

**Are We All Global Citizens Now?
Reflections on Citizenship and
Citizenship Education in a Globalising World
(With Special Reference to Singapore)**

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Abstract

Research into citizenship education has traditionally focused on citizenship curricula within the context of the nation-state. More recently, as a response to globalization trends, it has been suggested that citizenship research must embrace the concept of the ‘global citizen’. Such perspectives draw principally on Anglo-Saxon perspectives on the evolution of the nation-state and citizen-state relations. This perspective is critiqued from the context of a post-colonial developing state, Singapore, and an argument made that a nation-centric perspective is still viable.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I address the issue of the national and the global in the context of citizenship and citizenship education. I am appreciative of the fact that an interconnected globalizing environment is upon us. The recent turmoil in the Middle East will reshape the political geography of that region and have consequences for the supply and price of oil, which in turn will impact regional and national economics and food prices. We hope that the nuclear crisis in Japan will not result in radioactive clouds over Asia and the west coast of the United States. The European Union, the African Union, NATO, ASEAN and many other groupings require some giving up of national powers.

This pervasive sense of a world in which the nation-state is seen as weakened is in part due to the way in which both technology and economic activity have transformed socio-political life in the last three decades. The advent of the Internet and the increasing power and reach of communication technology has resulted in the 'death of distance'. The practice of citizenship is now shaped by events thousands of miles away; nationals can feel solidarity with others of say, the same ethnicity, religious affiliation, etc. over vast distances. The globalization of the means of production and the consequent mobility of talent and capital has also weakened the economic autonomy of nation-states. There are today multinational companies like BP, Toyota, and Citibank whose revenues annually are larger than the economies of some nations in the United Nations. The ways of financial markets and the speed with which capital flows in and out of national economies creates, especially in smaller, less developed states a huge sense of vulnerability. One can therefore understand why the notion of the demise of the nation-state has such widespread appeal.

I believe, however, that it would be an error to dismiss the nation-state as a locus for understanding citizenship and citizenship education even in this globalised world. Indeed, given the dislocations which world events cause – 9/11, the suicide bombings in 2005 in London – we should avoid dogmatism. The British Empire did so much to bind disparate peoples and localities together, and has been more intensely multicultural, and for a longer time, than many other developed Western states. And yet today, British Prime Minister David Cameron calls multiculturalism a failure and there are increasing calls for an increased emphasis on the learning of British history, traditions and norms. The Asian financial crisis of the 1990s was supposed to have ended the Asian economic miracle; today, when economic

matters are discussed, it is the role and reach of state-centred economic power of China, India that is foregrounded.

While I like to think of myself as cosmopolitan as the next well-travelled person, my citizenship biography influences my position. It is a biography that is intertwined with the evolution of the Singapore state over six decades. I was born in 1942, the second son of Indian migrants who came to Singapore in the late thirties. My father found work in the Churchill's British Naval Base, 'the impregnable fortress', and I went to school in the Base neighborhood. While I do not recall the years of the Japanese occupation, I guess that I must have heard the anthem being played and Japanese spoken. I do, however, recall, in school, standing up to and singing "Rule Britannia" and "God Save The Queen", and the Queen's birthday declared a public holiday. I recall the "Last Post" being played as the sun set into tropical waters. My secondary education took me outside the confines of the Naval Base, to Bartley Secondary. Bartley, an English medium school, was itself a good example of the major school rebuilding efforts of the colonial government to clear the backlog of the lost schooling during the war years. I recall studying Tamil as a second language and that Bartley was next to a major girls' Chinese-medium school. Bartley's principal Mr. Jesudason was ahead of his time in trying to foster inter-cultural ties with the girls' school, but to most students at Bartley, they were the 'other' in our lives. I went on to do my pre-university studies at Raffles Institution, whose founding Singapore founder, Stamford Raffles, had a large role and whose location, close to Beach Road, echoed the early years of the settlement and growth of Singapore as the major South East Asian port.

