proper control, they would undoubtedly become a stumbling block in our process of nation building. Perhaps this is the by-product of modern industrialization. We only hope that the introduction of religious knowledge and Confucian Ethics and a restructured moral education programme in schools would be a right dose of medicine. (National Archives of Singapore, 6 August 1982, emphasis added)

Ho’s words echo the disease metaphor of Western cultural influence from a few years earlier. Confucian values, which emphasize filial piety, the importance of societal obligations over individual desires, and obedience to a paternalistic hierarchical authority (Mauzy & Milne, 2002), were seen as a remedy to counter Western ideas of human rights and liberal democracy.

In line with our argument, what is noteworthy again is the mechanistic way in which education, and particularly, civic and moral education, is conceptualized in public discourse during this period. First, it was assumed that a cultural trend (such as materialism) that was closely linked to Singapore’s economic success could be eliminated through formal schooling, and more specifically, through religious education, which was made compulsory for all upper secondary students between 1984 and 1989. Second, the forcefulness of inculcation, entrenchment and dose of medicine implies a continual belief in top-down attempts to cultivate desired civic attitudes among students. As noted by Gopinathan (1988), religious knowledge as school subject focused on the factual aspects of world religions and textbooks emphasized secular moral values deemed vital for a loyal citizenry. By the end of the decade, there were clear indications that the curricular inclusion of religion, despite its factual orientation, had resulted in Christian and Buddhist religious revivalism (Kho, Ooi, & Chee, 2010; Tan, 1997) and in the heightening of ethno-religious divisions (Hill & Lian, 1995) and thus Religious Knowledge as a school subject was made optional.

Moral education programmes were not the only means by which citizenship education was carried out in schools in the 1980s. In 1984, a new interdisciplinary subject, Social Studies, replaced EFL in the primary school curriculum. The aims of Social Studies were to ‘enable pupils to understand their social world and to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to participate more effectively in the society and environment in which they live’ (MOE, 1981, p. 1). Topics included the history and geography of Singapore as well as issues related to Singapore’s lack of resources and the unique multicultural composition of its population (Fang, 2002). As Baildon and Ho (2009) note, national vulnerability and threats to survival are key ideological constructs by the
government that prevailed in the Social Studies curricula from 1981 up to the latest curriculum of 2012.

By the mid-1990s, a new threat seemed to have been endangering young Singaporeans: a government poll among 2500 students revealed the lack of historical knowledge concerning the country’s independence and the ‘unique experiences’ of Singapore. There was considerable worry among political leaders that this signalled a lack of understanding of Singapore’s ‘vulnerabilities and constraints’. According to the Minister for Education, Lee Yock Suan:

Younger Singaporeans have not gone through the hardship that the older generations have encountered in the past – the ravages of war and Japanese occupation, the struggle for independence, the horrors of racial riots, and the problems of high unemployment. Our young must be made to realise that the kind of Singapore they are familiar with and have come to take for granted, is not a birthright. (National Archives of Singapore, 27 July 1996, emphasis added)

Anxiety around the loyalties of younger Singaporeans has always been present among the political elite; in fact, it is in response to this anxiety that many civic and moral educational attempts have been designed. At the core of political rhetoric regarding citizenship education has been the assumption that in the absence of relevant experience, most notably hardships of war and racial strife, the attitudes and values one would learn through those experiences must be taught, or more precisely, transmitted, to Singaporean youth. By the mid-1990s, it became clear that previous efforts to achieve this through formal education had not been efficient, paving the way to the launch of a new citizenship education initiative, NE, in May 1997.

**Moulding the nation through engagement: NE**

NE differs from previous efforts both in terms of quantity and quality. On the one hand, it denotes a comprehensive initiative that is meant to infuse all aspects of the formal and informal school curriculum. Unlike previous attempts, it does not designate a new school subject but rather calls on schools and teachers to weave NE values and messages into every lesson, though special emphasis is given to Social Studies, History and Civics, and Moral Education to fulfil NE goals. On the other hand, NE amended existing concentration on the overt teaching of factual information with additional activities that every school must facilitate.

