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Interpreting inquiry learning in social studies: Singapore secondary school teachers' understandings of "Issue Investigation"—a preliminary study

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ABSTRACT

Inquiry-based learning is becoming a widely recognized and used pedagogical approach. However, existing research has largely focused on inquiry learning in science education, neglecting fields such as social studies (SS). In Singapore, inquiry learning in SS received an impetus when a component called "Issue Investigation" (II) was introduced into the compulsory secondary school syllabus of 2016. Given the recency of this introduction, there has been a lacuna of empirical research. Addressing both these research gaps, this paper presents qualitative findings from a preliminary study of Singapore secondary school SS teachers' perspectives and experiences relating to II. Building on a recognition of teacher agency and of the role teachers play in mediating curriculum and teaching/learning, this paper focuses on how teachers *interpret* the nature of inquiry learning in SS in the Singapore context. Findings suggest that teachers held broadly two conceptions of II: some saw it as aimed towards working out practical solutions to societal issues in the spirit of participative citizenship; others treated it akin to a social science inquiry process that fostered critical and analytical thinking. In addition, the challenges teachers encountered in implementing and enacting II, and their coping strategies are also briefly discussed.

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, inquiry-based learning (IBL), or inquiry learning, has become an influential discourse, and a widely recognized and adopted pedagogical approach in school instruction worldwide (Khalaf, 2018; Kidman & Casinader, 2017). There is no single fixed definition of what constitutes inquiry learning; indeed, understandings of it have changed over time (Barrow, 2006). However, educational scholars seem to agree in general that inquiry learning involves some manners of learner-centered activities of seeking discovery, constructing knowledge claims and, in the process, developing analytical and problem-solving skills (e.g. Keselman, 2003; Khalaf, 2018; Kidman & Casinader, 2017; Pedaste & Sarapuu, 2006). The rising prominence of inquiry learning can be glimpsed from Kidman and Casinader's (2017) claim – perhaps not without a slight

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tone of overgeneralization – that "[i]nquiry has become the standard for educational policy, curriculum, and practice" (p. vii).

There is also by now a notable body of literature evaluating the efficacy and advantages of inquiry learning vis-à-vis traditional classroom instruction strategies (see Khalaf, 2018; Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016 for two systematic reviews of literature). For instance, in basic science education, studies on learners of various age groups and educational stages found more or less in common that inquiry learning resulted in more positive learning attitudes and higher interest (Gibson & Chase, 2002), facilitated learners' comprehension of concepts (Van Hook & Huziak-Clark, 2008), and provided "more authentic science exposure" (Gormally et al., 2009). Although no doubt both traditional pedagogy and inquiry-based learning have their respective advantages and disadvantages (Khalaf, 2018), the growing body of scholarship on inquiry learning bears evidence of the significant impact this learning approach has had on the educational landscape.

However, a casual scan of the inquiry learning related scholarship quickly reveals that the vast majority of existing research has been concerned with science education (e.g. Minner et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). In comparison, inquiry learning in the social science and humanities subjects has remained under-researched. Khalaf (2018) echoes this observation when he pointed out recently, "[t]he application of inquiry-based learning is being increasingly carried out in science classes but is limited in the social sciences" (p. 556). Exceptions do exist: Kidman and Casinader's (2017) volume, for example, gives attention to inquiry learning in geography and history in addition to science; a small number of studies on inquiry used in social science and/or social studies education also seem available, but their emphasis is placed on the learning technology aspects (e.g. Hwang et al., 2015; Shih et al., 2010). Overall, a dearth of research on inquiry learning in non-science education is evident; in particular, inquiry learning in *social studies* has received inadequate attention (Parker, 2010; Totton, 2014), although again there are some exceptions (e.g. Selwyn, 2010). Thus, an overall objective of this paper is to add to the under-studied area of inquiry learning in relation to social studies.

