

Rocking the Boat: Critical Reflexivity in Social Studies Teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how critical reflexivity is manifested in and enacted by seven Social Studies teachers, in the Singaporean context of ethnic diversity, increased affluence and socio-political constraints. The cases show that critically reflexive teachers are strongly influenced by their lived experiences to develop good self-understanding and a deep sensitivity to systemic inequalities around them. Critical reflexivity presents as a continuum, with most teachers working towards improving their students' critical thinking and awareness to inequity through their teaching, while some undertake personally transformative journeys that also effect change in their immediate communities. Findings provide insights on the motivations behind critically reflexive attitudes, and also point to factors that hinder a greater development of critical reflexivity. We suggest that critical reflexivity attitudes can be developed in teachers via programs such as *currere*, for enhanced teaching practice. Findings also highlight the nuances in the nature of citizenship values in the Asian context, suggesting that critical reflexivity involves small and subtle actions of change and agency in teacher-practitioners.

Keywords: citizenship education, *currere*, reflexivity, social justice, social studies.

Introduction

Globally, citizenship issues are more complex and challenging than ever before, problematized for example, by transnational flows of people, ideas and goods, increased connectivity among countries, multiple and overlapping identities, and increasing income inequality within and across countries. Within Singapore, the landscape has evolved dramatically with greater social class differences and the emergence of new lifestyles, reflecting greater affluence and individualizing tendencies. Singapore ranks among the world's most globalized and competitive countries (Gygli, Haelg, & Sturm, 2018; Schwab, 2017) but it also has a Gini coefficient of 0.458 in 2016 (Yong, 2017), which makes it one of the most unequal societies among the developed countries.

More than ever, we need citizens who are critical, adaptable, and thoughtful. Schools must educate students to be aware of inequalities in society, and have the skills and willingness to tackle various problems.

Teachers are the gatekeepers of the classroom and exert tremendous influence on students' access to content and instructional activities (Thornton, 1991). Our focus in this study is on the social studies teacher, who plays a key role in citizenship education (Lee & Fouts, 2005). The teacher implements the citizenship education curriculum, acting as the bridge between the intended and enacted curriculum. Therefore, teachers are the decision-makers on what and how to teach, and in determining whether students are sensitized to systemic issues in society and empowered with knowledge and skills to make a difference. It is thus important to examine teachers' ideas and beliefs about social justice and social action, and whether they have the ability to look both inwards, to the self, and outwards to dominant messages in society - to make sense of their realities.

In this article, we build on our findings reported in an earlier paper, where three types of citizenship conceptions, namely character-driven, social-participatory and critically-reflexive conceptions were surfaced (Sim, Chua, & Krishnasamy, 2017). Although these conceptions corresponded loosely with the conceptions identified by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), namely personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented, we are also mindful that Western models of citizenship may not adequately describe the citizenship conceptions that are present in a non-Western context. Indeed, there were significant differences and distinct nuances, particularly in the critically-reflexive conception. Singapore teachers who identified as belonging to this conception, while somewhat similar to teachers identified as justice-oriented in Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) study, also displayed a strong sense of critical introspection. They examined their own life choices, experiences, and meaning-making deeply and intellectually, which in turn impacted their teaching, behaviours, and attitudes. In this article, we examine the nature of critical reflexivity exemplified in this group of teachers, and explore how such a characteristic had developed, and also whether this trait manifests itself both in their classroom teaching and in their day-to-day lives.

Literature Review

Reflexivity

Although reflexivity has been widely debated across a range of disciplines, there is still confusion over its meaning. In this section, we unpack the meaning of reflexivity, drawing from a selection of works in sociology, social work, and organizational studies where the concept has been more widely discussed, to help us better understand the nature of critical reflexivity as a conception of citizenship. At a simple level, reflexivity can mean the ability to look both inwards - to the self and outwards - to dominant messages in society - to make sense of how things are. With reflexivity, we think from within experiences, or as the dictionary puts it, thoughts are "directed or turned back on itself" (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

Broadly speaking, reflexivity can be critical or non-critical in nature, though this seems like a contradiction, as reflexivity is already a kind of turning on itself. In the literature, however, non-critical reflexivity downplays the issues of political power and structural inequalities that exist in society, while assuming that individuals have mastery over societal forces present in one's life (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Trevelyan, Crath, & Chambon, 2014). Critical reflexivity, on the other hand, recognizes that power and knowledge are linked in complex ways. The individual scrutinizes and actively interrogates the assumptions he or she carries about knowledge generation and power relations, particularly how the taken-for-

granted underlying logic and values shape the discourses and practices in use in specific contexts (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Trevelyan et al., 2014). For this reason, critical reflexivity goes beyond reflecting on the more mechanical aspects of practice to include deep attention to individual positioning within social contexts (Danielewicz, 2001; Dressman, 1998). The attribute ‘critical’ means the commitment to social transformation (Kessl, 2009, p. 311). Critical reflexivity transforms because it requires deep thought and careful consideration that “to create critical knowledge which potentially challenges and resists current forms of domination” (Fook, 2000, p. 118).

