The Development of Civic Participation Among Youth in Singapore

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Abstract

The development of active participation in citizens hallmarks the endeavor of formal citizenship programs, equipping citizens with the relevant knowledge, skills, and values to participate in their communities. Such attempts to formulate an ideal citizenry are especially apparent in Singapore, a small city-state whose success owes much to the role that formal citizenship education played and continues to play as an instrument of state formation. This chapter will discuss the development of youth participation in Singapore, specifically within the education context, and more generally among the youth. We will trace how the Singapore government has carefully molded what began as a politically bustling

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arena of activism among youths during the pre-independence era into a pervasively depoliticized understanding of participation in Singapore's young citizenry today. We highlight how several key aspects of education in Singapore – namely, National Education, the Community Involvement Program, Character and Citizenship Education, and the Values in Action initiatives – have attended to civic participation in reformulating the notion of an ideal citizen. Finally, we will briefly discuss the shift in civic participation brought about by the New Media Age in more recent times.

Keywords

Civic participation · Active participation · Youth activism · Citizenship education · Singapore

Introduction

The phase of youth marks a definitive stage in a person's development, a time when young people seek a sense of purpose, exploring identities, causes, beliefs, and commitments and connecting with like-minded others in organizations or social groups (Erikson 1968). In this exploratory phase, youths' political ideologies are passionately formed and pursued – a period most ripe for the birth of activists who strive for social change (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

However, the habit of active participation in youths does not occur as a matter of course; more often than not, it is contingent on youths' exposure to multiple perspectives, as well as feeling impelled to address and take a stand on social issues they believe in (Flanagan 2009). The exploration of multiple perspectives and development of motivation for civic participation, in turn, requires political space for youths to contest for change. In Singapore, which is a constitutionally democratic society, these conditions – especially the availability of political space – may not be present as the authorities increasingly proscribe the space for young Singaporean's active engagement in society, as will be discussed in this chapter (Huang 2006; Zhang 2013). Cherian George, a former journalist with *The Straits Times*, Singapore's mainstream newspaper, and now Professor of Journalism in Hong Kong, wrote "[w]inter is here" (George 2017, p. 58). George argued that since the 2011 general election, a chill has descended on political debate in Singapore, and dealings by the government with the press, the Internet, academia, the arts, and civil society have shown signs of tightening.

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling party governing the nation. In less than three decades, Singapore was transformed from an economically developing to an economically developed country, with its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world (Lee 2000). This success owes much to the deployment of education as the primary instrument for state formation. Through education, the PAP government (henceforth, referred to as the government) has not only trained a technically adept citizenry for

economic development but, more significantly, a citizenry that is inculcated with a common sense of identity, committed in attitude and motivation for national development (Gopinathan 2007; Green 1997). Indeed, the government often reminds its citizens of the roles they need to play in order to sustain the country's stability and survival (Chan 1971; Gopinathan 2007; Han 2007; Hill and Lian 1995). To this end, participation in Singapore's context largely emphasizes the practice of consensual politics among its citizens; "active participation" is depoliticized and reduced to grassroots volunteerism, or alternatively, providing feedback to the authorities for the purposes of fine-tuning pre-existing policy initiatives (George 2017; Goh 1979; Ho 2000; Sim 2011). However, youth participation in Singapore did not start out depoliticized in nature; the 1950s to 1970s was marked by fervent and political student activism; it was through the governments' subsequent efforts to reshape civic participation that the latter took on a depoliticized nature. As Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, once remarked:

> The two factors in the formative influences of a young man or a young woman's life are the home and the school. We cannot do very much about the home, *but we can do something about the school.* (Lee 1966, p. 1)

As with states around the world, education is not neutral, often designed and utilized to direct its citizens toward particular agendas. In Singapore, the mission of the education service is "to mould the future of the nation by moulding the people who will determine the future of the nation" (MoE 2018, n.p.). This chapter traces the development of youth participation in Singapore, specifically within the education context, and more generally among the youth. We discuss several key aspects of education that attend to participation, namely, National Education, the Community Involvement Program, Character and Citizenship Education, and the Values in Action initiatives. Through these discussions – by drawing on existing research – we wish to highlight that the survivalist rhetoric which frames youth participation in Singapore, while containing positive social and educational consequences (e.g., greater social cohesion in a multiracial society), does not hold the democratic principles adequately with its depoliticized rendering of civic participation for youths. In this chapter, we use youth participation and civic participation interchangeably and broadly to mean the same thing.