Social studies (SS) education in Singapore presents an apt context and opportunity for addressing this research gap. In Singapore, inquiry learning in SS was given an impetus in 2016 when a component called "Issue Investigation" (or "II") was introduced into the compulsory syllabus for secondary schools (specifically, for Express and Normal (Academic) streams; henceforth "E/NA" in short). This introduction of inquiry into SS can be seen as part of a broader shift towards a more inquiry-based approach in humanities education in Singapore, which in recent past has also witnessed inquiry components being incorporated into school history (see Afandi, 2013) and geography (see Seow et al., 2019) curricula. Due to the more recent "arrival" of inquiry in SS, however, there is still a lacuna of research on this new aspect of SS education. Existing research on SS in Singapore, instead, has been predominantly couched in a critical studies of curriculum perspective. Under this perspective, scholars have largely dwelt on the ways in which SS has been mobilized to serve the National Education agenda of the state and, relatedly, the state's hegemonic conception of citizenship education which allocates differentiated citizenship roles and capacities to different categories of students (see Ho, 2012; Sim, 2011; Sim & Print, 2005). In contrast, little has been written about SS from the perspective of pedagogy or teaching/learning experiences. Thus, by looking into inquiry learning in SS in Singapore, this paper also goes towards addressing a locally situated research gap.

Inquiry learning in social studies (or, indeed, in any subject) can be investigated from a variety of approaches and perspectives. This paper rests its investigation on a background understanding of *teacher agency* and a recognition of the teacher's role in mediating curriculum and teaching/learning. Specifically, it focuses on how teachers *interpret* the nature of inquiry learning in curricular context. To provide a theoretical anchoring, the next section offers a cursory discussion of teacher agency, teacher "curriculum-making", and specifically the teacher's role in relation to inquiry learning based on extant literature. Then, in the remaining parts of the paper, a background section first serves to sketch out an overview of social studies education in Singapore, before providing relevant details on Issue Investigation as the locus of inquiry learning in the current syllabus. Subsequently, an account of the empirical study underpinning this paper is given, covering research design and methods, participant recruitment details, as well as data collection and analysis processes. The main findings section of the paper deals with how teachers understood II in relation to their conceptions of SS as a subject in general. A second and briefer findings section follows, summarizing succinctly the implementation and enactment challenges teachers encountered in relation to II, and their coping strategies. Finally, the conclusion sums up the paper's contributions in light of broader scholarship on social studies inquiry learning, and ends with suggesting possible future research directions.

Teacher agency; teacher "curriculum-making"; and teacher role in inquiry learning

Underpinning this paper's focus on teachers' perspectives and accounts of inquiry learning is the concept of *teacher agency* and, relatedly, a recognition of the critical role the teachers play in "curriculum-making" and in mediating teaching and learning. In broadest terms, teacher agency may be defined as "[teachers'] active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 624). With more specific reference to curriculum and pedagogy – matters arguably at the core of what teachers do – Campbell (2012) defines teacher agency as "[t]he capacity of teachers to use professional discretion in their pedagogical and curricular practices" (p. 183). Scholars theorizing teacher agency seem to agree that while the exercise of "professional discretion" is often highly contextually contingent and delimited, nevertheless, to a greater or lesser degree teachers play an agentic role in shaping the educational process (Biesta et al., 2015; Campbell, 2012; Priestley et al., 2012).

Teacher agency can manifest in various manners. Referring to teachers as "developers of curriculum at a school level", Priestley et al. (2012) argue that teachers engage in "curriculum making in their classroom" (p. 208) in the sense of translating the "prescribed curriculum" into the "enacted curriculum" that comprises the "day-to-day practices in their classrooms" (p. 209). In other words, because teachers inevitably *mediate* between the curriculum prescribed by policymakers and the teaching/learning actually experienced by students, they in effect play a role of *re-shaping* and *re-making* the curriculum in the local context of their work. Due to the diversity and complexity of learning environments and learner characteristics, teachers often have to make certain choices and take certain actions; and these "choices and actions reflect the *implementation, interpretation, adaptation, alteration, substitution, subversion*, and/or *creation* of the curriculum contexts

in which they work" (Campbell, 2012, p. 183, emphases added). As these highlighted terms suggest, teacher agency in relation to curriculum and pedagogy can take on a range of different forms, which is why Priestley et al. (2012) also described teacher agency in terms of "repertoires for manoeuvre" (p. 211). Of these repertoires of manoeuvre, findings to be presented later in this paper shall relate particularly to *interpretation* and, to a lesser extent, *adaptation* and *alteration*.

