Notions of criticality: Singaporean teachers' perspectives of critical thinking in social studies

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In this article we explore the ways critical thinking is conceived by a group of Singaporean social studies teachers, what they see as its purposes as well as perceived constraints to critical thinking and teaching critical thinking in Singapore's schools. Using a case study research design and constant comparative method we analysed data from teachers' discussion board entries, observation notes and lesson artefacts from a Master's class. Findings revealed three key tensions involving teaching critical thinking in an exam culture, uncertainty about what constitutes the 'out-of-bound', and the issue of professional identity. Each of these tensions intersected and interacted in dynamic ways for teachers and shaped the way they understand and practise critical thinking.

Keywords: citizenship education; critical thinking; teacher education

Introduction

Fast capitalism (Agger, 2004), transnational flows of people, ideas, goods, media and technologies, and the shifting landscape of the knowledge economy require responsive populations and policies that can flexibly and quickly adapt to ever changing circumstances. Education reform plays a central role in mediating and managing shifting relationships between state and society, and is one way governments address anxieties accompanying fundamental changes due to globalization (Green, 1997; Koh, 2002).

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore has consistently made the whole society well aware of potential challenges and threats facing the small city-state in global contexts (Mok & Tan, 2004). In response to these challenges, Singapore instituted major educational reform in 1997 with the launch of *Thinking schools, learning nation* (*TSLN*). The vision describes 'a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future, and an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century' (MOE, 2008). *Thinking schools* entails education institutions developing future citizens capable of engaging in critical and creative thinking, while *learning nation* emphasizes that the culture of thinking and lifelong learning should be high on the educational agenda.

TSLN was partly in response to perceived economic imperatives. As Gopinathan (2007) argues, education reform in Singapore 'is primarily a way of retooling the productive capacity of the system' (p. 59). In a global context shaped by information

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and communication, the ability to think critically is essential to be able to respond appropriately to rapid and complex changes. This is true particularly of the employment flexibility dictated by global economic trends.

What also marks *TSLN* reform is the explicit recognition that globalisation and the changing economy 'will strain the loyalties and attachments of young Singaporeans' (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 61). Due to transnational flows of new media, new technologies, and diverse ideas and ideologies (Appadurai, 1996), young people are increasingly pulled into multiple allegiances that challenge the hold of the nation state. As Singapore's Education Minister Tharman acknowledged, 'Ideologies and events that threaten to polarise communities are now instantly spread and instantly accessed globally, via both traditional media and the Internet' (Tharman, 2007).

As a result, National Education (NE) was also launched in 1997 to develop the knowledge, values and skills deemed necessary for citizenship in Singapore. The objectives of National Education were to develop national cohesion, foster a sense of national pride, learn 'the Singapore story' (mainly the hardships and sacrifices of the founding generation and PAP), understand Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, and instil the core values of meritocracy, harmony and good governance (Ministry of Education, 2008). Forging a national identity in the midst of globalization was paramount, making citizenship education a primary concern of officials. In the context of NE, the secondary social studies curriculum was launched in 2001 as a major vehicle for NE (Sim, 2008).

Critical thinking and citizenship education are central to social studies education in Singapore. But these are not value neutral aspirations. Criticality is contested (Walters, 1994), and what is meant by a thinking citizenry will necessarily vary, even in a tightly controlled Singaporean education system (Sim, 2008). While few would disagree about the importance of helping students to think critically, many differ about the precise characterization of critical thinking.

We know little about how teachers understand and teach critical thinking. Yet teachers are central to the implementation of education reforms; it is through them that curricular intentions are realized in classrooms (Gudmundsdottir, 1991). McCutcheon (1988) explains that the teacher filters the intended curriculum. Teachers are mediators between the curriculum and students; they interpret, modify, augment and choose selectively from available curriculum materials (Parker, 1987). Consequently, Fullan (2001) argues that teachers are the determining factor of education reform where any educational change depends on what teachers think and do. In what follows, we examine teachers' understandings about the role of social studies education in promoting critical thinking, the types of criticality desired in Singaporean contexts, and the ways certain contexts shape notions of criticality.

