

## Educating Citizens: A Cross-Cultural Conversation

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*This study explores pre-service teachers' beliefs about citizenship across two nations, the United States and Singapore; the nature of their conversation about those beliefs; and the impact of their cross-cultural dialog on their reflections about the citizenship goal of social studies. Data is based on a Black Board-based threaded dialog, over two different semesters, between pre-service social studies teachers in the two countries. The discussions focused on the meanings each group held about what it means to be an effective citizen. Data was analyzed around themes of knowledge, skills, and values. The conversations provided some insight into the similarities and differences in conceptions of citizenship held by these two groups of preservice teachers. Across both groups and both years, the dominant view of the "good citizen" expressed by participants was that of the "personally responsible citizen." While many similarities were evident, there were also clear differences which the facilitators attributed to differences in disciplinary grounding and cultural contexts. Participants reported that the cross-cultural dialog had encouraged them to think more deeply about the concept of citizenship and the goals of social studies.*

Keywords: social studies, citizenship, cross cultural

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Social studies educators in democratic countries generally agree that an important goal of the social studies curriculum is the development of the skills and knowledge necessary for active citizenship in a democratic society (see Hahn, 2002; Nelson, 2001; Ochoa-Becker, 2007). However, this apparent consensus on the purposes of social studies is fraught with ambiguity and conflict. What are the skills and knowledge

essential to the education of citizens in democracies? What, for that matter, does it mean to be a citizen in the twenty-first century? How can and should social studies education contribute to the development of effective citizens? Given the varying concepts of citizenship and citizen education found in the literature (Evans, 2004; Nelson, 2001), what conceptions of citizenship and citizenship education are held by social

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studies teachers who are charged, ultimately, with enacting this social studies goal?

This study explores pre-service teachers' beliefs about citizenship across two nations, the United States and Singapore, and the nature of their conversation about those beliefs. The intention of this research is to illuminate prospective social studies teachers' beliefs about citizenship and social studies across two very different cultures. As will be described below, it was hoped that an exploration of the idea of citizenship across two cultures might push the participants toward more thoughtful reflection about this important topic. In addition, the instructors hoped that such a discussion regarding the meaning of citizenship might prompt the participants to push their thinking about civic responsibilities beyond national borders.

### **Educating Citizens**

There are conflicting views about the nature of the knowledge and skills necessary for effective citizens. The literature in the field is replete with debates about what it means to be an effective citizen and the sort of curriculum necessary to prepare young people for citizenship. Concepts of citizenship range from being socialized to the norms and expectations of society on the one hand and to the development of the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to question those norms and expectations on the other hand (Stanley, 2005). As will be described below, in the United States and Singapore, social studies is seen as an important component of citizenship education in schools (Ministry of Education, 2010; National Council for the Social Studies, 2010). Hence debates about what it means to be an "effective citizen" impact debates about the nature and implementation of social studies (Evans, 2004). Should

social studies promote citizenship focused on socializing young people to the status quo or should it aim at transforming and reconstructing society? Social studies as both socialization and counter-socialization (Ochoa-Becker, 2007) may send contradictory messages, yet those very contradictions may be necessary to education in a democratic society. Debates about the many and contradictory concepts of citizenship education are heightened when looking across national and cultural contexts (Hahn, 1998). Finally, what do social studies and citizenship education mean in an increasingly connected world in which national borders have become porous and global connections more significant?

### **Educating Citizens in Singapore and the United States**

In considering questions around the education of citizens, national context is important. Singapore and the United States share, at least on the surface, some similarities. The modern history of both nations began with colonization by Great Britain. Both nations have been built by immigrants and today both have racially and culturally diverse societies. Of course there are significant differences.

The United States is a Western nation grounded in Western ideals of individualism and freedom. The United States has long claimed, although not always practiced, the value of civic participation and citizen decision-making. Very early in United States history, schools became important partners in building the new nation and preparing immigrants to become American citizens (Herbst, 1996). The primacy of public schooling as a means to educate future citizens was reflected in the words and proposals of founding leaders. For example, Thomas Jefferson's proposal for

three years of free public schooling for all children was intended to establish a mechanism for democratically selecting future leaders. Horace Mann, considered by many as the “father of public education” in the United States, looked to public schooling as a way to socialize citizens to a shared set of political values.

For much of its history, citizenship education in the United States embraced an assimilationist ideology (Banks, 2002). From the early days of the nation, Americanizing the diverse population, and especially arriving immigrants, meant teaching newcomers to conform to the language, values, beliefs and behaviors of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who held power in the new nation (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006). Many young people did lose their language, cultures and ethnic identities, even at times becoming alienated from families and communities. The 1960s and 1970s brought a rising demand for the recognition of group rights as well as individual rights (Banks, 2008). The belief that citizens could maintain their connections to their cultural communities while at the same time participating in the shared, national culture was growing. Despite fears that continued allegiance to culture groups would balkanize the nation (see Schlesinger, 1991) the commitment to unity with diversity continued to grow, as culture groups held the mainstream accountable for living up to American ideals.