While literature drawing explicit connections between teacher agency and inquiry learning seems lacking, past scholarship has certainly noted the important role of the teacher in shaping inquiry learning implementation and outcomes. For instance, Keys and Bryan (2001) identified teachers' understandings and beliefs about inquiry learning, their knowledge of inquiry process, and their extent of practice in it, as crucial factors. Echoing this, Kidman and Casinader (2017) also pointed out that "[the] lack of teacher understanding about the complexities of inquiry learning is [...] at the heart of expressed concerns as to the relevance and effectiveness of inquiry-based learning" (p. xii). A few other scholars have similarly observed how teachers' individual or collective beliefs and perceptions about teaching/learning influence their attitudes towards and experiences of inquiry (Beshears, 2012; Gao & Wang, 2014; Voet & De Wever, 2018), where those more teacher-centered in orientation tended to be more sceptical and resistant towards inquiry learning, whereas those more learner-centered were more open and accepting. In addition, with respect to teacher enactment of inquiry learning, research has highlighted challenges such as the tension between inquiry and pressures to ensure student examination performance (Santau & Ritter, 2013; Yilmaz, 2008); the apparent difficulty of assessing students uniformly under inquiry learning (Talbot & Hayes, 2016); and classroom management issues (Beshears, 2012).

To sum up, what the foregoing discussion illustrates is that teachers' perspectives and experiences constitute a powerful vantage point from which to study inquiry learning. In particular, examining teachers' understandings and interpretations about inquiry can help shed light into the interplay between teacher agency and lived realities of inquiry learning. In the Singapore context of social studies education research, although a number of past studies have put spotlight on teachers, these studies were mainly concerned with the teachers' understandings of citizenship, citizenship education, and critical thinking (Baildon & Sim, 2009; Sim, 2008; Sim & Print, 2009a, 2009b). In contrast, the focus in this paper shall be on exploring SS teachers' understandings of Issue Investigation as the locus of inquiry learning in SS, and to a lesser extent, their experiences in implementing, enacting, and managing II. Before turning to the study and its findings, however, a background on SS in Singapore and some relevant details about II are in order.

Background: social studies in Singapore and "Issue Investigation" as the locus of inquiry learning

Regarding social studies in the educational context of Singapore, Sim (2008) offered a succinct yet comprehensive summary, worth quoting at length:

> Social studies is an integrated subject introduced from 2001 for all students at the upper secondary school level when students are generally 15-16 years old. It is a compulsory, examinable subject at the national examination. Social studies was developed in the context

of National Education (NE), the latter was launched in 1997, which is the latest nation-building initiative that citizenship is addressed. NE is aimed at developing and shaping positive knowledge, values and attitudes of its younger citizenry toward the community and the nation, with the purpose of developing national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future [. . .]. As such, social studies at the upper secondary level is a major vehicle for NE, the form which citizenship education takes in Singapore. Specifically, social studies was conceived of as a direct response to address the problem of young Singaporeans' lack of knowledge and interest in Singapore's recent history and the central issues key to national survival. The focus is on the nation, the common culture and shared values, reflecting the government's continuous pursuit of citizenship education to meet perceived national needs. (p. 256)

Evidently, in terms of underlying rationale and purpose, social studies in Singapore lays emphasis on citizenship education (CE). Over its two decades of existence, the Singapore SS syllabus has of necessity undergone considerable revisions and updates in substantive content. The latest version in 2016 covers three broad themes, namely, (1) citizenship and governance, (2) societal diversity and identity issues, and (3) globalization. Nonetheless, the subject's overall CE mandate has remained. It is relevant to note, though, that CE in other guises and forms predated the 2001 introduction of SS and the 1997 National Education framework: previous forms of CE in the 1980s through to 1990s had a stronger moral education inflection, as manifested in the teaching of "values" and religious/civilizational ethics (specifically "Asian values" or Confucian ethics) (Han, 2000, 2007; Sim & Print, 2005). For this reason, Sim and Print (2005) took the view that the introduction of SS in the early 2000s represented "a significant milestone in the development of citizenship education" (p. 66) in Singapore, characterised, according to them, by "a de-emphasis upon moral education, enhancement of thinking skills, and encouragement of participation for more active citizenship" (p. 66). They further added that SS brought in a "framework that *separates moral elements from citizenship education issues*" and "provides greater space and scope for exploring new grounds, particularly for infusing *thinking skills* in the curriculum" (Sim & Print, 2005, p. 67, emphases added).