Strong state management of education

A multiracial society built by immigrants primarily from China, Malaysia and Southern India, Singapore became independent when it separated from Malaysia in 1965. A tiny island with few natural resources, it faced severe challenges to its existence from the very beginning. Major political issues such as the Japanese Occupation, communism and the racial riots in the early years of independence emphasized to the PAP government, which has been consistently returned to power, that for Singapore to survive, nation-building, developing a shared national identity and modernizing the economy were urgent priorities (Chua & Kuo, 1991).

The themes of vulnerability and survival have been strong ideological constructs of the government in Singapore, and the 'structuring centre of reasoning and rationalization of the policies by which Singapore has been governed since independence' (Chua, 1995, p. 48). The development of human capital, as a major factor for economic growth as well as a means of building a nation out of a disparate collection of immigrants, was seen as essential in determining whether the nation would 'sink or swim' (Minchin, 1990, p. 242). Education viewed in instrumental terms became the means of achieving both the development of human capital and the building of social, communitarian reflexes that could bind a state with such a high degree of diversity (Gopinathan, 1999). Consequently, while the education system has undergone numerous changes, it has never faltered in its aim to 'support and develop the Republic as a modern industrial nation with a cohesive multiracial society' (Wilson, 1978, p. 235).

Singapore's education system is centrally planned and remarkably responsive to the directives of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and its political leaders. Such a system is seen as essential to promote economic development and to achieve the social and political goals of national cohesion. Not surprisingly, with the strong presence of the state in managing the educational needs and charting the educational future of the country, the aims of education in Singapore are inextricably linked with the political aims of the government. In Singapore, the school system is essentially an instrument of nation-building, characteristic of the developmental state where education serves the process of state-formation or nation-building (Green, 1997). In such states, the goals of national development are 'sacrosanct', 'ongoing' and are often couched in terms of 'national survival' (Sim & Print, 2005, p. 60).

Similarly, strong state management of the educational system also served the economic interests of the new 'administrative state' that focused on economic and social management rather than political debate about new policies (Gopinathan, 1991). Emphases on technocratic solutions to social and political problems became intertwined with a narrative of national progress and able leadership. Education became 'an important legitimizing instrument in sustaining the hegemony of the governing People's Action Party' (Loh, 1998, p. 1) to ensure order, stability and development. An official narrative of the government providing what matters most to people – safety, security, and prosperity – in exchange for economic discipline and social conformity provided the common shared national history education that would help forge the young nation. Politically, a tight system of control allowing few opportunities for dissent to maintain the social order was developed (Tamney, 1996). Consequently, Singaporeans seem generally uninterested in politics, deferring to the government so long as it gives them the good life (George, 2000; Seah, 2005).

Social studies in Singapore

Social studies was introduced in 2001 as a compulsory and examinable subject at the upper secondary level when students are 15- to 17-years-old. As an integrated subject that includes elements of history, economics, political science and human geography and focuses on national, regional and international issues central to the development of Singapore as a nation, it was designed primarily as a vehicle for NE and to prepare students to live in a global society.

The introduction of social studies is partly a response to globalization and its destabilizing effects and increasing anxieties about the engagement and participation of young people in Singapore's future. Affluent, well-educated, technologically

savvy, and highly mobile, young Singaporeans aspire for freedom and individual choice. Political leaders are concerned that many of them 'will pack their bags and take flight when our country runs into a little storm' (Goh, 2001) and it was recently reported that as many as 53% of Singaporean teens would consider emigrating (J. Lim, 2006). Leaders were also concerned by reports that younger Singaporeans had little knowledge of events surrounding Singapore's independence and expressed little interest in nation-building issues (Leong, 1996). Lee Hsien Loong, then Deputy Prime Minister, claimed, 'This ignorance will hinder our effort to develop a shared sense of nationhood. We will not acquire the right instincts to bond as one nation, or maintain the will to survive and prosper in an uncertain world' (Lee, 1997).