Related Concepts: Reflection, Critical Pedagogy and *Currere*

Reflection

While reflexivity is not a widely used term in education, there are related ideas of criticality that are resonant in education. In his book *How We Think*, Dewey (1997) wrote of the importance of reflection or reflective thinking, for educators – both as individuals and as members of a community. Reflection involves careful thought and interrogation – “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1997, p. 6). Reflection is grounded in experience, most particularly in experience that is problematic, perplexing, and that is a “felt difficulty” (Dewey, 1997, p. 72). Such an experience, involving feelings of disorientation, discomfort, and other emotions, moves the individual into reflection and ultimately into a transformative state. Dewey’s work on reflection was expanded by Schon (1987), who linked it to professional practice with the concept of reflection-in-action, that is the process of thinking and reflection even while in the act of teaching (Howard, 2003).

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a teaching philosophy most associated with Brazilian educator and activist, Paulo Freire that attempts to help students question and challenge domination. The idea of a just society in which people have political, economic, and cultural control of their lives is central to critical pedagogy (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Kincheloe, 2005).

Proponents of critical pedagogy advocate for social justice through education in a process called conscientization or “critical consciousness.” Conscientization begins with the recognition of a system of oppressive relations, and one’s own place in that system (Freire, 1973). It involves critical awareness of the social practices and structures that are embedded in everyday life and how they serve to maintain the dominance of people in power. Conscientization is reflexive as it calls for self-examination of one’s current and past circumstances to make sense of them (James, 2008).

For Freire (1973), change in consciousness and concrete action are linked. Transformation occurs through active revolution, which has a key role in removing structures of power. Hence, educators who are critical pedagogy advocates believe in an action-oriented approach, “guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010). In teaching towards social justice, some scholars argue that educators who hope to create concrete societal change must themselves engage in social action within and outside of their classrooms (Marshall & Anderson, 2008; Picower, 2011). They believe that

without action, the structures of oppression that they teach about remain intact. If this is the understanding, then to what extent can critical pedagogy be used by teachers in Singapore classrooms?

That being said, teachers may not participate in social action for various reasons. Picower (2015) identified four reasons or “tools” why teachers in a social justice education program did not participate in activism. These reasons included substitution, postponement, displacement, and dismissal. First, they substituted social action with their classroom teaching. Second, they postponed social action to the future. Third, they displaced the responsibility of social action to others. Fourth, they dismissed social action as impossible. These reasons for inaction were given in the US context. We were interested to see if there were similar factors in the Singapore context, or if there were other, more local factors relating to inaction.

Currere

Another strand of critical thinking and agency is found in Pinar’s (1975) work on *currere*. *Currere* is an autobiographical method of reflecting on one’s lived experiences, both as learner and teacher, from a narrative perspective. It invites one

to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. Then, slowly and in one’s own terms, one analyzes one’s experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one’s submergence in the present. (Pinar, 2004, p. 4)

Specifically, Pinar (1975) discussed *currere* primarily in the U.S. educational context, where he is critical of taken-for-granted aspects of school such as standardized testing, lack of intellectual freedom, and the politicized agenda. He suggests a reconceptualized curriculum that is more open, and connects content knowledge, student and teacher subjectivities, society, and historical context. The method of *currere* involves four steps: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the syncretical. Through these steps, educational practitioners examine their lived experiences of school in the past and present, and look ahead to imagine future possibilities. Such reflections necessarily involve an examination of the self within the dimensions of one’s social environment and context, “in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (Pinar, 2004, p. 188). Thus for teachers, the method of *currere* can allow possibilities for change and transformation in the ways that they understand, enact, and reconstruct curriculum; also in their private lives as they become “mobilized for engagement with the world” through a deeper understanding of self and society (Pinar, 2012, p. 47). Elements of *currere*, such as autobiography, reflection, story-telling, and narration are used in teacher education, particularly in North America (Kissel-Ito, 2006; Meier, 2016; Wang, 2010).

The Singapore Context

As a tiny island-state that became independent only in 1965, Singapore is a democracy that has progressed at astonishing speed, becoming an economic powerhouse that is known for its corruption-free administration, its productive work force, and less positively, for its tightly controlled politics. Chua (2007) notes that Singapore has a “less than fully democratic political system,” with a somewhat minimalist interpretation of democratic practice (p. 912). He argues that the ruling party, the PAP, has a system of political culturalism that situates citizenship along race-based lines, and provides an ideological base for non-liberal political institutions.

Singapore's education policy also reflects this race-based aspect. English is the first language, occupying a so-called "neutral" position among the ethnic languages, which are termed as "mother tongue" languages, and which also hold importance as entry subjects to the university. Ethnic diversity is thus managed by the educational system, with the Government controlling most, if not all, all aspects of curriculum and teaching (Gopinathan, 2001). Despite, or perhaps because of such a controlled education system, Singapore excels on the educational front, regularly topping international tests such as the TIMSS (Teng, 2016) and PISA (Hung, 2017).