Viewed against this backdrop, the introduction of "Issue Investigation" (II) in the 2016 edition of the social studies syllabus (E/NA) may be interpreted as a move to strengthen thinking skills development through a mode of inquiry-based learning. The 2016 SS textbook (E/NA) dedicates a full chapter to II ("*Chapter 12. Skills for Issue Investigation*"), and defines it for students as follows:

An Issue Investigation encourages you to identify a societal issue to develop a response to. A societal issue is one that is of concern to society and people have points of view about. An Issue Investigation allows you to analyse factors and perspectives that shape the development of societal issues. Through the course of the investigation, your group will also understand the impact the selected societal issue has on society and develop possible responses and recommendations to address the issue. (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 367)

In terms of carrying out Issue Investigation, the chapter prescribes a four-stage cycle: (1) sparking curiosity; (2) gathering data; (3) exercising reasoning; (4) reflective thinking. Indeed, the II chapter goes into considerable details about social science research issues such as formulating research questions, major types of empirical data, data collection methods, data analysis, and even matters such as research ethics and scholarly referencing/citation practices. It thus seems clear that II is meant to be an inquiry process

involving data gathering and analysis of some sort, reminiscent of a typical social science research process.

At the same time, however, being subsumed under social studies, Issue Investigation is also meant to be aligned with the subject's overarching objective of shaping citizens. Describing this intended alignment, the *Guide to Teaching and Learning Upper Secondary Social Studies* issued by the Ministry of Education (2016a) (henceforth *MOE Guide*) states: "Issue Investigation provides a platform for students to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and values needed for active citizenship" (p. 262). However, in light of the previous discussion of teacher agency, how SS teachers *actually* interpret and enact this intended alignment in their teaching practices remains an open empirical question. As shall be illustrated subsequently, one main finding from this study regarding teachers' understandings of II is a subtle tension between understanding II as social science inquiry as opposed to a more prescriptive mode of citizenship inculcation.

Another key issue to note is that, although now an integral part of the social studies syllabus, Issue Investigation is *not* directly reflected in the standardized national assessment. The compulsory national examination for SS consists of a self-contained 1-hour-45-minute paper, comprising a Structured-Response Question (SRQ) and a Source-Based Case Study (SBCS), to answer which the examinees in theory need not rely on any material beyond what is already provided in the paper. The assessment of II, on the other hand, is separate and "school-based", and thus has little apparent bearing on the national exam. In a performance-driven education system predicated on high-stakes examinations such as Singapore's (Cheah, 1998; Deng & Gopinathan, 2016), this setup inevitably raises questions about motivation and pragmatism. Thus, although the *MOE Guide* rationalizes that "Issue Investigation *also* contributes towards developing students competencies for *national assessment*" (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 262, emphases added), for teachers on the ground, the place of II in SS teaching is a question far from settled. As shall be mentioned briefly in the second findings section later, this is another issue featuring prominently in Singapore SS teachers' experiences as they grappled with this particular mode of inquiry learning.

The study

The study underpinning this paper was conceived as an exploratory project seeking to obtain preliminary qualitative insights into how Singapore secondary school social studies teachers have perceived the new curricular component of Issue Investigation, and what their experiences were in terms of implementing and enacting it in classrooms. Given this exploratory nature and preliminary scope of the study, the research design consisted of one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), targeting a modest number of research participants. The interviews and FGDs were designed to be complementary to each other, allowing for data triangulation and hence enhanced validity and reliability. The protocols used for interviews and FGDs thus asked a similar set of questions, organized around three broad thematic categories: (1) teachers' understandings and perceptions of II; (2) teachers' experiences of implementing and enacting II; (3) teachers' reflections on their experiences in relation to II.

Constrained by funding and time availability from the outset, the research design did not include classroom observations or interview with students, which would have

Table 1. Interview (one-to-one) participants.

Teacher (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Subject combination	Years of teaching experience
James (T1)	M	30	SS/Mathematics	4
Daliah (T2)	F	26	SS/History	3
Beatrice (T3)	F	28	SS/English	3
Keith (T4)	M	29	SS/History	2
Cherie (T5)	F	29	SS/English	3
Kali (T6)	F	55	SS/History	30
Laura (T7)	F	Undeclared	History/SS	10

required significantly more resources than was possible under the project. However, for the circumscribed objectives of this study, the research design and extent of data collection were thought to be sufficient.

Data was collected between April and October 2019 through seven semi-structured interviews and four FGDs. A total of 17 SS teachers were involved, with 7 participating in one-to-one interviews, and 10 in the FGDs (see Tables 1 and 2 below). These teachers came from seven mainstream government secondary schools in Singapore. According to the teachers' own descriptions, most of these schools were average based on students' Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) scores at admission, with two or three somewhat below average. Thus, in terms of school representativeness, the study could be thought of as covering the "middle ground" of the Singapore schools landscape, representing something of an "average" picture.

