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Anxieties Over Singapore Students' Conceptions About History and The Past

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Understanding history can be an intellectually challenging task for many students in schools. It requires students to contemplate issues, events and people who had lived in the distant past and who are often far removed (from them) in time and familiarity. Such challenges, however, have seldom been satisfactorily addressed in many history classrooms in Singapore. Where historical instruction in schools takes on a heavily content-transmission approach, students are more likely to conceive history learning as the uncritical absorption and memorisation of knowledge that has little bearing to their everyday lives. This is especially so when the existence of a prescribed textbook and a pre-selected content is viewed as sufficient learning materials for direct historical instruction. Additionally, the attention spent on developing methods to train and prepare students to answer examination questions has reduced historical thinking and reasoning to sets of somewhat rigid, algorithmically-devised skills-related procedures (Afandi & Baildon, 2010). While these may help build students' capacity to deal with the requisite assessment objectives tested in the examinations, they do little to build student's knowledge of history. Amidst a schooling context that places emphasis on rigid procedures to produce "the right answers" and driven by a strong purpose to meet assessment requirements and accountability in the examination, it is unsurprising if many believe that history teaching need not go beyond simply the transfer of (historical) knowledge or content. This, however, should not be confused with learning history. As Lee (1991: pp. 48-49) maintained,

> [it is] absurd … to say that schoolchildren know any history if they have no understanding of how historical knowledge is attained, its relationship to evidence, and the way in which historians arbitrate between competing or contradictory claims. The ability to recall accounts without any understanding of the problems involved in constructing them or the criteria involved in evaluating them has nothing historical about it. Without an understanding of what makes an account historical, there is nothing to distinguish such an ability from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths or poems.

Implicit in Lee's assertion is the suggestion that acquiring the kind of knowledge that is deemed *historical* goes beyond information acquisition and rote memorisation of facts; it must equip students with "more powerful" ways of understanding history and the historical past (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 216). Among other things, this would involve getting students to come to grips with the disciplinary basis of the subject and having them understand how knowledge about the past is constructed, adjudicated and arbitrated.

Yet, many may argue that knowing history and acquiring knowledge about the

past is sufficiently reasonable if students can be shown to be able to remember "key facts" and important events, and then to subsequently reproduce these facts in the exams or when asked. Lee (1999) contended, however, that in practice such a notion may prove disastrous for a number of reasons: first, students are not likely to be able to make much sense of the facts they committed to memory; second, students are likely to forget these facts anyway once they no longer have any use for them; third, students will encounter different stories outside school and often prefer these over ones handed out in school; and fourth, as students have not been given any guides for thinking about history, they would find it hard coping with contradictory or competing stories about the past. An approach that assumes historical instruction as one that is simply about remembering "key facts" and of learning the "right stories" about the past is predisposed to treating history stories as fixed and given, and is likely to judge these stories as authoritative rather than through claims to validity. History, however, is much more than that. The past is not a given; any claims we make about the past remain a construction that must be justified (more or less) on the basis of the available evidence. To say that students know a bit of history is to insist that they (at least) know the basis upon which claims about the past are made, and the ways these claims can be validly assessed.

Ongoing anxieties

"Anxieties" over school history have often led to claims that Singaporean students "don't know any history" – with *history* here referenced in terms of factual knowledge about specific events, personalities and moments in Singapore's history. These anxieties usually manifest themselves on the back of surveys that purport to gauge the level of historical knowledge Singaporeans have about aspects of the nation's history. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1996, for example, showed that young Singaporeans knew little about the country's history and seemed to lack any real interest in wanting to know about the nation's past. These results confirmed earlier reports of street polls conducted by The New Paper (11 June 1996) and The Straits Times (17 June 1996) on the "re-merger" issue. Taken together the findings pointed to the "glaring ignorance" (Abdul Azeez, 1998, p. 74) and "historical apathy" (Hussin, 2012, p. 125) among Singapore's younger generation toward their own history, and prompted then Deputy PM Lee Hsien Loong to highlight the "serious gap in the education of Singaporeans" (Straits Times, 18 July 1996) on issues pertaining to Singapore's recent past. The apprehension and anxiety brought about by these realisations led to moves to strengthen the national ethos through better articulation of the nation's history and its use in cultivating national identity: National Education was introduced, revisions were made to the local history syllabi, and the "Singapore Story" would become – more or less – the country's official state narrative.