Among the various subjects taught at schools, Social Studies is a compulsory and examinable subject at the upper secondary level, and includes the inculcation of citizenship values and competencies in students. First introduced to the Singapore curriculum in 2001, the goal of Social Studies is citizenship education and the development of an "informed and active citizenry committed to the well-being of the society and nation" (CPDD, 2016, p. 4). One important aspect of an "informed and active citizenry" could be a well-developed sense of criticality and social justice.

Methodology

The case study methodology was used in this study, with the teacher as the unit of analysis. The case study is "an exploration of a bounded system or a case (or a collection of cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). This methodology allows for an intensive examination of the teacher and provides a foundation upon which description, induction, and interpretation can be drawn.

This study focuses on seven social studies teachers who were studied over one school semester or 10 weeks. Five of these teachers were from our previous study on citizenship conceptions (Sim et al., 2017), while another two, Shaiful and Aisyah, were recruited at the start of this study. Consistent with the case study design, multiple sources of information were identified including interviews, classroom observations, and documents. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of citizenship and how they saw themselves as citizens. Other questions delved into influences and experiences that they felt had contributed to their conceptions of citizenship, and shaped their identities as citizen-teachers. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Naturalistic lesson observations of up to five social studies lessons were also conducted.

Data analysis was data-driven and inductive, shaped largely by the constant comparative method, which was used to unitize and categorize the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Data was then grouped together on a similar dimension to form a category. Categories that emerged were refined. Triangulation of the data from the multiple sources was done to maintain the credibility of the findings. Member checking was performed by checking with teachers whether they agreed with some of the conclusions we had made.

Findings

In our findings, we examine how critical reflexivity is exemplified in the seven teachers. Critically reflexive teachers are inclined to scrutinize and interrogate the assumptions about knowledge generation and power relations, and deeply attuned to individual positioning within social contexts. In this section, we first

explore teachers' awareness and understanding of societal inequalities, followed by an examination of their social action.

Critical Reflexivity Regarding Inequality

(i) Social class

All participants were aware of uneven systemic privileges; in fact, they each identified as being privileged in some way or other. Their ideas on privilege mostly focused on issues of social class, wealth, or family support. Michelle, who has taught at a school in an affluent neighborhood for eight years, said, "My profile is somewhat similar to my students. Rather privileged. I have the good end of a great stick - I have a happy family." Mike, a teacher of 26 years, expressed it this way, "I feel privileged. The fact that I have what I have. The fact that I have the friends I have, the family I have, the work I have, the ability to sustain a decent lifestyle. I feel privileged."

Likewise, Maria, a teacher of 26 years, felt privileged for her educationally rich home environment she was aware that "not many families have." The home literacy environment can be used as a proxy for social class, as research has shown that poor households have less access to learning materials and experiences to create a positive literacy environment (Bradley, Corwyn, McAadoo, & Coll, 2001). Maria shared,

I love to read, my family buys books, and share about what we read. We also have heated debates, like whether to accept gays, we fight tooth and nail to defend our stand ... My husband and I were in the Toastmaster's Club, we used to go to community centers and companies to teach public speaking. We love to communicate ... I feel privileged in this sense, I take pride that my family and I have brains that think.

May, a teacher of 21 years also felt privileged. Like Michelle, Mike, and Maria, May's privilege stemmed from social class. Coming from "a poor family background," May was aware of the "lack of." She shared, "I grew up in poverty, my parents are not educated, only my dad was working and he earned little. When I was younger, I felt, why am I not able to have what others have?" Instead of feeling bitter about her family circumstances, May turned it into a kind of capital, or more accurately, an inverse kind of privilege. She explained,

Now that I'm older, I'm glad for my humble background because it taught me empathy... how a less privileged student will feel when he doesn't have the means to go on fieldtrip and needs financial help. So to me now, it has become a privilege.

Among the seven teachers, it was generally those from the majority Chinese ethnicity who focused on social class as the key source of inequality. They tended to describe inequality from the perspective of advantage. Keenly aware of their own privileged position, they often inserted themselves as examples, and talked subjectively about inequality. They were self-conscious of how their privilege framed the way they viewed reality. For example, Michelle admitted that, "[y]ou ask me if I really know how the underprivileged or the people who suffered injustices feel, the truth is I don't. If giving them more means taking something away from me, I struggle to reconcile that." Similarly, May exhibited self-awareness when she explained, "Actually it depends on your perception and mindset. A situation can be interpreted as good or bad. I don't resent that I came from a poor family, because then I know empathy."

(ii) Race

Among minority-race participants, the sense of privilege was undercut with personal experiences of having to fight the system or having experienced unfair treatment due to race. Adila, a teacher of eight years, mentioned how the Singapore policy of pegging racial identity to four tightly organized groups of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others (CMIO) disadvantaged her, a person of Arabic origin. After her father fell ill, finances became tight and she could not afford to go to the university. She tried to get financial help from MENDAKI, the Malay-Muslim self-help community organization: “Although I’m not Malay, I thought being Muslim would qualify me for some help there. No, I was turned down. No bursary, no loan, nothing, because I’m not Malay. In my identity card, I’m Others. We’ve never really belonged.” Adila felt strongly that the policy of ascribing CMIO labels to people did not further the appreciation or even acknowledgement of diversity and nuance that is present in Singaporean community, saying “You can’t know people as groups, but we have been raised to do that for way too long.”