My years at the University of Singapore in the early sixties were also an object lesson in state building. In the late fifties, the task of determining Singapore's future began in earnest, in line with the decolonisation surge that led to Indian independence in 1947 and neighbouring Malaysia in 1957. How could a Chinese majority island with only a port going for it develop into a viable state? How could ethnic-linguistic pluralism be managed? How can an economy be developed to cope with rising employment and infrastructure demands?

The solution, a merger with Malaya and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, to form Malaysia was deeply contested. Indonesia was hostile to the idea and an alliance of largely Chinese-speaking left-wing politicians; trade unionists in Singapore were also anti-government. I witnessed the arguments for and against merger in debates at the University of Singapore. Malaysia was created in 1963 and, among other things, I learnt to

sing the Malaysian anthem. The merger failed and amongst much acrimony, Singapore separated from the federation in August 1965, I soon had to learn the new Singapore anthem.

I recount details of the biography at some length because they have profoundly influenced my views of citizenship and the practice of citizenship education which I have written about (1988, 1995). I have been a colonial subject and citizen of two nations, first Malaysia, then Singapore. I have also witnessed a very successful effort at state building first hand.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the world was still struggling with building credible state-cross national forces, spurred by an increasingly dominant neo-liberal economic agenda, the increasing power of communication and information technology, increased flows of capital and talent. Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) captured well this sense of the irrelevance of ideology and history. The rise of the market and the end, or at least the diminution, of (national) state powers was assumed to be the norm. And in this context, it did seem quaint to speak of a nation-centric citizenship.

One consequence of this view is that we should opt for global citizenship. A variant of this is the notion of global human rights underpinning citizenship education. The notion of universal human rights is, however, not made problematic but taken as self-evident. Thus citizenship within nation-states is only meaningful if these rights are ensured. In this formulation, it is the global, not the national, that is privileged.

But the state is well and alive in the imagination and everyday lives of millions of citizens. Kennedy (2010, p. 223) quotes Keating (2009) that "the nation-state model continues...to have a grip on the intellectual imagination and its normative elements survive in much writing about politics." As F. Noor notes (2011) firstly, despite its flaws and shortcomings, the post-colonial nation-state is the most practical solution to the challenges of governance, representation and distribution of resources. Across the World – and the ASEAN region is no exception – the logic of the nation-state animates politics, gives life to governance, and renders life livable. It may be romantic to coin your own currency or play around with a flag you designed yourself but we live our daily lives dependent on the most basic things such as the money we use to pay for our food and the passports we use when we travel abroad.

Part of the reason why (mainly Western) commentators tend to discount the strength of the nation-state is first, they pay less attention than they should to the effects of history and culture. The human rights project, the ways in which individuals as individuals and in relation to authority, whether political or religious, owes much to the revolt against the paternalism and authoritarianism of the *ancien regime*. It was aided by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the spread of market capitalism as well. While there is a general acceptance of the values inherent in the human rights project and human rights is central to considerations of citizenship education, in an East Asian context, history and culture influence how it is viewed. In contexts where the state is strong and legitimate, where the institutions of the state are strong and respected, there tends to be more emphasis on the responsibilities, rather than the rights, of citizenship.

A second consideration is that the development of states in Western Europe is different from that experienced in many ex-colonial territories. It could be argued that in many instances the borders of European states mapped on quite well to long-existing nations, collectivities of peoples bound by ties of blood, language and religion. By contrast, numerous new states were created in the 20th century by colonial powers. Their borders were often arbitrarily drawn, and very often a state was created within whose borders resided different groups separated by ethnicity, religion or language. Political elites upon independence had to grapple with issues of legitimacy, protect and project sovereignty, determine how the often meager fruits of economic growth could be shared and how to give groups and subgroups legitimate voice and power. This history, and it is an on-going concern, has great implications for how state-citizen relationships are viewed and what the imperatives of citizenship education are in individual states.