What Is Civic Participation?

The active participation of citizens is crucial to the sustenance of a healthy democratic society. A recurring consensus among scholars settles on the importance of an active citizenry and the need for civic education to equip citizens with the relevant knowledge, skills, and values to participate in their communities (Hahn 1998; Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Parker 2003). However, with disagreements in the academic literature about what a good citizen actually *is*, the ways in which civic participation is understood and what it ought to be remain a contested issue (Davies

2010). To further complicate matters, the term civic participation casts a broad net over a large range of meanings, encompassing a variety of goals, values, behaviors, attitudes, actions, knowledges, and motivations (Brady et al. 2012; Checkoway 2010; Youniss et al. 2002). Some conceptual clarification on the subject of civic participation is thus necessary.

Fundamentally, a conceptual schism can be traced in the debates between the ways in conceiving civic participation as political or non-political, along with the normative claims attributed to them. Proponents of non-political participation tend to conceive civic participation as nurturing youths to become active citizens by serving the community, especially through volunteerism, emphasizing the need to sustain social harmony and loyalty to the community. On the other hand, proponents of political participation stress the importance of a critical citizenry, actively involved in the political processes of a democratic society, emphasizing the need to challenge the status quo and address social injustices at a structural level. It should, however, be noted at the outset that this distinction is never so simple nor binary in reality (Ishizawa 2015). For instance, non-political participation can lead to indirect political socialization (Youniss et al. 2002) or serve as a catalyst in eliciting skepticism and dialogue (Pykett 2010). What we hope to accomplish with this distinction is to provide a conceptual road map that emphasizes the main aspects of civic participation and utilize it as a context for tracing the development of participation among youth in Singapore.

Non-political Participation

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conceive the personally responsible citizen as one who behaves responsibly by contributing to society through individualized rather than collective efforts. Typical instances of participation for these citizens include “picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt,” as well as participating in volunteer efforts such as charity drives for the underprivileged (p. 241). Akin to the personally responsible citizen, Westheimer and Kahne observe, is the participatory citizen who goes a step further by initiating and coordinating collective- and community-based efforts. Where personally responsible citizens participate in charity drives, participatory citizens organize them.

Between these two types of citizens, the participatory citizen constitutes a definitive goal for many citizenship youth programs and education policies. Driven by the agenda of fostering greater connection between youths and their communities, the production of participatory citizens is commonly identified as a remedy to an increasingly individualized society, by “[forging] a sense of belonging among young people to something wider than their individual selves” (Brady et al. 2012, p. 13). Active civic participation in this sense stresses the need for youths to be instilled with care and concern toward the community, manifesting typically through community service. Here, active “participation” is non-political to the extent that it operates at the level of “personal lives and local communities” while eschewing attention toward deeper power structures (Boyte 1997).

Non-political civic participation thus places emphasis on developing the characters of its citizens. This form of participation conceives the need for change on an individual rather than structural level, pinning social problems to the shortcomings in individuals' characters (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). In this sense, social problems – including a lack of social engagement – are reduced to deriving from deficits in individual character. In turn, resolutions are sought through the shaping of individual characters via the inculcation of desirable knowledges and values. Notably, this approach often operates within the norms of the community, enacting prevailing values that are "...common sense, unarticulated and often unchallenged..." (Buire and Staeheli 2017, p. 176; Pykett 2010).

In such cases, the prevailing norms and values of the community constitute a dominant narrative. Knowledge is conceived to be objective, where the learning process for youths involves an assimilation into a "correct" stream of knowledge (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Youths are viewed with a "deficit" mentality that does not treat them as resources until they reflect the prevailing values of society (Brady et al. 2012; Harris et al. 2010).