Shaiful, a male teacher of Malay origin who has taught for 14 years, said that from a young age, he began to notice the subtle differences, “some form of discrimination, some form of stereotypes” that clung to those of minority racial backgrounds. Shaiful, whose wife is from the majority Chinese ethnicity, said, “First question my mother-in-law asked my wife when my wife told her that she’s dating me was, “Is he a drug addict?” It’s real, this kind of stereotyping.” Describing himself as a “reluctant citizen,” Shaiful said he felt sidelined by race-based policies. He brought up the issue of Malays in the Singapore National Service (NS). It is a statutory requirement for all male Singaporean citizens to undergo a period of compulsory service in the uniformed services. However, few Malays are present in senior and sensitive positions in the Singapore Army (Barr, 2006; Chua, 2003). The policy was to avoid forcing the Malays to have to choose in a conflict between their religion/race and country, due to racial and religious affinity with the Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia (Barr, 2006; Seah, 2002).

Another Malay teacher, Aisyah, who has taught for seven years, spoke of an incident where a Chinese parent questioned her school over a cheating case among several students. The case was investigated by three teachers, all of whom were Malay. The parent requested a new investigation because he felt the teachers might have colluded with each other, being Malay. Aisyah was angry and shocked at the lack of trust in the teachers’ integrity. “It made me think hard... I feel like I had to constantly prove my worth.” She spoke of a need to consciously assert her Malayness:

I had to decide whether I want to be Malay or Singaporean. I chose to be Malay [because] I felt the responsibility and need of my community. I feel it’s important to emphasize my ethnicity because it’s a platform for me to assert certain authority or ideas. Because people don’t really see us as being prominent or anything – they’re like “Oh, this teacher is not so capable because she is Malay.”

Such disjuncture with the state’s professed narrative of harmonious multiculturalism and meritocracy points to unevenness in society, and is also noticed by some of the Chinese majority ethnicity. May said, “Indians, sometimes they call them names. I feel it isn’t appropriate. To me, a truly integrated society is when don’t even need to register your race in your IC – you are just Singaporean.”

(iii) Other discriminatory practices and attitudes

Other examples of discriminative practices and attitudes pertaining to public housing, streaming (academic tracking) and LGBT were also raised. Because the teachers either personally experienced the

discrimination or it happened to people they knew well, two of the teachers were “really upset” and even angry when talking about the discrimination. Michelle was “really upset” when she brought up the issue of public housing being unavailable to single people below 35 years of age, “like her.” She said, “I’m 33 and single, I don’t fit the government’s definition of family of father, mother, and children.” As a result, “I’m affected by this law that makes public housing unavailable to single people. Discrimination against singles ... it’s controversial.”

Similarly, Adila was angry with public housing schemes that discriminate against single mothers from buying a flat, because they are not recognized as a family nucleus. The discrimination affected one of her students who came from a poor single mother family, who had to be “put up with relatives and move from place to place when the goodwill ran out.” She said,

The government promotes the conventional family. How are single mothers not conventional? I know this single mother, she tries to make ends meet ... they contribute to the economy, their children are your precious resource. Why make it so hard for them to own an HDB [flat]1?

May spoke of the ill effects of academic streaming of students. She shared,

I feel strongly about streaming... it sorts students into Express, Normal (Academic) [NA], Normal (Technical) [NT]2 and labels the kids. The stigma remains with those students who are streamed into the NA and NT streams. It really tugs my heart...how the policy may have implications on the life of a child.

Mike, meanwhile, felt strongly about the social and legal challenges that gay persons face in Singapore. “It is now not illegal to commit adultery (laughs). Yah, they took out the provision that adultery is against the law. Everything they took out except the 337A. So that in a way is unjust.” Section 337A of the Penal Code Singapore is a piece of legislation that criminalizes sex between mutually consenting adult men.

It was not just the teachers’ personal experiences or their observations of society that caused them to develop deep understandings of democracy conceptions, such as justice, equity, power, and cultural diversity. Most of the participants also read widely which, among other things, afforded them a means to examine diverse narratives of Singapore and Singaporean-ness. For example, Maria spoke of the importance of actively seeking out different perspectives on political issues, articulated by voices seldom heard in the mainstream media. She said,

I like reading. And I am not blind-sided by one side. I ploughed through the entire series of Lee Kuan Yew’s books. I also read the other side, like Francis Seow’s *To Catch a Tartar* and Teo Soh Lung’s *The Blue Gate*. I need to see a balance, collect information - then you see a deeper vibrancy, a deeper current that is going on beneath that still water.