2. Singapore's Citizenship Journey

It would be useful to think of Singapore's modern history in three phases: a) 1945-1965, b) 1965-1997, c) 1997 to the present. 1965-1967 was the ex-colonial period when the key questions about ethnic diversity, political order and economic model had to be decided upon. A key preoccupation was that of state viability, in some part due to Singapore's overwhelming Chinese majority in a largely Malay region. The political solution was for Singapore to merge with Malaya and the Borneo territories. This solution was met with hostility from Malay-Muslim majority Indonesia, which saw merger as a British colonial plot. In any event, merger failed because of irreconcilable differences over political ideology and

socio-economic fundamentals. In Malaysia, the Malays wanted to dominate politics, get a greater share of the economic pie. They also adopted a policy of affirmative action in favour of the Malays. These created tensions with the Chinese majority government in Singapore.

In this context, early civics and citizenship curriculum material was directed towards teaching civic responsibility in an island whose future lay in urbanisation and industrialisation. A colonial-fostered mentality of subservience and inferiority had to be replaced with pride and optimism about new beginnings. It could be argued that more important than conventional civics education was the publication of the All Party Report on Chinese Education (1956), and the acceptance of the principle of “equality of treatment” with regard to language and culture. It was a significant first step in dealing with the issue and consequences of ethnic plurality. The socio-linguistic formula of one national language (Malay) four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil) continues to this day to be the core principle by which the state mediates ethno-linguistic relations. Putnam’s “bridging social capital” (2000) is a useful concept here. English, not Chinese, was positioned as the bridge language as it was not the language of any ethnic group. It allowed for continuity in administration and was vital in Singapore’s search for rapid economic growth as it provided access to capital, technology and markets. That it was also the coloniser’s language, and source of much resentment, on the part of the Chinese-educated, shows how much political will was required to opt for English.

The second phase 1965-1997 may be termed the post-colonial phase. This is the phase that saw Singapore, quite remarkably for a small island devoid of natural resources, taking great strides in socio-economic development. During the early phases of this period, the main vehicle for civics education was the Education for Living syllabus. Its aim was to help pupils understand the purpose and importance of nation building, to understand and appreciate the desirable elements of Eastern and Western traditions, and to cope successfully with changing national and social conditions. This was replaced in 1981 with the Being and Becoming programme (Gopinathan, 1988).

An interesting aspect of curriculum development for values education during this period of rapid economic growth, and a sense of achievement against formidable odds was the introduction of the Religious Knowledge curriculum. This curriculum speaks to a desire to underpin material achievements within a set of “recovered” and robust values. The larger canvas was the “Asian Values” initiative with Singapore’s then Prime Minister Lee Kuan

Yew as one of its strongest proponents. As early as 1972, Lee had stated, “It is basic we understand ourselves; what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about and what we want to do ... only when we first know our traditional values can we be quite clear that the Western world is a different system, a different voltage, structured for purposes different from ours” (Lee, quoted in *The Straits Times*, 8 February 1972). While the many critics of Asian Values have decried it as an excuse to justify authoritarian rule and create a compliant and submissive citizenry, it can be best read as “an expression of disquiet regarding certain Western values”, especially related to a perceived excessive stress on the individual rather than the community, a lack of social discipline and a too-great tolerance for eccentricity and abnormality in social behaviour (Milner, 2002). Milner (2002) quotes K. Mahbubani, current Dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy as saying that “it is vital for Western minds to understand that efforts by Asians to rediscover Asian values are not only or even primarily a search for political values. They involve, for instance, a desire to reconnect with their historical past after this connection has been ruptured by colonial rule and the subsequent domination of the globe by a Western Weltanschauung.”