Social studies in Singapore aims to prepare students for work in the knowledge-based global economy and develop and deepen national consciousness – a sense of belonging and feeling for Singapore among an increasingly materialistic, highly mobile and globally-oriented Singaporean youth. However, against the *TSLN* vision, social studies articulates a dialectical tension. Although there are multiple definitions of and approaches to critical thinking, there is some consensus that it requires divergent thinking, consideration of different perspectives, and critical judgment (Walters, 1994), whereas developing citizenship of the variety favoured by the government is inherently convergent and parochial. Consequently, citizenship education through social studies has become a complex task; the tension is between rapidly changing social, economic and political circumstances on one hand, and the PAP government's conservatism on the other. The official discourse on critical thinking in Singapore supports teaching critical thinking to prepare students for changing contexts. What is not known is how teachers understand critical thinking and give purpose to citizenship education through social studies.

Critical thinking in social studies

Critical thinking has been a long-standing goal of social studies education (Beyer, 2008; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Newmann, 1991). However, there is diverse understanding of what critical thinking means (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 1999; Beyer, 1985; Walters, 1994). In this section, we give a brief overview of some key issues in the debates surrounding critical thinking and operationalize the term for this study.

Critical thinking is often described as sets of competencies (Pithers & Soden, 2000). For example, Ennis (1987, 1993) offers a taxonomy of critical thinking skills and dispositions to be applied in identifying a problem and its assumptions, and making inferences, using inductive and deductive logic, and judging the validity and reliability of assumptions, sources of data or information (see Kennedy, Fisher, & Ennis, 1991). Broad dispositions such as a spirit of inquiry, open-mindedness and weighing the credibility of evidence are also very important (Ennis, 1993; Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993) and considered transferable over various domains.

It is not unusual to find critical thinking presented in the local social studies syllabus as a list of discrete skills, with assessment objectives emphasizing the demonstration of these skills. However, specifying and sequencing critical thinking skills as a formulaic set of steps and procedures fails to recognize how analytically distinguishable elements are interdependent in complex, ambiguous and unpredictable ways in practice (Giroux, 1994; Walters, 1994). Thinking is multi-discursive, located in socio-cultural, economic and political contexts, and inherently ideological (McLaren, 1994). Developing thinking skills and citizenship is never neutral, according to this view. But

persistently, the conception of critical thinking as skills assumes it is independent of the contexts in which such activity occurs, casting it to be impartial, neutral and apolitical. Such efforts at objectivity reinforce and universalize dominant categories of knowledge and values, thereby maintaining existing relations of power (Giroux, 1994). Teaching critical thinking as skills in social studies can therefore socialize students into an acceptance of dominant norms, beliefs and values. Rather than developing actively critical thinkers, Giroux (1994) argues that such an approach produces students who are either afraid or unable to think critically.

For our purposes, a more productive way of understanding critical thinking is to reconceptualize it as a form of critical social practice (Koh, 2002). Moving from psychological models of thinking to a socio-cultural model of critical thinking requires a shift from seeing critical thinking as technical, context-independent skills, toward a model which views critical thinking as culturally and historically situated critical social practices (Street, 2003). Critical social practice means that students are encouraged to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and assumptions; questioning how knowledge is constructed and used, which requires interrogating issues of power, justice, identity and the ways texts and practices are shaped by ideology. This means understanding that educational texts and practices can be interrogated in a number of ways, that some are advantaged and/or disadvantaged by the current ideology of schooling, and that certain views, kinds of knowledge, and ways of knowing are privileged while others are marginalized (Segall & Gaudelli, 2007).

Applying this conception of critical thinking in our teaching practice meant that teachers were encouraged to interrogate their own assumptions and the prevailing assumptions and ideologies that shape educational practice in Singapore. Shaped by the work of Apple (2004), Giroux (1988, 1994), and Segall (2006) among others, we stressed that 'social and ideological contexts orient the general purposes of educational systems' (Nelson, 2001, p. 27). Around issues of curriculum, this meant asking who makes curricular decisions, how and why these decisions are made, and whose interests these decisions represent. From this standpoint, social studies would be a form of citizenship education that aims to develop critical thinking and responsible social criticism (Engle & Ochoa, 1988) as social practices. They were social practices that we sought to support and develop in our course.