Over the years, such anxieties would re-emerge periodically through comments or letters sent to the media – frequently expressing "shock" over Singapore students' lack of knowledge about the country's "real history", and requiring responses from MOE's upper management assuring otherwise (for example, see: http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/forum/2013/06/the-teaching-of-singapore-history-in-textbooks.php). At times, some of these commentators often spoke in authoritative tones about teaching methods (of which they knew very little), in classrooms they had never visited (often referencing personal formative experiences decades

ago), while ending off with proposals for more "novel" ways to make "history come alive". Engaging younger Singaporeans (the usual target group) who have "little interest in a dusty past" remained a recurrent focus, and given the dangers of "fading collective memory" PM Lee Hsien Loong has recently found it necessary to warn Singaporeans of the need to remember the national history, as the people may end up having to "relearn painful lessons" should "we forget our history" (Straits Times, 31 January 2015).

The relationship between history and nation-building has been well-documented. It is no secret that the development of the local history curriculum over the years has been sensitive to political directives, and especially to the manifest objective of instilling a sense of shared nationhood among young Singaporeans. The focus has been on addressing *identity* aims, especially by highlighting the contributions the various ethnic groups have made to Singapore's development throughout its history and by relying on the common heritage, a collective past and the "shared aspirations for the future" (Tan, 2002) the different communities inextricably have with each other. Knowing the "Singapore Story" then – conceptualised as collective memories crucial to bind the nation together – has acquired a very important place in Singapore society and has served as a touchstone by which students' knowledge about history (more specifically, Singapore history) is judged or recognised. And as such, any indications that show failure on the part of students to know or remember specific dates, personalities, political entities, events or moments in Singapore history draws quick reactions and criticisms about "the younger generation" not knowing (or not having enough knowledge) about history. But can such "failure" be implied as indicative of students' not knowing enough about history? Is this a case of our students lacking historical knowledge on account of certain flawed history education experiences in school? Or are such public anxieties perhaps misplaced – in that concerns about students' knowledge of history should not be about their lack of factual knowledge but more so with their predisposition to viewing history in mainly *factual* terms?

Ways students in Singapore view history and the past

As part of his PhD study, Suhaimi spoke to fifty secondary two students (13 and 14 year olds) across five schools in Singapore to find out some conceptions they hold about history and the nature of accounts in history. Students first responded to questions that dealt with disciplinary aspects related to historical accounts in two written task-sets, and were subsequently interviewed in groups of three. Some of the questions asked (pertinent to this article) included:

- Why are there different accounts or stories about the past?
- How do you decide which is the better account?
- What ideas do you have about written accounts related to Singapore's history?
- Is there a single story or should there be several stories about Singapore's past?

We found that students have a range of preconceptions regarding historical accounts and are able to employ a range of evaluative strategies (with a range of competency) when deciding the better account. These preconceptions or ideas about history and historical accounts may be usefully viewed in terms of a "Factual-Multiple-Criterial" continuum. We share some of our initial findings in the

following section.

In mapping out students' ideas about the past and accounts of history, three categories of ideas that ranged in complexity and sophistication may be identified: from viewing historical accounts in a factual manner as copies of a fixed and objective past (Factual), to viewing accounts as multiple versions of a past that is complex and multi-faceted (Multiple), to viewing accounts as selective interpretations of past events that can be evaluated based on criteria (Criterial). Students' responses may feature elements of all categories but it may be possible to ascribe a distinct category of ideas that each student is likely to work within. Consider the example below (all student names are pseudonyms):

> I think you could say that accounts about Singapore's history follow the same plot, the same main event. But it's different in the sense that you can see it from many points of view – from the points of view of the natives, from the points of view of the migrants from China, from India, from Malaya... There are many stories pieced together that make the one Singapore story, and not just one story that makes it the Singapore story... It's the diversity of Singapore – the many events that are experienced by its people, or the many points of view that we have that makes "the Singapore story". We have to accept everybody's accounts and experiences. They should all be accepted as true. When you piece all of them together, that's when you get the true Singapore story.