The 17 research participants were recruited through a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The author reached out selectively to his professional contacts in the SS teaching community to invite potential participants, with the selection criteria geared towards achieving a relatively balanced representation of diversity in terms of gender, teaching experiences, and academic backgrounds. Confirmed participants were also asked to forward the research invitation to their eligible contacts, which led to several more volunteers. The sample eventually obtained comprised predominantly female teachers (14 out of 17), which reflected the general over-representation of women among social studies teachers (and indeed teachers of humanities subjects in general) in Singapore. Overall, the pool could be regarded as more or less typical of the profiles of SS teachers in Singapore schools, representing varying lengths of teaching experience, subject combinations,[1] and a spectrum of positions and seniority levels ranging from rank-and-file teachers to Senior Teachers, Subject Heads and Heads of Department.

Table 2. Focus group discussion participants.

Teacher (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Subject combination	Years of teaching experience
Chris	F	Undeclared	English/SS	19
Sam	F	Undeclared	Geography/SS	?
Padma	F	Undeclared	Geography/SS	>20
Gloria	F	30s	Geography/SS	11.5
Silvia	F	30s	SS/English	8
Monroe	M	30	SS/Mathematics	4.5
Esmerelda	F	27	History/SS	0.75
Clarice	F	29	English/SS	2
Ivy	F	38	Geography/SS	15
Lisa	F	34	SS/English	9

Nevertheless, given the limited sample size and the sampling methods used, caution is in order when generalizing this study's findings.

An interview/FGD session typically lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. All sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were anonymised to conceal participants' identities. (All participant names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.) The transcripts were coded thematically using the NVivo 12 software for analysis. The thematic coding process followed an iterative procedure between, on the one hand, the study's overall research questions and concerns and, on the other hand, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) whereby emerging themes were organized and refined in relation to each other.

Understandings of Issue Investigation and social studies

Examining how the research participants understood Issue Investigation, the study found these teachers' ideas of II to be inseparable from their general conceptions of social studies – its fundamental rationales and purposes. In specific, what may be termed a "practical contribution" model of II seemed to rest on a conception of SS emphasizing participative citizenship actions; whereas, an "investigative" model of II seemed to correlate with a view of SS that foregrounded analytical and critical thinking.

II as "practical contribution" under a participative citizenship conception of SS

A number of participants in the study viewed social studies with a predominant emphasis on citizenship and national education, and consequently treated the subject mainly as a platform for imparting desirable values and behaviours to students that would ultimately mould them into good citizens, defined currently as "informed, concerned and participative" (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. iii). This is illustrated in how Kali, a senior teacher in her 50s, explained her understanding of the subject:

> I think now [social studies is] more about . . . your role as a citizen as well, like, how you can contribute to society, not just "Oh, this is what the government does" . . . Also try to get the students to see that "We have a sense of belonging, we should also give back", things like that. I feel that should be at the values part of each [*sic*], you know, hoping when we teach, they realize there's a love for the country kind of thing.

In other words, an ideal citizen is constructed as one who strongly identifies with the nation ("have a sense of belonging", "love for the country") and seeks to make concrete contributions ("give back") to better the society.

Under such a conception of social studies, Issue Investigation came to be geared towards participative citizenly actions, where the word "issue" implied a situation which the learners, after *investigating* it, wished also to *do* something about it. Accordingly, for II, the students were expected and guided to identify concrete social problems in the society and/or in their local community (such as their neighbourhood or school), and then work towards proposing practical solutions or offering recommendations to address these problems. The eligible "issues" for investigation could reflect current societal discourses and debates, but typically they were readily defined in accordance with the policy agendas of the government, which duly appeared as suggested II topics

in the SS textbook (see Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 379). Examples of such "issues" mentioned by research participants in the study included "raising awareness for healthy living", "educating the public on fake news", or "increasing integration for foreign students in school". Not only did these topics reflect the current agenda of the policymakers, the way the questions were raised also implied certain pre-determined desirable outcomes or societal visions which were themselves seldom the subject of inquiry.