The study

Research context

The context for this study was a semester long course, 'Issues and research in social studies education' in the Master of Arts in Social Studies (MA SS) programme offered at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. MA SS was designed to support teachers in cross-disciplinary perspectives to 'develop a critical understanding' of social studies, history and geography and understand how recent scholarship in social studies education and the disciplines 'can be applied to studies of the social issues of our time'. Key objectives of the course include learning to critically read and understand research studies, and to participate in a community of inquiry to investigate issues and research in social studies education relevant to Singaporean educators. The course was taught by the two authors. Class sessions followed a seminar format with a range of opportunities for students to explore questions central to social studies education in Singapore. Course activities included in-class and online participation, such as the use of an online discussion board, critical curriculum analysis of

Singapore's social studies syllabus and/or textbooks, and a poster presentation providing a short literature review and critical analysis of a social studies issue in Singaporean contexts.

Since social studies is relatively new in Singapore and teachers had not taken previous course work in social studies methods or theoretical orientations, we wanted to help students develop understanding of some of the controversies in the field and have them consider emerging social studies issues in Singapore. The nature of citizenship, critical thinking and critical practice were key questions raised. To explore these issues, we introduced critical and postmodern theories because 'they offer new understandings and in part because they can generate new worlds and new ways of seeing, being, and acting' (Beyer, 2001, p. 160), especially in a system that is exam-orientated, characterized as hierarchical and bureaucratic, and where teachers are expected to implement a prescribed (and proscribed) curriculum to produce 'the national subjectivities necessary for affiliation to the state's modernization project' (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 57).

Methodology

In preparing students to be thinking citizens, we take into account the active agency of teachers as mediators of knowledge. As course instructors, we wanted to understand how teachers are conceiving the notion of critical thinking, the centrepiece of the new social studies. It is upon a notion of criticality that teachers play a part in shaping the meaning of citizenship, determine students' access to knowledge and shape their opportunities to learn. To explore teacher perspectives of critical thinking, we asked: How do teachers understand critical thinking? What tensions do teachers perceive in teaching critical thinking in Singapore's schools?

We utilized a case study approach to document and explain the complexities of teacher learning and understanding. The case study yields an in-depth analysis of a limited number of subjects, who together comprise the case in question (Stake, 1995). The course, with an enrolment of 24 social studies teachers was a purposeful case to help the researchers gain a deeper understanding and generate a theory of criticality among social studies teachers in Singapore. The case is information-rich because of the diversity of teachers in the course that reflects the make-up of social studies teachers in Singapore. See Table 1 for a profile of the class. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymity is maintained throughout this article.

The course provided teachers with the concentrated time and a safe environment to discuss, reflect, and explore issues in an informed manner. A variety of qualitative data were collected to obtain an emic view of the meanings teachers constructed about critical thinking. The data included curriculum artefacts; online discussion board entries; researchers' observation notes and memos; audio recordings of group discussions; and student assessments (e.g. written responses to in-class prompts, curriculum

Table 1.   Profile of the MA SS class.

Gender and ethnicity				Years in teaching		
Chinese male	Chinese female	Minority male	Minority female	> 8	4–8	< 4
5	8	5	6	10	12	2

analyses and poster projects). For this article, we focused primarily on the online discussion board entries and collective reflection on class entries.

The discussion board assignment and questions were posted as follows:

> You are required to post at least three responses. The general discussion is about critical social studies education in Singapore but you should use the following questions to focus your contributions:

(1) What does critical thinking in social studies education mean to you? What would be its purposes, outcomes, methods, etc?
(2) To what extent is this critical approach to social studies possible in Singapore? Explain.
(3) What do you see as 'out of bounds markers', limits, constraints, or restraints of teaching critical social studies in Singapore (both personal and/or because of various contexts)?
(4) How do you see the present social order? Is there a need for change? If so, what sorts of changes? Or if not, why?
(5) Do you see social studies as a vehicle for social change?

A total of 134 entries were posted on the online discussion board over 13 weeks, with an average of 400 words per entry. Using a constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we coded data sources to discern initial patterns and themes, which were continually refined and modified during the analysis to generate 'both descriptive and explanatory categories' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 341). After reading the online student discussion we identified several initial themes such as ways of thinking critically, time and space to experiment, issues related to political and cultural contexts, and teacher identity. We then identified what we considered to be representative excerpts of these themes to develop 'quotes packages' that we printed as one-pagers consisting of three representative quotes by different students. These 'quotes packages' were then shared with the class for further reflection and discussion in groups. After analyzing the group discussions, we then narrowed our analytic categories to three themes that recurred in the discussion, and that seemed most salient to understanding the teachers' views of critical thinking in Singaporean contexts. By doing this, we drew on the teachers' analyses to help us further refine and modify our initial themes. This also supported our desire to give voice to the teachers' sense-making as much as possible and include their analyses of key issues and themes that emerged from class activities and discussions.