Singapore, too, is a “nation of immigrants,” a multiracial society built by immigrants who came primarily from China, Malaysia, and India. Singapore gained self-rule in 1959 and became part of the newly independent Malaysian confederation in 1963. Singapore and Malaysia went their separate ways in 1965. At the time of independence, Singapore was threatened by

communists and had an undeveloped economy with high unemployment, few natural resources, and many social problems. The Japanese occupation had ended just twenty years earlier and the racial riots in the early years of independence led political leaders to believe that for Singapore to survive emphasis would need to be placed on developing a shared national identity, as well as building an infrastructure and modernizing the economy (Chua & Kuo, 1991). The Peoples Action Party (PAP) looked to schools as an important ally in developing national identity as well as economic strength. Since self-rule was achieved in 1959, there have been a variety of initiatives to address the need for citizenship education. Indeed, schools have been seen as the natural place for formal citizenship education slanted toward the development of a united, stable nation (Chew, 1998; Turnbull, 2009). Citizenship education focused on cultivating patriotism, a sense of belonging and a shared commitment to national development.

Developing racial harmony has been a core goal of modern Singapore. Singapore’s efforts at balancing unity and diversity have focused on strategies enabling Singaporeans to feel a sense of belonging to the nation while at the same time retaining roots in particular racial groups. Racial harmony is stressed through public policies and messages of racial harmony are embedded throughout society. This is certainly the case with social studies textbooks which are permeated with the theme of racial harmony. However, it has been argued (Adler & Sim, 2008) that these themes of racial harmony are superficially dealt with in the syllabus and in textbooks. Racial harmony appears to be stressed as a means to socialize students into the set of core societal values, rather than to promote in-depth understanding of diversity and of others.

Issues of diversity are not presented in a way that encourages students to question and discuss them openly. The knowledge of and values surrounding diversity are not regarded as problematic, but fixed and to be transmitted to the students.

### **Social Studies and the Education of Citizens**

In the United States, the term social studies first emerged in the early twentieth century and has been contested ever since (Evans, 2004). Although generally taught as a collection of separate courses, such as history, government and economics, an alternative conception of social studies as an interdisciplinary social issues oriented study has persisted (Evans, 2004; Thornton, 2005). However defined and organized, the rationale of “citizenship education” continues to dominate the literature, notwithstanding the fact that there are a variety of influences, both in school and out, that contribute to citizen education. The National Council for the Social Studies captures this commitment in its definition of social studies which asserts that “[t]he primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 2010, p.3). This apparent consensus, however, masks the ambiguity of the term and profound disagreements about what it means to educate citizens, as well as about the classroom goals of social studies.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004), for example, report finding a range of perspectives about the notion of the “good citizen” in their study of ten programs explicitly aimed at citizen education. These perspectives ranged from that of the “personally responsible citizen,” to the

“participatory citizen,” to the “justice-oriented citizen.” The first perspective, personally responsible citizen, was defined as a largely individualistic, service oriented conception. The second, the participatory citizen, was defined as having the goal of being an informed participant in public life, a notion defined as transcending particular community issues and problems. The perspective of the justice-oriented citizen was defined by its attention to the pursuit of social justice goals. This typology of perspectives toward citizenship mirrors, to some extent, the debates about citizenship goals of social studies. Stanley (2005), Evans (2004), and others have described an array of perspectives toward social studies. In their now classic study, Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) identified three orientations toward the goals of social studies: citizenship transmission, social studies as social science, and reflective inquiry. Those who maintain the citizenship transmission orientation see the major purpose of social studies as transmitting the values, history, and traditions of a society to the young. Those who hold to the social science tradition see the role of social studies as equipping young people with the knowledge and skills of the social sciences in the development of informed citizens. Within the reflective inquiry tradition the emphasis is less on specific social science knowledge and more on exploring issues in the social world which directly affect the students involved. Research suggests that the dominant perspective continues to be the “citizenship transmission model” which emphasizes preparing good citizens who obey laws, vote and behave responsibly toward others (Thornton, 2008). However, there are also those who advocate social reconstructivist notions with an emphasis on working to effect social change in the interest of greater justice and equity. Many

social studies educators hold views that may be seen as somewhere on a continuum between these two notions. In the United States, this diversity of perspectives toward social studies has been found over time and across the various states (Evans, 2004).