The goals of NE are to ‘develop national cohesion, cultivate instincts for survival and instill confidence in our students regarding Singapore’s future’ (MOE, 2007, p. i). These aims were encapsulated and publicized in six ‘NE messages’: (1) Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong; (2) We must preserve racial and religious harmony; (3) We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility; (4) No one owes Singapore a living; (5) We must ourselves defend Singapore; and (6) We have confidence in our future. Distinct themes were developed for the three academic levels of schools: Love Singapore (Primary level), Know Singapore (Secondary level) and Lead Singapore (Pre-university level), with programmes developed around each theme.

Government agencies and community organizations were harnessed through the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) as well as Learning Journeys (LJ), two programmes implemented in the informal curriculum. CIP afforded students opportunities to be involved in and contribute to the community. Students could, for example, volunteer their time cleaning a park or working at charitable institutions such as homes for the
elderly. CIP was designed to achieve the NE goals of nurturing socially responsible students and developing in them a sense of commitment to Singapore (MOE, 2013).

During LJ, which intend to instil national pride in students, pupils visit heritage sites and other government institutions to learn about challenges faced by Singapore and how these challenges are overcome (MOE, 2007). Other activities in the informal curriculum include schools’ commemoration of four core events – Total Defence Day, International Friendship Day, Racial Harmony Day and National Day. These are aimed at achieving the NE goals of developing national identity and pride as well as sensitizing students to the need for racial harmony, self-determination and defence of the country.

Clearly, NE signalled a shift in the government’s approach to using formal education for ‘moulding’ Singaporean youth according to a desirable ideal. Interestingly, it is still not uncommon to find in political speeches references that depict this educational process in terms of transmission. What has changed in the past 15 years is that an additional discourse has appeared that pays increasing attention to students as active participants. The following quote aptly illustrates the co-existence of these two discourses, one of passive inculcation, in this case inoculation against the perceived threats of the Internet, and one of engagement. In a speech at a local secondary school on the occasion of Racial Harmony Day, then Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen, said:

> As part of our efforts to inoculate our youths from undesirable influences on the Internet, schools have implemented cyber wellness programmes since 2007 … This collective effort by the school, cluster and their community partners is a good ground-up initiative to develop common educational resources to engage our youths in CEP. Such initiatives also reflect that government policy alone can only do so much. Hand in hand, we can achieve much more. (MOE, 21 July 2010, emphasis added)

Acknowledgement of the need for students to learn through experience and participation, rather than formal lessons, has intensified in the last 10 years. In place of constant admonishing of young Singaporeans that prevailed in the 1980s, there is clear emphasis on ‘nurturing’ and ‘engaging’ youth in their own education. Instead of individual quotes, perhaps more illustrative of this shift are two figures that depict the occurrence of the words engage and nurture in connection with youth in the larger corpus of 249 speeches we drew on for the analysis.

It is not so much the raw frequencies that are noteworthy, but rather the sharp increase in the occurrence of these two words in our corpus. We see (in Figure 1) that the word nurture rarely appeared in political speeches between 1965 and 1997 but has come up frequently since NE was launched, in statements such as ‘But while we expand the global experience in our schools, we want to nurture in our young a sense of home’ (National Archives of Singapore, 8 August 2006, emphasis added).

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![Figure 1. Frequency of occurrence of nurture in connection with students/youth.](image)
The difference is even more pronounced for engage (in Figure 2), which was practically absent prior to 1998 but is very commonly used in recent political rhetoric on NE, as in the example ‘I am glad that our schools are harnessing New Media to make NE come alive and engage and captivate our young’ (National Archives of Singapore, 21 July 2007, emphasis added). This rhetoric stands in sharp contrast to public pronouncements from earlier periods to ‘programme students’ and to give them ‘doses’ of religious education. Instead of being treated as mere receptacles, students are given a more prominent role as active co-participants.

These shifts in public discourse are again closely linked to educational policy considerations. An MOE-commissioned review of NE found that while NE was acknowledged as necessary, the core programmes were unevenly implemented in schools (MOE, 2007). In some schools, students had indicated that they were unexcited and some even ‘expressed cynicism at what they felt was “propaganda”’ (MOE, 2007, p. iv). This is no surprise as the Social Studies syllabus which these youths studied was designed around the six NE messages that easily evoke ideas of indoctrination. Based upon the outcome of the review, the focus of NE shifted to place greater emphasis on ‘cultivating heartware and rootedness to Singapore’ within the framework of ‘Head, Heart and Hands’. A key objective is to ‘engage and empower’ students to make a positive difference to society within a NE programme that is focused on ‘quality, customization and ownership’. There is thus a marked change in the conceptualization of NE towards developing active engagement as a civic trait among Singapore’s youth.