Political Participation

In theorizing about acts, Isin (2008) distinguishes between activist citizens and active citizens; while the former "engage in writing scripts and creating the scene," the latter "follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created" (p. 38). The distinction between political and non-political participation is analogously similar: although both are "active" in the sense of dedicating additional effort outside of one's routine activities toward the community, non-political participation operates within the established framework of existing structures, while political participation aims to turn participants' attention toward these structures, particularly for the purposes of unraveling and addressing structural inequities. In contrast from non-political participation (i.e., the personally responsible citizen and the participatory citizen), political participation typified through the justice-oriented citizen de-emphasizes the imperative for charity and volunteerism and emphasizes instead for the need to dissect the root of social issues and effect systemic change (Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

Critical scholars have problematized non-political participation, especially in the form of community service, for its potential to obscure the development of important democratic priorities, as well as failing to prepare youths for the complexities of a world riddled with diversity and tensions (e.g., Boyte 1997; Buire and Staeheli 2017; Kahne and Westheimer 1996; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Overemphasis on the non-political aspect of participation, Boyte (1997) contends, "lacks a vocabulary that draws attention to the public world that extends beyond personal lives and local communities" (p. 766). As a consequence, volunteers are seldom equipped to critically reflect on the structural causes of inequities and address the real issues beyond a symptomatic level. In effect, the rhetoric of altruism potentially serves to "back a conservative political agenda that denies a role for government," eschewing the need to address structural injustices (Kahne and Westheimer 1996, p. 596).

Where non-political civic participation adopts a deficit view toward its citizens – seeking the development of character at an individual level to reenact the "correct" values of society – proponents of political civic participation remain critical of the overemphasis on the individual's role at the expense of deeper structural issues. For instance, Edwards (2007) problematizes the youth deficit approach toward youth participation, arguing that refusal to engage youths as resources by seeking to change their characters according to prevailing norms disenfranchises them and relegates their inefficacy as citizens to an individual rather than structural issue. Similarly, other scholars have contended that the overemphasis on developing individual characters detracts from the need for collective and public mobilization to effect change at on a structural scale (Harris et al. 2010; Mirra et al. 2013). Granted, the social aid delivered through the development of caring and concerned citizens, though important, constitutes a transient solution for injustices and potentially veils the need to address the root causes of problems at the level of policy and politics (Barber 1992; Boyte 1997; Schram et al. 2010; Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

Political participation thus stresses the need for citizens to be part of the political process, definitive of a democratic society. This form of participation recognizes the diversity of interests in a society and the tensions that stem from it, highlighting the need for dialogue and negotiation. Knowledge in political participation is then constructed rather than fixed; it recognizes that values are constructions, prone to fallibility and revision (Appiah 2008).

In sum, while being "active" is equally advocated within non-political participation and political participation, the difference hinges on how activity is construed. Where non-political participation focuses on cultivating an ideal citizenry by instilling its participants with desirable (and often prevailing) values and traits, political participation stresses the need for its participants to challenge social injustices and address them structurally. In Singapore, political participation that challenges the status quo and power structures is treated by the authorities with heavy caution, especially when viewed through the ideological construct of national survival and vulnerability. Consequently, civic participation in Singapore finds itself almost exclusively within the domain of non-political participation, promoted through numerous initiatives and citizenship education programs, and serving as a catalyst to bolster national and social stability. We will here proceed to trace the journey that youth civic participation in Singapore takes in its transformation from a political to non-political form of participation.

Historical Overview of Youth Participation in Singapore

1950s to 1970s: Turbulent Student Activism

Huang (2006) noted that political activism was apparent among the youth in Singapore in the pre-independence era. With the end of World War II, and the beginning of the decolonization process, the 1950s saw students taking keen interest

in political matters. Specifically, there were two major student protests in 1954, first by Chinese-educated youths, followed by English-educated youths, against the colonial government. Both groups approached a young lawyer for legal advice – this lawyer was Lee Kuan Yew, who subsequently went on to form his own political party with supporters. Lee and his People's Action Party (PAP) grew in power, forming self-government in 1959.

From self-government to early independence, a new wave of political activism was set off among Singaporean youth. Much of this revolved around educational changes instituted by the ruling party's government, most particularly the phasing out of Chinese medium schools, as well as lack of support for newly established Nanyang University. The latter was in part due to problematic academic standards; more importantly, the newly established university was perceived to be a seedbed for communism (National Library Board 2018). As Huang (2006) noted: "Students from different institutions often banded together to launch manifestos, classroom boycotts, hunger strikes and street marches so as to protest against government raids, arrests, expulsions, and dissolution of student unions and publications" (p. 404).