In Singapore, the aim of social studies is to “develop our students into well informed, responsible citizens with a sense of national identity and a global perspective”(Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2011, p.3). Social studies in Singapore is an integrated subject that is taught in both primary and secondary schools. From its introduction, it was intended to have a clear citizen education function. First introduced in primary schools in 1981, the purpose of social studies was to “enable pupils to understand their social world and to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live” (MOE Social Studies Primary Syllabus, 1999, p. 1). At the secondary level, social studies was developed in the context of National Education (NE). NE is aimed at developing and shaping positive knowledge, values, and attitudes of its younger citizenry towards the community and the nation, with the purpose of developing national cohesion, the instinct for survival, and confidence in the future (MOE National Education, 2011). The intended outcomes of NE at the time of this study were “Love Singapore” at the primary school level, “Know Singapore” at the secondary school level, and “Lead Singapore” at the pre-university level.

The concept of citizenship in Singapore has been characterized as “passive”; that is, a good citizen is one who behaves responsibly, treats others well, and cooperates with the government to create prosperity for all Singaporeans (Sim & Print, 2009). This is consistent with the government’s goal of using education as part

of the important goal of nation building. Thus in Singapore there is little debate about the goals of social studies, or the broader goal of citizenship education. Furthermore, the curriculum is centrally controlled and high stakes exams in social studies at the secondary level help to assure some fidelity between the intended and the planned curriculum. Nonetheless, conceptions of social studies and the good citizen vary among social studies teachers themselves. In her study of teachers’ perspective toward citizenship, Sim (2009) found that the preservice teachers in Singapore who participated in the study held diverse views about the nature of social studies and citizenship. These views included social studies as citizenship transmission; social studies as social education, enabling young people to engage in the life of the community; social studies as personal, rather than civic, development; and finally, social studies as general education, enabling people to participate more knowledgeably in civic life. Further, the government’s increasing emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills has challenged an unquestioning acceptance of one point of view (Koh, 2004). In Singapore today, as in the United States, social studies is more and more contested ground.

### **Teacher Beliefs and Reflection**

Given these trends, what, then, is the role of teachers in educating citizens? A body of research now exists which supports the premise that good teachers matter (National Commission of Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; Sanders & Horn, 1998). This research points to the difference an effective teacher can make, even in very challenging circumstances. Teachers are far more than mere conduits of information or of curriculum developed by “experts.”



Teachers are the key to what happens in classrooms (Thornton, 1991, 2005). Ultimately, it is the teacher who makes the decisions about what actually is taught in the classroom, and how it is taught. To use Thornton's (1991, 2005) term, teachers are the "curricular-instructional gatekeepers."

Thus it can be argued that what matters at the level of classroom practice in social studies mirrors, to a large extent, the classroom teacher's conception of the nature and purpose of social studies in a particular context. The curriculum can be taught in a variety of ways. As Thornton notes, "Teachers may tend the gate well or poorly, consciously or unconsciously, but their gate-keeping is unavoidable" (2005, p. 5). Each individual teacher's behavior is heavily influenced by his or her worldview, that is, by a set of often largely unexamined beliefs about how the world works (Yero, 2002). What teachers believe to be the nature of citizenship and of social studies teaching and learning makes a real difference. And in both the United States and Singapore, teachers have choices and enact the curriculum in a variety of ways.

Although the construct of "teacher beliefs" has been used in a variety of ways, this study adopted Richardson's (2003) broad definition of beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (p.2). Several decades of research in the area of teacher beliefs has suggested that teachers' beliefs about schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy have developed over the years of life experiences both in and out of school (Richardson, 1996, 2003). A good deal of research points to the notion that preservice coursework is filtered through preservice teachers' prior beliefs. Individuals play an active role in negotiating the meaning of the

experiences in their teacher preparation programs (Adler, 2008).

An interest in teacher thinking and beliefs has led teacher educators to examine practices which engage preservice and inservice teachers in reflecting on their beliefs and practices. Beginning in the 1980s, teacher education programs have become increasingly focused on "educating the reflective practitioner." Originally grounded in the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987) this program emphasis is consistent with a view of teachers as decision-makers. Given this concern, teacher educators began to ask what experiences would promote reflective inquiry among preservice teachers and how teacher beliefs might be developed and clarified. There is some research which suggests that facilitating teacher reflection on their beliefs and understandings regarding the curriculum and subject matter to be taught can impact beliefs (Adler, 2008). It was this assumption that prompted our effort to engage social studies preservice teachers in a cross-cultural reflective inquiry intended to encourage them to make explicit their notions of citizenship and social studies.