The teachers in this study, while observing and taking note of instances of hegemony in their social and cultural environment, also examined their own participation in existing inequalities. Such critical reflexivity is a crucial element in citizenship conceptions. Some teachers were aware that they were enjoying privileged lives, but even as they acknowledged the injustice that enabled their privileges, they could not let go of them. There were feelings of guilt, shame, or powerlessness associated with this. Michelle said, “Privilege is a burden; my privilege traps me. I don’t feel I deserve all these. It is overwhelming.” Mike called himself a “running dog,” saying in a self-mocking way: “I’m a running dog and proud of it.” He elaborated, “You realized that life is never fair, you basically have to be happy with the best situation. You can’t have 100% justice. ... Sometimes I do feel conflicted, but if this is the best situation, so be it.”

Critical Reflexivity Regarding Action for Social Change

Critically reflexive teachers are also likely to be inclined towards social transformation, as the nature of critical reflexivity involves creating the kinds of knowledge that can challenge and resist domination. The teachers in this study were sensitive to unequal institutional structures and practices, as described in the section above. We now examine their willingness to participate in social change in the section below.

(i) Changing ways of thinking and seeing through teaching

A major strand of literature on citizenship education advocates for teachers to be agents of change. It is not enough to hold strong views about social justice; active work against social inequalities is needed (Banks, 2004; Picower, 2015; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The teachers in this study all advocated for change, most specifically change in ways of thinking and seeing, in their classroom teaching. Adila, in particular, wants to change how her students approach race. She was aware that her students are hesitant to discuss issues regarding race and religion. For her, race and religion are not “sensitive issues but critical issues to be discussed.” Adila observed that students hid behind the term “racism” to be politically correct: “They use racist for everything to avoid ‘sensitive issues’.” But she saw it as her responsibility to challenge students to be critical, to “deconstruct misconceptions of race,” because “when we avoid talking about race, we perpetuate racism.” Students, she felt, were “not given enough opportunities to discuss race and religion in class,” as many teachers were uncomfortable handling sensitive issues. She noted that the new Social Studies curriculum offers room for discussion: “The syllabus includes a section on Diversity. That gives me lots of opportunities to deconstruct issues.” As a minority-race Muslim woman, she also felt she could engage her students on race and religion without compunction.

In one of her lessons, Adila brought up the case of Anton Casey, an expatriate who had posted on social media disrespectful comments about Singaporeans and the public transport system, for discussion. Aware of her students’ hesitation in discussing race issues, she chose an “outsider” as a subject of discussion. Thereafter, she raised the bar and introduced Amy Cheong, a Singapore Permanent Resident of Chinese descent who had also made disrespectful remarks on social media about a Malay wedding. She asked the students: would Amy’s remarks still be regarded as “racist,” if she had criticized a Chinese funeral rather than a Malay wedding. Hence, Adila carefully problematized race, surfaced students’ misconceptions, and opened them for discussion.

Others also felt that their role as teachers afforded them a special position to affect social change within the younger generation. For example, May, who felt “very strongly against streaming,” also said that she accepted it, albeit reluctantly. “But you have to be realistic, this is Singapore,” she chuckled as she said,

I tried to voice out, but was it heard? (laughs)...there is no way you can change a system that is so ingrained, unless the people up there see light, you know, the ministers feel there is a need to relook. Take the PSLE grading, they relooked, but it’s still (laughs) ... just in form, not in essence, that kind of change. So this is how Singapore runs. (laughs)

Rather than feeling frustrated “because there are lots of things I can’t change at the policy level,” she reframed and looked for what she *can* do instead:

In my capacity as a teacher, I bring hope to them. I motivate them to be better learners, not just good citizens ... learn and think better. What I teach my Express classes, I teach my NA classes. They have

the right to learn the same things. I try to fight the system in that way... So I just institute and initiate change on my level and implement within my own capacity.

Unlike many Social Studies teachers who tried to simplify the learning for weaker students, for example, by getting them to copy notes or follow routinized steps, in the lessons observed, May refused to “spoonfeed them...” Instead, she challenged them to “learn to think and reason for themselves.” She expected the same rigour from the students in the so-called less able classes, even though it sometimes took more scaffolding to elicit responses from these students. “I don’t dumb down the lesson just because they are NA... I still get them to discuss, reason, and justify their answers to the class. These are life skills.” She explained that she cannot “further disadvantage these students... when the system is already not in their favour,” she said, “It’s the least I can do to mitigate the unfair labelling of the students that will affect them for life.”

Among the teachers, Mike stood out for consciously avoiding bringing up issues of controversy in Singapore. In the classroom, he was careful to avoid discussing inequity in the Singaporean situation, preferring to present case studies from other countries for discussion, saying: “To be honest, I do not use Singaporean examples, I tend to use examples from overseas. Like what we did recently about the French policy of assimilation, is it really fair that you can’t do this, you can’t do that, what would the situation be like if you are in Singapore.” Thus, although aware and sensitive to systemic problems in Singapore, Mike did not feel he could bring these issues to his classroom.

