Should comparative political systems be taught in school?

Jeremy Au Yong & Kor Kian Beng
The Straits Times, 9 January 2010

Law Minister K. Shanmugam has suggested that students learn about the costs and benefits of political systems in different cultures, so that they might better understand if the Singapore model can be changed without trade-offs and consequences. Should political education be introduced in schools - and can it be taught well?

Two hours of mathematics, then recess and mother tongue, followed by a class discussion on the political system of a country.

Take your pick - it could be America, India, Australia, the Philippines, France or any country in the world.

That is what a typical school day for a Singaporean student might look like if a suggestion by Law Minister K. Shanmugam were implemented.

Last month, he proposed that schools teach comparative political systems. He couched his argument in the context of improving the Government's effectiveness in reaching out to younger Singaporeans.

The ultimate aim, he explained, was to create a citizenry that was better informed about its political choices.

Writing in Petir, the newsletter of the People's Action Party (PAP), he expressed concern that younger Singaporeans, having grown up in stability, safety and security, might have the impression that Singapore would be able to import any political model from abroad without local trade-offs.

He stressed that while Singaporeans could choose any model they want, it should be an informed choice. But how do they go about making an informed choice?

The answer, he believes, lies in education, specifically by teaching them about the costs and benefits of different political systems, so that they can sit and reflect more deeply on the options.

As it stands now, he noted that schools focus on equipping students for the globalised economy, but do not teach enough about 'political systems, philosophies or histories of societies'.

'Our students do not get a clear perspective on our vulnerabilities and the consequences if those are not managed,' he wrote.

Stating categorically that the teaching should not 'trumpet the virtues of any particular system', he said: 'Students should be taught how political systems work in different cultures, why some societies succeed and others fail, and the impact of climate, geography, size, ethnic make-up and strategic situation.' (See full text of his article on the right.)

Mr Shanmugam's proposal has since become a talking point among Singaporeans. Many would agree that there is need for a more politically aware citizenry.

The problem is, how do you go about achieving it? Can political education be introduced in schools? Can it be taught? How can it be taught without attracting accusations that the ruling party is seeking to spread party propaganda and perpetuate PAP rule?

To teach or not to teach?

Like it or not, the merest suggestion of introducing some form of political teaching into the classroom is sure to draw charges of brainwashing.

The sceptics will find it difficult to believe that the PAP government would not be tempted to sing some of its own praises while taking swipes at the opposition when it introduces the programme.

Others suggest that even a well-meaning programme, based on purely noble aspirations, can be sabotaged down the line, perhaps by teachers trying too hard to steer clear of what they consider to be out-of-bound markers or imposing their own political views.

An indication of a possible pitfall can be gleaned from the experience of introducing National Education (NE) in schools.

It was rolled out in 1997 to educate students about Singapore's history and development since independence in 1965 and the importance of preserving social cohesion and racial harmony, among other things.

When the programme was unveiled, it was criticised as a brazen attempt to disseminate government propaganda.

Although criticisms have since subsided, some teachers still view NE with disdain, seeing it as a subject to be taught only because they are told to do so.

Not surprisingly then, despite Mr Shanmugam's clear emphasis on the neutrality of the content, many interviewees qualify their comments by stressing the need for political education to be completely free of bias.

Political observers, politicians, education experts and parents alike say that the content must not be perceived to be one-sided.

A representative view comes from Mrs Josephine Koh, 42, a mother of two teenage sons: 'There's one sensitive thing that they must not teach. I don't want them to talk about the PAP and the opposition. It cannot have bias.'

If there is so much emphasis on neutrality, it is due to the concern that a poorly implemented or botched-up political education programme would have dire consequences.

Not only would it fail to bring about the political understanding that the Government seeks among the young, it might end up garbling, if not warping, the intended message to them. The chance to reach out to them might be lost for good.

Concerned about the way it might be taught, National University of Singapore (NUS) political science lecturer Bilveer Singh says one can draw harsh lessons from one main purveyor of political education in the past: the communists.

As he puts it: 'Political awareness should be about the nation and its people, not about the regime. A lesson we can learn is how the communist parties in Eastern and Central Europe, including in the USSR, told lie after lie and eventually were thrown into the dustbins of history and spoken of negatively ever since.

'There, the political paradigm is a simple one - Never again the communists! This showed how badly and insincerely they managed their political education, through lies and propaganda.'

Similarly, Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer Eugene Tan warns that, should the programme be perceived to be biased and designed to achieve a partisan political goal, then it is more likely to 'elicit resentment and cynicism, drowning out the key messages'.

He points to one other implementation problem: getting students more informed about politics while keeping schools depoliticised.

Philosophical and political arguments aside, there is also a logistical problem that might stand in the way of political education: How to shoehorn a new subject into an already tight timetable?

Dr Kho Ee Moi, an expert in history and social studies education, agrees that political education is important: 'But as an educator, I feel a need to point out that students are already grappling with too many subjects in school.'

Do we need it?

For all the doubts and reservations, however, few oppose the idea outright. The prevailing view among political observers, politicians, parents and teachers appears to be: teach it - just make sure you teach it right.