### **Setting Up The Conversation**

This study falls into an increasingly popular approach to research in teacher education, that of the "self-study." Self-study is the intentional and systematic inquiry into one's own practice by those who prepare teachers (Dinkelman, 2003). Advocates of the self-study approach point out that such research models the reflective practice that many hope preservice teachers will learn (Dinkelman, 2003; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000). Furthermore, self-study could, argue its proponents, provide the potential for developing a deeper

understanding of the practices of teacher education by making the tacit theories of teacher education practitioners public and explicit and by subjecting those beliefs and practices to careful study, data collection and reflection (Adler, 2008). We were very much aware, however, that self studies are by their very nature a limited form of research. While we hoped to add to a body of literature regarding effective practices in teacher education, our main goal was to determine if this strategy was an effective one for our particular groups of students.

To encourage our preservice social studies teachers to explore and expand their conceptions of “effective citizens” in a democracy, we engaged our social studies methods classes, during two different semesters, in a BlackBoard-based, asynchronous threaded dialog which included discussion about what it means to be an effective citizen. This dialog occurred at the start of the semester for each class and was not intended to reflect readings and activities in the methods courses themselves. Rather, we each saw this dialog as a way to encourage participants to unpack and explore their beliefs about social studies and citizenship at the start of the course. The goals for this discussion included learning about education, especially social studies, in one another’s country; engaging the preservice teachers in conversation about what it means to be an effective citizen; and encouraging these preservice teachers to think about citizenship beyond their national boundaries.

### **Cultural Contexts**

Young people growing up in Singapore and the United States have very different school experiences, as well as different political experiences. Schooling in Singapore is very competitive and the

curriculum is largely shaped by high stakes examinations. Furthermore, in the lifetimes of the participants in this study, Singapore politics has been dominated by one party and has been focused on the pragmatic goal of economic development. Most of these preservice teachers grew up in a prosperous, affluent Singapore and have had little personal connection to the struggles and turmoil of the early days of self-rule and independence. Their experience with history and social studies in school, on the other hand, focused on how far Singapore had come in forty years. Racial harmony is stressed both in school and throughout society. But generally there is scant focus on understanding different groups and little analysis of differences and tensions. While the curriculum has long focused on programs designed to foster citizenship, Singapore students do not take a course in government, commonly found in the American curriculum.

Schooling in the United States is far less centrally controlled. Nonetheless curriculum is remarkably similar across the United States. Some have attributed that similarity to the role of textbooks in shaping the curriculum and, more recently, to the rise of content standards (Thornton, 2008). The social studies curriculum in the United States focuses on United States history, which students typically encounter at three different grade levels, and on an approach to history which focuses on knowledge rather than the modes of inquiry of the discipline (Barton & Levstik, 2003). United States students are likely to take a government course in high school. Such courses generally focus on the forms and structures of government and less on the role of the citizen (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). That schooling should help to build a shared set of civic values undergirds the development of public education. But in addition, the value of civic engagement is a theme that recurs throughout United States history and is echoed in much of the social studies literature.

## Participants and Institutional Contexts

The classes chosen to participate in this cross-cultural dialog were selected based, in part, on the fact that they were preparing to teach social studies and in part on convenience. The element of convenience meant the Singapore group was preparing to teach primary grades while the American group was preparing to teach secondary grades. Although all groups were preparing to teach social studies, those preparing to teach at the secondary level brought a deeper content background to the conversation. Furthermore, we were aware that educating citizens might mean something different to those teaching grades 1 to 6 than to those teaching grades 7 to 12. In Singapore the role of primary social studies in National Education at the time of this dialogue was to promote love of country and feelings of attachment: “love Singapore.” Not until the secondary level did the emphasis on “knowing Singapore” appear. In the United States, elementary school teachers are more likely to stress love of country, patriotism and socialization, while secondary teachers may believe it to be more appropriate to emphasize questioning and critical thinking (Ochoa-Becker, 2007). Nonetheless, in both countries knowledge and values permeate all levels of social studies teaching. Furthermore, the discussion of the nature of citizenship would be relevant to preservice teachers at both levels. Finally, we believed that our goals around promoting cross-cultural dialog, particularly our desire to stimulate reflection and to cross national boundaries in our discussions, could be accomplished despite this difference between the groups.

The students in Singapore were preservice teachers enrolled in a full-time one-year postgraduate diploma in

education program that prepares preservice teachers for teaching in primary schools. In the first cross cultural dialog, there were 45 participants, 8 men and 37 women. In the second, there were 15 participants, of which 2 were men and 13 women. Both groups were predominantly women and predominantly from Singapore’s majority (Chinese) culture. About half of these students had chosen teaching as their second or third careers while the rest were recent university graduates. A number of them were graduates from business, engineering or other technical faculties and thus did not have much academic background in the social sciences. They did not have to undertake additional coursework to give them grounding in subject matter knowledge, but were expected to read up and research on their own to fill in their own gaps in knowledge. As a result, for many, a grasp of disciplinary knowledge was shallow.