(ii) Engaging in the wider community

While all seven teachers were generally enthusiastic and committed in bringing ideas of social justice to their students, particularly through deep discussions, they were more wary of being change agents in the wider community. On the whole, minority-race teachers were more likely to participate in social action and community activities, in mostly race or religion-oriented ways. For example, Aisyah, with a group of Malay women professionals, pioneered a Muslim women’s group called ‘Soul Sisters’ three years ago, which served as “a platform to assert our authority and ideas as Malay women.” For Aisyah, engaging in social action was a way to change society’s prejudice against Malayness and women. She shared, “Being a Malay woman wearing a hijab, it’s like some kind of hindrance. When we share our thoughts and views, people have the perception like, oh, you mean you can actually do something intellectual...”

Aisyah felt that although her actions were not “big”, she was still “rocking the boat... making some waves” in good ways. She explained, “Me rocking the boat doesn’t mean that it is negative, it can be positive, an improvement, an enhancement of certain values.” Lately, due to work commitments, Aisyah has not been participating in ‘Soul Sisters,’ but continues to bring this cause into her work, where she challenges her students’ negative perceptions of “the Malay woman teacher.” She explained:

I find a need to assert my Malay identity when I’m teaching. Social studies class is the best platform for me to discuss ethnicity and race. You know, the need for students to understand the idea of majority privilege and how the minorities would feel.

Similarly, Adila conducted reading activities and tuition for MENDAKI, the Malay-Muslim community group, while in university. During this time, she also worked as a relief teacher. She related, “Those were difficult times ... people talk about it, but I went through it. ... I am better equipped to talk about issues, think about them, and reach out.” Shaiful, meanwhile, also felt impelled to volunteer, because he was from “a typical middle class family and went to good schools.” He said, “A lot of my adolescent interaction was within

a certain sphere of influence, a certain social class.” Thus, he chose to leave his “family comfort zone” and live in a smaller flat in a lower-income neighbourhood, where he volunteered with the Residents’ Committee (RC), helping those “who need financial assistance, explaining government policies to the old folks, writing letters of appeal for utilities etc.” This, he said, “keeps me grounded as I see for myself how lives are affected by policies ... it is not just abstract ... it also helps me as a teacher.”

Other teachers, and two were from the majority Chinese ethnicity, were not keen on advocating for social change, or even participating in social cause activities, for different reasons. Michelle said,

I am a person who works around part of the system that may not work. And I haven’t found a cause that I am passionate enough about ... that I will sacrifice time and effort for. I will never sign a petition unless I believe in it completely.

She elaborated,

I don’t think we are at that state where there must be a big fight. We are in this flux where it’s not too bad or too good. I think I would be more proactive if it was very bad.

Ironically, Michelle also decried the state of passive citizenship in Singapore, saying “The lack of a civic society here is scary. ... the lack of a civic voice scares me to death.”

May, meanwhile, had ideas of balance and harmony, of doing good in what she perceived as her role and space: “It is attributed to my religious belief. Being Buddhist, I want to find contentment in all that I do...” She avoids conflicts, preferring to retreat to her own space and do what she can within her sphere of influence: “A good citizen needs to put the interest of the group and nation first. There’s really nothing very wrong in the existing system that you have to really step out to be a hero.” She explained further, with a tinge of cynicism, “I don’t need to participate in politics to make my voice heard. Anyway, it won’t be heard. I might as well change the students’ life than go and change the system.” May also alluded to another reason for not working towards transforming inequalities outside the classroom. She explained, “I wouldn’t want to be arrested for saying the wrong things. Yah. I mean since young we know that we have to be very careful with the way we talk.”

Mike was the only minority teacher in this study who was not involved in any social action. He brought up the issue of gay persons and Section 377A in this way:

There is no need to be political. I would go to Pink Dot3, I would assist, but I wouldn’t go to the stage of becoming a gay rights activist. I will give you as much support as I can, but we also understand that the situation is like that ... don’t come to the extent when you rock the boat. ... You rock the boat, you end up worse.

Among all the teachers, one teacher stood out for actively trying to create change, both in the classroom and wider community. A teacher of 26 years, Maria, Chinese in ethnicity but married to a Eurasian husband, uses her political knowledge and her sense of responsibility to participate as a citizen-teacher in ways that she feels are right. Maria said that she believes strongly in the National Pledge, in particular, the phrase “regardless of race, language or religion,” which she regards as the cornerstone of equality and justice. Previously, she would write in to the *Today* newspaper whenever she came across social issues that she felt deserved discussion and thought. “It is also a way to encourage my Social Studies students to read newspapers, to engage with whatever is happening here... also inspire them to write in themselves.” In 2011, Maria wrote a newspaper commentary over an incident known as the “curry incident,” which centred on issues of integrating new migrants and local culture. Subsequently the incident gained much media attention and discussion in the community. Maria

believes that as a citizen she should speak up and question things “especially when unjust,” although in the Singaporean context, asking questions can land one in trouble. “You ask questions then you get yourself into trouble then your head kena4 chopped very badly, until minced. That is the consequence of asking questions.” Her questioning of school policies has led to censures from her principal, as well as setting of boundaries of what she can bring up during teachers’ weekly meetings. Such silencing is difficult. She said: “I need to protect my rice bowl also, you know. I didn’t give up my criticality. It’s just that now my audience is much more limited.” Maria affirmed that with her students, she is still as questioning and critical, saying, “If I can produce one or two critical thinkers out of a cohort of 200, I think I have ... succeeded.”