Findings: critical tensions

The teachers in our study identified three critical tensions that emerged in their efforts to teach critical thinking in their classrooms. These tensions arose from teaching critical thinking within a high stakes examination culture, dealing with political contexts and 'out of bounds markers' that set limits to critical thinking, and uncertainty about the role of the teacher in teaching critical thinking.

Teaching critical thinking in an examination culture

A persistent theme was the lack of time teachers had to teach in more critical and creative ways. Teaching critical thinking required more time and space for professional reflection

and change but the examinations were often cited as the main reason teachers struggled with more critical or innovative practices. In many secondary schools, social studies is taught two times a week with each class lasting 35 minutes. Still, the subject is examinable and this leads to feeling pressured to 'teach to the test' and 'cover the syllabus'. For example, one teacher noted that 'the rush to finish the syllabus is influenced by the examination and assessment of the subject'.

Examinations in Singapore are high stakes for students, teachers and schools. Test results determine life opportunities for students and determine tertiary education placement. Schools' test scores are made public and teachers' evaluations and performance bonuses are largely based on test results. Several teachers commented on the heavy emphasis on results and school rankings by noting that Singapore is very results-oriented. For example, one teacher commented that:

> As long as social studies is an examinable and compulsory subject, there will always be the pressure for teachers to teach what is needed for the students to do well in the exam. The pressure comes from the school, parents, as well as the students themselves. Teachers will not 'dare' to 'waste' time on what will not be tested as to risk their students doing badly.

Although the social studies examination tests students' abilities to make inferences, evaluate reliability and utility, identify and evaluate claims, compare and contrast sources, and construct reasoned and well-supported explanations, these teachers seemed to agree that such high stakes examinations tend to distort the skills and processes they are intended to develop in students. A teacher noted how teaching critical thinking skills has been reduced to formulae by teachers to help their students deal with the rigorous assessment modes and guidelines of the subject. The teacher added, 'This is the result of the pursuit of academic results, the quality of which determines the students' future prospects… who would be glad if their students performed below expectations?'

It is evident that such high stakes examinations result in teachers teaching to the test, and become treated as the goal of schooling rather than useful indicators of student achievement (Cornbleth, 2001; Madaus, 1999). Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult for teachers to reconceptualize their practice or experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning. Like Koh (2004), the teachers questioned to what extent critical thinking is possible in an examination culture. Despite 'the Ministry of Education trimming content to free up space for exploring critical thinking in the subject areas, many teachers find that this extra time is often used in brushing up on examination technique and skills' instead of pedagogies that support critical thinking such as debates, simulations and structured academic controversies.

Political contexts and 'out of bounds markers'

Many teachers commented on Singapore's 'OB' or 'out of bounds markers' which the PAP government coined in 1991 to refer to the supposed boundaries or limits of acceptable public discourse. OB markers are those issues that the government considers to be too sensitive or potentially destabilizing to public order (Ho, 2000, p. 439). Catherine Lim (2006), a local writer, offers some insights on how OB markers are used to manage the tensions of advocating critical and creative thought and innovation while setting firm limits on what is acceptable. Noting that OB markers shape the limits of political discourse, she argues that they are purposefully left vague to

promote a 'general sense of fear, hardly definable and therefore easily challenged by the Government' as non-existent (p. 89). The only way that their existence is discovered is retrospectively, after a trespass has been committed (George, 2000). In this 'atmosphere of continuing anxiety, there will be continuing self-censorship' (Lim, 2006, p. 91).