The students in the United States were enrolled in a teacher preparation program at an urban state university in the Midwest. During the first semester, 25 students participated in the cross-cultural dialog, 18 men and 7 women. In the second, there were 20 participants, 13 men and 7 women. The students were predominantly male and Caucasian, still the dominant group in the United States. Students in the United States classes were both graduates and undergraduates seeking initial certification in social studies. As is typical at this institution, many of the undergraduate, as well as graduate, students were “non-traditional” or over 25 years old. Like the Singaporean group, many were entering teaching as a second career. Most held a BA in history or one of the social sciences or were earning a BA in secondary education with a minor in history. All would meet the state mandated requirement of 38 hours of



content course work in history and the social sciences. The social studies methods course is taken the semester prior to student teaching.

### **The Assignment**

For all groups, the cross-cultural conversation was the first assignment in the course and took place at the very start of the semester following introductory class sessions on the goals of social studies in each country. Both instructors had asked class participants to consider what is meant by social studies as citizenship education and shared with course participants the various conceptions of citizenship found in the research literature. Although the specific discussion forums differed somewhat from the first year to the second, both groups were asked to discuss their understandings of the concept of citizenship and what being a good citizen meant to them. Participants were expected to make at least two substantive postings per topic and to show evidence of discussions and readings they had completed in class. Their participation in the discussion was a graded assignment worth approximately 15% of the semester grade for the Americans and 20% for the Singaporeans. Criteria for assessment included: timely submissions; well-organized and clearly written submissions; writing which demonstrated an awareness that the submission is being read by people from another country; evidence of having read submissions of others; and evidence of reflection on class and online discussions, readings and field experiences.

Upon reading the students' submissions, the course instructors agreed that a careful review and analysis of their postings might shed some light on the students' conceptions of citizenship and how this might impact their teaching. We wondered if asking

students to clarify their thinking about citizenship to one another and across cultures would help them think more reflectively about this key aim of social studies education, particularly in a global context. With permission of the students who participated in this assignment, we decided to analyze their responses with a particular focus on their understandings of citizenship and any possible cultural differences we might find.

### **Methodology**

Each of the researchers read and coded the submissions of all the students around the question of "what is an effective citizen." Reading separately, we each sought to categorize the preservice teachers' responses into major themes and looked for cross-cultural differences and similarities within those themes. We then discussed our coding. This process enabled us to establish some reliability in developing the analysis of the student work. A post-assignment survey was carried out to obtain participants' responses to the assignment.

### **What is a Good Citizen?**

The preservice teachers' responses were first sorted into the broad categories of knowledge, skills and dispositions or attitudes, although there was overlap even across these broad categories. Within these broad categories, we found that several dominant themes emerged across both groups and both years. Often, the broad theme was similar, but would be explained and supported differently. That is, American and Singaporean preservice teachers held similar views of the "good" citizen, but expressed and explained these within the contexts of their particular cultural experiences.

### **Knowledge: The Informed Citizen**

The American preservice teachers placed heavy emphasis on the importance of content knowledge. It should be recalled that the American groups were preparing to be secondary teachers and had strong content backgrounds in the fields that make up social studies in the United States. Many of the American participants noted that learners should learn about United States history, about the United States constitution and laws, and about current events. This belief seems to reflect their own experiences studying social studies in school. The Americans argued that to be good citizens people must be informed and must develop an understanding of the political system and democratic principles. The implication of their emphasis on the importance of developing a strong knowledge base in the content of the disciplines of social studies is that such knowledge would provide the foundation for the skills and attitudes of effective citizens: "...a good citizen is one that is informed regarding the history, culture, current events and legalities of one's culture (28 Aug, Year 1)." Several of the Americans were a bit more explicit about the role of the disciplines of history and social science in building the knowledge for effective citizenship and spoke of the need to study "enduring dilemmas" or problems of society.

Singaporeans, who were preparing to be primary teachers, were less likely to put knowledge at the top of the list of what it means to be a good citizen. An emphasis on values and emotions is consistent with the primary social studies syllabus in Singapore at that time. Nonetheless, several participants did emphasize the importance of knowledge. A particular emphasis was on the study of history to understand past decisions, to understand Singapore today,

and to understand the pain and efforts of the past. Like the Americans, Singaporeans made reference to the study of current problems and events.

### **Values**

Both groups spoke extensively of the values of good citizens. Behaving as a cooperative, caring member of society was important to both groups. The Americans were most likely to express this as paying taxes, obeying the law and voting. These were not common characterizations among Singaporeans. As one put it, "It never crossed my mind to equate citizenship to voting and the paying of taxes (5 Sept, Year 2)." Singaporeans were more likely to describe the responsibilities of citizens in terms of "moral values and right conduct," a phrase never used by the Americans. The Singaporeans tended to reflect the mental model of a Confucian society that focused on right behavior and relationships inculcated through years of moral education in the school, a subject that continues to be taught throughout the primary to the secondary grades.