In 1982, the Ministry of Education announced that from 1984, upper secondary students would be offered a more extensive Religious Knowledge curriculum. The original offerings were Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge and World Religions; later Confucian Ethics was introduced at the request of Lee Kuan Yew, and Sikh Studies at the request of the Sikh community. Confucian Ethics came in English and Chinese versions. The latter drew heavily for illustrative material from Chinese myths and legends. The rationale was that increasing industrialisation and urbanisation were seen as leading Singapore to an “incipient moral crisis”. Lee said Singapore was in danger of being “deculturalised” (Gopinathan, 1995). The PAP government had always emphasised the importance of family ties, orderliness in society, respect for institutions as crucial to Singapore’s well-being and development. It saw in the counter-culture movement of the sixties a threat to these values. It wanted also to avoid excessive individualism and materialism developing amongst its citizens. Traditional cultures / religions were seen as an antidote.

However, this initiative faltered when implemented in schools and was withdrawn in 1989 (see Gopinathan, 1995; Tan, 1997). While the government was strongly in favour of this, Confucian Ethics was the least popular choice among Chinese students. The then

Minister for Education noted that there was now a “heightened consciousness of religious differences and a new fervour in the propagation of religious beliefs”. A survey on religion had concluded that “aggressive and insensitive evangelisation had taken place”.

The failure of the religious knowledge initiative was followed by a ‘shared values’ one. In Parliament, the president of the republic stated that the proposed core values include placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention and stressing religious tolerance and harmony (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, 1989, col. 13). There is certainly an echo of the Asian values and Confucian Ethics formulation at work here.

This led in turn to the replacement of *Religious Knowledge* and *Being and Becoming* with a Civics and Moral Education initiative; a Good Citizen programme was introduced at the primary level. There was also greater emphasis on the histories of Southeast Asia, India and China in history and social studies curriculum.

Two points need to be kept in mind with regard to this phase. An export-led industrialisation model was chosen, and this was hugely facilitated by the earlier acceptance of the role of English. The success with maintaining ethnic peace, social solidarity (in contrast to the earlier period of inter-ethnic riots) and economic success laid the foundations for civic pride, strengthened the state and fed into an emergent sense of an island nation worth fighting for and defending. The introduction of National Service for male citizens above the age of 18 in 1967 strengthened this view. Rossi and Ryan (2006) cite Osler and Vincent (2002) who allude to other agendas in citizenship education which appear to be related to inculcating a sense of national identity and a sense of “citizenship” which has to do with pride in the nation-state, commitment to the national cause and developing a general sense of patriotism, belonging (see Davidson, 1994) and national unity across within-border cultures.

The third phase, 1997 to the present, may be thought of as the global city-state period. It is the phase in which Singapore, having achieved developed economy status had now to confront the economic and cultural challenges of globalisation. The economic model of export-led industrialisation was being imitated by other developing countries with larger and cheaper labour pools and large domestic markets. Singapore’s better educated labour force and English proficiency among its workers, and a high quality education and training system

seemed to give it a good chance to benefit from globalisation's challenges. This called for the creation of new skills and subjectivities, a point well made in then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" speech. But the years of plenty had been achieved by the adoption of what is termed "disciplinary modernisation" (Wee, 2001). Labour unions which had been active in politico-economic issues had been co-opted, the space for civil society organisations had shrunk and mass media adopted a "developmental" perspective generally supporting the government's line that order and investor confidence was vital to Singapore's economic success. Not surprisingly, Singapore's students stayed away from anything that could be called civic activism. The history, the passions, the debates, being part of the merger, later separation, events were in danger of being forgotten. Sim (2008, p. 256) concluded that "the pragmatic policies pursued by the government have also led to a citizenship that is passive, self-centred, and materialistic."

At the 1996 Teachers Day Rally, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong bemoaned the fact that students lacked sufficient knowledge of Singapore's history. The danger, as he saw it, was that lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Singapore's past and efforts at social cohesion, if forgotten, could lead to future problems. The ministry's solution was the introduction of the National Education programme.

The then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained that National Education's objective is to develop cohesion, instinct for survival and confidence in the future by (a) fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans; (b) knowing the Singapore story – how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation; (c) understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries, and (d) instilling the core values of our way of life, and the will to prevail, that ensures our continued success and well-being (Lee, 1997).