In 1974, student leaders in the University of Singapore Student Union (USSU), Tan Wah Piow and Juliet Chin, brought campus activism to new levels, with students campaigning against various social causes. Tan was arrested while Chin was deported along with four others. This prompted widespread protests and agitation by students from various tertiary institutions. The official narrative attributes these activities to Communist motivations. Immediately following the student protests, the government amended the constitutions of all student organizations at the universities. Among other things, the amendments curtailed the scope of activities of these bodies. Specifically, The University of Singapore (Amendment) Act, passed by Parliament on 20 November 1975, ended the autonomous status of USSU; its finances were reallocated under the university administration, and the constitution of any student organization was subject to the approval of and revision by the administration. Most importantly, the structure of USSU was modified to decentralize student leadership, compartmentalize student power, and limit political participation (Liao 2010). Youth activism since that time has not been politically oriented, causing one historian to remark that 1975 signaled "the end of student activism" (Turnbull 1989, p. 309). However, there continued to be intermittent political activity involving some youths, such as the Marxist Conspiracy of 1987, where 16 people (including a few students) of a Christian social group were arrested for being part of an alleged secret Communist network (Huang 2006).

1980s: The Ideal Citizen

Rapid industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s raised concerns among the government that the adoption of science and technology and the increasing use of English were causing young Singaporeans to become too "westernized." The perceived threat came in the form of "Western" individualism that was thought to deculturize and destabilize society, thereby jeopardizing social cohesion and national progress

(Hill and Lian 1995). This perceived threat urged the government to refocus its notion of the ideal citizen, presented through two key education reports in 1979, the Goh Report and the Ong Report. We quote the former at length:

> What kind of man and woman does a child grow up to be after 10-12 years of schooling? Is he a worthy citizen, guided by decent moral precepts?...[The] litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures citizens who can live, work, contend and co-operate in a civilised way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier, ready to defend his country, and so protect his wife and children, and his fellow citizens? Is he filial, respectful to elders, law abiding, humane, and responsible? Does he take care of his wife and children, and parents? Is he a good neighbour and a trustworthy friend? Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions? Is he clean, neat, punctual, and well-mannered? (Goh 1979, pp. iv–v)

Citizenship education programs – *Being and Becoming*, *Good Citizen*, and the short-lived *Religious Education* and *Confucian Ethics* – were consequently introduced. These programs emphasized the acquisition of moral values, especially “Asian values,” as a “necessary ballast against the inroads of undesirable Western influence” (*Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, 22 February 1977, col. 369, 370, cited in Yeow 2011, pp. 390–391; see also, Teik 1999). Values such as communitarianism, hardwork, thrift, and self-sacrifice were heavily emphasized. Conceived this way, these values provided the groundwork to prescribe a specific understanding of civic participation leading into the 1990s. It perceived a lack on the youths’ part – in morals and character – and sought a resolution by compensating them with the “correct” stream of knowledge and values.

1990s: National Education and Community Involvement Program

From the 1990s onward, youth activism tended toward government-sanctioned activities, retaining a depoliticized texture; in this sense, civic participation encouraged by the state focused heavily on servicing the prevailing structures in the community while simultaneously diminishing the importance for political dissent and democratic opposition among the citizenry. Tarulevicz (2010) attributed this to the twin strategies by the ruling party – one being the encouragement of young citizens to be consumers of Singapore’s growing globalized charms and the other being the effective policing of youth behavior, such that the young are ensured not to challenge the existing power and political base. He wrote:

> Encouraged and disciplined by the People’s Action Party (PAP) to behave, to conform, and to consume, the youth of the nation ultimately confirm the PAP’s role in guiding the nation into the future. (p. 24)

Numerous scholars have attested to the official narrative in Singapore that was constructed around the nation’s fragility and the need for a strong government to maintain stability and security (Rodan 2006; Tarulevicz 2010; Chua

2010). The central ideas in this narrative feature strongly in Singapore's National Education initiative (Sim 2011). National Education (NE) sought to educate a generation of youths to be cognizant of "the Singapore Story," a state-endorsed version of Singapore's history. Its scope covered Singapore's global, economic, social, and political position vis-a-vis the world, presented as "understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which makes Singapore different from other countries" (MOE 2012, n.p., cited in Sim 2013, p. 71).