They readily cite reasons why the young need political education. One argument put forward by NUS's Professor Singh is that the longstanding political apathy needs to be addressed if the Government hopes to get citizens involved in nation-building.

Where the notion of keeping 'political order through depoliticisation' was desirable in the past, that position is no longer tenable, he says. 'The nation's political anaesthesia needs to be corrected so that people can make informed decisions and, more importantly, build the nation from bottom-up.'

Mrs Josephine Teo, PAP MP and chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, sees political education as a means to make up for some of the real-world political experiences younger Singaporeans are not getting.

Because of the dominance of the PAP in recent years, voters have had little chance to practise making political choices, she says, thus making the link between voting and an impact on daily life unclear.

'Even if one gets to cast a vote, a win for the PAP at the national level means policy directions are unchanged and there is no sudden reversal of the previous government's decisions. This is very different from the 1950s and 1960s when Singapore's survival hung on a thread, so voters had to think hard,' says Mrs Teo.

Surprising as it may seem, even some opposition politicians are in favour of a political education programme, provided it is well-implemented, fair and balanced.

Says Mr Yaw Shin Leong, the organising secretary for the Workers' Party: 'If a fair programme is indeed achievable, the advantage would be that our students' understanding of political knowledge will be enhanced.'

Mr Tony Tan, the Reform Party's 'shadow spokesman for education', offers similar support. Though concerned about how opposition parties might be portrayed, he says the party believes 'students are discerning and they would be able to decide for themselves whether more information needs to be sourced online apart from those that are given.'

Teach less

Perhaps the hardest problem for anyone aspiring to teach political education is the crucial matter of how.

It is one thing to know where the potholes are, and quite another to actually navigate around them.

For this particular journey - if it gets the green light - the analysts and experts agree on one guiding principle: The teaching must come from the bottom-up and not the other way around.

Dr Kho, for instance, says improvement can start with the teaching materials: 'What can be improved could be case studies of different political ideologies and systems, how they work, and the history and contexts of their development.'

Students should be allowed to draw conclusions for themselves by 'examining each case in its context and with multiple lenses'.

'One weakness that I have noted in our school curriculum is that instructional materials tend to draw conclusions for students,' she says. 'If we want to nurture students to become truly independent critical thinkers, we have to refrain from such didactic practices.'

For Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, turning the course over to the students themselves may be the trick to achieving the comparative analysis vital for this approach and overcoming worries of propaganda.

'Leave it to students to answer the question of what works, what doesn't - and not tell them why something works or doesn't,' she says.

Students should pick their own cases, drive their research and argue their conclusions, with the teachers facilitating these discussions effectively, she adds.

The sensitive nature of the subject also means teachers need to be well-trained to handle a political education class.

Pioneer Junior College principal Tan-Kek Lee Yong thinks the current batch of teachers are not well-equipped to handle the subject. She says: 'If political education is to be introduced, more thought ought to go into the curriculum so that teachers can be effectively trained to teach such classes.'

Prof Singh's solution is to take the teaching out of the hands of the schools.

'Get the concept right, get the right people to lead and implement the programme, and more importantly, do it without fear or favour,' he says.

'Maybe, instead of the teachers running the programme in school, a special team of teachers should do it.'

He adds that it would have the happy side effect of not adding to the current teaching load.

He also proposes a rebranding exercise. To avoid any potential negative stereotypes evoked by the term 'political education', why not use the more neutral 'citizenship education'?

Learn more

Taken together, it is clear coming up with the ideal programme will take some trying. It has to be comprehensive and non-biased, delivered in a non-didactic, bottom-up manner by a group of highly skilled teachers.

But even when the teaching is perfected, the battle will be just half-won.

For SMU's Professor Tan, a bigger challenge is making sure the subject is 'meaningfully learnt, imbibed and applied'.

He says: 'It is about sensitising students and enabling them to do reasoned and thoughtful analysis, with a nuanced understanding of the realities facing Singapore.'

Of course, there are the detractors. Political watcher and constitutional law expert Kevin Tan is one who thinks the school setting is a poor place to learn about politics.

'I shudder at the thought of the kind of political education that the Education Ministry will roll out. Politics is learnt through open discussion, debate and open advocacy for different positions, not through some academic exercise.'

Pioneer JC's Mrs Tan is also sceptical about how interested students would be in the subject, as many would not immediately see its relevance to their lives.

'Even if students were to read up on the subject, it is to prepare for examinations. Hence, in order to get them interested in politics, it would take more than just lessons on politics.'

To get students interested in political education, she suggests, talk about real-life political situations at school assemblies and during civics and moral education classes, screen good political films as part of enrichment programmes, and hold dialogues with ministers or MPs to discuss the Singapore political system.

Some schools have already moved ahead with some form of political education, like Raffles Girls' School.

Its principal Julie Hoo says students learn about various political systems and ideologies through humanities and social studies lessons, and through enrichment activities like a moot Parliament programme.

It remains to be seen if Mr Shanmugam's proposal will become reality.

But at least for now, and for a start, it has already accomplished part of its goal: It has got some Singaporeans talking and asking questions about political systems.