Hence, the purpose of Issue Investigation is to provide a basis for students to engage in participative citizenly actions that contribute to realizing those desirable outcomes and visions. For instance, according to participants in one focus group, their school ended up implementing a recommendation submitted by students – in the form of a festival – based on their II project about foreign students integration in the school. In another school, linking the II project outcomes with their "Values in Action" (VIA) community involvement, students introduced board games in nursing homes to raise awareness for the elderly about scams targeting this vulnerable group. For a number of social studies teachers in the study, this affordance for developing *practical* participative citizen actions was a key merit of II as a vehicle for value-based citizenship education. As Silvia remarked during an FGD:

> I like that it's very *practical*, so whatever they have researched on, they really get to *use* it to inform others. So, they go back to educate their peers about what they have researched on. So, they see the *practicality* of it. (emphases added)

To sum up this first approach, for some teachers, based on a conception of social studies emphasizing participative citizenship, Issue Investigation was understood mainly as geared towards inculcating in students a sense of citizen duty to make practical, albeit modest, contributions to public wellbeing, in line with the prevailing definitions of societal and national interests. Investigation *per se* as an intellectual or analytical exercise is not the main aim, but a means towards informing what an "informed, concerned, and participative citizen" can *do*. As a result, teachers with this understanding of II tended to guide their students to develop a type of "social worker's project" where the "issue" and the desirable outcomes are more or less given or taken for granted, leaving the focus of investigation to be about finding solutions and recommendations.

II as open-ended investigation under a critical thinking orientation to SS

In contrast, from some other research participants, a second approach to Issue Investigation emerged, resting on an alternative conception of social studies that put front and center the development of analytical and critical thinking abilities. Among several participants who showed inclination towards this approach, Keith, a teacher in his late 20s whose academic background was in psychology, perhaps articulated it most explicitly. He said:

> SS focuses a lot on critical thinking [...] *rather than memorizing facts*. So [...] it's about interpreting information, *analyzing*, and then reaching a conclusion, a *logical* conclusion based on that information. So to me that's something that I've always loved about SS, and I think that's something that is all the more important nowadays. (emphases added)

With this focus on analytical and logical thinking foregrounded, the citizenship and national education aspects of social studies, especially those traditionally achieved through the regurgitation of facts and desirable values and morals, were downplayed. Keith was aware that this represented a somewhat different outlook compared with the traditional mode of teaching SS, but he nevertheless demonstrated conviction about his understanding of the subject; as he stated:

> I mean I cannot ignore the fact that SS is still grounded in National Education . . . But I think that moving forward, it's about communicating certain key concepts that people, citizens of this age, *not just [in] Singapore* . . . should be aware of . . . a certain set of skills that they would need to navigate the technological world around them with the access to the information that they have . . . So that's just what I see is my role as an SS teacher, to help impart these skills to the students so that they are able to better come to terms with the information they are seeing. (emphases added)

Indeed, by deemphasizing the national societal context ("not just [in] Singapore"), Keith could be interpreted as further toning down the citizenship/national education imperative in social studies, in favour of critical and analytical thinking development. Such a conception of SS, in turn, led to an approach to Issue Investigation that is more open-ended, and therefore distinctly different from the first model of II which, as discussed in the foregoing section, prioritized offering "solutions" and/or "recommendations" to pre-defined societal "issues". In Keith's school, for instance, one II question was formulated as "Are government and non-government organizations able to meet the needs of X?", where "X" was left to the students to decide. The open-endedness is further illustrated as Keith elaborated on the approach:

> [Y]ou are trying to find out more, so, "What do you understand about the situation?" . . . It's a very *exploratory kind of style of investigation, as opposed to it being prescriptive . . . We don't investigate to try to find a solution, we investigate just . . . to give students a chance to find out more*. Then, whether there is a solution or not, that depends, so in the case of our recent II, we asked them to try and come up with a solution, a recommendation, but even then, you don't have to prove to me that it's going to work [. . .] (emphases added)

When conducted in such a fashion, Issue Investigation then resembled more a miniscule social science research project, for which the investigative process is an end in itself – since it hones critical and analytical thinking – whereas the findings of the inquiry remain open and unpredictable. (Indeed, the project in Keith's school could have found the government *unable* to meet the needs of "X".) In short, under this "investigative" model of II, the social studies teachers guided their students to think of themselves essentially as junior social scientists, whose primary objective is to gain analytical and critical insights into a societal issue that is framed as a research puzzle.

Relationship between the two approaches to II and SS

Importantly, by and large, research participants did not seem conflicted over or disoriented between these two approaches to II. Arguably, this can be explained by the fact both understandings of II, and their respective underlying conceptions of SS, are present in the official SS syllabus and documents. In other words, both approaches to II might be inferred as equally valid. Accordingly, teachers did not see the two approaches as clear-

cut binary or mutually exclusive, but perhaps more in terms of two ends of a continuum along which they may take, and possibly shift, their positions. Teachers who took the practical citizenship action model of II nevertheless were not unconcerned with the methods and process of inquiry; conversely, teachers who took the investigative model were not dismissive about offering "solutions" and "recommendations" as a duty of concerned and participative citizens.