While previously the government had adopted strategies to "mould the young" and "transmit values" through individual subjects or programs, the introduction of NE in 1997 signaled the advent of a more structured and comprehensive approach to infuse both the formal and informal school curriculum with appropriate citizenship attitudes, skills, and values in schools (Weninger and Kho 2014). NE approached citizenship education with a youth deficit model; the impetus was young Singaporeans' lack of knowledge and apparent disinterest in Singapore's recent history and nation-building issues, suggesting that young people took peace and prosperity for granted (Sim and Print 2005). Then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argued that an understanding of historical knowledge was essential to commit young people to such ideals as meritocracy, multiracialism, and the Singaporean way of life (Lee 1997).

With an agenda of securing national cohesion and economic development, NE focused on imbuing Singaporean youths with, as Lee (1997) put it, "the instinct for survival" (p. 3), reproducing a survivalist and nationalist discourse by instilling in the young "the core values of our [Singapore's] way of life" (p. 6). Six NE messages framed how young Singaporeans should view the nature of citizenship responsibilities in Singapore:

1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong.
   (We treasure our heritage and take pride in shaping our own unique way of life.)
2. We must preserve racial and religious harmony.
   (We value our diversity and are determined to stay a united people.)
3. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility.
   (We provide opportunities for all, according to their ability and effort.)
4. No one owes Singapore a living.
   (We find our own way to survive and prosper, turning challenge into opportunity.)
5. We must ourselves defend Singapore.
   (We are proud to defend Singapore ourselves; no one else is responsible for our security and well-being.)
6. We have confidence in our future.
   (United, determined, and well-prepared, we have what it takes to build a bright future for ourselves and to progress together as one nation.)

(MOE 2012, n.p., cited in Sim 2013, p. 71)

Integral to NE was youth participation through the Community Involvement Program (CIP). Launched in 1997, the CIP involved a mandatory program for all

students from primary school to preuniversity, making it compulsory for students to fulfill a minimum of 6 h of community service as part of their graduation requirements. The type of volunteer work varied according to age group. Primary school pupils were engaged in activities such as peer group tutoring, tending to the eco-garden, maintaining school facilities, and making handicraft to raise funds. Secondary school students helped out in public libraries, welfare homes, or self-help groups, as well as teaching senior citizens computer skills or adopting a community project such as maintaining a section of a beach or park. Older students in preuniversity (Preuniversity education comprises 2 years of junior college or 3 years in a centralized institute course which prepares students for the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level examinations.) may assume leadership roles in youth groups or camps for younger students or help out at grassroots events (National Library Board 2018). The intent was that through active participation and involvement in community service, young people would become "good citizens," developing a strong social conscience, a sense of civic duty, belonging, and commitment to the nation (Koh 2006).

Noteworthy was the absence to develop students democratically, that is, to be skillful and effective in fulfilling the National Pledge of Allegiance, to "build a democratic society, based on justice and equality" (National Library Board 2014). With NE, active participation emphasized distinctly personal and social dimensions through volunteerism, echoing Isin's (2008) conception of the "active citizen" who reenacts the pre-existing status quo, as opposed to the "activist citizen" who engages in reshaping existing structures (p. 38). Congruent with Boyte's (1997) contention with volunteerism, the themes of helping "personal lives" and contributing to the "local communities" featured heavily in NE in Singapore. While these are desirable traits, they are not inherently democratic (Westheimer 2015). In fact, as Westheimer argues, volunteerism and kindness have been used to avoid thinking about politics and policy altogether. Under these conditions, which could be applied to Singapore, the political development crucial for a critical and democratically active citizenry is avoided, inadvertently risking the promotion of mere civility or docility rather than democracy (Boyte 1997; Kahne and Westheimer 1996; Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

Zhang (2013) notes that participation for Singaporean youths was actively shaped by the government. Where the older generation of activists who participated in oppositional politics were portrayed by the authorities as "being radical, antagonist, and unsuccessful," young activists were "expected to be different" (p. 256). Young activists were continuously circumscribed to maintain the "spirit of promoting social change," while "the practicalities of being oppositional [were] neutralized" (p. 256). In this regard, Koh (2006) criticizes that the "dominant ideology" transmitted by NE, which mutes opposition, "may produce parochial citizens who reproduce current government policy and ideology," instead of a critical citizenry capable of making informed judgments on Singapore's long-term issues (p. 367).