A decade later in 2007, surveys found that primary school pupils enjoyed national education but secondary school students felt it was propaganda and boring. Referring to the impact of globalisation, then Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said, "we have to work harder to keep a sense of shared identity among all our citizens and keep our society cohesive... we have to refine our approaches, adapt them to new circumstances, but not lessen our emphasis on National Education. What matters most is to make National Education a lively and naturally impactful experience for new generations of Singaporeans,

so that lessons and values stay in the mind as they grow up” (T. Rajar, *The Straits Times*, 15 August 2007).

How are we to judge the success or otherwise of Singapore’s efforts at citizenship education, especially National Education? Has globalisation’s challenges to nation-centric policies been so strong as to create scepticism with regard to national metanarratives, limiting visions of self and community. What is the evidence for Singapore?

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that the disciplinary modernisation strategy worked in material terms. Order and discipline characterise Singapore society and record levels of economic growth were evident in the seventies and eighties. But it also resulted in what some have termed “the nanny state”.

Hogan (2011) contends that what we have in Singapore is a “lack of subjective nationhood”. In his view, the social compact in which allegiance is given for benefits makes for qualified and contingent support, a weak foundation for robust citizenship. Sim and Print (2009) agree, claiming that “a citizenship that is passive, self-centred and materialistic” has emerged.

I do not believe that Singapore’s remarkable success in nation building, and the pride it engenders can be discounted in any assessment. Older “heartlanders” continue to be supportive of a paternalistic and interventionist government that has largely delivered on the social compact-order, economic growth, good public goods eg. education, housing, health in return for limited political participation. There is general acceptance of a “survival against the odds” nation-building narrative, and a rule-following, compliant-citizenry has emerged.

It is also not clear that students in schools overwhelmingly opposed. Ho Li-Ching’s (2010) research came to the conclusion the Singapore students from highly dissimilar socio-economic, academic and racial backgrounds shared a remarkably similar understanding of the Singapore historical narrative, particularly with regard to citizenship and race. Their responses, she states, echoed the states emphasis on racial equality, meritocracy and the individual citizen’s responsibility for racial harmony.

Sim and Print’s study (2009: 396) of eight Singapore teachers of National Education concluded that “none of the teachers held a transforming position premised on confronting injustice and resisting oppressive government policy. Teachers in this study were generally

supportive of the government educational vision for the nation and were reluctant to question the meaning of citizenship in ways that were critical of the system, reflecting an ideological consensus with governing power” .

We should perhaps avoid putting too negative a spin on this. It would be fair to contend that rule following is a desirable virtue in dense urbanised settings. Legitimacy can be conferred on state institutions if they are effective in delivering promised public goods. A commitment to multiracialism and social cohesion, compromise and acceptance of difference are desirable values and Singapore’s schools have generally been successful. A modernist, goal setting, reward for effort is now part of the Singapore psyche and it is perhaps no bad thing in a confused and distracted world.

National orientations apart, it does not seem that sufficient attention is paid to the issue of regional / global identities. Singapore has a long history as a nodal port in pre-colonial and colonial days. Though its Chinese majority sets it apart, its economic livelihood is very much tied to the region; it is a valued member of ASEAN. As a major trading economy, it needs to remain open and international; few small tropical islands are as valuable to the global economy as Singapore.

So while Singapore sees itself as both regional and global, National Education does not deal with the issues that come with such a role. Perhaps it sees the task of national, civic identity building as crucial and as a work in progress. Perhaps it does not want unwittingly to foster divided loyalties. However, given that out-migration is a reality, discussion of the issues around regional / global identity cannot be put off for too long.

So, while I would contend that a view that took Singapore’s short socio-political history into consideration would find much to appreciate in Singapore’s experience with citizenship education, I do acknowledge that the forces unleashed by globalisation are threatening the social compact. A sizeable proportion of citizens, old and young, feel threatened by the arrival of new migrants, rising income inequality and a reduced ability to access valued public goods. Onerous competition in the education sphere is raising questions about social mobility; questions are being asked if meritocratic criteria should be so applied that citizenship confers no advantage. Further, ethnic categorisation is seen as being increasingly irrelevant; more and more citizens and especially the young, are comfortable with hybrid

identities. With an increased push for pluralism, aided by new media platforms, alternative, even subversive accounts of the nation and its journey are beginning to emerge.