In particular, the teachers' comments seemed to focus on whether the 'OB markers' are real or perceived, the functional purposes they serve, the need to push against the 'OB markers' to meet the challenges of living in a global society, and what limits may be necessary for critical thinking. For example, in the online discussion teachers debated whether or not the markers were perceived. As one teacher noted:

> The OB markers are markers set by ourselves in our mind. If you stick to the stated aims of social studies it shouldn't matter. Social studies aims 'to equip pupils with the skills of independent enquiry and critical thinking' and 'to instil in pupils a sense of national identity as well as global awareness'. If we don't openly discuss the pertinent issues of nation and globalization how then can we equip our kids with the skills? Moreover, globalization implies a diversity of views and a flexibility of thought and action, and the notion of OB markers militates against that.

In response, another teacher argued that there were quite real consequences for crossing 'OB marker' boundaries:

> OB markers are the perimeters we shouldn't cross because *we would get into trouble* and not that *we think* we would… they're not blockages in our mind but real unspoken markers that if you openly disagree in public, you may get into trouble. For instance (now I'm running a risk) the so-labelled Marxists' conspiracy… did anyone defend the youth arrested under the Internal Security Act? People just stopped talking about it in public out of fear. [It's about] pragmatism. If arrest can happen, why risk it with the law that can't protect you because your rights may not align with what those in power want to give. If this paragraph comes through fuzzy, remember I'm typing in semi-fear! That's the work of the OB markers!

Here, we see how OB markers, whether real or perceived, operate to create fear and a 'pragmatic' stance, in which teachers have to be careful not to cross into certain, albeit ill-defined, areas of public discourse.

Another teacher more specifically described certain OB markers that operate in Singapore and is worth quoting in full:

> There is tight control on freedom of press and expression. A survey released by Reporters Without Borders in 2004 placed Singapore 147th out of 167 countries on press freedom, the lowest ranked developed nation. A former Singapore government scholar studying in the US shut down his weblog and apologized to the government after it threatened to sue him for defamation. Defamation suits are used to silence critical thinking. Media in the country rarely criticize the government and top officials regularly turn to defamation lawsuits to punish critics. Foreign journalists and publications have been banned because of anti-government reports. The Singapore government claims its tough policies on protests and media freedoms have been a cornerstone of the city-state's evolution into an Asian economic powerhouse.

This teacher points to the ways certain freedoms are limited and the very real consequences for transgression of those limits. The type of criticality that questions the given, power structures and the ideological constructions of truth and belief (Koh, 2004) runs the risk of official censure. Another teacher described the

contradictions between official rhetoric that calls for critical thinking and official actions that limit it. She situates social studies education in Singapore in the midst of these contradictions:

> I'm doubtful if government wants real debates and feedback. Prime Minister claims he wants a more open and inclusive society, and people to speak up yet the actions don't match the rhetoric. Take the Integrated Resorts (IR) example. The government said it would consider the feedback of Singaporeans, where many opposed it, but the government went ahead to allow not one, but two IRs. The question is whether the government listens to the people… Contexts have changed and we need a more participative society to remain competitive in this millennium. Social studies has the potential to develop an active citizenry with the emphasis on critically thinking, and if teachers dare to use more critical approaches, in spite of its curriculum materials disseminated by the MOE.

However, many other teachers discussed the need for limits and boundaries. For example, one teacher argued that 'OB markers demarcate boundaries that might invite potential upsets to certain interest groups which in turn might threaten the socio-political fabric of Singapore', while another believed that 'censorship is being applied here but for the betterment of the common good'. OB markers limit free speech and critical thinking, but the ideal of a 'common good' and the need for social harmony seemed to necessitate such limits. Many argued that 'racial harmony is vital and crucial for Singapore's survival as a nation' and that 'the present generation has to take responsibility to maintain the social fabric which is responsible for much of what they enjoy as Singaporeans'. Another teacher commented that 'under the PAP government, Singapore has become one of the world's fastest growing economies, enjoying one of the world's highest standards of living. Any social change will need to be carefully considered, so as not to create disruption to the growth'. Perhaps one teacher summarized this perspective best:

> I like the peace and stability the government is trying to maintain. I don't find that many constraints in my freedom of speech or movement or thinking. What's there to change? I enjoy a good standard of living. I'm comfortable with the levels of transparency and integrity of the government. There is really no perfect government or way of living. Is there really a need to change?

Clearly, these teachers struggled with ways to manage the tensions created by the need for social harmony and the common good balanced with a need for social critique. They were aware of the techniques used by the government to limit personal freedoms yet saw a need for social order and stability.