Differentiated Participation in National Education

Weninger and Kho (2014) saw the influence of NE as changing the meaning of civic participation itself:

> . . . NE is a continuation of a disciplinary strategy whose aim is to 'nurture' responsible citizens via regimented participation in socially charitable and morally upright behaviour. But engagement itself needs to be understood as a regulatory mechanism deployed by the state to control political participation. In other words, the new political rationality of consensus that has supplanted a purely economic pragmatism has necessitated the regulation of the range of legitimate activities that make up participatory politics. (p. 621)

Weninger's and Kho's (2014) contention on the state's "regulation" of participation finds resonance in Singapore's centralized student tracking and the dissemination of differentiated citizenship curricula to youths. Justified by meritocratic principles, students are sorted based on their academic performances into various tracks at the secondary level; these include the elite Integrated Programme (Students who are academically strong may opt for the Integrated Programme which exempts them from the prerequisites of the GCE "O" Levels (ordinarily required for entry into preuniversity); instead, students in the Integrated Programme undergo a 6-year track that leads them directly to the GCE "A" Level examinations. Curricula in the Integrated Programme are often more project-oriented and student-centric; students here are also not required to follow the state-mandated curriculum.) track, the mainstream academic track, and the vocational track. Each track is in turn lined with different citizenship curricula that prepare students for different citizenship roles (Ho et al. 2011; Ho 2014). Accordingly, while the minority of students in the elite track (10–15% of the cohort) are envisioned as "cosmopolitan leaders," students within the mainstream academic track (70%) are "globally oriented but locally rooted midlevel executive and workers" and students in the vocational track (13–15%) "local 'heartlander' followers" (Ho 2014, p. 31; see also Han 2000, pp. 65–66).

Students in each track subsequently undergo different and hierarchically framed citizenship programs. Only students in the Integrated Programme are exempted from adhering to the mandated national curricula and, as such, "are taught to critique government policies, analyse societal problems, and conduct research into fairly controversial topics" through programs autonomously crafted by their schools (Han 2000, p. 65). In contrast, students in the academic and vocational tracks are required to complete the national social studies curricula, culminating in a high-stake examination for those in the academic track. Adhering to the mandated curriculum, the civic exposure afforded to students in the latter tracks take a qualitatively different path, where "democratic principles are not explicitly incorporated in the curriculum or the textbooks" and bear a heavy inclination toward "issues such as social cohesion and economic development" (Ho et al. 2011, p. 217). Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis which "focuses exclusively on Singapore and promotes a set of relatively conservative values (e.g., loyalty and compliance)" among students in the vocational track (Ho 2014, p. 32).

A study conducted by Ho et al. (2011) found that the majority of students remained unaware of their roles as democratic agents – knowledge of political rights and democratic processes – instead preferring a strong government and cohesion for political and economic stability. Students in the vocational track were further removed from the democratic equation when they, under the hierarchically differentiated educational structure, demonstrated a lack of interest and confidence to affect change in society owing to their (perceived) diminished intellect and, along with it, their "right" to participate (pp. 222–223; see also, Alvar-Martin et al. 2012). This self-perception echoes Edwards' (2007) argument that the apparent lack of civic interest among youths stems from disenfranchisement at a systemic, rather than individual level.

Students in the elite minority subsequently comprise the remaining political lifeforce of Singapore's society. Yet, within a highly monitored political environment, education in the elite track does not guarantee a sufficient understanding of democratic priorities. Interviews with elite students found that while they demonstrated better mastery in civic knowledge compared to the majority of students, were more empowered by the system, and displayed an active desire to participate in the community, they nonetheless avoided the political in their conceptions of civic participation and eschewed the importance of activities which challenge existing structures such as lobbying or non-violent protests (Sim 2012). Active civic participation in Singapore thus revolves around the domain of the participatory citizen, ultimately functioning within the logic of preestablished power structures without necessarily addressing the deeper issues at play. Han (2000) wrote:

> . . .the notion of active citizenship, as used in Singapore, is among the more *passive* among the various uses of the term, particularly with respect to the degree to which the citizen is encouraged to participate in the political process at a national level. (p. 70)

It is noteworthy that while this quote was taken from Han's article published more than 15 years ago, it retains its relevance in present times. This "more *passive*" notion of citizenship participation continues to persist in Singapore today, characterized by involvement in social movements which largely protect the status quo, rather than actively seeking to challenge it.