- Gabriel Lee, 14-years-old

This was the response a secondary two student in a premier school in Singapore gave when asked (in an interview) the question: is there a single story or should there be several stories about Singapore's past? At first glance, Gabriel's response appeared to indicate maturity, depth and complexity in terms of how accounts about Singapore's history may be conceived and understood. It recognised the existence of multiple stories about Singapore's past and sought to present an inclusive approach designed to logically harmonise these disparate, fragmented and partial stories into an integrative and more coherent whole. Gabriel's response suggested a fairly sophisticated construct (for a fourteen-year-old) of how a national narrative should be viewed. In proposing a two tiered approach to answering the question, he offered a reasonable reconciliation: that there should be a single (true) Singapore story, with the same plot and the same main event but one that incorporated a multiplicity of stories that represented the diversity of views and experiences of its people. The sophistication in his argument also was premised on the idea that having a point of view was inevitable given different lived experiences, and demonstrated his awareness of notions of diversity in terms of how the world was seen from the eyes of different groups of people. Such a view may justify the existence of different accounts of history or be used as the basis for legitimising or accepting all accounts of events.

Yet, Gabriel's response also indicates limitations where an understanding of historical accounts is concerned. Although he highlighted the multiple realities and lived experiences that will (naturally) account for the diversity of stories people tell about past events, Gabriel appeared convinced of the possibility of acquiring a factually complete or "true" picture of the past, i.e. when these partial or imperfect stories are pieced together into a

consolidated "super-account" that (presumably) corresponded with the "real" past it described. In addition, while he rightly highlighted the importance of incorporating multiple voices and experiences in crafting the "true" Singapore story, these were predicated by the assumption that each and every story must correspondingly be "true" – and be accepted as such – without considering issues of partisanship, subjectivity and legitimacy where points of view or "personal truths" are concerned. Gabriel's response highlighted the fluid nature of students' ideas about history and the past, and illustrated how an ostensibly 'Multiple' way of viewing the past may be seen to be subordinated to a predominantly 'Factual' conception of that past. In other words, while there are multiple accounts that must be pieced together to give an accurate or more factual account of the past. Gabriel's response does not indicate any distinct 'Criterial' orientation as his tendency was to accept the validity of all accounts given that these accounts exist to reflect the legitimate, but diverse, viewpoints of their owners.

A framework for thinking about students' ideas about historical accounts

This Factual-Multiple-Criterial continuum also may be useful in describing broad shifts in students' implicit view of historical knowledge: from conceiving historical knowledge as fixed or given representations of a singular (factual) reality, to conceiving historical knowledge as productions of human minds, borne from (multiple) individual dispositions, experiences and viewpoints, to conceiving historical knowledge as re-constructions that are based on interpretation and therefore open to critical (and criterial) questioning. *Progression* may be seen in the shift of students' ideas from low-level types that assimilate simplistic conceptions about the nature of historical knowledge, to more powerful ideas that build on disciplinary understandings and treat history as a defensible form of knowledge. Utilising this continuum as a framework for thinking about students' conceptions, we were able to identify, categorise and describe the ideas students in our small sample group held about history and historical accounts.