Civil service and teacher agency

Teachers in Singapore are civil servants who are expected to follow national guidelines and serve their country's needs even within the framework of innovative projects. Here, the teacher's job is to transmit the national curriculum. In the context of OB markers and managing the tension between goals of critical thinking and accountability in the examinations, many teachers commented on the need for teachers to exercise 'social responsibility'. For example, one teacher noted that she had a responsibility to ensure pupils 'didn't have feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between their friends who are of different racial or religious groups', while another teacher commented that as a teacher she was 'a very important tool in the

spread of messages and values'. While most teachers acknowledged the need to stay current and engage in continual and ongoing professional learning, they also noted a reluctance to try new approaches because they viewed themselves as civil servants. A conception of critical thinking that interrogates existing power structures and prevailing ideology conflicted with teachers' notions of responsibility and accountability. For example, one noted that, 'As employers of the state, it is an unspoken rule that you do not bite the hand that feeds you. Do not "rock the boat", it is better to go with the flow and maintain peace and stability'.

One teacher commented, 'According to Wikipedia, civil servants are expected to be politically neutral, and are prohibited from taking part in political campaigns or being members of Parliament. Why don't teachers see themselves as "politically neutral entities"?' Many teachers were conflicted by this notion of civil service, with many believing that civil servants need to exercise caution and accountability. For example, one noted that 'as civil servants, there is an unwritten code of behaviour that needs to be adhered to. We shouldn't criticize the government openly in school'. Another added that 'as civil servants, teachers must be good and responsible, executing and implementing the policies initiated by the MOE in their lessons, regardless of personal views'. She went on to argue that, 'teachers shouldn't evoke so much of a critical approach in social studies especially in sensitive issues relating to race and religion… we don't want a racial riot to break out from such debates during social studies lessons'.

This led one teacher to argue that although some teachers have 'pro-opposition tendencies' while others have 'pro-ruling party inclinations', they should present themselves as 'politically neutral especially when we do not want to pass on our biasness to our charges. If we are openly biased, it would not be in the true spirit of getting students to think critically'. Another added, 'I always tell my students that there is not a right or wrong answer but only different perspectives. It is wrong to be swaying the students to one's way of thinking if our objective is to open up our students' minds and help them to become critical thinkers'.

The notion of being a politically neutral civil servant conflicted with the idea of engaging students in the types of critical thinking that might question power structures, official knowledge, and government policy. It also inhibited or influenced their beliefs about the extent critical thinking could be enacted in the classroom. The ways the traditional and ideological contexts of civil service in Singapore shape and hinder notions of teachers' professional agency, especially in regards to teaching critical thinking, needs further exploration.

Discussion

The teachers in this study are straddling fundamental tensions raised by educational reforms designed to mediate and manage processes of globalisation. These reforms typically call for greater critical thinking, innovation, and commitments to lifelong learning. However, there is uncertainty about what these terms and learning outcomes actually mean and look like in classrooms and how they might most effectively be taught. This is especially the case in social studies education because of oftentimes competing notions of what constitutes critical thinking as well as different ideas about effective instructional approaches for teaching critical thinking.

The teachers identified key tensions that both shape and constrain their teaching of critical thinking in Singapore. These tensions arise from attempts to teach in more crit-

ical and innovative ways while actual classroom practice continues to be constrained by high stakes assessment and other significant contextual factors shaping educational practice in Singapore. In the case of Singapore, official policy has steered educational change in the direction of 'a developmental skills formation model' (Ashton, Green, James & Sung, 1999, p. 4) that emphasizes human capital development for economic growth, strong state control of educational practice, high stakes assessment, and teaching and thinking as procedural, formulaic routines. However, there are increasing concerns that an educational model that is highly centralized, teacher-centred, and based on drill and practice and exam preparation is no longer preparing students for the knowledge-based innovation economy of the twenty-first century.