Discussion

In this study, we use the lens of reflexivity to understand how teachers who are more sensitive to the democratic ideals of citizenship enact their roles as citizens and teachers in Singapore. We had selected teachers who showed awareness of multicultural diversity and systemic inequalities in society and examined their motivations and whether they themselves personally participated in social action. The reflexivity concept helps us analyze how far each teacher is in his/her quest towards social justice and showed differences in how critical reflexivity pushes each of them into social action, or not, as the case may be. In the section below, we discuss the inspirations behind each teacher’s socio-cultural and political awareness, as well as the impetus for action or inaction for every teacher.

“Felt” Difficulties and Strong Emotions Motivate Action

Teachers in this study spoke of their lived experience, as citizens and as teachers, and how specific incidents pushed them into growth. These experiences were often personal and sometimes occurred in the professional workspace. They were difficult situations, imbued with feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and confusion. As Dewey (1997) has asserted, deep and critical thinking can only occur when we are confronted with a “felt difficulty” (p. 72). For these teachers, “felt difficult[ies]” has propelled them to examine the situation closely and make sense of it. The strong emotions acted as a motivating force for adjusting their worldviews and effect a change in perspective or attitude. This aligns with transformative literature that asserts that difficult and disorientating experiences, and the accompanying emotions, move one towards a stance of critical reflexivity (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Trevelyan et al., 2014; Zembylas, 2003). Transformations affected not just the self, but in several cases, also the communities in which these teachers lived and worked. For example, Adila’s experience of being unable to apply for financial aid as a student due to a race-based policy made her angry and upset. But these emotions sensitized her to the inequalities in the system, inspiring her to discuss racism in her classroom, pushing her students to look beyond the taken-for-granted veneer of harmonious relations, and scrutinize their own attitudes towards issues of race. Aisyah, meanwhile, had observed that being Malay was often perceived as being of lower status and had also experienced hurtful discrimination as a teacher. She made a conscious decision to assert her Malay identity, as an act of resistance against negative perceptions of her race.

Passive Reflexivity: No Rocking the Boat

Yet other teachers preferred to keep quiet, even as they were aware of systemic problems in society. Consciously or unconsciously, they did not wish to take social action, thus staying at the level of passive reflexivity. Mike presented a classic case of inaction. He is happy where he is, in his position of privilege, and believes that to question assumptions and practices would be “rocking the boat.” Michelle expressed it less overtly, saying that she would act only if a cause was worthy of action. May, meanwhile, substituted social action with her classroom teaching, believing her teaching to be the best way to affect change in her community, through influencing her students to think critically, and in the future, push for change.

Picower’s (2015) tools of inaction – substitution, postponement, displacement and dismissal - can help explain these teachers’ reluctance to confront inequalities. But their reasons for inaction may go deeper than that. May’s allusion to the possibility of arrest “for saying the wrong thing” may seem extreme, but fear of being penalized by the authorities is a strong deterrent in Singapore (Ho, 2010). Under the Sedition Act in Singapore, it is seditious to “raise discontent or disaffection” or “promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population” (“Sedition Act (Chapter 290),” 2018), and offenders can be prosecuted. The government considers this law necessary to preserve racial and religious harmony in Singapore; however, it is uncertain what exactly constitutes seditious content and where the limits of acceptability are (Neo, 2011). Additionally, teachers as civil servants are expected to abide by a code of conduct (PS21 Office, 2004), which includes rules like not publicly commenting on any topic that is potentially controversial or nationally sensitive. Even Maria, the most courageous among the teachers, after repeated sanctioning by her superiors has resorted to reducing the scale of her social action and seeking a smaller audience. Hence, we would like to add to Picower’s tools of inaction, another tool, the tool of self-protection. This tool points to teachers’ vulnerability in the face of certain constraints. Our findings have showed that teachers’ inaction may not be owing to a lack of willpower or self-centeredness. Rather, they have carefully assessed and understood the situation and chosen an in-between route to protect themselves. While this situation may apply specifically to Singapore’s context, it does not apply uniquely, as teachers in the US have also been sanctioned for bringing a critical point of view to their classrooms (Westheimer, 2006). However, we note that culturally, teachers in Singapore may also strive towards less confrontational and more relational ways of action, in keeping with the Asian context (Lee, 2012).