A "factual" approach to viewing history

Students who approached the issue of accounts in a *factual* manner were likely to regard historical accounts as copies of a fixed past that *really* happened. For these students, accounts existed as a collection of facts that were either correct or incorrect *representations* of that single reality. Apparent differences were attributed to factual inconsistencies within (and between) accounts, and more specifically, on their knowledge deficits. Deciding the better account entailed looking for the *best version* of the past amongst weaker accounts that were deemed factually deficient. As knowledge about the past is assumed to be straightforwardly available and could be reproduced (textually) as exact copies, false or distorted stories are a consequence of historians not getting their facts right. As Tze Kiat, explained,

> What makes the story true are the facts. Facts are fixed. They cannot be changed… So, if it's factual, then it's true.... But sometimes, the historian is biased and puts in his own views, sometimes deliberately… so when that happens….then it's not true.

For students like Tze Kiat, the factual basis of an account appeared to consequentially endorse the *truthfulness* of that account (possibly) in terms of its

correspondence to the *real* past. The historian was seen as the one most frequently responsible for arbitrarily or intentionally subverting the factual accuracy of accounts, which would subsequently result in different or distorted accounts.

Reflecting on the Factual category of student responses in this study, two points came to mind: first, that students seemed to have not only a fixed conception of the past, but also a rigid notion of *truth* that should count as valid historical knowledge (for example, that there is only one correct version of the past). Second, students in the study may not be familiar with (and may even view with disdain) the interpretative role historians play in the construction of historical knowledge. While they appeared to recognize that historians have biases, have their own views and opinions, and exercise personal discretions, they were more likely to view these as "damning" evidence of an account's untrustworthiness or its lack of factual integrity. Students who subscribed to the factual approach believed that learning history is simply about knowing what happened in the past and learning the correct narrative, thus constraining the development of proper understandings that focuses on the reconstructive and tentative nature of accounts in history.

<u>A "multiple-factual" approach to viewing history</u>

Students who approached the issue of accounts in terms of *multiple stories* (like Gabriel) were likely to acknowledge a past that is complex and multifaceted. For these students, multiple accounts of events were a matter of individuals or groups of authors expressing their different ways of thinking about (or perceiving) events. As Zain explained,

As human beings, we all have different experiences, different feelings about the same thing, so we will definitely have different views, different perspectives on things... Because of this, there will always be different stories about Singapore's history… because people will always have different views on certain decisions made or certain historical events that happened.

Consequently, having different accounts of events was expected and worked in a favourable way, that is, they served to complement or reinforce the telling of the (complete) story, albeit one that was still viewed in factual terms. Deciding the better account, then, entailed seeking a consensus by merging and tallying multiple accounts about the event. Students who viewed history in a "multiple-factual" way would likely use either of two strategies to deal with the issue: a) build a complete story (or a new account) that incorporated all other accounts; or b) count accounts and pick the majority position. Nevertheless, these strategies pointed more to expedient or practical options at reconciling differences; handling multiple stories remained a matter of finding the best means to "fit" accounts into the proper scheme of things (such as a complete picture or the best story).

Responses of students in the study suggested that even if students recognised that there could be multiple accounts of the same event, they remained unsure as to how they could manage these differences other than to combine or to count versions. For them, historical knowledge is seen largely as productions of the human mind, based mostly on individual dispositions, experiences and personal opinions. In the context of learning history then, understanding the past meant knowing about the different stories that people tell so that we can have a more complete or

"truer" picture of that (factual) past. This idea, however, ignored notions of a complex past where "different things are happening in different places at the same time". Notions of a complex past often were explained not in terms of *diversity* in historical experiences, but more in terms of the authors' different opinions or different experiences.

A "criterial" approach to viewing history

Students who approached the issue of different accounts in a *criterial* manner were likely to understand that historical accounts are essentially interpretations or selective reconstructions of past events. These students recognised that constructing historical accounts imposed limits on authors, and also subjected their choices to certain standards of practice. In explaining differences between historical accounts, for example, Lena referred to a range of factors but all would relate to issues of authorship,

> There are differences due to the objectives of the historian. They have personal biases as well. Some interpret the event as a bad thing. Others might see it as good. And this personal bias might influence the writing of their accounts, and thus their conclusions. … Also, the social background and upbringing of the two historians could have brought the two different conclusions… Another possibility is that one of the historians is not as good a historian as the other and thus the product was different, having a completely different conclusion.