The teachers in this study highlighted the contradictions between the demands of globalization (that call for greater openness, the ability to tolerate and appreciate increasing diversity and different perspectives, and broader ranges of cognitive skills and social practices) and the local ideological and political contexts that constrain the range of teaching and learning possibilities available to teachers and students. This study highlights the anxieties teachers experience teaching in school cultures that emphasize covering the curriculum and teaching to the test while recognizing that deep, sustained learning and the development of capacities necessary for critical thinking and innovation requires certain commitments in terms of time, resources and support. Concerns about 'OB markers' and political contexts as inhibiting innovation and criticality make apparent the contradictions of official rhetoric which calls for greater innovation and openness while maintaining tight control and imposing restrictions (with severe consequences) to limit criticality and innovation. The idea of teacher as civil servant in a top-down system of educational governance weakens professionalism, teacher agency and teacher decision-making. Together, these tensions curtail the range of criticality and innovation possible in social studies practice in Singapore. They also point to how critical thinking is construed and practised in schools is typically a situated response to the particular political economies of education and educational reform which are shaped not only by forces of globalization but by national institutional and governmental arrangements and the distribution of discourses and resources within societies (Luke, 2000).

Conclusion

Despite high scores attained in national examinations and international rankings, there are growing concerns about the types of students that the education system in Singapore is producing. As Adler and Sim (2008) argue:

> Leaders in Singapore want to cultivate the creativity and critical perspectives necessary to remain viable in the global economy. But it is not clear whether they are willing to cultivate critical thinking in young people beyond the marketplace… If the social studies curriculum as it is enacted asks students to accept ideas uncritically, they will be capable of little more. They will be unable to grapple with the problems of the twenty-first century, not only in technology and science, but also in human interrelationships. (Adler & Sim, 2008, p. 177)

Although Singapore's educational system struggles to manage these sorts of tensions, it puts teachers in a sort of 'double bind' (Bateson, 1999) in which they receive conflicting messages about critical thinking and innovation from a state that cherishes order and stability. As a result, official rhetoric calls for more innovation,

creativity, critical thinking, and risk-taking in classroom practice while exams and other systemic constraints continue to militate against such change in classrooms.

One teacher, in particular, gave voice to the tensions created by the call for critical thinking in Singapore's political contexts:

> Critical thinking for social change is handicapped by the political context we find ourselves in… We have little experience of a political alternative or participating in the political process. We discuss alternatives, preach diversity, build awareness and encourage critical thinking but these are in most cases, viewed as necessary but whimsical mental exercises in a general sense of building thinking skills rather than one directed at social change.

This is not surprising given the social and political development of Singapore. The government has taken care of what it sees as the needs of the people. It has transformed the material conditions of the population, by delivering material returns and raising the standard of living of Singaporeans. The acceptability of the government by the people is through material well-being and ideological consensus (Chua, 1995).

How to reconcile what many see as the propagandistic messages of national education and social studies education with calls for greater critical thinking, which requires consideration of divergent perspectives (Missimer, 1994; Paul, 1994), is a challenge many teachers face. It is a core challenge facing educators everywhere: how to prepare globally minded national citizens with the skills and understandings necessary for living in increasingly diverse and complex lifeworlds. With contradictory messages of preparing students to live in a global society and developing the abilities necessary for the future while emphasizing national education and exam preparation and results, students and teachers find themselves in a double bind. Contradictory messages that are typical of double bind situations often lead to high levels of uncertainty, confusion and stress. These mixed messages make it difficult to offer an education that will help young people deal with the complex shifting landscapes of knowledge and knowing that students will encounter as they move across new local, global and digital landscapes.

The unpredictability of globalization has forced educators everywhere to respond to complex, multiple and oftentimes contradictory demands. Notably, there is a need to move beyond conventional, instrumental and logicistic forms of critical thinking toward a meta-criticality, where both teachers and students become 'critical of forms of criticality themselves' (Stables, 2006, p. 117). Such a meta-criticality requires the development of capacities that empower people to understand many different ways of thinking and how and why different forms of knowledge are created, legitimated and disseminated as well as how certain forms of knowledge and ways of thinking typically serve larger ideological and social purposes (Segall, 2006). It requires that teachers see themselves as intellectuals (Giroux, 1988), curricular–instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 2005) and respected professionals, instead of mere conduits of curriculum and official knowledge. Only when we begin to understand how our choices are implicated in and determined by the contexts that make those choices possible can we begin to challenge accepted ways of thinking and explore the range of alternatives available.

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