Nuances in the Reflexivity Concept

By examining teachers using the reflexivity lens, we see that they fall along a continuum of propensities toward the social justice orientation. These teachers had well developed understandings of inequalities in Singapore. They believed in the principles of justice and equality. However, the inclination to act according to their beliefs and challenge social injustices varied greatly. Non-critical reflexivity was seen in Mike, who while aware of systemic issues in Singapore, was at this point disinclined to take any action, and hesitant to challenge his students to think more critically about issues around them. At the other end of the reflexivity spectrum, Maria often critiqued the status quo within her community, and pushed her students to think and discuss cases of controversy. The other four teachers can be placed along the reflexivity continuum according to their social justice beliefs and propensities for action. By using their lived experiences, teachers like Maria, Shaiful, Adila,

and Aisyah addressed problematic social hierarchies, each in their own way, and carried forward their critical reflexivities to their teaching, engaging their students in questioning accepted ways of thinking and behaving. Three of the minority-race teachers, namely Adila, Aisyah and Shaiful, also spoke about one-on-one interactions with others as the way to affect change – through small and personal acts of engagement. Yet others such as Michelle and May focused on promoting social justice ideas through their classroom teaching alone. We also believe that critical reflexivity is dynamic and growth-oriented; Mike may one day move out of his comfort zone and consider social change.

Social action in the community is often considered to be visible forms of activism such as “organizing, marching, rallying, protesting, and occupying” (Hyttén, 2016, p. 991). This study showed that social actions could be smaller, less visible and more individual – but no less powerful. Such actions can ripple through the community and effect social change, and they need not be provocative. For example, Shaiful’s act of choosing to live in a lower-income area and volunteer with the RC enables him to work directly with people in his community. This way he lives up to his purpose of “always having an ongoing conversation, while accepting that not everyone is ready for change.” Likewise, Adila’s willingness to engage with people, including her students, and discuss matters of race or religion allows for social change “through overcoming labels, whatever labels, attached to one another.” Such nuanced actions broaden and give depth to the social justice conception offered by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). We come to understand that critical reflexivity is personal and individual, and that it can advance the cause of social justice in a range of transformative ways, both in the classroom and wider community. Perhaps in contexts like Singapore that are conservative, a way to inculcate critical reflexivity and to act for social change, can be through individual journeys that are not so much “activist” as “personally transformative,” with these transformations causing ripples of change in the community. The practice of *currere* can be such a way.

***Currere* as a Means to Develop Critical Reflexivity**

Dewey (1963) wrote that education is a social process and that “development of experience comes through interaction” (p. 58). As such the lived experience of teachers - both as citizens in the community and as teachers in classrooms - are rich sites of meaning and potential for transformation and growth. By seeking meaning of the self through lived experience, the curriculum can be “truly experienced, enacted, and reconstructed” (Meier, 2016, p. 159). We suggest Pinar’s method of *currere* as a way for teachers to become more attuned with their past, present, and future selves, and reflexively chart a way forward as teacher-practitioners. Although none of our teachers consciously used *currere*, each of them examined their past selves and future motivations in their quest towards personal and professional growth. *Currere*’s regressive stage allows for the individual to work through intellectual and emotional difficulties “to reconstruct one’s relationship with oneself and the world” (Wang, 2010, p. 278). In our study, Aisyah examined her experiences of injustice and brought up memories of hurt and anger. Critical examination of these situations enabled her to imagine ways of being “equally Malay, Singaporean, and a smart modern woman.” She consciously decided to assert her Malayness, and through that, resist stereotypical notions of race in society. Such *currere*-like analysis of past experiences and agency in subtly transforming her identity makes for both personal and social change. We suggest that teacher education programs include *currere* as a way to engage teachers for personal and

professional growth. Teachers may then start to examine their personal and professional realities, and move forward on transformative journeys (Greene, 1978).

Conclusions

In this study, we scrutinized the citizenship conceptions of social studies teachers who identified as being critically reflexive, to reveal the various influences, lived experiences, and contexts of the teachers. As a group, they generally possessed attributes of good self-awareness, deep political knowledge, and sensitive understanding of the societal structures embedded in their educational settings and the wider society. We found that this group of teachers were generally motivated by felt difficulties and strong emotions to make a personal and positive impact in their classrooms, and for some of them beyond the classroom. However, this impact is small and subtle, mostly because of the more conservative national climate. These acts of manoeuvring in the limited spaces that teachers felt safe to do so, however, does not discount the courage and the possible future impact of their guarded agency.

Citizenship conceptions can differ according to contextual factors. In a conservative and post-colonial Asian context such as Singapore's, agency and social change may occur through actions at a personal, less visible level than is cited in literature based on Western models of citizenship. There is a strong need to develop understandings of citizenship conceptions in Asian societies, which are diverse in terms of political, social and economic contexts. Contextual differences also extend to the social studies curriculum, which is the main vehicle for inculcating citizenship values in a nation's young citizens. The beliefs and attitudes of social studies teachers influence how the curriculum is taught to their students. Curriculum, as Cornbleth (1990) said, must be seen in context. Towards that end, this study has also provided some insights on how the social studies curriculum is enacted in a specific Asian context. More work needs to be done towards building an evidence base of citizenship education practices and their associated meanings through social studies in the Asian context.

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Notes

1. HDB flat stands for Housing Development Board flat, which is public housing in Singapore.
2. In Singapore secondary schools, students are sorted into three main streams - the Express, the Normal (Academic), and the Normal (Technical) - according to student abilities.
3. Pink Dot is an annual event held in support of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community in Singapore.
4. Singapore slang derived from Malay that means to have an unpleasant situation befall one.

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