Students like Lena seemed aware of the constructed nature of accounts, and this enabled them to explain – albeit, implicitly – different accounts in terms of their specific authorial references/attributes, their respective story parameters, their authors' selective focus and so on. Deciding the better account required students to review the criteria used to construct accounts. Some of these may include: considering the question accounts are constructed to answer, distinguishing the comprehensiveness of accounts based on specific criteria that bounded the selection of theme and topic, weighing the perspectives within each account, and evaluating the strength or plausibility of arguments based on the evidence used to construct the interpretation.

Students' responses in the study demonstrated a tendency to think in terms of specific criteria when selecting the better account. The recognition that historical knowledge is constructed, and is based on interpretation of evidence, allowed students to view historical accounts as tentative and open to challenge. Such recognition opens up the possibility of history as a defensible kind of knowledge, with its own disciplinary rules and standards of construction.

How teachers can help strengthen and develop students' learning of history

Empirical evidence from the *How People Learn* project strongly suggest that students come into the classrooms bringing with them preconceived ideas based on their life experiences of how the world works and how people are likely to behave (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999). There is also ample research evidence in many national contexts that has shown that students' ideas and understandings about history and historical narratives are very much influenced by out-of-classroom experiences (Seixas, 1997; Voss, 1998; Seixas, 2000; Barton, 2001; Lee, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Wineburg, 2001; Vansledright, 2011). Rather than receiving these messages passively, students are

more likely to draw upon their life experiences to construct personal understandings (Hartzler-Miller, 2001). These prior ideas and "everyday preconceptions" (Lee & Shemilt, 2004) can be helpful to teachers, but they also can create problems, because ideas that work very well in the everyday world are not always applicable to the study of history (Lee, 2005).

For students to develop deeper understandings in history, they must be taught to think about accounts in criterial terms, where the acquisition of more powerful ideas may initiate further shifts in developing their ideas about history and historical knowledge. This would require putting in place a history pedagogy that is *receptive* both to an understanding of the epistemic and methodological underpinning of the discipline, as well as one that is *responsive* to the prior ideas and pre-existing understandings of its learners (Afandi, 2012). The identification of patterns of ideas or the categories of responses students in this study hold about accounts offers possible opportunities for an instruction that focuses on developing students' ideas about history. For example, by viewing these preconceptions as "starting points" in students' understandings, teachers can help students develop more sophisticated and complex ideas about accounts. This could be done by recognising certain ideas that may serve to "block" students' understandings of accounts (for example, the idea that "there can only be one factually correct account about the past"), and others that may be used to "build" better understandings (for example, building towards the idea that "it is in the nature of accounts to be different as they answer different historical questions"). Teachers can begin to identify some key ideas that may impede students' understandings or ones that "close down" the possibility of history, while at the same time recognising how some of these ideas may be useful in facilitating understandings and "opens history up" as a defensible form of knowledge.

Students in this study appeared to operate with a range of ideas about accounts that corresponded to a 'Factual-Multiple-Criterial' continuum. A very simplified range might describe students' ideas about different accounts as: a) Different but one correct story; b) Different, multiple stories but one past; and c) Different, multiple stories judged by criteria. Knowing that some students may be working with 'low-order', uni-dimensional conceptions of accounts would enable teachers to devise corrective strategies that can gradually move students' understandings forward. For example, students who viewed history as a fixed and real past are likely to regard historical accounts as accurate copies of the past to be committed to memory. Others who viewed all historical accounts as "inherently biased" or as "distorted interpretations" by their authors would be distrustful of historical knowledge and the work historians do. In both instances, students' misconceptions about history and the nature of accounts are likely to deepen and become entrenched if not addressed. One way to deal with these misconceptions and move students' ideas forward would involve helping students acquire *disciplinary* ways of looking at history and the nature of accounts. This would entail helping students view knowledge about history in evaluative terms – using criteria, standards or assessment by a community of scholars (Seixas, 1993) – and providing students with opportunities to gradually and increasingly understand ways to use these criteria and standards when making critical sense of the competing stories they encounter about the past.