Notwithstanding this, some teachers did perceive a subtle tension between the two approaches, which ultimately reflected a deeper underlying tension between critical thinking on the one hand, and the prescriptiveness of citizenship and national education in the Singaporean context, on the other. Several younger participants in the study voiced their uneasiness in skirting the line between their duty as civil servants which demanded certain loyalty and conformity,[2] and their role to nurture their students into critical and independent thinkers, which sometimes required a readiness to question the status quo and even political authorities. For example, Beatrice admitted a persistent worry about overstepping the boundaries of "the unwritten curriculum, the subtext and ... political undertones", which underlined a "self-censorship" reflex with which she approached social studies overall. Similarly, James also described experiencing a tension between facilitating genuine inquiry learning on the one hand, and teaching the "national agenda" on the other, stating that "we have to cope with two contradictions [*sic*] in our head constantly as we execute the syllabus".

Taken together, findings presented in this section illustrate that social studies teachers in Singapore do exercise a certain degree of "discretion" and enjoy certain space to "manoeuvre" when it comes to *interpreting* the recently introduced inquiry component "Issue Investigation" in the SS curricular context. And, despite the necessarily constrained nature of their discretion and manoeuvre, it is also evident that their varying interpretations of inquiry have indeed led to concretely different models of II being presented to students. This thus resonates with what extant literature says about teacher agency and teacher "curriculum making".

II implementation/enactment challenges and teachers' responses

In addition to teachers' understandings of Issue Investigation, the study also explored their experiences in relation to II implementation and enactment – particularly the *challenges* encountered and the ways in which they managed such challenges. Since a more detailed account on these matters has been published elsewhere (Yang, 2020), a summary of the key findings is provided below.

Pertaining to the implementation of Issue Investigation, a major obstacle has been its perceived irrelevance to the high-stakes national assessment, which gave rise to a prevalent attitude of pragmatism that disincentivized stakeholders from taking II seriously. In the brutally candid words of one research participant (Kali), "we don't see [II] as important, because it's not exam-based. *Never do also never mind!*" In other words, despite an intended alignment and complementarity between II and national assessment as described in the official/prescribed curriculum, for many social studies teachers on the ground, the two have remained "totally divorced" (Beatrice). Moreover, this exam-driven pragmatism did not affect only the teachers: several research participants observed a similar attitude amongst their students, especially the high-performing ones, who also

could "not see any functional [*sic*] benefit" (Beatrice) of II to the exam. Meanwhile, the enactment of II too was fraught with practical challenges, chief among which were the perceived overwhelming scope and depth of II, time constraints, and deficits of certain skills or preparedness among students and teachers. Reflecting on these difficulties commonly experienced by the teaching fraternity, Laura, an experienced teacher and Head of Humanities at her school, gave the following overall verdict on II: "I think in general, I don't think it's extremely well received in the community, I don't think so."

Grappling with these challenges and obstacles, social studies teachers in the study developed certain strategies to "tame" issue investigation (Yang, 2020), namely, to make it manageable – both for the students and for themselves. Two basic approaches to taming II were evident: first, virtually all schools/teachers in the study reported using some strategies to *simplify* the II activities and processes; second, at several schools, teachers also adopted what may be called a "*piggybacking*" approach, which worked essentially by making the undertaking of II also accomplish some other tasks, such as helping students practice exam-relevant skills, or fulfilling learning objectives under Value in Action (VIA) and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). In other words, "piggybacking" strategies essentially operated by *dual-* or *multi-purposing* II. Although these dual/multi-purposing strategies were clearly driven by the same pragmatic imperative which also underpinned the simplification strategies, they could also be seen as going some way towards addressing the more fundamental problem of the perceived irrelevance of II, as discussed in the preceding paragraph. In the words of one research participant, adopting the "piggybacking" approach provided some reassurance to both the students and the teachers that doing II was "not a waste of time" (Daliah).

Again, viewed through the theoretical prism of teacher agency, findings summarised above are clear instances of teachers exercising their professional judgment and discretion in *adapting* and *altering* a prescribed inquiry learning model in response to challenges and limitations characterizing their local educational context and classroom realities. It is perhaps interesting to note that participants in the study narrated their coping strategies in relation to Issue Investigation mostly in a tone associated with making pragmatic compromise, and seldom, if at all, saw what they did in *agentic* terms. Nevertheless, occasionally, a sense of vindication were intoned when some teachers remarked that it was thanks to their adaptation and alteration of II that they could finally make headways with what otherwise seemed a "daunting" (Kali) new curricular component.