Both groups also articulated that being fair, responsible and lawful was important in their conception of the good citizen. Upholding or safeguarding democratic ideals or values featured quite strongly in the discourse of the Americans but was not apparent in that of the Singaporeans. The Singaporeans focused on obeying the law, being considerate of others and volunteerism as important values in good citizenship.

Consistent with the primary social studies syllabus, Singaporeans were more likely to speak in terms of a love of country, a sense of loyalty to the nation, and a sense of belonging to and having pride in one's country. While there was at least one reference to love of country among the

Americans, this did not emerge as even a minor theme. Americans appear more likely to take pride and belonging for granted, or perhaps to assume that that is an issue for elementary school classrooms.

Compassion, empathy, respect and open-mindedness were important to both groups. Singaporeans were more likely to refer directly to “tolerance” of or respect for other racial groups. This featured strongly in their conversation, perhaps because of the internalization of the persistent message about the need for racial harmony in Singapore’s multiracial society and is, in part, a reflection of the success of the government’s socialization effort. Although one of the Americans spoke explicitly of the importance of respecting cultural diversity, the Americans were more likely to speak about the need to respect diverse opinions and points of view than about the need to respect diverse cultures.

A concern for the common good was a recurring theme. Both Americans and Singaporeans worried that the citizens of their respective countries were so caught up with financial gain and economic security that citizens are losing sight of respect and concern for others. One American noted that a focus on economic gain produces apathy toward government and civic action. Another American bemoaned that “apathy kills the soul (6 Sep, Year 1).” Both Americans and Singaporeans felt that it is important for good citizens to constantly balance individual rights and responsibilities within a context of public good.

Both groups talked about the good citizen asking not only what government should do, but what citizens can and should do for their society. Both groups said that while loyalty to the nation and government is important, such loyalty should never be blind. The Americans talked about looking critically at the problems of their country and speaking

out in constructive ways. Singaporeans were likely to describe this as not being a “blind supporter” of whatever the government says. Good citizens, noted one of the Singaporeans, know when to speak and when not to.

### **Skills**

Both groups also talked about the skills of citizenship, with a focus on problem solving. Singaporeans were most likely to use the term “decision-making” when describing one of the key skills of effective citizens. While the Americans were unlikely to use that term they frequently spoke of the need to develop the ability to make, defend and act on informed positions. Both groups spoke of the need to stay informed, to think critically and to listen openly to the views of others. One of the Singaporeans, and none of the Americans, spoke of the need to fight for social justice and against racial discrimination. The Americans on the other hand, showed greater belief in the power of the people in checking the government and emphasized that citizens “are aware of their power and know how to use it. They have a voice that does more than whine when things are not the way we like them (6 Sep, Year 2).” This belief in the power of the citizen in checking the government was not evident in the Singaporeans’ discourse.

### **Questions Raised**

The groups tended to raise somewhat philosophical questions with one another. One group discussed whether or not one can define a good citizen in the context of an oppressive government while another group discussed whether those who are not well-served by their society should be expected to be good citizens. The first group made frequent reference to the response of

Americans to Hurricane Katrina, raising the question of whether people who are without food, shelter and water should be expected to act lawfully if, by breaking the law, they can help their families and themselves survive. Singaporeans often spoke of national pride, a sense of belonging, and of pulling together in times of crisis. These themes did not come up among the Americans except by implication in the discussion of Hurricane Katrina.

### Discussion

Research on teacher beliefs consistently points to the importance of prior experiences on the development of beliefs related to teaching and learning (Adler, 2008; Richardson, 2003; Ross, 1987). Thus the participants in this study brought not only their individual differences, but their different cultural and schooling experiences as well. The two groups who participated in this study did share some similarities. Most were non-traditional students who came to teaching from other careers. Most were members of the dominant culture in their respective nations. Nonetheless, as described above, the two groups came to this “conversation” with diverse experiences in and out of school. In addition to the different cultural contexts it should be remembered that the Singapore group was preparing to teach primary school, in which social studies would only be a small part of what they would teach. They were not expected to have had a great amount of history and social science course work. Furthermore, the Singaporean groups were made up predominantly of women. The United States students were predominantly men preparing to teach secondary school and they expected that they would be teaching one or more of the disciplines that typically are included under the umbrella of

social studies. Given the different backgrounds, experiences, cultures and future directions of participants in each group, it was not surprising that there would be differences in their beliefs about citizenship education. Interestingly, the similarities in their beliefs were, in some ways, more striking than the differences.