**Discussion**

The point of departure for this paper was a noted shift in the PAP’s political ideology from instrumental rationality towards an appeal to collective interest. Given that such communitarian ideology needs to be legitimated through a consultative approach to governance with public input into delineating common interest, we also highlighted government initiatives over the last 20 years that have purportedly aimed at expanding opportunities for Singaporeans to actively participate in the political decision-making process. In the preceding sections, we argued that a parallel shift has been occurring in civic educational discourse and policy. In the 1990s, coinciding with the political ideological turn towards communitarianism, as well as with a national identity crisis among the ruling elite (Koh, 2005), a new citizenship education initiative was launched that incorporated participatory forms of learning. In addition, political speeches on the topic of NE have
increasingly adopted a vocabulary of engaging and nurturing students, though transmis-
sionist discourse still lingers. We would like to argue that this is no coincidence; rather, the
shift away from transmission towards ‘empowerment’ in NE is linked to the government’s
attempt to purposefully build a citizenry that is willing to get engaged in public affairs,
albeit strictly within the bounds of state-defined civic responsibilities.

It is precisely the question of bounds that serves as entry point for a more critical
assessment of the outlined changes. So far this paper has taken a political philosophical
approach highlighting discursive and policy changes supporting the PAP’s shifting
political rationality. But what is ultimately at stake are shifting dynamics in technologies
of political power. Foucault’s distinction between disciplinary and bio-power seems
particularly expedient for theorizing about the nature and effects of the changes outlined
so far. In a 1976 lecture, Foucault (1975–1976/2003) argues that the late eighteenth
century saw a new technology of power emerge that aimed to “make” live and “let” die’
(p. 241). This biopower or biopolitics is different from disciplinary power that had
already appeared in the institutions of the seventeenth century and was intent on
disciplining bodies through surveillance and training. This new power aimed not to
discipline but to regulate; and its target was not individual bodies but rather entire
populations. Because they operate at two distinct levels, these two technologies of power
are not mutually exclusive but are articulated with each other. Medical knowledge, for
instance, has disciplinary effects through targeting the health of individuals while also
regulating public hygiene through vaccination programmes and insurance schemes.
Political power requires both the workings of disciplinary mechanism impacting
individual conduct as well as regulatory mechanisms that affect human masses.

Education has been analysed by Foucault (1975) and others (Perryman, 2006) as a site
of disciplinary control par excellence. Much less clear is the way in which disciplinary
and regulatory power intersect in education to create not only docile bodies but to
normalize the population. Looking back at the pre-NE period in Singapore, disciplinary
control is quite evident and explicit in both educational policy and discourse that aimed to
forge civic bodies according to the PAP mould: loyal citizens who showed obedience and
responsibility towards Singapore. Parallel to that, but quite independently, there were
biopolitical interventions during this earlier period that were put in place to regulate the
civic population. One important mechanism had to do with the socio-spatial redesign of
post-colonial Singapore and its effects on the management of ethnic interaction. For
instance, ethnic settlements that persisted throughout colonial times were dismantled and
turned into sites of historical interest (Chinatown, Little India) rather than places for
ethnic affiliation (Hee & Ooi, 2003), with the population gradually moved into newly
constructed public housing high rises where they became homeowners through a
mandatory savings scheme (Vasoo & Lee, 2001). The design principles and features of
these estates and the public spaces attached to them reflected the political ideology of
racial harmony and cohesiveness (Hee & Ooi, 2003). Furthermore, in 1989, the Housing
and Development Board introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) that set racial
quotas for estates to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. In sum, intraracial
interaction, and the potential for civic activism along ethnic group interest stemming from
it, was partially controlled through the interconnecting regulation of space and race. The
collective regulatory effect of these and numerous other biopolitical interventions was to
control (regulate) civic consciousness along ethnic lines, which was in accordance with
the civic educational (disciplinary) goals of putting country before ethnic group.
Prior to the introduction of NE in 1997, what we see then is a civic education programme that is strongly disciplinary in orientation but involves no biopolitical mechanisms. That regulatory apparatus of state power was exercised primarily through non-educational interventions such as the EIP. What is new in NE is that we see an articulation of both disciplinary and biopower. On the one hand, NE is a continuation of a disciplinary strategy whose aim is to ‘nurture’ responsible citizens via regimented participation in socially charitable and morally upright behaviour. But engagement itself needs to be understood as a regulatory mechanism deployed by the state to control political participation. In other words, the new political rationality of consensus that has supplanted a purely economic pragmatism has necessitated the regulation of the range of legitimate activities that make up participatory politics. The Singapore Conversation needs to be understood in this light, just as other examples that mark the consultative shift in the government’s approach: ‘town-hall meetings’ and ‘feedback’ sessions organized by the PAP, online government forums that allow registered users to voice their views, as well as increased public discourse about the need for Singaporeans to volunteer. The regulatory nature of these new measures lies in their attempt to deal with ‘the population as a political problem’ (Foucault 1975–1976/2003, p. 245); the management, on the one hand, of a socially apathetic (i.e., youth) and on the other hand a politically deviant or deficient population that cannot be trusted with making informed political decisions.