Conclusion

To conclude, drawing on the notion of teacher agency, and relatedly a recognition of the teacher's agentic role in interpreting and mediating curriculum and pedagogy, this paper has offered an account of how social studies teachers in Singapore secondary schools understood and managed a recently introduced inquiry learning component called Issue Investigation (II). Findings show that, stemming from slightly different conceptions of the rationales and purposes of SS, teachers developed somewhat divergent notions of II. Some teachers treated II mainly as a vehicle for citizenship inculcation, resting ultimately on values and societal visions prescribed in the syllabus; other teachers framed II as an open-ended inquiry process stressing the development of critical and analytical thinking

in students. These findings are reminiscent of earlier studies done by Seow and Ho in relation to geography education in Singapore (Ho & Seow, 2017; Seow, 2009; Seow & Ho, 2014), which also uncovered ways in which teachers' subject conceptions (e.g. "What is geography?") or perceptions about certain topic (e.g. "What is climate change education?") shaped their teaching practices.

Of significance, in this study the divergent interpretations of inquiry developed by Singapore SS teachers have indeed led to concrete differences in how II was presented to learners, thus supporting extant scholarship's claims about teacher agency in "curriculum-making". Similarly, in managing key challenges associated with II implementation and enactment, the teachers also exhibited agency in developing certain "repertoires of manoeuvre" which in this specific context included what the author dubbed "simplification" and "piggybacking" strategies. Although teachers did not overtly see what they did in terms of "agency", it was clear that their reception and handling of II entailed agentic acts of interpreting, mediating, adapting and altering.

Through this account of teacher agency in relation to inquiry learning, the paper arguably makes a twofold contribution to scholarship. Firstly, it represents a small step towards addressing a locally situated research gap in Singapore whereby inquiry learning in geography and history education has received burgeoning research attention (Afandi, 2013; Seow et al., 2019) while a lacuna still exists with respect to social studies. Given that inquiry-based approach is likely to be a long-term trend in humanities education in Singapore, this study may serve as a foundation on which future research may be built. Secondly, as argued in the paper's introduction, much of the broader extant Anglophone scholarship on inquiry learning has concentrated on science education to the neglect of subject areas such as social studies. Even when inquiry in social studies was indeed examined, such scholarship has emerged overwhelmingly from the American context where "[h]istory has been the dominant subject studied in the social studies curriculum" (Nelson, 2001, p. 18). Consequently, much of the social studies inquiry that past scholars have written about in fact turned out to be inquiry applied to historical events or historical materials (e.g. the Harvard Social Studies Project of the 1960s-70s, see Bohan & Feinberg, 2008). Social studies inquiry learning of the kind presented in this paper, namely one caught in between a citizenship transmission model and a more open-ended social science model, appears much less common in existing literature. In this sense, thus, this paper makes a novel addition to the research of inquiry learning in social studies.

Finally, although this paper sheds some light into the current state of social studies Issue Investigation in Singapore secondary schools, owing to the study's preliminary nature and limited scope of data collection, many questions have remained unanswered. For instance, how might the contrasting interpretations of II and conceptions of SS be accounted for? Does teachers' academic background or specialisation play a role? Furthermore, in view of the teachers' various interpretations, adaptations and alterations of II, what may be the implications and outcomes, both intended and unintended, of these agentic acts for students' learning of SS? More broadly speaking, a more comprehensive picture about II implementation and enactment situations across different types of schools in Singapore can only emerge with a more extensive and representative sampling process, leading to a larger set of data. Factors explaining variations in II-related experiences between schools, academic streams, or even between classrooms, are also worth exploring. And, not least of all, II-related perspectives and experiences of

the students themselves constitute another major part of the equation that future research may do well to look into.

Notes

1. In Singapore all teachers in government secondary schools are expected to be competent in teaching two subjects, and are usually deployed accordingly. It is common for a Social Studies teacher to also teach another humanities subject (typically geography, history, or English), sometimes with the latter being their primary area of expertise, although other combinations are also possible.
2. The vast majority of school teachers in Singapore are employees of the Ministry of Education, and therefore civil servants. The only exceptions are teachers in a very small number of non-government schools.

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