

*An Identity Dilemma: A Comparative Study of Primary Education for Ethnic Chinese in the Context of National Identity and Nation-Building in Malaysia and Singapore.* By Ingrid Glad. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1998. 352 pp.

This fascinating comparative study links up issues of language, culture, and national identity in two countries that have some common historical roots, but very distinctive trajectories of nation-building over recent decades. The focus is on ethnic Chinese, a large and influential minority in Malaysia, and the majority in Singapore. The study has been carefully designed, and meticulously executed, to include both quantitative and qualitative forms of research, and to have relevance for wider issues of moral education, national identity, and language policy in education in other parts of the world.

The structure is that of a typical doctoral thesis, beginning with an introduction that sets out the main literature drawn upon, the range of methodologies selected and the basic concepts underlying the study. The second chapter provides an excellent historical overview of the socio-political development of Singapore and Malaysia, drawing on a rich local literature, and setting the cultural and educational dilemmas which constitute the main focus of the thesis in this broader context. A thoughtful review of the present situation brings to readers' attention the difficult dilemmas faced by both societies: how to develop appropriate and effective policies of language education, with three or four widely used languages in education, and the related issues of cultural and national identity.

The focus of this book is on the Chinese language, which has its own special demands and difficulties, as well as being the vehicle of a highly developed and very cohesive philosophical/ethical system, that of Confucianism. However, it also raises questions of the role of other religious belief systems, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, which have their own links to issues of language learning. In addition, the role of English as both an international language and a former colonial language, and the role of Christianity, among Chinese in both Singapore and Malaysia, are considered.

The main body of the volume deals with the educational questions that arise in the context of these fascinating dilemmas of language, culture, and national identity. Chapter Four provides a useful historical summary of the development of the education systems of Malaysia and Singapore since World War II. Chapter Five depicts the contemporary primary education systems in both countries, then explains the reasons for the selection of two representative schools in each society, representing somewhat different policies with reference to the teaching of Chinese. After describing the schools, the author then goes on to give detailed descriptions of the Chinese language syllabi used in these schools, and the ways in which they are linked to issues of moral education.

Chapter Six follows with a detailed analysis of the textbooks for Chinese language, culture, and moral education used in all four schools. The framework for the textbook analysis covers the cultural dimension, including national identity, cultural identity, and moral values. Detailed examples and illustrations are provided, showing clear differences between the two societies, with a much more overt Chinese and Confucianist context for the stories and texts in Singapore, and a greater tendency to emphasize universal elements and Asian stories in the case of Malaysia. The final part of the chapter analyses the pedagogical approaches used in the textbooks, showing how they tend to be rather traditional, and oriented towards teacher-centred methods of learning. This is followed by an analysis of the response of teachers and administrators in both societies to the researcher's questions about texts and pedagogy, which reveal some interesting differences of view, both within and between the two societies. Generally, Singaporean teachers were found to be more open to progressive pedagogy, and also more satisfied with the texts they had available, while Malaysian teachers expressed less satisfaction with textbooks that tended to be rather traditional and conformist. It is interesting to note that the author was not satisfied simply to note and analyse the existing situation of texts and pedagogy, but ends the chapter with suggestions as to how the work of local cultural figures, such as the Malaysian artist Lat, whose cartoons appeal to all races, could be used to liven up both the texts and the classroom discourse.

Chapter Seven is probably the most interesting of all the chapters, as it provides a rich analysis of interview data with forty-four teachers in Malaysia and forty-two in Singapore, all working in the four schools taken as case-studies. It uses both quantitative and qualitative means to highlight their views on issues of national identity and national culture, reading habits of teachers in terms of both literature and the press, and the issue of a common identity at the national level. It also explores issues of the past, present, and future of Chinese medium primary education in the two societies. Finally, we are able to hear the views of these Chinese teachers on the issue of national as against universal values, an issue of particular interest in the light of ongoing debates about the role and importance of “Asian values” in the global community.

This volume certainly constitutes an exemplary doctoral thesis in terms of the wealth of literature drawn upon, the conceptual richness of the discourse, and the thoroughness with which the case-studies are developed, providing a multi-dimensional understanding of the dilemmas of language learning and cultural and national identity. It is also an extremely valuable contribution to education literature. In methodology, it is a carefully crafted and judiciously developed comparative study; in substance and research outcomes, it contributes much to ongoing debates around multi-cultural education and citizenship education; in its rich contextual and historical detail, it provides readers with up-to-date knowledge of two important societies in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Singapore.

One of the most engaging features of this study is the sense of a dialogue between the researcher and her interlocutors, which emerges as one reads. There are times when the reader may become almost overwhelmed by the wealth of detail emerging from the case-studies. Yet, it is this very detail that makes it possible to hear the many voices of the teachers themselves, and gain an understanding from within of how they perceive and deal with the dilemma of language and identity in their classrooms on a daily basis.

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