Seen in this light, NE is significant as it combines disciplinary and regulatory powers: it nurtures docile citizens while carrying out the task of demarcating the boundaries of civic participation. However, engagement in NE, and also more generally, should be understood as at best a proxy for political participation: it emphasizes citizens’ responsibilities but remains silent on citizens’ rights. In fact, engagement has not resulted in any serious renegotiation of the substance of civics education; it has simply entailed a new tactics – a pedagogical overhaul that sidelined (though by no means eliminated) rote-learning in favour of learning-by-doing. The rights of citizens in a democracy are still not taught or discussed in the curriculum. Similarly, subjects such as Civics and Moral Education, History and Social Studies continue to stress the need to develop students into citizens who understand the constraints of a small island state and have competencies to contribute to Singapore’s development. Additionally, the values thought to be essential for a good citizen have also remained unchanged. At the opening of a conference on citizenship and character education Minister for Education, Heng Swee Keat, highlighted respect, integrity, resilience, responsibility, care and harmony as the values that need to be nurtured in young Singaporeans (MOE, 8 November 2011). One sees in these values the same emphasis on moral conduct – integrity, respect for others and harmony so as to preserve social stability in multicultural Singapore that had been delineated in the rhetoric and policies of the 1960s.

Conclusion

The Singapore General Elections of 2011, alluded to in the Introduction, are often described as having heralded a new era in Singaporean politics. As Tan and Lee (2011) note, ‘On 7 May 2011, Singaporean politics came of age. History was made … [T]he election saw a level of political engagement, mobilization and sense of ownership hitherto unseen since independence’ (p. 10). A strengthened political opposition that was able to field candidates to contest 82 out of 87 parliamentary seats, as well as an electorate that felt confident to express political alignments, did not only demonstrate Singaporeans’
desire for ‘a more competitive political landscape’ (Tan, 2011, p. 46) but more profoundly that the bounds of political participation may need to be redefined. As our analysis has shown, this needs to be considered as part of a process that began much earlier and involved a shift in the political discourse and ideology of the Singaporean government. Other factors have also facilitated Singaporeans’ increased sense of civic rights, among them non-government online media that have succeeded in impacting the national agenda and showed that the boundaries of public space are ‘permeable to conversations that circulate in the alternative media’ (George, 2012, p. 178).

It seems that government attempts at regulating the borders of acceptable civic participation through biopolitical interventions such as NE and Singapore Conversation have to contend with bottom-up efforts to redefine those same boundaries. For one, many Singaporeans are suspicious of the National Conversation and similar initiatives as staged. Additionally, people have utilized the limited offline space for exercising their civic right to shape politics. A most recent example came from a gathering of 4000 people at the Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park (the only spot where people can assemble without first obtaining a permit) in February 2013 to protest the endorsement of the government’s White Paper on Population. In this climate, then, one wonders how productive or counterproductive the strategy of ignoring discussion of civic rights in citizenship education is. GE2011 evidences empowerment and ownership – central tenets of the revised NE framework. Perhaps it is time to reconsider not just the pedagogy but also the substance of how to educate Singapore’s future citizenry.

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