Both groups expressed the belief that compassion, respect and empathy are an important part of being good citizens. Indeed, this appeared to be the most important characteristic of the “good citizen.” For both groups, good citizenship was less about one’s relationship with the nation-state and more about the ways in which people get along with one another. Rules and laws are not simply expressions of the powerful; rather, they allow for social stability. Across both cultures there was a strong emphasis on what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe as the “personally responsible” citizen. From this perspective, good citizens are seen as people who are honest, law-abiding and responsible. This would include contributing to civic causes and volunteering in the community. Westheimer and Kahne distinguish such behavior from the participatory perspective by noting that the personally responsible citizen will donate to a food drive, while a participatory citizen will organize the food drive. Both Singaporeans and Americans tended to see good citizenship in this personal, individualistic manner.

There were Americans who spoke about “checking the power of the government” and Singaporeans who referred to the dangers of following blindly. Both Singaporeans and Americans spoke of “thinking critically” and being “decision-makers.” There were threads of discussion about the apathy of their affluent societies. There was agreement that diverse viewpoints need to be heard and respected. The conversation

on both sides suggested that in times of great need, such as Hurricane Katrina, or in contexts of oppression, some laws might be broken without breaking the bond of caring and concern that is owed to others. While neither group explicitly discussed civil disobedience, the comments of both groups suggested that they believed that civil disobedience would not necessarily be a violation of good citizenship.

The focus of these concerns was on the behavior of individuals and the need for a stable society. No one in either group spoke of joining with others to assure their voice was heard. No one talked of joining advocacy groups to seek social justice for the underserved. Although Singaporeans spoke of “pulling together in times of crisis,” no one shared an actual experience of working with others through a crisis. Indeed, neither Americans nor Singaporeans shared an experience of being active in civic affairs. Most of the participants in both groups expressed a view of citizenship that was predominantly conforming to the status quo. Despite differences of culture, education and experience, the focus of citizenship was on the responsibilities of the individual and the stability of society.

Another similarity across both groups and both years was a relative silence on issues of diversity. Although there was a strong emphasis on respecting others and listening to diverse viewpoints, there was no substantive discussion about the value or challenges of ethnic diversity within a nation. This issue of diversity is relevant in both nations; both are racially and ethnically diverse. The social studies curriculum in the United States is still struggling with the balance between a story of history which stresses unity and homogeneity and a story of history which tells of differences and struggles. The Americans in these discussions did not take a stand on this

dilemma, even while acknowledging that open-mindedness and diverse view-points are important. In Singapore, on the other hand, the social studies curriculum is very explicit about including the four major races, even if superficially, and emphasizes the importance of unity in the face of this diversity lest racial violence break out once again. Consistent with this explicit focus on diversity in Singapore, the Singapore participants commented on the need for respect, or at least tolerance, of other racial groups. There was also some discussion of the need to broaden the definition of multi-racial Singapore to go beyond the state-defined four major racial categories of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others. Although the discussion raised questions about whether those less well-served should be expected to be loyal, neither group really explored what that question might mean in their own or other societies. Neither group suggested that there might be people who felt marginalized by society, who lacked that sense of belonging which seems to come with being a citizen. Nor did either group discuss the impact of globalization, increasing multiculturalism, and the possible tensions between the concept of national citizenship and that of global citizenship. This is an important issue for the United States and Singapore since both countries have become increasingly multicultural as a result of globalization. Singaporeans struggle with the issue of imported ‘foreign talent’ who are given citizenship on the basis of specific talents that they bring to the nation. While this is a hotly debated issue in Singapore, the preservice teachers were strangely silent on this topic.

Of course, one does not ‘air the dirty laundry’ in front of visitors. Both Singaporeans and Americans wanted to be respectful of others; but they also wanted to be respectful of themselves and their own



nations. It's not clear whether cultural diversity simply was not an issue to these preservice teachers or whether the tensions and contradictions of one's own nation were not considered appropriate in this discussion venue. Given the growing challenge in both nations to balance cultural, national and global identities (Banks & Nyugen, 2008), this silence was disturbing and suggested an area of possible program modification in both contexts.

Despite these powerful and, to us, surprising similarities, important differences reflected the different cultural and institutional contexts. One difference was that the Singaporean participants put a greater emphasis on the development of love of country. This may have been due to the grade level differences for which they were being prepared. It also reflects the Ministry of Education focus on developing "national identity (Ministry of Education, 2010). In addition, Singapore still grapples with the issue of what it means to be Singaporean because they are still building a national identity. Thus, it is not surprising that for Singaporeans, this issue was a specific focus of discussions. Americans appear to take for granted that citizens have a sense of belonging to their nation. The American student teachers did not question how increasing immigration and cultural diversity might affect this feeling of belonging.

The Americans reflected their academic backgrounds and their conceptions of their roles as future secondary teachers with their very explicit focus on content knowledge. The Singaporeans, preparing to be primary school teachers, reflected an understanding of the social studies goals at that level by placing greater emphasis on empathy and moral behavior. Both groups emphasized the importance of the skills and knowledge of democratic citizenship and no areas of major

disagreement emerged. The American discourses occasionally suggested a more critical and reflective conception of citizenship while the Singaporeans generally reflected a more conforming one, but the difference was not great.