It is this context that is raising questions about Singapore's citizenship education arrangements. If the data on a rule following, compliant citizenry are accepted, it could be asked if the Ministry has been too successful! As Singapore moves into an uncertain future globally, it requires citizens who can handle this uncertainty. A singular meta-narrative of state building will not be sufficient. It is inevitable that there will be greater questioning of the relationship between rights and responsibilities; a more participatory and committed citizenry can only come about if there is space to question and to freely commit. The state can no longer "own the truth". So while Singapore's vulnerabilities will always remain, the way to strength and security cannot come from a restrictive view of the national experience, nor more of the same for the future.

In early May 2011, Singapore held its 14th parliamentary general election. It can be described as game changing. For Singapore watchers accustomed to expecting more of the same, the results were significantly different from what most observers had expected. Though the People's Action Party's overwhelming majority in Parliament remained, their share of the popular vote at 60.1 percent was the lowest since independence; additionally, they lost two ministers and a nominee for Speaker of Parliament.

These results raised some issues about evolving attitudes to agency, citizenship/civic responsibilities and the views of young voting adults. While it is too soon to come to firm conclusions about what the voting patterns signalled about young voters' views on a variety of issues, it seems to me that they call into question characterisations of Singapore's schooled population as compliant and cowed.

It is agreed that younger voters bypassed traditional media and used social networking media to good effect to raise questions about political governance and policies. Rather than being apathetic, they attended political rallies, especially opposition ones in huge numbers, and loudly cheered criticisms of government policy. Many volunteered and organised on behalf of opposition candidates. A constant refrain was that the government had lost touch with voters' needs, office holders were too distant from voters' concerns, that government officials in general were arrogant, taking a "we know best" attitude. While generally appreciative of what the government had done, they wanted participation, fairness in the

political contests, a say in how Singapore's future should be shaped. They did not riot in the streets, nor occupy squares but followed the rules and sent a clear political message that bread alone was not going to be enough.

Certainly, government responses suggest that they recognise the need to establish a new social compact. Decisions over immigration which speaks to issues about identity, rising income inequality which is perceived to make mobility more difficult, limits on civic freedoms, including freedom to organise, civic and political expression, salaries and privileges of appointment holders have all been acknowledged to have been policy mistakes. In a radical cabinet reshuffle, several cabinet ministers lost their positions.

The results of the elections have made it clear that a certain maturing of the Singapore citizen has taken place. Desire and expectations for greater political participation have arisen, especially among the young who are the most recently schooled. They have been very adept at using social media to organise, critique and to be active participants in a sphere in which the previous rules of engagement with the government were controlled and restrictive. A new social compact is now required, and this seems set to be quite different from the previous one. Has the wheel come full circle? Just as 1965 was the year of new beginnings, 2011 is bound to usher in new civic possibilities, new participatory practices and new hopes.

It is obvious that the changed context, and as noted earlier, risen expectations for greater political participation must lead to a serious re-examination of citizenship education in Singapore, one more appropriate for changed times. The current leadership elite has responded by acknowledging the changed landscape; the "survival against odds" narrative now seems, to some in Singapore, not one of contending against natural limitations but one created by policies that paid little heed to their present needs and aspirations. At the very least, this will require a serious re-appraisal of the current rendition of Singapore's political and development history. More space will probably be needed for alternative interpretations, of paths not taken, and acknowledgement of the roles and contributions of a wider array of political actors. Pedagogy, in line with the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation initiative, will need to be broadened to do justice to the aspiration of developing more engaged and responsible citizens. Above all, students in schools and tertiary institutions will need to be taken far more seriously, their present conditions better understood and catered for and given time and space to dream and act to build the futures they desire.

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