2014 and Beyond: Character and Citizenship Education

More recently in 2014, Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) was implemented by the Ministry of Education. Unlike NE which was nation-centric, CCE is comparatively more student-centric and values-driven, focusing on developing students holistically in five core values – Respect, Responsibility, Resilience, Integrity, and Care and Harmony (Ministry of Education 2014). The practical aspect of CCE is applied through Values in Action (VIA), a reframing of the former Community Involvement Program (CIP) to give greater focus on acquiring values. Like CIP, the kind of participation encouraged is volunteeristic in community

service, with the emphasis on putting values into practice. Students are directed to reflect on their community service experiences, the values they put into practice, and how they can continue to contribute meaningfully. Such an approach is driven by the objective to develop students to be socially responsible and foster student ownership over how they contribute to the community.

It is noteworthy that a shift has taken place in CCE where the value of the individual has been afforded greater attention. For instance, principles such as "self-worth" and "the intrinsic worth of all people," recognizing that "he [the citizen] has a duty to himself," and demonstrating "moral courage to stand up for what is right," are articulated when defining the core values. The adoption of multiple perspectives on issues and the civil sensibility to "graciously agree to disagree" have been encouraged (Ministry of Education, Pre-University CCE Syllabus, 2014, p. 18). However, despite these changes, political participation continues to remain muted, with participation still retaining a depoliticized texture. Here, the "active" citizen is limited within the context of community work, as one who "demonstrates a sense of responsibility towards the community," "is civic minded," and "contributes through community- and nation-building activities" (ibid, p. 7).

However, given that CCE is still in its early years of implementation, there will be several revisions to update the curriculum. One important aspect for consideration and revision within the curriculum remains the notion of participation, particularly given that the local landscape has evolved dramatically in recent years, with greater social class differences and the emergence of new lifestyles, reflecting greater affluence and individualizing tendencies. Youths today are better educated, more widely traveled, and technologically savvy: they harbor diverse needs and aspirations, with many wanting more control in personal spheres and more say in the decision-making processes in the collective arena (Loh 2013; Sim and Print 2009; Varma 2015). A healthy and sustainable society requires youths who are passionately invested in its future, limiting the young's opportunities and abilities to speak out and collectively wrestle with issues which shape the future risk of their disenfranchisement or, worst, their departure. In order to secure Singapore's future and survival, it is thus, arguably, imperative to engage Singapore's youth more politically or risk some of these young, skilled, and mobile Singaporeans emigrating overseas (Teng 2014).

Recent Times: Social Media Activism in the New Media Age

With the launch of a high-speed broadband network by late 1998, digital technology has made steady inroads into Singapore. By 2006, for example, about 71% of the population was already using the Internet at home, and by 2010, 84% had at least one computer at home (Infocomm Media Development Authority 2017). Youths growing up in the era of digital technology are more media-savvy and sophisticated when compared with youths from the earlier generations. In a number of countries, the young have taken up the spaces afforded by social media to carry out activism projects, most particularly of a political nature (Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Valenzuela et al. 2012).

In Singapore, young people participate in online activities such as blogging, putting up posts on Facebook and Twitter, as well as looking for information on political sites such as The Online Citizen. In a paper examining activism trends in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, Weiss (2014) wrote, “The availability of new media has thus far reshaped activism itself more than Singapore’s political culture or policy outcomes” (p. 98). She contended that the Internet offers space for critical public debate, thus supplementing the constrained spaces in print media in the form of letters to the editor, as well as the “semi-free” physical space of the Speakers’ Corner at Hong Lim Park. For Weiss, the very act of making a commentary online on an opposition party, for example, is already activism:

> Simply presenting otherwise-suppressed information online represents more transgressive an act in Singapore than in either Malaysia or Indonesia. Reporting and activism merge. . .. (p. 96)

Using Weiss’ relatively loose standard as a yardstick for youth activism in Singapore, it can be argued that young people here do engage in activism. However, this participation is also more likely to focus on social activism and advocacy, such as LGBT causes or environmental issues, rather than political issues that “directly challenge the ruling power” (Zhang 2013, p.267; see also, Weiss 2014). Few politically oriented activists have come to the public’s notice, but one who did was 24-year-old Nicole Seah, who contested in the 2011 Singapore elections as a candidate for the opposition National Solidarity Party (NSP). Seah was popular with the public as a “straight-talking young woman who has impressed Singaporeans through her dealings with the media. . . and comparative substance” (Russell 2011). However, Seah ultimately failed to win a seat and has since maintained a low profile, giving up all connections with politics. The bright but all-too-brief presence that Seah impressed upon Singapore’s political horizon highlights the fragile state of political contestation among youths in the country; political participation aimed at fruitful structural change requires sustained effort and, for this reason, needs to be habitually developed from a young age.