### **Dialog as Reflection**

Did this threaded discussion across two cultures achieve the goals we had set? Our first goal was simply to have the participants express and share their conceptions of citizenship and citizenship education. At the very least, we wanted their taken-for-granted conceptions of these ideas to be expressed and examined. But we also hoped that in the process of sharing ideas and responding to others, the participants would question and clarify their own conceptions. We hoped that the cross national nature of the conversations might, at the very least, raise questions and deepen the thinking of these preservice teachers.

The survey the participants completed at the end of this assignment showed that most students found the assignment to be worthwhile. For the Americans, this was an opportunity to learn more about a country they knew little about and they felt as though they had become more knowledgeable as a result. The Singaporeans, already somewhat knowledgeable about the United States, did not indicate that they had learned more about this nation whose culture is felt worldwide.

Some of the Singaporean participants indicated in the survey that they had problems with the assignment as they lacked a good grounding in disciplinary knowledge and understanding of citizenship education to carry on an in-depth discussion of the topic. They also expressed frustration with technical and other difficulties

encountered at the start of the dialog. It is worth noting that these conversations were not conducted in real time. The Singapore semester began earlier than the American semester and the Singaporeans were on the discussion board before the Americans had a chance to think about the assignment. This frustration continued even after the Americans had signed on and a few Singaporeans were impatient with the initial slow response from the Americans in spite of being told repeatedly by the instructor that the time difference with the Midwestern United States was 13 hours. In spite of initial problems, the Singaporeans too felt that the assignment had enabled them to clarify their own thinking about citizenship and that, furthermore, they had gained new insights into the nature of citizenship.

In the post-assignment survey, the participants reported that they had become more reflective about the concept of citizenship and educating citizens. However, as is the case with much research on teacher beliefs and reflective practices, there was little evidence beyond this self report that these discussions had made a difference. Neither the units they developed in their methods classes nor the lessons they taught during student teaching reflected any impact from these discussions. No follow-up was done a semester or year later to once again ask the participants about the impact of the discussion board experience. According to their self-reports, it would appear that the preservice teachers did, in fact, think more deeply about citizenship when put in a position of discussing the concept with far away others. But once undertaking the work of teaching, there is no evidence that this, in fact, made a difference.

## **Conclusions**

This assignment was intended to provide a platform for preservice social studies teachers to explore their beliefs about what is meant by “the good citizen.” It was hoped that by articulating and explaining their beliefs to people in another country, they would further clarify their own thoughts. There is some research (Dinkleman, 2003) that suggests that such opportunity for reflection in preservice teacher education can, at the very least, provide prospective teachers the focus and vocabulary to more deeply explore their teaching. Furthermore, several studies suggest that technology can be a powerful tool to encourage collaborative reflection. A few studies specifically suggest that Web-based dialog can be used to promote thoughtful and insightful discussion (Mason, 2000; Mason, 2000/2001; Merryfield, 2000.)

Surveys completed by the participants suggest that these asynchronous, Web-based discussions were useful reflection tools. Participants indicated that the assignment was interesting and did cause them to clarify their thinking about citizenship and the role of social studies in the education of citizens. However, the tendency toward easy consensus calls this into question. Were the participants really so alike in their notions of good citizenship? Perhaps there was a sense of needing to be polite to far-away, unknown others who live in a different culture. We accept the participants’ reports that it was an interesting and engaging assignment; but we wonder about their willingness to explore differences or sensitive issues.

As an inquiry into preservice teachers’

beliefs about citizenship, interesting insights emerged. The emphasis both groups placed on personal responsibility was striking. On the one hand, literature on conceptions of social studies, conducted primarily in the United States, does suggest that personal responsibility and values transmission are dominant perspectives toward citizenship and toward the role of social studies. On the other hand, given the different educational and cultural experiences of the two national groups, we were surprised by the dominance of this theme. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while this common theme was evident, there were also clear differences which the facilitators attributed to differences in disciplinary grounding and cultural contexts.

We concluded that as an assignment, this approach was a reasonable and interesting strategy of reflection for the participants. We wondered, however, whether a synchronous discussion would have allowed the participants to feel more comfortable with one another and perhaps have felt comfortable to disagree about ideas. Unfortunately, conducting a discussion in real time when there is a thirteen hour time difference is a major obstacle. As an inquiry, we became aware of the need for greater analysis of the differences in socio-cultural, educational and political contexts before any conclusions could reasonably be drawn about the conceptions of citizenship held by preservice teachers in the United States and Singapore. There is also a need for more structured follow-up studies to examine the impact of such cross-cultural conversations on the participants.

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