Addressing anxieties: What should our students know about 'history'?

The short answer to this question is: It depends on what is construed as *proper knowledge* about history. If our earlier point about understanding history as a disciplinary enterprise is accepted, then having proper knowledge of history will provide students with a way of seeing and making sense of the world, and introduces them to a way of thinking about the past, the present and the future within a disciplinary framework of established academic practice and procedures. Having a proper understanding of history enables students to construct valid accounts about the past, and provide the best explanations they can through the use of available evidence. As demonstrated in the exploration of students' ideas in this study, some students are already working with sophisticated notions about accounts that would allow them to distinguish criterial differences between competing or rival versions. Also, the broad range of students' preconceptions about accounts suggests the possibility of identifying students' diverse "entry-points" so that their ideas could be developed in a progressive way. In other words, even if students are working with simplistic notions of accounts, with good teaching, they will be able to build a framework for making critical sense out of legitimate stories, and rationalise why certain histories offer alternative and competing accounts of the past. By acquiring the disposition to think historically about the past, students learn to shift the way they approach the study of the past, i.e. from learning history as simply "knowing stories about the past" to learning history as a "disciplined inquiry into the past".

This is not to say, however, that students do not need to know stories about the past, or accounts of events, or "the facts" of history. Indeed, an appreciation of historical narratives has been regarded as crucial to the learning of history (Mayer, 1998; McKeown and Beck, 1994). A more pertinent point, however, is the recognition that learning accounts or narratives about the past involves sophisticated processes of interpretation and judgement (Wineburg, 1994). Simply giving students the stories they should know may not be the best way to get students to learn history or develop sound historical understandings (see Shemilt, 1980; Lee, 1999). Given that students in Singapore are constantly exposed to different forms of audio-visual and textual representations of past events (and presumably encounter different interpretations outside the classroom), there is a need for teachers to help students build a framework for making critical sense of legitimate stories, as well as ones that offer alternative or competing histories. As Lee (1999) argued, the issue is not so much whether students should know enough history (clearly, they should); nor is the issue about the (correct) version of the past students should learn. Instead, the fundamental issue here is whether students are taught proper history "so that whatever versions of the past they encountered, in school or out, they would have the understandings required to make sense of them…and have the intellectual toolkit that can give them strategies for dealing with conflicting accounts of the past".

A legitimate outcome of an education in history should be that students know and understand a bit about history as the past, and as a discipline. Anxieties over students' lack of knowledge about the official content in the state narrative may be legitimate if the goal of history education is one that seeks to guarantee social, psychological and emotional attachment to the nation and the nation-state. Nonetheless, achieving such social

outcomes may only be possible (if at all) at the expense of proper historical study – where history is presented as "fixed" in order to guarantee those outcomes, or where the historical past may have to be plundered for lessons that can be used to support what we want to say about the present.

Learning history goes beyond simply knowing about a particular story, seeking practical uses of the past or demanding that students be enthralled to a privileged version of the past; the experience should offer students with an opportunity to make sense of the past in its complexity and open up ways of understanding the world. Certainly, the promotion of official history (i.e., knowing the "Singapore story") within the context of a teacher-centered and exam-based history curriculum have consequences. Alternative accounts and perspectives, interest in historical inquiry and historiography, and more discipline-based or critical approaches to history education are limited or discouraged by such singular approaches and fail to prepare students adequately for dealing with the multiplicity or complexity they are likely to encounter in real life. Conformity to an institutionalized narrative and to a rigid structure of Singapore's official history and curriculum may end up limiting more flexible ways to engage with, connect to, or organize new knowledge. Ultimately, it may not be sufficient to say that students know "enough history" if they are shown to be able to recite and recount facts, figures, particulars, personalities and events, but unable to demonstrate an understanding of history as a mode of inquiry and appreciate the subject's importance as a means of making sense of human experience.

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