Two other instances involving young people on social media are worth noting. In November 2014, a 33-year-old blogger, Roy Ngerng, was found guilty of defaming Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he published an article on his blog that questioned the management of the Central Provident Fund (CPF). Ngerng had to pay $150,000 in damages to PM Lee.

In 2015, several days after former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had passed away, a 16-year-old blogger, Amos Yee, uploaded an 8 min video entitled “Lee Kuan Yew is dead.” In the video, Yee denounced Lee as a negative influence for Singapore and also compared Lee and Jesus Christ in what was considered to be an offensive manner. Many Singaporeans were shocked by the video and several filed police reports. Yee was arrested, tried, jailed, and later also sent for psychiatric counseling. While some political commentators have labeled Yee as “just an attention-seeking teenager” (Tan 2016, p. 246), it cannot be denied that Yee’s loud and unrestrained production jolted the public consciousness to reflect, even a little, on the hegemonic nature of Singapore’s politics.

Both these cases received a fair share of attention within Singapore and also abroad. There was much concern over the curtailment of freedom of expression and also over the treatment of the two youths in general (Tan 2016). The heavy hand dealt – by society and the authorities – to Ngerng and Yee sets a stern tone for independent youth political participation in Singapore, particularly when the latter seeks to directly challenge political power in a confrontational manner perceived to threaten the country's stability.

Conclusion

We began by thematically tracing the distinction between non-political and political participation to contextualize the development of youth civic participation in Singapore. We visited the hotbed of youth activism that defined the pre-independence era in Singapore, where youths politically agitated against the colonial powers. This political fervor continued into the post-independence years, as university students actively stood up against perceived social injustices. However, the grip on activist action subsequently tightened, accompanied by the articulation of the ideal citizen at a curricular level which sought to inculcate desirable character and morals in youths. By the end of the 1980s, youth activism had simmered down.

In the 1990s, the government initiated NE and CIP formally focused on developing good citizenship attitudes, skills, values, and practices in the young. During this time, youth activity was depoliticized, reallocated, and promoted non-politically as community service through government-sanctioned channels. Tailing this redefinition of participation, student tracking, and differentiated citizenship education limited political participation to the elite student minority, which even then eschewed democratic activities in the form of, for example, lobbying or non-violent protests. This trend carried on into the revamped CCE and VIA which retained its limited notion of civic participation. Finally, we discussed the age of new media where young activists are engaging the community largely via social media, albeit centered on social issues rather than political change, reflecting a limited space for political contestation.

In Singapore, political activism has a particularly narrow definition, being confined to any opposition party politics that attempts to challenge the ruling PAP's dominance (Chua 2017). While non-political participation is amply emphasized for youths in Singapore, the development of a democratically competent citizenry capable of engaging in political dialogue – especially oppositional dialogue with the authorities – and challenging the structural inequities beyond, leaves much room for improvement. The promotion of civic participation as an almost exclusively non-political endeavor fails to equip the young with critical skills to positively challenge and reshape structural problems, instead encouraging them to perpetuate the existing social *logos* through temporary volunteer efforts. It is thus crucial for Singapore's youth to be provided the space – especially political space – to rationally and passionately explore their views on the one hand and be exposed to a more nuanced and meaningful notion of what it means to actively participate beyond the

non-political. It is only then that we can say we have taken a step toward the goal in our National Pledge of Allegiance, where citizens pledge "to build a democratic society based on justice and equality" (National Heritage Board 2018).

Cross-References

► Constructions of "Youth" and "Activism" in Lebanon
► Education for Youth Civic and Political Action in Australia
► Youth Civic Engagement and Formal Education in Canada: Shifting Expressions, Associated Challenges
► Youth Engagement and Citizenship in England

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